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A COMPANION TO
*R*OMANTIC
*P*OETRY

EDITED BY CHARLES MAHONEY

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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Charles Mahoney

Introduction

Charles Mahoney

“We are living through a great age for poetry,” Anne Elliot observes to Captain Benwick in the screen adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (Dear 1996: 47). Although Anne (and Austen) have reservations concerning its moral efficacy, the cultural significance of poetry is never questioned. Indeed, precisely this claim is made time and again by Romantic writers – from Wordsworth and Baillie to Austen and Hazlitt, Keats and De Quincey – but perhaps nowhere with greater conviction or urgency than in Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*, when he contends:

The most unfailling herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. . . . It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns in their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations, for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. (Shelley 2002: 535)

Romantic poetry – for Shelley, the “power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature,” the “words which express what [the poets] understand not” (2002: 535) – Romantic poetry is revolutionary. It is electrifying. It is dangerous, “seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely,” according to Austen (1998: 90). For Hazlitt, it “partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age” (Hazlitt 1930–4: 11. 87). The center and circumference of Romanticism, Romantic poetry is for Shelley nothing less than the spirit of the age. It delineates, as Wordsworth expresses it, “the very world which is the world / Of all of us, the place in which, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all” (Wordsworth 1979: 1805 *Prelude* x. 725–7). Romantic poetry may not necessarily define Romanticism, but it is indispensable to any definition of Romanticism.

“Romanticism” is a notoriously difficult term to define. It resists historical confinement every bit as much as it deflects assignment of its definitive qualities. There are no incontestable dates with which to delimit Romanticism as a period; neither is there any one controlling idea that informs Romanticism as a concept. Integral to nearly every account of Romanticism, however, is the conviction that its poetry is somehow or another essential to its self-definition. Romantic poetry has also proven to be, for over half a century, a privileged site for the entry of critical theory into literary studies. The poetry that Cleanth Brooks and the New Critics read as the finest expression of their privileged category of “ambiguity” exemplified for William Wimsatt the intimate and ennobling exchange between mind and nature that inhered in the Romantic image. This same body of writing provided the material for M. H. Abrams’s classifications of the “greater Romantic lyric” and the “correspondent breeze,” as well as his comprehensive understanding of Romantic poetry as a template of “natural supernaturalism.” The poetry that made possible Geoffrey Hartman’s reading of the opposition between the Romantic imagination and nature, the *via naturaliter negativa*, was for Paul de Man exemplary of the rhetorical indeterminacy that characterized the “literariness” of poetic language. Work that Harold Bloom pressured as manifesting his theory of literary “misreading” served in turn for Marjorie Levinson and Jerome McGann as the aesthetic elision of an ideological reality. The arbitrarily marginalized writings of women poets catalyzed Paula Feldman and Stuart Curran to reorganize our understanding of the Romantic canon and chronology beyond the confines of a masculine gender line. And the ostensibly naive formalism of Romantic poetry provided Susan Wolfson with occasion to remap the relation of literary form to ideology under the heading of a renovated and contextualized formalist criticism.

As recently as twenty years ago, companions to Romantic poetry would have been (and often were) organized around the six principal male poets who dominated the canon – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats – and consequently structured in terms of the categories generated by their writing. Today, our sense of both the achievements and the possibilities of Romantic poetry is far more expansive, due in no small measure to a number of groundbreaking anthologies that have dramatically increased our access to previously noncanonical Romantic writing. As Duncan Wu has remarked, “If critics create their own versions of Romanticism, so too do anthologists” (Wu 1994: xxvii), and Wu himself has been instrumental in this remapping, both with *Romanticism* (1994; 3rd edn. 2006) and *Romantic Women Poets* (1997). The circumference of our sense of Romantic poetry has grown almost beyond recognition in the wake of these two anthologies, accompanied as they have been by significant revisions to established offerings as well as by the emergence of new anthologies, not to mention numerous scholarly editions of the works of these recently “canonized” writers. As a result of the work of feminist, historicist, and cultural critics, the august canon that once seemed confined to six male poets has since exploded to include the work of such previously marginalized poets as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and Joanna Baillie, Anna Barbauld, Robert Burns and Thomas Moore, John Thelwall, George Crabbe and Walter Scott, Robert Southey, Leigh Hunt and John Clare, Grace

Aguilar, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon. If the French Revolution continues to provide the historical backdrop against which the achievements of Romantic poetry may be highlighted, the poetry itself continues to serve as the battleground for new and often antagonistic theories regarding the nature of literary canonization, evaluation, and interpretation.

Integral to the reevaluation of Romantic poetry has been a reinvigorated attention to the formal vocabulary of this poetry, including but by no means limited to such matters as form and meter, genre and mode. (As Michael O'Neill has observed in a related context, "it is in the use of poetic shaping that Romantic poetry conveys most authoritatively its variety and high quality" (O'Neill and Mahoney 2008: xxviii).) This revitalized attention occurs, moreover, not in isolation or as the obfuscation of history (however inflected), but in increasingly refined relation to such categories and concerns as gender, politics, ecology, economics, sexuality, canon formation, and of course literary theory. The essays in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry* attest to the remarkable diversity of this poetry at the same time as they illuminate it in relation to the historical and theoretical struggles that continue to take place in and around it. Arguably since Stuart Curran's *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, with its rejuvenated claim for the inevitability of thinking about form when thinking about Romantic poetry, it has become increasingly difficult *not* to think about the logic of Romantic forms – if not also the degree to which, as Curran argues, "the formal structuring principle in large part predetermines ideological orientation" (1986: 10). Similar claims for formal agency are advanced by Susan Wolfson throughout *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism*, with its practice of "an intensive reading of poetic events within a context of questions about poetic form and formalist criticism" (1997: 1), a method designed to interrogate conventional associations of "form" and "ideology." In *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, Michael O'Neill argues for a similar sense of formal agency in his reading of the "self-conscious poem" not only in terms of "the recognition made by a poem that it is a poem" but furthermore in the contention that "it is in the taking on of form that Romantic and post-Romantic poems are often at their most self-conscious" (1997: xiv, xv). William Keach's attention to the logic of Romantic forms manifests itself in *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* as a sustained examination of the politicizing of poetic styles at the "intersections between political and linguistic 'possibilities,' between historical reference and stylistic performance" (2004: xii). More recently, David Duff has argued not only that "[i]deas about genre are inseparable from Romanticism" but that, following Curran, "the Romantics effected a major expansion of the generic repertoire" (2009: 1, 2). As these and other examples demonstrate, the renewed attention to the close reading of poetic form should not be misunderstood as a reactionary turn against the critical *-ism* of the day, but as a sophisticated attempt to explicate the critical relations that abide between Romantic poetry and ideology, history, gender, sexuality, class – indeed, as a politicizing of Romantic poetic forms from all angles. Consequently, attention to form in this *Companion* is not confined to those chapters that attend specifically to one form or genre. The centrality of formal considerations here is such that numerous chapters also explicitly take up matters of

form and genre, whether in the context of, say, Romantic short lyrics and songs (chapter 1), the Romantic sonnet (chapter 4), Celtic Romantic poetry (chapter 15), Anglo-Jewish poetry (chapter 16), improvisation (chapter 19), Romantic poetry and illustration (chapter 21), the “pleasures of enduring form” (chapter 26), the genres of the Romantic sublime (chapter 29), or the persistence of Romantic poetry and poetic forms (chapter 34). The entirety of *A Companion to Romantic Poetry* participates in the critical premise that matters of poetic form *matter*, regardless of the specific teleology of any given critical practice.

The essays in this *Companion* are arranged in four parts. The first, “Forms and Genres,” underlines the centrality of meter and form to a *poetic* consideration of Romantic poetry. This section consists in considerations of forms as fixed as the couplet and the tercet, as hybrid as loco-descriptive poetry, and as seemingly undefinable as the pastoral. Certainly, these boundaries are frequently as permeable as they are arbitrary, and there is a significant degree of productive interplay between various forms and various chapters, such as between the ode and the elegy, the pastoral and the georgic. The second part, “Production and Distribution, Schools and Movements,” attends to the public spheres in which Romantic poetry was produced and in which it circulated, under such headings as the periodical press, the public lecture, or conversation. Integral to this section is an understanding that the “schools” of Romantic poetry are not limited to, say, the Lake School and the Cockney School but include such diverse poetic entities as labouring-class poetry, Celtic Romantic poetry, and Anglo-Jewish poetry. The third part, “Contemporary Contexts and Perspectives,” assembles a series of readings of cultural and intellectual concerns particularly germane to Romantic poets themselves. These include poetic celebrity, improvisation, the role of sport in Romantic poetry, poetry and science, poetry and illustration, and the Romantic poets’ relations to Milton. Finally, the fourth part, “Critical Issues and Current Debates,” brings to the fore a number of critical concerns in recent scholarship on Romantic poetry. While there is certainly a good deal of overlap between parts III and IV, these chapters more often highlight the critical lexicon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Included here are considerations of the enduring forms of Romantic aesthetics, constructions of gender in Romantic poetry, emerging trends in ecocriticism, the relation between literary criticism and Romantic poetry, and the persistence of Romantic poetry in twentieth-century American poetry.

Near the conclusion of the *Preface*, Wordsworth reminds his readers that

an *accurate* taste in Poetry and in all the other arts, as Joshua Reynolds has observed, is an *acquired* talent, which can only be produced by thought and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition. . . . if Poetry be a subject on which much time has not been bestowed, the judgment may be erroneous, and in many cases it necessarily will be so. (Wordsworth 1974: 1. 156)

Though it is certainly not the goal of this volume to inculcate taste (however Wordsworthian), *A Companion to Romantic Poetry* does aspire to provide “long continued

intercourse” with some of the most resonant voices and forms of Romantic poetry, in the hope that such intercourse will reward the time of reading with a renewed conviction that Romantic poetry, as Shelley contended, “arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life, and veiling them *or in language or in form* sends them forth among mankind” (Shelley 2002: 532, emphasis added).

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Part I
Forms and Genres

Mournful Ditties and Merry Measures: Feeling and Form in the Romantic Short Lyric and Song

Michael O'Neill

Short poems can condense all things into themselves, drops of dew that fold in on themselves but mirror the cosmos. Brief in one sense, they are immense in others, making one little stanzaic room an everywhere. Keats's hauntingly tuned "In drear nighted December," with its dancing, troubled lilt, contrasts nature's indifference to its changes with the human experience of loss. The poem trips, in both senses of the word, as it concludes by pointing out how "The feel of not to feel it, / When there is none to heal it, / Nor numbèd sense to steel it, / Was never said in rhyme" (ll. 21–4). The passage moves fleetly, but, as it turns from song to speech in the last line, a line that catches up the close of the previous two stanzas in its rhyming wake, it mimes the effect of slowing, even half-stumbling. The poem's end suggests the huge tracts of human experience never caught in "rhyme" and hints at its own success in netting a strange, uncomfortable sensation, the "feel of not to feel it," when "passèd joy" (l. 20) is re-experienced like a phantom limb.

Keats's poem shows how Romantic brief lyrics turn into metapoetry (poetry about poetry) with startling rapidity. The short lyric is poetry at its most exposed; each short lyric performs an implicit work of poetics, bearing out a poet's essential idea of poetry, and this is partly because it must "sing," or at least be "A Sort of a Song," to borrow the title of a poem by William Carlos Williams. Brief lyric and song, my two concerns, blend and intermingle as subgenres: "lyric," for my purposes, draws attention to the expression of feeling, "song" to the imperatives of the rhythmic movement of words, a movement rooted in traditional airs and measures.

The long, withdrawing roar of historicist and ideologically theorized reaction against aestheticism in its varied shapes and guises has meant a relative indifference to the gift of song which Romantic poetry extends to its readers. At times one may feel that the loss is ours; and one does not have to be a follower of Theodor Adorno, with his view that, through its very autonomy, art might offer a revealing "negative" image of social and political realities, to see that supposedly "pure lyric," in obeying its own formal laws, has

much to say about a very impure bundle of realities. In the hands of Romantic practitioners, the short lyric and song represent a major generic breakthrough. If the Romantic short lyric and song draw on the eighteenth-century revival of ballad and minstrelsy, they imbue their forms with a new personal note, even as they encourage the personal to communicate with the impersonal (often embodied in the form of poetry). The chapter argues that, in their dramatization of the relationship between form and feeling, the Romantic short lyric and song explore their own cultural purpose and value.

I

My title comes from a poem by Shelley, entitled, like so many ventures in the lyric mode, "Song," and, like many of Shelley's briefer pieces, it uses its lyricism to lament an absence, but it does so in such a way that it converts absence into musical presence. From its beginning, "Rarely, rarely comest thou, / Spirit of Delight!" (ll. 1–2), a trochaic lilt moves in sympathy with the coming and going of the "Spirit of Delight," whose visitations are "rare," in the dual sense of being very infrequent and being valuable. In "Song," Shelley expressly shapes lyric into a dimension which "may be / Untainted by man's misery" (ll. 35–6), yet the "taint" of "man's misery" refuses to be eradicated. It reappears in the poet's own refusal to sentimentalize: "Let me set my mournful ditty / To a merry measure. / Thou wilt never come for pity – / Thou wilt come for pleasure" (ll.19–22). The poem notes the disjunction between form and content, even as the "merry measure" bears witness to Shelley's refusal simply to intone "mournful" commonplaces. Lyric art heightens, so the lines suggest, our awareness of the "mournful" by bringing into play awareness of art as always art, always obedient to rules governing "measure."

In fact, Shelley's lyric self-positioning, as in "To a Skylark," is relatively intricate. In that poem the trill of the clever stanzaic form, its long last alexandrine floating and running "Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun" (l. 15), imitates the poet's admiration for the skylark's world of "clear keen joyance" (l. 76); at the same time, Shelley recognizes his distance from such a world. "Our sweetest songs," as he notes reflexively, "are those that tell of saddest thought" (l. 90), and "saddest thought" discovers its nature most profoundly and finds "sweetest" expression when contemplating its opposite. "Song," too, both surrenders to and offers a critique of pure lyric, if one identifies such a thing with the "Spirit of Delight," a Spirit sought after with a restrained, disciplined longing that is affecting. It is as though the lyric poet's fate were to devise beautiful forms that articulate his distance from the beauty they embody. The close of the poem composes a chastened music out of its sense of such a distance:

I love Love – though he has wings,
 And like light can flee –
 But above all other things,
 Spirit, I love thee –

Thou art Love and Life! O come,
 Make once more my heart thy home.
 (ll. 43–8)

The metre here, as elsewhere in the poem, plays with and against the cadences of the speaking voice, which is allowed to assert itself in unostentatious ways at moments such as “though” (l. 43), “all” (l. 45), “love” (l. 46), and “my” in the last line. The emotion is one of longing, as is betokened by the final apostrophe. Yet “once more” in the final line indicates that the invoked Spirit has, in the past, made the poet’s “heart” its “home,” where the alliterative bond suggests, tantalizingly, the appropriateness of such a domiciling, just as the previous line has briefly married “Love and Life.”

Shelley’s “Song” suggests that many Romantic lyrics carry their burdens of significance lightly. Appropriately, my word “burdens” can have a musical meaning, too, and Romantic lyrics are frequently within calling distance of literal music. As often, they anticipate Verlaine’s nuanced injunction in his “*Ars poétique*” “*De la musique avant toute chose*” (Music above everything; Verlaine 1999): an injunction which allows for things, even as it sets music in a superior position to them. Byron wrote the poems in *Hebrew Melodies* to be set to music by Isaac Nathan; Shelley’s lyrics have often been set to music, too. Moore’s *Irish Melodies* provide a preeminent example of poems written to be sung, even if, in the words of one entranced listener, the American poet Nathaniel Parker Willis, Moore “makes no attempt at music” in his singing of his poems. Willis continues: “It is a kind of admirable recitative, in which every shade of thought is syllabled and dwelt upon, and the sentiment of the song goes through your blood, warming you to the very eyelids, and starting you to tears, if you have soul or sense in you” (Vail 2001: 85). Such a “recitative” serves as a means of reflecting on the purpose and role of poetic lyric, as Moore’s “Oh! Blame not the Bard” (1810) brings out. Participating in sophisticated ways in that recovery of the bard as impassioned champion and chronicler of a culture typical of the eighteenth-century revival of medieval minstrelsy, the poem’s galloping anapaests may lack the subtlety of rhythm and suggestion which Verlaine urges in “*Art poétique*”; they may even threaten to descend to the status of that “*littérature*” which is the final scornful word of Verlaine’s poem. But nuance re-enters via a syntax which hints at failed possibilities, so many sharp stones on which to cut one’s feet beneath the limp flow of the rhythms. Indeed, the poem acts as a lament for what the lyric poet might have done with his art: were Ireland’s “spirit” not “broken” (l. 10), then

The string that now languishes loose o’er the lyre
 Might have bent a proud bow to the warrior’s dart,
 And the lip which now breathes but the song of desire
 Might have poured the full tide of a patriot’s heart.
 (ll. 5–8; quoted from Wordsworth and Wordsworth 2003)

The image of the lyre-string which have might strung a longbow suggests that the hand is mightier than the pen, but it is only the bardic effusion which makes possible

“the song of desire”: a desire for the “mights” of patriotic engagement. And in its final stanza the poem throws off its veils of self-abasement and recovers its lyric nerve:

But though glory be gone, and though hope fade away.
 Thy name, loved Erin, shall live in his songs:
 Not e'en in the hour when his heart is most gay
 Will he lose the remembrance of thee and his wrongs!
 (ll. 25–8)

True, this sentiment might play into the hands of those who would see Moore as an ineffectually anglicized Irish bard, wailing tunefully and noncontroversially of his nation's injuries. But the writing links lyric to processes of “remembrance” in ways that are complicated. The poem may be learned by heart, remembered as though a song of some long-distant historical event; yet its capacity to work on the conscience of Ireland's rulers is suggested, too, a suggestion made overt at the end when Moore sings to “loved Erin” (l. 26) of a time when “thy masters themselves, as they rivet thy chains, / Shall pause at the song of thy captive and weep” (ll. 31–2). This complicated state of affective embroilment by both “masters” and “captive” in the pity induced by Ireland's “wrongs” means that the word with which that noun rhymes, “songs,” draws powerful attention to itself. “Songs” point up “wrongs,” a rhyme that hints at Moore's apologia for his career as a poet.

II

Romantic brief poems often reflect, implicitly or explicitly, on their own reasons for existence and mode of being, and do so through their musical intensity. Leigh Hunt praises Coleridge for writing poems “so perfect in the sentiment of music, so varied with it, and yet leaving on the ear so unbroken and single an effect,” and in doing so comes close to formulating an ad hoc Romantic poetics of the lyric. For him, Coleridge's is a poetry “quietly content with its beauty”: furthermore, “Of pure poetry, strictly so called, that is to say, consisting of nothing but its essential self, without conventional and perishing helps, he was the greatest master of his time.” There are substantial objections to the idea of a “pure poetry,” just as there are to the notion of “music” in poetry. Rhythm, sound-effects: these cannot be isolated from semantic considerations. Yet we can grant the force of these objections, and still believe that Hunt has captured a quality without which poems such as Coleridge's “Love” would make only half their impact on us. That quality is a sense in which the lyric mastery of the poet, consubstantial as it is with the poem, is also felt as a contributing and overriding presence. Hunt notes of “Love,” a poem of great narratorial sophistication, that “one of the charms of it consists in the numerous repetitions and revolvings of the words, one on the other, as if taking delight in their own beauty” (Hunt 1891: 251, 250, 259). Such

“revolvings” slyly and affectingly link to the poem’s hints that its scenario serves as a mask for an unspoken autobiographical endeavor of the poet’s, one running parallel to the sophisticated self-awareness of the lyric. Mirrors start to mirror mirrors in a stanza such as this, singled out by Hunt: “I told her how he pined: and ah! / The deep, the low, the pleading tone / With which I sang another’s love, / Interpreted my own” (ll. 33–6). As the singer of a song, the “I” has stepped inside the lyric space; as the writer who draws attention to the singer who has so stepped, Coleridge invites us to suppose that we might interpret his own extra-poetic feelings.

Self-consciousness about lyric reaches an extravagant extreme in Edgar Allen Poe’s bravura post-Romantic manifesto, “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846). It is post-Romantic in that Poe has, it would seem, studied the effects of the best Romantic lyrics and sought to elicit from them a formula for the archetypal short, perfect poem. Poe has this to say:

What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones – that is to say, of brief poetical effects. . . . For this reason, at least, one half of the “Paradise Lost” is essentially prose – a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, *inevitably*, with corresponding depressions – the whole being deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity of effect. (Poe 1846: 164)

Poe may exaggerate. Yet he isolates a central feature of, and source of power in, Romantic poetry. Shelley, for all his grasp of Dante’s *Commedia* as an epic poem, anticipates Poe in his sense of the Italian poet’s work as burning with a many-faceted, highly localized brilliance: “His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought” (Shelley 2003: 693). Is it not the case that Shelley’s famous or notorious difficulty connects closely with the jostling con-course, in poems such as the “Ode to the West Wind,” of many “burning atoms of inextinguishable thought”? Were figures of speech ever so vividly heaped, one upon another, as at that poem’s close, as we move from imagined “incantation” (l. 65) of the poem we are reading to “Ashes and sparks” (l. 67) “scattered” (see l. 66) as from “an unextinguished hearth” (l. 66), to the “trumpet of a prophecy” (l. 69)? Each word burns with its own connected, if atomized, minidrama; thus the command to “Scatter” (l. 66) imbues the verse with a sense of the poet’s authority so to command; in the same breath, it hints, too, at the notion of dispersal, even at an Orphic sacrificial ritual that links with the eruption into the second terza rima sonnet, by way of a simile, of “some fierce Maenad” (l. 21). The terza rima mimes, among other things, a continual interplay between concentration and scattering.

The idea of poetry struggling to aspire to the condition of a single word may have its origins in Christianity’s trust in the Logos. The poet of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, canto III, true to that canto’s shadowy, alternative life as an extended sequence of connected short lyrics, expresses the wish to

wreak

My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
 Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
 All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
 Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe – into *one* word
 (97, ll. 906–10)

The longing comes and goes, and defeats itself in the act of utterance. The trailing sentence speaks of conditionality, unassailability. Even details such as the repetition of “feel” after “feelings” tell us that the dream of encapsulating the self into “one word” cannot be realized. But many Romantic poems believe that brevity is the soul of poetic achievement, as the following very short poem bears witness:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
 I had no human fears:
 She seemed a thing that could not feel
 The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
 She neither hears nor sees,
 Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course
 With rocks and stones and trees.

Wordsworth’s enigmatic poem continues to haunt. Coleridge spoke of it as a “sublime Epitaph” and went on: “Whether it had any reality, I cannot say. Most probably, in some gloomier moments he had fancied the moment in which his sister might die” (Wu 2006: 478). Coleridge poses a possibility, that of the lines having “any reality,” that the poem outlaws and prompts. Its lyric autonomy seems absolute. Yet its urgency shocks us into the wish to find a biographical key. Even in his glissade to “the moment in which his sister might die” after “in some gloomier moments he had fancied,” Coleridge slides from lyric to life in a way that suggests the power of the fiction is to suggest in some way that it is not a fiction.

The poem itself fuses brevity with intensity. It wrongfoots the reader, operating with unknowing, knowing, sly straightforwardness. It is the poem’s art to be piercingly direct and endlessly productive of doubt and interrogation. “A slumber did my spirit seal,” then, but, ironically, now – though the right inflection of any irony is hard fully to register – a slumber does her spirit (and body) seal. “I had no human fears”; did I have superhuman fears? Did I suppose she was beyond “human fears.” And is “She,” as has been argued, not another person but a reference to “my spirit” (see the discussion in Rzepka 2008)? This possibility flickers and troubles, even as most readers are surely right instinctively to see the poem as reaching out to someone beyond the poet in that “She.” If she was a woman or girl who then “seemed a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years,” she is now, most definitely, a thing “Rolled round” with other things, whose thinginess could not be more thingy, “rocks and stone and trees.” Is this

a bad outcome? Has she been reduced? Is it a good one, in that she can now be thought of as having been absorbed back into “earth’s diurnal course,” rather as the Pedlar tells us of Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage* that “She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here” (l. 512)? To mention that narrative poem, inwardly emotional as its mode and effects often are, is to recognize that brief Romantic lyric offers few reliable handholds, yet many tempting prospects, for the story-hungry imagination.

In the poem, the conditions of meaning seem visibly to stage themselves. Wordsworth emphasizes a syntactical continuity between the stanzas. Each stanza begins with two declarative assertions, then concludes with a two-line expansion. The effect is of a confirmation in the second stanza of the first stanza’s retrospective inklings. At the same time, we travel a long way from the opening’s endorsement of subjectivity. If at the start all is internalized, at the close we are taken into a world of things beyond the self. The dead Lucy belongs to a Newtonian universe, at once august and cold, in which she is deprived of individual “motion” and “force” and yet participates in the universe’s ceaseless “motion and force” as she is “Rolled round . . . / With rocks and stones and trees.” Those “rocks and stones and trees” are particulars obdurately indifferent to the self; “trees” is a rhyme-word insistent on the object-world.

If *esse est percipi* in most lyrics, that is, “to be is to be perceived,” the poem mocks such Berkeleyan idealism as self-regard; Lucy “neither hears nor sees,” but, the poem tells us, there is a world beyond our sense-impressions. Thus, Wordsworth’s lyric acts as the vehicle for an affirmation yet questioning of subjective feeling. We might wrest significances that are positive and negative from this fact: the poem can still our anxieties as well as exacerbate them. In recalling Milton’s cosmology in *Paradise Lost* in which he stands “on earth,” ready to sing of that which is “narrower bound / Within the visible diurnal sphere” (vii. 23, 21–2), the poem draws our attention to a “diurnal course” that wheels its stable, ordered way, even as it refuses to extend its gaze beyond such a “sphere” (there is no mention of a transcendent heaven, for example, as there is in Milton).

As already intimated, a question of wider relevance to Romantic lyric bequeathed by the poem arises from its seemingly biographical pathos. I take “pathos” from Frederic Myers, who argues in connection with Wordsworth’s Lucy poems that “One can, indeed, well imagine that there may be poems which a man may willing to give to the world only in the hope that their pathos will be, as it were, protected by its own intensity” (quoted in Beer 1998: 175). Myers assumes that Wordsworth seeks to protect the personal “pathos” of the Lucy poems by means of their very “intensity.” Beer himself argues that “factuality does make a difference,” and, indeed, contends that “What the Lucy poems are about, it has to be urged again, is the effect of actual loss” (1998: 38, 60). Despite Beer’s persuasive speculations, it is hard to know how one might prove his assertion, yet this Romantic short lyric thrives on the tension between its formal self-sufficiency and an urgency that might lead us to believe the poem is expressive of pre-poetic experience. But such an urgency is known most surely as an effect of the language itself.

The Lucy poem which, arguably, brings a new and peculiarly original form of affective force into English lyric is entitled “Song.” What is groundbreaking about this

short poem of three quatrains in standard ballad-metre is not that it is so powerful – lyric power and intensity are there in abundance in poems by classical Greek and Roman poets such as Sappho and Catullus – but that its power threatens to overwhelm language:

She dwelt among th'untrodden ways
 Beside the springs of Dove,
 A Maid whom there were none to praise
 And very few to love.

(ll. 1–4)

The opening quatrain mingles the clear and the hauntingly ungraspable. If it is reassuring to know that “She dwelt,” where the iambic pulse beats with healthy solidity, it is slightly unreassuring to know she did so among “th’untrodden ways,” where the elision stumbles just a fraction, almost as though tracking the wake and gait of a ghost. If it is sad that she was “A Maid whom there were none to praise,” it is also strange that, despite this absence of praise, she was one whom there “very few to love.” How many people need to love you for you to be loved? And was the poet of their number? And, as in so many short Romantic lyrics, we are made to look intently at microlinguistic events: empires of feeling fall and rise as we meditate the “difference” (l. 12) – that word of near-incommunicable importance in the poem – between “praise” and “love.” Wordsworth’s second stanza daringly dispenses with any main verb, offering two beautifully complementary yet contrasting images that share a love of the single (“A Violet” (l. 5), “a star” (l. 7)), but flow across the boundary between what is secret and what is shown, “Half-hidden” (l. 6) and “shining in the sky” (8). The stanza acts an imagistic interlude, as we return in the third stanza, one that uses fully the resources of synthesis, resolution, and onwardness offered by a triadic structure, to the syntactical shape of the first stanza. Or, at any rate, in the first two lines, we seem to do so:

She *lived* unknown, and few could know
 When Lucy ceased to be ...

(ll. 9–10)

“She *lived* unknown” pairs up with “She dwelt among,” but “*lived* unknown,” with its italicized emphasis, tilts the song decisively in an elegiac direction; it now seems as though “dwelt” was serving, all along, as a tactful euphemism for “*lived*” and that “*lived*” is itself holding at arm’s length the deep, barely speakable recognition that Lucy has died. Or, as the poet prefers to put it, “ceased to be” where the cessation of being sounds paradoxically like another way of existence, as though Lucy had entered another dwelling-place: the realm of words, of the commemorative song. That “few could know / When Lucy ceased to be” not only replays earlier tricks of nonlogical connection (after all, she lived “unknown”), it also brings to the poem’s surface the

stirring, profoundly disturbed need to confront a knowledge that arrests like trauma: “She” turns into a nameable person “Lucy” and is locked into an internal rhyme, “ceased to be.” But, then, as though the poem had aroused a countercurrent of feeling, the idea that anyone could really “know” what Lucy’s passing means to the poet is repudiated in the final, magnificent, language-challenging exclamation: “But she is in her Grave, and Oh! / The difference to me” (ll. 11–12). Wordsworth draws on Shakespearean effects of tragic simplicity and outcry to shape a lyrical insistence on the primacy of personal feeling: feeling that refuses to be articulated even in the act of being dramatically emphasized. The rhyme of “Oh” with “know” suggests that the heart has its reasons which reason cannot grasp, while “difference” confirms what has been dimly, emergently communicated to us by the poem’s brief, lyric voyage: that the poem is itself the means by which we experience a “difference,” a “difference” that can be thought of as a distinction between what we sensed at the outset and are stirred into feeling on our pulses by the close, and as a gap between what happened, so to speak (and this is an effect communicated by the poem’s words), the other side of language and what is happening in the very words that are speaking, implicitly, of the final inadequacy of language.

Coleridge’s own version of a Lucy poem, his “Constancy to an Ideal Object,” declares a rueful allegiance to a spectral ideal. The poem, thirty-two lines long, uses the couplets into which it soon settles to dramatize a friction between constancy and the fact that “all that beat about in Nature’s range, / Or veer or vanish” (ll. 1–2). From the start, constancy questions itself, even as it refuses to abandon its commitment: “why shouldst thou remain,” the poet asks, “The only constant in a world of change, / Oh yearning thought! that liv’st but in the brain?” (ll. 2–4). The question might seem to be voiced skeptically, yet the skepticism is inseparable from “yearning.” The fact that the “thou” is both itself and one with “yearning thought” makes it appear to be a product of the “brain”; Coleridge’s phrasing, “that liv’st but in the brain,” however, holds back from wholly identifying the ideal object with a false coinage of the brain; it “liv’st but in the brain,” and yet, as though confronting the subjectivity at the heart of lyric, the poem might also be asking, where else “but in the brain” do our feelings and ideals live?

The poem keeps a double time. It is short enough to strike to the heart of the emotional matters it addresses from the beginning; it does not “beat about” the bush in its opening assertion about “all that beat about in Nature’s range.” What in a more meditative lyric or ode might be apprehended by degrees, as in Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode,” is here stated with pulse-quickenning compellingness. It is long enough for complex developments to occur. They include the capacity to look ahead to the poet’s dying moment, and the recognition that his “yearning thought” will never take on embodied form until then – though even then, in a deft switch into allegory, it will do so only “when, like strangers shelt’ring from a storm, / Hope and Despair meet in the porch of Death!” (ll. 9–10); that is, the possible realization of the poet’s ideal gives way to a further spectral scenario. It is long enough for the poet to articulate, with wry,

heartbreaking clear-sightedness, his awareness that the “yearning thought” both is and is not identifiable with “some dear embodied good” (l. 13).

This Romantic lyric thrives on riddles, “She is not thou, and only thou art she” (l. 12), that collapse longing into tongue-twisting puzzle. But it also has space to elaborate in its final eight lines a multi-toned retort to its deepest fear, expressed in the question, “And art thou nothing?” (l. 25). The long simile that follows allows for the ideal object to be something, yet for that something to be substanceless and wholly inseparable from illusion, which in a further twist seems at one with poetry’s own offerings. Like the Brocken spectre glimpsed by the “enamoured rustic” (l. 31), the poet sees “An image with a glory round its head” (l. 30). The use of “its” lends a temporary otherness to the “image,” and if the close tilts toward exposure of projection, it does not wholly annul the idea that something exists beyond the self: “The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues, / Nor knows he makes the shadow he pursues!” (ll. 31–2). Enamoured rustic and yearning poet differ in that the latter “knows” and the former does not know that both make the shadows they pursue. The phrasing tilts tantalizingly away from the merely disenchanted and negative.

III

Lyric’s participation in illusion is the theme of many Romantic short poems, conscious of themselves as wearing “An image like a glory round their heads.” Felicia Hemans’s double-edged lament “The Lost Pleiad” seems to elegize a still-living Byron, for all the gender reversal such a reading involves (all seven of the Pleiades were the daughters of Atlas and Pleione). “Like a lost Pleiad seen no more below,” the poem’s epigraph from Byron’s *Beppo* (l. 112), prepares us for the mingling of tones in Hemans’s poem. Byron is characteristically both mock-elegiac and genuinely affecting in the passage from *Beppo*. Hemans grieves, if she grieves, for the fact that “yon majestic heaven / Shines not the less for that one vanish’d star!” (ll. 24–5). The poem’s five-line stanzas, rhyming *abbab*, all pentameters except the shortened trimeter of the third line, move with a majestic slowness, the triple *b* rhyme suspending and slowing feeling rather than encouraging forward movement. If read as about sibling rivalry between female and male Romantic poets, the lyric can seem to articulate a muted satisfaction that “thy sisters of the sky / Still hold their place on high” (ll. 2–3). Yet any such feeling seems muted by a feeling that all has changed utterly, even though there is no palpable change at all.

The lyric offers itself as a gorgeous rehearsal of poetry’s resources. Cadences and rhymes say to us that verse’s machinery is perfectly oiled, that its keyboard awaits the next dancing set of fingers: like “the regal night” (l. 6), the poem’s subtext seems to say, poetry “wears her crown of old magnificence” (l. 7); like the constellations, the lines “rise in joy, the starry myriads burning” (l. 11). Indeed, at moments such as this third stanza, the desolate beauty of Hemans’s lyric arises from its deep insight into the

element of heartlessness at the very center of autonomy: whether that autonomy belongs to natural cycles or to the poetic wheelings that mimic them:

They rise in joy, the starry myriads burning –
 The shepherd greets them on his mountains free;
 And from the silvery sea
 To them the sailor's wakeful eye is turning –
 Unchang'd they rise, they have not mourn'd for thee.
 (ll. 11–15)

The lyric is the more affecting for never quite taking on the role of mourning for “thee.” If anything, it suggests a sublimity of sorrow that transcends mourning. The poem’s reserve betokens respect, as though the addressee has a greatness that forbids elegy: “Bow’d be our hearts to think on what *we* are, / When from its heights afar / A world sinks thus” (ll. 22–4).

It was a fine revisionary decision to change “It is too sad,” the reading in the poem’s first printed appearance (in the *New Monthly Magazine*) to “Bow’d be our hearts.” The change allows for a more steadfast contemplation of “what *we* are” in the act of bowing, by way of the rhyme, to “heights afar.” Shelley’s concluding rhyme in *Adonais* sets the feeling of being borne “darkly, fearfully, afar” (l. 492) against the knowledge that “The soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are” (ll. 494–5): “are” proclaims a plenitude of undisturbed being against the storm-tossed voyage of the wanderer driven “afar.” Hemans reverses the order of the rhymes and adds her own complicating inflection to the meaning that Shelley finds in the rhyme between “afar” and “are.” For Hemans, “what *we* are” is by no means clear when placed in the context of what is occurring in “heights afar.”

Elsewhere, lyric’s doubleness takes the form of seeming to offer a single emotion. Shelley’s “When the lamp is shattered,” paradigmatic lyric of loss though it seems to be, turns into a poem of survival, living on. It behaves as though it were describing emotional catastrophe, but we are alerted in various near-subliminal ways, including the alternation of feminine and masculine rhymes, to the fact that not everything is over, even though we appear to be told that it is. The proliferation of analogies implies a brooding obsession and, as is the way with analogies, difference is introduced under the guise of repetition and sameness. Thus, the lines, “When the lute is broken / Sweet tones are remembered not – / When the lips have spoken / Loved accents are soon forgot” (ll. 5–8), work to reintroduce the very idea – of remembrance – which is overtly denied. Partly this is the consequence of the cunning use of inversion: “remembered not” is not quite the same thing as “not remembered.” Partly it is to do with a temporal modifier – “soon” – that contains a world of ambiguity; how soon is “soon,” especially after the strong initial stress on “Loved accents,” which suggest their abiding presence? Stanza 3 brings into the open the fact that the poem is dealing less with cancellation of feeling than with its painful continuation: “When hearts have once mingled / Love first leaves the well-built nest – / The weak one is singled / To endure

what it once possessed" (ll. 17–20). As is so often the case with Romantic short poems, hovering possibilities inhere in the decisive swiftness of the lyric sketch. The idea of the "well-built nest" might imply that the padding of egotistical self-concern insulates some people when "cold winds come" (l. 32). And if the reader wonders by whom is the solitary "weak one" "singled," the answer might be by whatever it is in life that seems to give some people a raw deal, or even by a predisposition, in some people, to play the part of a selfless victim, as in Blake's "The Clod and the Pebble."

Subsequent lines illustrate how much work Shelley's category disruptions can perform: "O Love! who bewailest / The frailty of all things here / Why choose you the frailest / For your cradle, your home and your bier?" (ll. 21–4). Here Love is both personification and feeling. Judith Chernaik helpfully comments: "In the voice of reason, the poet questions a perverse and self-destructive deity" (1972: 158). But the "perverse and self-destructive deity" is also a lamenting poet-philosopher, condemned to see that the assonantal link between bewailing and frailty offers an insight into the human condition. Shelley speaks to "Love" as though to a lyrical alter ego, true to lyric's shadowy sense of hospitality to voices beyond the voice of the poet. In the poem's microcosmic world, "frailty" clings to any notion of stable semantic significance. Not only does the poem's appositional phrasing allow "cradle," "home," and "bier" to become one another, but also the word "frailty," including in its meanings something like untrustworthiness, passes into "the frailest," meaning the most vulnerable: a slide which shows how Romantic lyrics wring from repeated use of the same words concentrations and duplicities of meaning. Love chooses "the frailest" precisely because frailty is not the name of the frailest: the "frailest" may turn out, in the eyes of some, to be foolishly loyal. Again, the show of reason points up lyric's knowledge of all that disrupts reason's careful, encoded patternings.

IV

Great Romantic short lyrics have something in common with the caricaturist's eye for the telling detail (this is the age of Gillray, after all), but they turn away from savage critique toward an empathy with pain. In "When we two parted," it is as though Byron were rehearsing for an audience his need to keep feeling from the prying eyes of a public. The poem's mingled feelings correspond to its metrical cunning. Clipped yet lilting in its rhythm, the poem employs a cunning blend of two- and three-syllable feet to convey both a driving forward to emotional finalities and a circling back to memories impossible to forego. From the opening,

When we two parted
 In silence and tears,
 Half broken-hearted
 To sever for years
 (ll. 1–4),

the word choice seems almost a formulaic compound of Regency favorites, with their accompanying familiar rhymes, “parted” (l. 1) and “broken-hearted” (l. 3), “years” and “tears” (ll. 2–4), for instance. Yet Byron never settles for the obvious or banal. On the one hand, the poem wishes to assert that the former parting served as “the warning / Of what I feel now” (ll. 10–11); on the other hand, the poem is preoccupied with the problem of defining “what I feel now,” the adverb “now” always a tell-tale sign of emotional disturbance and breakthrough in Byron.

In fact, the lyric’s dialectical dance between now and then, pointed up by the return at the close to the opening’s “silence and tears” (l. 32), makes the reader aware that past and present are equally enigmatic for the poet. Odd surprises in the diction suggest that the former scenario is still one that makes the speaker’s nerves jump: the apparent pleonasm of “we two,” for instance, implies that the couple formed a secret society, or still do form one in the poet’s memory, even that Byron feels an ongoing sense of alliance with the woman he seems to be, in some sense casting off. “Half broken-hearted” will not allow the former parting to be thought of merely in tritely sentimental terms. Arguably it is among those moments of “grammatical freedom” (see Hopps) that allow Byron to say a number of things: that each lover was only half broken-hearted; that their half broken-heartedness turned into whole broken-heartedness as they severed for years, as though severing were itself an ironic version of living, growing’s shadow. The feelings of coldness and chill experienced by the lovers seem to come less from broken-heartedness than from a foreboding sense that the future would twist the emotional knife in some as yet unformulated way.

The bite of this lyric, with its drummingly syncopated tune of loss and surviving regret, lies in the way Byron is at once near-accuser and closest ally of the woman. “I hear thy name spoken, / And share in its shame” (ll. 15–16) is how the second stanza closes. “And share in its shame,” there, equivocates between vicariously experiencing the woman’s shame and feeling shame on her behalf. The “They” (l. 17) to the fore in the third stanza have insinuated “their” social norms inside his mind, and yet the “shudder” (l. 19) that he experiences, with its accompanying question, “Why wert thou so dear?” (l. 20), cannot be dismissed only as revulsion at her or himself. Much in “When we two parted” riddles itself in and out of a surprised contact with unexpected depths of feeling: “They know not I knew thee, / Who knew thee too well; – / Long, long shall I rue thee, / Too deeply to tell” (ll. 21–4). In various ways, the writing keeps its options open, but with the openness of an open wound: he “knew her too well,” in that his knowledge transcends “theirs” both through its intimacy and its awareness of possible shortcomings, shortcomings which may reflect his own imperfections; to “rue” can mean, and here does mean, to feel regret on another’s and one’s own account, while “Too deeply to tell” turns its topos of inexpressibility into a strong conviction that the poet’s feelings defy articulation. Things clarify or seem to clarify in the end, as Byron assumes the role of the let-down ex-lover, forgotten and deceived, but the two uses of “silence” in the final stanza (ll. 26, 32) have the effect of taking the edge off his impulse to recriminate, as does the achingly obsessive presence of “thee” in the penultimate rhyme position of both the last two stanzas (ll. 21, 23, 29, 31).

Romantic short poems look before and after, their grace both a torch shining into the future and a frail stay against a tide of pressures lapping against their verbal shores. Beguiling us with glad rhythms and a series of “ands” that declare an apparently joyous disregard for causes, the close of Blake’s Introduction to *Songs of Innocence* is representative: “And I pluck’d a hollow reed” (l. 16), with its hint in “hollow” of something hollowed out in the act of writing, modulates into these lines: “And I made a rural pen, / And I stain’d the water clear, / And I wrote my happy songs / Every child may joy to hear” (ll. 17–20). The reader is left to wonder just how deeply these still or stained waters might be running. When Blake chooses “may” rather than “will” he leaves us certain of this one thing; that our response, our mediation of his meanings, will be crucial to his poetry’s effect.

Lyric looks self-sufficient; Romantic lyric is constantly intent on dialogue, often signaling its intent through an interplay between meaning and mode. Burns is a central precursor or founding father here. In his “Song” (“Oh my love’s like the red, red rose”), he treats the hyperbole of love poetry with a mixture of witty vigor and emotional power. The love is ever-renewing and fresh “like the red, red rose, / That’s newly sprung in June” (ll. 1–2), rather as Burns’s lyric reasserts the freshness of traditional material, “newly sprung” in his lines. Indeed, hyperbole intensifies in order to convey its underlying urgency. An example is the extravagant “And I can love thee still, my dear, / Till a’ the seas gang dry –” (ll. 7–8), where Duncan Wu, basing his text on a manuscript, revealingly reads “can” as opposed to “will,” the received published reading. This head-in-the-clouds boast of unfettered capacity passes, by way of an enjambment across a stanza break, into a repetition and extension of the idea that stretch it nearly to breaking point:

Till a’ the seas gang dry, my dear,
 And the rocks melt wi’ the sun;
 I will love thee still, my dear,
 While the sands o’ life shall run.
 (ll. 9–12)

The image of the “sands o’ life” evokes human limitedness and transience. Without questioning the lover’s sincerity, it exposes, affectingly, his rhetoric as just that: a rhetoric of protestation. That dynamic familiar to lyric – one in which subjective feeling chafes against objective constraints – finds its way into the poem’s nooks and crannies. The poet’s protestations speak to us, in an unvoiced, eloquent subtext, of the human need for hyperbole. Appropriately the final stanza sustains both its tonal buoyancy and its subtextual hints, concluding with a line which imagines overcoming another obstacle in the way of the lovers:

And fare thee weel, my only love,
 And fare thee weel, awhile!
 And I will come again, my love,
 Though ‘twere ten thousand mile!
 (ll. 13–16)

At the other end of the Romantic era, the work of Landon, Beddoes, and Clare reveals a sophistication about song that is inseparable from the implications of preceding decades of practice. The alliance and gap between art and life, “song” and “wrong,” is thematized, for instance, in Landon’s 1824 lyric excerpted from *The Improvisatrice* as “[Sappho’s Song]” (see Wu 2006). Sappho, archetypal female poet and lyrical alter ego for poets such as Mary Robinson in her sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon*, speaks with reflexive accents in Landon’s five octosyllabic quatrains. Her initial rejection of poetry, “Farewell, my lute, and would that I / Had never waked thy burning chords!” (ll. 1–2; line numbers adapted from Wu), settles into a more reflective acceptance:

It was my evil star above,
 Not my sweet lute that wrought me wrong;
 It was not song that taught me love,
 But it was love that taught me song.
 (ll. 9–12)

This stanza gets cart and horse in the right order, but trying to ensure that “song” and “wrong” maintain a decorous relationship is, despite the elegant movement of the verse, difficult. “Song” is the place where “wrong” finds itself named; the chances of rhyme seem almost tyrannies as they demand song thrives on wrong. And the very conclusion, with its sense that “lute” and “wreath” (l. 17) will ensure her fame cannot dispel the impression that the poet lives to write, rather than writes about living.

Poetry, “*The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*,” in Poe’s suggestive phrase from his “The Poetic Principle” (Poe 1982: 894), may demand a heavy price, it sometimes seems, from Romantic makers of short poems, but the continual drive in these poems is toward a tenacious sense of artistic recompense. Clare’s “I Am” converts harrowing, existential chaos into a song of the self, however bereft. In “Dream-Pedlary” Beddoes subjects the relationship between poet and reader to lyrical scrutiny. The poem uses an entrancing measure to lure us into wishing to fulfill its initial “if,” even as the language tacitly warns against thinking we can buy dreams: “If there were dreams to sell, / What would you buy? / Some cost a passing bell; / Some a light sigh” (ll. 1–4). Those dreams may be discernible through the measures of lyric poetry; they may be fulfillable, the lyric suggests, only in death. What is typical of Romantic brief lyrics about the poem is the way in which they rehearse both the attractiveness and danger of seeking to realize, through art, the longing embodied in song.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 3 “The Temptations of Tercets”; chapter 12 “‘Other voices speak’: The Poetic Conversations of Byron and Shelley”; chapter 26 “‘The feel of not to feel it,’ or the Pleasures of Enduring Form”; chapter 27 “Romantic Poetry and Literary Theory: The Case of ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’”; chapter 34 “The Persistence of Romanticism”

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Archaist-Innovators: The Couplet from Churchill to Browning

Simon Jarvis

The heroic couplet might even today seem to provide a rather marginal angle from which to approach this period of literary history. Its overwhelming dominance in the early and mid eighteenth century would appear progressively to have been broken. Other verse modes, especially blank verse, usurped that centrality which had, in the period of Pope's dominance, clearly been the heroic couplet's. Yet the couplet remains salient in the period before us, for a number of reasons. (This essay concerns decasyllabic couplets, with the occasional variations in syllable numbers attending them, and excludes shorter or longer kinds of couplet.) It remained the preferred mode of many of the period's most popular poets. T. J. Mathias's *Pursuits of Literature* was already in its thirteenth edition in 1805. It was also favored by some of those with the strongest literary reputations. When Byron sketched a pyramid of poetical merit in November 1813, second place (just below the very summit, Scott) was awarded to Samuel Rogers, the poet of *The Pleasures of Memory* (Marchand 1974: 200). Rogers's work was for a long while more widely read than Wordsworth's (St Clair 2004: 632, 660–4). Both Mathias and Rogers handled the couplet along lines broadly laid down by Pope's obsessive sharpening of the verse idiom developed by Waller, Dryden, and others – although, as I shall suggest, the conscious continuators of Pope's manner were in fact either incapable of reproducing, or unwilling to reproduce, many of the most important brilliances of his idiom. Meanwhile, other writers were subjecting the mode to a much more drastic series of developments, sometimes under the partially fantasized idea that their couplets were more like Dryden's than Pope's, and sometimes taking models from a still earlier mode of Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline couplet-writing which had for most of the previous century and a half been widely considered merely barbarous. Leigh Hunt consciously developed a much looser mode of couplet-writing, but the two masterpieces of the new couplet are Keats's *Endymion*, a poem still only imperfectly assimilated to the series of literary monuments in this period, and Shelley's

Julian and Maddalo, one of the summits of English couplet-writing, and the instance of a dazzling mode of handling the couplet which no successor proved able to match, develop, or even to repeat. Browning's *Sordello* forms a coda to this mode. Its notorious combination of structural and local difficulty would not have been imaginable without Keats's early couplet manner.

One aim of this essay, then, is to trace something of the itinerary by which couplet-writing in England moves from Churchill's mode (of which more in a moment) to this:

A herald-star I know thou didst absorb
Relentless into the consummate orb
That scared it from its right to roll along
A sempiternal path with dance and song
Fulfilling its allotted period
Serenest of the progeny of God
Who yet resigns it not; ...

(Browning 1840: 16).

I break off at the point where the first punctuation, a semicolon, appears in this passage. Few readers in 1761, perhaps, could have anticipated that the most important couplet-poem of 1840 would look like this. Browning has accommodated to the couplet a syntactic propulsion as powerful as Milton's. The resulting stretch of verse freed from the props and buttresses of punctuation is of a flight and extent remarkable in themselves. It is much more than an amplificatory device for the paraphrasable content – an item which is not always, in any case, to be obtained on every page of *Sordello*.

To tell the story in this way, though, risks writing literary history from the standpoint only of the victors. In particular, it risks representing the history of the couplet in this period as a triumph of innovation over backwardness. Yuri Tynianov, the great master of Russian historical poetics (cf. also Prins 2008) wanted, as Roman Jakobson reported, to call his collection of investigations into the history of verse thinking "Archaist-Innovators." In the event the collection appeared under the more easily digested, but falsier, title "Archaists *and* Innovators" (Jakobson 1981: 136). Study of the development of the couplet in this period of literary history needs to take its cue from Tynianov's preferred title. That compound term hints at the difficulty of disentangling archaism from innovation in the history of verse thinking. It is not simply that some of the most important innovations in this period proceed, as is well known, by deliberate recourse to archaism, but that conscious attempts at conservatism always also result in innovation too, insofar as it is impossible to replicate any given mode of verse with no differend whatever. And Tynianov's title also cautions us against thinking that verse arts are progressive. Certainly, they change – perhaps irreversibly so. Yet constant vigilance is needed against the Whig narrative which takes the destruction of some given technical constraint (for example, the dislike of running sense over line-ends manifest in much eighteenth-century couplet writing) for pure gain in expressive freedom. Verse is a repertoire of constraints. These constraints are not only an impediment to thinking, but, also, as is well known, its motor. Yet what is less often reflected

upon is the corollary. Each time some particular constraint is deleted from the repertoire, the result is always a loss as well as a gain. The exhilarating series of possibilities opened up by a shock such as *Endymion* is intimately connected to what is, taken from another direction, the radical deafening of one part of the nineteenth century's prosodic ear. The entire series of minute discriminations which had allowed Johnson to find the melody of Pope's verse overwhelmingly pleasurable was gradually throughout the following century lost, culminating in (for example) Matthew Arnold's inability to hear that music (Johnson 2006: iv. 1–93, 77; Arnold 1973: 181).

This essay cannot attempt an exhaustive account of its topic in the space available, but it does try to do some work in a somewhat neglected area. There has been a great deal of attention over the years, and now there is again more, to “form” in poetry of this period. But there has been rather less attention, with some shining exceptions, to what might be thought of as the absolutely critical constituent of “form” (if that is the desired rubric) so far as verse is concerned: rhythm and meter. (Among fine studies of verse rhythm and meter in this period, note especially Hollander 1985 and O'Donnell 1995; for important comments on couplet style see Keach 1986.) “Every poet, then, is a versifier; every fine poet an excellent one,” as Leigh Hunt still understood (Hunt 2003a: 24). Stuart Curran's valuable and influential study of *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* contains, for example, scarcely any detailed or sustained treatment of rhythm and meter. We lack an account of metrical and rhythmic elements of verse style which could do for this period what Bradford (2002) does for its predecessor. The doxy that form and content are a seamless unity – a doxy which prompts the question why either term is needed – has provided an excuse for dealing with questions of rhythm and meter in a largely occasional and opportunistic fashion, as though these compositionally constitutive elements of verse were essentially illustrative in their nature, were something which does just what the paraphrasable content does, only – more so.

In this essay I attempt to count some of the small change of verse, not with the aim of showing how in each case form would sublimely paint content, but with that of specifying some of the different manners of handling the couplet developed in this period, and of (tentatively) enquiring after their possible significance. For this reason, there are no “readings” of complete poems in this essay. Instead, I compare sizeable slabs, in emulation of a venerable art-historical method, and in the light of a wider study which I have been undertaking of the handling of the metrical-rhythmic micro-structure of the heroic line in this period and earlier. I try to show how handling differs in each case: to specify the particular bolt-hole in which each couplet-writer ends up or the new manner on which he or she might luckily or creditably happen. In order to make space to give a sense of these various textures, I have had to limit myself to those couplet-writers whom I think most important to the mode's development in this period – so that many perhaps almost equally important figures, such as Clare, Byron, Moore, Rogers, and Barbauld, have had to be left to one side.

None of this, finally, wants to go along with any reduction of art to craft. It wishes, rather, to refuse the still persisting metaphysics behind the splitting of works of art among those categories, and proceeds instead from the constellated convictions that

verse is a peculiar mode of thinking with its own rubs, botches, and history; that poets think historically through their very immersion in the historically mediated materials of verse; and that, consequently, verse technique is the way in which poets think.

I

Few, perhaps, would think of English verse from around 1660 onward as especially metapoetical, given over to reflection on poetry itself. Metapoetical poetry is usually thought of as characteristic of a later period. But English verse from that date is, if not metapoetical, then metaversificatory, at least from the point at which Sir John Denham's lines wishing that his manner of versifying could be like his topic (1974: 103) began to be quoted, parodied, and alluded to over and over again. It is hard to think of another verse cliché which took so long to die as this one. Eighteenth-century readers seemed literally never to tire of it – or, rather, poets never tired of serving it up. Imitation and parody of this passage persisted late. To take one example, one single poem, Crabbe's *Parish Register*, could allude to it to praise frugality ("Sparing, not pinching, mindful though not mean, / O'er all presiding, yet in nothing seen"); to deplore pompous funeral arrangements ("the wearied eye, / That turns disgusted from the pompous Scene, / Proud without Grandeur, with Profusion, mean!") and to deplore pompous funeral arrangements again a few lines later: ("Dark but not awful, dismal but yet mean, / With anxious Bustle moves the cumbrous Scene"; Crabbe 1988: 1. 212–80, 225, 262, 278–9). We might conclude, then, that the ubiquity of this allusion might be because it could capture something important to poets and readers alike about couplet-writing. Couplet-poems so often included passages about writing couplets that the whole mode was infused with a metatechnical force in potential, a potential which could readily be awoken at the slightest allusion, marking, or reference.

This characteristic of couplet-writing is at its most ramified in the verse of Alexander Pope. Couplet-writing after Pope is in part a history of the slow and necessary deafening which alone would allow anyone to write couplets after him – this as a rather elementary anxiety of influence, the element of competitive display which is perhaps present in all verse writing. It was widely agreed in the first half of the century that English versification had arrived at a state of perfection which admitted of no further improvements (for one example, see Gildon 1718: 1. 83). If anything further was to be done with couplet-writing, it was therefore essential to lose the ear for Pope's melody. I begin with Charles Churchill for two reasons. He was a very widely read poet whose literary-historical importance has been somewhat neglected (for a recent case for his importance, however, see Twombly 2005) because he does not fit any narrative of sensibility or pre-Romanticism. He best exemplifies the predicament of the couplet-writer after Pope.

Churchill's escape from Pope is a double maneuver. First, he intensifies a trope which was ubiquitous in earlier eighteenth-century verse and criticism: the attack on mere melodiousness of verse (for some examples, see Gildon 1718: 1. 83; Daniel 1718:

1. x; Barnard 1973: 92). Such attacks are, of course, also to be found in the work of the very poet who was universally conceded to be the most melodious English poet – Pope himself. Excessive niceness in the matter of verse melody was, variously, regarded as Frenchified or Italianate, effeminate, perverse, and so on – just at that moment, of course, when all these nicenesses were necessary conditions of poetical success. A striking passage in Churchill's *Apology* vividly concentrates this series of charges. For Churchill, excessive preoccupation with melody in verse is the equivalent of operatic castration:

Verses must run, to charm a modern ear,
 From all harsh, rugged interruptions clear:
 Soft let them breathe, as Zephyr's balmy breeze;
 Smooth let their current flow as summer seas;
 Perfect then only deem'd when they dispense
 A happy tuneful vacancy of sense.
 Italian fathers thus, with barb'rous rage,
 Fit helpless infants for the squeaking stage;
 Deaf to the calls of pity, Nature wound,
 And mangle vigour for the sake of sound.

Churchill 1761a: 17).

The simile borrows power from a concealed truth. Verse is continuously and ineliminably a process of cutting into language and cutting it up. Nowhere are these ornaments of incision more markedly shown than in Pope's verse. So to compare verse to castration for the song's sake is no chance link – and, of course, it reminds us that the voices of *castrati* were very widely admired indeed, a reminder which brings out that ambivalence which is often present in the kind of complaint Churchill is developing here. Note that the poet is the castrator in this simile, his verse the castratee. All this is building up for an attack on Pope, but, of course, it could not have been written without that poet's work – the *Essay on Criticism* is audible close at hand. "Her Voice is all these tuneful fools admire," writes Pope; "breeze" had appeared as a rhyme-word not only in *Winter* but also as part of the *Essay's* celebrated complaint against cliché-rhymes (Pope 1961: 93, 276–7, 279). Churchill just stops short of the one Pope there specifies, breeze / trees, by finding "seas" instead. The whole passage also recalls Pope's mockery of those who pursue sound for its own sake in *The Dunciad* (Pope 1999: 316).

The masculine "vigour" which smooth poets supposedly "mangle" gives the clue to the second part of Churchill's maneuver, one which was to be repeated in many different ways by later couplet-teers – to prefer, or to claim to prefer, Dryden.

IN polish'd numbers, and majestic sound,
 Where shall thy rival, POPE, be ever found?
 But whilst each line with equal beauty flows,
 E'en excellence, unvary'd, tedious grows.
 Nature, thro' all her works, in great degree,

Borrows a blessing from VARIETY.
 Music itself her needful aid requires
 To rouse the soul, and wake our dying fires.
 Still in one key, the Nightingale would teize:
 Still in one key, not BRENT would always please.
 HERE let me bend, great DRYDEN, at thy shrine,
 Thou dearest name to all the tuneful nine.
 What if some dull lines in cold order creep,
 And with his theme the poet seems to sleep?
 Still when his subject rises proud to view,
 With equal strength the poet rises too.
 With strong invention, noblest vigour fraught,
 Thought still springs up and rises out of thought;
 Numbers, ennobling numbers in their course,
 In varied sweetness flow, in varied force;
 The pow'rs of Genius and of Judgment join,
 And the Whole Art of Poetry is Thine.

(Churchill 1761a: 18)

Churchill's preference for Dryden develops the uses of imperfection. Pope's fault is that he is too continuously melodious, so that the reader tires. Samuel Johnson may indeed have been thinking of just this passage when he suspected aloud that the complaint that Pope's poetry was "too uniformly musical" might be "cant," and that the complainants would "even themselves have had less pleasure in his works, if he had tried to relieve attention by studied discords, or affected to break his lines and vary his pauses" (Johnson 2006: 4. 78–9). Dryden's advantage over Pope consists, for Churchill, in his having more weak lines than the later poet. This provides a variety which is both refreshing in itself, and allows Dryden to suit register to topic. The account of Dryden's admirable unevenness, though, is developed through a demonstrable verbal and rhythmic borrowing from Pope. "What if some dull lines in cold order creep?" asks Churchill. This at once echoes Pope's complaint about poorly handled monosyllabic lines: "And ten low Words oft creep in one dull Line" (Pope 1961: 278). The link is made certain by "dull line(s)" and "creep" appearing in Churchill's line too. Although "order" saves Churchill's line from total monosyllabicity, it finely seizes the point of Pope's line, which is not a complaint about monosyllabic lines as such (a kind of line which appears from time to time in all Pope's poems – in the *Essay on Criticism* alone see, for examples, lines 14, 35, 48, 73, 81, 107, 113, 226, 254, 284, 303, 335, 338, 347, 358, 399, 426, 451, 504, 574, 599, 632, 673, 685, and 744, the very last line of the poem) but about the metrico-rhythmic clumsiness which can dog such lines when syntax does not offer sufficient rhythmic cues. Monosyllables are very often metrically ambiguous in English verse (Tarlinskaia 1976: 83ff.). Whether they are stressed or not depends in many cases entirely on phrasal and syntactical contexts, and so lines consisting entirely of them can produce pile-ups of stressed syllables or of syllables which could be stressed, as in Pope's line, and in the first half of Churchill's. In his satire on bad acting, *The*

Rosciad, Churchill again draws on Pope to provide a stumbling line when he specifies one actor's imperfect command of verse rhythm: "In monosyllables his thunders rowl, / He, she, it, and, we, ye they fright the soul" (Churchill 1761b: 20–1). And when Churchill arrives at his moment of truest praise for Dryden – "Thought still springs up and rises out of thought, / Numbers, ennobling numbers in their course" – his repeated polyptoton is a figure to which Pope more often paid attention than Dryden: "Beaus banish Beaus, and Coaches Coaches drive" (Pope 1962: 153). Many of Churchill's most vivid lines, in fact, result from pursuing, rather than repressing, these plays with repeating pattern which Pope so developed, as in the line from *The Rosciad* where one actor is described as a "mere mere mimic's mimic" (Churchill 1761b: 12).

What this is meant to indicate is not insincerity on Churchill's part, but that verse art, if not progressive, has a certain irreversibility to it. As Twombly notes, "In his poetry [Churchill] claimed to be Dryden's disciple ... but his corpus bears more marks of Pope's writing" (2005: 94). Pope's rhythms and the thoughts developed by them cannot at will be unheard or unthought (on the contrary, this achievement requires decades of collective forgetting) even by one who wishes to take Dryden for a model instead. So Churchill's mode is, in the event, a kind of barer Pope. It is rendered plainer in accordance with an *idea* of "Dryden" – stripped, for example, of the more easily removed "graces of harmony" such as the continual interplay of assonance with rhyme, yet continually playing off Pope and retaining many structural features of Pope's manner.

II

One fear sometimes expressed about couplet-writing, even in the early part of the eighteenth century, was that the technical progress widely agreed to have been accomplished in the second half of the seventeenth century had led to a situation in which it was possible for even mediocre poets to produce technically accomplished verse. The anxiety persisted, as is negatively indicated even by Hunt's assertion that

[P]eople have ceased to believe that wit and verse are the great essentials of the art; much less cant phrases, and lines cut in two; or that any given John Tomkins, Esq., upon the strength of his stock of Johnson's Poets, can sit down, and draw upon our admiration in the usual formulas, as he would upon his banker for money. (Hunt 1956: 130)

But close scrutiny of post-Popean couplet-writing reveals, instead, something else: the difficulty of recapturing Pope's bravura and the genesis of many different sub-manners at once hoping not to fall below Pope's standard and, in the event, producing something less assured. George Crabbe's couplet-work is an instructive example, because of the internal loosening in it which is gradually evident as Crabbe's writing develops. The following passage from *The Village*, one of Crabbe's earliest poems, well

demonstrates how a metrico-rhythmic regularity more violently self-imposed than Pope's produces a stiffness rarely to be found in the earlier poet's work:

Lo! where the heath, with withering brake grown o'er,
 Lends the light turf that warms the neighbouring poor;
 From thence a length of burning sand appears,
 Where the thin harvest waves its wither'd ears;
 Rank weeds, that every art and care defy,
 Reign o'er the land and rob the blighted rye:
 There thistles stretch their prickly arms afar,
 And to the ragged infant threaten war;
 There poppies nodding, mock the hope of toil,
 There the blue bugloss pains the sterile soil;
 Hardy and high, above the slender sheaf,
 The slimy mallow waves her silky leaf;
 O'er the young shoot the charlock throws a shade,
 And the wild tare clings round the sickly blade;
 With mingled tints the rocky coasts abound,
 And a sad splendor vainly shines around.

(Crabbe 1988: 1: 159).

What we have learned to call the "iambic pentameter" was not always, or even usually, called this at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when a justified suspicion had prevailed about the relevance of classically derived metrical schemes to the phonology of English and the meters working on that phonology – or, as prosodists then less scientifically but not less precisely put it, to "the Genius of the Tongue." The term "iambic pentameter" is at the very least unfortunate, because it implies that a five-foot or five-beat pattern is the norm for what was in this period more often called "the heroic line" (Groves 1998). In practice, however, lines with four or fewer stress peaks are often more common than five-stressed lines in long stretches of such writing, and so the assertion that such passages nevertheless "are" in some underlying and essential way "five-beat" lines begins to look rather Platonic. In particular, it is very rare (for example) to find a long passage of Pope's writing in which syllables four, six and eight all bear stresses. Pope will very often leave one or more of these places without a stress – producing a lightness or apparent rapidity of line in place of a stiffly marshaled alternation. This also creates breathing room for the rare yet telling introduction of stressed syllables at places which less frequently carry them – at three, five or seven, for example. The power of this kind of art-verse line in English is closely bound up with its metrico-rhythmic ambiguity, the continual shifts in the numbers of stresses which are found in it, allowing its finest exponents to play on the tension between a four-beat line, with its links to popular meters, and a less readily graspable five-beat structure.

What is at once remarkable in the passage from Crabbe's *Village* above is that four, six and eight in every single line bear stresses, almost as though the poet believed that he was indeed writing iambic pentameter, and that the writing would be unmetrical

were stressed syllables not to appear in each of these places. When we add to this Crabbe's willingness to offer stressed syllables at three – and note how in each case these stressed syllables are just the same part of speech, an adjective: *light, thin, blue, young, wild, sad* – we can begin to appreciate some of the reasons for the impressively clotted, stiff character of Crabbe's writing here. The sheer proportion of stressed syllables is higher than we at all find in Pope, and their strictly alternating disposition in the decisive middles of these lines produces a solidity of rhythmic outline which we do not usually find, for example, in Churchill, or in later continuators of the satirical couplet such as Mathias and Gifford – or even, to take a different example, in the lofty and technically conservative *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* by Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1812).

Unlike Churchill, however, Crabbe is strongly interested in developing those plays with vocalic echoing whose scope and significance had been so ramified in Pope's verse art. At line 9 here, for instance, we have a strongly marked instance in the triple vocalic repetition at each successive stress: *poppies nodding, mock*. This is so strongly marked that it is probably more than Pope might usually have allowed himself, except for comic effect: one essential feature of Pope's melodic intelligence, largely absent from Crabbe, is to induce continuous doubt in readers about whether particular clusters of phonemic echoing represent deliberated marking or, merely, felicitous weather formations. And in the following line, the echo in "blue bugloss" is all the sharper because of the unusual placing of a stressed syllable at three. Crabbe's early verse is not only stiff but also packed, dense with stresses and markings. In falling short of or in relinquishing Pope's ease and brilliance, it develops other effects of its own.

Crabbe's later verse rarely feels like that which we have just been examining. It exhibits more flexibility at the middles of lines, and develops a more open, as well as, sometimes, a plainer texture – an effect reinforced by Crabbe's relative paucity of polysyllables when compared with a writer like Pope. But its end-stopping remains little less strict than Pope's. This internal loosening can be compared with the more radical program of loosening developed by a very different poet, Leigh Hunt. Once again, as so often in this period, this is a relaxation one of whose legitimations is an appeal to Dryden over Pope's head. Hunt found the movement of Pope's verse "see-saw" (Keats's "rocking horse"; 1975: 77) because of the supposedly continuous repetition of caesuras in the same place, and was able to support this by selective quotation (Hunt 2003a: 31). Passages at which the caesura falls at the same place in line after line are in fact rare in Pope's poetry, and thus represent a deliberate act of ornamental incision rather than a default, but Hunt preferred what he took to be Dryden's greater "variety" (2003a: 32). Hunt's own couplet style is certainly a good deal more aereated either than that developed by Churchill, or than Crabbe's or Mathias's or Gifford's:

It was a lovely evening, fit to close
 A lovely day, and brilliant in repose.
 Warm, but not dim, a glow was in the air;
 The softened breeze came smoothing here and there;
 And every tree, in passing, one by one,

Gleamed out with twinkles of the golden sun:
 For leafy was the road, with tall array,
 On either side, of mulberry and bay,
 And distant snatches of blue hills between;
 And there the alder was with its bright green,
 And the broad chestnut, and the poplar's shoot,
 That like a feather waves from head to foot,
 With, ever and anon, majestic pines;
 And still from tree to tree the early vines
 Hung garlanding the way in amber lines.

(Hunt 2003b: 179; ll. 124–38)

Many technical developments come together at once to produce the comparative informality of Hunt's mode. Most evident, perhaps, is Hunt's familiar diction: there is none of the attempt at continual heightening of register which belongs less consistently to Pope than to his continuators, and which is so conspicuous in a later poet such as Barbauld. Hunt's informality has both its advantage and its cost, when compared with, say, Barbauld, in a willingness to relax vigilance against vacancy of sense. Hunt is entirely willing not only to tell us that "It was a lovely evening," but that this lovely evening was fit to close "A lovely day." The repetition is perhaps there to show us that Hunt is quite well aware of the imprecision of his epithet, and wants generously to let us know that its imprecision is less important than the atmosphere of easy conversation between friends which it might help to establish. Hard precision, this repetition seems to suggest, is something which might be important for a topographer or meteorologist, but not for a poet, who should be a friend and companion rather than an instructor. At least as important as this sort of effect of diction, though, is Hunt's metrical-rhythmic texture. The chief development does not really concern run-on and end-stopping: there is, certainly, a little more freedom here than we find in most couplet-writers from the late seventeenth century onward. There are only two enjambments in the whole passage (at 1 and 14), and neither is violent: between verb and object, and subject and verb, respectively (cf. Hollander 1985 on enjambment: 91–116). The medial pauses, where they obtain, are varied in just the manner Hunt praises in Dryden, and the proportion of stressed syllables is much lower than in Crabbe's *Village*. These features, however, despite what Hunt himself says, might be found in many passages of Pope. Much more surprising are those places in which the usual devices for containing a stressed syllable in a surprising place are dropped. In Pope, where we find a stress on 3, 5, 7 or 9, this is almost always as part of a sequence of *three* stressed syllables. In "The Line too *labours*, and the Words move *slow*," the surprising stresses on "too" and "move" are contained by the surrounding stresses (Pope 1961: 282). They can readily be absorbed, as Derek Attridge suggests (1982), as notionally "demoted" for rhythmic purposes. A much more difficult pattern to assimilate into the metrical base of the heroic line, however, comes when two relatively unstressed syllables are followed by two relatively stressed ones. Wordsworth referred to one of his lines in which this happened ("Impressed on the white road in the same

line”) as “the most dislocated I know in my writing” (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1967: 434; cf. O’Donnell 1995: 21–47). In 9–10 here, we have a “dislocation” of this sort in each of two successive lines (“–ches of blue hills”; “with its bright green”):

And distant snatches of blue hills between;
And there the alder was with its bright green,

The dislocation is noticeable enough for there to be a temptation, counterphonologically, to stress “its” in line 10, so as to produce a more compliant series of three stresses in place of the awkward two/two pattern. Hunt is introducing tremors and wobbles into a couplet structure which, while it has begun to ramble rather than to march, remains essentially within the framework of English couplet-writing established from Waller onward.

III

The effect of all these devices when brought together is not one of revolutionary overthrow – it is worth remembering that as well as disliking monotony and stiffness Hunt also warned, conversely, against “weakness in versification,” which he identified with “want of accent and emphasis” (Hunt 2003a: 26) – but one of a loosening from several different directions at once. It would have been easy for Hunt’s readers to link this unbraced metrico-rhythmic texture, and more familiar diction, with the notion of poetry as a form of amicable sociability which was championed in his critical writing. The unfavorable critical reception of Keats’s *Endymion* is usually set in contrast with Hunt’s fostering of Keats. But Hunt did not think the versification of *Endymion* at all satisfactory. Indeed, he believed it to be absent: “His *Endymion*, in resolving to be free from all critical trammels, had no versification ...” (2003a: 109). It is not hard to see why he reacted in this way when we compare Keats’s couplet-style with Hunt’s. The moderate ventilation of the couplet performed by Hunt, and his carefully calculated appeal to Dryden’s supposed Chaucerianism, contrast drastically with the much more shocking recourse (a recourse which, however, is as we shall see by no means total) to the most disorderly of pre-Wallerian seventeenth-century models in Keats’s poem.

There are who lord it o’er their fellow-men
With most prevailing tinsel, who unpen
Their baaing vanities to browse away
The comfortable green and juicy hay
From human pastures; or – oh, torturing fact –
Who, through an idiot blink, will see unpacked
Fire-branded foxes to sear up and singe
Our gold and ripe-eared hopes. With not one tinge
Of sanctuary splendour, not a sight

Able to face an owl's, they still are dight
 By the blear-eyed nations in empurpled vests,
 And crowns and turbans. With unladen breasts,
 Save of blown self-applause, they proudly mount
 To their spirit's perch, their being's high account,
 Their tiptop nothings, their dull skies, their thrones,
 Amid the fierce intoxicating tones
 Of trumpets, shoutings, and belaboured drums,
 And sudden cannon.

(Keats 1975: 206–7; iii. 1–18).

This degree of violence at line-end simply had not been heard in the English couplet – and only rarely even in blank verse – since the middle of the seventeenth century. The poet whom Keats most resembles in the disposition of his couplets is William Chamberlayne, the author of *Pharonnida* – although, as we shall shortly see, no perfect reversion is possible, and Keats's manner in fact bears traces of the intervening years. Only five lines of eighteen here have any pointing at line-end. The effect of such insistent crossing of metrical with syntactical limits would ordinarily be one of apparently unstoppable momentum, where syntax pushes the verse rudely over the line-ends. In couplets, of course, such onward drive is in cooperative antagonism with the echo of rhyme, which detains attention just at the moment when syntax will be propelling it forward. And Keats's syntax is, in fact, by no means merely propulsive. Because it is so often paratactical, rather than (as Milton's so generally is) hypotactic, the forward movement which pushes us over line endings is often aggregative rather than logical. On several occasions here Keats begins a new line simply by adding to a list which has been begun earlier: "And sudden cannon"; "And crowns and turbans." The lists themselves not only mingle imaginable objects with quite abstract phrases, so that the verse yields no pictorially constructible scene, but, in a passage like this, register itself is also subjected to a series of blurrings and minglings. The poem as a whole, in fact, concertedly assaults the very framework for discriminating high, middle, and low which the couplet had turned into as Pope's flexibility, after his death, was made to harden into a series of molds for style. The moment in the poem's story at which Endymion is made to fall from a great height – "Down, down, uncertain to what pleasant doom" (ii. 661) – is in part to be understood in a metaversificatory sense. Endymion doesn't know what will happen to him when he falls, but is sure that it will be pleasant. His romance world is made to lack moral gravity, just as high and low are so thoroughly mixed and interknit in Keats's couplet manner that no bathos can result – because the very framework for determining bathos has been destroyed. In connection with the line "When dolphins bob their noses through the brine," "The words *raise push* were suggested to the author: but he insisted on retaining *bob*" (Keats 1975: 134n). Keats well knew that what later criticism would take for his early and immature manner was in fact essential to the life of his verse.

In this passage, in fact, Keats implicitly links the hierarchy of registers which turns familiar expressions into bathetic lapses with the appropriation of grandeur for purposes of political hierarchy, and his new metrico-rhythmic manner is critical to the way in

which he does this. In 14–16 here “their being’s high account” is immediately taken down a peg or two verbally: “their tip-top nothings.” “Tip-top,” of course, is a word which we have already met in the poem’s first book, to describe the very apex of happiness – as love – and without any sense of bathos whatever on Keats’s part (i. 805). Here it pushes a stress into the usually unstressed third place in the line, and this is then followed by a wobble just like one of Hunt’s: “– things, their dull skies.” Together with the hurry at the beginning of the previous line, where the first two syllables must be crammed into one place (“To their spirit’s ...”), 14 and 15 feel as though there is a good deal of rage being pushed into two lines. But this is then followed by 16’s “Amid the fierce intoxicating tones.” The tip-top stop-start of the previous two now lifts into a line of perfect elasticity, their many commas into a line quite free of all pointing or even of any medial pause, and their many monosyllables and compressing elisions into the leisured pentasyllable “intoxicating.” Keats has most likely, consciously or not, learnt this kind of marked play of monosyllables against polysyllables, and of heavy against light pointing, from Pope, in whose mature verse art it is an essential component. This moment of revolutionary archaism for English verse also sublates and contains many of the technical innovations even of those more immediate predecessors which it seems decisively to be rejecting.

We can appreciate this better if we compare *Endymion* with the couplet-work of the seventeenth century which looks most like it, William Chamberlayne’s notorious *Pharonnida*. There is not space here to quote Chamberlayne at length, but a passage such as Book III, Canto I, ll. 109–48 (Chamberlayne 1905: 126–7) well illustrates the affinities and contrasts. Chamberlayne’s enjambments are if anything even more abrupt than Keats’s. There is no interest whatever in the couplet as a closed unit. His syntax, too, is still more proliferatingly obscure than Keats’s. Relative clauses pile up on top of each other until it is hard to remember with what the sentence, twenty lines ago, might have begun. What Chamberlayne lacks which Keats has, however, is that sense of opportunistic yet nonaccidental play with markings and instrumentations of the verse line which Keats learns from predecessors later than Chamberlayne. It is the combination of these with something like Chamberlayne’s bewildering syntax and free-flowing couplets which produces the astonishing manner of *Endymion*:

Wherein lies happiness? In that which beck
 Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
 A fellowship with essence, till we shine
 Full alchemized and free of space. Behold
 The clear religion of heaven! Fold
 A rose leaf round thy finger’s taperness
 And soothe thy lips; hist, when the airy stress
 Of music’s kiss impregnates the free winds
 And with a sympathetic touch unbinds
 Aeolian magic from their lucid wombs –
 (i. 777–85)

Keats is playing virtuosically with this manner by foregrounding its unusual features, in a way which we hardly find in Chamberlayne. Especially depreciated in the previous century (by Johnson, for example) had been the pause very close to either end of the line, on the grounds that it tended, in a predominantly monosyllabic language such as English, to dissolve the verse character of whatever phrase found itself trapped between pause and line-end. This scrap would become a bit of prose, whereas Johnson's ideal was that you should in each phrase find the scattered limbs of the poet: each fragment of a verse line should manifest its verse character even when broken off and considered singly (Johnson 1969: 111). Lines 4 and 5 here are consciously playing on this: the unusual and strongly marked rhyme of two imperatives ("Behold/Fold") is coupled with a ratcheting up of the improper pause: at "Behold," with only two syllables left in the line, but then, with the single syllable "Fold," at nine. Nothing quite like this is to be found in English verse before Keats. It is the mark of the way in which his delighted recourse to older and non-Wallerian models of the couplet is at the same time – to borrow his own description of the preface which Keats first drafted for the poem, and which was replaced with a preface believed to be less provocative – "an undersong of disrespect to the public," a gleeful series of innovations which live for effect off the very prohibitions which they are overthrowing (Keats 1958: 2. 267). Once more, there is no pure reversion: if archaism innovates, this is, in part, because it cannot usually delete the immediate past.

IV

Keats's innovation is like opening a bottle by smashing its neck, a comparison I borrow from Charles Rosen (1976: 198) on a very different moment in Mozart. He is not merely willing to accept semantic obscurity, partially archaic lexicon, mingling of registers, and narrative complexity as the price of this new mode but appears, rather, to delight in them. Shelley's couplet mode is no less unforeseeable and startling than Keats's; it is also the invention of a wholly unanticipated manner, but one whose intense melody is accompanied by urbane lucidity (Davie 1967: 133–59) rather than by rich impenetrability. Once again, I cannot attempt to give a reading in full of the poem I am centrally concerned with here, *Julian and Maddalo*, because I want to get to Shelley's handling of the couplet mode itself.

This day had been cheerful but cold, and now
 The sun was sinking, and the wind also.
 Our talk grew somewhat serious, as may be
 Talk interrupted with such raillery
 As mocks itself, because it cannot scorn
 The thoughts it would extinguish: – 'twas forlorn
 Yet pleasing, such as once, so poets tell,
 The devils held within the dales of Hell

Concerning God, free will and destiny:
 Of all that earth has been or yet may be,
 All that vain men imagine or believe,
 Or hope can paint or suffering may achieve,
 We descanted, and I (for ever still
 Is it not wise to make the best of ill?)
 Argued against despondency, but pride
 Made my companion take the darker side.
 The sense that he was greater than his kind
 Had struck, methinks, his eagle spirit blind
 By gazing on its own exceeding light.
 – Meanwhile the sun paused ere it should alight,
 Over the horizon of the mountains; – Oh
 How beautiful is sunset, when the glow
 Of Heaven descends upon a land like thee,
 Thou Paradise of exiles, Italy!
 Thy mountains, seas and vineyards and the towers
 Of cities they encircle! – it was ours
 To stand on thee, beholding it; and then
 Just where we had dismounted the Count's men
 Were waiting for us with the gondola. –

(Shelley 2000; ll. 34–62)

I quote at length because so much of the art of this poem lies in Shelley's transitions, his ability to glide without the least sense of strain from one topic or one discursive mode to another. The couplet manner at which he has arrived is essential to this dexterity of transition. The surface is much less forbidding than Keats's for a reader, and yet Shelley's couplets are by no means less audacious in the freedom which they take with line endings. But this freedom goes together with other elements which give Shelley's verse a completely different texture from Keats's. The first is the almost total exclusion of local phrasal inversion, coupled with the extension of a single sentence over many lines. Julian's arc of thought (in, for example, his description of the kind of talk he has with Maddalo, ll. 3–8) proceeds past the rhymes as though these were the merest chance felicities of a turn of mind, rather than a device obligatory once committed to. The result is an ease, a *désinvolture*, which perhaps exceeds even Pope's in his Horatian mode. The outstanding instance of this is in the first line quoted here: "This day had been cheerful but cold." The metrical dislocation is so strong that many readers must suspect a textual error, and perhaps even offer, half-involuntarily, an editorial emendation: "This day had cheerful been but cold." Shelley is showing himself conspicuously unwilling to buy meter at the expense of that inversion. The line is a moment of generous negligence: Shelley can *afford* to throw away the dominance of the verse principle here, without insult, because he so effortlessly accommodates it in the rest of the poem. It is not comic; the poet is not winking at us behind Julian; it is perfectly assured *sprezzatura*. Julian's, and Shelley's, ease of discursive transition, from narrative to reflection and back again, finds also a metrical-rhythmic art of transition which is its equal.

But Shelley's manner in *Julian and Maddalo* has also learnt from Wordsworth's blank verse, whose decisive technical innovation is to bring together an abruptness over line endings as stark as Milton's with the conspicuously uninverted syntax which blank verse writers such as William Cowper and Charlotte Smith had been developing. What results in Wordsworth is a verse idiom at once able to look as steadily at its subject as could be wished, and intensely melodious. One outstanding technical property of Wordsworth's lines is his ability to sustain as heroic a line with fewer than four stress peaks – something which we from time to time also find in Pope, though much more rarely in Pope's putative rhythmic continuators. Shelley here, if possible, takes this even further than Wordsworth. The last four lines of this passage are a virtuosic instance. It is not merely that the lines have respectively three, three, five and two (or three, depending on how one approaches "gondola") stressed syllables, but that, at the same time as doing this, the final rhymes offer us promotion to stress of what might otherwise be verbal small change: "ours," "then." The passage has the same exquisite sense of verse's ability to unfold the inner logic of a temporal sequence of events as we find in some of Wordsworth's blank verse – in, for example, the opening of the fragment "The Baker's Cart," which Shelley could not have known (Jarvis 2010). The final line here keeps tempting a poor or inflexible reader to sound out a stress of some kind on one of its little monosyllables: on "for," or on "with," or on both. But there is just no need to. The line's bridge floats across, remains airborne, even in the apparent absence of the requisite quantity of pillars. In *Julian and Maddalo* it is as though Shelley had managed to bring Wordsworth's sustained blank verse style to rhyme, yet with no loss at all of phenomenological intentness. It is as though Wordsworth's lofty and solitary blanks were made, in Shelley's poem about friendship and solitude, companionably to rhyme with each other. The verse, like Wordsworth's, walks, not hurtles, forward, but, here, does so in pairs.

V

"So what? How would you put any of this into the service of *an actual reading* of any of these poems?" Actual readings gets done by actual readers, not by those who are, actually, when they are in the act of writing, writers. *Doing a reading* is of course really doing a certain quite peculiar form of writing. These are very obvious points, but they are very often forgotten. The presumptive supremacy of hermeneutics over poetics stops our "mental ears" (Prynne 2010, though his approach is not followed here) to verse thinking. What has been attempted here is something else – to try to make a little bit more explicit that penumbral complex of intuitions, experiences, and perceptions which we rapidly assemble whenever reading verse, and which allow us very rapidly to differentiate one verse style from another. This level was and is essential to readers' experiences of poetry, however hard it might be to press into the service of "a reading" of a poem. This suggests some necessary cautions about the search for one longstanding grail, "the politics of style." The easiest way in which to link *politics* and

style lies in those elements of the latter which are *symbolic*, which seem in some way to offer a sign of something. Some elements of verse style are indeed symbolic. They are metacommunicative, in that they send out messages about implied audience, affiliation, and so on. One very obvious instance of such a metacommunicative element of verse style is the divergence among twentieth-century poets as to whether verse lines should begin with upper- or lower-case letters. The possible impact of this upon reading is largely made up of the badge of affiliation which this kind of marker produces: those who begin with lower-case have tended to write nonmetrical verse, those beginning with majuscules have more often written verse which is metrical or parametrical. Therefore, to combine lower-case introits with metrical verse or opening upper-case with free verse opens a further repertoire of plays.

As I have argued elsewhere, however, symbolic or metacommunicative effects of this kind in fact constitute a relatively small and uninteresting part of the range of effects open to the melodics of verse (Jarvis 2010), borrowing the term “melodics” from Eikhenbaum (1969). Significant innovations in verse thinking happen just at the limit of such symbolizations – and therefore, also, at the limit of the recruitment of style to the function of operating as a political badge. Whenever, for the purposes of finding a royal road to “the politics of style,” verse style is exhausted by its possible metacommunicative deployments, a deaf ear is being turned to most of the range of thinking which verse style can accomplish. The conception of style as a badge awards verse no more importance than a hatpin. This is not to claim that there can be no profound hatpins, but the hunch I am following is that verse style might form an implicit mode of historical knowledge which is registering, not those political items which are the current coin of everyday contention, but historical shifts in the structure of individual and social experience which are too profound, too internally devastating or exhilarating, readily to be processed narratively or discursively.

The mutations and mutilations of verse traditions (as well as tradition-mediated refusals of tradition) are extraordinarily difficult, not simple, to map on to other kinds of historical change, for many reasons. The verse thinking of a given poet may very readily possess a much more decisive relationship with that of another poet who may have been dead for decades or for centuries than with an entire crowd of his or her celebrated contemporaries. This can never be decided, moreover, simply by accepting whatever the poet in question might say about his or her verse, just insofar as verse thinking is a mode which in large part takes place inexplicitly, paraconsciously or unconsciously (Blasing 2007). Statements about verse styles belong to a completely different order of thinking and may have all sorts of other justificatory or decoying functions to perform. Such statements are certainly important to notice, but the evidence they provide can be important as much for what it conceals, colors or distorts as for what it reveals.

Verse style changes. It is historical. These historical changes cannot but, for sure, be related in some way to broader historical and social change. Yet verse-historical understanding is still a very long way from being able to demonstrate how these relations might work, because work on verse, with some few exceptions, tends always to be

looking for an instant hermeneutical payoff. The work of noticing and understanding in detail the history of English verse style itself – as opposed to the linguisticist modeling of meter, which addresses only one small part of that subject – remains in its infancy.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 3 “The Temptations of Tercets”; chapter 12 “‘Other voices speak’: The Poetic Conversations of Byron and Shelley”; chapter 17 “Leigh Hunt’s Cockney Canon: Sociability and Subversion from Homer to *Hyperion*”

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The Temptations of Tercets

Charles Mahoney

Why does it seem to be so difficult to define a tercet? To say that it is a verse unit of three lines is both entirely accurate and entirely inadequate. But that is where most definitions begin, and many end. In no way does such a reductive explanation do justice to the elasticity of the tercet's possibilities. Does it rhyme? How? What is the meter of the individual lines? Is it a discrete stanzaic form? Or is it embedded within a longer verse form? The very fact that the deceptively simple term "tercet" may immediately designate either a rhyme scheme or a verse form, or both, only serves to complicate the problem attending the delineation of this curiously overlooked and underheard rhyme and measure. Moreover, the tercet may be construed as a vibrantly representative Romantic measure. A discrete unit of isolated virtuosity in some instances (Southey's dactyls in "The Soldier's Wife," Lamb's "disordered" meters in "The Old Familiar Faces," various of Landor's songs to Ianthe) and of great regularity in others (Hunt's unrestrained use of triplets, Shelley's exemplary *terza rima*), the tercet is a particularly charged site for this poetry's restless revitalization of poetic forms and meters.

Significantly, a tercet is both more and less than it appears. And that is why integral to understanding what a tercet is (and is capable of) requires establishing what it is *not*. It is not a couplet, having one line (and potentially one rhyme) too many. Neither is it a quatrain, having one line (and one rhyme) too few. This is not to say, however, that it is therefore a perversion of one or the other, an undisciplined couplet that exceeded its bounds or an incomplete quatrain that expired before the fourth line. Rather, the tercet asks to be read and interpreted in terms of its own, decidedly particular parameters. More than merely a matter of syllables and stresses, the scale of the tercet has everything to do with a rich vocabulary of architectural, metrical, and narrative possibilities. Structurally, it may appear at first to be out of place, unbalanced between larger and smaller units, if one reflects upon the relative instability of the triadic unit in a poetic tradition which more often assembles itself in stanzaic units of twos and fours, sixes and eights. At the same

time, however, it is integral to our understanding of the sestet of the “legitimate” or Petrarchan sonnet (*cdecde*), and is the preferred stanzaic unit for numerous short lyrics self-reflexively concerned with poesis (Jonson’s fettered rhymes and staccato measures in “A Fit of Rime against Rime,” Pope’s infrequent yet exemplary triplets in *An Essay on Criticism*, the extravagance of Browning’s trochaic octameter triplets in “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”). In terms of rhyme, it admits of no one necessary scheme but a variety of unorthodox rhyming possibilities, whether triplets or *terza rima*, or something else entirely and even more heterodox. Narratively, it calls to mind the undulating, interlocking rhymes of the *terza rima* as well as the accumulating strength of triplets, both operating against the almost contractual commitment in English verse to the self-contained units of heroic couplets and quatrains. Though modestly but three lines, the tercet allows for an outsized array of formal and metrical possibilities, and may historically be seen less to inhibit and confine poetic production than to occasion an unusual degree of poetic virtuosity, as it often returns upon and tropes the received sense of the tercet as a perverse poetic mis-fytte.

Nevertheless, despite its prosodic versatility, as otherwise indispensable a resource as the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines a tercet merely as “a verse unit of 3 lines, usually rhymed, most often employed as a stanzaic form,” hardly comprehensive, as far as definitions go (Preminger and Brogan 1993: 1270). Beginning with Dante’s fabrication of *terza rima* for the *Commedia*, the editors fundamentally limit their consideration of the tercet to this inflection and those sestets of Italian sonnets rhyming *cdecde*, selectively listing important English practitioners before glancing at the triplet (elsewhere identified principally with Dryden), William Carlos Williams’s use of the “triadic stanza,” and Wallace Stevens’s unrhymed tercets, then concluding: “Though 3-line stanzas are less common in the poetries of the world than quatrain, still, they are important” (Preminger and Brogan 1993: 1270). In what follows here, I will take exception to this hesitant claim (“still”?), and the larger, abiding misunderstanding it represents, to argue that tercets, whether *terza rima*, triplets, or unrhymed, whether embedded in longer poems, constituting the sole architecture of shorter ones, or leaping out as an isolated trope of formal discomfiture, are indeed more than merely “important,” that they are in fact integral to some of the most vital, innovative Romantic thinking about prosody. Hence the temptations posed by the tercet. Wherever it is seen or heard, the tercet announces a potential scene of poetic virtuosity, a fit of form against form, as it were, as it unsettles and reconfigures our received sense of the dominant meters, rhymes, and stanzaic patterns of Romantic poetry.

Whether in dictionaries, encyclopedias of poetics, or poetry “handbooks,” most treatments of the tercet quickly reduce its possibilities rather than grasp the peculiar expansiveness latent in this unorthodox form. Poets as well as critics have for hundreds of years repeatedly treated the tercet as either a rhyme scheme or a stanzaic unit but rarely as both. Indeed, some authorities do not even acknowledge it as either. Puttenham makes no mention of any sort of tercet in *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), moving directly from the couplet to the quatrain in his discussion of measure: “And the first distance for the most part goeth all by distich or couples of verse agreeing in one

cadence, and ... [the] second distance is, when ye pass over one verse, and join the first and the third, and so continue on till an other like distance fall in" (Puttenham 2007: 175). Attentive as he is to the structures of joining, overlapping, and continuance, and as often as he cites Chaucer, Wyatt, and Surrey, it is all the more remarkable that he overlooks their important, inaugural developments of *terza rima*, from Chaucer's experiments in "A Complaint to His Lady" through Wyatt's satires ("Myne owne John Poyntz") and his translations of the Psalms, to Surrey's satires ("London, hast thou accused me"). Nor does he mention tercets in his chapter on rhyme.

Soon thereafter, in *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598), Florio succinctly defines the "terzetto" as a "terset of rymes, rymes that ryme three and three" (as cited *OED*), tripling his own use of "ryme" in imitation of the same. Florio's tercet is principally a rhyme scheme (*aaa bbb*) but it is also a verse form with some structural momentum, moving as it does three-by-three. In other words, it is a triplet as now commonly understood. And as Donne deployed them in numerous songs and lyric epistles from the same period. In the songs, Donne often fabricates a stanza that, whatever its initial sequence, concludes with a triplet which clinches the conceit. Take for example the last three lines of "The Good-Morrow":

What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.
(ll. 19–21)

Here, if "two loves" are to "be one," they can do so in a triplet. Consolidating "thou" and "I" in one love across three unequal lines (rhyming "equally ... I ... die"), Donne eradicates their discrete differences in forging the larger, counterintuitive "none" that will abjure the equation and not die. In a similarly unifying conceit in "Lovers' Infiniteness," Donne assimilates each of the three stanzas with a triplet ending on "All," as when he concludes,

But wee will have a way more liberall,
Then changing hearts, to joyne them, so wee shall
Be one, and one anothers All.
(ll. 31–3)

In both instances here, the triplet serves to mix and join two (lovers) in a more sophisticated (tripartite) and compelling way that the nominally more plausible couplet could manage. The more liberal way of the triplet is to exceed the partial unity of the couplet and figure unification in threes: one, one another, and all. Whether in isolated lyric moments such as these or in longer narrative works in which the dominant narrative rhythm is determined by heroic couplets, the triplet often serves to unify, to gather together disparate threads in the service of the emerging "All."

Florio's understanding of the tercet-as-triplet underscores the prevailing poetic practice through the early eighteenth century (after the numerous engagements with

terza rima from Wyatt through Milton), one in which the triplet accommodates a versatile array of forms, meters, and voices. Jonson uses triplets satirically in his epigrams (“On Spies”) and Drayton in his odes (“The Heart”), while Herrick uses them not only in numerous occasional lyrics and love songs but also various of the “Noble Numbers” meant to be sung before the king. Most memorable of course are the two triplets which comprise “Upon Julia’s Clothes”:

When as in silks my Julia goes,
Then, then (me thinks) how sweetly flows
That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes and see
That brave Vibration each way free;
O how that glittering taketh me!

Herrick’s mimetic triplets liberate themselves from the otherwise girdling constraints of the couplet in numerous ways: the overflowing enjambments (especially the first, with its langorous vowels); the indulgence in expletives (the four stuttering syllables of “Then, then (me thinks)” with which the second line cannot quite commence); the characterization of the tremulous couplet-cum-triplet as a “Vibration” which won’t be bound; the concluding reminder that though silks may liberate Julia, triplets liberate “me.” As is so often the case with tercets, Herrick’s reveal a very particular sense of poetic freedom, buoyantly poised as they are between two forms which threaten to constrain them but which here fail to do so.

For Dryden, the tercet is explicitly a triplet or “triplet rhyme,” his use of which he defends in the Dedication to the *Aeneis* because “they bound the Sense” (Dryden 1958: 1055). Expanding the envelope of sound and sense from two lines to three, Dryden strategically deploys the triplet in dramatic, narrative, and lyric poetry for both liberation and a new form of confinement, reliably trading on his rhymes to underscore as much. Consider the pivotal triplet in “To the Memory of Mr. Oldham,” which culminates the poem’s mourning for the “rough” satirist who died too young:

Thy generous fruits, though gather’d ere their prime
Still shew’d a quickness; and maturing time
But mellows what we write to the dull sweets of rhyme.
(ll. 19–21)

Dryden’s “prime-time-rhyme” here not only rhymes on time (what the younger poet did not have) but provides some semblance of that extra time in more ways than one. The fact of the triplet, of course, extends time in a poem otherwise constructed in heroic couplets. But beyond that, the enjambment of the second and third lines – refusing to run out of time, the poem here runs overtime – is all the more breathless due to the alliteration and, even more, the absence of caesurae in the second half of the triplet,

concluding poignantly with an alexandrine. Dryden's use of the alexandrine here is representative of his treatment of the triplet, whether in other occasional poems (such as the epistle to Congreve, where he builds on "Strength" and rhymes on "Space"), the *Fables*, or the translation of the *Aeneid*. (Indeed, it is so representative that Pope, no advocate of triplets, praises as he emulates Dryden's use of the triplet in one constructed accordingly, when he writes "Waller was smooth; but Dryden taught to join / The varying verse, the full resounding line, / The long majestic march, and energy divine" ("Second Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated," ll. 267–9.) In his "Life" of Dryden, Johnson delineates in some detail the history and use of the triplet (and alexandrine), openly acknowledging the role they play in "admit[ing] change without breach of order, and . . . reliev[ing] the ear without disappointing it." At the same time, however, he laments that "though the variety which they produce may justly be desired, yet to make our poetry exact there ought to be some stated mode of admitting them" (Johnson 1967: 1. 467, 468). In other words, without proper regulation the triplet poses a threat to the orderliness of English versification. The variety triplets introduce may be pleasing, but without a "stated mode" of admitting and controlling them, they may capriciously overrun the verse.

Earlier, in the *Dictionary*, Johnson neither advocates for nor essays to regulate the triplet, offering a remarkably reductive definition, diminutively glossing "tiercet" (here, from the French, "tiers") as "A triplet; three lines" (as cited *OED*). But three lines of what? Plowing? Writing? Tetrameter lines? Pentameter lines? Concluding alexandrines? Rhyming how? Without any suggestion of verse, of the turn and return of lines of writing, there is no indication that "tiercet" is even a poetic term. Over a century later, a critic of a similarly august stature, George Saintsbury, offers another startlingly reductive and unsatisfying definition of a tercet: "A group of three lines like *triplet*, but specifically limited to that used in *terza rima*" (Saintsbury 1914: 295). "Like" a triplet but "specifically limited" to *terza rima*? What does this mean? Despite his extraordinarily capacious reading, Saintsbury here provides a definition which simultaneously delineates all there is to say of a tercet ("a group of three lines") and suggests that such a delineation, in its inadvertent deferrals to triplets and *terza rima*, is far from adequate, let alone complete. Here as elsewhere, a tercet is too often understood in terms of what it is not.¹

The principal point of this incomplete rehearsal of the history and reception of the tercet is that while its primary patterns are legible (triplets and *terza rima*, as we have seen), it is not in fact a uniform or "tight schema" but a multifarious and unpredictable one which provides a supple formal and metrical vocabulary, one which allows for a formal play which need not return upon and exhaust itself quite so abruptly as most definitions, historical and contemporary, suggest. Whether construed as a triplet, *terza rima*, or something else entirely, the tercet invigorates through its suggestion of something getting out of hand, of a measure and form perplexing the possibilities of poetry we too often otherwise take for granted or stratify according to received patterns of couplets and quatrains, sexains and octets. Tercets, as it were, keep poets on their feet. In the readings that follow here, considerations of Hunt's triplets in *The Story of Rimini*

and Shelley's *terza rima* (sonnets) in "The Ode to the West Wind," I hope to demonstrate both the versatility of this unorthodox form and its appeal for Romantic poets bent on redefining the rules of genre and creating the taste according to which their works might be read.

Hunt's Triplets

When he first published *The Story of Rimini* in 1816, Hunt prefaced it with a detailed explanation of his opinions on such matters as Italian poetry, medieval romance, modern versification, and "the proper language of poetry" (Hunt 2003b: 167). Of these, the last two warrant some attention, not least because of the sustained, indeed vitriolic criticism Hunt notoriously received in the periodical press as a result of the abrasive pretended principles and presumptuous canons of poetry and criticism. In particular, Hunt's cultivation of a "free and idiomatic cast of language" (2003b: 167) was attacked not merely by Gifford in the *Quarterly Review* (January 1816) and Lockhart in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (October and November 1817), but even by the sympathetic Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* (June 1816), so much so that when he republished the poem in his 1832 *Poetical Works*, he not only eliminated nearly all of the offending neologisms ("A *clipsome* waist, and bosom's balmy rise" (i. 122); "The jerked feather *swaling* in the bonnet" (i. 210)) but diffidently apologized for the "quaintnesses and neologisms, which formerly disfigured the *Story of Rimini*" (2003c: 79). In defense of his innovations in versification, however, Hunt was much more adamant. Having disparaged Pope and Johnson in 1816 for their ostensibly having "mistaken mere smoothness for harmony ... because their ears were only sensible of a marked and uniform regularity" (2003b: 167), Hunt triumphantly cited Dryden in 1816, 1832, and later (*Imagination and Fancy*, 1844; *Stories in Verse*, 1855) as one of the great masters of modern versification ("the rhymed heroic couplet in his hands continues to be the finest in the language" (2003a: 200)). More to the point for our purposes, he repeatedly invokes Dryden in defense of the versification he will not abjure – to wit, his use of triplets (and alexandrines) in heroic poetry.

Though contemporaries such as Crabbe, Byron and Moore used triplets intermittently in their sustained writing in heroic couplets (respectively, for example, *The Borough*, 1810, *The Corsair*, 1814, and *Lalla Rookh*, 1817), none of these poets explained his practice in any detail, let alone took the time to promulgate it as a crucial precept of modern versification. Hunt, however, repeatedly took it upon himself not merely to explain but to expound a practice which was for him integral to the achievement of "variety in versification," a cardinal value in his poetics which (as he wrote later in "An Answer to the Question, 'What Is Poetry?'") "consists in whatsoever can be done for the prevention of monotony, by diversity of stops and cadences, distribution of emphasis, and retardation and acceleration of time" (2003a: 30). The use of triplets (and alexandrines) is so integral to this precept that, whereas Hunt may equivocate regarding his use of free and idiomatic language, he here has "no reason to doubt the measure of

my pretensions ... upon points which I did not feel it shaken" (2003c: 80). Hunt's 1832 defense and explication of the triplet is worth quoting at length, not least because it provides the criteria according to which we can evaluate not only his poetic practice in this regard but also that of his contemporaries (notably, of course, Keats, from as early as *Calidore* and *Endymion* through to *Lamia*):

It has been said of the triplet, that it is only a temptation to add a needless line, to what ought to be comprised in two. This is manifestly a half-sighted objection; for at least the converse of the proposition may be as true; namely, that it comprises, in one additional line, what two might have needlessly extended. And undoubtedly compression is often obtained by the triplet, and should never be injured by it; but I take its true spirit to be this; that it carries onward the fervour of the poet's feeling; delivers him for the moment, and on the most suitable occasions, from the ordinary laws of his verse; and enables him to finish his impulse with triumph. In all instances, where the triplet is not used for the mere sake of convenience, it expresses continuity of some sort, whether for the purpose of extension, or inclusion; and this is the reason why the alexandrine so admirably suits it, the spirit of both being a sustained enthusiasm. In proportion as this enthusiasm is less, or the feeling to be conveyed is one of hurry in the midst of aggregation, the alexandrine is perhaps generally dropped. The continuity implied by the triplet, is one of four kinds: it is either an impatience of stopping, arising out of an eagerness to include; or it is the march of triumphant power; or it "builds the lofty rhyme" for some staid shew of it; or lastly, it is the indulgence of a sense of luxury and beauty, a prolongation of delight. Dryden has fine specimens of all. (2003c: 80–1)

The "true spirit" of the triplet, as announced here by Hunt, consists in three parts: carrying forward the fervor of the poet's feeling; delivering the poet "from the ordinary laws of his verse"; and (thus) allowing him to "finish his impulse with triumph" and a certain formal impunity. That is to say, the triplet allows the poet to break formal rules and boundaries with a particular sense of license, carrying him forward beyond the confines of those ordinary laws which decree, say, end-stopped lines, medial caesurae, and closed decasyllabic couplets. Acutely attentive to the triplet's unique posture, balanced as it is between the threat of a needless extension and a succinct compression, Hunt identifies four principal criteria for the evaluation of triplets: the impatience of stopping (or "agitation of nerves" (2003c: 81)); the sense of power; the elevation and proportion of rhyme; and the indulgence of luxury enjoyment; all of which he illustrates with passages from Dryden's later poetry.²

All of these criteria articulate a continuity of some sort, and all are legible in *The Story of Rimini*. For "impatience of stopping," take Giovanni's headlong agitation when he realizes that there is something untoward in Paolo's relations with Francesca:

What a convulsion was the first sensation
Rage, wonder, misery, scorn, humiliation,
A self-love, struck as with a personal blow,

Gloomy revenge, a prospect full of woe,
 All rushed upon him, like the sudden view
 Of some new world, foreign to all he knew,
 Where he had waked and found disease's visions true.
 (iv. 160–6)

Following immediately upon the initial exclamation, the accumulating emotions convulse the lines as they too rush onward into the triplet, where the scope of this “*new* world,” alien to all he *knew* and could comprehend, forces a third line to encompass his dreadful surmise. Though Hunt often elsewhere enjambes the preceding couplet into the triplet to enforce the sense of impatience, here it is announced by Giovanni’s convulsion and his inability to control his response. In marked contrast to his handling here of Giovanni’s epiphany, Hunt earlier depicts Paolo’s moment of insight, apropos his relations with Francesca, in what can almost be called a gratuitous triplet:

It seemed, as if the hopes of his young heart,
 His kindness, and his generous scorn of art,
 Had all been a mere dream, or at the best
 A vain negation, that would stand no test;
 And that on waking from his idle fit,
 He found himself (how could he think of it!)
 A selfish boaster, and a hypocrite.
 (iv. 53–9)

More idle even than Paolo’s fit is Hunt’s triplet, which seems guilty of “add[ing] a needless line, to what ought to be comprised in two” (2003c: 80). Eliminating the expletives and the internal parenthesis, it might be compressed thus: “On waking rudely from his idle fit, / He found himself a selfish hypocrite.” Though the “story” of Rimini may favor Paolo, its versification does not always follow suit.

Nevertheless, Hunt’s second category, the “sense of power,” can in fact be read in his depiction of Paolo, such as in his display of his horsemanship when in Ravenna:

His haughty steed, who seems by turns to be
 Vexed and made proud by that cool mastery,
 Shakes at his bit, and rolls his eyes with care,
 Reaching with stately step at the fine air;
 And now and then, sidelining his restless pace,
 Drops with his hinder legs, and shifts his place,
 And feels through all his frame a fiery thrill:
 The princely rider on his back sits still,
 And looks where’er he likes, and sways him at his will.
 (i. 300–8)

Rhyming conspicuously on “still,” this triplet halts at the same time as it renders more stately both the haughtiness of the steed and Paolo’s unswerving command over it. Its

power consists in the concision with which it halts the courser's restless, fiery "thrill" at the end of the first line, as if in obeisance to Paolo's "will," his ability not merely to sit "still" upon his horse but to "still" the horse's energies. The stillness at the center (on the back?) of the triplet also arrests the swaying of the lines above, their own "restless pace" (most notably in the numerous trochaic substitutions in the first foot as the lines attempt to shake the (metrical) bit they cannot dislodge), in favor of the measured march of the triplet, culminating as it does in the perfectly balanced alexandrine. Indeed, much after Dryden's own strategy with concluding triplets, Hunt here exploits the alexandrine (always, for Hunt, expressive of "sustained enthusiasm" (2003c: 80)) not merely to create a sense of climax but also to balance an otherwise uneven unit: the third line thus exerts its own sway over the triplet at the same time as it may be heard to sway over the cusp of the medial caesura that balances it.

One of Hunt's triplets demonstrating "elevation and proportion" similarly takes its bearings from measured motion: the description of the riders' accommodation of Francesca on the journey to Rimini.

'Tis down a hill they go, gentle indeed,
 And such, as with a bold and pranksome speed
 Another time they would have scorned to measure;
 But now they take with them a lovely treasure,
 And feel they should consult her gentle pleasure.
 (ii. 149–53)

Though the riders have renounced "bold and pranksome speed" in favour of gentleness, their momentum nonetheless carries them over the couplet's bound into the triplet (here as elsewhere indicative of "impatience of stopping"). Having there arrived (as in the preceding triplet), the first line arrests the poetry's forward motion and imposes a new pace and "measure" for the remainder of the triplet. Here, appropriate, rather, proportionate, to Francesca, the gentle measure undulates with the double rhymes, the added syllables of which temper what might otherwise have been a bold career, moving line-by-line without any internal pauses to interrupt its smoothness of sound and rhythm. This is a triplet which does not elevate, build, and expand (not surprisingly, there is no alexandrine here) so much as it quietly and somewhat paradoxically contracts, as if creating a controlled, intimate space within which to enfold and protect its subject matter. Ensnared in the middle of the triplet, the "treasure" that is Francesca is bracketed both by the riders and the rhymes. Similarly, the triplet with which the poem concludes does not resound majestically so much as it folds back in upon itself:

But no more of sorrow.
 On that same night, those lovers silently
 Were buried in one grave, under a tree.
 There side by side, and hand in hand, they lay

In the green ground: and on fine nights in May
 Young hearts betrothed used to go there to pray.
 (iv. 515–20)

One might argue that the couplet would be the more appropriate form for the entombment of two lovers. According to Hunt's logic regarding the inclusiveness of the triplet, however, one might as easily argue that it is the triplet here that transforms this grave into a pilgrimage site, a larger unity which requires a third (enjambéd) line as a means of invitation to "young hearts." As with Francesca's journey to Rimini, it is a question of intimate rather than elevated measure.

Hunt's fourth category, "continuity of enjoyment," resembles his first, "impatience of stopping," insofar as each perpetuates poetic pleasure through extension or inclusion. In Hunt's description of Francesca's bower, it is characterized, "And ... / And ...", by the "prolongation of delight" (2003c: 80):

The princess came to her accustomed bower
 ...
 [to] enjoy the airs,
 And the low-talking leaves, and that cool light
 The vines let in, and all that hushing sight
 Of closing wood seen through the opening door,
 And distant splash of waters tumbling o'er,
 And smell of citron blooms, and fifty luxuries more.
 (iii. 508, 511–16)

The sensual abundance here is created in a variety of registers: the cool light admitted by the "low-talking" leaves, the subsequent sound of the waters "tumbling o'er" (as do the lines here, even before the triplet), the odor of the blooms, all strung together impetuously until the alexandrine gestures beyond its own confines, "... and fifty luxuries more." At the heart of this synaesthetic tableau is the sense of sight, not so much the word itself or even its rhyme with "light," but the way in which the cool light which the vines "let in" in turn lets in the "hushing sight" of a "closing" wood visible through the "opening door," for it is this concentrated sight-line that opens the way into the expansiveness of the triplet, all that it promises and the "more" to which it can only gesture. This is not an idle verse, but one which exemplifies Hunt's claims for the triplet's "true spirit," that it "carries onward the fervour of the poet's feeling; delivers him on the most suitable occasions from the ordinary laws of his verse; and enables him to finish his impulse with triumph" (2003c: 80). (Put otherwise: the couplet simply does not admit of a poetics of "more.") That this triplet (among others) carries the poetry onward is self-evident. What is critical to underscore here is, as we observed earlier, the way in which the triplet "delivers" the poet "from the ordinary laws of his verse": if one is to fashion a "freer spirit of versification" (2003b: 167), then laws will have to be broken.

Handled in this fashion, the triplet is no longer merely an ornament with which to manifest “variety in uniformity,” but a revolutionary way of unmaking the laws of verse.

Shelley’s *Terza Rima*

Though the “Ode to the West Wind” is arguably Shelley’s most anthologized poem, the majority of the criticism on it pays scant attention to its form. Certainly, there has been significant consideration of its generic status as an ode but, curiously enough, much less sustained attention to its form. While critics necessarily note, usually in passing, that it is written in *terza rima*, there is little consensus as to the units of its composition: tercets? a sonnet sequence? that curious hybrid “*terza rima* sonnets”? Integral to this confusion, I would argue, is a lingering unease about how to manage *terza rima* in English. Indeed, this ambivalence and the absence of a proper critical lexicon is everywhere legible in no less a critic than Saintsbury. Unwilling even to take up the “West Wind” (which he describes as a poem written in “batches,” variously quatorzains, a sonnet-sequence, and *terza rima* triplets (Saintsbury 1923: 3. 106n)), Saintsbury turns instead to the earlier “Prince Athanase” (like *The Triumph of Life*, a fragment) and immediately asks, “Why . . . do English poets seem so shy of *terza rima*, or why is it so shy of them?” His preliminary answer is that, for the English ear, *terza rima* too nearly resembles the couplet and that one is therefore inclined “to read on as if it were a sort of interchained couplet verse” (1923: 3. 106). (In his earlier remarks on Wyatt and Surrey’s innovations in this form, he characterizes them as “interlaced heroic couplets” (1923: 1. 311).) Additionally, there is the challenge of writing in English after the manner of Dante, with double rhymes, few internal pauses, and infrequent enjambment between the individual tercets, all of which contribute to what Saintsbury calls the slow motion and stanzaic integrity of the “Dantean tercet” (1923: 3. 107).

Terza rima needn’t be written, however, under such strict adherence to Dante’s model. In fact, all the Romantic innovations in this form may be said to be characterized by an entirely different quality, namely, fluidity, or forward momentum. (I am thinking here not only of Shelley’s poetry, mentioned above, and Byron’s *The Prophecy of Dante*, but also of the contemporaneous translations from Dante’s *Commedia* by Shelley, Byron, and Hunt; see below.) Though Saintsbury reads *terza rima* in terms of certain reflex actions that slow it down, I would argue instead that, certainly in Shelley’s handling of it, the concatenated rhymes almost effortlessly propel the poetry forward, as each tercet simultaneously relinquishes and announces a rhyme. As James Merrill understood, “No verse form *moves* so wonderfully. Each tercet’s first and third line rhyme with the middle one of the preceding set and enclose the new rhyme-sound of the next, the way a scull outstrips the twin, already dissolving oarstrokes that propel it” (1986: 89). With its attention to the fluidity of motion, the dissolution of rhyme sounds in their own wake as it were, Merrill’s metaphor here is more than apt for a reading of Shelley’s innovative *terza rima* in the “Ode to the West Wind,” a poem characterized throughout by tropes of motion as well as commotion. In what follows here, I hope to show how Shelley’s

manipulation not merely of rhyme but also of meter propels the poem forward, through each section and across the verges that separate one tercet and one “sonnet” from the next. Integral to the significance of Shelley’s practice here is that in the composite form of the poem as he has devised it, he has simultaneously allowed scope for the self-propulsive quality of the *terza rima* and manufactured a way to arrest its potentially endless movement – or, as the case may be, its inevitable dissolution.

“The way a scull outstrips the twin, dissolving oarstrokes that propel it”: although not specifically a characterization of Shelley’s *terza rima*, Merrill’s observation is remarkably apt for precisely this poet, for whom dissolution figures everything from political strife (“Dissolve in sudden shock those linkèd rings” (*Laon and Cythna* I. 242)) to emotional intimacy (“dissolved / Into the sense with which love talks” (*Prometheus Unbound* II.i.52–3)) to figurative evanescence (“Like light dissolved in star-showers”; “Stanzas Written in Dejection,” l. 13). (For a detailed account of the role that dissolution plays in Shelley’s poetry, see Keach 1984: 118–53.) The language of dissolution is furthermore critical to understanding Shelley’s figurations of poetic inspiration in the *Defence*, such as when he writes of those “evanescent visitations of thought and feeling . . . , always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden” that “[i]t is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over a sea, which the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain only as on the wrinkled sand which paves it” (Shelley 2003: 697). The language here of evanescence and interpenetration, of rising and falling, and above all of erasure, illuminates Shelley’s practice in the “Ode to the West Wind,” where the feet do not march so much as they skid, rising and falling, across the lines.

Central to the poem’s drama is the speaker’s competition with the wind in the last two sections, his desire to “outstrip thy skiey speed” (l. 50) and subject it to the incantatory power of “this verse” (l. 65), this *terza rima*. In order to do so, however, the poem must first get its verses up to speed (see Keach 1984: 162–4). And integral to the movement of the verse in this regard is Shelley’s use of enjambment. More than merely a matter of overrunning line endings, enjambment participates in the constitutive tension of *terza rima*, the elasticity of propulsion and a certain reflex action as the new rhyme is announced then momentarily deferred with one last articulation of the outgoing rhyme. This back-and-forth is everywhere on display, but most prominently when Shelley deploys a double rhyme (which he does in all sections but the last, the extrametrical syllable further modulating the poem’s advance) and when the enjambment bridges two tercets. Take for example the opening section of the poem:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,
 Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

 Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
 Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O Thou,
 Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
 Each like a corpse within its grave, until
 Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
 (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
 With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
 Destroyer and Preserver; hear, O hear!

(ll. 1–14)

The heedless rush of the opening apostrophe is tempered by the double rhyme of “being” and “fleeing,” prolonging the time of the first tercet even as the next rhyme, “dead”, tumbles headlong into the next line, driven as it were by its as yet unheard partner in rhyme. (Like “winged seeds,” each new rhyme must lie low until it is reanimated in the ensuing tercet.) The impetus driving Shelley’s invocation and his verseform becomes more legible in the enjambments that bridge and connect the second with the third and the third with the fourth tercets. As is the case with any effective enjambment, each of these hinges on an incomplete syntactical and grammatical formulation (here, the separation of verb and principal object), such that the suspended *sense* of the poem further propels it across the “aery surge” between the tercets. In the case of the second enjambment (ll. 9–10), the forward impetus is that much more urgent when we remember that we are waiting on the restorative powers of “Thine azure sister of the Spring,” whose clarion call fills the entirety of the fourth tercet, “driving” the opening movement of the poem into the embrace of the concluding couplet. Whereas Dante concludes each canto of the *Commedia* with a single line which rhymes with the last internal rhyme, as if arbitrarily breaking off the chain, Shelley here uses two, as if to round back on the poem for a more comprehensive arrest. Concluding this and the ensuing two “sonnets” with a soundly closed, epigrammatic couplet and the imprecation “O hear!” (which, when repeated in the ensuing two sections, grows increasingly defiant), Shelley acknowledges the wind’s savage qualities even as he harnesses them, subjecting its seemingly antithetical powers to the elasticity of the *terza rima* (here itself chained by a couplet).

The impetuosity of Shelley’s versification reaches a crescendo in the fourth section, which simultaneously recapitulates the previous arenas in which the wind’s sway was manifested (respectively, the earth, the air, and the sea) and announces the entrance of the poet into an increasingly fraught engagement with the wind.

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
 If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
 A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
 Than thou, O, Uncontroulable! If even
 I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
 As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
 Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
 Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
 I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
 One too like thee: tameless and swift and proud.
 (ll. 43–56)

After the largely monosyllabic march of the first two isolated, end-stopped lines, the poetry vaults the chasm between the first two tercets at the mention of “share,” as if it might indeed be possible to share the strength of the wind, “only less free.” At the center of a rhyme sequence that assembles “thee” (the wind) and “be” (the poet), “free” concentrates what is now most immediately and formally at stake in the ode: who is to be the freer, more powerful force, the wind or the poet? Though initially supplicating to (and capitulating before) the wind, the poet nevertheless endeavors here not so much to chain but (not coincidentally ...) to “outstrip” the west wind – courtesy, I would argue, of the particular virtuositities and incantatory powers of the *terza rima*.

Enjambling six of the first nine lines and all four tercets into one increasingly relentless surge of sound, Shelley gives ample and varied expression to the status of the wind as “Uncontroulable” even as he strives with it here. At the same time, of course, the formal gesture of apostrophic address, “O, Uncontroulable!”, controls the wind through subjecting it to the lyric economy of the poet’s own voice, burying it in the middle of the middle line of a tercet (“like a corpse within its grave”), and assigning it its somewhat equivocal epithet. With the mention of “outstrip” in the next tercet (albeit an imagined memory), the poet seems poised to pull ahead of the wind. In this drama, however, “speed” sets up “need” and “bleed,” which retard the imagined propulsion, as the poet is once more reduced to monosyllables and static declarations (“I fall ... I bleed”). As was the case in the first “sonnet,” the concluding couplet (again closed) succinctly articulates the thematic and formal drama of the poem even as it interrupts the *terza rima*: “A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / One too like thee: tameless and swift and proud” (ll. 55–6). What does it mean to be “too like thee”? On the one hand, simply the shared and valorized attributes after the colon: “tameless and swift and proud.” But this is unsatisfactory. For what is at stake here seems in fact to be the “too,” the excessive nature of the similarity. Perhaps it is the wind which is “too like” the poet, for here, finally, the wind has been outstripped, “bowed” before the poet who has “chained” it in the linked bonds of *terza rima* which themselves bow every fourteen lines to the blunt

force of the concluding couplet. At this pivotal juncture in the poem, the three attributes ostensibly shared by the poet and the wind have been tamed by the rhyme: rhyming “bowed” with “proud,” Shelley subordinates the power of the wind to the power of his rhyme. Thus it is he can command the wind as he does in the ode’s triumphant close.

The year 1819 was important for *terza rima* in English. In addition to Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (published in 1820 with *Prometheus Unbound*), Byron completed the *Prophecy of Dante* (published in 1821) and Hunt published the first of his translations from Dante, from *Purgatorio* II, in *The Indicator*. Subsequently, in March 1820, Byron translated nearly fifty lines of *Inferno* V (“Fanny of Rimini” as he put it), Shelley translated a significant section of *Purgatorio* XXVIII (“Mathilda Gathering Flowers”), and of course was at work on *The Triumph of Life* at the time of his death.³ In the case of Byron and Hunt, each thought he was the first to render Dante’s *terzetti* in English (Cary’s 1814 translation was in blank verse), if not even to try what Byron called “third rhyme” (Byron 1973–82: 7. 58; see also Byron 1980–93: 4. 214). As Byron remarked of his translation, “I have done it into *cramp* English line for line & rhyme for rhyme to try the possibility” (Byron 1973–82: 7. 58). Drawing attention to the straitened, constricted nature of the exercise, Byron suggests that the possibilities might not be so accessible, let alone expansive in English. (In comparison with Shelley’s, Byron’s *terza rima*, most noticeably in the translation, is decidedly more deliberate, with much less enjambment of any kind and a greater adherence to the tercet as a syntactical unit.) Regardless, the Romantics’ metrical experiments with *terza rima* allowed them to explore lyric as well as narrative possibilities of linking and interleaving rhymes beyond the received vocabulary of couplets, quatrains, and the various sexains that habitually assumed their vocabulary and architecture from the same. And it also allowed the poets who wrote in their wake to explore more varied meters and looser rhymes.⁴

In early editions of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, if you had looked up “Tercet” you would have found the following: “See Triplet.” As I have tried to demonstrate here, the tercet not only deserves but rewards more serious and sustained attention, due in large part to the innovations of the Romantics. In addition to the renovation of the triplet by Hunt (and to a lesser degree by Crabbe, Byron, Moore, and Keats) and the experiments with *terza rima* by Shelley (and Byron and Hunt), the potential virtuosity of the form is also on display in the poetry of Southey, Lamb, Landor, and others. And it can furthermore be read in composite forms, such as the Italian sonnet (when the sestet is articulated in three rhymes), Keats’s ode stanza (*ababcdecde*), and later in villanelles (five tercets before a concluding quatrain), sestinas (the concluding *envoi*, with the six rhymes embedded in three lines), and of course haiku. In the twentieth century, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens wrote extensively in, respectively, triadic stanzas and unrhymed tercets. Indeed, two tercets from this period can illustrate the form’s ability to accommodate either stability or instability, stasis or momentum. Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Roosters” is remarkable for its sensual cacophony and restless momentum, all generated in loosely rhymed triplets that habitually graduate from two to three to four stresses per line as the stanza accelerates:

The crown of red
 set on your little head
 is charged with all your fighting blood.

Yes, that excrescence
 makes a most virile presence,
 plus all that vulgar beauty of iridescence.

(Bishop 1979: 37)

Like an uncontrollable triplet, the roosters' excrescence is not only visible in the "virile," tumescent swelling of the lines but also audible, first in the short rhyme of "red" and "head," finishing in an outburst of "blood," then in the superabundance of the double rhymes, culminating in the parallelism of "virile presence" and "iridescence." Indeed, the vibrantly "vulgar beauty" of these lines consists in no small part in the excess and excrescence made possible by the triplet. As Bishop explained in a letter to Marianne Moore, what was important to her here was a certain "'violence' of tone — which I feel to be helped by what *you* must feel to be just a bad case of the *Threes*" (Bishop 1994: 96). "The *Threes*," in this instance, do not merely organize but punctuate the poem, pushing it to exceed the decorum and propriety of the couplet in favor of a certain bellicosity heard in these aggressively graduated triplets.

Finally, one of Stevens's late poems may serve here in conclusion to illustrate the temptation, if not indeed the reassurance, of tercets. "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract" is a poem of writhings, "Of windings round and dodges to and fro, / Writhings in wrong obliques and distances" without resolution or answer (Stevens 1954: 429–30). Hence the lament with which the poem concludes:

It would be enough
 If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
 In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,
 Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
 Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
 And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy.

(Stevens 1954: 430)

As we have seen time and again, the unevenness of the tercet creates an instability which oftentimes seems to make it incline, if not lunge, forward, whether this is Hunt's sense of the triplet's impatience of stopping or Merrill's sense of the propulsive oarstrokes that drive the *terza rima*. Here, however, in Stevens's handling, the tercet figures stability. After the poem's restless writhings, these tercets first frame then make possible the speaker's desire to fix himself and us "at the middle." Not once but twice in the lines above, stability, completion, and being are articulated in tercets that mimetically establish the "enormous" middle for which, here and elsewhere, Stevens yearns. The tercet is the form of what will suffice. The ultimate poem will be in tercets.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 1 “Mournful Ditties and Merry Measures: Feeling and Form in the Romantic Short Lyric and Song”; chapter 2 “Archaist-Innovators: The Couplet from Churchill to Browning”; chapter 17 “Leigh Hunt’s Cockney Canon: Sociability and Subversion from Homer to *Hyperion*”

NOTES

- 1 Neither in contemporary handbooks on poetic form is there any practical consensus as to what constitutes a tercet. For valuable considerations, however, see Corn 1997 and Steele 1999; for mimetic examples, see Hollander 2001.
- 2 Hunt’s examples from Dryden are as follows: “impatience of stopping,” *Theodore and Honoria*, ll. 88–94; “sense of power,” *The Hind and the Panther*, ll. 281–7; “elevation and proportion,” “To My Dear Friend Mr. Congreve,” ll. 13–19; “continuity of enjoyment,” *Cymon and Iphigenia*, ll. 104–6. For an exemplary reading of Dryden’s use of the triplet, see Ricks 2004.
- 3 For Hunt’s translations from Dante, see Hunt 1923: 434–40; for Byron’s, see Byron 1980–93: 4. 280–5; for Shelley’s, see Webb 1976: 310–36.
- 4 See, for example, Browning, “The Statue and the Bust,” Yeats, “Cuchulain Comforted,” Auden in *The Sea and the Mirror* (the opening of the second chapter), and Merrill, “Transfigured Bird” and *The Changing Light at Sandover (Scripts for the Pageant, “Venetian Jottings”)*.

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4
To Scorn or To “Scorn not
the Sonnet”

Daniel Robinson

Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,
Mindless of its just honours; – with this Key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody
Of this small Lute gave ease to Petrarch’s wound;
A thousand times this Pipe did Tasso sound;
Camöens soothed with it an Exile’s grief;
The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle Leaf
Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned
His visionary brow: a glow-worm Lamp,
It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land
To struggle through dark ways; and when a damp
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
The Thing became a Trumpet, whence he blew
Soul-animating strains – alas, too few!

(W. Wordsworth 2008: 356–57)

Out of well over 500 of them, no sonnet by Wordsworth contains as many proper names as does “Scorn not the Sonnet,” which originally appeared among his *Miscellaneous Sonnets* in 1827. Wherever it appears today in anthologies, so too might appear dutiful annotations to the poets Wordsworth specifically cites, fellow sonneteers such as Shakespeare, Petrarch, Tasso, Camöens, Dante, Spenser, and, of course, Milton. Like many sonnets, this one is addressed to someone – an unidentified and possibly unidentifiable critic – and the poem’s first independent clause is imperative: “Scorn not the Sonnet,” the speaker generally admonishes. The poem is patently a defense of the sonnet as a vehicle for poetic expression. In the absence of any other contextual information, however, Wordsworth’s poem might seem surprising, and superfluous: today’s readers likely are not aware of any reason to scorn the sonnet, retrospectively seeing Wordsworth in the impressive company of, in addition

to the poets he cites, Sir Philip Sidney, John Donne, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, W. B. Yeats, Robert Frost, Claude McKay, Edna St Vincent Millay, John Berryman, as well as contemporary poets such as Mark Jarman, Billy Collins, Rita Dove, and Dan Albergotti, who continue to practice and experiment with the form. Writing sonnets, these poets all have explored its poetic potential by tempering innovation with tradition. Wordsworth is no different. The history of the Romantic-period sonnet largely is the story of two poets – Charlotte Smith and William Wordsworth, with the titanic shadow of Milton behind them. The scorning of the sonnet is indeed part of this story as Romantic poets reconsidered the form's relevance to English poetry.

With so many sonnets to his credit, Wordsworth unquestionably is the leading sonneteer of the Romantic period and is the author of some of the most exquisite sonnets in the English language, most particularly "Composed upon Westminster Bridge"; "London, 1802"; "The world is too much with us," and "Surprised by joy." Although he remained a critical pariah well into the 1820s, Wordsworth's sonnets were his saving grace – critically and commercially. Wordsworth was rarely criticized for writing sonnets and writing so many of them likely saved his career and preserved his reputation. Wordsworth's sonnets represented to critics the promise that he might rise above the deficiencies of the simple style of poetry he had become known for writing ever since *Lyrical Ballads*. For example, Francis Jeffrey's infamously damning review of the 1807 *Poems*, which contains more than 50 sonnets, makes some exception for the sonnets in the volume because Wordsworth, according to Jeffrey, "when he writes sonnets, escapes again from the trammels of his own unfortunate system" (1807: 230). Still, Jeffrey finds that these good poems "are quite lost and obscured in the mass of childishness and insipidity with which they are incorporated" (1807: 231).

Wordsworth's success in the form, as many recent scholars have shown, follows the success of Charlotte Smith, whose *Elegiac Sonnets* effectually revived the form by capturing the late eighteenth-century zeitgeist, by selling well enough to justify ten subsequently expanding editions between 1784 and 1811, and by earning the respect of readers, poets, and critics. In 1792, John Thelwall, writing for the *Universal Magazine*, praised Smith as the country's premier sonneteer, even above Milton, whom Thelwall deems the chief epic poet in English. As early as 1793, the *Critical Review* complained that, since the prodigious success of Smith and her most successful imitator, William Lisle Bowles, whom Coleridge particularly admired, "we begin to be almost satiated with sonnets" (*Critical Review* 1793: 114). Almost a decade later, in 1802, reviewing a new edition of Milton's poetry, the *Critical Review* nonetheless proclaimed that, after a century of disuse, "the sonnet has been revived by Charlotte Smith: her sonnets are assuredly the most popular in the language, and deservedly so" (*Critical Review* 1802: 393). By this time late eighteenth-century poets and early Romantics inspired by Smith such as Bowles, Mary Robinson, Robert Southey, and Coleridge had all engaged the form with great interest and some popular success. This was also the year in which Wordsworth devoted serious attention to writing sonnets, having been inspired by his sister's reading aloud Milton's sonnets to him. Wordsworth, who admits in a letter to Walter Savage Landor that he once considered the sonnet an "egregiously absurd"

form, explains that he changed his mind about the sonnet when his sister read Milton's sonnets to him: "I was singularly struck with the style and harmony, and the gravity, and republican austerity of those compositions" (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1978: 125–6). Wordsworth later recalled being "struck on that occasion with the dignified simplicity and majestic harmony that runs through most of them"; as he put it, he "took fire" and wrote three sonnets, one of them the sonnet on Napoleon beginning "I grieved for Buonaparte," which he published in the *Morning Post* in 1802 (W. Wordsworth 1993: 19). Shortly thereafter, by the end of 1802, his sister, Dorothy, notes that he has taken some time to reread Smith's sonnets along with Milton's while working on his own (D. Wordsworth 2002: 135). And years later, roughly contemporaneous with "Scorn not the Sonnet," in 1830, he urged Alexander Dyce to include more of Smith's sonnets – in a second edition of his *Specimens of English Poetesses* (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1979: 260). In 1836, moreover, calling her his "old Friend," Wordsworth remarks that Smith "was the first *Modern* distinguished in that Composition," the sonnet (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1982: 149–50). His fascination – one might say obsession – with the sonnet began with these two very different sonneteers and they remained touchstones in his thinking about the form.

Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* not only revived the sonnet but the emotional resonances that pervade Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, and in fact includes four translations from Petrarch. The first sonnet in Smith's series borrows the Petrarchan conceit of the poetic laurel that Petrarch also associates with his beloved Laura. This sonnet is in its own way a sonnet about itself and its relationship to the Petrarchan tradition. It opens by proclaiming the favor of "the partial Muse" that

has from my earliest hours
Smiled on the rugged path I'm doom'd to tread
And still with sportive hand has snatch'd wild flowers
To weave fantastic garlands for my head. . . .
(Smith 2007: 17, ll. 1–4)

Like Petrarch, she too has been favored by the Muse and crowned with "fantastic garlands," which unlike the classical laurel leaves, are humble and rustic, made of wild flowers, and are specifically English. Smith's muse, moreover, is not the angelic Laura but a more ambivalent, potentially sadistic muse who favors those gifted with a feeling heart and eloquent means of expression. But this poetic favor does not come without the heavy price of a sensitive heart to feel the pricks of the roses with which her muse has decked her. The poet is gifted with a sensibility that intensifies every mode of perception, including painful emotion. The sonneteer feels more pain, as she asserts, "But far, far happier is the lot of those / Who never learn'd her dear delusive art" (Smith 2007: 17, ll. 5–6). Smith, even in this first sonnet, and in the others that follow, appears to miss the consolatory light of heaven that Petrarch gains from the death of Laura; and thus, Smith's persona takes a strikingly anti-Petrarchan stance. The reader completes the triangle begun in the exploration of the relationship between the

poet and her muse in the first two quatrains and becomes essential to understanding the way the sonnet's expressive despair works. Borrowing from Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard*, Smith closes the sonnet with an acknowledgment that the poet, with her heightened sensitivity of perception and feeling, is the best recorder of human emotion, while again emphasizing the expense of such power: "Ah! then, how dear the Muse's favours cost, / *If those paint sorrow best – who feel it most!*" (Smith 2007: 17, ll. 13–14). The poem thus ends, not with an allusion to Petrarch, but to perhaps the most popular English poem of the eighteenth century, *Eloisa to Abelard*, a poem that resounds throughout the so-called literature of Sensibility that leads into Romanticism. But, in Smith's hands, the allusion to Pope is also the keynote of the Romantic-period sonnet revival. And it significantly comes in a couplet, concluding the sonnet in the now-familiar Shakespearean manner.

Despite her immense popularity, Smith is missing from the list of poets in "Scorn not the Sonnet." Possibly, Smith's is too contemporaneous a name to enlist in Wordsworth's appeal to an established tradition – Milton being the most recent writer mentioned. Wordsworth's sonnet predicates its defense on historical perspective and on a generally established conception of the form – a fourteen-line poem that rhymes. Given the variety of sonnets composed by these venerable poets, Wordsworth permits in other sonneteers fairly broad latitude in following the rules: many of them produced idiosyncratic sonnets that differ from the strict Petrarchan model, which in the eighteenth century was called the "legitimate" sonnet – the two chief violators of Petrarchan form in Wordsworth's list being Shakespeare and Spenser whose eponymous variations are well recognized today. In the eighteenth century and for most of the nineteenth, however, non-Petrarchan variations – including Shakespeare's – were deemed "illegitimate" sonnets or occasionally were given the more neutral designation of *quatorzain*, which simply means fourteen-line stanza, as Capel Lofft had done in his massively comprehensive 1814 sonnet anthology. Smith's formal designation is "elegiac," a reference to the quatrains as much as to the melancholy tone characteristic of her sonnets (D. Robinson 2003). The majority of Wordsworth's sonnets, however, are Petrarchan in form, with an *abbaabba* octave. Traditionally, the Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet consists of two discrete formal and rhetorical parts: the octave presents a description, position, or conflict that the sestet modifies, changes, or resolves; but the two parts are usually marked by a volta, or turn in thought, that comes after an end-stopped eighth line. Wordsworth particularly admired a slight but no less important structural variation in Milton's practice: Milton's elision of the volta and the rhetorical division of the Italian sonnet, while maintaining the rhyme. Following the example of Italian poet Giovanni Della Casa, Milton in his sonnets enjambes the octave and the sestet to create what Wordsworth describes in an 1833 letter as the "intense Unity" of "the image of an orbicular body, – a sphere – or a dew drop" (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1979: 604–5).

More than thirty years earlier, just a few months after rediscovering Milton's sonnets with Dorothy, Wordsworth had written of Milton's sonnets that their "music" "has an energetic and varied flow of sound crowding into narrow room" (Wordsworth and

Wordsworth 1967: 379). This is an image he employs in his first sonnet on the sonnet, “Nuns fret not at their Convent’s narrow room,” which culminates in a defense of the “sonnet’s scanty plot of ground.” In this sonnet, originally designated as the “Prefatory Sonnet” for his series of sonnets in 1807, Wordsworth asserts that he can move about freely within the confines of the sonnet:

In sundry moods, ‘twas pastime to be bound
 Within the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground:
 Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find short solace there, as I have found.
 (W. Wordsworth 2008: 286, ll. 10–14)

It is precisely in this “narrow room” where Wordsworth distinguishes himself from his immediate predecessors and claims poetic immortality for himself. Even the adjective in line 14, “short” modifying “solace,” tropes the form itself more explicitly than the later-revised line’s “brief solace,” which draws attention away from the form’s size. Wordsworth clearly likes the challenge of containment – a preference that, in general, agrees with the position he takes on meter and form in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: the unity of the sonnet form supplies “the co-presence of something regular” that tempers the excesses of emotion or even of metrical effects within the lines themselves (W. Wordsworth 2008: 609). So, in “Scorn not the Sonnet,” while Wordsworth defends the form in general from those who would scorn it, he himself prefers the more subtle impression of the sonnet being one whole, rather than, for example, three quatrains and a couplet, as in the Shakespearean sonnet, which give the impression of four discrete and movable parts – with the final couplet producing a punch line effect at the end. Referring to the Shakespearean or illegitimate sonnet, Henry Crabb Robinson wrote that Wordsworth considered “it to be absolutely a vice to have a sharp turning at the end with an epigrammatical point” (1938: 2. 485). With the exception of his first sonnet – “On Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress,” published in 1787 when he was seventeen and under the influence of Charlotte Smith – Wordsworth avoided the English or Shakespearean form. So, even as he introduces “the Sonnet” in “Scorn not the Sonnet” according to a loose definition of the form, the subsequent rhyme scheme and punctuation reveal that this particular sonnet is the Wordsworthian-Miltonic variation – a potent rejoinder in and of itself to the critic’s contempt.

After this imperative, the speaker immediately addresses this critic with the charge that the critic’s disdain is profoundly ignorant. Excepting the possibility that he is upbraiding himself for his initial opinions, Wordsworth’s sonnet would seem to suggest, as Lee M. Johnson asserts, that “the form was in disrepute” (1974: 40). But this is a preposterous claim given the popularity of the form. Indeed, the sonnet has never really been in disrepute since the eighteenth century, when Samuel Johnson so facetiously defined “sonnet” as a “small poem” and then “sonneteer” as a “small poet” in

his *Dictionary*. Writing this sonnet sometime between 1820 and 1827, Wordsworth, by the time it was published, already had composed around 400 sonnets and had published his most successful volume to date – *The River Duddon* (1820), a sequence of legitimate sonnets. And a second generation of Romantics – Keats, Shelley, Horace Smith, Leigh Hunt, Mary F. Johnson, Samuel Rogers, John Clare, Elizabeth Cobbold, even Byron – already had experimented with the form to various degrees, even engaging in sonnet-writing contests as tests of skill, as Shelley and Smith and Keats and Hunt had done. Shelley had written such outstanding sonnets as “To Wordsworth,” “Ozymandias,” “England in 1819,” and “Lift not the painted veil”; Keats had written the exceptional sonnets “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” “Bright Star,” and “When I have fears that I may cease to be.” Regardless of whether or not Wordsworth knew what his juniors were up to, the composition of such superb poems by them certainly suggests an environment in which writing sonnets was no shameful activity. So, who is the frowning critic wrongheaded enough to denounce the poetic achievements of such great writers in such a traditionally demanding form? And upon what grounds might this critic base such a negative appraisal?

Given the nearly universal approbation of Wordsworth’s sonneteering, the phantom “Critic” of “Scorn not the Sonnet” seems like a straw-man. Leigh Hunt, invoking Wordsworth’s “Critic,” practically admits as much in his introductory essay to *The Book of the Sonnet*, posthumously published in 1867 (Hunt 2003: 297). Here, for the purposes of informing the ignorant sonnet-scorner, and stopping tantalizingly short of the magic number for sonnets, Hunt delivers thirteen rules for sonnet composition, chief among them its form: “in order to be a perfect work of art, and no compromise with a difficulty, must in the first place be a Legitimate Sonnet after the proper Italian fashion; that is to say, with but two rhymes to the octave, and not more than three in the sestet” (Hunt 2003: 297). The difficulty of rhyming in English according to the Italian form is both the reason the English sonnet developed and the claim the legitimate sonnet makes for the poet who meets the challenge. Even Milton, though, could not escape the censure of Samuel Johnson in his *Prefaces to the Works of the English Poets* (1779): the best he can say of some of Milton’s sonnets is that “they are not bad”; but Johnson sees the form as inherently impractical for the English tongue, due to the lack of similar word endings: “The fabric of a sonnet, however adapted to the Italian language, has never succeeded in ours, which, having greater variety of termination, requires the rhymes to be often changed” (1984: 702). So, Johnson’s complaint really is against the greater number of rhymes in the English sonnet, implying of course that the fewer rhymes required by the Italian scheme is too difficult for even the best of poets. Johnson seems eager to dismiss the sonnets as trivial achievements so that he can move on to *Paradise Lost*, and obviously many intelligent readers have agreed on Milton’s success in the form. But poets such as Spenser, before Milton, and Keats, after him, also found the Italian form inappropriate for the language, while still succumbing to the appeal of the sonnet as an intricate means of developing the lyrical impulse within a set form. Both simply tried to find different ways of interweaving

rhymes. Perhaps following Spenser's example, Keats experimented with his own nonce sonnet that could match the legitimate sonnet's minute complexity. As Keats writes to his brother George in 1819, "I have been endeavouring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have. The legitimate does not suit the language over-well from the pouncing rhymes; the other kind appears too elegiac, and the couplet at the end of it seldom has a pleasing effect" (2002: 298). This letter also includes a draft of a new sonnet ("If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd") to illustrate his attempt but admits that he has not "succeeded" at it. Like Wordsworth's "Scorn not the Sonnet," Keats's is another sonnet-on-the-sonnet, a kind of metapoem that emerged during the Romantic revival:

If by dull rhymes our english must be chain'd,
 And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet
 Fetter'd in spite of pained Loveliness;
 Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,
 Sandals more interwoven and complete
 To fit the naked foot of Poesy.
 Let us inspect the Lyre, and weigh the stress
 Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd
 By ear industrious and attention meet.
 Misers of sound and syllable no less
 Than Midas of his coinage, let us be
 Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown.
 So if we may not let the Muse be free,
 She will be bound with garlands of her own.

(Keats 2002: 298–9)

Here, Keats uses the same metaphor – "garlands" not "laurels" – that Smith does in her sonnet above. But these garlands represent the peculiarities of the sonnet form itself. Keats's sonnet is about its own limitations and expresses considerable (and perhaps facetious) resentment at how the tradition has kept the Muse from being completely free but acknowledges that "She will be bound with Garlands of her own," while managing what Susan J. Wolfson calls "an escape-artist performance" from "the binds of tradition" (2001: 105). But at the same time, Keats mostly composed sonnets in the established legitimate form, with only a few exceptions.

Compared with the Italian one, the illegitimate sonnet, then, seemed facile and structurally flawed. Despite Smith's popularity, this had long been the criticism leveled at not only her poetry but Shakespeare's – and their scores of imitators. Although Shakespeare is one of the poets Wordsworth names in "Scorn not the Sonnet," Wordsworth's preference for Milton's sonnets over Shakespeare's recalls the eighteenth-century debate over the English sonnet's legitimacy, giving "Scorn not the Sonnet" a strange anachronistic irrelevance. In 1793 George Steevens scornfully omitted the sonnets from his edition of Shakespeare only to be praised for doing so by critic Nathan Drake in 1798 (Havens 1922: 481). In 1805, another critic denounced Shakespeare's

"spurious form" while praising the sonnets of Milton, who has "drunk from the sweet streams of Italy, where a single sonnet can give immortality to its author" (Herbert 1805: 297). Praising a sonnet by Robert Merry, writing under the pseudonym Leonardo, the poetry editor of *The World* on January 10, 1789 wrote in an editorial headnote, obliquely referring to the sensation occasioned by Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*: "We hear of *Sonnets* every day; but seldom is it we have seen one *metrically correct*, after the manner of Petrarch" (Leonardo 1789). So it seems that Smith, more than Shakespeare, gave license to poets eager to take liberties with the form.

Some of these liberties went too far – literally. Two years earlier, for example, *The World* had published a poem of thirty-six lines, in couplets, entitled "Love Renew'd. A Sonnet"; in 1794, both the *European Magazine* and *Town and Country Magazine* printed Joseph Moser's poem of five six-line lyrical stanzas entitled "The Captive's Return, a Sonnet"; and the highly regarded novelist Ann Radcliffe experimented with eighteen-line interpolated sonnets in her novels *Romance of the Forest* (1791) and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). But it was Smith's form that became ubiquitous; the London newspapers from the 1790s are rife with hundreds of sonnets many of which bear the influence of Smith's – many inscribed to her and to other poets – but fail to come anywhere close to hers in quality. Even Coleridge began his career as devotee of Smith's sonnets with his illegitimate sonnet "To the Autumnal Moon," written in 1788 at the age of sixteen, one year before Bowles's sonnets would appear. Coleridge later privately would print in 1796 a pamphlet called *Sonnets from Various Authors* in which he attempts to show by Smith's and Bowles's examples that the English one is the superior form (see Zall 1967). As he writes in his preface to the pamphlet, Smith and Bowles "first made the Sonnet popular among the present English: I am justified therefore by analogy in deducing its laws from *their* compositions"; Coleridge goes on to assert that the defining characteristic of fourteen lines is arbitrary, the essential requirement for him being the development of "some lonely feeling" (2004: 49). He goes on to reject the Italian form as unsuitable for the English language, finding that attempts at that form in English result in "racked and tortured Prose rather than anything resembling Poetry" (2004: 50).

While Coleridge expressed something of a cavalier attitude toward the formal demands of the sonnet, women poets such as Anna Seward and Mary Robinson made their claim to poetic legitimacy by writing legitimate sonnets (D. Robinson 1995). As Hunt points out, the Italian or legitimate sonnet should have no more than five rhymes, whereas the English-Shakespearean-elegiac-illegitimate sonnet has seven. Smith, like Shakespeare and others before her, found, as she writes in the first preface to *Elegiac Sonnets*, "the legitimate Sonnet is ill calculated for our language." But many poets found the challenge to be an inspiration because, after all, Milton had done it. In "To Mr. Henry Cary, on the Publication of his Sonnets," a poem worthy of comparison to "Scorn not the Sonnet," Anna Seward makes a similar assertion of the sonnet's "just honours":

Praised be the Poet, who the sonnet's claim,
Severest of the orders that belong
Distinct and separate to the Delphic Song,

Shall venerate, nor its appropriate name
 Lawless assume. Peculiar is its frame,
 From him derived, who shunned the city throng,
 And warbled sweet thy rocks and streams among,
 Lonely Valclusa! – and that heir of fame,
 Our greater Milton, hath, by many a lay
 Formed on that arduous model, fully shown
 That English verse may happily display
 Those strict energetic measures, which alone
 Deserve the name of sonnet, and convey
 A grandeur, grace and spirit, all their own.

(cited in Feldman and Robinson 1999: 103)

Originally published with Henry Francis Cary's *Sonnets and Odes* (1788) and reprinted in her own *Original Sonnets* (1799), Seward's sonnet on the sonnet, even more so than Wordsworth's, is in strict formal allegiance to Milton's, although the sonnet finds Seward playing offense where Wordsworth plays defense. Seward's sonnet is born out of frustration with Charlotte Smith's popularity and Smith's preference for the illegitimate sonnet, so her sonnet is an attack on those who would "lawless[ly] assume" the title of sonneteer. Like Hunt, Seward sees mastery of the more difficult form as a demonstration of poetic supremacy. Similarly, Mary Robinson's 1796 sequence *Sappho and Phaon*, which anticipates by fifty years Elizabeth Barrett Browning's similar *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, performs a strictly Petrarchan sequence as a claim to poetic skill: she writes in the preface,

To enumerate the variety of authors who have written sonnets of all descriptions, would be endless; indeed few of them deserve notice: and where, among the heterogeneous mass of insipid and laboured efforts, sometimes a bright gem sheds lustre on the page of poesy, it scarcely excites attention, owing to the disrepute in which sonnets are fallen. So little is rule attended to by many, who profess the art of poetry, that I have seen a composition of more than thirty lines, ushered into the world under the name of Sonnet, and that, from the pen of a writer, whose classical taste ought to have avoided such a misnomer. (M. Robinson 2009: 321)

The aforementioned "Love Renew'd" may be the offending poem to which Robinson alludes (especially since she had been a frequent contributor to the paper in which it had appeared); but while she pays her respects to Smith, she clearly has a more ambitious agenda than simply to demonstrate her ability to write fourteen-line stanzas in whatever form suits her. She employs Petrarchan form in the name of the archetypal woman poet (and lyric poet) as a means of subverting the tradition in which the male poet sublimates sexual desire for an unattainable female object of desire as poetic immortality; and, as Browning would do later, Robinson chooses to do so in a sequence of forty-four perfectly legitimate sonnets to show, in the most gendered sense possible, how she has mastered that tradition. Sexual politics aside, if there is a poetics of sonnet-writing, Robinson and

Seward have articulated it as well as anyone. The sonnet, more so than any other form other than the epic, its formal doppelganger, is always an allusion to every other poem of its kind ever written. The sonnets of the English Renaissance, for instance, particularly those of Sidney, Spenser, Drayton, and Shakespeare – even the *Holy Sonnets* of Donne – are always about Petrarch, his Laura, and his *laurel*, regardless of whatever else they have to say. After Petrarch, sonneteers tend to approach the form with an eye toward immortality: as Shakespeare writes, in his famous "Sonnet 18" ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"), "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." "This" is of course the sonnet.

For sonneteers of the Romantic period, though, the sonnet had lost its novelty: it had been stripped of Petrarchan erotics by Milton and then it had been scorned by the greatest poet of the eighteenth century, Alexander Pope. Even Wordsworth had disparaged Gray's sonnet on Richard West in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The sonnet revival offered a choice: either the form was going to be an artifact of the Renaissance and a gaudy display of poetic pretension and artifice, or it was going to be a test of poetic prowess and a means of ensuring poetic fame. Due to the success of the illegitimate sonnet, however, it also became a choice between popular culture and literary tradition. Wordsworth's sonnets seem to have made the case so well that by 1829 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, in surveying Wordsworth's career, could assert that "it is chiefly by his sonnets that Wordsworth will be known to posterity" (Townshend 1829: 907). The reviewer, C. H. Townshend, goes on to suggest that a disdain for Smith's illegitimate sonnets similar to Seward's lay behind Wordsworth's omission of her from his version of the sonnet tradition; it is the difficulty of the attempt and subsequent success that determines the quality of the sonnet:

When we read the sonnets of Milton, or of Warton, we feel that each of them is the result of more thought, and more tends to produce thought in others, than many a long poem which has issued from a mind of weaker stuff. On this ground, more than on account of their nonconformity to the sonnet rules, I should deny the name of sonnet to the compositions of Bowles, or Mrs. Charlotte Smith. They may be pretty songs, or pathetic elegies, but they are not sonnets. They were popular, for they neither resulted from deep thought, nor required deep thought for the comprehension of them. The sonnets of Shakspeare and Milton (however admired by the few) have never been popular, because they address themselves to the understanding as well as the heart, to the imagination rather than to the fancy. Of this stamp are the sonnets of Wordsworth. (Townshend 1829: 907)

Despite the popularity of Smith's sonnets, they failed to speak to the next generation of readers because they reeked of what we might call today popular culture. Although Smith's sonnets today have risen in critical and scholarly estimation, to most Romantic-period readers, Smith's sonnets were the pop songs of her day, sentimental and pathetic but utterly consumable, even disposable. The entire enterprise of writing sonnets – at least legitimate ones – would seem to be in direct opposition to consumable culture; and poets such as Seward, Robinson, and Wordsworth have invested in a conception of the sonnet as something only the best poets can do.

In 1838, Wordsworth collected his own sonnets in one volume and publicly announced his debt to Milton by dedicating the book to him. In his "Advertisement to the First Edition," Wordsworth writes that it was his admiration of Milton that first "tempted" him to write sonnets: "The fact is not mentioned from a notion that it will be deemed of any importance by the reader, but merely as a public acknowledgment of one of the innumerable obligations, which, as a Poet and a Man, I am under to our great fellow-countryman" (1838: n.p.). Ironically, this dedication is of supreme importance to Wordsworth's reputation because it, above all else, changed the literary history of the sonnet revival. While it is clear that Wordsworth is not the only major sonnet writer since Milton, it is true that Wordsworth is the first poet to make a significant contribution to the sonnet revival following Charlotte Smith that considerably diverges from her example – and the first *male* poet to do so. Thus, the irony is underscored in the distinction of kinship Wordsworth makes between himself and Milton as poets and as men. The fraternal allegiance Wordsworth suggests here overwrites the previous generation of sonnet writers, many of the most successful of whom were women. As Frederick Burwick suggests, for Wordsworth and other male poets – after the success of women sonneteers, chief among them, Charlotte Smith – to reclaim the sonnet as masculine it was necessary "to regender the form" (Burwick 1997: 142); or, more precisely, to *de*-gender it. It seems likely that Wordsworth, if not attempting to distance himself from women poets, is at least distancing himself from a version of the sonnet that had become cloyingly trendy, and explicitly feminine, by the end of the eighteenth century. And Smith starts to disappear from the tradition at almost the same time Wordsworth publishes "Scorn not the Sonnet."

Regardless of whether or not Wordsworth deliberately overwrites the female poets' influence on him, he did have his own unique vision for the sonnets that he crafted over a period of sixty years; and, as "Scorn not the Sonnet" suggests, he wanted to use the sonnet to sound the "trumpet" unheard since Milton. Burwick also suggests that this sonnet, while self-conscious, is not as compellingly self-reflective as "Nuns fret not," published twenty years earlier in 1807. According to Burwick, "Scorn not the Sonnet" "surveys the historical province of the sonnet without ... returning to reflect upon its place, or Wordsworth's place, in that province" (1997: 52–3). Even so, it would seem that, in the act of writing a sonnet that does one and not the other, Wordsworth, while not specifically addressing his place in the sonnet tradition, certainly does reflect on his place in it by implicitly adding his name to the list. But the company he is keeping appears to be problematic. Indeed, with the exception of Milton, none of the writers in this particular poem are ones who come to mind when considering significant Wordsworthian forebears. And the comparison to Milton along with the regret that closes the sonnet – that Milton wrote, "alas, too few" sonnets – raises an interesting question for Wordsworth as a sonneteer. The ultimate placement of Milton at the end of the sonnet signals Wordsworth's preference for Milton's sonnets, but what does it really mean for Wordsworth to complain that Milton wrote too few sonnets? It is almost as if he misses the additional validation that would come with Milton being as obsessed with the form as he is. As he points

out that Milton wrote "too few" sonnets is he also acknowledging that he has written too many? The regret then becomes self-reflexive: Milton dabbled in the form and perfected it with only two dozen sonnets and then went on to write the greatest epic poem in the English language.

"Scorn not the Sonnet," then, becomes not so much a defense of the form as an excuse for it, expressing implicitly a desire that the sonneteer could write something else instead – as indeed most of the sonneteers Wordsworth names are actually more famous for their other poetry than for their sonnets: Shakespeare for his plays, Tasso and Camöens for their epic poems, Dante for *The Divine Comedy*, Spenser for *The Faerie Queene*, and, of course, Milton for *Paradise Lost*. Wordsworth takes big writers and makes them small. The poem reduces and miniaturizes literary giants within the sonnet itself but also suggests, by defining them as sonneteers, that the sonnet's tradition has diminished them. In a perverse way, the sonnet affirms Samuel Johnson's appraisal. Wordsworth's sonnet seems to develop as an explication of the sonnet's "just honours." Are these "just honours" simply the fact that these famous poets chose to write sonnets? Reading the sonnet more closely, however, these "honours" appear to be engendered by the form itself. But Wordsworth's sonnet is torn between an understanding of what the sonnet is able to do for the poet and what the poet is able to do with a sonnet – possibly questioning what the sonnet does *to* the poet. Do the constraints of the form as well as the larger sonnet tradition transform the poet himself into an object?

In a backwards way, Wordsworth's sonnet may be more about his other poetry than his sonnets. And maybe sonnets are always meant to be understood in relation to a poet's other poems as a definitive statement of choice – e.g., "although I can write in other forms, I choose to write sonnets." Jennifer Ann Wagner discusses the two sonnets, this and "Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room," in terms of a Wordsworthian "self-enclosure" that ultimately expands outward as poetic vision. "Nuns fret not" may be more convincing as a trope for poetic accomplishment in the way the sonnet itself, with its limited length and its particular rules, becomes, in Wagner's words, a "spatial trope for the self-bounded mental space of the poet" that explodes in "the expression of thought" (1996: 37). In other words, what Wordsworth describes in "Nuns" as "the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground" is really the creation through formal demands and rigor of a site for poetic construction. As we know from projects such as *The Excursion*, *The Recluse*, and *The Prelude*, Wordsworth was haunted by epic ambition – yes, by the "anxiety of influence" – and his aspiration to write in longer, more Miltonic forms. So, by contrast, these ambitions become for Wordsworth "the weight of too much liberty" and the sonnet offers much-welcomed "brief solace." He even wrote to Landor that "I have filled up many a moment in writing Sonnets, which, if I had never fallen into the practice, might easily have been better employed" (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1978: 126). Today, we might call Wordsworth's interest in the form obsessive-compulsive, but it is probably more accurate to say that writing sonnets came easily to him whereas other projects may not have done. Indeed, Wordsworth told Isabella Fenwick that "Scorn not the Sonnet" was "Composed, almost *ex tempore*, in a short walk on the western side of Rydal Lake" (W. Wordsworth 2008:

724). Wordsworth likes to remind us how easy sonnets are for him, but doing so also reminds us of his anxiety over producing something of greater scale. Coleridge certainly was dismayed that Wordsworth became interested in “writing such a multitude of small Poems” instead of moving forward with the great philosophical epic he wanted Wordsworth to write (Coleridge 1956: 2. 1013).

If “Scorn not the Sonnet” says anything about the Romantic-period sonnet it is ultimately that the leading Romantic-period sonneteer, Wordsworth, thinks the only sonneteers who really matter are Milton and, implicitly, Wordsworth. The other poets shrink in stature. They appear as poets of Sensibility; for them, according to Wordsworth, the sonnet functions as an emotive form – which certainly contrasts with his workmanlike celebration of the form in “Nuns fret not” twenty years before. The sonnet allows Shakespeare to “unlock his heart”; it eases “Petrarch’s wound”; it cheers “mild Spenser” – these characterizations are diminutions. Wordsworth takes “epic” bards and reduces them to sonneteers. But the Romantic sonnet is about becoming something more than a sonnet – as Wordsworth says, in Milton’s “hand / The Thing became a trumpet.” Unlike the Renaissance sonnet, which delights in its “sonnetness,” the Romantic sonnet aspires to be the opposite of what it is – huge.

In a broader sense, we might be able then to consider the Romantic sonnet not only in relation to previous sonnets but also to the way that Romantic poets after Milton use the sonnet’s form, primarily defined by its size – the word literally means “little song” – to suggest poetic aspiration on a larger scale. For the Romantics, the sonnet has to somehow transcend itself, where for the Renaissance Petrarchans and anti-Petrarchans there is always that fun to be had just in the formal allusion – nowhere more delightfully developed than in Romeo and Juliet’s “pilgrim” sonnet (I.v.92–106). The Romantic sonnet has to be a sonnet and yet something else. The sonnet’s tininess is ultimately a commentary itself on the transcendent potential of poetry to become bigger than the form itself would seem to allow. Certainly, Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon* sequence, with its complex intertextual web involving Petrarch, Sappho, Pope, and Ovid, points to an ambition beyond the scope of fourteen lines – even as the perfect rendering of each fourteen-line unit permits such ambition. In 1840, Ebenezer Elliott, the notorious “Corn-law Rhymer,” asked in a sonnet on the sonnet, “Powers of the Sonnet,” “Why should the tiny harp be chained to themes / In fourteen lines, with pedant rigour bound?” (cited in Feldman and Robinson 1999: 206). His answer is that “The sonnet’s might is mightier than it seems,” holding up as the example Milton, who “gave this lute a clarion’s battle sound.” Consider the sublimity suggested at the end of Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” or in Shelley’s “Ozymandias.” Its formal integrity – its compactness, its smallness – is an inverted trope by which the poem magnifies itself. What single sonnet expresses the vast ambition of the sonneteer and the sublimity of literature better than Keats’s “Chapman’s Homer,” which as Stuart Curran points out, is one of several sonnets “to record, or enact, an artistic experience” (1986: 52)? Here, Keats collapses and enfolds the entire epic enterprise within the bounds of a perfectly legitimate sonnet – octave, volta, sestet – and makes Homer’s accomplishment seem bigger, truly sublime, for

having been so transformed. Similarly, Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is as much a sonnet sequence as it is an ode, composed of five fourteen-line sections that formally allude to Dante's *Divine Comedy* instead of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*: each section consists of four tercets that employ the interlocking rhyme characteristic of Dante's *terza rima* and a concluding couplet. The formal allusion suggests the scope of Shelley's ambition while also sonically rendering the power represented by the wind as contained by the poet. Like all sonnets, each section of "Ode to the West Wind" is about mastery, culminating in the poet's command of literal inspiration – "Be through my lips to unawakened Earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!" (Shelley 2002: 301). Again, the poet makes the sonnet into something else, something bigger – something literally alarming; and in so doing, the poet transcends the limitations of the form and becomes more than a sonneteer.

To Elliott, Wordsworth at sonnets assuredly is "another Milton"; but Elliott notes that "Wordsworth's second peer" has yet to be found. As far as the history of the Romantic-period sonnet is concerned, Wordsworth's "second peer" would not be found until the end of the twentieth century when scholars started to recover Charlotte Smith's place in the tradition. It seems that, due to the backlash against the illegitimate sonnet, Smith had to be erased in order to preserve the form for the Victorian period. By 1902, John Max Attenborough, writing for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, declared:

The sonnet has been a poetical vessel of so much honour in the nineteenth century, and so much of the century's finest poetical thought has been poured into it, that we find it hard to-day to realise the state of the literary world a hundred years ago, when a great poet like Wordsworth felt called upon to make an apology for using the form. (1902: 353)

Referring to the sonnet writers of the second half of the eighteenth century as "the heralds of the romantic school," Attenborough goes on to discuss some of the more important sonnet writers from Thomas Edwards to William Lisle Bowles. But, as Elliott's sonnet indicates, literary opinion, as early as 1840, had already come to see Wordsworth as Milton's heir to the sonnet tradition, despite the many important sonnet writers of the eighteenth century who rejuvenated the form. A few years earlier, in 1897, Charlotte Smith, Anna Seward, and Mary Robinson having been long forgotten, A. T. Quiller-Couch confirmed a direct line from Milton to Wordsworth, chronicling that "when, after a slumber of a hundred years, the sonnet awoke again in England, it awoke with Milton's seal on its brow" (1897: xvii).

SEE ALSO

Chapter 11 "Ear and Eye: Counteracting Senses in Loco-descriptive Poetry"; chapter 25 "Milton and the Romantics"; chapter 26 "The feel of not to feel it,' or the Pleasures of Enduring Form"; chapter 29 "The Matter of Genre in the Romantic Sublime"

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Ballad Collection and Lyric Collectives

Steve Newman

Romantic Encounters with the Ballad: “The Solitary Reaper” and Its Limits

In Romantic poems, ballads are often happened upon by a lucky accident. Take William Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper” (1807), in which an English traveler is halted by the sound of a Scots Gaelic singer:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
(ll. 1–4)

To understand why it matters that the speaker surmises that the reaper’s song is a ballad, it is useful first to consider the genre of Wordsworth’s poem. I refer to lyric, the genre usually placed at the center of Romantic poetry and which is conveniently paired with the ballad in Wordsworth’s (and Coleridge’s) best-known volume of poetry, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798; 1800). It is as if John Stuart Mill, a great admirer of Wordsworth, had “The Solitary Reaper” in mind when he formulated his well-known definition of poetry, by which he means lyric: “eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener” (Mill 1967: 56). The solitary reaper is overheard by the solitary speaker, who is careful not to alert her to the fact that she has an audience; and the turns of his consciousness as inspired by the song are “overheard” by the solitary reader.

Romantic lyric as a vehicle of self-consciousness found one of its most influential formulations in Geoffrey Hartman’s *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787–1814*, which not

surprisingly begins with “The Solitary Reaper.” As Hartman reads the poem, the speaker is quietly shocked at the intimations of mortality that come with the Reaper’s song, registering in “Stop here, or gently pass” the language of epitaphs. To defend his imagination from a deathly force that would interrupt its progress, he represents the song as unconscious and natural (Hartman 1971: 3–18). So what looks to be a chance meeting gives way under interpretative pressure to reveal a highly articulated structure of the Romantic mind at work. If we wanted to sketch the turns of Romantic scholarship since the phenomenological and then poststructuralist criticism exemplified by Hartman, we could recast the gap between the underlying structure and the immediate surface of the poem in a more historicist key, though space prevents as subtle an exposition as some provide (Manning 1990). That is, we could see in the English tourist’s travels a reenactment of the colonization of the Scottish Highlands. The many attempts to forcibly “improve” this “primitive” world, which had accelerated after the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, were still going strong when this poem was written in 1805. The translation of her Gaelic song seems a bit too easy, and the line “I listened, till I had my fill” (l. 29), though later revised to “I listened, motionless and still,” seems to put the speaker and thus his readers in the creepy position of feeding on a bit of local color before moving on to the next picturesque bit of the Highlands. This colonial exploitation is the occluded public context of the solipsism often attributed to Romantic lyric.

But we might complicate this familiar game of ideological “Gotcha!” by asking whom the speaker has in mind when he asks, “Will no one tell me what she sings?” (l. 17). Even if he is understood to be speaking to himself, the question presupposes a social world and, moreover, a world divided between English-speakers and Gaelic-speakers, a threat to the British unity urgently required in the midst of a war with Napoleonic France. With no one to translate her song, he instead hypothesizes that she sings about “old, unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long ago” or about “[f]amiliar matter of today,” a “sorrow, loss, or pain / That has been, and may be again.” (ll. 19–23). It is no coincidence that these two hypotheses correlate with two subgenres of the ballad – minstrelsy like “Chevy Chase” and village tragedies like “Barbara Allen.” Neither is it an accident that the first four lines of each stanza begin with a balladic rhyme scheme (*abab*) and a modified version of balladic long meter, as if this lyric were taking the ballad inside of it. Though she is solitary, the reaper engages in the communal acts of harvesting and singing, which includes, for a moment, the poetic speaker and the reader.

In other words, the solitariness of Romantic lyric is often supplemented by the collective world bound up with the ballad. So the collection of the ballad in Romanticism, which ranges from antiquarian editing projects like Scott’s *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802) to stylized imitations like Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (1820), is designed to produce what I call lyric collectives, groups bound together by song. As I have already suggested, the politics involved in the uneasy hyphenation of the nation-state do figure in to these lyric collectives (England and the Scottish Highlands are both part of Great Britain), as do class and gender. However, nation, gender, and class are themselves mediated by literary structures of three kinds – the relationship

of poet to audience, the formal qualities of lyric and ballad, and the literary history of the elite appropriation of the ballad. For by Wordsworth's era, what scholars have named The Ballad Revival was well established, beginning in the early eighteenth century and consolidated in antiquarian texts like Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765).

The concern of the speaker in "The Solitary Reaper" that no one might be listening to him rehearses the basic conundrum facing the Romantic poet, unsure of his audience thanks to "the decline of patronage, the rise of the novel and the periodical press, and the emergence of the mass reading public" (Franta 2007: 1). It is significant, then, that the only example of good poetry that Wordsworth actually cites in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is the venerable ballad "The Children in the Wood" (Wordsworth 1974: 1. 152). Dating back to a broadside of 1595, this ballad had attracted polite notice since Joseph Addison's *Spectator* no. 85 (1711). In juxtaposing a stanza of the ballad with Johnson's parody of it, which was itself a jab at a ballad imitation by Percy, Wordsworth attests to how familiar The Ballad Revival was to poets of his era. Indeed, there are very few poets in current Romantic anthologies not shaped to some degree by The Ballad Revival, not only the so-called Big Six (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats) but also many others who have happily claimed more scholarly attention of late, from Thomas Chatterton to Joanna Baillie to John Clare.

Wordsworth is not alone in presenting ballads as a cure for both a diseased popular and a diseased elite culture. Free of the fripperies of "poetic diction," they are also supposedly free of the disturbing elements that characterize texts popular in a bad way, appealing to "a degrading thirst for outrageous stimulation" (Wordsworth 1974: 1. 128), from the extravagances of London theater to sentimental novels to periodicals capitalizing on political unrest and other sensational stories. (One confusing twist is that one could number among these sensational texts souped-up German imitations of Percy's ballads like Gottfried August Bürger's "Lenore" (1773) or Goethe's "Der Erlkönig" (1782), which led to many English imitations, including Scott's first poem.) The purifying effect of the ballad is due in part to its putative source. As influentially hypothesized by Percy, ballads (at least, the ballads worth collecting) were initially written by minstrels, an order of poets highly regarded in the feudal court. Tied strongly to a particular historical moment, these minstrel ballads are themselves strongly narrative, telling the stories of "battles long ago." They also tell the metanarrative of the degeneration of minstrelsy with the coming of print, surviving only in rare manuscripts, black-letter ballads, and the undependable memories of the peasantry. There was little evidence for this theory, as the irascible and radical antiquarian Joseph Ritson pointed out (1783: 1. liii). Yet mere facts could not overcome the attraction of tying ballads to a celebrated rank of poets in a time of cultural fragmentation and great uncertainty about the estate of elite poetry.

Minstrelsy is the stock-in-trade of poets like Scott, who makes a poetic career out of a series of long narrative poems that draw heavily on the imagined tradition of minstrelsy, beginning with *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), which set the pattern for works like James Hogg's *The Queen's Wake* (1813). Wordsworth found modern

minstrelsy too focused on incident at the expense of emotion, as we can see in a poem like "Hart-Leap Well" (1815), which frustrates the reader's desire for heroic action (Pfau 1997: 220–7). Even so, he also places the ballad remotely, treating it as the artifact of the simple power of English folk life, giving voice to "familiar matter of today," as in "The Thorn" (1798) and "Simon Lee" (1798).

The ballad as presented in the Romantic era thus tend to have a strong narrative component. But as important as the content of the narrative and its medieval accoutrements is its concentrated mode of expression, which is due in significant part to the fact that the ballad is a *song*, meant to be performed. As one reviewer of *Lyrical Ballads* asks, "What ballads are not *Lyrical*?" (Review 1801: 131). Ballads are not just musical, reminding us that "lyric" comes from "lyre," but also meant to be performed. The residue of performance built into the ballad is carried into Romantic ballad collection by way of formal elements like the refrain or the meter woven into "The Solitary Reaper." These performative elements, even in Romantic poems not meant to be sung, help explain the elite attraction to the ballad, since the genre seems to assume a social world it creates by gathering others to sing.

But what is a ballad, the reader may have been justifiably asking for some pages now. While I could respond with a stipulative definition like "a narrative folksong," this would be an anachronism. Indeed, the work of Romantic ballad collectors and "the scandals" surrounding them (Stewart 1991) were key in establishing the discourses that led to definitions such as "narrative folksong" and broader concepts such as "the folk." So my emphasis here is on what Romantic authors emphasized in drawing on those things they called "ballads" and associated subgenres like "national songs," approaching genre in terms of the how and why of its use rather than a presupposed what. This is not to say that there are no such things as ballads beyond their representation by Romantic authors; but even here there can be no easy separation of genre from the history of its uses and the contests surrounding terms like "the popular" and "literature." This is why I am employing an idea of "ballad collection" that is also more capacious than its folkloric understanding as the collecting, emending, and commenting on folksongs; for while I include this as well, understanding the Romantic appropriation of the ballad requires that we also consider more passing allusions to and imitations of popular songs.

These are some of the things about Romantic poetry that "The Solitary Reaper" helps us to see. But a fuller understanding of the Romantic incorporation of the ballad requires moving beyond Wordsworth and seeing how that incorporation was shaped by struggles over class and gender, and how differing representations of the ballad yield differing lyric collectives. I'll consider how Robert Burns collects popular songs to grasp the way that The Ballad Revival tended to undervalue briefer songs and, in a related move, made matters difficult for poets who actually came from the socioeconomic classes most strongly associated with ballads. Then, to illuminate the masculinism of The Ballad Revival, which represents women as preservers but not authors of ballads, I'll look at Felicia Hemans's sustained intervention into authoring "national songs." Finally, by briefly touching on the work of John Clare, I'll glance at the large swaths of balladry typically overlooked by Romantic ballad collectors and only recently

taken up by scholars, and what these efforts reveal about the state of Romantic criticism. That Burns, Hemans, and Clare have not tended to figure into discussions of Romanticism until recently suggests how looking at the ballad's place in Romanticism has the capacity to redraw the boundaries of the field. This is a fitting role for a genre that does not fit easily, that resides in the Romantic era on the border in so many ways, between one nation and another, print and orality, text and song, popular and elite.

Burns and the Case for Scots Songs

Although Burns lived in Ayrshire, he repeatedly drew on the Highlands in his songs, and in ways that contrast profitably with "The Solitary Reaper." One of his best-known pieces, "My heart's in the Highlands," is cited by Walter Scott as an example of Burns's "genius" in renovating traditional songs (Scott 1902: 4. 15). The song begins:

My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here;
My heart's in the Highlands, a chasing the deer;
Chasing the wild deer, and following the roe;
My heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go.

(Burns 1968: 2. ll. 1–4)

Set to the haunting Gaelic tune, "Failte na miosg," the song expresses the speaker's fundamental sense of displacement from the "here" of his speaking. To conjure the place he misses, he uses the resources of song, the repetition of the opening phrase and "chasing," the incantatory rhythm of the line as it swings back and forth across a medial caesura. In the second stanza, this elegy to a lost place of free hunting gains political resonance as the Highlands are described as "[t]he birth-place of Valour, the country of Worth" (l. 6), implying that the present lacks these qualities.

So, as in "The Solitary Reaper," Burns uses traditional song to represent the Highlands as a purifying alternative to the present. But his profound differences from Wordsworth are indicated by the fact that this is not the representation of a song but an actual song to be sung, a genre Wordsworth seems to have eschewed entirely. It is song, rather than the mediating and meditative lyric later tied to Wordsworth, that Burns concentrates on. Burns pays a price for this in his literary reputation. Though Scott praises Burns's songs, he also laments that Burns spent so much time on them, such as the 186 he contributed to *The Scots Musical Museum* (1787–1803), not to mention the 114 he contributed to *A Select Collection of Scottish Airs* (1793–1818). His intimate relationship with traditional song, while befitting a "high-souled plebeian," also leads him into the "constant waste of his fancy and power of verse in small and insignificant compositions" (Scott 1809: 26, 32). The songs that absorb Burns's attention are not the more prestigious minstrel ballads, and focusing on them overmuch can be read by Scott only as a diversion from the serious business of a literary career.

We thus appear to have another episode in the twice-told Tale of Burns the Peasant Poet. Introduced to the Edinburgh literati by Henry Mackenzie as a “heav’n-taught ploughman,” which conveniently erases his considerable reading in literary traditions, elite and popular, he improvidently wastes his talent, preferring the instant gratifications of “Scots, fucking, and song” (Skoblow 2001: 170). But as Skoblow himself points out, Burns’s embrace of this heretical triumvirate is not a besotted reflex but a conscious choice. For him song collection is in fact an antidote to a career he turned away from in the wake of the great success of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786) and his subsequent tour of the Edinburgh literary world (Newman 2007: 75–93). He is willing to leave his plans for “large Poetic works” to that “great maker and marrer of projects – TIME” in order to become “a consumpt for a great deal of idle metre” (Burns 1985: 1. 319). Songs will not bring him fame as the literati understand it, which comes through longer poems like Cowper’s *The Task* or Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* or Scott’s extended riffs on minstrelsy. Instead, Burns absorbs himself in collecting Scottish songs he is eager to get into print so that they can be read by everyone with an interest in them.

To add specificity to the lyric collective Burns imagines through his songs, it is useful to consider briefly a couple of other pieces that touch on the Highlands. The first appears in *Love and Liberty – A Cantata* (c.1785), later published with the title *The Jolly Beggars*. The mise-en-scène for this text is a pub in Burns’s neighborhood called Poesie Nansie’s, where a maimed soldier, his common-law wife, a pickpocket, a fiddler, a tinker, and lastly a ballad-singer each performs a song (the ballad singer actually gets two) voicing their travails but also expressing their preference for “liberty” over the repressive codes of mainstream society. The text is something like a dramatization of the lyric mind overhearing less civilized people sing ballads, with the narrator often commenting ironically on what he hears. But unlike Wordsworth’s tourist in the Highlands, Burns is at home at Poesie-Nansie’s, and the polite world is more his target than the beggars themselves. Rather than a cantata written for the pleasure gardens of Vauxhall and Ranelagh (Timms 2010), Burns writes something closer to the inverted world of ballad opera inaugurated by John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728). The ballad-singer declares that he is “a Bard of no regard, / Wi’ gentle folks an’ a’ that” (Burns 1968: 1. ll. 208–9). His defensive posture toward the taste of “gentle folks” is in keeping with the work as a whole, which shows how a body impolitic of outcasts is held together by brief songs of the type Scott dismisses.

Among them is the pickpocket’s contribution, “A Highland Lad My Love Was Born,” set to the tune “An’ Ye Were Dead Gudeman,” its verses seemingly indebted to the old Jacobite song “Lewis Gordon.” Holding “the lalland laws . . . in scorn,” her beloved becomes a highwayman, and the two of them “liv’d like lords an’ ladies gay” off the fruits of their robberies (ll. 89–104). Though transported for his crimes, he returned, and “ere the bud was on the tree, / Adown my cheeks the pearls ran, / Embracing my John Highlandman” (ll. 106–8). Caught and hanged, he leaves her a widow whose only “comfort” is a “hearty can” of drink. She also finds consolation in the arms of a tinker:

The Caird prevail'd – th'unblushing fair
 In his embraces sunk;
 Partly wi' LOVE o'ercome sae sair,
 An' partly she was drunk:

(ll. 181–4)

She may use refined English diction to metamorphose her tears into “pearls,” but she is shrunk back into a “raucle Carlin” (a coarse old woman) by the deflating Scots tones of the recitative. Still, if she is very far from the chaste sublimity of the Solitary Reaper, we are drawn into the chorus of her lament as its melody soars into the upper register: “Sing hey my braw John Highlandman! / Sing ho my braw John Highlandman! / There's not a lad in a' the lan' / Was match for my John Highlandman” (ll. 93–6). The distance that allows the narrator's ironic commentary also allows the overhearing that absorbs us into her situation. In this way, Burns adapts a Jacobite song in order to generate a subversive community of another sort. Rather than challenging the legitimacy of the Hanovers, the tipplers at Poesie Nansie's breach the wall between high and low, tying together the Highlands, Burns's Ayrshire, and his anticipated readers, many of whom have a dim view of Scots vernacular as proper to poetry, let alone the ribald scenes of Poesie Nansie's pub.

The politics informing that community is made explicit in the concluding chorus:

A fig for those by law protected!
 LIBERTY'S a glorious feast!
 Courts for Cowards were erected,
 Churches built to please the PRIEST.

(ll. 254–7)

It is no wonder that the eminent preacher and belletrist Hugh Blair was horrified by *Liberty*, declaring it “licentious” and “altogether unfit in my opinion for publication” (Low 1974: 82). If polite readers sympathize with these singers, they are put in the uncomfortable position of having their Enlightenment models of refinement challenged by low members of society. Defiantly pleased to be outside of authorized behavior and elite texts, the beggars have their own social code and their own culture of drink, conversation, and ballads.

We should not, however, confuse Burns's beggars with Burns himself, even if he solicits that confusion. Unlike his ballad-singer, Burns did want to be regarded by “gentle folks”; but he was on guard on what sort of compromises this regard might involve. His cantata, while it appears uncompromising in its satirical energy, may threaten to turn the world of beggars into a digestible bit of low life to amuse elite readers. Conversely, the marginal world of *Love and Liberty* risks restricting his lyric range; absent, for instance, are a young woman's anxiety over being “ruined,” and the worry over the thousand other natural shocks that those living a more conventional life are heir to.

We can see how Burns repurposes Scots songs to open up his sources, lyric situations, and potential audience in a final piece that touches on the Highlands, “My Harry was a gallant gay.” Set to the tune, “The Highlander’s Lament,” it first appears in the third volume of *The Scots Musical Museum* (1790). In a manuscript note, Burns reports, “The chorus I pickt up from an old woman in Dunblane; the rest of the song is mine” (1968: 3. 1241). Burns draws without apology on oral recitation, and this sets him apart from nearly every ballad collector of his era. But his sources were not exclusively oral; he looked at manuscripts, and, just as the ballad singer of *Love and Liberty* takes a printed ballads from “his Pack” (l. 244), he also drew freely on print in his pursuit of traditional songs. Like Wordsworth’s tourist, he makes use of verse he happens upon, but he does not limit his imagination of popular song to a primitive orality.

To see how Burns incorporates and transforms his sources, consider the third stanza of “My Harry.” There, the singer tells of how at night she wanders about the glen and sits down to weep for her banished Highlander, echoing a song in the manuscripts of the eminent Scottish song collector David Herd, which Burns got a hold of during his sojourn in Edinburgh.

Here is one of the fragments from Herd:

I ne’er can sleep a wink,
 Tho’ ne’er so wet and weary,
 But ly and cry and think
 Upon my absent deary.

When a’ the lave’s at rest,
 Or merry, blyth and cheary,
 My heart’s wi’ greif opprest,
 I am dowie, dull and wearie.
 (Burns 1968: 3. 1242)

And here are the second and third verses from “My Harry,” minus the chorus:

When a’ the lave gae to their bed,
 I wander dowie up the glen;
 I set me down and greet my fill,
 And ay I wish him back again.

O were some villains hangit high,
 And ilka body had their ain!
 Then I might see the joyfu’ sight,
 My Highlan Harry back again.
 (Burns 1968: 1. 347; ll. 9–16)

Burns has taken the grieving and restless woman of Herd’s manuscript and has inserted her in a more politically charged context. Harry has apparently been banished in the aftermath of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, like the John Highlandman of *Love and*

Liberty. But the situation is pared down. This highlandman does not seem to engage in thieving; this singer does not profit from her beloved's crimes; and there is no narrator to provide ironic commentary. Instead, the poem ends with a piercing cry for justice that emerges from her grief: "O were some villains hangit high / And ilka body had their ain!" (ll. 13–14). The phrase "ilka body had their ain" has a multiple resonance. It imagines that the highlandman has his "ain" property and rights restored but also that the singer has her beloved's body restored to her, and the carnal embrace of those bodies is in fine balance with the bodies of Harry's persecutors "hangit high."

Burns in his songs aims to forge a lyric collective that challenges the assumptions of progress informing the work of the Enlightenment *litterati*. His idea of lyric is thoroughly quotidian, from the variety of sources he happens upon to the range of situations, emotions, and persons within them, to the sociable situations in which the songs will be sung. He defends his practice in the preface to the second volume of *The Scots Musical Museum* (1788), where he acknowledges that "Ignorance and Prejudice may perhaps affect to sneer at the simplicity of the poetry or music of some of these pieces; but their having been for ages the favorites of Nature's Judges – The Common People, was to the Editor a sufficient test of their merit" (Stenhouse 1962: vol. 1, Preface to 2nd vol. of *Scots Musical Museum*, iii). Burns's lyric collective is underwritten by this leveling idea of taste, which runs against the polite aesthetic argued for by Blair and others. Against the Anglocentric bias of Great Britain, he insists on the peculiar value of Scots and Scotland. Against the snobbery of elite writers, which typically persists even when they consider "The Common People," he offers their taste as "a sufficient test." This is his intervention into The Ballad Revival, and while Scott was correct that Burns has often been unjustly excluded from the Romantic canon, his songs have secured his fame with a larger audience.

Hemans: Spanish Songs and the Woman as Minstrel

Of the British writers of her era, Felicia Hemans was among the most deeply and widely read in the burgeoning archive of popular songs and its associated critical materials, including Johann Gottfried Herder's theory of *Völkspoese* (reminding us again that Romantic ballad collection was a pan-European phenomenon with particular strength in Germany). Starting with *Tales and Historic Scenes, in Verse* (1819), Hemans published songs in "the spirit" of many nations and cultures, ranging from Wales to North America to Turkey. Many of these songs were set to music in groups or singly, and they enjoyed great commercial success; for instance, "The Captive Knight," a favorite of Scott's and dedicated to him, was advertised as having reached a seventieth edition. More inclined than Wordsworth to draw on the antiquarian materials of The Ballad Revival, Hemans asked whether a woman can assume the typically masculine role of minstrel, as someone who writes ballads for public ends. Women were crucial to The Ballad Revival in many ways, not only preserving songs but also writing and/or commenting them, as in the celebrated Jacobite ballads by Carol Oliphant, Lady Nairne (1766–1845) or Charlotte Brooke's learned *Reliques of Irish*

Poetry (1789). But The Ballad Revival cast them almost exclusively as unconscious preservers of tradition – the nursemaid or mother or granny by the fireside, singing old songs. In addition to making a claim for women as songwriters, Hemans also asks whether the bloodshed and collateral suffering that so often attends the masculinized world of national song is worth it.

Her interest in re-gendering balladry can be seen in a poem with some resemblance to “The Solitary Reaper.” In a letter from Ireland to her friend John Lodge, her musical collaborator, she sympathizes with the racket he endured beneath his windows by telling a similar story of how she begged a band of Irish musicians to stop disturbing her. She then notes:

One sometimes *does* hear a sweet female voice among a wandering band. ... [O]ne such voice came to my ears lately on a very stormy evening: it was uncultivated, as you may suppose, but had a mournful and piercing sweetness, which, mingling as it did with the fitful gusts of the storm, lingered some time in my imagination, and gave rise to the little song I enclose: if you think it suitable to music it shall be your own. (Chorley 1836: 202)

There are elements in this passage to support those who find an imperialist strain in Hemans, author of “The Homes of England” (1828) and other anthems. Having moved to Ireland in order to be near her brother, George, chief commissioner of police for the colonial British administration, Hemans relates her suffering at the sounds of a “barbaric” group of indigenous musicians (Chorley 1836: 202). But within this colonial frame, she also finds a congenial voice that yields feminine solidarity. As is often the case in representing feminine distress in the Romantic era, Hemans hears this cry in a primal register; the woman’s singing voice is “uncultivated” and, like the Reaper’s song resounding in the vale, properly harmonizes with a “fitful” and violent Nature. Still, despite all of the gaps between the middle-class English woman inside and the homeless Irish woman outside, Hemans attempts to bridge them in this “little song” in ballad meter she writes out of the experience, “To a Wandering Female Singer.” It begins:

Thou hast loved and thou hast suffer’d!
 Unto feeling deep and strong,
 Thou hast trembled like a harp’s frail string –
 I know it by thy song!

(ll. 1–4)

The figure of the harp incorporates the Celtic world of the singer with the more inclusive Romantic symbol of the Aeolian harp, which makes a sound when the wind blows over it. She is at once a trembling string and the force that strikes it, her love in a hostile world redounding back upon her to produce suffering. This figuration is, in turn, secured by an assumption about woman’s lot, which gives the listener confidence that she knows intimately the singer’s story of abandonment, which she can only hint at: “Thou has suffer’d all that woman’s breast / May bear – but must not tell” (ll. 7–8). The speaker of

“The Solitary Reaper” remains in a state of surmise, hypothesizing about what he hears, both in terms of the song’s content and its relationship to the reaper’s own experience, and he never addresses the reaper directly, which would risk interrupting her song. Hemans’s speaker, in contrast, strongly asserts her knowledge and dwells more on the way her song expresses the singer’s suffering and ratifies the speaker’s power to feel along with her as she overhears; this intimacy is recapitulated in the imagined address to the wandering singer. It is almost as if the English–Gaelic barrier is a *help* to understanding, for it allows the listener to focus entirely on the affect she perceives and Hemans to move woman from passive conserver of tradition to author twice over: the wandering singer gives vent to her passions, and Hemans writes the poem out of the encounter and sends it on to her musical collaborator with an eye to a future song to be taken to market.

Within the dramatic situation of the poem, we have a lyric collective of only two, but Hemans’s bridging of the jagged divide between English and Irish by way of feminine feeling points toward the broader political ends of her ballad collection. Those ends and their attendant complications appear more clearly in works that follow Percy and Herder in focusing on Spanish songs, “the oldest as well as largest, collection of popular poetry, properly so called, that is to be found in the literature of any European nation” (Lockhart 1842). For a quarter century, she publishes poems about Spain, all of which include at least some mention of Spanish songs, from *England and Spain* (1808) to *The Abencerrage* (1819) to “Songs of Spain” in *National Lyrics and Songs for Music* (1834). Most interesting are the two major texts on Spain that she publishes in the 1820s, *The Siege of Valencia* (1823) and *The Forest Sanctuary* (1825). In the former, she writes a woman into an active participation in politics by making her a bardic figure defending the state. Valencia is falling under the pressure of a Moorish siege, and the sons of the governors have been kidnapped and promised death if the city does not surrender. The one who turns the tide and martyrs herself in the process is the governor’s daughter, Ximena. Faced with a population on the edge of rebellion, she channels their energy back toward a defense of the state through an impassioned speech that culminates in “The Cid’s Battle Song.” The song demands that wedding and funeral be interrupted to defend “the Cross” against the moor (vi. 193–224, in Hemans 2000). Recognized by the crowd as “inspired” (vi. 123), Ximena shows how obligations to the state trump not only demands for social equity but also private domestic affections, like a sister’s love for her brothers. Before being overcome by her great exertions, Ximena carries into the present an archaic communal voice that turns the crowd from radical agitators to defenders of the state.

But the sacrifice demanded calls forth the resistance of Ximena’s mother, Elmina, who at one point denounces the masculine code that sacrifices her sons, asking her husband: “Think’st thou all hearts like thine? Can mothers stand / To see their children perish?” (vi. 262–3) She is among the many sisters, daughters, and mothers in Hemans’s work haunted by the graves that crowd the imperial terrain of her work. This critical strain sounds more clearly in *The Forest Sanctuary* (1825). The influential reviewer Francis Jeffrey identified it as the sort of poem she “must not venture again on” (Hemans 2000: 554). In a reversal of Scott’s wish that Burns would try something greater than songs, Jeffrey

makes it clear that Hemans should stick to the short emotional effusions that make her work “a fine exemplification of female poetry” (Hemans 2000: 551). While we may disagree violently with Jeffrey’s judgment, he is right to detect in *The Forest Sanctuary* one of Hemans’s many attempts to break the bounds prescribed for the Romantic poetess. For it is a poem structured by an ambitious attempt to integrate individual lyric and lyric collective. The speaker is a conquistador who returns from Peru to Spain, and, appalled by the cruelty of the Inquisition, is forced to flee with his son and wife to North America. Writing in the Spenserian stanza that James Beattie, Wordsworth, and Mary Tighe had helped to revive, Hemans displaces the chivalric wonders of *The Faerie Queene* with the romance of a mind finding itself in a New World. The *Forest Sanctuary* is a clear example of high Romantic lyric, the alienated man walking through the ruins of history, his subjectivity emerging from his search for something to ground it.

But if Hemans’s thematic and formal choices incline us to read *The Forest Sanctuary* as an allegory of lyric internalization, it also depends upon the public resonances of national song. The poem opens with the speaker’s yearning for the “sweet and mournful melodies of Spain, / That lull’d my boyhood” (Hemans 2000: i. 100). More telling are the songs sung by his wife Leonor, who dies from the heartbreak of following her apostate husband into exile. Like all women according to Hemans, Leonor clings like a “brooding dove, to that sole spot of earth / Where she hath loved” (ii. 293–4), and she expresses the killing pain of her exile in the one set of lines that interrupts the poem’s Spenserians, a hymn to the Virgin Mary: “Ave, sanctissima! / ’Tis night-fall on the sea; / Ora pro nobis! / Our souls rise to thee!” (ii. 388–91). She repeats the hymn at the moment of her death as a lullaby to her son, right after singing “the mountain-songs of old,” including “Rio Verde” (ii. 494–502), educating her son in patriotism through song as his father was educated before him.

Under the pressure of Hemans’s revision of male chivalry and female sacrifice, Spanish songs become an ambiguous object for the building of lyric nations and selves. They stand for an outdated Catholic and feudal militancy yet retain the “feminine” values of home, religion, and nation that Hemans continues to view as essential to a modern state. The antithesis is insoluble, and it kills Leonor, turning her songs into the watchword of her impending death and the dissolution of the family. They fall upon the speaker’s ears as a “torture” worse than the Inquisition (ii. 412–13). Having uprooted his wife from the ground that nourished her, he is haunted by her death, and the manuscript version of the poem ends not with consolation but a concluding plea to restore his wife’s body, buried at sea (Hemans 2000: 322). To voice that wish, Hemans then appends one of her own songs, “Treasures of the Deep” (Hemans 2000: 322). It catalogues the material riches lost to the waves and then offers to trade them for the return of “the lost and lovely” men who are “the love of woman” (Hemans 2000: 25, 31). The song insists on distinguishing men from commodities, a confusion made possible by the masculine pursuits of war and trade. Its recontextualization in *The Forest Sanctuary* demands that women also be distinguished from objects, despite the tradition of seeing them either as the spoils of the battlefield and marketplace or as the passive mourners of men who die doing manly things. She thereby alters her representation of Spanish

songs from a vehicle that celebrates sacrifice to the nation, including those made by women (*The Siege of Valencia*), to one that questions the wisdom of that suffering (*The Forest Sanctuary*). In the stanza omitted from the published poem, she moves toward an alternative vision of national song. By imagining one of her own songs in Leonor's mouth, she forges an alliance between women over the centuries, a temporalization of the bond in "The Wandering Female Singer." In doing so, Hemans puts pressure on the *quid pro quo* of Britain as *imperium*, in which woman's lot is to bear the terrible cost of its construction. That she erases the stanza and song indicates the difficulty she feels in making such a case. In the end, the only lyric collective *The Forest Sanctuary* can affirm is the masculine hero's Protestant hymn to God; the vexing archaism of collective life bound up in Spanish songs keeps it from passing into lyric modernity.

Clare: Cheap Print and the Borders of Romantic Poetry

The representations of songs in the texts I've cited reside at a significant remove from the streams of ballads actually circulating in the cities, towns, and countrysides of Great Britain during this time. The one possible exception is the ballad pulled out of the pack in *Love and Liberty*, but even the separate volumes of *The Scots Musical Museum* were considerably more expensive than the single sheets, songsters, and chapbooks that were the chief delivery systems for ballads. Considering this largely undiscovered country speaks to a turn in Romantic scholarship from the 1990s on toward "the history of the book," or, more broadly, print culture, which takes up the actualities of how texts were printed, distributed, and bought, and the even trickier matter of how they were read (Klancher 1987; St Clair 2004). Within this larger turn, there have been many productive inquiries into radical print culture (Mee 1992; Gilmartin 1996), including radical songs (Scrivener 1992). But political verse constitutes only a portion of cheap songs, which also include, among many other subgenres, religious exhortations, bawdry, and the cries of London vendors, as well as the occasional reprints of Byron, Thomas Campbell, and Thomas Moore, to name a few (Bodleian Library 2010). The need to come to terms with this broad stream of popular song has recently sparked much stimulating work (Perry 2006; McLane 2008; Connell and Leask 2009), especially among those interested in Scotland and Ireland (Pittock 1994; Langan 2005; Davis 2006; Sorensen 2009). These studies, in turn, cast new light on how we might interpret the internal dynamics and cultural work of Romantic poetry.

Clare was uniquely situated to consider the fissures and overlaps between elite poetry and popular song. He was born and lived almost all his life in Northamptonshire, serving largely as an agricultural laborer. This meant that he was introduced to an elite audience by his editor, John Taylor, as a peasant poet in the lineage of Burns (Clare 1820: xix). It also meant that Clare was raised in an atmosphere rich in cheap print, source of many of the ballads he heard and read. At the time of his birth, Northampton happened also to be the home province and a key distribution node for the Diceys, the greatest ballad printers of the eighteenth century. Indeed, Clare lamented a great

transformation in the ballad market, as changes in copyright law allowed new texts to be reprinted cheaply, thereby displacing older ballads preserved in significant part due to a scarcity of material (St Clair 2004: 337–56).

There is a meeting of these two strands, the peasant poet negotiating his situation before an elite audience and the system of cheap print, in his essay, “Popularity in Authorship” (1825). Beginning with a conventional opposition between mere popularity and true fame, he then adds a third category, “common fame,” which he defines as “those sort of things and names that are familiar among the common people” (Clare 1825: 301). Even though “the common people” are unable to distinguish between Shakespeare and the wares of “paltry ballad-mongers,” “there is something in [popular fame] to wish for, because there are things of its kindred as old as England, that have out-lived centuries of popularity ... as familiar to children even as the rain and spring flowers” (1825: 301). That “true fame” and “common fame” may not be so far apart is underscored by his concluding metaphor, in which he draws on the same model of nature’s permanence: “Men trample grass, and prize the flowers in May, / But grass is green when flowers do fade away” (1825: 303). Though Clare is at this point the author of two well-received volumes, he still struggles to grasp an elusive and punishing system of elite reception that might lead to “true fame” as well as economic security (compare Burns). So he draws on two entities more familiar to him – the texts prized by “the common people” and the natural world.

A similar strategy informs “Shepherd’s Hut,” published in the last volume of his to appear in his lifetime, the poorly selling *The Rural Muse* (1835). In this double sonnet, the speaker fondly recalls the hut as a place where the shepherds regaled their audience with “long old songs” (Clare 1998: l. 17). “[T]his ancient minstrelsy” has fallen prey to “disregard” but:

... in these ancient spots – mind ear & eye
 Turn listeners – till the very wind prolongs
 The theme as wishing in its depths of joy
 To recollect the music of old songs
 & meet the hut that blessed me when a boy
 (ll. 24–8)

Here is a strong example of Romantic lyric, as the speaker’s “mind ear & eye / Turn listeners,” overhearing these old songs reminiscent of childhood, borne on the natural vehicle of the wind. Listening to his “rural muse,” Clare enacts for his elite readers the role of preserver of an organic but faltering peasant culture of oral song. But the word “recollect” echoes with something less “pure” and reveals the overlay of lyric meditation with the mediations of print culture. For “recollect” is also legible as “to collect again” – as in the songs that Clare collected from his neighborhood in the 1820s, many of which are drawn from cheap print (Deacon 1983: 49–52).

So while Clare, too, posits ballads as a better version of the popular, he does not exclude cheap print. He consequently helps sharpen the question of what we mean by

“the popular.” Need it be tied in some way to “the people,” and whom do we mean by that? A residual English peasantry? An emerging urban mass closer to the world of Blake, another great “re-collector” of ballads? And/or should “the popular” also be pegged to sales, which means that Hemans’s songs would have at least as strong a claim to being called “popular” as Clare’s work? Then, how do we understand the gift-books bought in the tens of thousands by middle- and upper-class women where the songs of both Hemans and Clare appeared? To ask these questions is perforce to ask what we mean when we say we are studying “Romantic poetry.” It’s hard to imagine the term could mean *any* poem published, say, from 1760 to 1830, and still remain analytically useful. And yet it is clear that we need some way to account for ballads in Romantic poetry beyond the way particular poets used them. To phrase this more concretely, should it change our understanding of Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven” to know that the bibliographical record supports Clare’s claim that he saw *it* as a broadside (Clare 1825: 301)? And, if so, how should our protocols of interpretation change? For thinking about ballads raises questions not only about “[t]he construction of poetic authority in Romanticism” but also “the situation of poetry, and of humanists, in the present” (McLane 2008: 11). The Romantic encounter with the ballad, part of a larger self-consciousness about the splitting off of elite from popular culture, helped seed the emergence of “literature” in the more restricted sense as a set of imaginative texts in the vernacular tongue. During Clare’s lifetime, it became a subject to be studied in schools, a subject in which Romantic lyric featured prominently.

It is not surprising that scholars of literature in general are just beginning to understand how to take the proper measure of broadsides. They tend to lack the figural and rhetorical features that have remained the grist for the interpretative mill however much the field has become less interested in formal paradox or aporia and more interested in history. The ballads’ melding of text, music, and image (the woodcuts signify, too) also challenge the text-centered approach of literary scholarship that persists even in a supposedly interdisciplinary age. On the other hand, if ballads nudge us to guard against the fetishization of the high literary object, the supposed solidity of bookbinding, sales figures and the like may lead us to underestimate the difficulties built into understanding how texts were and are read and heard. These are cruxes that scholars interested in the interface between elite literature and the ballad have begun to take up. The enduring capacity of ballads to command our attention as we continue to make sense of the accidents, real and planned, of our textual encounters, means that Romantic scholarship shares at least one thing with the speaker of “The Solitary Reaper.”

SEE ALSO

Chapter 10 “Shepherding Culture and the Romantic Pastoral”; chapter 14 “Laboring-Class Poetry in the Romantic Era”; chapter 15 “Celtic Romantic Poetry: Scotland, Ireland, Wales”; chapter 32 “The World without Us: Romanticism, Environmentalism, and Imagining Nature”

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6

Satire, Subjectivity, and Acknowledgment

William Flesch

Satire is one of the kinds of what George Puttenham called “poems reprehensive,” that is to say poems meant to reprove and punish those it took as its targets (Puttenham 1869: 46). (The word *satire* can also mean more generally a long discursive poem, as with Donne’s Satires, but this is not the use that concerns us here.) Satire as satire is of more than local or historical interest when the things that it reproves are general or recurrent human failings, rather than the specific faults of specific people; but we can still take very great interest in satires directed against individuals when they are representatives of recognizable types. Part of the effect of satire is to define or describe the type to which the individuals it castigates or lampoons belong. Those individuals will then risk becoming negative or ludicrous examples.

Satire is of interest then because its targets are perennial, which means that it more or less knows it does not and cannot extirpate what it attacks. It is a fundamentally pessimistic genre. To reverse Gramsci’s moral aphorism, this is pessimism of the will, but optimism of the intellect, since satire delights the intelligence even as it fails to improve the world. Swift’s famous definition, in the preface to *The Battle of the Books*, makes clear why this should be so: “Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover every body’s face but their own; which is the chief reason for that kind reception it meets with in the world, and that so very few are offended with it” (Swift 2009: 95). We are not offended because we like to see others reprovved, and do not recognize our own faces in the mirror, and without such recognition we have no reason to reform. Byron, the greatest of the Romantic satirists, and inevitably the largest focus of this chapter, recognizes this at once in the Preface added to “English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,” where he says that he expects his targets to “succeed better in condemning my scribblings, than in mending their own.” (Byron 2009: 9–10).

It appears therefore that satire almost by definition cannot correct what it reprehends. Byron’s words suggest the two reasons for this, one formal and one substantial.

The substantial reason (as the quotation from Swift suggests) is that satire's great complaint is that its target is too depraved or degenerate to recognize its aptness. *Look at yourself – look at how you don't recognize yourself!* says satire, and everyone regrets the general truth of this observation – evident in the complacency of everyone *else*. People should recognize themselves but don't. They should recognize themselves because their faults are not those of imbecility but a kind of wanton blindness, which is why satire always claims perverse badness rather than unexceptionable mediocrity as its subject. Hence Byron, again from the Preface to "English Bards": "the unquestionable possession of considerable genius by several of the writers here censured renders their mental prostitution more to be regretted. Imbecility may be pitied, or, at worst, laughed at and forgotten; perverted powers demand the most decided reprehension" (Byron 2009:: 31–7). (Juvenal, on whom Byron models himself, as Johnson had before him, asks the same question in his First Satire: "It is difficult not to write satire, for who is so patient with the unjust city, so iron of disposition, as to restrain himself?" (ll. 30–2); so that all must hate the unjust city that they themselves comprise.)

This substantial complaint – the pessimism of the will – allows for the optimism of the intellect, the fact that satire, and especially parody, has a subject worthy of its powers, namely the powers Byron acknowledges here, perverted and prostituted though they may be. It is such acknowledgment that makes it possible for Romanticism to engage in satire, since Romanticism is about the indomitability of the human soul, the "considerable genius" which is the inheritance of all people before they pervert it. Swiftian satire expresses "savage indignation," bitterness at the low and greedy state of every human being. It reprehends "every body," all those who *rightly* see "every body's face" in the glass, and are wrong only in thinking their own selves exempt from this reflection. Those relatively less vicious in their condemnation – Dryden, Pope, and Johnson, for example – see the possibility of escape from an all-too-risible world in religion: we turn from this world, threatened as it is for example by Universal Dullness (in Pope) to Heaven, which is a satire-free realm, so that turning to heaven grants a "celestial wisdom" that "calms the mind / And makes the happiness she does not find," as Johnson puts it at the end of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (ll. 365–6). Johnson's poem is an imitation of Juvenal's Tenth Satire, which concludes with a somewhat less optimistic capitulation to the gods: we should give up our own will which will always founder on the refractoriness of the self-dealing will of others, and accept that our virtue is its own and only guaranteed reward. For the Augustan satirists such optimism of and in the will allows for the exceptional exemption that Swift doubted, the exemption that comes from turning away from the world toward what transcends its meanness.

Byron satirized genius, however, and although it's true that "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" claims to be a bracing and therapeutic corrective to the waywardness of those who otherwise drift into self-parody, still for the Romantics, especially for the second generation Romantics, to which Byron belonged, a drift into self-parody seems the inevitable fate even or especially of genius. It's one of the hallmarks of Romanticism to take as inspiration, however briefly, the loss of access to the sources of inspiration. The spectacular crisis of inspiration collapses, even as it inspires, and so cannot last. The loss of inspiration serves instead as a last fitful and gusting flare of brilliancy (it enhances what

disappears, as Shelley put it, “like darkness to a dying flame” (“Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” l. 45)), but only if that loss is real. (Byron’s and Shelley’s great proto-Romantic precursor Rousseau makes this point in *Julie*, when she notes the increased concentration and saturation of affect that is a temporary concomitant of the evaporation of the sea of life in which it lives.) Thus the most sublime moments of Romanticism always depict the entanglement of achieved self-knowledge and despair, such moments as those captured by Wordsworth when he says that he prefers death to the fading of his joy in the daffodils, or that he sees by glimpses when he writes *The Prelude* and when age comes on may hardly see at all. Shelley’s early sonnet “To William Wordsworth” laments the obvious and inevitable next step: “One loss is mine / Which thou too feel’st, yet I alone deplore” (ll. 5–6), namely that everything flees “like sweet dreams,” including, alas, the impulse to lament this fact, so that Wordsworth has fully succumbed to what his greatest poetry rightly feared, having achieved greatness through the expression of that fear.

Second generation satire, then, does not imagine itself exempt from what it scorns. Its scorn is part of its acknowledgment of the justice of scorn. Where Juvenal or Swift or Dryden or Pope or Johnson were shocked by the depravity of a world they spurned, Byron and Shelley, in their more pessimistic modes, see this depravity as the human condition. Shelley himself said of Byron (in the person of Count Maddalo), with an accuracy that made the satire a tribute rather than an act of deprecation, that “he derives, from a comparison of his own extraordinary mind with the dwarfish intellects that surround him, an intense apprehension of the nothingness of human life” (Preface to *Julian and Maddalo*, Shelley 2009: 212). Pride does not indemnify Maddalo from pessimism of the will, but intensifies it: the nothingness of human life applies just as much to him as to those around him. A telling phrase makes this clear, in the opening of Canto VII of *Don Juan*: “I hope it is no crime / To laugh at all things, for I wish to know / What after all are all things – but a show?” (vii. 2). “I hope it is no crime:” no moralistic rephender of human depravity would use this language. To hope it is no crime is at the same time to accept that it is no smugness-entitling virtue either. Indeed Byron will accept the justice of Shelley’s phrase more explicitly just a few stanzas later (Shelley’s reference to his apprehension of “the nothingness of human life”), quoting it in lines drafted just around the time of Shelley’s death:

Ecclesiastes said that all is vanity;
Most modern preachers say the same, or show it
By their examples of true Christianity.
In short all know, or very soon may know it;
And in this scene of all-confessed inanity,
By saint, by sage, by preacher, and by poet,
Must I restrain me, through the fear of strife
From holding up the nothingness of life?

(vii. 6)

Byron’s proud and dashing skepticism is his most salient and “romantic” feature, but Shelley’s criticism is apt as long as Byron’s poetic persona still takes pleasure in his

conscious superiority. Shelley's penetrating account of Milton's Satan in comparison with his own Prometheus probably looks to Byron as its model and its target (conversely, I think there's a lot of Shelley in the sublime innocence of the character of Don Juan), and certainly applies to one aspect of Byron's character, which it seeks to correct. Look at how apt it is to replace "Satan" with "Byron" (and *Paradise Lost* with *Childe Harold*) in the following quotation:

The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus is Byron; and Prometheus is, in my judgment, a more poetical character than Byron because, in addition to courage and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which in the Hero of *Childe Harold* interfere with the interest. The character of Byron engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure. (Shelley 2009: 229)

But this could also be an expression of Byron's own attitude towards his mad, bad, and dangerous to know self.

By the time he begins working on *Don Juan* Byron gives up preening himself on his provocatively dismissive claims of conscious superiority to his fellows. He may for a while be "the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme" (xi. 55), but like Napoleon he falls; unlike Napoleon he knows that such a fall is inevitable and he isn't captious about it. Poetry isn't saving, as he once thought it was. It is here that we can locate the specific hallmarks of Romantic satire. On the one hand it aims at everyone; but on the other it aims particularly at empty moralism. Where Augustan satire reprehended those indifferent to morality, Byron attacks those who establish their own value on the smug display of their moral superiority to the mass of humanity (Bob Southey being the leading example of such priggishness). Such attacks on hypocrisy are of course a staple of satire. What's different in Byron (though here he has a precursor in Swift) is the extent to which he acknowledges that he is not himself exempt from the burlesque. Neither pride nor savage indignation is the right final attitude towards the discovery of the nothingness of life. Indignation without pride might be better: indignation at those who would impose an oppressive moralism on everyone else, but what honest indignation should condemn is the indignant, bullying *fuss* which is the excrescence of our pride and hypocrisy, as Shelley puts it in *Peter Bell the Third* (see below). And yet (as we've established) such moralism seems the inevitable outcome of disappointed poetic vocation (because for Romanticism poetic vocation is always a vocation for disappointment), if the Lakers, the older Romantics, can be taken as examples.

One way to avoid the trajectory towards priggishness is to turn in the opposite direction. In a note to *Peter Bell the Third*, Shelley seriously regrets what Wordsworth has "forgotten from [the] sweet and sublime verses" of his own earlier poetry (Shelley's notes on stanza 26, l. 588). Wordsworth's *Excursion*, he says there, shows "evidence of the gradual hardening of a strong but circumscribed sensibility, of the perversion of a penetrating but panic stricken understanding," a judgment which should be

compared, for its similarities as well as its differences to the sketch of Maddalo. If disappointed reverence for vocation leads to pious moralism in the Lakers, in Byron, Keats, and Shelley it can lead instead to irreverence, which at its best is committed to promoting sociability and friendship. The crucial fact about the best Romantic satire, the satire that anyone can enjoy without boning up on its historical contexts, or (put otherwise) the satire that would make one *want* to bone up on the historical context, the better to relish the joke, is that it's funny and that its funniness is always on the side of humanity and humane attitudes. You can be vicious alone but you can't be funny alone: there has to be someone to enjoy the joke, and so the comic verse that the later Romantics write is appealing just because it *is* appealing: it makes an appeal to an audience.

What makes joking funny is the very fact that unlike the vicious topical political satire of the day, and of every day, joking by its nature does not address a coterie audience. Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Barbauld, as well as plenty of purer polemicists, wrote bitter and sometimes savage Juvenalian denunciations of political figures and policies (for example Barbauld's "England in 1811," Shelley's "Mask of Anarchy" or Coleridge's "Famine, Fire, Slaughter.") But as satires these are not characteristically Romantic; they're versions of the kind of invective to be found down the ages. What is more Romantic is the mode of address to a reader who will be first surprised and then delighted by the jokes. It's the nature of genuine funniness that it can't be addressed to like-minded readers, as vicious and demagogic satire almost always is – or purports to be: vicious satire can of course have other *uses* within a political context, such as provoking enemies into ill-judged responses. But genuine funniness has to surprise, which means it has to say something unexpected and win the reader over to the unexpected perspective. It therefore has to convince a reader who has different views from the speaker to acknowledge that they *also* have shared sensibilities, and this is what makes it humane. For the Romantics, this is one mode of the general idea that because human subjectivity is transcendently intense, the social world is made up of equally intense other minds. The danger is that they will forget that intensity in the brute material world where selfishness and indifference propagate themselves by turning their victims, the victims of their relentless assault on subjective vocation, into oppressors in their turn. If transcendent vocation turns into pious moralism, laughing at all things may be the inoculation against that.

I've said that this kind of good humor – let's call it for its oxymoronic pungency Byronic good humor – is appealing, and what makes it appealing is that it makes an appeal to the reader rather than bullying her. This way of being appealing is something that readers have always liked in the younger Romantics, and it's harder to find in the first generation. Keats is perhaps felt to be most appealing of all (though Clare comes close), and it's worth seeing an example of how such good humor colors some of Keats's characteristic pleasures in worldly experience in the poems as well as the letters. Reeve Parker has argued (in seminars and conversations) that Keats's sense of humor is undervalued. Parker finds, if not satire, at least irreverence in such lines as the instructions the old dames give Madeline in "The Eve of St Agnes":

They told her how, upon St Agnes' Eve,
 Young virgins might have visions of delight,
 And soft adorings from their loves receive
 Upon the honey'd middle of the night,
 If ceremonies due they did aright;
 As, supperless to bed they must retire,
 And couch supine their beauties, lily white;
 Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require
 Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire.
 (ll. 46–54)

“Supperless” makes the second movement of the Spenserian stanza funny. It is self-deflating, showing its tenderness towards the innocent wonder of Madeline by being sensitive to it, while sharing in that innocence only vicariously. This is Keats's mode: the poet is the most unpoetical of all things, which means that he is estranged from the life of sensation that he celebrates. That life is in Keats what Wordsworth called “a pretty piece of paganism,” and it's the innocence of paganism that he protects here, indifferent to the piety of Christian moralism.

In this he is oddly like Byron, who treats Haidée with the same sort of unexpected delicacy in *Don Juan*, though of course Byron and Keats had almost no sympathy for each other. Both imagine worldly readers, but neither takes worldliness as meaning moral superiority. To be worldly is to be disabused of the idea that poetic vocation is transcendent. Keats is of course not a major satiric poet, as Byron is, but the continuity between them shows that Byronic satire at its best is more central to Romanticism than might be expected. Even Shelley will defend urbanity and reject otherworldliness when it comes in the pious forms of the later Wordsworth, and he'll do it in a funny poem – just the sort of poem he knows people think him incapable of writing, as he says to his publisher Ollier: “perhaps no one will believe in anything in the shape of a joke from me” (Shelley 1964: 2. 540). Thus he contemns Wordsworth's *Peter Bell* for giving up “the world of all of us, *and where / We find our happiness or not at all*” (italics Shelley's, condensing and slightly misquoting in his Preface Wordsworth's 1809 extract from *The Prelude*, “The French Revolution as It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement,” ll. 38–40; see 1850 *Prelude* xi. 142–4). Shelley elsewhere treats these lines of Wordsworth's unfairly, as suggesting that this world is the only chance we're given to earn eternal life and avoid eternal punishment after we die. But in the Preface to *Peter Bell the Third* he regards this passage more accurately as representative of the Wordsworth he once loved, before the older poet's fall into pious superstition.

It's just this that he castigates in *Peter Bell the Third*, once Peter/Wordsworth has turned into “a formal Puritan, / A solemn and unsexual man” (ll. 150–1). Peter's Puritanism has just one doctrine, which is this: “That ‘happiness is wrong’” (l. 573). Why is happiness wrong? What we do to each other is to contemn each other's happiness, out of resentment and revenge and disappointment and a false sense of entitlement to deference that we think will indemnify us for the true wrongs we have suffered. Wordsworth's wonderful and original early poem “Lines Written in Early

Spring,” first published in *Lyrical Ballads*, celebrates the pleasure of the spring, and takes from the joy of the season reason to lament, as its unexpected last line puts it, “What man has made of man.” Shelley is probably remembering some echo of this when in *Peter Bell the Third* he gives his own parodic diagnosis of human life (in a stanza that begins by echoing Marlowe’s Mephistopheles, with Wordsworth another Faustus):

And this is Hell – and in this smother
 All are damnable and damned;
 Each one damning, damns the other;
 They are damned by one another,
 By none other are they damned.
 (ll. 217–21)

But if happiness is *not* wrong, what kind of happiness is available in this world? Romanticism can be defined both with respect to what it championed and what it fought against. The continuity between the earlier and the later Romantics is one of a continuous acknowledgment of the intensity of subjective experience, in oneself and in others. In oneself: how else would one know what it meant to acknowledge others? In others, who share with us the experience of subjectivity. For Romanticism intense subjectivity and intense acknowledgment are correlates of each other.

This is true even in the most self-regarding poems of the high Romantic Byron – the “Byronic” Byron. Even in the modes which we probably now find most adolescent and most distasteful, he appeals to a reader who (like Shelley’s First Spirit in “The Two Spirits: An Allegory”) feels the power of his loneliness. Peacock parodies this when he has his Byron character Mr. Cypress take his final leave of England with an assurance to his friends that to their memory he “should always look back with as much affection as his lacerated spirit could feel for anything” (Peacock 1897: 97). But Byron’s self-regard, as Wordsworth himself recognized, is not very far from Wordsworth’s own, and is as unexpectedly chastened and humiliated, even in the midst of his apparent egotism, as Wordsworth’s own. The melancholy element of necessarily vicarious relation to a lost experience of nature is at the center of the great Wordsworthian tradition of Romantic poems of crisis and loss, and vicarious experience of one’s own lost self is always also vicarious experience of a reader’s or narratee’s or audience’s vicarious experience of one’s own lost self, and thus treats the reader as a peer. A way of saying this is that neither Wordsworth nor Byron, in their great expressions of what Keats called “the egotistical sublime,” ever set themselves up as superior to the *reader*, whoever else they may have deprecated. In fact it is just this implicit disparagement of the reader that Keats and Byron condemn in the later and lesser work of the Lake poets: the didactic poetry that takes the reader not as a companion but more as an inevitably wayward pupil whom the poem’s tone of superior moral rectitude rebukes, tests, and even dismisses. Thus Keats’s critique of Wordsworth’s bullying, which comes out of the “palpable design” it has on its readers:

It may be said that we ought to read our Contemporaries, that Wordsworth etc. should have their due from us, but for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist? Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes a false coinage and deceives himself. (Keats 2002: 86)

Shelley too deplures Wordsworth's bullying in *Peter Bell the Third*:

His virtue, like our own, was built
Too much on that indignant fuss
Hypocrite Pride stirs up in us
To bully out another's guilt.
(ll. 289–92)

Although Keats, unlike Shelley, also thinks of Byron as a bully (the Byron of *Childe Harold*), the similarity between Keats, Byron and Shelley is more significant: they see themselves, both as readers and as writers, as addressing peers in humanity. So too did the older Romantics in their youth, but now their work seems more intent on castigating their younger contemporaries, and it is this that the younger Romantics see as ruinous. As Shelley says of the triplicate Peter Bell, representative of Wordsworth in particular as well as the Trinity of Lake Poets: "He was at first sublime, pathetic, impressive, profound; then dull; then prosy and dull; and now dull – o so dull! it is an ultra-legitimate dulness" (Shelley 2009: 416).

For satire to work, it has to be funny, not dull, and for satire to be funny it has to show respect to its narratee. Even the most savage satires of Swift imagine a narratee who will appreciate them and appreciate their scorn for an implied narratee who doesn't. Here again, though, Swift (and even Dryden and Pope) are expressing a conscious sense of superiority to everyone else except the narratee. But Byron, Keats, and Shelley in their funnier poems, are defending those whom the moralists of the elder generation now disparage.

They do this through the surprising good humor I have mentioned, which might be the hallmark of Romantic satire. That good humor signals a kind of acknowledged relaxation of egotistical self-infatuation, so that even in the midst of a sublime lament Byron wonders aloud how he would look in a "peruke" (i. 213). His satires represent an achieved wryness (even while they comment incisively and passionately about anything important), and that achieved wryness may be seen in Shelley and Keats as well, though most often not in comic form. What is the nature of that wryness? It's that fate of all people to fail at their grandest aspirations:

As boy, I thought myself a clever fellow
And wished that others held the same opinion;
They took it up when my days grew more mellow,
And other minds acknowledged my dominion.
Now my sere fancy "falls into the yellow

Leaf," and imagination droops her pinion;
 And the sad truth which hovers o'er my desk
 Turns what was once romantic to burlesque.
 (iv. 3)

The comparison with Macbeth (by way of the misquotation of Macbeth's "My way of life is fall'n / Into the sere, the yellow leaf"; *Macbeth* V.iii.22–3) is one to which Byron recurs, but in fact he's no Macbeth, as the enjambment and rhyme foisted on Macbeth's great blank verse speech makes clear. He's like all of us, someone who's read Macbeth and thought of himself as like him, when to think of oneself as like Macbeth turns out to mean only that one thought oneself clever, which means one wasn't like Macbeth at all. But now he shares with the reader instead the quick and easy allusion to Macbeth: we're all in the same boat, figures who are not Macbeth. He once thought he would be: Manfred is a Faust-turned-Macbeth. But now whatever it is he's achieved – whatever it is that anyone achieves – achievement itself falls short of what he'd once hoped:

I
 Have spent my life, both interest and principal,
 And deem not, what I deemed, my soul invincible.
 (i. 213)

This passage is extracted from the great, Horatian lament for lost youth at the end of Canto I. It's worth seeing how that lament modulates into comic verse, and how the modulation represents the end of transcendent confidence it describes. In place of the passions of his heart he's achieved "a deal of judgement, / Though heaven knows how it ever found a lodgement" (i. 215), and that middle-brow, middle-aged tone exemplifies what it says. All of this is sad, but the sadness isn't saving or transcendent, and instead there's a kind of achieved haplessness in Byron's voice. The important thing to see is that at many of its best moments *Don Juan* is simultaneously impassioned and hapless and good-humored about that simultaneity. Here, for example, his farewell to love sketches a one-line trajectory of the progression of human life:

My days of love are over, me no more
 The charms of maid, wife, and still less of widow
 Can make the fool of which they made before;
 In short I must not lead the life I did do.
 (i. 216)

Youth to age: maid, wife, and widow. But what matters is the joke here, which provides a fine example of Byron's perfect timing. The charms of maid correlate with his own youth and courtship; we imagine that the charms of wife are the charms of married love, but then the identification of the possessor of the last set of charms – the widow – makes us rethink the line on the fly. Widow is the natural last term for the triplet; but it makes no sense if the three ages of woman are indices of the age of

the man who loves her, because the widow has outlived her husband. So we realize rather that Byron has enjoyed the favor of widows, and then we realize that this means that he's also enjoyed the favor of wives – not his own, but so what? Still, we have to recalibrate the meaning of the words in the line.

To get this effect, Byron, or his speaker, has to play the innocent. What he's innocent *of* is the thought that there could be a *more* innocent reading: even his adulteries bespeak an innocence of judgment and affection. The more conventionally innocent reading, which he plays at being unaware of, is what a pious moralist would think the word *wife* implied, so the trick here is that Byron sounds more innocent yet than the moralist scandalized by what the line turns out to mean. Byron's speaker isn't scandalized; it never enters his mind, so that it is not he who's responsible for the scandal but the moralists. He simply loves women, whereas they see women as moral tests and traps.

None of this is a claim about Byron, but rather about the dynamics of the joke. The lines suggest the way Byron is like Juan, a kind of enjoyer of whatever it is that fate brings him by way of pleasure; and in no way a schemer, always on the lookout for his own advantage. This quasi-naive candor makes for a large part of his charm, and culminates in his sense of what he was like:

A chymic treasure
Is glittering youth, which I have spent betimes,
My heart in passion and my head on rhymes.
(i. 217)

He's spent his head on rhymes because they don't come easy. They take work and yet they're an idle pastime, which is his point. What could be franker than such an admission, unless the charm of spending your youth on rhymes is more winningly open still. It's worth noticing how much of *Don Juan* is about the very process of rhyming, and how Byron gets carried away, or represents himself as carried away, by the very form of the poem. To take one example of many, consider the series of linguistic self-reflections in Canto VI, where his narrator acknowledges in stanza 18 that he had to misquote Horace to end the previous stanza, with the result that "there's neither tune nor time / In the last line, which cannot well be worse, / And was thrust in to close the octave's chime" (vi. 18). Sometimes rhymes lead to accidental felicities, as when he notices that he hasn't used *bliss* as one of the two rhymes for *kiss* (he's used *amiss* and *this*) and so remarks: "'Kiss' rhymes to 'bliss' in fact as well as verse; / I wish it never led to something worse" (vi. 59), so that here *fact* itself rhymes with *verse*, paralleling and diverging at once, as rhymes do, as what is worse than *bliss* is both held at bay, within rhyme, and the natural end-result of the factual progression rhyme notes. Between these two stanzas is another passage, in which Byron apologizes for a long-winded parenthesis in his description of the metrically apt Dudú, Juan's paramour in this section. Here he will allude to a classical theory of etymology whereby words are derived from their opposites, *lucus*, a shady grove, derived from *non lucendo*, not allowing light, another version of the divergence of language from its reference:

And therefore was she kind and gentle as
 The Age of Gold. (When gold was yet unknown,
 By which its nomenclature came to pass;
 Thus most appropriately has been shown
Lucus a non lucendo, not what was,
 But what was not, a sort of style that's grown
 Extremely common in this age, whose metal
 The devil may decompose but never settle.

I think it may be of Corinthian brass,
 Which was a mixture of all metals, but
 The brazen uppermost.) Kind reader, pass
 This long parenthesis (I could not shut
 It sooner for the soul of me) and class
 My faults even with your own, which meaneth, put
 A kind construction upon them and me,
 But that you won't. Then don't; I am not less free.

(vi. 55–56)

It's worth noting that like Pope (in *The Rape of the Lock*) Byron encourages us to skip the parentheses, both in words and in form. Doing so drops one pair of rhymes, since each member (*but* and *shut*) is separately parenthesized, and so yields near-continuous rhyming:

And therefore was she kind and gentle as
 The Age of Gold. Kind reader, pass
 This long parenthesis, and class
 My faults even with your own, which meaneth, put
 A kind construction upon them and me,
 But that you won't. Then don't; I am not less free.

(vi. 55–6).

The point here is that the linguistic features of language carry him away and he allows himself to be carried away by them. He's always improvising, and the improvisation is impressive not for the depth of soul of which it is the highest expression but for the good humor with which he finds a way to go on – just as Juan does, and as he does for Juan. This procedure, like all joking, courts an audience who will appreciate the joke, and it is strongly social and sociable in its address to us. It's social and sociable because he plays the innocent whom both he and the reader laugh about. We share his faults and we share his pleasures. The pleasures we share are pleasures he's proud of being the author of – yes – but he is his own Madeline here: he looks at his poetic persona from our point of view, as long as we're the type who care for that there kind of pleasure. If we aren't, if we're priggish like the Lake poets, then we're damning ourselves. But if we do take pleasure here, we will see our own image in the glass, and take delight in seeing it. The great Romantic satires are like the greatest poems of Romanticism in offering us a way of seeing ourselves through and in another subjectivity – a subjectivity

contemplating subjective experience itself as experience of others and for others whom it acknowledges as equally subjective. Unlike Juvenalian or Swiftian satire, but like most of the greatest Romantic poetry (though in quite a different affective mode), Romantic satire undoes the difference between optimism and pessimism, showing how the intellect can take over from the will and devote itself to human happiness, as long as the will remains good will.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 7 “‘Stirring shades’: The Romantic Ode and Its Afterlives”; chapter 12 “‘Other voices speak’: The Poetic Conversations of Byron and Shelley”; chapter 15 “Celtic Romantic Poetry: Scotland, Ireland, Wales”; chapter 22 “Romanticism, Sport, and Late Georgian Poetry”

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“Stirring shades”: The Romantic Ode and Its Afterlives

Esther Schor

*A third time came they by; – alas! Wherefore?
 My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams;
 My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er
 With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams ...*
 Keats, “Ode on Indolence”

Odes of Progress: “the sword, in myrtles dressed”

My intention in this essay is to stir up a few shades. Indeed, beneath the passive tenses of Keats’s “Ode on Indolence,” we perceive his own hand stirring the urn, sending its three white-robed figures around and around and around. With particular attention to a trio of shades – Liberty, the Nightingale, and Melancholy – I will argue that “the Romantic Ode” is itself a shade, a lyric afterlife of two eighteenth-century discourses: the enlightenment rhetoric of progress, and the culture of sentimentalism. My point of departure is what Stuart Curran has called a “radical internalization of the public ode” (1986: 66) in the generation of Collins and Gray. These poems, though they attempt to celebrate the progress of both poetry and liberty, come upon something rather different: the cyclical, ongoing, entanglement of liberty and power. In odes by Coleridge, Hemans and Byron, celebrations of liberty become disjointed, aborted, or ironic, as the dramatic tension between liberty and power takes center stage. Satiric odes by Southey, Lamb and Peter Pindar (John Wolcot) deliver the progress ode to a Juvenalian destiny in the Romantic era. In fact, even the odist’s freedom comes in for strong satirical treatment in poems by Cowper, Moore and Reynolds. In odes of the Romantic era, we also find the afterlife of sentimentalism, particularly in the hands of women poets such as Charlotte Smith, Hemans, Eliza Cook, and Joanna Baillie. Such

stock figures of sensibility as Melancholy, Psyche and the Nightingale are treated, by and large, with either satirical brio or grotesque extravagance.

As the preceding list of odists might suggest, for readers of today, met with a vastly larger array of texts, modes and genres than those in the traditional Romantic canon, “the Romantic Ode” is a decidedly ambiguous entity. Perhaps this is nothing new; two of our most eminent critics of the ode – Stuart Curran and Paul Fry – describe it as inherently self-divided. For Curran, the Romantic turn in the ode’s history occurs when “a Horatian voice was invested in a Pindaric form. . . . [T]he Horatian meditative presence, its contemplations built through a sequential and associational logic, becomes a mediating presence standing above sequence, forced to impose, or to create within itself, a synthesizing order – an epode – upon the universal strophe and antistrophe of experience” (1986: 71). Here, the ode enacts a dialectical dance between the Kantian subject and entropy, with resolution occasionally deferred to a privileged object: Coleridge’s joyful Lady; Wordsworth’s Dorothy; Byron’s Saint George – George Washington, that is, in his odes on France and Italy. Fry, in *The Poet’s Calling in the English Ode*, finds the ode divided elsewhere: between its hymnic offices – in Fry’s words, “theurgy, celebration, genealogy” – and the poet’s own arrogation of “divinely cosmogonic powers” (1980: 6). “The aim of the ode,” writes Fry, “is to recover and usurp the voice to which hymns defer: not merely to participate in the presence of voice, but to *be* the voice” (1980: 9). Hence, Fry’s paronomastic title, in which the poet’s calling *to* – his “invocation” of powers – is both the predicate of and predicated by his poetic calling – his vocation as poet.

There is yet another self-division within the ode, a crack that begins in the following question: What is at stake when a public mode is internalized, when the world invades the soul of lyric? In the odes of Collins and Grey, we find a paradox: While these odes characterize the lyric as a mode of radical freedom, they persistently justify that freedom by an appeal to power. This paradox becomes particularly visible – and particularly troubling – in that mainstay of the Enlightenment, the Progress Ode. Collins’s “Ode to Liberty” celebrates the origins of Liberty among the martial youths of Sparta and a pair of Athenian tyrannicides: “What New Alcaeus, Fancy-blest, / Shall sing the sword, in myrtles dressed” (Lonsdale 1972: ll. 7–8), the poet asks, and indeed, the sword disguised in myrtle is an index of liberty’s mixed inheritance. Myrtle, a symbol of freely given affections, of spontaneous social concord rather than social contract, also symbolizes death, which is precisely what it conceals in the form of a shining blade. Tyranny alone sustains a wound, for even after the fall of the Roman republic, Collins assures us that Liberty survives, a “perfect form” (l. 31) in the institutions of Florence, Pisa, San Marino, Venice, Switzerland, and Holland; moreover, it continues to thrive in Britain. But Collins elaborates the progress of Liberty with mythopoetic extravagance. Britain and France, it seems, were once a single land mass: “The Gaul, ‘tis held of antique story, / Saw Britain link’d to his now adverse strand / No Sea between nor Cliff sublime and hoary, / He passed with unwet feet through all our Land” (ll. 66–9). But the “inward Labours” (l. 77) of Liberty erupt violently, causing not birth but a “blest divorce” (l. 87), with custody of Liberty awarded (without contest) to Britain. This rift with France seems a decisive moment for Liberty, for the

“laureate band” (l. 129) of Britons who engrave her fane with “prophetic rage” celebrate her as the “rule[r] of the West” (l. 144), a “Soul-enforcing Goddess” (l. 92). And when the hand of “Blithe Concord” (l. 132) lifts her wand, it puts us decidedly on edge.

In Gray’s “Progress of Poesy,” poetry chafes at “Freedom’s holy flame” (Lonsdale 1972: l. 65), but circumstances for poets are rarely so warm. In Gray’s “The Bard,” the “grisly band” (l. 144) of murdered poets weave a tissue of tyranny and betrayal, stamped indelibly with vengeance. The Bard uncannily prophesies poetry’s revival in the hands of Shakespeare, Milton, and more “distant warblings” (l. 133). But even at the rising of the regal orb of Elizabeth, Liberty is not among the attendants, and *The Bard* closes with a lose/lose choice between “sceptered care” and the “triumph” (ll. 140–1) of death. Though it was the writ of Edward I that drove this Bard to his bad end, neither the bards of eternity nor this bard’s prophetic vision glimpse Poesy unsceptered, free, and lovely. However many Progress poems poesy springs through, her steps are always stalked by power, whether that of the human tyrant or that of the tyrants within: rage, anger, horror, fear, and vengeance.

In odes of the revolutionary-Napoleonic era and its aftermath, pageants of progress, where they occur at all, are disjointed, aborted, or ironic, and the dramatic tension between liberty and power takes center stage. In Coleridge’s 1794 “Ode to the Departing Year,” for example, Time’s “wild harp” (l. 1) resounds to notes of woe and joy, weeping and rejoicing. The visionary poet writhes in a sort of death-agony, less a prophet than a Soldier who “deathlike . . . dozes among heaps of dead!” (l. 116). As he sings of Albion’s “predestined ruins” (l. 146), what birds there are sing warnings, for the “famish’d brood of prey / Flap their lank pennons on the groaning wind!” (ll. 51–2). Two years later, in *France, An Ode*, the poet claims that though he “hung my head and wept at Britain’s name” (l. 42), he never deserted the “holy flame” of Liberty. But even this claim is second-guessed in Coleridge’s poem, originally titled “The Recantation.” Bitterly, he mocks his erstwhile faith in revolution – “‘And soon,’ I said, ‘shall Wisdom teach her lore, / In the low huts of them that toil and groan!’” (ll. 59–60) – as an idolatrous breaking of faith with Liberty. Hence, the ode swerves toward an austerity halfway between pantheism and Protestantism, abjuring the notion that Liberty ever “breathe[d] thy soul in forms of human power” (l. 92). But disavowing the forms of human power entails a strange disavowal of the human form itself, as Liberty, now disembodied, stirs in the breeze, in the murmur of pines, in surging waves.

Felicia Hemans’s “Liberty: An Ode,” which she published (as Felicia Dorothea Browne) in 1808 at the age of fifteen, also situates the goddess in nature, rather than on the battlefield or in a national fane. In the opening stanza, the poet conjures a sublime and phallic landscape – “Where the bold rock majestic towers on high / Projecting to the sky; / Where the impetuous torrent’s rapid course / Dashes with headlong force” (Hemans 1808; *EPD* ll. 1–4) – only to dissolve it whimsically into “scenes less wild less awful” (l. 5). Relocating Liberty from a sublime landscape to one of beauty, Hemans tracks her to nature’s recesses: among dells, groves, glades, she is “sportive,” a “rover”; like Milton’s Eve, she “trips” and wanders. Solitude, for her, is best society. In fact, Hemans’s Liberty is utterly self-delighting; her chief pleasure is “to rove unseen” (l. 10) and this pleasure the poet vows to protect. Though privy to Liberty’s wanderings, she

gives us, in lieu of a bodily Goddess, a blur of motion, in “accents soft” (l. 25). In closing, Hemans delivers her safely to “the cool impervious grove” (l. 39) – impervious to the reader, that is. For Hemans, to free Liberty from her more sanguinary exploits demands sheltering her within a feminine recess.

That Byron returns Liberty to the fray should not surprise us, but in his odes on the demise of Napoleon, Liberty’s hands are stained with blood. The 1814 “Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte” is a marvel of contempt, not only for the abdication, but also for Byron’s own chagrin at finding the Emperor turned to “hero dust” (l. 100) on Mortality’s scales. For Byron, abdication by itself is neither shameful nor noble; witness the Roman Emperor Nepos who “[t]hrew down the dagger – dared depart, / In savage grandeur, home” (ll. 57–8). In the best possible case, Byron suggests, abdication is a Satanic mode of freedom, the mind become its own republic. But this is precisely the abdication *abdicated* by Napoleon, who can boast no “self-upheld abandon’d power” (l. 63).

In the immediate wake of Waterloo, however, Byron writes an astonishing series of odes in which he ventriloquizes the collective voice of the defeated French forces. From the French perspective – and Byron titles his poem “Ode: From the French” as if he had merely translated it – the blood soaking the battlefield belongs not to France, but to Freedom. Indeed, Napoleon would have died Freedom’s son, had not “the Hero sunk into the King” (l. 33). Murat, similarly, sold his soul to the King of Naples. But for Byron, however much the French invoke “equal rights and laws,” their vision of freedom is not based on natural rights. It is a vision of Freedom, perpetually embattled, lance at the ready, spattered with gore: in a telling rhyme, for her *sword*, she is *adored*. Though Byron hopes that “Freedom ne’er shall want an heir” (l. 98), her legacy is not birth but death: “When once more her hosts assemble, / Tyrants shall believe and tremble – / Smile they at this idle threat? / Crimson tears will follow yet” (ll. 100–4). By transforming Freedom into a gory, thuggish figure, Byron reminds us that even Coleridge’s Freedom left bloody stains upon the snowy alps.

The Juvenalian handling of Liberty in these odes by Coleridge and Byron suggests why, as Gary Dyer and Steven Jones have suggested, the ode becomes a mainstay of political satire during the Romantic era (Dyer 1997: 160; Jones 2000: 74–5). What shapes our sense of certain odes as “satires” is not their political stance, which can be left or right, but their strategy of indirection. Instead of embodying a transcendental deity, such odes elevate an sublunary object through which they expose a multitude of sins: abrogations of rights and liberties, abuses of power, public deception, even self-deception. Robert Southey’s “Ode to a Pig while His Nose Was Boring,” a poem written in 1799 but suppressed until 1829, shows us what is left of Liberty when, like Astraea, she has fled: that is, a bloodletting. Southey’s “Piggy” is a social animal who has exchanged his native freedom for creaturely comforts: “Sure is provision on the social plan, / Secure the comforts that to each belong: / Oh, happy Swine! the impartial sway of man / Alike protects the weak Pig and the strong” (ll. 21–4). To shame the squealing pig, Southey dares him to behold Burke’s swinish multitude: “Go to the forest Piggy, and deplore / The miserable lot of savage Swine! / See how the young Pigs

fly from the great Boar, / And see how coarse and scantily they dine!" (ll. 29–32). Protection by humans, however, proves to be limited by human hungers. Ultimately, the pig's nose knows his fate: once he lets the iron through his nose, it is a matter of time before all his blood "trickles to the pudding pan" (l. 40). Whether we read this as an abolitionist poem or not, just beneath the social contract lurk brutal relations of power and appetite, though the savage pig, forever dodging the great Boar of scarcity, fares hardly better.

Another ode that sacrifices liberties to appetites is Charles Lamb's caustic "Pindaric Ode to the Tread Mill," a homage to Defoe's "Hymn to the Pillory." Here Lamb sings the virtues of the punitive instrument, or as he drily puts it, alluding to Wordsworth's Intimations Ode, "Thou best Philosopher made out of wood" (*EPD* I. 78):

Incompetent my song to raise
To its just height thy praise,
Great Mill!
That by thy motion proper
(No thanks to wind, or sail, or working rill)
Grinding that stubborn corn, the Human will,
Turn'st out men's consciences,
That were begrimed before, as clean and sweet
As flour from purest wheat,
Into thy hopper.
All reformation short of thee but nonsense is,
Or human, or divine.

(ll. 56–67)

Scratch this reformist ode, and a grisly parody of the eucharist emerges, the human will ground to a flour, sacrificed not for social communion, but to feed the people's belly. Thomas Moore's "Ode to a Hat" lambastes the pride and ambition of Anglican ministers: "What swarms of Tithes, in vision dim, – / Some pig-tail'd, some like cherubim, / With ducklings' wings – around it hover! / Tenths of all dead and living things, / That Nature into being brings ..." (*EPD* II. 15–19). Like Pope's sylphs, the Tithes anxiously protect the minister's "reverend Hat" (l. 1), which he'd exchange in a heartbeat for a bishop's miter. A final example comes from the voluminous works of Peter Pindar, otherwise John Wolcot, whose "Ode to My Ass, Peter," a performance far lengthier than the average ass, celebrates asinine ingenuousness:

Though, Balaam-like, I cursed thee with a smack;
Sturdy, thou droppd'st thine ears upon thy back,
And trotting retrograde, with wriggling tail,
In vain did I thy running rump assail:

For lo, between thy legs thou putt'dst thine head,
And gavest me a puddle for a bed.
Now this was fair – the action bore no guile:

Thou duck'dst me not, like Judas, with a smile.
 O, were the manners of some monarchs such,
 Who smile even in the close insidious hour
 That kicks th'unguarded minion from his power!
 But this is asking p'rhaps of kings too much.

(EPD ll. 27–38)

Before leaving the matter of satire, we must acknowledge the scores of odes that mock the elevated diction of the ode itself. Often read as parodies of convention, they seem to me to parody the odist's poetic freedom – a freedom squandered on hollow sublimity and stock tropes. Consider “Ode: *Secundum Artem*” (attributed by Southey to Cowper) – “Shall I begin with Ah, or Oh? / Be sad? Oh yes. Be glad? / Ah no” (ll. 1–3); or Peter Pindar’s “Ode upon Ode” – “World! Stop thy mouth – I am resolved to rhyme, / I cannot throw away a vein sublime” (EPD l. 1–3). Or Moore’s delightful teenage odist Fanny Fudge in “The Fudges in England”: “Bring me the first-born ocean waves, / From out those deep primeval caves, / Where from the dawn of Time they’ve lain – / The embryos of a future Main!” (EPD l. 7–10). With this embryonic main, Fanny aborts her ode, confiding to her cousin:

I had got, dear, thus far in my Ode,
 Intending to fill the whole page to the bottom,
 But having invoc'd such a lot of fine things,
 Flowers, billows, and thunderbolts, rainbows and wings,
 Didn't know what to do with 'em, when I had got 'em.
 (ll. 18–22).

As Fanny Fudge notes (Wood 1994: 155–214), inflated poetry needs more than the usual amount of puffing:

As for *puffing* – that first of all lit'rary boons,
 And essential alike both to bards and balloons
 As, unless well supplied with inflation, 'tis found
 Neither bards nor balloons budge an inch from the ground.
 (ll. 67–70)

Perhaps the most urbane satire of odic inflation is John Hamilton Reynolds’s “Ode to Mr. Graham, the Aeronaut.” Allowing his cigar smoke to waft him into Graham’s balloon, the airborne poet sees Horatian vistas, while buffeted by Pindaric gales:

Away! – away! – the bubble fills –
 Farewell to earth and all its hills! –
 ...
 Ah me! My brain begins to swim! –
 The world is growing rather dim;

The steeples and the trees –
My wife is getting very small!
I cannot see my babe at all!
(*EPD* ll. 13–14, 19–23)

Here, the rapt elevations of the ode bring on a Swiftian change in perspective: “Lord! What a Lilliput it is . . .” (l. 26); indeed, they bring the existential vertigo of liberty, in which the accustomed signs of society are all but illegible.

All this inflation calls for some reduction. We have seen Liberty, when it traffics in power, stained in blood. Alternatively, when Liberty is cut loose from the social sphere, it becomes airborne, nugatory, fanciful. To be airborne, of course, is the ambition of the poet in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” and the comparison to Reynolds’s ode is instructive. For Shelley resolutely argues for the political efficacy of this liberating wind. What is more, Shelley’s ode, more than any other Romantic text (unless we count Emerson’s *Fate*), imagines a fruitful, dialectical encounter between freedom and power; an encounter that is the life of poetry. In Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” the progress ode meets its end in “Black rain and fire and hail” (l. 28), rising again, phoenix-like, as apocalypse.

Odes of Sentiment: “One morn before me were three figures seen”

But Liberty is not the only figure who registers the introjection of the public in the odes of British Romanticism. Sentimentalism, a theory of the affections as a social network, becomes now sundered into the stirring shades of *Psyche*, *Melancholy*, and the *Nightingale*, with consequences I will now develop. Keats, of course, was hardly the first poet to contemplate the *Nightingale*’s song, but typically, the bird appears, *Penseroso*-style, as an accouterment to *Melancholy*. Beside *Melancholy*, the *Nightingale* is something of a wannabe. In his “Ode XXII To *Melancholy*,” George Dyer situates the goddess within a “wood / Where pour’d the nightingale her liquid throat, / And varied thro’ the night her melting note, / As tho’ her mate were fled, or tender brood” (Dyer 1812; *EPD* ll. 17–20). Whether this nightingale sings of erotic abandonment or maternal grief, the violent myth of *Philomel* – the hideous violence of her rape and mutilation – is suppressed, and this is often true even of poems that invoke her by name. Hood’s “Ode to *Melancholy*,” for example, invites us to “Come, let us set our careful breasts, / Like *Philomel*, against the thorn, / To aggravate the inward grief. / That makes her accents so forlorn” (*EPD* ll. 1–4). The euphemistic “thorn” both dulls and sharpens *Philomel*’s pain. Even Hemans’s “*Melancholy*” (in the lyric of the same name) invokes “the bird of eve’s romantic tale” (1808; *EPD* l. 8) without coming clean on exactly what that might be.

Perhaps because *Philomel*’s song is left her in lieu of tongue and tale, interiority accrues instead to *Melancholy*. As an object for sympathetic contemplation, *Melancholy*

is the sentimental icon of feminine melancholia – pale cheek, weeping eyes, downward gaze, disarranged tresses, *deshabille*, against a backdrop of yews and cypress. But in the Romantic era, Melancholy comes increasingly to be represented in an interior space. We see this shift in the allegoresis of melancholy quite spectacularly in Dyer’s “Ode VI Written in Bedlam: On Seeing a Beautiful Young Maniac.” Contemplating a so-called “Beautiful young female maniac” in her cell, Dyer rues her abrupt transformation by “Melancholy’s baleful wand” (Dyer 1802; *EPD* I. 9). The wand, however, points not to convulsed or ruined beauty, but rather to the woman’s “temples,” to the “moonstruck horrors” that “haunt thy restless head” (l. 11). In Coleridge’s “Melancholy: A Fragment,” a motionless, sleeping figure, oblivious to her surroundings, lies in the throes of dreams: “That pallid cheek was flush’d: her eager look / Beam’d eloquent in slumber! Inly wrought, / Imperfect sounds her moving lips forsook, / And her bent forehead work’d with troubled thought. / Strange was the dream – ” (ll. 9–13), he breaks off suddenly, faced with Melancholy’s all but hermetic mind. Similarly, John Clare’s “To Melancholy” accords her “troubles all thine own,” “secret woe” (ll. 8–9); enclosed within the churchyard, she walks among the stones, a “reader” of troubles. No nightingales within this woeful library, the only winged thing, a “snow white moth, on stilly breeze” (l. 5).

Perhaps Clare is wrong about this “snow white” thing hovering over graves; perhaps it is Keats’s psychic “death-moth,” a soul blanched by melancholy. Hemans’s strange, compelling “Lines to a Butterfly Resting on a Skull” might well allegorize the soul that hovers over mortality. Though Hemans knows the butterfly to symbolize the Christian soul, liberated from the body at death, the butterfly doesn’t seem remotely aware of this fact:

Creature of air and light!
Emblem of that which will not fade or die!
Wilt thou not speed thy flight,
To chase the south wind through the glowing sky?
What lures thee thus to stay
With silence and decay,
Fix’d on the wreck of cold mortality?
(1839; *EPD* II. 1–7)

Hemans insists to the butterfly that all thoughts have flown the mortal “prison-house,” that the skull is but an empty chamber, a deserted nest, a broken shell, while the soul-bird sings on in what Milton once called “other groves.” The poem ends, unresolved, with this rather desperate soliloquy. But this image of the psychic butterfly clinging to the human skull is perhaps as close as Hemans comes to figuring a fully humanized imagination. “Lines to a Butterfly” returns us a bit skeptically to Keats’s “Ode to Psyche”: though Keats claims to *introduce* the rites of Psyche, his more urgent task is to rescue her from too many pale-mouthed priests, too many who would save her from the unholy taint of wholly human loves.

And what of the Nightingale, once Melancholy comes to dwell within temples, churchyards and human skulls? For a start, the Nightingale can finally inspire a

response other than melancholic sympathy; she can at last sound happy. And the response of Keats's ode is to dissolve the moralist's line between suffering and pleasure in a solution of Lethe, Hippocrene and liquid song. If Keats's Nightingale ever spotted Melancholy among the "verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" (l. 40), she's since forgotten, or perhaps it's just too hard to see. Here, "to think is to be full of sorrow" (l. 27), but in the Nightingale's postmelancholy world, sensation has pride of place and that great metaphor of the understanding – *I see* – no longer avails. Inevitably, perhaps, Keats realizes he is not of this nightingale-world; as a poet, he is destined for rapturous visions and vexing dreams; his breath is fated to turn to words, not air. But had he not banished melancholy to the Temple of Delight, Keats might never have imagined death – some death, if not his own – as an ecstasy of song, or melancholy as the bitter undertaste of pleasure.

Of course, in these postmelancholic woods are other spirits, too. Hemans, for one, writes a blithe "Ode to Cheerfulness," and another "To Mirth"; Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, writes a dashing "Ode to Whim," a versatile, resourceful sprite, who ensures that women keep their charms as they age. Not every poet is enthralled by the Nightingale's song; in a certain mood, say that of the poet who has waited two hours for inspiration, it just might drive one crazy. Consider Eliza Cook's "Lines Suggested by the Song of a Nightingale":

And all at once a Nightingale has perched above my head;
 And burst into a strain that might almost arouse the dead.
 So loud, so full, so exquisite, so gushing, and so long;
 O! can I hear the lay, and not be jealous of the song?

 So free so pure, so spirit-filled, so tender and so gay;
 I do feel jealous; yes I do; and really, well I may,
 When I have sought such weary while to breathe a few, choice notes;
 And find myself so mocked at by the tiniest of throats.
(EPD ll. 33–40)

As Keats said, with a somewhat different affect, "Already with thee!" (l. 35). Instead of a poet fleeing to the Nightingale, here the Nightingale touches down expressly to mock the poet. Cook ends her comic patter-song by almost wishing the bird "trammelled in a cage" (l. 50), but settles for this malicious fancy:

I'll wish he had to *write* his song beneath a midnight taper;
 On pittance that would scarcely pay for goose-quill, ink, and paper;
 And then, to crown his misery, and break his heart in splinters;
 I'll wish he had to see his proofs, his publishers, and printers.
(ll. 53–6)

Cook's nasty wish reminds us that some have found in Keats's ode, too, this desire to ensnare the Nightingale, to "bury" her along with her "plaintive anthem" "deep / in the next valley-glade" (ll. 76–7).

However droll Cook's verses, to imagine the bird leaving the immortal groves to dwell among humans is to wreak a Copernican shift upon the ode; hence, perhaps, Cook's preference of "Lines" rather than "Ode" as a title. Joanna Baillie makes an identical shift – and an identical titular gesture – in her "Lines to a Parrot." With a nod to Keats, Baillie's comic tetrameters invoke "lays most musical and melancholy," then saunter off:

In these our days of sentiment
 When youthful poets all lament
 Some dear lost joy, some cruel maid;
 Old friendship changed and faith betray'd;
 The world's cold frown and every ill
 That tender hearts with anguish fill;
 Loathing this world and all its folly,
 In lays most musical and melancholy, –
 Touching a low and homely string,
 May poet of a parrot sing
 With dignity uninjur'd? Say? –
 No; but a simple rhymester may.

(EPD ll. 1–12)

Even for this Parrot, though, "there was a time" no less splendid than that invoked by Coleridge and Wordsworth; at the heart of the poem, lies a vision of the Parrot's native woods, worth quoting at length:

 where day
 In blazing torrid brightness play'd
 Through checker'd boughs, and gently made
 A ceaseless morris-dance of sheen and shade!
 In those blest woods, removed from man,
 Thy early being first began,
 'Mid gay compeers who, blest as thou,
 Hopp'd busily from bough to bough,
 Robbing each loaded branch at pleasure
 Of berries, buds and kernel'd treasure.
 Then rose aloft with outspread wing,
 Then stoop'd on flexile twig to swing,
 Then coursed and circled through the air,
 Mate chasing mate, full many a pair.

(ll. 30–43)

Unlike the celestial groves of Wordsworthian childhood; and unlike the lush, lonely, dark habitat of Keats's Nightingale, the parrot's native woods blaze with color, patterns of light and shade, the movement of rising wings and swaying branches. Baillie rings a change on the discourse of luxury, noting that here only loaded branches are

robbed, and treasure is neither jeweled nor coined but “kernel’d.” Where the nightingale-world is lonely, the parrot-world is a scene of sociality and of gratified appetites, both digestive and sexual.

“But now how changed!” (l. 48) exclaims the poet, in a sudden Miltonic cadence; caged, the parrot has become a plaything for children and ladies, a showy stunt, a reluctant mimic of human speech. “Learning,” Baillie remarks sardonically, “Is a charming thing” (l. 75). The caged bird, of course, is one of Wollstonecraft’s favorite metaphors for the condition of women (1986: 146), their learning circumscribed and imitative, their primary role, at least before marriage, self-display. And like Wollstonecraft, who worries over how women reared only for courtship will fare as aging matrons (1986: 110), Baillie anticipates the “untoward days” when “this bright plumage, dull and rusty, / Will seem neglected, shrunk and dusty, / And scarce a feather’s rugged stump / Be left to grace thy fretted rump” (ll. 116–19). The poet’s closing promise to the Parrot – “Yet in old age still wilt thou find / Some constant friend thy wants to mind” (ll. 126–7) – precisely reverses Keats’s valediction to the Grecian Urn: “When Old age, shall this generation waste, / Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe / Than ours, a friend to man” (ll. 46–8). But Baillie’s parrot was never a partaker of immortal beauty, a singer of immortal song. Ultimately, pathos resides not in the distance between human and bird, but in the difference between what this creature once was, and its tricked-out, trumped-up, reduced life among humans.

Baillie’s genius for demystification is nowhere clearer than in her virtuosic “Lines to a Teapot.” Long, long before Keats’s Grecian Urn became a commodity in the pages of *Studies in Romanticism* (Jones 1995; Phinney 1991), Baillie presumed to invoke a piece of crockery:

With straight small spout, that from thy body fair
Diverges with a smart vivacious air,
And round, arch’d handle with gold tracery bound,
And dome-shaped lie with bud or button crown’d,
Thou standst complete, fair subject of my rhymes,
A goodly vessel of the olden times!”

(EPD ll. 21–6)

Like Keats’s Urn, this teapot bears an enigmatic legend, but Chinese, not Greek: A “small-eyed beauty and her Mandarin” (l. 5) lean over an arched bridge, under which a gorgeous pair of pheasants idly preen, as if to display the splendors of the mated state; at the shore floats a small boat with oars and netted awning, as if ready for this couple to abscond ... as if, as if. But where Keats teases a tale out of the Urn’s shapes, shades, forms and hollows, Baillie narrates her teapot’s busy career. First, a scene of creation: on its “natal day” (l. 28), fresh from the spinning potter’s wheel, “the brown-skinn’d artist” (l. 37) traces these figures “beneath his humble shed” (l. 39). Imported to “Britain’s polished land” (l. 49), auctioned off to great demand, the teapot attains “the climax of thy glory” (l. 74) at tea, where it becomes a source of social, rather than aesthetic, inspiration for those fashionable beings who inhale its “fleeting, delicate

perfume" (l. 84). But fashions change, and this China teapot is nothing if not a creature of fashion. Doomed to obscurity in "the modern-drawing room" (l. 95), it goes back to the auction block, into the hands of sober connoisseurs who, "with wrinkled brow / And spectacles on nose, thy parts inspect" (ll. 114–15). Whereas the Grecian Urn is valued for its enduring beauty, the teapot's value is simply what someone will pay for it. Knocked off the table by the market, it ends up, eternally, on the shelf.

Odes of Performance: "so I may applaud"

What separates Keats, we might ask, from those connoisseurs who inspect the Urn's nether parts? Thirty years after the publication of Jerome McGann's "Keats and the Historical Method" in *Modern Language Notes* (McGann 1979), the answer "not much, really," has become commonplace. When we exchanged art-talk (not to mention literature-talk) for culture-talk, our critical currency became the notion of art-as-use; or more properly, art-as-(*cultural*) capital. If Keats, for McGann, was a test-case for historicism, then Keats's odes have become a test-case for historicists. Perhaps reacting *against* McGann's claim that the odes of the 1820 volume are "reactionary" and "escapist," most historicist writing about Keats argues against the view that, in Michael O'Neill's words, "history writes poetry" (1995: 145). Many essays in Nicholas Roe's excellent 1995 collection, *Keats and History*, argue delicately, with the utmost in nuance, that the odes are documents in the pressure and process of history even as they maintain the odes as poems – or, in Roe's words, "lyrical interventions" (1995: 208). With the exception of Marjorie Levinson (1988) and Daniel P. Watkins (1989), New Historicist critics on Keats usually disclose an intense longing for the ode's reflexivity, for it somehow to know before we tell it that in being "about" its own art, it must also be "about" its own being as artifact.

On the other hand, those of us who continue to ponder about poetics per se can usually be found loitering around Keats's odes, too. Fry's "The Hum of Literature: Ostension in Language," a coda to his full-length study of the ode, finds Emily Dickinson fining down the florid song of Keats's Nightingale to the buzz of a fly. In this buzz, Fry detects a transhistorical "sounding of the existent" (1993: 178). He elaborates:

Beyond or prior to reflection there is also that astonishment at the simple being-situated of the self among things, according no special privilege to the self among things, out of which reflection arises and toward which, perhaps, it also gradually sinks. It is solely in the suspended time of reverie that poets and the rest of us too are aroused from blankness by the humming of the world. (179)

If this sounds to you like Keats's Indolence, it does to me, too. But Fry veers away from this term, wishing to dodge certain class associations indolence contracts when exposed to mid-Victorian ennui. A decibel or two quieter than Fry's essay is Marshall Brown's "Unheard Melodies: The Force of Form." Brown examines several *musical* examples of

unheard melodies – the most spectacular, an inner musical line in the score of Schumann’s Humoresque, which the pianist is instructed *not* to play. Confronted with “unheard melodies,” the mind picks up the soft pipe and plays on, as the ear strains to catch these conceptual “ditties of no tone.” In lyric poetry, Brown suggests, form requires that the reader collaborate with the poet, comparing, contrasting, unfolding potentials, and establishing relations: “Unheard melodies are structure, skeleton, attitude, feeling: they are the inside of the piece, or of the urn” (Brown 1992: 473). James O’Rourke, in the only full-length study of contemporary critics and Keats’s odes, detects in Keats’s Negative Capability a version of the famous “*fort-da*” game played by Freud’s grandchild. But Keats’s is not a game of mastery and repetition, but one more radical – simply, the game of “*fort*,” or as O’Rourke nicely puts it, to “play gone” (1998: xiii). Thus, the “deflections and decenterings” O’Rourke finds in the odes (1998: xii) do not vaporize the subject so much as condense into the negativity of pure sound.

In all three of these critics, the zero degree of the ode goes well beyond the Kantian subject: for Fry, it is the humming, electric sense of being; for Brown, the hermeneutic encounter between unheard melodies and unsung readers; for O’Rourke, the negative capabilities of sound. So it is one of the ironies of our critical moment that formalism finds poetry determined by sources beyond the subject’s consciousness (could that hum of existence be – ideology?), while historicism sustains a notion of the poet that resembles, if faintly, Helen Vendler’s ahistorical Portrait of the Artist in *The Odes of John Keats* (1983). If we are to look to criticism for the afterlife of the ode, we will find it in an aporia: somewhere between the self-conscious subject who strives, hurts, reads, writes, knows, who remembers or forgets, who lives or dies; and the plenum of that which lies beyond our knowing: sound, being, futurity.

To live on in an aporia is, I suppose, a kind of afterlife. But in closing, I would like to consider a more vital afterlife sustained by the ode, one lived out in the neighborhood of poets. Like Winnie the Pooh, who lives under the name of Sanders over his door, many odes today live under other names. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, in *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, call the ode “part convention, part mode, and all opportunity” (2001: 240). Under this rubric they include the Proem from Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, James Tate’s “Ode on the Confederate Dead,” Marianne Moore’s “The Paper Nautilus,” Judith Wright’s “Australia 1970,” and Charles Simic’s “Miracle Glass Co.” Strand and Boland’s emphasis on the adaptation of the ode’s “address” and “decorum” to modernity, puts us in mind of several more “opportunistic” poems: Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead,” Sandra McPherson’s “Urban Ode,” Eavan Boland’s “Ode to Suburbia,” Andrei Codrescu’s “Ode to Laryngitis,” and Joy Harjo’s lovely “Perhaps the World Ends Here” – *here*, being the kitchen table.

But I have argued here that the trick of demystifying the transcendent and celebrating the mundane was not taught by modernism; on the contrary, it is the legacy of such Romantic-era poets as Wolcot, Baillie, Cook, Moore, Reynolds, and Smith. Moreover, the internalization of the ode in Romanticism is always partial: the soul is tinged with world, and the world with soul. What, if anything, remains for poets to do with the ode? What, in a world without gods, where liberty is a statue, urns are

recycled and even nightingales are on CD, remains capable of stirring us, no less enchanting us? – and which of us remains capable of enchantment?

But not so fast: if there are no gods, there are still those whom we worship, whether magnified by projector, speakers or spotlight. For worship is what fans do in the dark. In such poems as Frank O'Hara's "Ode to Tanaquil Leclercq," Langston Hughes's "Ode to Dinah [Washington]" and Wayne Koestenbaum's "Ode to Anna Moffo," the ode rediscovers its enchantments in performance. In Koestenbaum's poem, it soon emerges that performance is an art shared alike by diva and devotee. An autobiographical proem called "The Debut," twice as long as the ensuing fan letter to Moffo, might well be the poet's answer to the therapist's question: "What brings you here?" Indeed, what brings Koestenbaum to the ode is a lifetime in music, from his kindergarten debut on the tambourine, to Hebrew School choirs, to piano lessons on Clementi and Kuhlau and (later) Bach partitas, to college, when he suddenly takes up the trumpet. Along the way, girlfriends give way to crushes on boys: "We switch / instruments to soothe / the blister of consistency" (1990: 41). In his case, consistency is provided by the fixed star he worships: the soprano Anna Moffo, whose clippings, programs, and albums lie:

exiled in a box,
whose fragrance,
when I open it, is dust
mingled with narcissus, scent of what I will never have:

presence of her voice
in the house alive,
so I may applaud,
while wind from a special effects machine streams through her hair.

(1990: 37)

Koestenbaum conjures the presence of Moffo in his own house, or as he delicately puts it, "in the mind's Met, where Broadway joins forgotten avenues" (1990: 46). Yet knowing that "[n]o voice is venison – / lasting, salted" (1990: 48), Koestenbaum devotes fourteen Spenserian stanzas to individual performances, including vocal flaws, props and artifacts – the wind machine, the false eyelashes, even the white mink worn in Baltimore – for the props of glamor are crucial to the performance of Anna Moffo, diva. Of his one live encounter with Moffo, Koestenbaum retains a torn stub, marked with "time, place, price" (1990: 50). But like the loops of her autograph, "so full they overflowed the page" (1990: 51), Moffo's performance exceeds the bounds of these stanzas. Tongue in cheek, Koestenbaum hails a strong wind as one might a cab, to drive his stanzas over the universe:

now, the gust-scattered clippings fan
out from an imagined nucleus like fronds
of a child's pinwheel,
or like a tropic flower stretched
on the rack of the seasons it has suffered.

(1990: 45)

As Koestenbaum's stanzas fan out into the public domain, the rack of the seasons is no match for the voice that sings on "to this day, in a second, / parallel Met, a hologram of the original / Projected in air" (1990: 45).

Wayne Koestenbaum may be right about one thing: "An ode's a body / on the witness stand, under oath / to explain itself" (1990: 38). In the odic performances of O'Hara, Hughes, and Koestenbaum, the ode bears witness to its own devices, its wind machines and jukeboxes, its lilac ozone. Like the rest of us postmoderns, it confesses, it explains. And yet Anna Moffo trills on, Dinah Washington croons the "Hesitation Blues," and Tanaquil Leclercq leaps into air thinner than what you and I are breathing. If these are the shades that stir us now, what better afterlife for the ode?

SEE ALSO

Chapter 6 "Satire, Subjectivity, and Acknowledgment"; chapter 8 "Pastures New and Old: The Romantic Afterlife of Pastoral Elegy"; chapter 16 "Anglo-Jewish Romantic Poetry"; chapter 29 "The Matter of Genre in the Romantic Sublime"; chapter 34, "The Persistence of Romanticism"

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Pastures New and Old: The Romantic Afterlife of Pastoral Elegy

Christopher R. Miller

As Coleridge defined it, elegy is a “form of poetry natural to the reflective mind. It *may* treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject *for itself*, but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself” (Coleridge 1990: 1. 444–5). Under this rubric, much of the poetry written in the Romantic era could be considered as some form of elegy; but while Coleridge’s parameters might seem overbroad, they reflect the historical fluidity of the genre. In classical Greek and Roman poetry, the term “elegy” denotes both a song of lamentation and a metrical scheme (alternating lines of pentameter and hexameter verse) adaptable to a variety of purposes. In the English tradition, the word chiefly denotes poetry that mourns the dead; but the adjective “elegiac,” which became increasingly popular in the mid to late eighteenth century as a poetic modifier, encompasses an even wider spectrum of sadness. Charlotte Smith’s influential Romantic-era collection *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784–97) exemplifies this expansion. It features very few poems that address a specific occasion of death, but a melancholic brooding – on the fragility of happiness, the evanescence of friendship, the disappointment of artistic ambition – pervades the whole. To speak of Romantic elegy, then, is to address the imaginative engagement with a broad range of loss and emotional response.

In the face of death, elegists typically seek some form of consolation: in the Christian tradition, it is the assurance of an afterlife for the immortal soul; in a secular context, it is earthly fame, the legacy of good works, the generational endurance of children and descendants, or the human ties of sympathy and love. In general, Romantic elegies tend to be less assured by orthodox religious ideas than their predecessors, and their underlying skepticism and doubt prefigure the inconsolable and self-ironizing elegies typical of the twentieth century (Ramazani 1994: 17). The poetic task of mourning, however, has always been a vexed one. In the starkest terms, poets know that an elegy cannot bring back the dead person, nor can it substitute for a permanent monument or gravestone. Milton keenly articulates this sense of inadequacy in his seminal elegy,

“Lycidas” (1638), when he pauses in the midst of a description of funereal flowers to acknowledge that such beautification is a mere attempt “to interpose a little ease” – to avert one’s gaze from the bare fact of death (l. 152). The poet cannot repress the fact that his friend Edward King, a fellow Cambridge undergraduate, will never have a proper burial, since he died in a shipwreck on the Irish sea: “Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise. / Ay me! Whilst thee the shores, and sounding Seas / Wash far away, where ere thy bones are hurld ...” (ll. 153–5). The “false surmise” arises in the notion that the flowers, with their dewy tears and drooping heads, share in the grief of human mourners; to the contrary, they merely mark the edge of a void that can never be filled. Paradoxically, it is when that absence is felt most keenly that Milton addresses his friend as if he could hear the lament, in a sudden cry of regret and self-reproach.

The influence of “Lycidas” on Romantic elegy – indeed, on lyric poetry in general – cannot be overstated. Milton’s chief innovation was to adopt the pastoral elegy of Theocritus and Virgil, in which a shepherd laments the loss of a fellow shepherd; and to exploit the symbolic possibilities of setting an act of mourning within the natural world, in the span of a single day. As one scholar has suggested, this temporal and spatial structure has the effect of placing sorrow, which might otherwise seem boundless, within a finite, earthly context (Lambert 1976). Milton saw how the characteristic features of this classical genre could be adapted: the idyllic green space of pastoral suggested the quadrangles and environs of Cambridge and the innocent freshness of youth; the colloquies and singing-contests of shepherds represented the fraternal gatherings of scholars; and the pastoral theme of shattered tranquility had poignant relevance to the occasion of a young man’s death. The idea of a sudden and arbitrary ending haunts the closure of the poem, but with a tentatively more hopeful inflection. Milton’s pastoral alter ego turns away from his absorptive grieving to notice the setting sun, and thus looks ahead to a literal and symbolic new day: “Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new” (l. 193). In Milton’s Christian imagination, Lycidas, the dead shepherd, will be resurrected into the eternal light of Heaven; and in the speaker’s terrestrial world, those new pastures hint at new poetic terrain yet to be explored. King’s premature death haunted Milton as a warning that there might not be enough days or figurative pastures in which to realize his own creative potential. Coleridge’s remark that elegy fundamentally concerns “the poet himself” is certainly true of “Lycidas”: beyond offering a eulogistic portrait of the deceased, the poem articulates Milton’s own latent doubts and fears as they are precipitated by the death of a friend.

Milton’s poetry cast a long shadow over the eighteenth century, and some successors might justifiably have wondered whether they were writing in the nocturnal twilight of a previous poetic era rather than in the dawn of a new one. But other pastures did lie beyond “Lycidas,” and Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1750) charted significant new ground. The poem begins at precisely the moment when “Lycidas” ends, at dusk; it translates the generalized pastoral space of its predecessor into the specifically English locale of a village burial ground; and it dispenses with Milton’s shepherd persona, instead featuring a speaker who is clearly an outside

observer, one who lingers in the gathering darkness to ponder tombstone inscriptions rather than join the laborers who head home after a long day's work. Gray's speaker is engaged in another kind of work, the invisible act of poetic thought and composition. By symbolic implication, his rustic counterpart is the artisan who chisels inscriptions on gravestones; as Gray says of the dead who are remembered by these simple markings, "Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered muse, / The place of fame and elegy supply" (ll. 81–2). Paradoxically, Gray suggests an equivalence between crude inscriptions on stone and polished verses in a book, but he does so within a published volume of poetry. Though it might be suspected that Gray believes in the vocational superiority of his own form, his deeper suggestion is that poetry is rooted in the basic impulse to memorialize, and that elegiac verses should be seen as a complement to funerary inscription. The relation between the craftsman who carves and the poet who writes is a reflection of the poem's double perspective – a mediation between visitor and villager, the urban and the pastoral, fame and obscurity.

Aesthetic and ethical concerns are thus held in balance: while Gray surely believes in the artistic desirability of "lettered" artistic achievement, he also asserts the moral equality of souls, regardless of their accomplishments in life or memorials in death. What is buried in each plot of ground is not simply a villager but the possibility of a different life: under less confined circumstances, any of these people might have achieved greater things or risen to national prominence. "Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest" (l. 59), the poet speculates, echoing Milton's fear of dying before realizing his poetic ambitions. Rather than merely bewailing missed opportunity, however, Gray asserts the dignity of an unremarkable life of daily labor and domestic affection. It was a convention of pastoral elegy, exemplified by "Lycidas," to declare that all of nature mourned the fatal silencing of a shepherd's voice; avoiding that personification, Gray simply describes the natural world as an environment no longer to be enjoyed by the dead. What is lost is not an active contribution to the world but rather one person's perception of it, the gift of consciousness itself – of waking to "[t]he breezy call of incense-breathing morn" or "the swallow twittering from the straw-built shed" (ll. 18–19).

Together with "Lycidas," Gray's "Elegy" held a significant imaginative sway over later English poetry. (Indeed, the form in which Gray wrote his poem – iambic pentameter quatrains with alternating rhyme – has come to be known as the "elegiac stanza" largely because of his example.) Both poems were influential in setting the occasion of mourning in a specific time and place: a landscape could evoke the presence of the dead person while serving as a constant reminder of an absence. Gray's further innovation was to write an elegy for the ordinary and uncelebrated rather than for the great or heroic, and to do so in tribute to a whole group rather than a single person. Gray thus contributed to what might be called a democratization of elegy: one of the most significant developments in the English poetry of mourning lay in the broadening assumption about who was worthy of such attention. Funeral elegies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras typically observed the demise of a public figure or influential patron rather than a private or familial loss, and some deaths occasioned mass poetic outpourings of grief – Sir Philip Sidney's in 1586, Queen Elizabeth's in 1603,

Prince Henry's in 1612. These poems had strongly political inflections and careerist purposes, in that the author of each was assuming the role of official mourner on a national stage, competing with other writers in the same endeavor, allying his poetic stature with the eminence of the person being mourned, and marking the passing of an era. By the eighteenth century, that ceremonial role was no longer automatically presumed, and this cultural shift was crystallized in Byron's response to the poet laureate Robert Southey's *A Vision of Judgment* (1821), a poem on the death of George III. Incensed by Southey's description of the king's jubilant reception by a pantheon of immortal poets, Byron composed a satirical rebuke, mockingly entitled *The Vision of Judgment* (1822). In this version, the king gains furtive entrance into heaven because the angels have been driven to distraction by Southey's pompous recitation of his own verses, and the antimonarchical Milton and his brethren offer no welcome.

While the Romantic poetry of mourning was not without political import, it tended to avoid the act of official, public commemoration. It was more typically concerned with the loss of friends and family members; and a lament for the dead might be found in the confines of a sonnet or in a passage of a larger poem rather than in a freestanding elegy. The Romantic fascination with the prospect of premature death in obscurity is epitomized in the cry that ends one of Wordsworth's ballads on the death of a young woman identified only as Lucy: "But she is in her grave, and oh, / The difference to me!" ("She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways," ll. 11–12). Lucy's near-anonymity is very much the point: it is only the bereft speaker who has seen what is special in her, and without his poetic commemoration, she would be entirely forgotten. The word "difference" implies several things: the permanent difference that Lucy has made in the speaker's life, the difference between the world with Lucy in it and the world without, and the alienating difference between the mourning speaker and indifferent others.

Elegiac tributes to literary predecessors became popular in the Romantic era, in part because of a solidifying sense of a distinctly English poetic tradition with ancestors to honor. Charlotte Smith, for instance, paid homage in various sonnets to Thomas Otway, Robert Burns, and William Collins, imagining them as resident spirits in gloomily twilight landscapes that suited what she called "the mournful temper of my soul" ("Sonnet XII, Written on the Seashore," l. 20). As a nineteen-year-old budding poet, Wordsworth followed Smith's example, writing a "Remembrance of Collins" (1789), which he set on the River Thames as "the evening darkness gathers round" (l. 23). Smith's sonnets surely inspired Wordsworth to think of landscape as haunted by the spirits of other poets, and his variation on that idea is to do something in "remembrance" of Collins, who had placed his own elegy on James Thomson (1700–1748) in the same riverside setting. Paying tribute to a poet who hearkened to the hum of beetles in his "Ode to Evening" (1746), Wordsworth stops rowing his boat and listens to water dripping from the suspended oar. This wordless act – of cessation and heightened perception – eloquently registers a prior poet's presence, not as resident ghost but as internalized perception.

Many years later, in very different circumstances, Wordsworth revisited this premise in his "Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg" (1835), remembering

walks he took along the River Yarrow with his friend and fellow poet. At this point, he has lived long enough to see the passing of several friends, and the landscape seems unbearably suffused with their memories: the thought of Hogg's death cascades into a lament over the deaths of Coleridge and Charles Lamb; and a reference to the funereal "black wreath" (l. 30) of London's sooty atmosphere reminds the poet of the last time he beheld a city vista with his friend George Crabbe, also dead. Wordsworth's underlying idea – one that many contemporaries shared – was that to mourn the loss of a loved one was also to reflect upon the mental impressions left on those left behind. This notion had philosophical underpinnings in a theory of cognitive development commonly known as associationism, first advanced by John Locke and later developed and popularized by David Hartley in his *Observations on Man* (1749). In essence, it offered a model of the mind as an ever expanding network of perceptions and ideas, such that one experience impels the recollection of another – as if a single memory were a stitch in a larger fabric, and one tugged thread could cause an accidental unraveling. For the aging Wordsworth, writing an elegy for James Hogg meant writing a lament for other lost friends and experiences; ultimately, the poem served as an anticipatory elegy for himself, as the surviving but fragile vessel for the memories of other poets.

One of the most widely lamented authors in the Romantic era was a seventeen-year-old author of pseudo-medieval poetry named Thomas Chatterton, who killed himself in 1770 out of despair over the fate of his career, before he was able to achieve anything like greatness. Memorialized by Coleridge as a victim of "cold neglect" ("Monody on the Death of Chatterton," l. 5), by Keats as the "child of sorrow" ("Oh Chatterton! How very sad thy fate," l. 2); and by Wordsworth as "the marvelous boy" ("Resolution and Independence," l. 43), Chatterton mythically embodied these poets' fears of cultural marginality and unfulfilled promise. The prospect of suicide – of following the dead person to a better world – had always haunted English elegies; but fascination with Chatterton's lurid death (a dose of arsenic taken in a London garret), as well the popular obsession with the hero's self-murder in Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), brought that taboo into the open. In his monody on Chatterton (1790), Coleridge imagines the scene of the poet's anguish, describes the "corpse of many a lurid hue," and places himself at the grave site, where he bitterly proposes that the stones give the dead poet some meager protection from "freezing Neglect." At the same time, Coleridge could acknowledge the ghoulishness and bathos in such a tribute: in the same year, he wrote a "Monody on a Tea-Kettle," on the breakage of a favorite household implement, which he memorializes in Miltonically pastoral terms as a "sooty swain" that once sang tunefully but now stands poised to become rusty scrap-metal.

Coleridge's satirical poem spoofs the strain of self-pity in the poetic descendants of "Lycidas," but it also exemplifies the Romantic disposition to see the elegiac potential in the ordinary. What is lamented is not just a familiar object and its material comforts but also its spiritual function as muse that inspires "all the warm raptures of poetic fire" (l. 32). Coleridge even invokes a trope of religious consolation, hearkening to a psalmic "glad voice" that offers the poet hope of a "better kettle." In the tradition of

mock-epic, this playful lament adapts a lofty literary form to a minor occasion; but while it pokes fun at the conventions of funeral elegy, it also has subtler implications: the loss of a teakettle can justifiably prompt a reflection on mortality and fleeting poetic creativity. Several years later, another domestic mishap occasioned one of Coleridge's greatest lyrics, "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," which opens with a quasi-elegiac lament. Lamed by a spilled pot of scalding milk, the poet bewails his convalescent confinement in a grove of trees; and when he observes the absence of friends "whom I never more may meet again, / On springy heath" (ll. 6–7), he intimates a loss deeper than that of the "beauties and feelings" of an hour's walk – not just his prospective loss of close friends but their loss of *him*. The bower reminds the poet chiefly of a prison, but it is also a leafy underworld from which he must escape on the wings of imagination; and after dark forebodings of his own demise, he finally rejoins the world of the living with a new sense of elation. In Romantic poetry, as Coleridge's lyrics demonstrate, a mundane loss – a teakettle, an afternoon walk with friends – could serve as a sufficient occasion for elegiac reflection. In the later words of W. H. Auden, "the crack in the teacup opens / A lane to the land of the dead" ("As I Walked Out One Evening," ll. 43–4).

Though Coleridge broadly defined elegy for his own era, it is his friend and collaborator Wordsworth who best exemplifies the Romantic poetry of mourning. He was interested in both worldly elements of epitaph-writing and metaphysical questions about the afterlife; and though he was a Christian poet, he did not write primarily from that perspective. Whereas Milton proceeded from the orthodox religious assurance of a heavenly reward, Wordsworth arrived at this idea indirectly, by a kind of anthropological deduction. Like Gray's churchyard elegist, he had a keen interest in funerary inscriptions, and in his *Essay upon Epitaphs* (1810), he proposes that all epitaphs reflect a yearning for immortality, for "without the consciousness of a principle of immortality in the human soul, Man could never have had awakened in him the desire to live in remembrance of his fellows" (Wordsworth 1974: 2. 50). Despite the fact of material extinction, we still speak of (and to) the dead as persons; and as one critic has argued, the desire to perpetuate their memory amounts to an ethical obligation – not merely to an abstraction but to a being that dwells in heaven as imperishable soul and on earth as abiding presence (Spargo 2004). Nothing can be done to compensate for the loss, but the elegist typically acts as if some justice can be served – in protesting the cruelty and prematurity of death, in offering a moral lesson on the life of the dead person, or in encouraging the return from debilitating grief to productive living.

In Wordsworth's argument, our earliest questions in childhood about origins are intertwined with the question of our ultimate destination; and the sense of immortality, whether held as formulated doctrine or as ineffable feeling, informs our bonds of feeling with the people and things of the world. This is the fundamental implication of the ballad "We Are Seven" (1798), in which an eight-year-old girl who has lost a sister and brother refuses to subtract the two from her tally of siblings. This grammatical and arithmetic error reflects a deeper metaphysical truth about the blurred

boundary between present and past tenses, the living and the dead. To the child's mind, there is no inconsistency between the religious premise that the souls of her sister and brother are "in heaven" (l. 16) and the untutored sense that they are still with her as she plays around their graves and "sing[s] a song to them" (l. 44). Living in a "church-yard cottage" (l. 23) with her mother and spending much of her time in the churchyard itself, the girl is a rustic, un-selfconscious version of Gray's elegist – a permanent resident rather than an outsider, making not just one twilight pilgrimage but ritual evening visits, going there to eat her supper "often after sun-set" (l. 45).

If this girl represents an artless yet profound expression of Wordsworth's philosophy, the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1807) is its mature culmination; one critic has even suggested that it should be considered as a variation on pastoral elegy (Schenk 1988: 123–35). Here, the occasion is not the death of a person but the vanishing of childhood, with its freshness of perception and buoyancy of spirit; the immediate question is not "Where do we go when we die?" but "What happened to the feelings and perceptions we had in childhood?" Wordsworth tentatively resolves this conundrum by invoking the Platonic myth of preexistence, which describes a cycle of reincarnation by which the soul is purged of its previous identity and returned to earth to assume a different body and a new life. In Wordsworth's version, the Lethean oblivion is not total, and the young child retains a trace of his heavenly origins – not a specific memory but something the poet describes in numinous terms as a "visionary gleam" (l. 56) and "clouds of glory" (l. 64). This answer forms only part of the poet's search for adequate consolation, for he must still reckon with the progressive disappearance of that gift. In essence, the compensation for this loss of vision lies in what Wordsworth calls the "philosophic mind" (l. 189) – the abstractions of thought rather than the immediacy of sensory perception, the imaginative capacity for metaphor rather than the childhood sense of wonder, and the stoic acceptance of death rather than the boundless joy in life. (The word "thought" appears five times in the poem, always in association with adult consciousness; in essence, the poem's narrative of maturation is about learning how to think.) The ode is elegiac in its concern with death and loss, and though it does not concern any particular occasion, it addresses the accumulated exposure to death and a deepening sense of human mortality. While the girl of "We Are Seven" sees no pathos in her twilight churchyard ritual, the chastened adult sees the daily fall of evening in a new light: "The Clouds that gather around the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch over man's mortality" (ll. 200–2).

Around the time that Wordsworth was completing the ode in 1806, his brother John, the commander of a merchant ship for the East India Company, died at sea. With this loss, the stoic counsel of the ode ("We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind" (ll. 183–4)) found a new occasion to be tested, and when Wordsworth wrote his "Elegiac Stanzas" on the loss a year later, he echoes and revises this austere consolation in his final line: "Not without hope we suffer and we mourn" (l. 60). After a cherished brother's death, the impulse to grieve cannot be so easily resisted; rather, it is redirected into a sober meditation on the nature and purpose of artistic representation,

with painting rather than poetry as the main focus. With a year's distance and three previous attempts at a suitable elegy, Wordsworth decides against responding directly to the death, describing instead the way the world looks in its wake.

As Milton poignantly demonstrated in "Lycidas," it is common to avert one's gaze from the physical fact of death; and the "Elegiac Stanzas" is occasioned by precisely that impulse. When Wordsworth visited an exhibition at London's Royal Academy in May 1806, his artist friend Sir George Beaumont hoped that the bereaved poet might be kept from viewing his painting entitled *Peele Castle in a Storm*, for fear of evoking painful associations with another storm. In essence, the poem challenges the assumption behind that well-meaning gesture – the hope that someone in mourning could be shielded from reminders of a painful loss. Its implicit argument is that the world looks unavoidably different after the death of a loved one, and mental associations are realigned in unsettling ways; in the language of the ode, the simplest daily events take on a "sober colouring." "The set is now broken," Wordsworth wrote in a letter, referring to the close-knit circle of siblings and intimates of which John was a part (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1967: 2. 540). This brokenness is precisely what the girl of "We Are Seven" does not fully see in the count of her own familial "set," whereas the adult poet cannot *un*see it.

The way we see – voluntarily or involuntarily – is the central concern of the "Elegiac Stanzas." Despite the futility of Beaumont's wish to shield Wordsworth from the painting, the gesture of redirection leaves an indelible imprint on the poem, for rather than confronting his brother's death at the outset, Wordsworth describes the painting; and rather than beginning with the painting itself, he summons an image that it evokes – the memory of the same scene in happier times and more temperate weather. Neither the mental image nor the painting falsifies the other; the two represent complementary perspectives. In fact, Wordsworth insists that despite its dark turbulence, the painting need not represent only peril and death: in a strenuous act of reimagination, he turns the castle into a symbol of fortitude in the face of adversity. And yet this counter-embellish is itself subject to skeptical revision, as the poet recoils from the implication of benumbed solitude – a "heart that lives alone," aloof from humanity and human feelings and concerns. This variability of mental association is precisely the point: in Wordsworthian psychology, happy thoughts give rise to sad thoughts, and vice versa.

Such is the emotional dynamic at work in an elegiac sonnet Wordsworth wrote six years later about his daughter Catherine, who died before she reached the age of four (Gill 1989: 286). Like "Elegiac Stanzas," "Surprised by joy" is not framed as a deliberate observance; rather, both poems spring from daily accidents – the unplanned glimpse of a painting, a sudden and inexplicable feeling of elation. The opening of "Lycidas," in which the speaker declares his poetic intentions, announces the work of mourning as a discrete effort, a moment out of time, but here Wordsworth registers a series of surprises that occur within the daily course of life:

Surprised by joy – impatient as the Wind
I turned to share the transport – Oh! with whom

But Thee, deep buried in the silent Tomb,
That spot which no vicissitude can find?
Love, faithful love recalled thee to my mind –
But how could I forget thee! – Through what power
Even for the least division of an hour,
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
To my most grievous loss? – That thought's return
Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
That neither present time, nor years unborn
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

Elegy usually moves from grief toward consolation, but Wordsworth's sonnet inverts that order: it describes a state of happiness from which the survivor suddenly falls back into mourning. That pivotal movement is established by the opening clause, which can mean both "struck by a sudden feeling of joy," and "surprised that I could feel joy." Surprise can take the form of both a feeling and a proposition about that feeling; it is both a corporeal jolt and a cognitive reflection. The transitory emotion of surprise is not typical of elegy, which tends to emphasize the sturdier passions of grief and anger; but Wordsworth movingly evokes the feeling here. The very fact that joy comes as a surprise implies a prior state of unhappiness or blankness; it enables the poet to name the sadness that had formed the emotional background of his life since the loss of his daughter. The second surprise lies in Wordsworth's realization that he has had an impulse to share a happy moment with a daughter who is no longer around to do so. Such a lapse could be taken as a hopeful sign that the fact of death is not constant mental burden, or as a confirmation that Catherine will always be there in spirit. The remarkable thing about this poem as an elegy is that Wordsworth refuses both consolations.

The lyric apostrophe – in its etymological meaning, a *turn* to address some absent person or personified entity – is a conventional feature of elegy, a way of bringing the dead to imaginative life. Wordsworth's address to his daughter has special poignancy, because it is a deliberate rewriting of an accidental and quite literal turn. The poet had reflexively looked around to share a happy moment with Catherine, momentarily oblivious to the fact of her death; and now he insists that he could never forget this loss. Despite that insistence, the poem uncomfortably registers the awareness that a year or so after Catherine's death, it is possible to stop being constantly aware of that absence. In essence, Wordsworth is haunted by the thought that memories – and grief itself – can fade over time, and yet the reckoning with loss is never over.

While Wordsworth echoed Gray's fascination with English churchyards, Lord Byron came to the realization in his well-chronicled travels abroad that the whole world was a burial ground. The grand tour of Europe and the Levant that he charts in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–17) is also an elegiac trip into the past and a descent into the

underworld; and his visits to crumbling landmarks exemplify the Romantic fascination with ruins, and a pervasive sense that poetry has no more assurance of immortality than a decaying monument (Janowitz 1990: 9). Byron plays with mock-epic hyperbole when he says that upon departing England his world-weary hero “almost longed for woe, / And e’en for change of scene would seek the shades below” (i. 6); and yet this is precisely what Harold does find, as he follows the path of destruction wrought by Napoleon’s Peninsular campaign and confronts ruin both recent and ancient. As Harold surveys the wreckage in Portugal and Spain, Byron reflects that every spot in nature seems to be both battlefield and grave site: “Where’er we tread ‘tis haunted, holy ground” (ii. 88). A religious pilgrimage is by definition a journey to a specific “holy ground” – a saint’s shrine or other sacred spot – but Harold’s pilgrimage is less deliberate than that, without the purpose of prayerful homage or spiritual communion. The poem is itself a loosely accretive structure of accidental or spontaneous pilgrimages – the first two cantos based on Byron’s travels in 1810–11, the second two commemorating the self-imposed exile from England from which the poet never returned. Though the travel enabled by Byron’s wealth and leisure was meant to fill a void, it opened up new abysses. Expanding the scope of Gray’s group elegy, Byron’s poem memorializes an astonishing variety of people and things – dead soldiers and generals, outworn religions and overthrown deities, vanished civilizations, blighted landscapes, ruined temples, and perished loved ones.

In terms of elegiac models, Byron’s poem mingles the personal lament of “Lycidas” with the generalized mourning of Gray’s “Elegy”; individual loss is put into a global and historical context, while war’s carnage is given a human face. In the third canto, Harold visits Waterloo, where Napoleon was defeated by British troops in June of 1815; and Byron’s narrator commands, in the hortatory language of classical epitaph, “Stop! – for thy tread is on an Empire’s dust!” (iii. 17). Gray had insisted in his elegy that since no “storied urn or animated bust” (l. 41) could bring back the dead, the simplest grave markers were the most eloquent, and truer in their memorial modesty. Byron makes a still more radical point: noticing that “no colossal bust” or “column trophied for triumphal show” marks the historically significant spot, he concludes that “the moral’s truth tells simpler so, / As the ground was before, thus let it be” (iii. 17). In the Spanish and Portuguese section of the poem, Byron had made a similar suggestion about the battle sites of Talavera and Albuera as he reflected on the remains of the dead: “Let their bleach’d bones, and the blood’s unbleaching stain, / Long mark the battle-field with hideous awe, / Thus only may our sons conceive the scenes we saw!” (i. 88). How to memorialize the sufferings and losses of war? Not with a crafted monument but with actual shards of destruction; not with a metaphor but with the thing itself. Two centuries after Byron’s poem, in a world of bureaucratized death and the genetic identification of human remains, it should be kept in mind that earlier warfare left precisely the kind of nameless and unclaimed carnage that Byron describes. Within a nineteenth-century context, the poet’s idea of fixing an indelible image for posterity would prove eerily prescient of an even more deadly conflict and a new technology of memory: a few decades after Byron wrote his poem, Mathew Brady’s photographs of

the corpse-strewn battlefields of the American Civil War ensured that later generations could visually “conceive the scenes we saw.”

On the subject of mourning, Byron speaks from personal experience as well as journalistic observation. At the end of the first canto, he turns from the general sufferings of Spain to his own particular grief: within the space of a month in 1811, he lost his mother and his old schoolfellow John Wingfield, and he apostrophizes both of them here. The abrupt turn from public to private loss is typical of the digressive nature of Byron’s poem, but it also has a thematic resonance: the peripatetic Harold’s self-imposed distance from his native land reflects the poet’s own estrangement from his mother, first in life and then irrevocably in death. Of Byron’s losses in 1811, the most wrenching was that of his friend John Edleston, who was a choirboy when Byron met him as a Cambridge undergraduate. Byron quickly formed a passionate (and reciprocated) attachment, but the two young men parted ways in 1807, when Edleston found work in London. Four years later, while he was in Malta in 1811, Byron heard that his friend was unwell, only to find upon his return to England that Edleston had died. In the following year, Byron wrote a series of elegiac poems, known as the “Thyrza” cycle, of which six were published with the first and second editions of *Childe Harold*. Byron was fearful enough of English homophobia to profess his love in coded personal shorthand: contemporary readers assumed that the “Thyrza” eulogized by this male poet was a woman (Crompton 1985; MacCarthy 2002). Though Byron never mentions Edleston by name in *Childe Harold*, he recalls him with a passionate intensity that few other people in the poem inspire.

In the midst of contemplating the fragility of any civilizations and pondering the question of an afterlife, the only certain refuge Byron takes is in the vitality of his own memory: “and can I deem thee dead,” he rhetorically asks in an impassioned apostrophe to Edleston, “When busy Memory flashes on my brain?” (ii. 9). Nevertheless, there is cold comfort in something that appears only in the ephemeral phenomena of synaptic “flashes”; a similar problem troubles Wordsworth in the reminder of his daughter’s death – the stab of surprise that both brings her to mind and achingly confirms her absence. In seizing on this mnemonic consolation, Byron is likely thinking of his friend Samuel Rogers’s poem *The Pleasures of Memory* (1792), which was inspired by Hartleyan associationism. Rogers explains in his preface to the poem that “there is a continued succession of ideas in the mind,” such that “the conception of any object naturally leads to the idea of another which was connected with it either in time or place” (Rogers 1792: v–vi). This mechanism, by which a present sensation involuntarily compels one to relive a past experience, might indeed prove, in Rogers’ term, a pleasure; but Byron dwelt more on the potential pain in such mental circuits. Just when we think our grief is subdued, we might be surprised into a new awareness of it:

it may be a sound –
 A tone of music – summer’s eve – or spring –
 A flower – the wind – the ocean – which shall wound,
 Striking the electric chain wherewith we are darkly bound ...
 (iv. 23)

In balance with this unreliable, earthly form of immortality, Byron continually returns in *Childe Harold* to the hope for a Christian afterlife. For all of his notorious iconoclasm, he harbored fundamentally conventional Christian ideas, in sharp contrast to his friend Percy Shelley's ardent atheism. Byron's real poetic strength, however, lies not in religious consolation but in articulating the feelings of the disconsolate. In one of his most succinctly eloquent statements in the poem, he says of himself and of the bereaved everywhere: "They mourn, but smile at length; and smiling, mourn" – "And thus the heart will break, yet brokenly live on" (iii. 32). Verbal repetition is a common feature of elegies, in their approximation of the brooding excess of grief, and Byron's finely calibrated echoes exemplify that tradition. The grammatical modulations of "mourn but smile" / "smiling mourn" and "break, yet brokenly live on" capture a bittersweet complexity of emotions: the stubborn presence of death within the ongoing flow of life, the tidal surges of happiness within a steady current of grief, the imperfect repair and psychic scar implied by a breaking heart that "brokenly" lives.

John Keats fantasized about magical remedies to such brokenness – though he was just as clear-eyed as Byron in his tragic sense of life (he himself had been orphaned by the age of fifteen). At the end of his early poem "I stood tip-toe" (1817), he imagines a scene from the myth of Cynthia and Endymion in which pairs of lovers presumed dead are returned to life – and given immortality – by a magic spell: "Therefore no lover did of anguish die: / But the soft numbers, in that moment spoken, / Made silken ties, that never may be broken" (ll. 236–8). As the reference to "soft numbers" suggests, this vignette serves as an allegory for the power of poetry, which Keats the physician-in-training liked to think of as both palliative and curative. The consolations offered by traditional elegy, however, were not congenial to Keats's sensibilities. Though he composed a sonnet on the death of Chatterton in 1815 and two poems in memory of Robert Burns during a walking tour of Scotland, he never wrote a poem about his own brother Tom, who died of tuberculosis in December of 1818. Rather than writing an overt elegy for him, Keats followed the example of Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*: in his "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), a particular cause of grief is buried within a generalized scene of sorrow. Here, Tom's last days are fleetingly invoked in reference to a world "[w]here youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies" (l. 26). The dying youth is just one actor in a larger scene of earthly suffering from which Keats fantasizes an escape, as if such a thing were as effortless as disappearing into the forest with the nightingale and becoming pure voice without a mortal body. First entertained as seductive fantasy, the idea is ultimately rejected in horror, as the poet confronts the implications of killing oneself and moldering into a "sod" – while the nightingale continues blithely to sing.

The specter of premature death and unfulfilled potential expressed in "Lycidas" haunted Keats throughout his brief career. When Milton voices his fear that Fate, in the mythological figure of Atropos, will prematurely slit "the thin spun life" with her "abhorred shears" (ll. 75–6), he is reassured by Apollo that fame transcends such arbitrary limits, dwelling eternally in the "perfect witness of all judging Jove" (ll. 82). By contrast, when Keats writes his own meditation on a life cut short in the sonnet "When I have fears," he refuses this religious consolation. Fame is not a heavenly reward but

rather a mirage to be seen through and thought away. In Christian terms, Milton imagines that Edward King is “sunk low, but mounted high” (lifted to heaven by the mystical buoyancy of resurrection); and in pagan terms, the young man becomes a “Genius of the shore,” a resident spirit who protects others who “wander in the perilous flood.” But no such consolation remains for the agnostic Keats, who stands “on the shore / Of the wide world,” lost in thought “Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink” (ll. 13–14). The best he can do is to achieve a kind of stoic serenity.

In the “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats contemplates his own death in the face of the bird’s continuous and deathless song; but in the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” he thinks first about the death and disappearance of others – both the anonymous craftsman who made the urn and the society of which he was a part. In both cases, whether he is listening to birdsong or looking at an artifact, Keats situates himself as single, limited perceiver within a historical continuum. Tellingly, both poems share a preoccupation with the idea of human *generations* – a term that connotes both biological persistence and cultural flux: “No hungry generations tread thee down” (l. 62), Keats enviously says to the nightingale; and to the urn, he remarks, “When old age shall this generation waste / Thou shalt remain in midst of other woe / Than ours” (ll. 46–8). Though it is not an elegy in a strict sense of the term, the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” echoes the themes of Gray’s “Elegy” and echoes Byron’s meditations on European ruins in *Childe Harold*. In Gray’s poem, the stark eloquence of names carved on gravestones is enough to evoke the lives of otherwise anonymous villagers, while the elegist suggests that more elaborate monuments – “storied urn or animated bust” – can do no more (ll. 41–2). In a similarly chastening vein, Byron considers a cinerary urn at the Parthenon and moralizes on human vanity: “That little urn saith more than thousand homilies” (ii. 4). Keats’s own imaginary urn – inspired by sculptural fragments brought to England from the very site that Byron visited – is put to different uses. Though it might well have been a funerary urn, Keats never mentions that function; he dwells instead on its tantalizing visual surface, not on what it was crafted to contain. The figures depicted on the urn – a musician, a young man chasing a maiden, a priest leading an animal to ritual sacrifice – seem to live in serenely eternal limbo, while the poet speculates about their elusive historical meanings. Just as a churchyard makes Gray think of the living village, the scene of religious ceremony on the urn inspires Keats to surmise the place from which the participants have traveled; both Gray’s English village and Keats’s Attic town lie beyond the spatial boundaries of their respective poems. Gray’s innovation was to write an elegy for a whole group of people, and Keats obliquely imitates that gesture, displacing the pathos of death into an apostrophe to the emptied town: “And, little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou are desolate, can e’er return” (ll. 38–40). In a poem that contemplates the capacity of visual art to freeze a single moment in time, it is apt that the moment of death is elided: the sacrificial heifer is caught on its way to destruction, and the personified town is bereft of its inhabitants without ever knowing why. All living creatures have passed into the realm of art, while death haunts the urn as a penumbra, beyond direct visual representation.

Two years after he wrote his odes, Keats himself would become the subject of an elegy, Percy Shelley's "Adonais" (1821) – one of the last and most ambitious elegies of the Romantic era. At more than twice the length of "Lycidas," the poem pointedly expands the temporal scope of its predecessor, with a duration that goes well beyond the compact arc of a dawn-to-dusk dirge; and it is even more vexed in its efforts to console – both dilatory in its false starts and impatient in a quasi-suicidal desire to know what lies behind and beyond earthly existence. In Keats, dead of consumption at the age of twenty-five, Shelley saw his own generation's Chatterton, imagining a poet ruined not only by neglect but also by negative reviews in literary periodicals. Though the characterization of Keats as hapless victim was greatly exaggerated, the mythology reflected Shelley's own self-image as misunderstood and marginalized artist; and it significantly contributed to the shaping of Keats's legacy and legend in subsequent decades.

Shelley's self-referentially elegiac sensibility emerged early, in the quest-romance, *Alastor* (1816), which features an alter ego doomed to die alone in search of an elusive vision and esoteric knowledge. Shelley explored another vocational dimension of elegy when he wrote his sonnet "To Wordsworth" (1816), in which he audaciously lamented the figurative death of the elder poet, who would actually outlive Shelley by nearly three decades. Invoking Wordsworth's own lament over the lost "visionary gleam" of childhood, Shelley mourns the poet's abandonment of youthful political idealism: "thou leavest me to grieve, / Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be" (ll. 13–14). Usually, the pathos of such an apostrophe lies in the fact that the dead person cannot *bear* the address, but the point here is that Wordsworth would not *recognize* the loss in the way that his former admirer does; in this way, Shelley both buries a predecessor and heralds a new generation of poets.

Several years later, the audacity of that gesture found ultimate expression in "Adonais." Shelley called the poem "a highly wrought *piece of art*" (Shelley 1964; 2. 294) with good reason: a pastoral elegy written in the intricate form of Spenserian stanzas, it alludes to "Lycidas" in numerous ways – in its pseudonymous title, its formal language of lamentation, its community of mourners, its mythological personages, its images of nature's participatory grief, its dawn-to-dusk vigil. Other Romantic poets made passing references to Milton's archetype, but only Shelley wrote such a thoroughgoing homage; it is at once a studiously antique poem and a boldly innovative effort, both familiar and strange. Nearly two centuries separate the two poems, and Shelley's distance – literal and figurative – is apparent. Like Gray's Elegy, "Adonais" is set in a burial ground, but not a native English churchyard. Rather, it is the Protestant cemetery in Rome, where non-Catholic funerals had to take place before dawn (and where Shelley's own son William was buried in 1819); and something of the dew-chilled twilight of Keats's interment hangs over the poem. Keats, who had once imagined in the "Ode to a Nightingale" a restorative elixir distilled of "the warm south" (l. 15) had come to Rome to convalesce from the illness to which he would eventually succumb. Shelley, himself an expatriate living in Italy, reflects on the pathos of dying nearly alone and far from home; but in the way that Byron mines the symbolic potential

of his European tour, Shelley also uses the ancient setting to ennoble individual loss within a long historical perspective: Rome is “that high Capital, where kingly Death / Keeps his pale court in beauty and decay” (ll. 55–6), and Keats occupies “a grave among the eternal” (l. 58).

As chief mourner, Shelley follows Milton’s example of assuming a pastoral alter ego, but in a more self-alienating way: on the one hand, he is the monodist who opens his dirge with the bold proclamation, “I weep for Adonais” (l. 1) and the command to others to follow his lead; on the other, he describes himself in the third person as straggler in a funeral procession, which includes Byron and Keats’s early mentor Leigh Hunt. In this desolate self-portrait, Shelley stands “neglected and apart” (l. 296), a “frail Form” (l. 271) that goes unrecognized by the maternal muse-figure of Urania. Shelley’s self-division – between disembodied lyric voice and fragile body – is apt, for it reflects the poem’s bifurcation of Keats into mortal poet and enduring poetry. Like Keats, Shelley had a fundamentally materialist conception of the world: he thought of the human self as an arrangement of atoms in flux, rather than as a transcendental duality of body and soul. That vision is manifest in Shelley’s reimagining of pastoral landscape as the mind itself: here, the poet’s thoughts are “flocks” that once drank from “the living streams / Of his young spirit” (ll. 75–6) but now “wander no more, from kindling brain to brain” (l. 78). There is some comfort in the idea of Keats’s surviving poems, but none in the fact that the source of those poems has dried up forever. The physiological specificity of that source (“brain” rather than “soul” or “mind”) echoes a word the medically minded Keats favored – as in the agrarian metaphor of his pen gleaning the poetic fruits of his “teeming brain” (“When I have fears,” l. 2), or the horticultural trope of thought as undergirded by the “wreathed trellis of a working brain” (“Ode to Psyche,” l. 60). Meanwhile, the notion of thoughts as kindling sparks that wander “from brain to brain” pays homage to Keats’s earliest conceptions of poetry as a warmly sociable endeavor, read in the company of friends and written for them. There is no better tribute to Keats in the elegy than this Keatsian rendering of neural interchange – the mingling of poets and poems, poets and readers.

This was the utmost that Shelley could say about Keats’s immortality. As an ardent atheist, he could not follow Milton’s syncretic model of elevating Lycidas as both a pagan guardian-spirit in this world and as a Christian soul resurrected into the next. Rather than ending in fresh pastures or elysian fields, the symbolic geography of “Adonais” stretches fearfully beyond the shore of the wide world, while Keats’s memory has become a bright navigational beacon in a dark sky. When in the final lines of the poem Shelley imagines that “[t]he soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are” (ll. 494–5), he comes close to a Miltonic apotheosis; but the trope says more about his own yearnings – for poetic fame, for life without end – than about any settled theology. In more boldly affirmative terms, Shelley says that Keats lives on in his words, and in his way of seeing the world. The Romantic inclination to think of death as a rent in the fabric of thought and perception finds an eloquent response in Shelley’s description of Keat’s persistence in the world:

He is a portion of the loveliness
 Which once he made more lovely: he doth bear
 His part, while the one Spirit's plastic stress
 Sweeps through the dull dense world, compelling there,
 All new successions to the forms they wear ...
 (ll. 379–82)

Here, in the emphatic repetition of “portion” / “part,” Shelley suggests that Keats has not miraculously risen above the world but rather become an irreplaceable piece of it. “The poetry of earth is never dead,” Keats wrote in his sonnet “On the Grasshopper and Cricket”; and Shelley echoes that sentiment in suggesting that there is always beauty to be found in the endless “successions” of nature’s forms. As Shelley’s echoing phrase (“loveliness ... more lovely”) suggests, it is the role of poets to intensify that beauty or see it in a new way – just as they can find in surprises of joy a grief more piercing and a loss that is ever new.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 7 “‘Stirring shades’: The Romantic Ode and Its Afterlives”; chapter 9 “The Romantic Georgic and the Work of Writing”; chapter 10 “Shepherding Culture and the Romantic Pastoral”; chapter 16 “Anglo-Jewish Romantic Poetry”; chapter 25 “Milton and the Romantics”

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The Romantic Georgic and the Work of Writing

Tim Burke

Introduction

It is a measure of the expanding precincts of the scholarship of Romanticism that a volume such as this *Companion to Romantic Poetry* should include an essay whose terms would, to many earlier generations of readers, have seemed incongruous, even antagonistic. Romanticism more than any other poetic movement or aesthetic idea has seemed the very antithesis of the physical, temporal, processes of productive labor that the georgic describes and celebrates. Although poets have been, since Ben Jonson in 1616, describing their creations as “works,” labor and Romanticism have long had an uneasy relationship. Blake’s identification of alienated labor as a signature of the world of “experience” in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), Wordsworth’s distaste for the torpor-inducing effects of modern modes of production in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and the opposition set up, in Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*, between the mechanical arts and true poetry, are among the most frequently cited instances of Romanticism’s supposedly hostile attitude toward the developing capitalist economy and its redefinitions of human efforts and energies.

Through the nineteenth century and long into the twentieth, the character of Romantic poetry continued to be understood as inhering in a privileged remoteness from the worldly concerns of getting, spending, and working. The “New Critics,” who dominated the mid twentieth-century critical terrain, regarded the Romantic poem as a singular, ideal, transcendent force, which famously “should not mean but be.” These critics expected the poem as artifact to be well wrought, of course, but they spent little if any time considering the text as a *production* – a consequence not just of the poet’s arduous labor (mental and physical), but of all the contiguous energies needed to put books into the hands of readers. The work of prefacing, editing, printing, packaging, marketing and reviewing as well as the physical mechanics of the writing act itself were ignored.

The critical orthodoxies that succeeded New Criticism continued the essentially Romantic desire for the erasure of particulars, or their translation into universals. For critics indebted to the insights of Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, the working men and women who populate the poems of Wordsworth and Blake and to a lesser extent those of Coleridge and Shelley did not figure as subjects in their own right. Instead, they were reduced to projections, which helped to externalize discomfiting aspects of the poetic self. The “real world” of the poems operated primarily as a psychological landscape. In the 1980s and 1990s, the “New Historicists” began the shift toward a more materialized approach. Critics such as Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, and Alan Liu showed that historical and material realities were embedded within Romantic poems despite the efforts made to suppress them by authors questing for imaginative escape from earthly concerns. But the historicity restored to the poems was more textual than material; in the New Historicist criticism one finds much about the legal, cultural, and economic circumstances of the moments in which the poems were produced, but little attention is directed toward the *ontology*, or *experience*, of labor that Romantic poems can encode. The recent retrieval work undertaken by scholars using feminist and cultural materialist methodologies has been more productive. Authors previously marginalized have been dusted down and reintegrated into a Romanticism that is now significantly broader and more diverse. The presence in our classroom anthologies and period histories of John Clare, Ann Yearsley, and Robert Bloomfield, each of whom was born to a life of labor and made that labor a central facet of both the content and the style of their verse, means that oppositions between writing and working are no longer secure. Recent years have seen an explosion of interest in the material objects, the working humans and animals, and the physical processes with which Romantic poems engage (for example, Broglio 2008; Keegan 2008; Milne 2008), and important revisions to conventional ideas of Romantic anti-economism (Connell 2001; Underwood 2005). The effect has been to alter dramatically our understanding of the period.

Work's Genres: Georgic and Pastoral

A renewed interest in the genre of pastoral is one consequence of this altered landscape, as is, perhaps less obviously, a fuller attention to the georgic form. The Romantic fascination with the simple, the natural, and the primitive helps to explain why poems of the period frequently deploy pastoral motifs and imagery. Poets who wished to endorse or celebrate work as an individual experience or a social process, however, tended to experiment with the genre of the *georgic*. Both georgic and pastoral are anchored in the countryside, and have as their defining texts the Arcadian pastoral *Idylls* of Theocritus (c.250 BCE) and the poem which first elaborates the necessary labors of each season, Hesiod's *Works and Days* (c.700 BCE). The English understanding of pastoral and georgic was more often filtered through the works of their Roman successor, Virgil, author of both the *Eclogues*, written in c.37 BCE, and the *Georgics*, published in 29 BCE. They share sources in common then, but thematically and structurally, pastoral and georgic

are thoroughly distinct. Pastoral celebrates all that is presently felicitous and lovely in nature, and the shepherds who sing in pastoral poems do so in distinctly refined, relaxed, and decorous fashion. The pastoral world is no utopia – lovesickness, lost sheep, and the need to weave a basket while singing occasionally interrupt or accompany the fun – but it is one generally untroubled by history or hard work, and such politics as are presented are diffused into allegory and largely opaque symbolism. The pastoral genre is highly artificial and playful and, as such, it is always prone to inversion. Certainly, English poets deployed its motifs in sophisticated, self-conscious and often highly ironic ways.

In the distinct subgenre of antipastoral which emerged in the later eighteenth century, pastoral pleasures are illusory. Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770) and Crabbe's *The Village* (1783) drew unfavorable comparisons between the brutal reality of rural culture and Arcadian ideals. In Keats's early sonnet, "To one who has been long in city pent," pastoral fantasies are entertained, but eventually recognized as unsustainable. Despite relishing the smiling open face of sweet pastoral nature, the speaker's deliverance into the city's clutches at the poem's end inverts the typical homecoming motif familiar from classical poems. Arcadia is thus vulnerable to the economic conditions of modernity, and the sonnet's Miltonic allusions associate Keats's speaker with Adam, banished from pastoral Eden and doomed to the divine punishment of labor and sweat. Long considered the least worldly of all the canonical Romantics, we now know that Keats was intimately familiar with the material conditions of physical work and bodily pain, especially during his apprenticeship as a surgeon-dresser (Barnard 2007). Still, however skeptical writers like Goldsmith, Crabbe, and Keats could be, both pastoral and antipastoral forms of writing remain generically separate from the concerns and modes of georgic poetry.

Virgil wrote the four books of the *Georgics* in the aftermath of two civil wars which had depopulated the rural landscape. The task of rebuilding a nation on the brink of anarchy and chaos meant restoring the vital connection between the land and those who work it and consume its fruits. The toiling farmer has little time for song, or play; he has more pressing concerns than the weaving of baskets. He – and it is always a he – stands as a heroic, patriotic figure, reuniting man with both the soil and the gods. Upon rustic man, Rome's future Golden Age will basically depend, and Virgil packs the *Georgics* with a pleasing mixture of mythic and historical narrative and more didactic passages in the Hesiodic style, advising farmers on many aspects of agricultural practice. Dryden's translation, and Joseph Addison's acute essays upon it (published in 1697) prompted the early eighteenth-century craze for georgic in Britain. Georgic seems to flare into particular relevance at times when a culture is facing into profound change, without having first fully come to terms with trauma in its immediate past. Most periods of modern Western history might seem to fit this bill, but a Britain still reeling from civil war and embarking on a revolution in its territorial limits at home and abroad (via union with Scotland, and colonial interventions further afield), while accommodating proto-industrial technologies and working practices at home, was susceptible to Virgil's appealing mix of didacticism and patriotism in soaring verse. The georgic had immediate attractions for the many English writers who wanted to

celebrate or advocate the human capacity for manipulating natural resources – in the form of crops, animals, or other human bodies. Inevitably and regrettably, georgic poems tended to endorse the exploitation of those resources. The soil, and the workers of it, are often exhorted to ever increased productivity and thus such poems served to communicate and celebrate the advances of mercantile and imperial capitalism.

But georgic did not necessarily serve expansionist purposes. As David Fairer notes, “Pastoral could be inverted, [and] played with, but in order for all this to work it had to remain a stereotype. Georgic, on the other hand, was at home with notions of growth, development, variety, digression and mixture, and had a natural tendency to absorb the old into the new and find fresh direction” (2003: 80). This tendency allowed the English georgic “mode,” as Fairer calls it, to survive the fading fashion for long formal poems in the Virgilian style as the eighteenth century drew to a close. Critics have only recently begun to recognize the extent, and the importance, of its diffuse persistence, however. Donna Landry has investigated the Romantic intersection of georgic, pastoral, and antipastoral, while Clifford Siskin explores the convergence of georgic and romance (Landry 2006; Siskin 1998). Anne D. Wallace has argued that a georgic mood persists in Romantic poems when they represent walking, rather than working: pedestrianism is a Romantic device for articulating the expansive power of useful human energies which transform the visually appropriated object world (1994: 143–9). In John Barrell’s account, the georgic’s “celebration of rural life and the nation based on an idealized or distanced acknowledgment of labour ... survived quite comfortably into the [nineteenth] century by attaching itself to the discourse of sentiment.” Georgic “retreat[ed] to the domestic, the small-scale” (Barrell 1999: 245). Kevis Goodman refines Barrell’s thesis. She agrees with him that georgic is “most influential, if less well understood, not as a relatively short-lived Augustan genre but when and where it persists afterwards as a subtle underpresence” (Goodman 2004: 10), though she investigates further the “discourse of sentiment” to which Barrell alludes. Goodman finds the characteristic immediacy of georgic in poems which register emotion as “sensory discomfort” or the “noise of living,” rather than the “shapely, staged, or well-defined emotions” characteristic of the period’s sentimental fictions (2004: 3–4). The persistence of a georgic faith in the progressive power of vision and technology is further detected in the Romantic period’s developing culture of “news,” born of a thirst for local and global “intelligence.” However, Kurt Heinzelmann locates a re-oriented Romantic georgic more precisely than Wallace, Barrell, or Goodman. In Heinzelmann’s account, prior to the working of the land and the expansion of the nation in Romantic georgic is the character of the poet, which must be assiduously cultivated. This reconstituted, newly reflexive georgic consists in the “invisible way in which georgic supplied both the very materials of poetry and the productive power to use them” (Heinzelmann 1991: 201).

These processes, of self-generation and the generation of the materials for the making of both the self and the work of art, will be called, in what follows, georgicism. Unlike the formal eighteenth-century georgics, in which the speaking poet assumes a lofty vantage point from which to oversee material and geopolitical forces at work,

georgicism's self-made self generates its own world, not merely describing work or narrating progress, but enacting and enshrining the process of forging, styling, and repeatedly remaking the experiential self. This model might seem to herald a return to a model of Romantic subjectivity that is insular or solipsistic. In fact, however, the subject that emerges from georgicism is produced as a cultural effect rather than through authorial intention, as evidenced in the Romantic period's invention of celebrity culture (Mole 2007). The tendency in this period for poets to articulate their apartness was, Mole contends, a consequence of a rapidly expanding market for literature. The invention and manipulation of an author's distinctive "character," or identity (what we might call today their "image," or even their "brand") was increasingly essential to generate commercial success. In the interval between Burns and Byron, Romanticism's greatest celebrity authors, the poetic self was not a transcendent spirit, above and beyond the world of work, but itself a worked object, a product of the promotional endeavors required by the dramatically changed literary marketplace.

Hannah More's Stare

Ann Yearsley is a pivotal figure in the decisive turn away from the pan-global georgics of John Phillips, John Dyer, and James Grainger, and toward the new georgicism that emerges at the eighteenth century's end. Yearsley's poetic "brand" is the result of her patrons', and her own, determined efforts to style her as an object for consumption, and the verse she produces is an equally studied attempt to investigate the convergence of work, writing, and subjectivity.

Born to illiterate parents in 1753, Yearsley had only a rudimentary schooling, and earned a living by delivering milk to the elegant villas of Clifton, near Bristol, while supporting a husband who seems to have been an unreliable breadwinner. Yearsley's early life was a good apprenticeship for a literary career that was marked by struggles with patrons, publishers, politicians, and customers. Her first published work appeared in 1785 and she went on to produce two further collections of sophisticated, weighty verse, a novel, and a stage play. Her poetic talents were said to have been discovered by a gentleman passing by the barn in which she and family had holed themselves up in the shortage winter of 1783–4, though how much of this compelling story is genuine and how much is mythologization remains unestablished. By whatever means, she was brought to the attention of Hannah More, a prominent literary "bluestocking" and evangelical. More was greatly affected by the milkwoman's story, and set about procuring subscribers for a volume of her poetry after announcing her to the reading public in the pages of the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1784. In a private, unpublished letter of August 1784 to Elizabeth Montagu, More records her astonishment on hearing that Virgil was among the few poetic models her new protégée had encountered: "Among the Heathens, said She, I have met with no such Composition as Virgil's Georgics. How I stared! besides, the choice was so *professional*" (cited in Landry 1990: 128).

Astonishment is succeeded by a satisfying sense of aptness in a working poet taking inspiration from a book about the value of work. More repeatedly stressed that Yearsley's primary responsibilities were her maternal and milk-selling duties, not the "making of verses." But the "stare" in the letter to Montagu alludes, perhaps unconsciously, to a passage in Virgil's text that was a favorite with its eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century readers: the set piece conclusion at the end of Book I of the *Georgics*, in which a farmer stares in amazement as his plow unearths relics from wars past, bringing to light precious, long-submerged material:

Nothing surer than that the time will come when, in those fields,
a farmer plowing will unearh
rough and rusted javelins and hear his heavy hoe
echo on the sides of empty helmets and stare in open-eyed amazement
at the bones of heroes he's just happened on.

(*Georgics of Virgil*, i. 493–7)

More's stare situates both Yearsley and herself within a series of complex georgic scenarios. Conventionally enough, she plays the patron to Yearsley, just as Maecenas did to Virgil. More also casts herself in the role of the staring farmer, bringing to the surface a "relic" which seems to belong to some barbarous age; Yearsley and her writing are routinely described by More as rude, unpolished, elemental, even "savage." In a proto-industrial era, such qualities accrued value as refreshingly authentic antidotes to the excesses of ornate poetic diction, neoclassical elegance, and the mesmerizing flows of capital and labor in Britain's complex imperial economy. Fresh from the fields, Yearsley, like the "heav'n-taught ploughman" Robert Burns, and Robert Bloomfield, "the farmer's boy," had a certain appeal as a living throwback to a moment that, while unrefined, was nonetheless attractively uncorrupted by modernity. Even the poet laureate, Robert Southey, experimented with styling himself as a laborer in his writing, and he also patronized a number of servant poets, wrote a study of England's "uneducated" laboring-class poets (*Lives and Works of Our Uneducated Poets*, 1831), and encouraged critics to brand him as a model of industriousness.

The upright figure of Hannah More might seem an unlikely farmer, but as a friend of the celebrated actor David Garrick and as the object of considerable media attention herself, she was acutely aware of how literary celebrity functioned. She knew that Ann Yearsley's poetic personality must be manufactured, and Yearsley's subsequent adoption of the pseudo-classical pen-name "Lactilla" presumably owes something to that awareness, even though it was Horace Walpole who coined the name. "She must remember that she is a Lactilla, not a Pastora, and is to tend real cows, not Arcadian sheep," he told More (Walpole 1961: 221). More announced that she would be sorry to see the "wild vigour" of the milkwoman's poetry "laboured into correctness," but performed such a labor all the same in polishing Yearsley's *Poems on Several Occasions* for publication. More is thus the archetype of the "patron as poet maker," to use Betty Rizzo's illuminating – and distinctly georgic – phrase (1990: 242).

Yearsley was no passive recipient of More's manipulations, however. She had clearly read the *Georgics* carefully, since she too is able to occupy several roles within its topos. She variously identifies herself with the land that is worked, the farmer who works it, and the Virgilian poet who writes about both. She is acutely sensitive to the status of the speaker of the *Georgics* as one of five essential, carefully hierarchized elements in Virgil's poem. At the zenith stand the gods; positioned immediately below them are Octavius and Maecenas, the new emperor of Rome and Virgil's wealthy patron respectively. The land rests at the base of this structure, and upon it moves the farmer who toils the fields and furrows. Positioned awkwardly at the center of this cosmology is Virgil himself, unsure with whom to identify, uncertain of where his best interests are served. Is he himself aligned with Maecenas as a part of Rome's literary establishment which spectates upon and consumes the work done in the fields below? Or does he toil with the farmer, as a species of worker, producing to order the poems his patron commands? Yearsley experienced a similar pull. In 1784–5, she occupied a tensile space between the land and animals she worked, the lower-class community in which she originated, the new influence of Hannah More and increasingly Elizabeth Montagu also, and, more abstractly, the republic of letters on the threshold of which she was now placed.

Such tensions structure "Clifton Hill," a remarkable loco-descriptive poem of 1785 in which Yearsley, employing her witty pen-name, plays both the buried relic – "half sunk in snow, / Lactilla, shiv'ring, tends her favourite cow" (ll. 19–20), and the discovering farmer, who turns up various signs of violence and distress. Of the latter, the most amazing is the emaciated figure of Louisa, a young runaway living rough in Clifton's woods: "Here the fair Maniac bore three Winters' snows / Here long she shiver'd" (ll. 207–8). From a vantage point half sunk in snow, one might expect a cold milkwoman to reach instinctively for the antipastoral in order to complain about her hard lot and compare it with classical ideals and modern romanticizations of the rural life. Instead, as Donna Landry has suggested, she develops a novel fusion of pastoral possibilities and a "georgic ethos." Like Clare and Bloomfield, Yearsley has an intimacy with both the pleasures and the perils of rural existence which leaves her acutely aware of the "precarious balance" between "sustainable needs and greed" (Landry 2006: 265). Louisa and Lactilla struggle to survive on the Clifton landscape. Their initial appeal is thus as sentimental figures from a pastoral tableau (the child of nature and the singing milkwoman), but the pastoral costumes are rapidly abandoned as the women testify to the georgic struggle to create a coherent, functioning self from the limited resources available. Louisa is short of food and shelter, and Yearsley more metaphorically undernourished by her lack of poetic education and training. The madwoman on the moors might have a literary archetype in Crazy Kate, a character in William Cowper's poem *The Task* (1784), published just a few weeks before Yearsley wrote "Clifton Hill"; but of greater importance is the fact that Louisa and Lactilla are similarly shivering, snow-bound, and eager to escape obscurity.

Yearsley employs the georgic to question patriarchal assumptions about women and their work again, in "To Mira, on the Care of her Infant" (from her volume, *The Rural*

Lyre, 1796). The poem is typically georgic in that it dispenses advice, but unusual also, because the work described is the encouragement of physical, intellectual, and moral development in a child. In a further Virgilian move, Yearsley places responsibility for the future health of the nation with mothers, because like Mantuan farmers, they are uniquely attuned to nature. To demonstrate that a mother's work of feeding, nurturing, and educating is genuinely difficult as well as productive, a fact not always understood or appreciated by the powerful, Yearsley reshapes the closing lines of the second *Georgic*. Virgil here celebrates the farmer's remoteness from the city, a place where "the rods of public power" and the "iron rule of laws" corrupt and madden. At a time when breastfeeding was culturally unacceptable among bourgeois families (Landry 1990: 260–7), Yearsley urges Mira to reject "the force of social law," telling the story of an unnamed woman who secretly and riskily resorts to the rural fringes of Bristol to breastfeed: "far from public view in yon lone wild, / She sometimes strays to tremble o'er her child" ("To Mira," ll. 83–4). Yearsley's georgic ethos allows her to see that both nature and productive work flourish best at a distance from both law and fashion.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau had been promoting a similar model of parenting since the late 1760s, but Yearsley uniquely insists upon the physical challenge of the work of mothering. Mira's labor in feeding and educating young Edward is no simple expression of natural feeling; it is both hard work, and a guarantee of the nation's future strength. Mira's young Edward will be bred for power, and prove an asset to his nation. His qualities will be determined, initially, by Mira's maternal intervention: "To ancient fathers be thy boy consign'd, / But plant thyself true virtue in his mind" ("To Mira," ll. 213–14). In distinctly georgic vocabulary, it is the work of mothers to cultivate, literally *plant*, virtue in their sons; the consequence will be, in the long run, a more honorable patriarchy. The Yearsley of 1796 seeks to reform, rather than dismantle, the present state of society, but her critique of contemporary masculinity is nonetheless withering. The opening lines of "To Mira" set this agenda by drawing extensively upon the depiction of warring bees in Virgil's third *Georgic*, in which a "million" drones blindly obey their monarch, even to the point of self-destruction. The allusion serves to condemn the present, masculine state of society. Yearsley advocates the mixture of "mild pleasure" and consuming labor that women experience in taking responsibility for rearing their children, because the practice of female *nursing* is a more productive activity than war:

Whilst war, destruction, crimes that fiends delight,
 Burst on the globe, and millions sink in night;
 Whilst here a monarch, there a subject dies,
 Equally dear to him who rules the skies;
 Whilst man to man oppos'd wou'd shake the world,
 And see vast systems into chaos hurl'd,
 Rather than turn his face from yon dread field,
 Or, by forgiving, teach his foe to yield:
 Let us, whose sweet employ the Gods admire,
 Serenely blest, to softer joys retire!

Spite of those wars, we will mild pleasure know –
 Pleasure, that, long as woman lives, shall flow!
 We are not made for Mars; we ne'er could bear
 His pond'rous helmet and his burning spear;
 ...
 No: whilst our heroes from their homes retire,
 We'll nurse the infant, and lament the sire.

(“To Mira,” ll. 1–14, 17–18)

Yearsley’s tender “tending” of animals, infants and the self in both of these poems indicate her modern georgicism, especially since the literal and figurative landscapes she describes are not readily susceptible to improvement. Forging a self is a fraught process for Lactilla and Louisa and Mira alike; maternal work can at best slowly alter the belligerence of men; and on “Clifton Hill,” the “lovely verdure” of Leigh Wood “scorns the hand of Toil” (l. 157). But there is a noticeable progression in the ten-year interval between the two texts: in the earlier poem, the work is hard and the gain uncertain. By the time of writing “To Mira,” however, Yearsley’s georgicism has matured sufficiently to find that work and mild pleasure are not oppositional but potentially coexistent.

“It was our occupation to observe”: Labor in Wordsworth

As for Ann Yearsley, walking, work, and pleasure are intimately connected in the poetry of William Wordsworth. It has become a commonplace to think of Wordsworth as a poet who did his poetic work on the hoof, composing his verses along the lanes and by the lakes. As one able to live comfortably, if not extravagantly, without the need to earn money, Wordsworth’s versification of walking and working is less immediately impelled by economic considerations than Yearsley’s was. But the material activity of writing is an important and often neglected aspect of Wordsworth’s sense of his poetic vocation, and Andrew Bennett has shown how the poet’s reputation for composing on foot and for prioritizing inspired speech over laborious writing are romanticizing myths (Bennett 2007). Wordsworth may have delegated some of the mechanical work of writing to his wife and sister – several recent studies have investigated the gendered division of labor within the poet’s household (Heinzelmann 1988; Hanley 2003) – but he wrote assiduously and prodigiously. He was also attracted to the performative aspect of other kinds of work: he sought out, in his garden or on the lake by his home, various laborious activities, among them, fishing, planting, and cropping. Such experiences contributed to his ideal georgic ecology, which in Donna Landry’s terms, is founded on both the inevitability, and the ethical justness, of the fact that “both nature and humans are going to be used, and to be used up” (Landry 2006: 253).

Wordsworth was preoccupied with work. He often fell sick due to overworking himself, and he loved to observe and describe the sights and sounds produced by the labor of other people. Lakeland laborers regularly appear in his verse, in various states

of inspiration and distress, and the area's independent smallholders are, in his poetry, figures as heroic as any farmer in Virgil or the formal English georgics. He also meditated deeply, throughout his long career as a writer, on the process, the value, and the pleasure of poetic effort. His investment in the new georgicism is the deepest of any of the Romantic period poets.

Lyrical Ballads (1798–1802), by Wordsworth and Coleridge, includes many poems concerned with rural life and labor, but what makes the volume as a whole a truly *georgic* enterprise is the attempt to apply the theoretical stress, proposed in the volume's famous Preface, on georgicism as a poetic enterprise and even as a state of mind. The Preface suggests that the work of writing, like all dutiful labors, should be done purposefully and honorably. With a characteristic flourish of abstract nouns, Wordsworth seeks "to explain some of the chief reasons which have determined me in my choice of purpose" and thus avoid the "most dishonourable accusation which can be brought against an Author, namely, that of an indolence which prevents him from endeavoring to ascertain what is his duty, or, when his duty is ascertained prevents him from performing it." (Wordsworth 1991: 244). That "purpose" comprises the stimulation of "pleasure"; the construction of permanent objects and feelings, and the authentic replication, in metrical form, of the speech patterns of peasants. This so-called "real language of men" is, in Maureen McLane's reading, an ethnographic fallacy which Coleridge systematically exposed, and Tim Fulford has accounted for its rapid abandonment (McLane 2000: 43–79; Fulford 1996: 172–4). Nonetheless, Wordsworth insists that poetic "habits" of meditation should be as rooted in the familiar and everyday as the habitual labors of the farmer. As such, the languages of poet and farmer will be alike in "arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings." This amounts to "a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets" (Wordsworth 1991: 245). Wordsworthian language and farm talk are aligned in a shared purposefulness. Poet and farmer both work with familiar, natural raw materials in habitual ways and so avoid the alienation of city dwellers condemned to a chronically routinized, semimechanized experience of work and culture. The lyrical ballads themselves take for their settings and their exemplary narratives "low and rustic life," since here "the essential passions of the heart find a better soil" (Wordsworth 1991: 245).

Wordsworth's early writing has been characterized as a fusion of georgic and pastoral (Graver 1991: 119). "Michael," for example, is subtitled "a pastoral poem." Its eponymous hero is a shepherd, and in common with pastoral convention, the rural world it presents has greater integrity and community than the urban. Michael's shepherding labor is not valued solely because of the traditions and customs that his pastoral duties enshrine; the poem's more georgic aspect pays microscopic attention to local detail, while detecting macroeconomic forces at work. It also seeks to illustrate that those who work hard on the land, and those who think hard about it, are equally productive and equally likely to feel "the pleasure which there is in life itself" ("Michael," l. 77). That said, for all his honorable toil, Michael's efforts come to nothing. All that remains of his life's work is a heap of straggling stones from an unfinished sheepfold,

and at his death, new owners arrive and modernize the farm. Wordsworth leaves us, as readers, with the more vital work: can we, he wonders, take on some of Michael's genius for interpreting signs in the weather and the soil? Can we, like Virgilian farmers turning up the relics of history, work hard at interpreting a landscape simultaneously "improved" and depleted? The labor that is now ours to perform will be difficult, since both georgic endeavor and pastoral remoteness are under threat by new and often inscrutable forces, such as commercial banks, capitalist farmers, and cities that swallow up a vulnerable young workforce.

Another poem about the difficulties of interpreting the scene of labor is "A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags," the fourth in a series of "Poems on the naming of places." It was written, like "Michael," in October 1800 at a time when Wordsworth was under pressure from his publisher to complete the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem is much less often studied than "Michael," but it too is an important text in the development of Wordsworth's georgic imagination. Wordsworth's Romantic georgicism consists in a careful attention to his own poetic acts of labor, as well as to the laborious activities of others, and "A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags" is a piece in which Wordsworth strives to voice this new understanding of literary work by staging a dialogue with two key poetic predecessors, James Thomson and William Cowper. Like them, Wordsworth seeks to situate appropriately, and then adequately interpret, the laboring body, while developing a poetic style and personality fit for this purpose.

The poem's occasion is a walk enjoyed by the speaker and "two beloved friends" along the eastern shore of Grasmere Lake, close to Dove Cottage, the new home of William and his sister Dorothy. The lake, rather like William Cowper's seat of retirement at Olney, as described so lovingly in *The Task*, seems "safe in its own privacy." The companions are in "vacant mood . . . trifling with a pleasure alike indulged to all" (ll. 16, 28–9). They saunter, and play with their time. The poem reads at this stage like an out-take from *Home at Grasmere*, the long poem begun earlier in 1800: in its perfect contentment and unity entire, Grasmere, that poem suggests, had provided Wordsworth with his own seat of retirement and, simultaneously, a launch pad for his professional poetic career. "A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags" begins in this vein too, and it similarly takes comfort in Grasmere's apparent isolation from urban economic relations, a solitude underwritten by its subsistence food production. The walkers' pleasure is intensified by the music and laughter that reaches them from the harvest fields opposite:

– So fared we that sweet morning: from the fields,
 Meanwhile, a noise was heard, the busy mirth
 Of Reapers, Men and Women, Boys and Girls.
 Delighted much to listen to these sounds,
 And in the fashion which I have describ'd,
 Feeding unthinking fancies, we advanc'd
 Along the indented shore

(ll. 41–7)

There is routine business and festive merriment in this oxymoronic “busy mirth.” The poem here emulates Virgil’s eclogues by splicing together an echo of the labors of the fields and the pleasures of pastoral song, gently and delightfully conflating the Arcadian *otium* familiar from Theocritus and the need for labor, insisted upon by Hesiod in his *Works and Days*. As Gary Harrison and Tim Fulford have shown, Wordsworth developed his understanding of the stylistics of labor from Virgil and the English georgics but also by studying Cowper’s verse style (Harrison 1994; Fulford 1996). Cowper’s oxymoronic depiction of blissful toil in *The Tasks* softens its physicality and cushions the reader from too near an intrusion of the sweaty, georgic laboring body. Because Wordsworth’s companions hear rather than see the reapers, the pastoral and picturesque scene appear to be similarly uncontaminated.

Although neither has Ann Yearsley’s intimate knowledge of physical labor, both Cowper and Wordsworth are eager to register the necessity of rural production and their own toilsome efforts in composing verse. As Kevis Goodman has shown, it is when Cowper seems to be most leisurely, as when reading a newspaper upon his sofa, that *The Task* discloses its distinctly georgic aspiration to connect the local, the national, and the global. It does so, not by describing the technologies that transform and transport materials from English fields to colonial markets, but instead, through the author making it his business to interpret and convert to verse the disparate knowledge, both local and imperial, encoded in the news (Goodman 2004: 78–87). In “A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags,” Wordsworth too is busying himself with the work of reading and looking. “It was our occupation to observe / Such objects as the waves had toss’d ashore,” and poetic potential is harvested from “Feather, or leaf, or weed, or wither’d bough, / Each on the other heap’d along the line / Of the dry wreck” (ll. 12–13, 14–16). Such activities *occupy* the companions’ time, but this is not simple leisure: a nature poet’s professional *occupation* is precisely the accumulation and transformation into cultural material of such raw objects as these. Grasmere becomes like text upon a page, demanding to be read, as the saunterers walk “along the *indented* shore,” and later see a man fishing on the “*margin* of the lake” (ll. 47, 52; italics added). The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* speaks of the duty of readers, as well as authors, to work hard. Though the poems take humble settings, and their language is often more ordinary than heightened, the reader must still work at interpreting them. The “inexperienced Reader,” Wordsworth warns, is liable to “*rashness*,” because “if Poetry be a subject on which much time has not been bestowed, the *judgment* may be erroneous” (Wordsworth 1991: 271).

Wordsworth has, for the first forty-seven lines, chosen to interpret Grasmere and its environs in exclusively pastoral terms. The rest of the poem is dedicated to exposing the rashness of such a reading. Wordsworth dramatically confesses the inadequacy of his understanding of landscapes and laborers. In fact, the first concession to interpretative error occurs at line 42, where Wordsworth’s approving description of the “busy mirth” of the Grasmere reapers seems to force a contrast with the “giddy mirth” that, in James Thomson’s georgic poem *The Seasons*, is heard at the decadent social gatherings enjoyed by the wealthy and powerful. Thomson condemns these revelers for

spending “thoughtless hours” in wasteful “riot” while, outside, a peasant drowns in a freezing lake:

Ah! little think the gay licentious proud,
Whom pleasure, power, and affluence surround –
They, who their thoughtless hours in giddy mirth,
And wanton, often cruel, riot waste –
Ah! little think they, while they dance along,
How many feel, this very moment, death,
And all the sad variety of pain;

...

how many bleed,

By shameful variance betwixt man and man.

(*The Seasons*, “Winter,” ll. 322–8, 330–1)

Thus far, we seem to be in familiar Wordsworthian territory, in which rural simplicity trumps urban corruption. In “A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags,” the reapers’ mirth is admirably busy, not lamentably giddy. But what of the *unthinking* fancies on which the poet and his friends have been “feeding”? This phrase, echoing Thomson’s *thoughtless, little think(ing)* revelers, indicates that the vacant mood of Wordsworth’s walking companions is as liable to indulgent corruption as the Thomsonian revelers. And so, from line 48 onward, Wordsworth explicitly acknowledges that the judgments he makes in reading Grasmere as an idyllic, enclosed world have been dangerously, self-deludingly Arcadian, and that a rash estimate of the nature of the work performed by reapers, and by poets also, has been made.

The riotous parties Thomson describes are not just “wanton” but “cruel,” since while the rich are indulging themselves, the freezing, grieving poor beyond the gates “furnish matter for the tragic muse” (l. 342). Wordsworth’s poem also begins to take a tragic turn when, through a wonderfully picturesque “veil of glittering haze” (l. 48), the companions see a man in “peasant’s garb” idly angling on the lakeshore, at a time when he ought, the companions agree, to be working in the harvest fields with the rest of the community. As Wordsworth writes this poem, there are, perhaps oddly, published guidelines on how fishermen ought to be depicted within a landscape. The picturesque painter and theorist William Gilpin believed that the presence of bodies, or any sign of productivity, would tend to ruin a landscape sketch or poem, and should a fisherman appear in a scene, “he is indebted for this privilege, not to his art, but to the picturesque apparatus of it – his boat, his nets . . . *They* are the objects; *he* is but an appendage. Place him on the shore as a single figure, with his rod and line; and his art would ruin him. . . . let him take care not to introduce the vulgarity of his employment in a scene of grandeur” (Gilpin 1786: 2. 45). In Wordsworth’s poem, the enchanting picturesque mist is soon dispersed, because after making “ready comments” on the fisherman’s laziness, the sauntering companions soon reproach themselves, seeing plainly that the man is too ill and weak to work in the fields. He is not angling for sport, they realize, but toiling to survive:

Thus talking of that Peasant, we approach'd
Close to the spot where with his rod and line
He stood alone; whereat he turn'd his head
To greet us – and we saw a man worn down
By sickness, gaunt and lean, with sunken cheeks
And wasted limbs, his legs so long and lean
That for my single self I look'd at them,
Forgetful of the body they sustain'd. –
Too weak to labour in the harvest field,
The man was using his best skill to gain
A pittance from the dead unfeeling lake
That knew not of his wants.

(ll. 61–72)

Wordsworth's fisherman is a ghastly irruption, into the smooth, enclosed world of the picturesque and the pastoral, of the georgic struggle to survive against a nature indifferent to human needs. The poem incorporates the fisherman's corporeity without being so unfeeling as to reduce the man to an object, as Broglio has recently proposed (2008: 112–18). His recalcitrant and undeniable physicality renders Wordsworth's speaker vulnerable and weak himself. This tragic spot of time is noticeably different to the laconic, comic spirit of curiosity on bodily transformation that informs Cowper's neo-georgic in *The Task*. Wordsworth's emaciated fisherman prompts sublime and ultimately cathartic pity and fear, partly via the contrast with Cowper's amusing description of his own legs as shriveled, not by hunger, but the low winter sun casting shadows, "spindling" his legs "into longitude immense":

That I myself am but a fleeting shade
Provokes me to a smile. With eye askance,
I view the muscular proprtion'd limb
Transform'd to a lean shank.

(*The Task*, v. 11, 13–16)

Cowper wittily retains control of his self-representation, even as light and space collide in the illusion of a infinitely expansive self. But zooming in on the legs of the fisherman radically threatens the integrity of the Wordsworthian self and the composure of catharsis is achieved only with difficulty.

Wordsworth's suffering fisherman is no illusion, rather a sublime intrusion, or invasion, of the national into the local. The man is a specter of the hunger and famine afflicting or about to afflict most of Britain in the autumn of 1800. As Wordsworth and his friends "advanced / Along the shore" on a calm September morning, riots of protest against the "advanced" price of essential provisions at market, and the deliberate withholding of supply by large-scale farms and profiteering merchants, were occurring (Wells 1988). Disturbances are recorded at Ulverston, Carlisle, and Whitehaven, all within a twenty-mile radius of Grasmere. The crisis developed quickly: on

September 6th, *The Times* reported simply “a very scanty supply of every article of grain, excepting some arrivals of Foreign wheat; in consequence of which it was expected that prices would advance.” By October 9th, however, *The Times*’s editorial was attributing the cause of the riots to the replacement of an “honest, industrious race of farmers” by “consolidated farms under long leases to rich lessees . . . A Farmer ought not to be a rich man; he ought to be obliged by a salutary poverty to thresh his corn as soon as he can find a market.”

The fisherman’s “sickness,” it can be conjectured, is a grim prolepsis of the malnutrition that would surely soon spread from the urban markets to rural outposts like Grasmere. But the encounter recorded here as taking place in September is clearly derived from an incident recorded earlier that year, in late July 1800. One of Coleridge’s notebook entries from this time reads: “Poor fellow at a distance idle? In this haytime when wages are so high? Come near – thin, pale, can scarce speak – or throw out his fishing rod” (Coleridge 1957: 1. 762). One effect of Wordsworth’s decision to shift the poem’s scene from the “haytime” of midsummer to a misty September morning is a redeployment of the poetic reapers from the July hay harvest to the cropping of wheat, or barley. Doing so intensifies the fisherman’s hunger and our readerly distress at the sight of a suffering body unlikely to survive the approaching winter. It also brings the man’s suffering into the context of shortage and potential famine, rendering pastoral fantasies unsustainable, even ludicrous. With its removal to September, “A narrow girdle” goes out of its way to attempt and confront a historicization of the present. Wordsworth’s allusions to Thomson’s “shameful variance betwixt man and man” allow historically specific class differences and economic inequities to destabilize the privacy of Grasmere and the security that rural retirement had seemed to promise. A version of the mythic Fisher King, the starving man is an emblem of a land desolated as much by political failure as by crop failure. And, just as in the Fisher King myth, atonement is required:

– Therefore, unwilling to forget that day,
My Friend, Myself, and She who then receiv’d
The same admonishment, have call’d the place
By a memorial name, uncouth indeed
As e’er by Mariner was giv’n to Bay
Or Foreland on a new-discover’d coast;
And, POINT RASH-JUDGMENT is the Name it bears.
(ll. 80–7)

The poem’s ability to expand and contract its range of vision is a typically georgic procedure. In formal georgics such as John Dyer’s *The Fleece*, and in a thoroughly Virgilian work like *The Seasons*, there is, as David Fairer notes, a “reaching from the provincial riverbank to the national picture, and then through time and space to distant lands” (2003: 94). The second half of “A narrow girdle” is similarly expansive, moving outwards from the narrow path by Grasmere shore to ponder the state

of the nation's food supply, and via the inverted imperialism of the "uncouth" mariner on some "new discover'd coast," it returns to the micro-details of the man's emaciated figure. The poem's initial narrow concerns – pastoral pleasure and safety, poetic beauty – broaden significantly through a romanticizing act that translates particular suffering into the spectralized fears of a nation expanding outwards, but collapsing internally.

The starving fisherman demands both instant and continuing interpretative judgment, howsoever rashly applied. Wordsworth's continuing allusions to Thomson's "Winter" in the poem's final lines indicate that the man is being announced as a sign of national suffering, of the real hunger of the present. The poem moves to its conclusion after the companions concede their shameful misreading of the man's desperate condition:

I will not say
 What thoughts immediately were ours, nor how
 The happy idleness of that sweet morn,
 With all its lovely images, was chang'd
 To serious musing and to self-reproach.
 Nor did we fail to see within ourselves
 What need there is to be reserv'd in speech,
 And temper all our thoughts with charity.

(ll. 72–9)

The speaker here pledges himself to "thoughts," and in so doing submits to the demand, in Thomson's "Winter," that the licentious and wasteful should give "thought" to the "thousand nameless ills, / That one incessant struggle render life" for the poor, in order to make "The conscious heart of Charity . . . warm" (*The Seasons*, "Winter," l. 354). Wordsworth however "will not say" what exactly those "thoughts" are, and "the social tear" symptomatic of deep sensibility does not "rise," as Thomson seems to think it should. Wordsworth never cries for the poor, either here or in later poems on suffering such as *The Excursion*. But the poem does enact change: the earlier "lovely images" of Grasmere are converted, "chang'd / To serious musing." Unthinking fancy is replaced by coming face-to-face with the realities of a famine economy. Thoughts will be tempered by charity, and flimsy "delight" exchanged for "serious musing," the hard poetic work whose solemnity will confer upon it the "purpose" so important in the Preface.

Working on "A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags" made Wordsworth sick, and while he toiled, his erstwhile collaborator, Coleridge, was busy doing nothing. Duncan Wu has shown that, during preparations for the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge had promised a poem about the starving fisherman recorded in his July notebook (2004: 170–88). His tardiness irritated Wordsworth, and by October, with the publisher, Longman, pressing for the finished manuscript, he decided to compose it himself. His health deteriorated under the pressure of the work, and the experience was a shaping one in Wordsworth's development as a poet

of labor and the land. The pastoral fantasies of *Home at Grasmere* are abandoned to the reality of hard georgic work. The summer's long afternoons spent angling and composing at leisure (William, with various companions, went pike fishing on June 9th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 19th, 21st, 23rd, and 25th) were supplanted by the toils of autumn, and the fearful vision of a "single self" encountering a lone fisherman at the brink of death.

Wordsworth's fullest application of the georgic is apparent in the parts he assembled for the construction of his epic project, *The Recluse*. *The Excursion* for example is being reclaimed as a poem fundamentally georgic in its study of the "seed-time" and subsequent development of its principal character's emotions. Clifford Siskin's provoking observation that its autobiographical section, *The Prelude*, is a form of curriculum vitae, fusing georgic and romance to invent, effectively, the possibility of loving one's work, should alert us to its status as a poem not just of abstract vocation, but one which details material encounters with humans and "natural" objects as a species of professional training (Siskin 1998: 103–29). As Goodman notes, "*The Prelude* adopts the language of georgic to advocate what John Stuart Mill would call, speaking of Wordsworth, 'the very culture of the feelings'" (Goodman 2004: 118). The cultivation of emotion is the essence of Wordsworthian labor; in poems like "A narrow girdle," we see the preparations being made for *The Prelude*'s "arduous work" (1805, ii. 147).

Conclusion

In the poetry of Romanticism, from its epic poems of vaulting imaginative ambition, to the seemingly humble attempts in verse of milkmaids, servants, and farmhands, work is everywhere to be found. This essay has traced just a few of the several strands in which the period's georgicism is manifested, and the scholarly work of retrieving and analyzing the acts of labor, and the bodies of laborers, that Romantic poets were enthralled by is still underway. Perhaps though, the greatest legacy of Romantic georgicism does not consist in any particular poetic work or body of works, but in attempting, however haphazardly and uncertainly, to build the cultural conditions in which physical and imaginative activities could productively coexist – within the same poem, and within the same culture at large.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 8 "Pastures New and Old: The Romantic Afterlife of Pastoral Elegy"; chapter 10 "Shepherding Culture and the Romantic Pastoral"; chapter 11 "Ear and Eye: Counteracting Senses in Loco-descriptive Poetry"; chapter 14 "Laboring-Class Poetry in the Romantic Era"; chapter 32 "The World without Us: Romanticism, Environmentalism, and Imagining Nature"

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10

Shepherding Culture and the Romantic Pastoral

John Bugg

*He had learn'd the meaning of all winds,
Of blasts of every tone, and often-times
When others heeded not, He heard the South
Make subterraneous music, like the noise
Of Bagpipers on distant Highland hills.*
William Wordsworth, "Michael"

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Britain witnessed an unprecedented level of interest in the economic and political significance of the sheep and wool trades, and with them the figure of the shepherd, all of which were perceived as essential to the nation's financial and even cultural well-being. This preoccupation is reflected in the flood of contemporary publications – pamphlets on parliamentary issues, practical manuals, economic treatises, and so on – that urged the importance of sheep and wool to British commerce and society.¹ Given this explosion of material detailing the lives of shepherds, their professional duties, and their historical and contemporary significance to the nation, it is no wonder that writers interested in pastoral literature, a mode that traditionally issued idealized scenes of shepherd life borrowed from ancient Greek poetry, now found themselves inclined to craft realistic depictions of the daily workings of the shepherding trade in their own country. Eighteenth-century writers such as Oliver Goldsmith, William Collins, and Stephen Duck refused the pastoral's capacity to offer a fantasized rural peace to console city dwellers for the discontents of urban life, and instead portrayed the hard, often tragic lives of Britain's rural workers.

Much of the pastoral poetry of the Romantic period follows and develops this turn to realism. For some critics, this very realism, in refusing traditional pastoral scenes of idealized country life, tolls the death of the pastoral, and the rise of something closer to an "antipastoral" mode. For others, the turn to realism is the strength and the

hallmark of modern pastoral, from William Wordsworth to Seamus Heaney and beyond.² Surveying the critical history of the pastoral, in fact, we find almost as many attempts to define the mode as there are pastoral poems. The term “pastoral” itself is drawn from the Latin *pastor*, for “shepherd,” and quite literally means depictions of the lives of shepherds. Pastoral is sometimes spoken of as a genre, in the sense of being a recognizable classification of literature, but it has no prescribed form, as do some genres, such as the sonnet. An elastic category, pastoral can be comic or elegiac, based in local details or fantastical. It may be best to understand the pastoral as a tradition or mode: a constantly reinvented way of depicting rural life. At essence, what it requires is an imaginative effort to recreate the lives of people more rural, rustic, and close to the land than the speaker. Tracing the long history of the mode, we can identify two strains of pastoral, often represented by Theocritus and Virgil respectively, and presented as realistic Sicilian farm sketches on the one hand, and imagined Golden Age sighs on the other. As Stephen Parrish (1973), Stuart Curran (1986) and others have shown, the pastoral divide extends from the classical era into the eighteenth century, and beyond, with familiar players staking their sides. Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, Christopher Marlowe, and Alexander Pope joined Virgil in Arcadian reveries, while Ambrose Philips, George Crabbe, and John Clare opted for Theocritized images of the aching muscles and muddy boots of working British shepherds. In 1799, we find Wordsworth nodding to classical precedent, matching Theocritus’ naturalistic pastoral to his own experience of rural Britain. “Read Theocritus in Ayrshire or Merionethshire,” he told Coleridge “and you will find perpetual occasions to recollect what you see daily in Ayrshire or Merionethshire” (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1967: 255).

Wordsworth’s pastoral poetry belongs to the tradition of Theocritus, but even as he participated in the mode’s growing realism, Wordsworth worked to bring the poetic depiction of country life to its breaking point by striving for a new unity between the poet and his subject, seeking to efface, erase, or transcend any distinction between the voice of the educated poet and that of the rural worker. In Wordsworth’s effort to undertake this quest so thoroughly, his poetry exposes in a sustained way the paradox at the heart of the pastoral: though it may approach closer and closer to its quarry through the techniques of realism, its horizon of authenticity is constantly receding: to become commensurate with the rural voice would be to cease to register as “literature.” This is the lesson that Wordsworth learned from the contemporary reviews of “The Last of the Flock,” which dismissed the poem as nonsensical precisely when it was truest to rural speech.

The pastoral was on Wordsworth’s mind early and late. In the “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” (1815), Wordsworth mentions the early eighteenth-century dustup between Ambrose Philips and Alexander Pope over what should constitute the proper expression of British pastoral (Wordsworth 1974: 3. 72).³ Pope’s critique of Philips’s portrayals of rustic British shepherds anticipates contemporary reviews of *Lyrical Ballads*, as Pope mocks supporters of Philips’s “beautiful rusticity” (while Pope himself had succumbed to the writing of “downright poetry”), and urges readers to remember what should be included in the term “poetry” and more importantly what should not.

This debate was no less alive as Wordsworth was composing the pastorals that would go into *Lyrical Ballads*. In *Literary Hours* (1798), Nathan Drake laments the “servility” of much British pastoral verse before listing the requirements for “naturally and correctly given” pastoral: “simplicity in diction and sentiment, a proper choice of rural imagery, such incidents and circumstances as may even now occur in the country, together with interlocutors equally removed from vulgarity, or considerable refinement” (1798: 224; 237–8). The first three criteria are not unexpected, but it is important that Drake also emphasizes the poet’s negotiation between “vulgarity” and “refinement,” though he remains vague on this point: “incidents of sufficient simplicity and interest ... tinged with national manners and customs, might, with no great difficulty, be drawn from fact, or arranged by the fancy of the poet” (1798: 223–4). Whether cagey or unconcerned, Drake in the end does not trouble over the distinction between “fact” and “fancy,” between what Wordsworth would call “adopting” or “imitating” rural culture.

It is the difficulty of this distinction that focuses Wordsworth’s versions of pastoral. “In size a giant, stalking through the fog, / His sheep like Greenland bears” (*Prelude* viii. 400–2). So Wordsworth recalls, in Book 8 of *The Prelude*, glimpsing what appeared to his young eyes a wondrous British shepherd. Such fantastic visions were instrumental, Wordsworth explains, in leading him from love of nature to love of humankind: “Thus was man / Ennobled outwardly before [his] eyes,” so that his “heart was at first introduced / To an unconscious love and reverence / Of human nature” (viii. 410–14). But this is not the whole story. The shepherd, thirty-four year old Wordsworth now editorializes, was no “giant,” but “a man / With the most common,” who “suffered with the rest / From vice and folly, wretchedness and fear” (viii. 423–6). Autobiography’s split subject allows Wordsworth to register the shepherd’s two guises: mystical border figure of British mythology, and “most common” of Lakeland workers. This convergence of the mythic and the homely appears in Wordsworth’s sketches of shepherds in *Lyrical Ballads*, but without the child’s mind as alibi, the doubleness prompts autobiographical meditations less on sociation than vocation, as Wordsworth works out his own professional status with and against the figure of the British shepherd.

In the evolving relationship between shepherd and poet revealed in several of his poems at the end of the 1790s, Wordsworth both tests his ideas of the potential of pastoral, and begins to sketch his own professional identity. In works such as “The Last of the Flock,” “The Idle Shepherd-Boys,” and “Michael,” the search for a linguistic register true to Lakeland life leads Wordsworth to press issues of representation that are essential to his developing poetic. “The Last of the Flock” – the only one of these poems included in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* – finds Wordsworth suggesting a professional kinship between British shepherds and British poets. In “Michael,” the sole poem from the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* composed after the Preface, Wordsworth expands and revises his thoughts on representing “low and rustic life,” as his reflections on the relationship between poet and shepherd develop his notion of his own profession and forecast his famous definition of the “Poet” in the 1802 Preface (Wordsworth 1991: 245).⁴

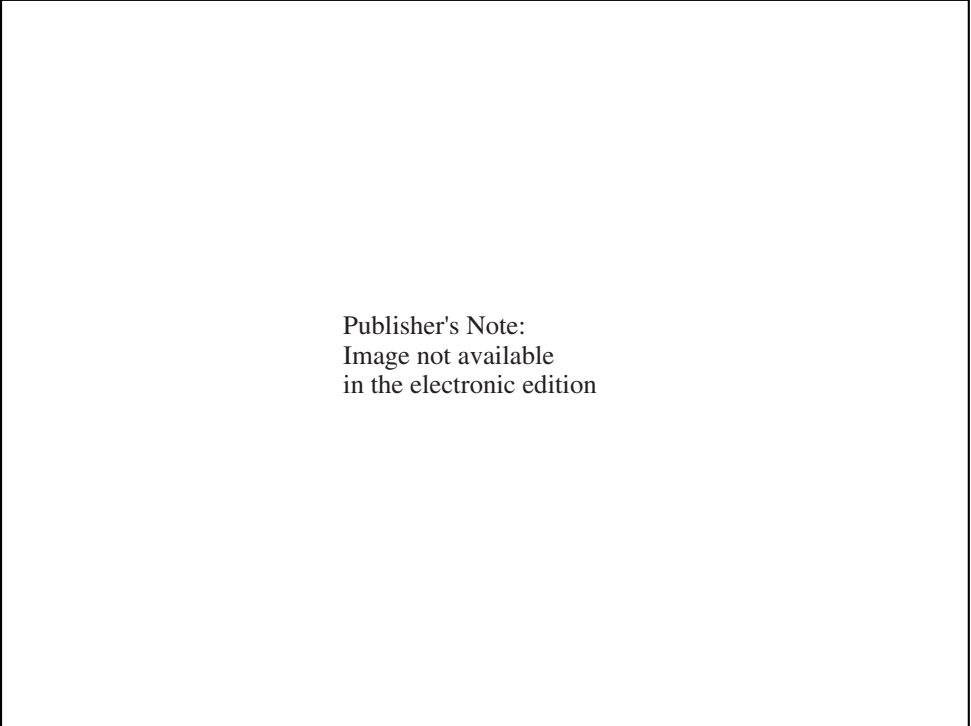
For the Improvement of British Wool

“Wordsworth publishes a second volume of *Lyrical Ballads, & Pastorals*” (Coleridge 1956–71: 1.585). Reading this letter of April 10, 1800 from Coleridge to Southey, Kenneth Johnston suggests that the original title for the 1800 edition may have been “*Lyrical Ballads and Pastorals*,” adding that “a still more accurate title ... could have been *Lake District Pastorals*” (2001: 95–6). To gauge Johnston’s proposal, we need look no further than Wordsworth’s decision to subtitle five of his poems “pastoral” for the 1800 edition, signaling that these pieces would in part be about the mode itself. Wordsworth was far from alone in finding interest and inspiration in the labor and lives of British shepherds, nor was he the only Romantic-era writer invested in revising conventional ideas of the pastoral. “Pastoral writers, ‘more silly than their sheep’ have like their sheep gone on in the same track one after another” (Southey 1799: 183). Thus Robert Southey, of the woolly-headed tradition of banal derivative-ness he wished to stray from in his own “English Eclogues” of 1799.⁵ Southey was one among many Romantic-era writers who breathed new life into an old genre by treating the lived experience of rural workers with documentary detail. This effort to muscle realism into a poetic so long tied to idealism was concomitant with a growing number of publications that examined and troubled over Britain’s number one commodity: wool.

Real shepherding was a topic of real interest at the end of the eighteenth century. *An Enquiry into the Nature and Qualities of English Wools* (1782), for instance, penned by “A Gentleman Farmer,” boasts of the fineness of the national product before emphasizing its role in the British economy. “Wool,” he contends,

is no where cultivated with the Success that it is in this Island; and the Advantages which we derive from it ... yield not in Consequence to any other that is enjoyed by this great commercial Nation; neither can any other Trade so generally diffuse the Riches and Blessings which are derived from this, for the poor and lower Classes of all Denominations are the People who principally profit by it ... when therefore this Trade flourishes, Joy and Plenty brighten the Faces of our poor Labourers and Artificers; but when it stagnates, Despondency and Depopulation are the inevitable consequences. (“Gentleman Farmer” 1782: 4)

Arguing that the government must permit the export of wool in order to save the industry from a dwindling economy, the “Farmer” routes us through a long-historical detour: “between the years 712 and 727 ... King Ina made a Law” regulating the price of sheep, and “160 Years afterwards, Alfred established the first Woollen Manufacture” (“Gentleman Farmer” 1782: 14). And so down to the Farmer’s day this grand tradition has continued, but now, in holding the price of wool artificially high by restricting its export, the government threatens this heritage and, with it, the nation’s economy and even population (1782: 34). This is the Farmer’s jeremiad: a proud inheritance predating Alfred will soon be plowed under and lost forever.



Publisher's Note:
Image not available
in the electronic edition

Figure 10.1 Contemporary tracts documenting various kinds of British sheep in close detail; figures engraved on wood by Thomas Bewick from Ralph Beilby, *A General History of Quadrupeds* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1800), pp. 56, 58, 66, 70.

Against such warnings came a broad effort to support and strengthen the British shepherding trade by documenting its varied and complex practices. As the era of statistics was dawning – Malthus was just a few years away, and the first national census would appear in 1801 – there was a national effort to catalogue sheep farming and register its various successes and failures. These works ranged from the anecdotal to the encyclopedic. John Naismyth's *Observations on the Different Breeds of Sheep, and the State of Sheep Farming* (1795), for instance, sponsored by the Society for the Improvement of British Wool, takes a measure of the size and variety of sheep farms, and offers a meticulous account of variations in breeds of sheep and shepherding practice from region to region. In such works there is a zeal to document the current state of the trade, and added to this is something of an indigenous curiosity: the illustrations and painstaking taxonomies of these studies evoke the popular accounts of the flora and fauna of foreign lands (figure 10.1). Leading the charge in this effort to catalogue the trade was the Society for the Improvement of British Wool, which realized the immense scope of its venture, and soon enough called upon “every reader of intelligence and public spirit” to send in “any additional facts or observations which may occur to him . . . in order that accurate descriptions may be obtained” for the “best mode of managing” the industry (*Observations* 1787: 6).

The Society would have been grateful for those works that brought local knowledge of the trade to print, such as *The Shepherd's Guide*, written by Wordsworth's friend (and his own "guide" to Yarrow) James Hogg, the "Ettrick Shepherd." Documenting the proper care of sheep throughout Britain, Hogg argues in the opening of his *Guide*, will help in the battle against livestock diseases – for Hogg a project of national importance: "too much can never be enquired, nor written, about the means of preserving an animal, which is the great source of riches and manufactures of our country" (Hogg 1807: 6). Hogg claims authority from his "continual course of conversation" with working shepherds, and feels it his responsibility to record and publish their collected wisdom, for shepherds "are men nowise singular for their literary acquirements," even though they have much to share: "though they can communicate their sentiments with perspicuity in conversation, [they] never once think of doing it in writing. It is thus that a great many observations are lost to the country" (1807: 2–3). Preserving this knowledge by transcribing the "conversation" of British shepherds for a readership of both working shepherds and interested outsiders, Hogg addresses the issue of his own rhetorical mode, explaining that he must "retain a homely and plain style, with the common phrases and denominations of sheep, herbs, and diseases; otherwise, I would be unintelligible to the very class of men to whom these hints can be of any use" (1807: 4). Hogg's prefatory statement, which claims a national urgency for his project while explaining the pitch of his language, resembles Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: both writers have long moved among and now turn to delineate Britain's shepherding populations, a turn that demands an articulation of their own mediative roles.

Counting Sheep

As Wordsworth was working on poems about shepherds-in-crisis such as "The Last of the Flock," *The Anti-Jacobin* began running parodies of sentimental poetry which figured the destitute as hustlers of sentiment, and their bourgeois auditors as eager enablers of these shows of misery. Southey's moving 1796 war poem "The Widow," for instance, moved George Canning to pen a lampoon titled "The Friend of Humanity and the Knife-Grinder," in which the weepy "Friend" assures the impoverished tradesman that "Drops of compassion tremble on my eyelids, / Ready to fall, as soon as you have told your / Pitiful story" (ll. 18–20). Targeting the Friend's solicitation of the poor man's tale, *The Anti-Jacobin* implies not only that this narrative's provenance is not the felt misery of the impoverished, but that the very contact between poet and pauper effects a fraudulent discourse. What is at stake in the *Anti-Jacobin's* parodies, in other words, is not only the earnestness of sympathetic verse, but the viability of a politically meaningful pastoral. Could the working poor receive legitimate poetic representation? This question is at the heart of many of the "experiments" in *Lyrical Ballads*.

At the close of a decade that saw mass agitation for parliamentary reform, it is no wonder that *The Anti-Jacobin* should take aim at a poetry that sought to give voice to England's working poor. Although Wordsworth's "The Last of the Flock" does have a

good deal in common with the poems targeted by *The Anti-Jacobin*, in not developing the relation between impoverished speaker and sympathetic auditor Wordsworth forestalls charges of fraudulent sympathy, as the poem's sense of fracture signs its legitimacy. Wordsworth's version of the "Friend" – and the narrator himself activates this keyword (l. 15) – does not frame the narrative of despair, as the shepherd's words title and close the poem. In fact, the shepherd speaks eighty-four of the poem's hundred lines, while of the frame narrator we learn little, nor are we told of his response to the tale the shepherd tells. With the silence of the frame narrator Wordsworth avoided the stagey "sympathy" parodied by *The Anti-Jacobin*, but he also left readers with a reticent, confounding poem. In his 1799 review of *Lyrical Ballads*, Charles Burney queried the narrative lacunae of "The Last of the Flock":

We are not told how the wretched hero of this piece became so poor ... No oppression is pointed out; nor are any means suggested for his relief. If the author be a wealthy man, he ought not to have suffered this poor peasant to part with *the last of the flock*. What but an Agrarian law can prevent poverty from visiting the door of the indolent, injudicious, extravagant, and, perhaps, vicious? and is it certain that rigid equality of property as well as of laws could remedy this evil? (Burney 1991: 325)

Burney ranges among four sites of silence: he wonders why the poem's "wretched hero" does not fully explain the process of his impoverishment; he asks why his interlocutor does not offer any "means ... for his relief"; revealing that despite such elisions he was affected by the tale of misery, he asks why the "author" does not help the shepherd himself; and finally Burney questions the legislative reticence he feels should address such suffering, only to have his querying inertia redound back upon his own suggestion. Burney's interrogative volleys hit the basic interpretive problems that many of the poem's readers have struggled with ever since, though for Burney much rests on the "indolent, injudicious, extravagant, and, perhaps, vicious" character of the impoverished shepherd.

By contrast, recent critics have tended to exonerate the shepherd, instead approaching "The Last of the Flock" with a turn to politics and history. The poem has been read alongside Prime Minister William Pitt's attempts to revise the Poor Laws, William Godwin's belief that private property breeds corruption, and Erasmus Darwin's pro-psychological case studies (see Friedman 1979 and Chandler 2001). These critical readings have illustrated how "The Last of the Flock" subtends a network of contemporary issues, but as Burney's review demonstrates, the poem's reticence is its primary provocation. The impoverished shepherd attempts the history of his decline, but this story of calamity is lost in a dash:

Upon the mountain did they feed;
They throve, and we at home did thrive:
– This lusty lamb of all my store
Is all that is alive.

(ll. 35–8)

Unlike many destitute figures in *Lyrical Ballads*, the shepherd is met while still in the midst of decline, and as though searching for a coherent narrative of his plight, over the next six stanzas he attempts the history behind the dash. After working a Malthusian calculus that ties the onset of his trouble to the size of his family, he moves on to unsteady confessions about his “wicked fancies,” which, he explains, issued paranoia: “every man I chanc’d to see, / I thought he knew some ill of me” (ll. 71–4). Finally, in one last attempt to express his plight, the shepherd returns to the numerical discourse he has worked throughout the poem. We recall that his flock had grown to a “full score” of twenty, and then to fifty, only to drop to thirty, and then to continue falling “one by one away” (l. 69). The shepherd revisits this language at the poem’s end:

They dwindled, Sir, sad sight to see!
 From ten to five, from five to three,
 A lamb, a weather, and a ewe;
 And then at last, from three to two;
 And of my fifty, yesterday
 I had but only one,
 And here it lies upon my arm,
 Alas! and I have none;
 To-day I fetched it from the rock;
 It is the last of all my flock.

(ll. 91–100)

This episode of counting leaves us with one last repetition, as the closing lines revise the couplet with which the shepherd opened his tale, framing the story of loss.

Just as important as filling in the elisions in the shepherd’s tale of ruin is listening to how this tale is told, for his language of counting bears a significant cultural pedigree. We might approach the history of this discourse by thinking about Wordsworth’s relationship to rural culture. In a letter of April 12, 1798 to his publisher Joseph Cottle, Wordsworth writes of his progress on the pieces that would make up *Lyrical Ballads*, “You will be pleased to hear that I have gone on very rapidly adding to my stock of poetry” (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1967: 215). Wordsworth’s language indicates that he was imagining his craft in the idiom of his subject, and in fact the relation between shepherd and poet in “The Last of the Flock” moves beyond analogy. Wordsworth’s suggestion of a deeper kinship between the two trades is signaled in the first instance by a formal sympathy between the shepherd’s tale and the poem itself. The last words of the final stanza’s even lines perform a countdown that links the dwindling of the flock to the conclusion of the poem: we read “three,” “two,” “one,” and, with the final sheep’s death marked by the shepherd’s “Alas!” we arrive at “none” (l. 98). With the closing couplet revising the “he” (the “lusty lamb” of line 17) to a lifeless “it,” the expiration of the flock is coterminous with the poem’s end. This connection between the formal and thematic concern with keeping count extends to the poem’s numerical regularity, as each stanza is ten lines long, and the poem is comprised of a total of ten stanzas, a linear and stanzaic symmetry aligned with the

shepherd's ten children. What happens when we read the destitute shepherd's counting with this numerical alignment in mind?

Lost to us now, the shepherd's art of counting sheep once claimed a vibrant place in British culture. At the end of the nineteenth century, linguists began documenting the counting styles used by shepherds in northern England and Scotland. In "Numerals Formerly Used for Sheep-Scoring in the Lake Country with their Affinities," T. Ellwood plots a Welsh origin for this "sheep-scoring," while Alexander J. Ellis traces the counting style to "the ancient Cumbrian, or Strathclyde kingdom" (Ellis 1879: 319). Shepherds used the number twenty, a "score," as a counting unit, and this came to name the measuring system – the "Shepherd's Score." J. R. Witty points out that twenty was an obvious choice: "In the North of England sheep are always counted by the score, which is simply the number of the shepherd's fingers and toes" (Witty 1997: 29). Linguists have taken a particular interest in the Shepherd's Score because the "counting words of the fells and moors" are rare relics of "a pre-Anglian language" (Witty 1997: 29), living records of a lost culture. Complex variants have been found throughout the west and north countries, so while in Cumberland and Westmoreland the numerals have a Welsh character – ein (one), tein (two), tethera (three), wethera (four), etc. – those from nearby "Borrowdale, Keswick, Cumberland" show a Gaelic influence: yan, tyan, tethera, methera. Few such counting systems were still in use in the late nineteenth century, but Ellis notes that several children's rhymes which evolved out of the Shepherd's Score are still used today for games of "counting out" – the best-known is "eeny, meeny, miny, moe" (Ellis 1879: 321).

Wordsworth signals this counting tradition in "The Last of this Flock," both in the shepherd's recollection of a time when he "number'd a full score" (l. 29), and in the final stanza, as the distraught shepherd poignantly returns to the counting system passed to him through oral tradition. To communicate his story in a language that is resonant for him, the shepherd sounds the numbers of his trade. Ending "The Last of the Flock" with the shepherd's counting, Wordsworth merges the traditions of this trade with his own. What Wordsworth brings to the pastoral, in other words, is not only descriptive realism of the arduous life of a contemporary shepherd, but also an attempt to allow the forms of shepherding culture to contour the forms of his verse. But in bringing the Shepherd's Score into his poem without gloss Wordsworth ran the risk of alienating readers not versed in country things, and contemporaries such as Burney did indeed perform the legitimacy of their concerns – the puzzled responses to "The Last of the Flock" dramatize the potential illegibility of Wordsworth's version of pastoral.

Two years later, in the 1800 Preface, Wordsworth defends his verse experiments as elements in his broader search for the true heritage and present province of the British poet. He explains of his linguistic mode in this search: "in these Poems I propose to myself to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men" (Wordsworth 1991: 250). It is in the space between "imitate" and "adopt" that Wordsworth's theory of the pastoral uneasily lingers. He addresses this space elsewhere in the Preface: "The language too of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what

appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust” (1991: 245). Although Wordsworth acknowledges that he will enact a purification process, the exact nature of his alembic dissolves behind passive voice and parentheses. This passage has become a crux in critical readings of the Preface. Derek Attridge, for instance, sets Wordsworth’s words on “purification” within a long debate about “the difference between nature and art, or more specifically between ordinary language and the language of poetry,” an enduring problem that for Attridge emerges from the poet’s need to locate a “special linguistic register” while also claiming sociolinguistic authenticity (Attridge 1988: 46–7). Wordsworth’s “purification” thus “make[s] the crucial difference between the language of poetry and natural language” (Attridge 1988: 71). Coleridge was less patient. He identified this moment in the Preface as a logical fault line in Wordsworth’s poetic theory. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge explains that Wordsworth’s use of the language of “low and rustic life” marks “the point to which all lines of difference [between Wordsworth’s “poetic creed” and his own] converge” (Coleridge 1983: 2. 45). In effect, Wordsworth claims for a contingent *parole* the status of *langue*, but for Coleridge, rural language must necessarily differ from county to county according to a variety of influences, not least the education and character of local clergymen, and once such language is “purified” anything specific to its locale is lost in the distillation, so it “will not differ from the language of any other man of common-sense, however learned or refined he may be, except as far as the notions which the rustic has to convey are fewer and more indiscriminate” (1983: 2. 52). For Coleridge, the very idea of “purification” renders Wordsworth pastoral idiom untenable. Yet, Coleridge’s critique is redolent of a general tendency in the contemporary reviews of *Lyrical Ballads*, in which a discourse of censure swarms around the very issue that Wordsworth’s poetry investigates. These investigations extend beyond the Preface and into Wordsworth’s poetic practice (Attridge 1988: 88), particularly in “Michael,” the only *Lyrical Ballads* pastoral he wrote after composing the Preface.

Subterraneous Music

In “The Last of the Flock” Wordsworth limned a union between shepherd and poet. Two years later, in “Michael,” this shared vocational territory defines his poetic vision. “The Idle Shepherd-Boys,” composed a few months before “Michael,” forecasts this project.⁶ “The Idle Shepherd-Boys,” featuring “two shepherds and their coronals and music making,” has been called the most traditional pastoral in *Lyrical Ballads* (Mason 1992: 262), yet we might also describe it as one of the most self-reflexive. As the poem opens we follow some roving ravens through Dungeon-Gill before focusing on two boys lazing on a sunny day: “It seems they have no work to do / Or that their work is done” (ll. 14–15). At ease in the sunlight, they remain curiously out of sync with the scene, for as nature sings of springtime, the boys’ tune is off-time: “they play / The fragments of a Christmas Hymn” (ll. 16–17). Their songs are scraps from another season, and while they “wear the time away,” a “plaintive cry” rises “from the depth of Dungeon-Gill” (ll. 32–3).

Pressing the boys' neglect, Wordsworth leaves readers to worry about this plaintive cry as the boys busy themselves with a race. At last, as one boy crosses a "bridge of rock" on a dare, "he hears a piteous moan" (ll. 53; 60). Wordsworth writes a symbolic death for the boy at this moment: hearing the sheep's moan, "his heart within him dies – / His pulse is stopp'd, his breath is lost, / He totters, pale as any ghost" (ll. 61–3). But when the boy at last recognizes the sheep's cry, his body reanimates and his voice returns:

When he had learnt, what thing it was,
That sent this rueful cry; I ween,
The Boy recover'd heart, and told
The sight which he had seen.

(ll. 78–81)

The Arcadian dreamer is reborn as a Lakeland worker, and instead of piping scraps of Christmas songs, he uses his voice to attend to his trade. With the shepherd restored to his vocation, "A Poet" suddenly materializes – one "who loves the brooks / Far better than the sages' books" (ll. 84–5). This *poet ex machina* saves the stranded sheep and gives it to the boys, an inversion of the vocational union we saw in "The Last of the Flock." But in Wordsworth's description of the Poet's rescue of the sheep, "He drew it gently from the pool" (l. 89), the poem swerves from anecdote to trope: the "pool" is the "basin black and small" (l. 54) of the fifth stanza, an inky well from which the Poet "drew" the lost sheep. This language of graphic representation projects the Poet as an actualization of his own determining power, a metaphor that extends into the sole meeting in *Lyrical Ballads* between a "Poet" and a Lakeland character:

Into their arms the Lamb they took,
Said they, "He's neither maim'd nor scarr'd" –
Then up the steep ascent they hied
And placed him at his Mother's side.

(ll. 93–6)

In this unique encounter between Lakelanders and a "Poet" there is no conversation, but there is an exchange. As though performing Wordsworth's relationship to Lake District culture, the Poet acts as intermediary, however unremarked by the shepherds, as he draws from a "basin black." If the boys transform from generic conventions to real north country shepherds, the Poet, after actively engaging with these shepherds, is himself reborn as the "Bard" (l. 97), and as the rhyme with "scarr'd" suggests, this moment portrays an important development in Wordsworth's relationship to the working culture of the Lakes. This transformative exchange between shepherd and poet deepens in the story of vocational exchange that Wordsworth tells in "Michael."

The sociational role of the shepherd that Wordsworth depicts in the *Prelude* (love of the shepherd leading to love of humankind) is there as well in "Michael," as the narrator of the induction explains that the "Homely and rude" story of Michael, which he learned as a boy, "led me on to feel / For passions that were not my own" (ll. 30–1).⁷

But in “Michael,” as Susan Wolfson has noted, the narrative turns outward, concentrating on the life of the shepherd (Wolfson 1986: 92). Shaping this external focus, Wordsworth’s description of Michael progresses from attention to the shepherd’s vocational powers to a suggestion of their cultural significance. “In his Shepherd’s calling he was prompt / And watchful more than ordinary men” (ll. 46–7), Wordsworth writes, anticipating his 1802 definition of the poet (Wordsworth 1991: 255–6). Thanks to this heightened sensibility the shepherd is able not only to recognize and predict weather patterns, but also to read aesthetic forms in the signs of nature:

Hence he had learn’d the meaning of all winds,
Of blasts of every tone, and often-times
When others heeded not, He heard the South
Make subterraneous music, like the noise
Of Bagpipers on distant Highland hills.

(ll. 48–52)

The shepherds’ skill obtains in his power to find meaningful patterns in the elements of nature, and in hearing this “subterraneous music” the shepherd receives a topographical promotion, becoming a “He” who holds the stirring memory of a thousand years. Wordsworth returns here to the vocational union of shepherd and poet, developing the portrait of a rural figure who through cultural inheritance, natural endowment, and steady attention, possesses the powers of a poet.

Plotting *Lyrical Ballads* as a transitional text in the history of the pastoral, John Stevenson has argued that “between 1709 and 1798 . . . the poet-shepherd transformed into the shepherd-poet” (1967: 629). For Stevenson, in the new pastoral on display in *Lyrical Ballads*, “the boundaries would now be re-settled with real shepherds, primitives, and children, all of whom were in their natural condition the true poets” (1967: 638). Wordsworth was not the only writer to see in the shepherd something of a “true poet.” In “On the Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland,” Nathan Drake points to James Thomson’s *The Castle of Indolence* to illustrate that the shepherd-seer has long fascinated British writers (Drake 1798: 233). Thomson, in an extended simile, compares waking dreams to the visions of “a Shepherd of the *Hebrid-Isles*, / Plac’d far amid the melancholy Main” who

Sees on the naked Hill, or Valley low,
The whilst in Ocean *Phoebus* dips his Wain,
A vast Assembly moving to and fro:
Then all at once in Air dissolves the wondrous Show.

(Thomson 1748: 16; ll. 262–3, 267–70)

Thomson’s passage calls to mind Wordsworth’s description of Leonard in “The Brothers,” a mariner who “had been rear’d / Among the mountains” and so “Was half a Shepherd on the stormy seas” (ll. 41–3). In his own state “Of tiresome indolence” amid “the cloudless main,” Leonard, gazing into the swirling sea,

Saw mountains, saw the forms of sheep that graz'd
 On verdant hills, with dwellings among trees,
 And Shepherds clad in the same country grey
 Which he himself had worn.

(ll. 59–62)

Leonard shares both Michael's ability to find in nature's elemental patterns meaningful forms, and Wordsworth's ability imaginatively to create scenes of Lakeland shepherd-ing life.

This tradition of the shepherd-seer allows Wordsworth to figure Michael as a natural poet who hears in the blasts of wind the tones that sound his cultural legacy. But the shepherd is also, as we saw in the *Prelude*, "a man / With the most common" (*Prelude* viii. 423–4), and this aspect of Michael also commands Wordsworth's attention. We learn of the working lives of the shepherd and his family, their long days of labor, their "oaten cakes" and "plain home-made cheese" (ll. 103–4), and the simple household objects they own. Of these objects, Wordsworth slows down to take special note of an old lamp, the glow from which describes "the limits of the vale" (l. 145). Casting this light, the shepherd's cottage is known as the "Evening Star" (l. 146), which Wordsworth would later gloss by reporting that although Luke's story came from the history of a family that once lived in Dove Cottage, "The name of the Evening Star was not in fact given to this house but to another on the same side of the valley more to the north" (Wordsworth 1991: 311). Tempted by the named coordinates of Michael's cottage – "with large prospect North and South / High into Easedale, up to Dunmal-Raise, / And Westward to the village near the Lake" (ll. 139–42) – critics and Grasmere hoteliers have with equal gusto tried to pinpoint the location of the "Evening Star" (McCracken 1984: 39). Did Wordsworth have a specific cottage in mind as he wrote "Michael"? Perhaps, but the name he chose provocatively plays with a popular term used throughout Britain for Venus: as John Clare puts it, the evening star is commonly referred to as "the Shepherd's Lamp, which even children know" (Clare 1827: 111). There may have been a home "more to the north" of Dove Cottage referred to as the "Evening Star," but by using this rural colloquialism Wordsworth works a pun specifically for "the most common" of Lakelanders.

Subtly different figurations of Michael have emerged: a mystical and privileged seer and a typical working Cumbrian. These two versions of the shepherd enact the dilemma that Attridge calls an underexamined problem in the Preface, leaving Wordsworth with a difficult choice: if the shepherd is a natural poet whose thoughts and feelings might be adopted without purification, Wordsworth faces the problem of finding some "special principle" to distinguish himself from this rustic figure; but if he writes the shepherd as an ordinary member of rural Lakeland, he must leave behind his dream of finding a natural poet within "low and rustic life" whose language he could simply adopt without purification. Would a successful realization of pastoral obliterate poetry as Wordsworth defines it? In "Michael," Wordsworth's meditation on the relationship between poet and shepherd shapes a compromise to this paradox, one registered less in the selection of language than the language of form.

This formal story emerges at the poem's close, as the poet writes Michael's death, but with difficulty. His first attempt interrupted by a return to the community's version of Michael's history (ll. 469–71), he prevails only by shifting his focus from shepherd to sheepfold: "The length of full seven years from time to time / He at the building of this Sheep-fold wrought, / And left the work unfinished when he died" (ll. 479–81). These last two lines image Michael dying at the sheepfold, as animation leaves him and his body collapses into the pile of stones. From Michael's earlier words we know that his ancestors' bodies lay in the "family mold," and so we might presume that Michael's body does indeed pass into the earth near Green-head Gill (l. 380). There is an important connection between the "subterranean music" that the shepherd discerned in the meteorological play and the poem's earlier words on the bodies buried beneath the terrain where the poet now stands, a connection that plays through the poem's final verse paragraph:

Three years, or little more, did Isabel,
Survive her Husband: at her death the estate
Was sold, and went into a Stranger's hand.
The Cottage which was nam'd The Evening Star
Is gone, the ploughshare has been through the ground
On which it stood; great changes have been wrought
In all the neighbourhood, yet the Oak is left
That grew beside their Door; and the remains
Of the unfinished Sheep-fold may be seen
Beside the boisterous brook of Green-head Gill.
(ll. 482–91)

The ground has been plowed and new developments have arisen. Parrish has observed that the revision of the manuscript scraps of the earlier "ballad Michael" into the blank verse of "Michael" "signalizes Wordsworth's movement in 1800 away from his early experimental voices into the main region of his song" (Parrish 1973: 187). But Wordsworth refuses entirely to leave the ballad behind, and instead demonstrates that his blank verse line has grown out of, and still bears within it, the ballad tradition. Wordsworth allows this tradition's subterranean music to sound within those lines excerpted above, on the plowing over of the shepherd's land:

the ploughshare has been through
the ground On which it stood;
great changes have been wrought
In all the neighbourhood [.]
(ll. 486–8, reformatted)

Narrating a history of cultural erasure, Wordsworth stubbornly inscribes the subterranean music of the ballad tradition, insisting upon its perseverance even within the "great changes" of his own work. In a poem that opens by thematizing the challenge of "reading" an encoded landscape, it is no surprise that it concludes in these lines, in

which there “may be seen” a subtle but telling remnant. Wordsworth does not solve the paradox of pastoral, but he has worked his way toward a compelling suggestion. Rather than adopting the Shepherd’s Score as he had attempted in “The Last of the Flock,” Wordsworth shapes a compromise in “Michael” by allowing his language to bear the forming influence of the culture he is representing, for as we encounter the poet’s elegant blank verse, we nonetheless hear within these lines a family resemblance to the music of northern Britain’s shepherding culture.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 5 “Ballad Collection and Lyric Collectives”; chapter 8 “Pastures New and Old: The Romantic Afterlife of Pastoral Elegy”; chapter 9 “The Romantic Georgic and the Work of Writing”; chapter 16 “Anglo-Jewish Romantic Poetry”

NOTES

- 1 Examples include Anstie 1787, Luccock 1809, Carvolth 1825, Trimmer 1828, and Hodgson 1849. By the mid-nineteenth century, historical accounts of the trade began to appear, such as Brothers 1859.
- 2 Readers interested in a comprehensive survey of the Romantic pastoral should consult Curran 1986, which builds upon Parrish’s thoughts on the mode (1973). For a long-historical treatment of pastoral, see Alpers 1996, Marinelli 1971, and the classic works of Empson 1974 [1935] and Williams 1975.
- 3 For a useful account of Wordsworth’s interest in the eighteenth-century pastoral debate, see Page 1989.
- 4 On this compositional sequence, see Parrish 1973: 149–51.
- 5 See as well Nathan Drake’s lament over the “servility” of much contemporary pastoral (1798: 327).
- 6 “The Idle Shepherd-Boys” was completed no later than August 4, 1800, while “Michael” was finished by December 9 (Wordsworth 1992: 252).
- 7 Geoffrey Hartman has taught us about the self-reflexive significance of the opening frame of “Michael,” observing that the poet projects “a strange identity between himself and his main character,” and concluding with an oft-cited assertion: “the poet is Michael’s true heir” (Hartman 1964: 262, 266). Peter Manning, too, has stressed the significance of the poem’s narrative frame: “the shattered covenant between the eighty-year-old Michael and the eighteen-year-old Luke is succeeded by the compact between the narrator and his heirs,” allowing Wordsworth’s self-fashioning “as the intrepid and trustworthy guide of his readers, the sage father of future poets” (Manning 1990: 48).

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Ear and Eye: Counteracting Senses in Loco-descriptive Poetry

Adam Potkay

“Loco-descriptive” is a Romantic-era phrase for a poetic genre rooted in the eighteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, defining the term as “descriptive of local scenery, etc.,” traces it to Wordsworth’s “Preface” to his 1815 *Poems*. Although Wordsworth lent his authority to the phrase, it goes back further: Robert Aubin adduces the title of Daniel Walters’ “Landough: A Loco-descriptive Poem,” published 1780 (1936: vii, 339). The popularity of a genre with at least titular interest in actual locales is staggering: Aubin’s bibliography of, as he calls it, “topographical” poetry lists roughly 3,500 items, all but a few of them from the period 1700–1840 (1936: 297–394). But the *loco*-descriptive cannot be divided too strictly from more generally *descriptive* verse. Wordsworth in his 1815 Preface categorizes the genre under the more general heading of “Idyllium, – descriptive chiefly either of the processes and appearances of external nature, as the Seasons of Thomson; or of characters, manners, and sentiments,” especially “in conjunction with the appearances of Nature” (Wordsworth 1974: 28). As distinct from descriptive verse that renders external nature in a general, abstract, or ideal way, loco-descriptive poetry treats specifically named places or things (estates, buildings, rivers, even a few mines and caves); this distinction, however, pertains more to theory than to practice, as giving a poem a local habitation and name does not ensure any specificity or detail in its delineation. Moreover, Thomson’s *Seasons* – a work only intermittently loco-descriptive – is, as I shall suggest in this essay, of signal importance to the Romantic practice of describing places.

Wordsworth, in a postscript to his sonnet sequence *The River Duddon* (1820), situates the poem – depicting an imaginary one-day walk from the source to the mouth of the river – in a tradition of sunup to sunset excursions including John Dyer’s *The Ruins of Rome* (1740; Gilfillan 1858) and William Crowe’s “excellent loco-descriptive Poem,” *Lewesdon Hill* (1788) (Wordsworth 2004: 76). Conveniently, these two poems may stand in for two broad subdivisions of loco-descriptive poetry, *Lewesdon Hill* being

a *prospect poem* – a description of sites seen from atop a hill or other elevation, interlaced with moral reflections on their histories and often on their temporal “prospects” – and *The Ruins of Rome* being a *peripatetic poem*, a guided tour through both a particular terrain and the moral lessons it has to offer.¹ The prospect poem soon achieves its Pisgah view: “On this height I feel the mind / Expand itself,” writes Crowe, 67 lines into his 475-line poem. By contrast, peripatetic poems ask us, before any ascent (if there is one), to follow a speaker’s footsteps. Dyer punctuates his path through Rome with locomotive markers: “I move along” (l. 78); “I wind the lingering step” (l. 87); “Suffice it now the Esquilian mount to reach / With weary wing” (ll. 369–70). If the “loco-descriptive” offers, in the *OED*’s definition of the term, “scenery,” it does so because this latter term, originally denoting stage decor, was first applied metaphorically to natural or architectural elements by William Cowper in his perambulatory poem, “The Winter Morning Walk” (*The Task* (1785), v. 741).² I would offer as other examples of peripatetic poems John Gay’s *Trivia; or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716); Mary Leapor’s estate tour, *Crumble Hall* (1751); Coleridge’s imaginative ramble in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” (1797/1800); much of Wordsworth’s poetic corpus, including *An Evening Walk* (1793), *Poems on the Naming of Places* (1800), *The River Duddon*, and *The Prelude* (1805), Book 7 – Wordsworth’s panorama of the London streets; and, to cite just one of many virtually unknown examples (and thus suggest further scholarly work), the Rev. Reginald Heber’s “An Evening Walk in Bengal,” written in 1824 (Aubin 1936: 375). We may also include among the perambulatory subgenre sequences devoted to longer and typically international tours, including Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812–18) and Wordsworth’s later series such as *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent*, 1820, and *Memorials of a Tour in Italy*, 1837. Book 6 of *The Prelude* may be considered both a poem of international perambulation and, in that its travelers miss the Alpine summit they had sought, a failed prospect poem. Wordsworth here deflects the prospect conventions he elsewhere entertains, in which achieved summits afford visually and conceptually wide surveys.

It is the prospect poem that has received the lion’s share of critical attention over the past sixty years, to the extent that it is often, if erroneously, treated as though it were synonymous with topographical poetry in the “long eighteenth century” (c.1660–1830). The prospect subgenre stretches from John Denham’s *Cooper’s Hill* (1642, rev. 1668) – for Samuel Johnson, the origin of “a species of composition that may be denominated *local poetry*” (2006: 238) – through the milestones of Dyer’s *Grongar Hill* (1726), Richard Jago’s *Edge-Hill* (1767), and Crowe’s *Lewesdon Hill*, to Coleridge’s “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” (1796); Wordsworth’s *Descriptive Sketches* (1793, ll. 366–422), “Tintern Abbey,” ascent of Snowdon in *Prelude* Book 13 (ll. 1–119), and hilltop climax of *The Excursion* (1814, ix. 559–766); Helen Maria Williams, “A Hymn Written among the Alps” (1798); Charlotte Smith’s *Beachy Head* (1805); Leigh Hunt’s sonnets to Hampstead Heath (1813–15); Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* (1816 – one of several poems of the era so named), and Keats’s “I Stood Tip-Toe upon a Little hill” (1817). This “*little hill*,” I would suggest, ironically deflates the superior elevation – often social and/or moral, as well as physical – of the

polite author who presumes to control through artful arrangement the physical and social landscape that he surveys. It is but a small step down from Keats's hill to the horizontal, eye-to-eye purview of John Clare's poems on his native farming village of Helpston, a poetry endowed with, as the critic John Barrell calls it, an "open-field sense of space" (1972: 103). Nonetheless, modern criticism has forged an almost exclusive link between loco-descriptive poetry and the view from tall hills.

A more vexed question concerns the degree of continuity or change between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century loco-descriptive verse. Earl Wasserman (1959) finds in prospect poems from *Cooper's Hill* to Shelley's *Mont Blanc* variations on the cosmic/political theme of *concordia discors*, or harmony-through-opposition, expressed through contrastive elements in the poets' visual fields (e.g., in Denham, the "deep, yet clear" Thames; in Shelley, Mont Blanc's inaccessible peak and its "Dizzy Ravine"). M. H. Abrams (1965) draws a sharper distinction between eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poems – which he associates with hill prospects – and their "lyricized" offspring, the descriptive-meditative poems or "greater Romantic lyrics" in which the poet's "responses to the local scene are a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling," preferably expressed unconventionally, "and displace the landscape as the center of poetic interest" (1965: 540). The limitation of this thesis lies in the restricted range of Romantic-era poems that qualify, according to Abrams' strictures, as "greater Romantic lyrics"; modeled on "Frost at Midnight" and "Tintern Abbey," this proposed genre does not accommodate all of Wordsworth's or Coleridge's poems on places, and clearly excludes loco-descriptive works by such poets as Smith, Hunt, Byron, and Clare. Granted, well-known Romantic-era loco-descriptive (or descriptive-meditative) poems sometimes differ, in degree if not kind, from their eighteenth-century precursors and *arrière-garde* nineteenth-century works, evidencing a greater amount of personal memory and meditation; a more intense metaphysical querying (in lieu of Christian orthodoxy); and less overt political concerns (although New Historicist critics have drawn our attention to covert ones). But the difference should not be overstated; Wordsworth, for one, saw no great disruption in the form from Dyer to his own work.

Reflecting on antecedents to his work, Wordsworth paid particular tribute to James Thomson as an inspired poet, whatever his stylistic faults (chiefly poetic diction), who provides with scant exception the only original images of nature between Milton and Wordsworth's own page ("Essay, Supplementary to the 1815 Preface," 1974: 72–80). Thomson's "idyllium" *The Seasons* is a hybrid work, mixing loco-descriptive pieces with generalized descriptions of British (especially Scottish) nature, georgic materials, exotic excursions, and panegyrics on Whig grandees. What Wordsworth and successive Romantic poets gleaned from Thomson, however, were ways of representing the sights – and, I will argue, the sounds – of more or less particularized places. Wordsworth, who began his own poetic career by publishing two loco-descriptive poems – *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* – borrowed more from Thomson than has generally been appreciated, as did other Romantic-era poets, including Crabbe, Smith, and Clare, who grew up on the widely available works of

Thomson (a key author in what the historian of the book William St Clair has dubbed the era's "old canon" (2004: 133, 138)).

In recent years, one aspect of Thomson's legacy to the Romantics has engrossed critical attention: the picturesque artistry, and ideological agenda, of his loco-descriptive pieces. John Barrell, in his highly influential work on the poetry and ideology of landscape representation, argues that Thomson organized his prospect views (Barrell adduces the view from Hagley Park in "Spring," ll. 950–62) according to painterly principles derived from Claude Lorrain: the eye is drawn hurriedly to the horizon, and then moves back to the foreground, and continues in a back-and-forth movement at a more leisurely pace (1972: 14–20). This "eye's journey" requires an elevated and thus detached viewpoint; the composition of poet or painter demands as well the suppression of too much particularity or detail (1972: 22–3). For Barrell (1972; 1983), this aesthetic does the ideological work required by the enclosure of commons and the extension of metropolitan political and cultural authority: extirpating or glossing over local forms of life, it inculcates the abstract, occlusive, and seemingly disinterested point of view of the gentleman connoisseur (building on Barrell's work, Jacqueline Labbe (1998) stresses the gendered aspect of this prospect gaze). Thus Thomson, as later William Gilpin in his writings on the picturesque, seeks "to control whatever power nature seems ... to have, by coming to *know* the natural landscape," and this is "part of a wider movement in the eighteenth century, to *explain* the countryside, open it out, and to make each particular place in it more available to those outside it" (Barrell 1972: 84).

Barrell's impress is clear upon subsequent criticism of the loco-descriptive genre. Thomas Pfau traces to Claude, Thomson's *Seasons*, and Wordsworth's early loco-descriptive poems an imagined community of the "cultured eye" that reproduces on a symbolic level the productivity and exclusionary violence of a new middle-class formation (1997: 44). Blanford Parker adds the exclusion of religion to the cultural work performed by the genre, finding in Poussin, Thomson, and their heirs the very origin of "the literal (and its twin the empirical)" in "the empty space brought on by the erasure of both analogy and fideist theology" (1998: 18, 20). Both Pfau (1997: 43–9) and Parker (1998: 156–73) find in Thomson's representations of the sun a figure for the clinical eye of the poet and the readers he schools in seeing. Ron Broglio censures the picturesque ideal as "optical hegemony," a visual discipline "offering the lure of unity, control, and power to the perceiving subject" (2008: 19, 63). Broglio, a sensitive critic, finds in Wordsworth's corpus a tension between, on the one hand, the prospect overview and the mind that would supersede nature, and, on the other, an evasion of subjectivity in poems of walking (Broglio does not recognize their generic antecedents), interpersonal encounter, and environmental contact with "entities among themselves" (2008: 99). Broglio observes that Wordsworth "wants to make the subject more than a spectator of the scene and to represent a sense of space prior to mental abstraction and categorization of sensations" (2008: 73), evidencing a keen close-reading of the disorientation of the senses represented in the final portion of the Simplan Pass episode of *The Prelude* vi. 549–80 (2008:

86–101). But although aware of Wordsworth's dissatisfaction with the eye, Broglio does nothing with the counteractive sense that Wordsworth, like Thomson before him, sets against it: the sense of hearing.

Audition and Attachment

Audition and attachment are the unsung and ecologically critical counterparts to the qualities that have come to characterize descriptions of long-eighteenth-century loco-descriptive verse: observation and control. The line of critique extending from Barrell to Broglio is valuable, but it is also partial. What it occludes, I argue, is the deconstructive energies of a poetic genre in which the *I/eye* and their basis in empiricism and technology are offset by *hearing* and the thematized/enacted power of *music* (natural or artificial, instrumental or poetic) to *attach* us to a world that exceeds linguistic or scientific comprehension or control. In other words, in certain (pre-) Romantic descriptive poems the modernism of abstraction and control is set against the proto-postmodernity of an environmental aesthetic.³ For music is, in all senses of the term, an “environmentalist” power. It locates us as part of a complex environment: to listen to music or, more broadly, to attend to musicality, is to understand in a discursively indefinite manner that blurs the scientific line between objective property and subjective response, as well as any line between subject and intersubjective (biological, cultural, aesthetic) norms. Music also reveals our dependency on that which exceeds us: it embodies, as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum suggests, “our urgent need for and attachment to things outside ourselves we do not control, in a tremendous variety of forms” (2001: 34). Building on Nussbaum's analysis, Andrew Bowie argues that music allows us to imagine “a different sense of how metaphysics might be construed” (2007: 34), attuning us to a world in which meaning is irreducible to verifiable propositions and thus not incompatible with theology or, in Bowie's alternative, “the needs aroused by the decline of theology” (2007: 364). These reflections on a (post-Pythagorean) philosophy of music – not just music as philosophy's object, but music's suggestion of an alternative metaphysics – may help us construe appeals to natural music in a selection of poems (which might be greatly expanded) from Thomson to Wordsworth and Clare.

Thomson's Music

We misunderstand Thomson if we think of him as seeking merely to control nature through striating it into well-defined visual bands (foreground/middle/background) by analogy with visual art. What criticism has neglected is the role of music in his descriptions, the representation of natural music in and through the music of Thomson's own lines. Here, for example, is a passage about the sun's emergence after a shower that Pfau quotes as though it involved no more than a point about the “axis of eye and sun” (1997: 43):

in the western sky, the downward Sun
Looks out effulgent from amid the flush
Of broken clouds, gay-shifting to his beam.
The rapid radiance instantaneous strikes
The illumined mountain, through the forest streams,
Shakes on the floods, and in a yellow mist,
Far smoking o'er the interminable plain,
In twinkling myriads lights the dewy gems.
Moist, bright, and green, the landscape laughs around.
Full swell the woods; their every music wakes,
Mixed in wild concert, with the warbling brooks
Increased, the distant bleatings of the hills,
The hollow lows responsive from the vales,
Whence, blending all, the sweetened zephyr springs.

("Spring" ll. 189–202)

The passage's first nine lines do indeed describe the painterly, prospect view that Barrell has taught us to see: the eye darts to the sun above the horizon and a background mountain, and then moves forward via a middle ground of forest and streams, to a dew-sparkling plain, which again leads us backwards to its own "interminable" blending with the horizon. But offsetting this schematic visual focus, we are surprised by a "laughing" landscape and then given, musically, a scene of music. "Full swell the woods; their every music wakes": this line, with its initial spondee and dramatic caesura, slows recitation and sets us up to accent the "muse" of "music." This music is self-reflexive as well as mimetic: the line establishes a gliding pattern of semivowel "w" alliteration that continues into the next line ("wild/warbling"). This alliteration recurs in a line that arrests us with the appearance of grammatical ambiguity: "The hollow lows responsive from the vale." As a further element of a prepositional list ("with the warbling brooks . . . , the distant bleatings"), the line must refer to the bellowing of cows; yet "low" as a noun is not common (it does not feature in Johnson). Thus the line invites us to hear it as a self-contained sentence: "the hollow" as "cavern, den, hole" (Johnson) metonymically "lows," perhaps with more reverberation than usual. Poised uncertainly in space, the line adds indefinitely to the "wild concert" being described, and it adds, moreover, musicality: "hollow lows" is an onomatopoeic as well as echoic phrase that here is about echoing, specifically about how entities in an environment, including entities we cannot with certainty locate or name, "respond" to one another. Finally, Thomson's last line summons the interdependence of "senses" as well, both semantically and sensuously: the zephyr that springs from the vales – or is it the woods? – has a force that conjures touch and smell, and a "sweetness" that applies to taste or, figuratively, sound or perhaps a Hutchesonian "moral sense," although it is clearly not for human sense alone. Wind, like ambient sound, wafts unbidden; it is not, like our visual field, readily subject to human (or genteel) framing and control. Insofar, then, as landscape is transmuted into a soundscape or more general realm of the senses the comprehension and control embodied and figured by the

eye (“I see,” “that’s clear,” etc.) is counteracted by absorption in an environment or, poetically, the audition of a corresponding environment.

Thomson’s concert here centers on birds of the woods: it is their music that first wakes and finds increase in his depicted environment. Birdsong, in “Spring,” everywhere intimates an interconnectedness that may include but that does not center in us. At the very outset of the poem, a morning chill makes plovers unsure of the season, and thus of their time “to scatter o’er the heath, / And sing their wild notes to the listening waste” (ll. 24–5). “Listening waste,” inasmuch as it at first seems an oxymoron, sparks recognition that places uncultivated by us are not uninhabited. Conversely, what might seem to us a “waste” in the sense of useless expenditure or squandering may be, in a broader environmental context, a gift of love. Having amplified upon a “full concert” of birds (l. 613), with each constituent type (blackbirds, linnets, and so on) designated and characterized, Thomson traces its impetus to erotic attachment: “’Tis love creates their melody, and all / This waste of music is the voice of love” (ll. 614–15).

Here birdsong is no longer simply a salient element of a concerted environment, but something more: an index of generative love, the *Venus Genetrix* that Lucretius – an author Thomson sometimes imitates in “Spring” – hymns in the prologue of his philosophic poem *De Rerum Natura*, and whom Thomson praises, simply, as the all-animating “God” (“Spring” ll. 848–67). Thomson’s insistence in categorizing birdsong as “melody,” as “music,” has the converse effect of making music itself seem a natural sign of the un-individuated libidinal force that manifests itself in all individuated life forms – as indeed Arthur Schopenhauer will declare it to be in *The World as Will and Representation* (1819). But Thomson, unlike Schopenhauer – and, more to the point, unlike his model Lucretius – does not seek a more or less ascetic liberation from desire, but rather offers images of a golden and recoverable age when the music of love attached each creature to every other. In the “first fresh dawn” of the world, writes Thomson, when “Love breathed his infant sighs, from anguish free, / And full replete with bliss” (ll. 242, 252–3),

music held the whole in perfect peace:
Soft sighed the flute; the tender voice was heard,
Warbling the varied heart; the woodlands round
Applied the choir; and winds and water flowed
In consonance.

(ll. 267–71)

And it is this amorous, musical utopia that Thomson seeks to recover, on the far side of the erotic suffering he limns with Lucretian colors in the penultimate section of his poem (ll. 963–1112), in the poem’s ending lines on the “harmony” and “attunement” necessary for virtuous love (ll. 1113–76). That which knits together Thomson’s happy family is what attaches them to other creatures as well, both human and, as in his lines against bird-caging, nonhuman:

Oh then, ye friends of love and love-taught song,
Spare the soft tribes, this barbarous art forbear!
If on your bosom innocence can win,
Music engage, or piety persuade.

(ll. 710–13)

Two of Thomson's definitions of "engage" may pertain here: "to enlist; to bring to a party" (verb def. 3); or, my preferred one, "to unite; to attach; to make adherent" (def. 5).

In sum, whereas for many critics since Barrell "Spring" is a poem about cultivated observation and elite control of both nature and falsely naturalized social relations, it is also, and perhaps more centrally, a poem about things one cannot control – drives and other natural operations; other beings both like and unlike us. It is a poem about how music at once embodies and responds to those things. Finally, it is about how music might subtend ethical relations. Like the "meaning" of music itself, none of these inferences from Thomson's text is an entirely clear, let alone a verifiable, proposition – this, presumably, is why critics have sidestepped the abundant appeals to music in descriptive poetry – but rather inducements to think beyond "the realm of explanation and legitimation by evidence and argument" (Bowie 2007: 280).

This inducement in "Spring" becomes, in "Summer," an injunction: submit, through music, to unreason. From "Spring," we have seen the sun reemerge after a gentle rain; in "Summer," a more astringent poem, the sun emerges after a summer storm whose lightning has turned one of a pair of pastoral lovers into "a blackened corse" (l. 1216). Thomson presents the returning beauty of the day and the sylvan concert it awakes as a reason for not repining at gratuitous suffering and death:

As from the face of Heaven the shattered clouds
Tumultuous rove, the interminable sky
Sublimar swells, and o'er the world expands
A purer azure
...
'Tis beauty all, and grateful song around,
Joined to the low of kine, and numerous bleat
Of flocks thick-nibbling through the clovered vale.
And shall the hymn be marred by thankless man,
Most-favoured, who with voice articulate
Should lead the chorus of this lower world?
Shall he, so soon forgetful of the hand
That hushed the thunder, and serenest the sky,
Extinguished feel that spark the tempest waked,
That sense of powers exceeding far his own,
Ere yet his feeble heart has lost its fears?

(ll. 1223–6, 1233–43)

This scene in Thomson is one that Wordsworth will re-create, repeatedly, in his own loco-descriptive poems.

Wordsworth and the “Social Accents” of Things

Since Geoffrey Hartman’s seminal book *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787–1814* (1964), Wordsworth’s visual imagery, at least during his so-called “great decade” (1797–1807), has been read as being in tension with his imaginative vision. His representation of external nature and other selves is precariously balanced against a desire for transcendence or, following Paul de Man’s critical writings, the self-reflexive and self-confounding energies of literary language itself. Less remarked is the tension in Wordsworth between seeing and hearing, or the different kinds of knowledge gleaned by the eye and by the ear. At some level this opposition is evident, as in Wordsworth’s well-known lines from “The Tables Turned” (*Lyrical Ballads*):

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife,
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music; on my life
There’s more of wisdom in it.
(ll. 9–12)

But more salient is the opposition, in his loco-descriptive poems of the 1790s, between visualized death and the power of music or euphonious sound to cancel its horror.

The opposition figures in *An Evening Walk*, a series of tableaux drawn from Wordsworth’s native Lake District, as well as from his reading and fancy. The logic by which Wordsworth passes from scene to scene is often no more than locomotive progress as dusk proceeds to night, but some collocations are clearly thematic: thus he follows his description of a secure family of swans (ll. 195–240), antithetically, with a lurid tale of a human family that has no security. Wordsworth depicts a vagrant war widow who “haply” – her fanciful origin is strongly implied – has “dragg’d her babes along this weary way” (ll. 242–4) in the summer heat of day, and who will at some point in the future discover them, by lightning’s illumination (and perhaps its strike), dead at her breast:

Soon shall the Light’ning hold before thy head
His torch, and shew them slumbering in their bed,
No tears can chill them, and no bosom warms,
Thy breast their death-bed, coffin’d in thine arms.
(ll. 297–300)

Clearly this scene is related to the summer-lightning death of Thomson’s “Summer,” although Wordsworth’s version is still more disturbing: what happened unexpectedly to Thomson’s happy lovers happens to Wordsworth’s miserable vagrants because they are continually exposed to the elements. Pfau assesses the picturesque aspect of this vagrant tale: the mother and her babes, objects of sight, give way to an aesthetic “practice of seeing,” undercutting what at first glance might seem a critique of “the systemic

indifference of a complex, human economy” (Pfau 1997: 101, 103). What Pfau does not engage, however, is the appeal to music that immediately follows this sacrificial tale. Such an appeal was quasi-homiletic in Thomson’s “Summer” – a tale of accidental death followed by an exhortation not to murmur, but to join in nature’s song – but it reappears in Wordsworth as a jarring collocation of corpses and sweet sounds:

Sweet are the sounds that mingle from afar,
 Heard by calm lakes, as peeps the folding star [Venus],
 Where the duck dabbles ’mid the rustling sedge,
 And feeding pike starts from the water’s edge,
 Or the swan stirs the reeds, his neck and bill
 Wetting, that drip upon the water still;
 And heron, as resounds the trodden shore,
 Shoots upward, darting his long neck before.

(ll. 301–8)

No continuity is articulated between the vagrant mother’s abjection and this expansive music (the description of variegated music continues through line 328). In the suggestive power of *unarticulated* connection Wordsworth finds the key to his future tragedies of common life (as well as a cornerstone of modernist aesthetic), tragedies in which natural beauty and particularly natural music are offered not as a consolation for the spectacle of death, not as theodicy, but nonetheless as a reattachment to life. The sweet sounds of calm lakes are pivotal in *An Evening Walk*; after this passage, soundscape increasingly dominates the poem (ll. 345–78, 433–46), and the practice of hearing ironically counteracts not so much actual suffering in the world as the poet’s own visual fancy which – as in the vagrant mother’s tale – distorts tragedy into the “super-tragic.”⁴ The shift from eye to ear signals creative chastening as well as environmental humility.

Another way of getting at the implication of Wordsworth’s leap from death to sound is to say: life means inasmuch as, and in the way that, music means. And not only to us: in the above passage “lakes” appear to have the ability to “hear” as we do (“heard *by* calm lakes” is purposefully ambiguous). In his 1794 expansion of the poem Wordsworth elaborated on this intuition (at l. 85), giving us his poetry’s first “pan-sensuous” passage:

A heart that vibrates evermore, awake
 To feeling for all forms that Life can take,
 That wider still its sympathy extends,
 And sees not any line where being ends;
 Sees *sense*, through Nature’s rudest forms betrayed,
 Tremble obscure in fountain, rock, and shade;
 And while a secret power those forms endears
 Their social accents never vainly *bears*.

(Wordsworth 1984a: 135, emphasis added)

The music of sensate things, in Wordsworth's later loco-descriptive poems, appears in lieu of regret for humans who pass away. In *Descriptive Sketches*, set among the Alps, an episode concerning a chamois-hunter who dies in an avalanche (ll. 366–413) is followed by one in which the speaker/hearer rejoices in the "Soft music from th'aëreal summit" (l. 421), and in the absence of "man":

– And sure there is a secret Power that reigns
Here, where no trace of man the spot profanes
...
An idle voice the sabbath region fills
Of Deep that calls to Deep across the hills,
Broke only by the melancholy sound
Of drowsy bells for ever tinkling round;
Faint wail of eagle melting into blue
Beneath the cliffs, and pine-woods steady sigh;
The solitary heifer's deepn'd low;
Or rumbling heard remote of falling snow.
(ll. 424–5, 432–9)

These lines decenter not just the world apart from contemplative consciousness, but that consciousness itself in the accumulation of particular sounds conveyed as though for their own sake. In the "Deep that calls to Deep across the hills," the *basso continuo* over which play an array of "melancholy" (but not saddening) sounds, Wordsworth recalls the first line of Psalm 42:7 – "Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts [cataracts]" – while signally omitting its second line, in which the sound of ravines becomes a vehicle for the speaker's spiritual dejection: "All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me." In Wordsworth's lines inner landscape gives way to outer: the deeps are those of nature, not of spirit. The deeps call but not to us, the speaker's witness notwithstanding.

The music of things delights, and if there is a consolation here beyond delight itself it lies in the very proximity of music to the motion and force of life, beneath and apart from individual existences. Keats addresses his singing nightingale, "Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird! / ... / The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days" (ll. 61, 63–4): neither, in this limited sense, are we hearers mortal. From this insight, later Romantics would elaborate a metaphysics of music, from Schopenhauer, for whom the motions of music are an index to the sexualized life force that underlies all passing phenomena, to Nietzsche, who claimed "It is only through the spirit of music that we can understand the joy involved in the annihilation of the individual" (1967: 104). Through music we rejoice in the life force that undergirds all phenomenal beings and periodically reclaims them. Although Wordsworth in the 1790s would not have gone so far as this, he is in his loco-descriptive poetry of human suffering and suprahuman song – in *The Ruined Cottage*, "Tintern Abbey," and throughout the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, as well as the poems we have examined – closer to Nietzsche than to Christian or Enlightenment theodicy.

Counteracting Senses

In *The Prelude* (1805), Wordsworth laments that sight has become overvalued on the basis both of science – “telescopes, and crucibles, and maps” (v. 330) – and a picturesque aesthetic involving comparative evaluations of landscape, “a comparison of scene with scene, / Bent overmuch on superficial things,” a state in which the eye, “the most despotic of the senses,” holds “absolute dominion” over heart and mind (xi.158–9, 171–5). Wordsworth urges instead a balance or commonwealth of the senses:

Gladly here,
 Entering upon abstruser argument,
 Would I endeavour to unfold the means
 Which Nature studiously employs to thwart
 This tyranny [of the eye], summons all the senses each
 To counteract the others and themselves,
 And makes them all, and the objects with which all
 Are conversant, subservient in their turn
 To the great ends of liberty and power.

(xi. 175–83)

Wordsworth defers this argument to “another song” (xi. 184) that was, in the event, never written. The senses Wordsworth in fact elicits in his poetry are predominantly sight and hearing, though he may allude here to the moral sense as well, and perhaps the fundamental sentience he sometimes attributes to all entities in nature. The “lower” senses of taste and smell and physical touch play but a small part in his verse or, I think, descriptive poetry in general (on poetry and the hierarchy of the senses, see Stewart 2002: 21–32). Synesthesia renders them salient for moments in Thomson (e.g., “smell the taste of dairy” (“Spring,” l. 107)), and, more often and elaborately, in Keats (“tasting of Flora and the country green, / Dance, Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!” (“Ode to a Nightingale,” ll. 13–14)).

The most sensuously complex as well as sexually charged *loco-descriptive* poems are Hunt’s sonnets to Hampstead Heath, at which here I have space only to glance: “They tell me, when my tongue grows warm on thee, / Dear gentle hill, with tresses green and bright . . .” (“Sonnet to Hampstead. II,” ll. 1–2). It is not till “green,” and perhaps not even then that Hunt’s paean to his little Hampstead hill seems at all distinct from erotic verse: might a green tress be a virgin’s, or a Nereid’s? “Tongue” will become a metonymy for speech (and, as cause for effect, audition), but it first and lingeringly seems a literal tongue upon a hill of Venus. That Hunt invited such a reading become clear in a later sonnet, in which the heath’s hills are compared to breasts with a directness that flouts more restrained bower/loved parallels from the biblical Song of Songs through Renaissance pastoral:

I beheld, in momentary sun,
 One of thy hills gleam bright and bosomy,
 Just like that orb of orbs, a human one,
 Let forth by chance upon a lover's eye.
 ("Sonnet to Hampstead. VI," ll. 5–8)

The "male gaze" is here counteracted by the suggestion in "let forth upon" of a palpable hit, and underscoring this suggestion Hunt's speaker elsewhere sings the touch of (heath air's) fingers upon his eyes: "these feverish eyes / Met the moist fingers of the bathing air" ("Sonnet to Hampstead," ll. 3–4). The eye's contact with its environment is tactile, *in situ*; we are far removed, physically and conceptually, from the superior vantage point of the prospect poet. The eye, subject to touch, no longer (just) controls, but rather becomes a contact surface, an erogenous zone. The ear functions in a similarly responsive manner when eyesight pauses, as it does in both literal and figurative (inward) senses in the closing sestet of "Sonnet to Hampstead. VII":

So I, first coming on my haunts again,
 In pause and stillness of the early prime,
 Stood thinking of the past and present time
 With earnest eyesight, scarcely cross'd with pain;
 Till the fresh-moving leaves, and startling birds,
 Loosen'd my long-suspended breath in words.
 (ll. 9–14).

Hunt seems in his responsive, pan-sensuous appeal to an environment to anticipate the Frankfurt school theorist Herbert Marcuse, who castigated the mass culture of industrial society for inculcating immediate gratifications (as Wordsworth also did) at the expense of an erotics of life, in which "the environment from which the individual could obtain pleasure ... as [from] an extended zone of the body" would be as broad and lush as possible (Marcuse 1964: 37).

Clare's Song Pictures

With scarce less gusto and at much greater length than Hunt, John Clare rhapsodized his native environment in what he called "song pictures" ("The Progress of Rhyme," l. 332), a phrase poised between verbal representation of sound and the sound of verbal representation. Clare's best work comprises a paean to the particularities of his native place, the Northamptonshire village of Helpston, and a protest against the economic and social forces that were, in his lifetime, transfiguring it: enclosure, tree removal, and social stratification, "a wider space / Between the genteel and the vulgar race" (*The Shepherd's Calendar*, "June," ll. 165–6). In a way that no notable descriptive poet earlier had, not even Wordsworth, Clare

presents himself as wholly attached to this particular spot, especially as this spot existed at a particular point in time:

Dear native spot which length of time endears
 The sweet retreat of twenty lingering years
 And oh those years of infancy the scene
 The dear delights where once they all have been
 ...
 In those past days for then I lov'd the shade
 How oft I've sighed at alterations made
 To see the woodmans cruel axe employ'd
 A tree beheaded or a bush destroy'd
 Nay e'en a post old standard or a stone
 Moss'd o'er by age and branded as her own
 Would in my mind a strong attachment gain
 A fond desire that there they might remain ...
 ("Helpstone," ll. 51–4, 85–92)

Barrell eloquently expresses Clare's debt to and difference from the descriptive poets of the eighteenth century, particularly Thomson, the discovery of whom at age thirteen quickened Clare's sense of his own poetic vocation: "the descriptive poetry of the eighteenth century appeared to offer Clare a medium through which, in describing Helpston, he could express a sense of its identity; but of course what it offered him was what he wrote to oppose – a detachment from the places it described, and a habit of looking at landscape with reference to an *a priori* sense of its design" (1972: 188). Barrell details the differences between Thomson's artistry and Clare's in his masterful close reading of the latter's "Emmonsails Heath in Winter": whereas Thomson from his Hagley Park prospect subordinates the objects of the landscape to the action of the eye, Clare, conversely, subordinates the eye to objects that, syntactically, are alternately linked through hypotaxis and disaggregated through parataxis (1972: 154–63).

But one element of Clare's corpus to which Barrell does not attend is his remarkable investment in hearing as well as seeing, often imagining the two as inextricable. For Thomson as for early Wordsworth, absorption in a soundscape is opposed to the theatricality of landscape, and sweet sounds may counteract terrible sights. For Clare, by contrast, vision and audition are symbiotic, and they work within an environment that admits no simple oppositions (e.g., inside/outside, natural/artificial). In "Summer Images," for example, many of Clare's images seem designed to show, first, an environment in which nature and culture, nonhuman sounds and human instruments, mutually characterize one another: thus bees have "mellow horns," the grasshopper a "treble pipe," the "droning dragon fly" a "rude bassoon" (ll. 27–33). But Clare's images embody the interdependence of visual, aural, and to a lesser degree tactile responses to an environment. To see the relative novelty of this, we need first to return to some earlier examples of auditory representation. Natural "music" is typically an unacknowledged cultural category structuring a response to the rhythmic and/or "melodic"

repetitions of nonhuman agents or forces. It is often simply proposed with regards to a wood: “Come, hear the woodland linnet, / How sweet his music”; “Full swell the woods; their every music wakes.” When Thomson strives for greater auditory detail, he does so within a sense of space that is less visual than antiphonal: “The blackbird whistles from the thorny brake, / The mellow bullfinch answers from the grove” (“Spring,” ll. 604–5). Similarly, early Wordsworth is typically content with directional hearing – “the duck dabbles mid the rustling sedge” – though he does rise to at least one striking collocation of sound and color imagery: “Faint wail of eagle melting into blue / Beneath the cliffs, and pine-woods steady sigh” (this last word, as Wordsworth explains in a note, is “a Scotch word expressive of the sound of the wind through the trees” (*Descriptive Sketches*, l. 80)). The energy of these lines derives first from a grammatical ambiguity about whether eagle or its wail passes into blue, and then from the grammatical surprise of the second line’s locative preposition. Still, none of this quite prepares one for the serial surprises, and sound–sight crossings, of Clare’s stanza:

Rich music breaths in summers every sound
 And in her harmony of varied greens
 Woods meadows hedgrows cornfields all around
 Much beauty intervenes
 Filling with harmony the ear and eye
 While oer the mingling scenes
 Far spreads the laughing sky.
 (“Summer Images,” ll. 134–40)

“Harmony” is axial in both the second and fifth lines of this stanza, the points at which, respectively, “sound” rotates to “greens” and green-spaces to “ear.” An alternative way of explaining the word’s work is that its first appearance seems at first literal (a quality of sound) but turns out to be figural, and its second appearance reverses this process. The first five lines enact an interdependence of eye and ear that is underscored in the stanza’s closing image of “the laughing sky,” one that is presumably acoustic – the sky is uproarious with sounds – but that conjures a laughing face. This visual image, if inadmissible, is not easily avoided, as we do not often find laughter without laughers, and the sky is rendered animate by the participle form of “laughing,” an improvement over Thomson’s version, seen above in a quotation from “Spring”: “the landscape laughs around.”

The interaction of light and sounds continues throughout “Summer Images,” splendidly, I think, in the stanza that follows here:

And mark the evening curdle dank and grey
 Changing her watchet [light blue] hue for sombre weeds
 And moping owls to close the lids of day
 On drowsing wing proceeds
 While chickering [chirping] cricket tremolous and long
 Lights farwell inly heeds
 And gives it parting song
 (ll. 148–54)

Unlike his purposive owls, who appear to have flown off the pages of the old canon, Clare's "chickering cricket" – the internal rhyme of that phrase (chick/crick) imitates its object – responds to the waning light not out of any anthropocentric motive, but rather because the dynamics of light effect those of sound. Sounds themselves then trigger sounds, including human imitation – Clare later calls it a "vibrating joy" (l. 193):

While on the meadow bridge the pausing boy
Listens the mellow sounds
And hums in vacant joy

(ll. 166–8)

This pausing boy stands in for Clare or his earlier self, who, according to his self-dramatizing poem "The Progress of Rhyme," garnered his sense of rhythm and melody from birdsong. Clare thus renders disarmingly literal the pastoral convention, deriving from Theocritus, of nonhuman music as source and benchmark for human song:⁵

I heard the blackbird in the dell
Sing sweet – could I but sing as well
I thought – untill the bird in glee
Seemed pleased and paused to answer me
And nightingales O I have stood
Beside the pingle [small meadow] and the wood
And oer the old oak railing hung
To listen every note they sung
...
– "Chew-chew Chew-chew" – and higher still
"Cheer-cheer Cheer-cheer" – more loud and shrill
"Cheer-up Cheer-up cheer-up" – and dropt
Low 'tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug' and stopt
One moment just to drink the sound
Her music made and then a round
Of stranger witching notes was heard
As if it were a stranger bird
"Wew-wew wew-wew chur-chur chur-chur"
Woo-it woo-it" – could this be her
"Tee-rew Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew"
Chew-rit chew-rit" – and ever new
"Will-will will-will grig-grig grig-grig"
The boy stopt sudden on the brig
To hear the 'tweet tweet tweet' so shill
Then "jug jug jug" – and all was still
A minute – when a wilder strain
Made boys and woods to pause again
Words were not left to hum the spell
Could they be birds that sung so well
I thought – and may be more then I

(ll. 225–32, 239–59)

Clare brilliantly suggests the interdependence of nature and culture in human responses to nature and particularly natural music, which is heard first as words or indeed messages – “cheer up!” – and then as radically Other (“stranger witching notes”), meaningless in any conventional sense, but pointing toward a different sense of what meaning is. Clare’s lines connect music to the idea, as Andrew Bowie formulates it, “that meaning has to do with pre-conceptual engagements with things, with embodied ‘being in a world,’ where one acts, feels, etc.” (2007: 378). “Music,” Bowie continues, “has precisely to do with connections to the world which often cannot be characterised in terms of what we know or in representational terms” (2007: 385–6). As such, it counteracts both the eye and the (Romantic) “I” – here, in poetry where music matters as much or more than representation, taking precedence in Clare’s phrase “song pictures,” offered (like birdsong) to his object of desire (Clare’s beloved Mary): “I saw thy beauty grow with days / And tryed song pictures in thy praise” (ll. 331–2).

In entangling ear and eye, Clare counteracts, still more than Thomson, Wordsworth, or Hunt, the ocular “tyranny” that Wordsworth denounced and that critics of the loco-descriptive genre, deaf to its aural counterappeals, have gone on denouncing. In this essay I hope to have suggested the importance of hearing, as well as the representation of hearing, in selected poems descriptive of place. Both the eye and its critics have much to learn from the ear and its involvements in the world in which we poetically dwell.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 4 “To Scorn or To ‘Scorn not the Sonnet’”; chapter 9 “The Romantic Georgic and the Work of Writing”; chapter 32 “The World without Us: Romanticism, Environmentalism, and Imagining Nature”

NOTES

- 1 On the genre of the “peripatetic poem,” particularly in relation to Wordsworth, see Robin Jarvis (1997: 62–77, 89–91).
- 2 “Scenery,” *OED* def. 3: “the general appearance of a place and its natural features, regarded from the picturesque point of view.” The word does not appear in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755).
- 3 For a recent theoretical formulation of such an aesthetic, see Timothy Morton 2007.
- 4 Looking back in *The Prelude* on his youthful “willfulness of fancy,” Wordsworth writes: “Then common death was none, common mishap, / But ... / The tragic [was rendered] super-tragic” (viii. 521, 530–2).
- 5 See the opening exchange of Theocritus’ *Thyrsis*: “Something sweet is the whisper of the pine that makes her music by yonder springs, and sweet no less, master Goatherd, is the melody of your pipe”; “As sweetly, good Shepherd, falls your music as the resounding water that gushes down from the top of yonder rock” (1938: 9). The goatherd later compliments the shepherd: “sure your singing’s as delightful as the cricket’s chirping in the spring” (1938: 23).

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Part II

Production and Distribution,
Schools and Movements

“Other voices speak”: The Poetic Conversations of Byron and Shelley

Simon Bainbridge

Many and long were the conversations between Byron and Shelley
Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

*So, as we rode, we talked; and the swift thought,
Winging itself with laughter, lingered not,
But flew from brain to brain, – such glee was ours –
Charged with light memories of remembered hours,
None slow enough for sadness; till we came
Homeward, which always makes the spirit tame.*

Percy Shelley, *Julian and Maddalo*

Percy Shelley’s gleeful evocation of his discussions with Lord Byron as they rode along the Venetian Lido on August 23, 1818 offers one of the great literary celebrations of conversation. Like William Wordsworth’s recollections in the closing lines of *The Prelude* of how, “when on Quantock’s grassy Hills,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge “in delicious words, with happy heart, / Didst speak the Vision of that Ancient Man, / The bright-eyed Mariner, and rueful woes / Didst utter of the Lady Christabel,” while Wordsworth himself “associate in such labour, walked / Murmuring of him who, joyous hap! was found / After the perils of his moonlight ride / Near the loud Waterfall” (xiii. 393–402), *Julian and Maddalo* highlights the roles of friendship and conversation in Romantic poetry, as both subjects and forces behind the production of verse. Contrary to the most familiar constructions of the Romantic poet, wandering “lonely as a cloud” (Wordsworth 2000: 303) or “hidden / In the light of thought” (Shelley 2002: 305), *The Prelude* and *Julian and Maddalo* draw attention to the value of the poets’ interchange with others. Wordsworth thought of the poem that his wife would title *The Prelude* as “the poem to Coleridge” and it is part of a series of works that constitute a dialogue with the creator

of the “Conversation Poem” form. Shelley’s subtitle *A Conversation for Julian and Maddalo* emphasizes the work’s poetic mode (while also being a slightly misleading term for a work made up of the narrator’s recollection of a series of dialogues that frame a monologue and end with a repeated refusal to answer questions). In this essay, I want to explore the idea of conversation in relation to Byron and Shelley, both in terms of their ongoing dialogue with each other but more specifically as a form, theme, and value within the works themselves. The “conversation” which defines their relationship to each other becomes internalized within their poems and particularly within the hybrid forms of the “Dramatic Poem” and “Lyric Drama” which could be argued to constitute their most profound contribution to the generic innovation characteristic of the period.

Julian and Maddalo has understandably come to occupy a central place in accounts of the relationship between the two poets and of their mutual influence. Anticipated by Shelley’s sending of his early works to the more famous peer before the two writers’ famous, now even mythical, first meeting in the summer of 1816 near Geneva, the poets’ friendship became a major and defining part of their literary careers and personal lives. As Charles E. Robinson has written in the definitive study of the relationship, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight*, “they were personally acquainted for six years, spent in excess of two hundred and fifty days together during that time, read and reacted to all of each other’s major works, and exchanged fifty letters” (1976: 3). Shelley directly influenced the texture of Byron’s verse, perhaps most famously through the “dosing” of his fellow writer with Wordsworth that prompted Byron’s altered representation of man’s relationship with nature in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage III*. He sought explicitly to shape Byron’s poetic output, recalling in a letter that “In a more presumptuous mood, I recommended the Revolution of France as a theme involving pictures of all that is best qualified to interest and instruct mankind” (Shelley 1964: 1. 508). Indeed, upon hearing Byron read “one of the unpublished cantos of Don Juan [Canto V]” in 1821, Shelley not only described the poetry as “astonishingly fine,” setting its author “not alone but far above all the poets of the day,” but claimed it as the culmination of his own poetic project and specifically of his advice to Byron:

There is not a word which the most rigid assertor of the dignity of human nature could desire to be cancelled: it fulfils in a certain degree what I have long preached of producing something wholly new & relative to the age – and yet surpassingly beautiful. It may be vanity, but I think I see the trace of my earnest exhortations to him to create something wholly new. (Shelley 1964: 2. 323).

Shelley’s desire to transform Byron into an idealized embodiment of his own faith in poetry’s possibilities is also evident in the various versions of Byron that he writes into his poetry, the “tempest-cleaving Swan / Of the songs of Albion” of *Lines Written among the Euganean Hills*, Count Maddalo, “a person of the most consummate genius, and capable, if he would but direct his energies to such an end, of becoming the redeemer of his degraded country,” and *Adonais*’s “Pilgrim of Eternity” (Shelley 2002: 114, 120, 419).

William D. Brewer has observed that “as far as we know, the effect of Shelley on Byron was almost uniformly helpful and supportive,” adding that the “encounters

between the two poets inspired their poetry, the difference between them being that Byron could write in Shelley's presence, but Shelley had to wait until he was away from Byron before he could be truly prolific" (Brewer 1994: 6, 17). With differing emphases, Brewer, Robinson, and others have shown how Shelley's poetry responds to Byron's, whether in terms of formal and stylistic influence (such as that of the urbane, conversational mode of *Don Juan* on the informal, observational style of "Letter to Maria Gisborne"), or as a counterargument (*Prometheus Unbound* is frequently read as an extended answer to Byron's "Prometheus" and *Manfred*). For Robinson, the relationship between the two is essentially oppositional: "their frequently contradictory metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics determined each poet to assert his point of view, his 'spirit,' to correct the misconceptions of the other" (Robinson 1976: 2). This oppositional model could itself be seen as Shelleyan, or as influenced by the poet's own conceptual modes. The alternating voices of nihilism and meliorism in Shelley's poetic dialogue "The Two Spirits – An Allegory" can be read as an allegory of the Byron–Shelley conversation, the pessimistic First Spirit's doom-laden decree that "Night is coming" answered by the Second Spirit's optimistic assertion that the moon and stars and "the lamp of love [within my heart]" will "make night day" (ll. 4, 11, 16). In this posthumously published poem, now normally dated to the period 1818–20, Shelley resolves the oppositional structure of the opening four stanzas with two stanzas that find a tentative resolution in a collectively articulated vision, the second of which concludes the poem:

Some say when the nights are dry [and] clear
 And the death dews sleep on the morass,
 Sweet whispers are heard by the traveller
 Which make night day –
 And a shape like his early love doth pass
 Upborne by her wild and glittering hair,
 And when he awakes on the fragrant grass
 He finds night day.

(ll. 41–8)

With its shift from the opposition of contrasting individual viewpoints to the united if not totalizing agreement of "Some say," and with its emphasis on the transformative power of "sweet whispers," this beautiful lyric's structure enacts one of the main strands of argument in this essay which explores Byron's and Shelley's developing interest in the aesthetics and ethics of juxtaposing lyric, dialogic, and polyphonic poetic modes.

The sense of tentative resolution at the end of "The Two Spirits" can also be seen to have parallels with other critical accounts of the Byron–Shelley relationship, such as that of William Brewer, who argues that the poets' "interchanges were generally more collaborative than oppositional" (1994: 3) and seeks to make more complex an understanding of the relationship that he believes has too often reduced the poets to symbols in a series of oppositions. Of *Julian and Maddalo*, for example, Brewer writes: "Through their conversation both men come to a deeper appreciation of human despair, an

appreciation that seems to unite rather than divide them” (1994: 3). However, in an excellent essay exploring the writers’ biographical constructions, Arthur Bradley warns against the dangers of developing such accounts into a Hegelian understanding of the relationship as a dialectic working ultimately toward reconciliation, a tendency he identifies in many evaluations of the poets’ friendship. Bradley argues against such dialectical readings (and writings) “because the numerous differences between and within each poet’s life and work are grotesquely simplified when they are represented as two sides that always find their meaning in a drama of opposition and reconciliation” (2003: 165). Indeed, when Percy Shelley drowned in 1822, the friendship with Byron had produced no overall uniting vision. Like the “return homeward” of *Julian and Maddalo* and the anticlimactic, inconclusive poem in which it is contained, the relationship failed to culminate in a shared ideology, aesthetic or ethic, with Shelley feeling overshadowed by Byron’s fame and his access to an audience. But such seeming inconclusiveness should not lead us to underestimate the value of the process that precedes it, the interchange of words and thoughts that flew from brain to brain.

The Poetry of Conversation: *Julian and Maddalo*

Julian and Maddalo has often been read as a poem which is structured through the opposition of its two main figures, symbolizing more generally a principle of opposition and the relationship between Byron and Shelley. For example, Robinson comments that “*Julian and Maddalo* may be the only poem that explicitly juxtaposes the melioristic Shelleyan and the fatalistic Byronic spirits, but after 1816 the two poets frequently used their major works to debate their philosophical differences” (1976: 5), while Michael O’Neill argues that at the heart of the poem is “Shelley’s developing capacity to see life in terms of dialectical oppositions” (1989: 76). Certainly, the poem’s opening movements operate through juxtaposed worldviews dramatized as contracting responses to landscape. While the Venetian sunset prompts the Shelleyan Julian to eulogize Italy as a “Paradise of exiles” (l. 57), the Byronic Count Maddalo attempts to alter Julian’s state of mind by taking him to a new location from where the view of the sunset is interrupted by a madhouse and its belfry tower. These literally contrasting points of view dramatize the protagonists’ different philosophical positions, described by Julian as follows:

Of all that earth has been or yet may be,
 All that vain men imagine or believe,
 Or hope can paint or suffering may atchieve,
 We descanted, and I (for ever still
 Is it not wise to make the best of ill?)
 Argued against despondency, but pride
 Made my companion take the darker side.

(ll. 43–9)

Shelley captures beautifully in this poem how much the two friends enjoy the to-and-fro of argument, suggesting that their taking of different sides is part of a performance that requires the opposition of the other. Maddalo's shifting of locations illustrates that a certain stage management is inseparable from his conversational conduct. His comment "I will shew you soon / A better *station*" (ll. 86–7, emphasis added) places him in the role of picturesque tour guide, selecting a viewpoint to support an existing set of assumptions. Similarly, the use of "descanted" with its primary meaning of to "sing harmoniously ... play or sing a descant" draws attention to the debate's musical and artistic qualities, just as Julian's parenthetical question suggests the extent to which he is taking a part in an antiphonal exercise rather than speaking from a position of absolute certainty. During the poem's course, the pair's performed oppositions break down, especially in the face of the "Maniac" whom Maddalo takes them to visit; as Maddalo confesses in an aside, "I think with you / In some respects, you know" (ll. 240–1). Julian comments that as a result of their encounter with the Maniac "our argument was quite forgot" (l. 520), but this does not bring their conversation to an end, "for we talked of him / And nothing else, till daylight made stars dim" (ll. 523–5).

Julian and Maddalo's conversations move through several different modes during the poem, from the gleeful and seemingly telepathic talk with which the poem opens, to the more "serious" discussion characteristic of "Talk interrupted with such raillery / As mocks itself, because it cannot scorn / The thoughts it would extinguish" (ll. 36–8), to the "descanting" on philosophical subjects described above, to the discussion of the Maniac. In a longer examination of the poem, it might be possible to differentiate and evaluate all the various conversational modes, but what I want to emphasize here is how these different exchanges, grouped together under the poem's subtitle as *A Conversation*, are set against the Maniac's inability to engage in dialogue. This opposition between the Maniac's fragmentary, incomprehensible ravings and the friends' variously challenging, enquiring, and supportive dialogues are indicative of a more general theme in Byron's and Shelley's poetry, the relationship between the isolated lyric voice traditionally associated with poetry (and with Romantic poetry in particular) and the dramatic or conversational modes which the two poets came increasingly to explore.

The Maniac has frequently been identified as a type of poet. Kelvin Everest, for example, argues that "the figure of the maniac may emerge in the poem as the externalized representation of the buried poetic potential in Julian, a potential tragically unmediated for any audience and thus possessing the aspect of a tragic incoherence" (2002: 677). For William Keach, through the Maniac "Shelley is confronting, not just idealizing, or sentimentalizing, an impulse in his own writing that for many readers, then as now, threatens or limits communication" (2004: 90). In interpreting the Maniac as a poet, Everest and Keach are following in the critical tradition of Julian and Maddalo themselves:

The colours of his mind seemed yet unworn;
For the wild language of his grief was high,

Such as in measure were called poetry;
 And I remember one remark which then
 Maddalo made. He said: "Most wretched men
 Are cradled into poetry by wrong,
 They learn in suffering what they teach in song."
 (ll. 540–6)

As Everest and Keach both argue, if the Maniac is understood as a poet then his representation draws attention to the potential problems of the lyric mode. His account of himself emphasizes his inability either to communicate or understand himself. His written and spoken verse instead portrays a mode in which a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings is really a return of the repressed:

"How vain
 Are words! I thought never to speak again,
 Not even in secret, – not to my own heart –
 But from my lips the unwilling accents start
 And from my pen the words flow as I write,
 Dazzling my eyes with scalding tears ..."
 (ll. 472–7)

As a poet, the Maniac has lost touch with both any potential audience or any voice other than his own; as Maddalo comments, "He ever communes with himself ..., / And sees nor hears not any" (ll. 269–70). And it is in contrast to the figure of the isolated lyric poet that Julian and Maddalo's conversations can be read as an alternative poetic mode, one that celebrates the values of friendship and human interaction in all its various dialogic forms. As Shelley revealed in a letter to Leigh Hunt of August 15, 1819, *Julian and Maddalo* was specifically an attempt to make poetry out of conversation: "I have employed a certain familiar style of language to express the actual way in which people talk with each other whom education and a certain refinement of sentiment have placed above the use of vulgar idioms" (1964: 2. 208). While the class implications of this statement have understandably provided a focus for commentary, it nonetheless reinforces the argument that in the poem Shelley offers the pleasures and consolations of dialogue as an alternative mode of poetry to lyrical self-expression. And as Julian comments toward the close of the poem, it is conversation which offers the greatest promise of self-knowledge:

I might sit
 In Maddalo's palace, and his wit
 And subtle talk would cheer the winter night
 And make me know myself, and the firelight
 Would flash upon our faces, till the day
 Might dawn and make me wonder at my stay.
 (ll. 558–63)

I have been arguing that *Julian and Maddalo* constitutes a celebration of conversation as a poetic mode in which Shelley draws upon his own experience of dialogue with Byron and juxtaposes this mode with the monologic voice of the lyric poet. The poem can thus be seen as Shelley's version of Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, adopting the "language really used by men" and making the poet "a man speaking to men" (Wordsworth 2000: 595–619). Yet this reading might appear to be called into question by the ending of the poem, with its frustrating refusal by the narrator to satisfy the reader's curiosity as to the fate of the Maniac:

I urged and questioned still, she told me how
All happened – but the cold world shall not know.
(ll. 616–17)

Julian's refusal to narrate the Maniac's history replays Maddalo's daughter's similar initial refusal in the preceding lines:

"Ask me no more, but let the silent years
Be closed and ceared over their memory
As yon mute marble where the corpses lie."
(ll. 613–15)

Yet by ending with uncertainty, Shelley draws the reader into the poem (as he does more obviously with the famous rhetorical question at the end of "Ode to the West Wind": "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (Shelley 2002: 301)). Julian's refusal of the Lady's request to "Ask me no more," and his urging and questioning provides the model of action for the poem's implied reader – we too must urge and question, and in so doing exemplify a set of values that prove the world is not cold. In provoking this response, Shelley's subtitle *A Conversation* comes to represent more than the dialogues between Julian and Maddalo; it offers the desired relationship between the poet and his readership.

Byron's "other voices"

It was in their generically innovative hybrid works, the "Dramatic Poem" *Manfred* and the "Lyrical Drama" *Prometheus Unbound*, that Byron and Shelley most successfully juxtaposed the individual lyric sensibilities and worldviews of their eponymous protagonists with a variety of alternative positions supplied by other characters. Both works show a commitment to dialogue as an artistic and philosophic principle, one which enables other voices to speak in the manner that Byron outlines in the opening of Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* when describing the "beings of the mind":

I could replace them if I would, still teems
My mind with many a form which aptly seems

Such as I sought for, and at moments found;
 Let these too go – for waking Reason deems
 Such over-weening phantasies unsound,
 And other voices speak, and other sights surround.

(iv. 7)

Part of a passage which plays the world of imagination (“our fairy-land,” “our fantastic sky”) off against “strong reality,” this stanza juxtaposes the mind’s productions with various alternative perceptions potentially supplied by “other voices” and “other sights,” a juxtaposition which Byron most forcefully enacts in *Manfred: A Dramatic Poem*.

Byron began *Manfred* in the summer of 1816 (completing it in April 1817), and it is one of several poems that critics have read in the context of the friendship with Shelley, classifying it, for example, as an “anti-Shelleyan tract” (Robinson 1976: 59). Strikingly, when Byron described the poem to his publisher Murray, he began with the poem’s form, writing that “I forgot to mention to you – that a kind of poem in dialogue (in blank verse) or drama – from which ‘the Incantation’ is an extract – begun last summer in Switzerland is finished – it is three acts – but of a very wild – metaphysical – and inexplicable kind” (Byron 1973–82: 5. 170). Byron concludes his account by stressing that he does not want the play to be performed: “I have at least rendered it *quite impossible* for the stage.” As a “kind of poem in dialogue (in blank verse) or drama” which is not to be performed, *Manfred* hovers between dramatic and poetic modes, just as Manfred feels himself pulled between the body and the spirit, the human and the divine, defining himself as “Half dust, half deity” (I.ii.40). Byron’s generic innovation enables him to test the limits of Romantic selfhood by placing his solipsistic hero within a questioning environment peopled not only by spirits who may or may not be projections of his own mind, but also by servants, a chamois hunter and an abbot, all of whom engage in debate with Manfred and offer a variety of alternative perspectives.

Manfred was Byron’s first “dramatic” work in an authorial career in which he would increasingly explore the possibilities of the form, but before offering a more detailed account of the text itself as a “poem in dialogue” it is important to note that in his earlier works Byron had frequently sought to question the authority of a single narrative point of view (and the cultural and political hegemony it might claim). Perhaps the most remarkable text here is Byron’s first “Turkish Tale,” *The Giaour* (1813), the story of a love triangle between a Venetian (the eponymous Giaour), Hassan the Turk and Leila his harem slave. This tale is presented from a number of different viewpoints by a range of different narrators to the extent that a full understanding of the narrative is withheld from the reader. For example, the Giaour is initially presented not by an impartial narrator but by a Turkish fisherman hostile to his race and religion:

I know thee not, I loathe thy race,
 But in thy lineaments I trace
 What time shall strengthen, not efface;

...

Though bent on earth thine evil eye
 As meteor-like thou glidest by,
 Right well I view, and deem thee one
 Whom Othman's sons should slay or shun.
 (ll. 191–3, 196–9)

Through this fragmentary, multi-narrator form, Byron enables other voices to speak, and in this tale of struggle between a Venetian and a Turk there is, of course, a wider politics to his formal experimentation, juxtaposing Western and Eastern viewpoints, value systems and religions. In a time of increasing political and cultural imperialism, Byron's poem questions the Western Christian perspective normally central to the romance form. But in this poem of "other voices," there is one voice that is never heard, that of the woman the Giaour and Hassan fight for, Leila. Present only in the poem as a memory and when thrown into the Bosphorus into a sack, Leila's silence indicates the limits of Byron's ability to speak the "other" at this stage in his career.

While the opening two-thirds of *The Giaour* present the action through a variety of different narrators, the poem concludes with a monologue from the Giaour himself, a structure which might appear to give the Venetian the final word on the events of the tale. Yet while this secular confession provides the reader with a fuller understanding of the central protagonist's motivation and consciousness, we read it in the context of what has gone before, remembering for example the sense of loss that accompanies the Giaour's killing of Hassan and the account of his grieving mother. Indeed, Byron's presentation of the Giaour's confession anticipates Browning's and Tennyson's development of the dramatic monologue later in the century in which flawed protagonists reveal their darker motivations while seeking to justify their actions. For example, the supposed hero of the tale reveals that he too would have killed Leila had she been unfaithful to him, as she had been to Hassan:

Yet did he but what I had done
 Had she been false to more than one;
 Faithless to him – he gave the blow,
 But true to me – I laid him low;
 Howe'er deserv'd her doom might be,
 Her treachery was truth to me;
 To me she gave her heart, that all
 Which tyranny can ne'er enthrall.
 (ll. 1062–9)

The Giaour reveals the contradictions in his attitude to Leila, at once hailing love as beyond tyranny while also seeking to possess her exclusively.

Manfred broadly reverses the structure of *The Giaour*. Whereas in *The Giaour* the reader experiences a polyphonic form superseded by the hero's lengthy monologue, in *Manfred* the initially isolated voice of the protagonist becomes increasingly subject to the questions and observations of other figures. This mode provides the dominant

structure of the play's opening movements in which Manfred's self-conception and sense of his relationship to the world outside him, initially presented through soliloquies, are tested and revised as a result of his encounters with forces beyond himself: the seven spirits, the Chamois Hunter and the Witch of Atlas. Indeed, as the "dramatic poem" progresses, Manfred is increasingly placed within a social context; whereas the first two scenes begin with the stage direction "Manfred *alone*," four of the final five scenes begin with Manfred in company or even absent and the subject of others' discussion.

To illustrate the importance of "other voices" in this "poem in dialogue," I want to offer an analysis of a particular dramatic scene before drawing a comparison with one of Byron's lyric poems, "Prometheus." The encounter I want to examine is that with the Chamois Hunter, presented early in the play in Act I scenes ii and iii. In the preceding scene, Manfred had summoned the "Spirits of earth and air" seeking "Forgetfulness" (I.i.136), and despite his claim that "there is no form on earth / Hideous or beautiful to me" (I.i.184–5) had fallen senseless when one of the spirits appeared "*in the shape of a beautiful female figure*." Rejecting what he terms "super-human aid" in the opening soliloquy of Act I scene i, Manfred turns to the natural world's beauty but fails to achieve the kind of Wordsworthian transcendent escape through union with nature that had been a feature of the Shelley-influenced third canto of *Childe Harold*. Into this scene Byron introduces the figure of the Chamois Hunter who is unseen by Manfred and offers a contrapuntal humane and practical voice set against Manfred's increasingly elaborate and baroque imaginings:

Chamois Hunter: The mists begin to rise from up the valley;

I'll warn him to descend, or he may chance

To lose at once his way and life together.

Manfred: The mists boil up around the glaciers; clouds

Rise curling fast beneath me, white and sulphury,

Like foam from the roused ocean of deep Hell,

Whose every wave breaks on a living shore,

Heaped with the damn'd like pebbles.

(I.ii.82–9)

By beginning both speeches "The mists," Byron draws attention to the contrasting responses to the natural world. For the Hunter, the mist presents a threat to life, one which must be dealt with practically. For Manfred, it is the starting point of an extended Homeric metaphor that leads him to a vision of Hell symbolic of both the world as he sees it and his own mind's turmoil.

Manfred's despair leads him to attempt suicide by throwing himself off the crag on which he teeters, but he is saved by the Hunter who "*retains him with a sudden grasp*" and takes him back to his chalet, where the following scene is set. This scene is made up entirely of dialogue and plays off the Hunter's politeness, hospitality and "humble virtues" against Manfred's near-hysterical accounts of his visions – "there's blood upon the brim" (II.i.21) – and assertions of his own uniqueness – "I am not of thine order"

(II.i.38). The discrepancy between the two characters' senses of self and of their relation to the world verges on the comic (and could indeed be played for laughs, were the play to be staged), but as the dialogue progresses Manfred comes increasingly to respect the identity of the Hunter and to tolerate his position:

Manfred: I look within –
 It matters not – my soul was scorch'd already!
 Chamois Hunter: And wouldst thou then exchange thy lot for mine?
 Manfred: No, friend! I would not wrong thee, nor exchange
 My lot with living being: I can bear –
 However wretchedly, 'tis still to bear –
 In life what others could not brook to dream,
 But perish in their slumber.
 Chamois Hunter: And with this –
 This cautious feeling for another's pain,
 Canst thou be black with evil? – say not so.

(II.i.72–81)

Earlier in the poem, we need to remember, Manfred had engaged in a search for "Forgetfulness" that had led him to attempt suicide. Now he claims he is able to "bear" his condition, and his comment at the end of the scene that "the mountain peril's past" (II.i.94) indicates that he has moved beyond this suicidal stage. Moreover, as the Hunter observes, Manfred's new-found strength is also linked to his "feeling for another's pain," a significant linking of the protagonist's self to those around. The Chamois Hunter, then, is no rude mechanical or base clown against whom Manfred can display his superior class or intelligence; he offers a significant alternative model for the relationships between an individual, the world and other beings. As such, the Hunter's "other voice" not only provides a counterpoint to Manfred's but one from which he can learn as he continues on his search. Similarly, through his other encounters, Manfred is able to engage with the forces within and outside himself: with his own past in his encounter with the Witch of the Alps, with the events of history given voice to by Spirits in Act II scenes iii and iv, and with the religious belief for which the Abbot acts as spokesman (a figure treated with far greater seriousness than his equivalent in *The Giaour*).

Manfred ends with its hero having moved from a search for "forgetfulness," through an ability to "bear," to conclude with a sense of self that finds value and identity through defiance. As Manfred tells the Spirit who summons him in the final scene of the play:

Manfred: I do defy ye, – though I feel my soul
 Is ebbing from me, yet I do defy ye;
 ...
 I stand
 Upon my strength – I do defy – deny –
 Spurn back, and scorn ye!

(III.iv.99–100, 119–21)

In this articulation of defiance, Manfred recalls the protagonist of one of Byron's lyrics written during the Shelleyan summer of 1816, "Prometheus," which culminates as follows:

Thou are a symbol and a sign
 To Mortals of their fate and force;
 Like thee, Man is in part divine,
 A troubled stream from a pure source;
 And Man in portions can foresee
 His own funereal destiny;
 His wretchedness, and resistance,
 And his sad unallied existence:
 To which his Spirit may oppose
 Itself – an equal to all woes,
 And a firm will, and a deep sense,
 Which even in torture can descry
 Its own concentrated recompense,
 Triumphant where it dares defy,
 And making Death a Victory.

(ll. 45–59)

The comparison with "Prometheus" reveals how much *Manfred* gains from Byron's experimentation with the "dramatic poem" form. "Prometheus" is a strikingly monovocal poem, an apostrophe to the "Titan" who is seized upon as a figure of potential hope in what for Byron was a period of political despair following the allied triumph at Waterloo in 1815. With a tone of near desperate assertiveness, reinforced by heavy end-stopping and strong rhymes, the poet describes Prometheus and transforms him into "a symbol and sign," but never allows him to speak for himself (the poet answers his one and only question in line 6). The lyric allows no articulation of alternative positions, of the sort we have seen in *Manfred*, and its concluding flourish feels like a rhetorical rather than a real "Victory." By contrast, Manfred's death remains open to interpretation, with the hero's final statement set against that of the Abbott:

Manfred: Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die. [Manfred *expires*]

Abbot: He's gone – his soul hath ta'en its earthless flight –
 Whither? I dread to think – but he is gone.

(III.iv.151–3)

The dialogic form of *Manfred* prevents a closing down of meaning or a single interpretation of death as enacted in "Prometheus." Not only is Manfred's own statement open to various readings, but it is set against the Abbott's closing words which can be taken to offer a both Christian interpretation of Manfred's death and a questioning of that interpretation. As such, *Manfred's* form points in the direction of the polyphony of Byron's great conversation poem, *Don Juan*.

“A voice to be accomplished”: Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*

In his “Lyrical Drama” *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley draws upon the hybrid form Byron developed in *Manfred* to provide his own extended critique of the monologic form and centered philosophy of “Prometheus.” Written in the year after Waterloo in an era that both Byron and Shelley believed to be characterized by increasing political reaction and repression, Byron’s “Prometheus” clutched at defiance as the only valid or available mode of action in the face of “the inexorable Heaven, / And the deaf tyranny of Fate / [and] The ruling principle of Hate” (ll. 18–20). In this historical moment, “Prometheus” suggests, a defiant death is the only imaginable Victory with no foreseeable end to tyranny. To the more optimistic Shelley, Byron’s treatment of the mythological figure they both became obsessed with in 1816 would have suggested his imprisonment within both a mindset and a form, and it is from both of these that he seeks to release his version of the hero in *Prometheus Unbound*.

Prometheus Unbound begins, like *Manfred*, with the protagonist’s single voice as Prometheus looks within to consider his own suffering, hanging chained to a rock in the Indian Caucasus. It also begins with an expression of defiance comparable to that of Byron’s lyric as Prometheus seeks to turn his own suffering and opposition into victory over his competitor Jupiter:

Whilst me, who am thy foe, eyeless in hate,
 Hast thou made reign and triumph, to thy scorn,
 O’er mine own misery and thy vain revenge.
(I.9–11)

However, Prometheus’s opening monologue is also the point at which Shelley’s hero begins to break out of his imprisoning mindset and form, his defiance and hatred toward Jupiter turning into one of pity as he anticipates his rival’s eventual fall:

And yet to me welcome is Day and Night
 ...
for then they lead
 Their wingless, crawling Hours, one among whom
 – As some dark Priest hales the reluctant victim –
 Shall drag thee, cruel King, to kiss the blood
 From these pale feet, which then might trample thee
 If they disdained not such a prostrate slave. –
 Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee. – What Ruin
 Will hunt thee undefended through the wide Heaven!
 How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,
 Gape like a Hell within! I speak in grief
 Not exultation, for I hate no more
 As then, ere misery made me wise.
(I.44, 47–58)

Prometheus's movement from "disdain" to "pity" causes him to bring other voices into the poem, as he asks the Mountains, Springs, Air, and Whirlwinds to help him "recall" (remember and retract) the curse he had placed on Jupiter. The responses of the four "Voices" who personify these natural phenomena signal the shift in the play's form, introducing the juxtaposition of sonorous, stately Miltonic blank verse with lighter rhymed lyrics that characterizes the formal texture of this most musical of works. Their responses also spark an important recognition for Prometheus, startled by something whose origins lie outside his own self: "I hear a sound of voices – not the voice / Which I gave forth" (I.112–13). For Prometheus, this acknowledgment of other voices and the movement from monologue to dialogue is integral to the processes of self-knowledge and to liberation.

In *Prometheus Unbound* it is through discussion with others that an individual comes to know himself or herself. This is not only the case for Prometheus but also for Asia, his female counterpart, whose journey to be reunited with her lover constitutes the central action of the play. On this journey, Asia is led by the Echoes to the cave of Demogorgon, whom she initially consults as an oracle, only to realize that the answers he gives to her various questions are the things she knows already:

Asia: So much I asked before, and my heart gave
 The response thou hast given; and of such truths
 Each to itself must be the oracle.
 (II.iv.121–3)

Asia's dialogue fulfills the hopes expressed in *Julian and Maddalo* that future conversations would "make me know myself." And it is this realization through dialogue that knowledge lies within that produces the play's climax with Jupiter's dethroning. At the moment Asia imagines this process through a questioning of Demogorgon that is also a self-interrogation, the tyrant's overthrow begins to happen:

Asia: One more demand . . . and do thou answer me
 As my own soul would answer, did it know
 That which I ask. – Prometheus shall arise
 Henceforth the Sun of this rejoicing world:
 When shall the destined hour arrive?
 Demogorgon: Behold!
 . . .
 These are the immortal Hours
 Of whom thou didst demand.
 (II.iv.124–8, 140–1)

Asia's role in mankind's redemption and the Earth's millennial transformation is specifically presented as the awakening of a voice, as the Echoes reveal at the start of her journey:

In the world unknown
 Sleeps a voice unspoken;
 By thy step alone
 Can its rest be broken,
 Child of Ocean!
 (II.i.190–4)

This voice's awakening constitutes one of the key actions of the play, realized when the Spirit of the Hour blows the conch shell announcing Jupiter's fall and the advent of a new utopia. Prometheus himself located the "voice unspoken" within this conch shell when giving the Spirit of the Hour his orders:

For thee, fair Spirit, one toil remains. Ione,
 Give her that curved shell, which Proteus old
 Made Asia's nuptial boon, breathing within it
 A voice to be accomplished, and which thou
 Didst hide in grass under the hollow rock.
 (III.iii.64–8)

It is the accomplishment of this voice in the blowing of the conch shell that is described by the Spirit of the Earth in Act III scene iv, bringing about the physical and psychological transformation of man and the natural world.

Voices and dialogue are integral to the meaning, action and form of *Prometheus Unbound*, a remarkable and complex creation and investigation of sounds and speech, the spoken and the unspoken. As the action of the play progresses, tracing the transformation of the world into a paradise on earth, the various voices proliferate. As Ione comments in response to one of the play's visions, "Their beauty gives me voice" (I.759) and the play itself can be understood in terms of the ideas presented by the Chorus of Spirits in the final act:

And our singing shall build
 In the Void's loose field,
 A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield;
 We will take our plan
 From the new world of man
 And our work shall be called Promethean.
 (IV.153–8)

Prometheus Unbound is just such a work that seeks to create a new world through the union of many voices. At the very end of the play it is "All" who call for Demogorgon's closing speech: – "Speak – thy strong words may never pass away" (IV.553). As the play's operatic fourth act reveals, with its love duet between The

Earth and The Moon, music provides the representational means and the underlying metaphor for new golden age: redeemed Man is described as “one harmonious Soul of many a soul” (IV.400), for example. Prometheus himself powerfully articulates this transformation of voices into song, of dialogue into music, as he envisions his future life with Asia:

A simple dwelling, which shall be our own,
Where we will sit and talk of time and change
...
And we will search, with looks and words of love
For hidden thoughts each lovelier than the last,
Our unexhausted spirits, and like lutes
Touched by the skill of the enamoured wind,
Weave harmonies divine, yet ever new,
From difference sweet where discord cannot be.
(III.iii.22–3, 34–40).

Here Prometheus captures the ideal of conversation in Shelley’s writing; art is created from a difference between voices that produces not discord but harmony.

“‘Ye Gods, I grow a talker!’ Let us prate”: Byron’s *Beppo* and *Don Juan*

The culmination of this poetic exploration of the ethical value and artistic potential of conversation is, of course, Byron’s *Don Juan*. Byron had experimented with the mode he would use in his comic-epic masterpiece in *Beppo*, and central to his achievement in both was the discovery of the *ottava rima* stanza form that facilitated the urbane, chatty mode that characterizes the two works. Like *Don Juan*, *Beppo* is a highly self-conscious poem, though the poet primarily jokes about the creation of the poem as a process of writing (rather than speaking). Yet the tone of *Beppo* is conversational in a number of ways, not least in the familiar asides intended for a specific audience, as in Byron’s description of the Ridotto: “‘Tis (on a smaller scale) like our Vauxhall, / Excepting that it can’t be spoilt by rain” (ll. 461–2). In *Beppo*, Byron relishes the physicality of spoken language that requires the poem to be read aloud to be fully appreciated, as when he contrasts the Italian against the English languages:

I love the language, that soft bastard Latin,
Which melts like kisses from a female mouth,
And sounds as if it should be writ on satin,
With syllables which breathe of the sweet South,
And gentle liquids gliding all so pat in,

That not a single accent seems uncouth,
Like our harsh northern whistling, grunting guttural,
Which we're oblig'd to hiss, and spit, and splutter all.
(ll. 345–52)

Byron's brilliant use of onomatopoeia illustrates the poem's essential oral quality, and this is seen too in his ability to introduce other voices into the narrative, as in the tale's climax when the heroine Laura realizes that the mysterious Turk is in fact her husband, returned after years of absence.

Now Laura, much recovered, or less loath
To speak, cries "Beppo! what's your pagan name?
Bless me! Your beard is of amazing growth!
And how came you to keep away so long?
Are you not sensible 'twas very wrong?
"And are you *really, truly*, now a Turk?
With any other women did you wive?
Is't true they use their fingers for a fork?
Well, that the prettiest shawl – as I'm alive!
You'll give it me? They say you eat no pork.
And how so many years did you contrive
To – Bless me! did I ever? No, I never
Saw a man grown so yellow! How's your liver?"
(ll. 725–35)

Beppo is in a number of ways a rewriting of *The Giaour*, one in which the love triangle is resolved not through murder and revenge but through conversation over coffee ("Such things perhaps, we'd best discuss within," comments Beppo (l.716)), and perhaps nothing is more remarkable in this rewriting than the shift from the Leila's silence to Laura's loquaciousness.

The incorporation of other voices constitutes a major feature of the poetic texture of *Don Juan*. Particular highlights include Donna Julia's thirteen-stanza berating of Don Alphonso and her letter to Juan (Canto I), Juan's farewell to Spain and to Julia while suffering from seasickness, the poet's dialogue with "Philosophy" (Canto II), the "Isles of Greece" song (Canto III), Raucocanti's tale (Canto IV), the dialogue between the naive Juan and the man of the world Johnson and their subsequent negotiations with the eunuch Baba (Canto V), Dudu's account of her dream (Canto VI), and the contrast between Juan's idealizing peon to England as "Freedom's chosen station" and the urban slang of Tom the highwayman ("Oh Jack! I'm floored by that 'ere bloody Frenchman!" (xi. 13). Moreover, as Philip Martin has shown in a fascinating account of *Don Juan* as a dialogic poem (Martin 1993), this last incident also illustrates how the poet incorporates and ventriloquizes the voices of his subjects:

He from the world had cut off a great man,
 Who in his time had made heroic bustle.
 Who in a row like Tom could lead the van,
 Booze in the ken, or at the spellken hustle?
 Who queer a flat? Who (spite of Bow-street's ban)
 On the high toby-spice so flash the muzzle?
 Who on a lark, with black-eyed Sal (his blowing)
 So prime, so swell, so nutty, and so knowing?

 But Tom's no more – and so no more of Tom.
 Heroes must die; and by God's blessing 'tis
 Not long before the most of them go home. –
 Hail! Thamis, hail! Upon thy verge it is
 That Juan's chariot, rolling like a drum
 In thunder, holds the way it can't well miss,
 Through Kennington and all the other "tons",
 Which makes us wish ourselves in town at once; –
(xi. 19–20)

These two stanzas brilliantly illustrate the mobility of voice characteristic of *Don Juan's* narrator, swinging from cockney slang to mock-heroic use of Spenserian poetic diction ("Hail! Thamis, hail!") before punning on Kennington to parody the upper-class pronunciation of "town" as "ton." Alongside the various other quotations, allusions, epigrams, apostrophes, snatches of dialogue, slogans, exclamations and interjections that Byron injects into the poem, the range of other voices and the poetic persona's own mobility of voice create a work that is polyphonic, ideally suited to capture what Byron describes as "life's infinite variety." And it is in response to "life's infinite variety" that Byron gives his fullest characterization of *Don Juan* as conversational:

I perch upon an humbler promontory,
 Amidst life's infinite variety:
 With no great care for what is nicknamed glory,
 But speculating as I cast mine eye
 On what may suit or may not suit my story,
 And never straining hard to versify,
 I rattle on exactly as I'd talk
 With any body in a ride or walk.

 I don't know that there may be much ability
 Shown in this sort of desultory rhyme;
 But there's a conversational facility,
 Which may round off an hour upon a time.
 Of this I'm sure at least, there's no servility
 In mine irregularity of chime,
 Which rings what's uppermost of new and hoary,
 Just as I feel the "Improvisatore".
(xv. 19–20).

Here Byron places *Don Juan* within the Italian tradition of oral improvised performance poetry that he had previously associated with the Count in Beppo (“He patroniz’d the Improvisatori, / Nay, could himself extemporize some stanzas” (ll. 257–8)) and his self-description beautifully captures the poem’s urbane, digressive, and paradoxical nature, self-effacing but ambitious, oppositional but charming. Conversation becomes poetry and poetry becomes conversation, and as readers we become the “any body” to whom Byron rattles on as in a ride or walk; we become the Julian to Byron’s Maddalo.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 1 “Mournful Ditties and Merry Measures: Feeling and Form in the Romantic Short Lyric and Song”; chapter 2 “Archaist-Innovators: The Couplet from Churchill to Browning”; chapter 6 “Satire, Subjectivity, and Acknowledgment”; chapter 18 “Poetry, Conversation, Community: *Annus Mirabilis*, 1797–1798”; chapter 19 “Spontaneity, Immediacy, and Improvisation in Romantic Poetry”

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The Thrush in the Theater: Keats and Hazlitt at the Surrey Institution

Sarah M. Zimmerman

The Thrushes and Blackbirds have been singing me into an idea that it was spring, and almost that Leaves were on the trees –

Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, February 21, 1818

if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.

Keats, letter to John Taylor, February 27, 1818

At 8:00 p.m. on January 20, 1818, John Keats arrived “an hour too late” at the Surrey Institution to hear Hazlitt speak, but instead met his friends “just as they were coming out.” Although he missed the main event, his timing was perfect for absorbing the animated energy of the period’s thriving culture of public lectures. Auditors spilled over the threshold and into the streets just south of Blackfriars Bridge: “all these pounced upon me,” he reports, “Hazlitt, John Hunt and son, Wells, Bewick, all the Landseers, Bob Harris, [C]ox of the Burrough, Aye & more” (Keats 1958: 1. 214).¹ At the next lecture, though, Keats arrived on time, and famously began formulating some of his key poetic tenets in response to Hazlitt’s arguments, recording his critical reflections in his letters. Their encounter was a two-way street: Keats was dismayed when Hazlitt took a swipe at Thomas Chatterton, and Hazlitt began the following lecture with a comment generally taken as a partial apology. He expressed regret “that what I said in the conclusion of the last Lecture respecting Chatterton, should have given dissatisfaction to some persons, with whom I would willingly agree on all such matters” (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 278). This exchange captures the lectures’ theatrical dynamic, at once personal and public, which generated not only Hazlitt’s influential arguments but also a poetics of acutely responsive listening – particularly to a human voice – that Keats honed in the Surrey Institution’s theater.

Hazlitt's role as Keats's "intellectual mentor" is well known, but the precise impact of the lectures remains an open question, because the story generally collapses Keats's solitary reading of the prose works with his sociable listening to the lectures (Sperry 1994: 23). I move from the well-trod ground of Keats's responses to particular arguments to the more speculative question of what he learned from absorbing those claims in a live performance. Keats's letters and poems have been carefully combed for the impact of Hazlitt's critical points, but we have not yet mined them for traces of the lectures' material culture, and specifically the consequences of assuming the auditor's role in this animated forum. I propose that Keats sharpens his sense of how another's unanticipated words can injure, elate, or transform an auditor. He makes an apt guide to the period's public lecture culture because he was keenly susceptible to it and because he pursued his own responses in letters and poems. I will focus on several poems, including a blank verse sonnet sometimes called "What the Thrush Said" that was composed during the series and included in a famous letter in which Keats considers the possibilities for poetry of being "passive and receptive" (Keats 1958: 1. 232). In the sonnet, Keats hones a poetics of listening, and thereby being subject, to another's voice that I would suggest informs consequential acts of hearing in later poems, including "Ode to a Nightingale" and "The Fall of Hyperion."

By the time Keats entered the Surrey Institution on Blackfriars Road, "beneath an elegant portico of the Ionic order ... crowned with the appropriate statue of Contemplation," he had been trained to treat lectures as professional education as a medical student at Guy's Hospital (Combe and Pyne 1808–10: 3. 157). He had also recently been attending plays in a professional capacity, as a substitute drama critic for *The Champion*. In his review of Edmund Kean's return to the stage after illness, Keats pays particular attention to the actor's "elocution," celebrating the marvelous way in which he makes Shakespeare's "words appear stained and gory" (Keats 2003: 530). I suggest that this layered experience as a medical student, theatergoer, and lecture auditor developed Keats's keen sense of the resources for poetry of listening – particularly to a human voice – and that he carried that understanding into poems in which the speaker is primarily a listener. As an auditor in these various theaters, Keats had repeated opportunities to grasp the dramatic potential of spoken language, to learn that "The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word" (Ong 1982: 75). Maureen McLane has called for "a full literary-historical account of the use and abuse of orality, oral cultures, and orality effects by and in what we conventionally call British Romantic poetry" (2000: 426); Keats's attentive listening in Hazlitt's lectures provides one chapter in that history.

It was also an important chapter in his professional life. Hazlitt's focus in his first literary series on English literary history and on what constituted true literary "fame" would have been particularly compelling to a poet ardently, if anxiously, pursuing a new career. In late January 1818, Keats was in the process of completing *Endymion* – the self-defined "test" or "trial of my Powers of Imagination and chiefly of my invention" that would appear in May (Keats 1958: 1. 169). He was inclined to listen to Hazlitt, whom he knew personally and whose prose works had already influenced his thinking about poetry (Bromwich 1983: 374). Like the best students, however, Keats learned in significant measure by discovering his disagreements with his "intellectual mentor." The instance I examine is particularly

relevant to the lecture theater: shortly after Hazlitt criticized James Thomson's "indolence" as a poet, Keats wrote a letter embracing "delicious diligent Indolence" and containing a blank verse sonnet produced simply by listening to a thrush sing. In a poem seemingly composed by taking dictation, Keats at once embraces the auditor's "passive and receptive" role and defines it as a source of poetic authority that counters Hazlitt's claims. Sitting in the lectures, Keats gains a sharp sense of how the act of listening could itself bring poetry "as naturally as the Leaves to a tree" (Keats 1958: 1. 231–2, 238).

Keats arrived late, not only to Hazlitt's second lecture, but also to the entire genre of the public lecture on literature. In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, men and women from the middle and upper classes flocked to lecture rooms to hear the famous poets and critics of the day tell them whom and how to read. By the time Samuel Taylor Coleridge first approached the podium at the Royal Institution in 1808, public lectures on science and elocution were well-established events, and lecturers on literature included the Reverends John Hewlett and Thomas Frognall Dibdin. Coleridge's debut nevertheless marks the genre's arrival, because he attained a celebrity that only Hazlitt would rival once he began lecturing on literature in early 1818. Poetry was one subject among many on what amounted to a public lecture curriculum provided by itinerant lecturers, scientific and literary institutions, and private bodies such as the Royal Academy (where Henry Fuseli, J. M. W. Turner and Sir John Soane lectured). In a variety of venues, paying auditors could attend lectures on a diverse range of subjects, including poetry, elocution, moral philosophy, history, music, architecture, art history, chemistry, and astronomy. On October 29, 1817, the *Morning Chronicle* announced Hazlitt's first literary series, "On the British Poets, from Chaucer to Cowper," alongside series by the Reverend William Bengo Collyer on "ethics," James Lowe Wheeler on "chemistry," and William Crotch on "music."

Science retained center stage in public lecture culture, but scientific and literary institutions broadened their curricula in order to attract a wide range of the middle and upper classes, including the women whose presence, Gillian Russell observes, was vital to the institutions' vitality and financial stability (Russell 2002: 133). The pioneers of public lectures were scientists: at the beginning of the eighteenth century, "[s]cientific lecturers burst on the scene as the Enlightenment's answer to the itinerant preacher, trading on the new prestige of Newtonian science and the magic of experiments using dazzling apparatus" (Porter 1990: 240). By the end of the century the genre was in the process of being institutionalized, although many lecturers continued to organize their own series independently (renting rooms, printing prospectuses, placing newspaper advertisements, and selling tickets). The success of the Royal Institution (1799) at drawing the *beau monde* to hear Humphry Davy speak on chemistry, Sydney Smith on moral philosophy, and Coleridge on poetry, spurred imitators, including the London (1805), Surrey (1808), and Russell (1808) Institutions. Public lectures perpetuated an Enlightenment culture of self-improvement that emphasized the practical application of new knowledge. In what Jon Klancher terms the "London lecturing empire," the Royal Institution set the tone by defining its "two chief purposes" as "the speedy and general diffusion of the knowledge of all new and useful improvements"

and “teaching the application of scientific discoveries, to the improvement of arts and manufactures in this country, and to the increase of domestic comfort and convenience” (Klancher 1991: 174; Royal Institution 1800: 7). Public lectures were integral to those goals. Frederick Kurzer notes that “[t]hrough popular in approach, the lectures conformed to high educational standards and were delivered by recognized authorities in their fields,” such as Coleridge and Hazlitt (Kurzer 2000: 109).

Each of London’s early nineteenth-century scientific and literary institutions catered to a clientele defined by rank and urban location. Founded by “fifty aristocratic land-owners,” the Royal Institution directed scientific and technological advances toward the aims of “agricultural improvement” (Klancher 1991: 176). In contrast, both the Surrey and London Institutions were “established by the initiative of prominent City merchants, bankers, and manufacturers,” and aimed to provide “a local centre for the educational, cultural, and even social activities of its subscribers, most of whom were at that time still residents of the City and its close environs” (Kurzer 2000: 111). On November 28, 1807, the *Morning Chronicle* announced that a meeting had been held at the London Coffee House to agree upon “the erection of a third [scientific and literary institution] in a populous and central situation” in “[t]he vicinity of Blackfriars Bridge,” not far from Guy’s Hospital, where Keats had trained as a medical student. Its theater, known as the “rotunda,” was “one of the most elegant rooms in the metropolis” and “calculated to contain upwards of five hundred people.” Standing behind a large lecture desk flanked by two hanging candelabra, Hazlitt would have faced a circle of “eight Doric columns, of Derbyshire marble” that supported “the uppermost” of two galleries; during the day natural light entered through the theater’s “dome” (Combe and Pyne 1808–10: 3. 157–8). He would have felt at home at the Surrey Institution, among other professionals who were at once eager for diversion and earnest about education.

Keats was the ideal lecture auditor, both by temperament and by training. He enjoyed public lectures as sociable events: “I generally meet with many I know there,” he told his brothers (Keats 1958: 1. 237). He was also steeped in what Jan Golinski has termed an Enlightenment “public culture” of science in which lecture demonstrations were an important means of presenting new theoretical and technological developments that (male) scientific auditors could then repeat independently. After a five-year apprenticeship to the surgeon-apothecary Thomas Hammond in Edmonton, Keats attended the Borough Medical School of the United Hospitals of Guy’s and St Thomas’s.² For two semesters he attended lectures by some of the period’s most prominent physicians and scientists, including William Babbington (on chemistry), Astley Cooper and William Cline (on anatomy and surgery) (De Almeida 1991: 24). Keats’s scientific and medical training emphasized the immediate application of newly acquired knowledge. Hermione de Almeida notes that “courses were taught by the hospital’s clinical physicians and surgeons who also practiced experimental medicine in its wards”; students were meant to gain “both comprehensive knowledge” and “comprehending minds able to use this knowledge in the practice of their art” (1991: 27–8, 36). Keats was well prepared to turn Hazlitt’s lectures toward the “practice” of his new “art” of poetry.

He was initiated into an Enlightenment culture of scientific learning even earlier, at his grammar school in Enfield, where the pedagogical tone had been set by its founder, John Ryland. Although Ryland was dead by the time Keats arrived, he was, as Nicholas Roe puts it, “a presiding spirit in Keats’s education at Enfield.” Specifically, Ryland “adopted teaching methods which were strongly empirical and practical” (Roe 1997: 30, 34). I would add that they emphasized student participation and performance. Perhaps most memorably, Ryland had his students act out a human orrery, one of the era’s most popular pedagogical instruments for demonstrating the movements of the solar system and a regular feature in the period’s lecture culture. Ryland’s students performed “a living orrery, made with sixteen school-boys” (Ryland 1768: xix). In *An Easy Introduction to Mechanics*, he explains how he distributed cards inscribed with the names of the planets and information on their orbits in order to stage an astronomical drama: “Now begin your play, fix your boys in their circles, each with his card in his hand, and then put your orrery in motion, giving each boy a direction to move from west to east, mercury to move swiftest, and the others in proportion to their distances, and each boy repeating in his turn the contents of his card, concerning his distance, magnitude period, and hourly-motion” (Ryland 1768: xxi). Students learned about planets’ orbits by enacting them, thus becoming the demonstration themselves. By the time he heard Hazlitt speak, Keats was immersed in an educational culture in which learning and performing were inseparable.

Hazlitt’s career as a public lecturer began at the Russell Institution, where he spoke on philosophy in 1812. In January 1818 he offered the first of three series on literature at the Surrey Institution; they were announced in the *Morning Chronicle* as “On the British Poets, from Chaucer to Cowper” (1818), “On the Comic Writers and Genius of Great Britain” (1818–19), and “On the Literature of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth” (1819). He published each for a profitable print afterlife (under slightly different titles).³ He also lectured independently, repeating the first series at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in London and speaking in Glasgow in 1822. The first literary series, and the only one that Keats attended, began on January 13, 1818 and continued on successive Tuesday evenings through March 3, 1818. According to the painter William Bewick, Hazlitt “became a favourite at the Surrey Institution, and stood up in his place at the lecture-table with all confidence, in the consciousness of having friends and admirers about him” (Landseer 1871: 1. 147). That “confidence” was, however, painfully acquired. Henry Crabb Robinson was dismayed by Hazlitt’s 1812 debut at the Russell Institution: “he seems to have no conception of the difference between a lecture and a book,” he complained, explaining that “[w]hat he said was sensible and excellent, but he delivered himself in a low monotonous voice, with his eyes fixed on his MS., not once daring to look at his audience; and he read so rapidly that no one could possibly give to the matter the attention it required” (Morley 1938: 1. 368). When Hazlitt returned to lecturing at the Surrey Institution in 1818, his nervousness flooded back, and he actually tried to bolt from the room (Wu 2008: 234–5). Soon, however, he learned to produce highly conversational prose scripts that directed his acerbic wit at the poets he treated and the auditors he addressed.

Hazlitt mastered the art of scoring a palpable hit while leaving only surface scratches. Charles Lamb (who did not attend) speculated that Hazlitt attacked prominent contemporaries such as William Wordsworth in order to create *frisson*: “W.H. goes on lecturing against W.W., and making copious use of quotations from said W.W. to give a zest to said lectures” (Lucas 1905: 6. 512). Peter Manning discerns a profit motive: “Hazlitt must have known that his inveterate outspokenness was also shrewd business” (Manning 2005: 231). Crabb Robinson took the bait. On February 24th, he reports that “I lost my temper and hissed” when Hazlitt was “contemptuous towards Wordsworth.” Chagrined, he hastens to add that he was “on the outside of the room,” but he found that his fury was not expended: “I was led to burst out into declamations against Hazlitt which I afterwards regretted, though I uttered nothing but the truth” (Morley 1938: 1. 220).

Hazlitt took aim not only at the writers he critiqued, but also at the auditors he faced. In February, Crabb Robinson found him “almost obscene” in “quoting” the “unseemly verses” of Prior and praising Voltaire, “the modern infidel,” “to a congregation of saints,” an allusion to the Dissenters who flocked to the Surrey Institution (Morley 1938: 1. 219). Hazlitt fired another round when he dismissed the evangelical Hannah More as “another celebrated modern poetess, and I believe still living” who “has written a great deal which I have never read” (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 301). This comment sparked an outburst unusual in the polite arena of literary lectures, which was largely restricted to the middle and upper classes by the relatively high cost of admission.⁴ Thomas Noon Talfourd reports that “a voice gave expression to the general commiseration and surprise, by calling out ‘More pity for you!’” (1886: 1. 39). A letter writer to *The Times* complained about the vehement responses that Hazlitt aroused: “I was not a little shocked at seeing so well-dressed and respectable an audience emulating the uproar of one-shilling gallery behaviour” (quoted in Kurzer 2000: 135). Not all auditors were appalled by the reactions Hazlitt elicited, however. Mary Russell Mitford was present when Hazlitt lectured “on the Modern Poets.” “Most charmingly he trimmed the whole set of them,” she recalls, adding that “Nothing was ever so amusing.” She was still amused several days later when she told Sir William Elford that “Mr. Hazlitt is really the most delightful lecturer I ever heard – his last, on modern poetry was amusing past all description to everybody but the parties concerned – them to be sure he spared as little as a mower spares the flowers in a hayfield” (quoted in Jones 1989: 284).

However entertaining, Hazlitt’s gift for provocation came bearing a serious purpose: he meant to shape auditors’ reading habits and determine which writers were worthy of joining the “British Poets.” By mocking women writers he might shame auditors out of taking them seriously. He dismissed Anna Letitia Barbauld as “a very pretty poetess” and “a neat and pointed prose-writer,” and sniffed that Joanna Baillie “treats her grown men and women as little girls treat their dolls” in her plays (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 301). His barbed critiques would have made the lecture theater a highly charged site for a poet like Keats, whose own desire for literary “fame” was accompanied by anxiety about his preparation for a poetic career. Keats was present when Hazlitt proclaimed that “fame” was “not popularity, the shout of the multitude, the idle buzz of

fashion, the venal puff, the soothing flattery of favour or of friendship; but it is the spirit of a man surviving himself in the minds and thoughts of other men, undying and imperishable" (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 298). Keats had probably already encountered Hazlitt's notion of "posthumous fame" in a *Roundtable* essay on it, but that concept would have gained significant resonance in the Surrey Institution's lecture theater, where he sat among readers who could determine his professional fate. Listening to a prominent and intermittently vituperative critic, Keats could not afford the amused detachment that Lord Byron assumed attending lectures by Coleridge and Thomas Campbell. In February 1819, Keats acknowledged his own relative vulnerability in response to a report of a patronizing compliment to his poetry: "You see what it is to be under six foot and not a lord" (Keats 1958: 2. 61). Byron's aristocratic remove was unavailable, and he was all too close to the women readers and writers who sat alongside him in the lecture theater and who, like him, lacked a university education.

However anxiety-provoking for lecturers and poets alike, public lectures offered both parties valuable opportunities for publicity. Duncan Wu notes that for some of Hazlitt's auditors "these lectures were the first sighting of a powerful new intellect" (Wu 2008: 287). Moreover, as Manning notes, the forum was particularly conducive to celebrity: "For the speaker, lectures offered an immediacy not offered by print: an exchange with an audience, both spontaneous and designed, a dramatic situation that could be exploited to make the lecturer, focus of all eyes and ears, into a star" (Manning 2005: 234). Hazlitt could in turn feature the work of poets he deemed worthy. In responding to complaints about his treatment of Chatterton – presumably Keats's admission, "I was very disappointed" – Hazlitt devoted additional attention to the poet (Keats 1958: 1. 237). Rather than recanting, however, Hazlitt actually expanded on his verdict, as if his auditors had simply misunderstood him, adding archly in a gratuitous swipe at Robert Southey, that had Chatterton lived, "who knows but he might have lived to be poet-laureat [sic]?" "It is much better to let him remain as he was," Hazlitt asserted, a "prodigy" (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 279). His *coup de grace* was actually directed at those, like Keats, "who are really capable of admiring Chatterton's genius, or of feeling an interest in his fate." To them "I would only say," he continued, "that I never heard any one speak of any one of his works as if it were an old well-known favourite, and had become a faith and a religion in his mind" (1998: 2. 281). In a final conciliatory gesture, however, Hazlitt read aloud as Chatterton's "best" poem one of Keats's favorites, "The Minstrel's Song Ælla," in its entirety (1998: 2. 281). He thus contributed to Chatterton's "fame," which he defined later in the series as the "recompense not of the living, but of the dead" (1998: 2. 298). Even as Hazlitt issued sustained critiques of "living poets," he quoted them at length. In the opening lecture of his third series, published as *Lectures on the Age of Elizabeth* (1820), Hazlitt read a line (slightly misquoting) from "Sleep and Poetry" – "Like strength reposing on his own right arm" – thereby making a small but audible contribution to Keats's own future "fame" (Keats 1958: 2. 230; Hazlitt 1998: 5. 171).

Keats's more sustained engagement with Hazlitt's lectures occurred, however, in silence and solitude, in acts of reading and letter-writing both during the series and

after he joined Tom in Teignmouth, where his brother was trying to recover his health. “[L]eft alone with his thoughts,” Keats carried on the lectures’ two-way exchange (Bate 1963: 321). David Bromwich notes that “[i]n the whole body of his letters he gives this sort of prominence to the words of no other writer” (1983: 365). Sometimes the impact was immediate. Soon after Hazlitt championed Voltaire, Keats reports reading him (Keats 1958: 1. 237). When Hazlitt mentioned Dryden’s translation of Boccaccio’s tale of Isabella, Keats “found a narrative which gripped him so powerfully that within hours of reading it he had drafted a few stanzas of a poem on the same subject” (Morton 1997: 229). Hazlitt is also widely credited with motivating a more thoroughgoing shift in Keats’s poetic thinking, from an anxious regard for his contemporaries (particularly Wordsworth and Byron) to a more enabling attention to the “old Poets” (Keats 1958: 1. 225). Keats took to heart Hazlitt’s organizing claim that no other poets “can really be put in competition” with Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 207).

Charting a decline from an English literary golden age, Hazlitt concluded his first series with a confession that “I have felt my subject gradually sinking from under me as I advanced, and have been afraid of ending in nothing.” Characterizing his lectures – and perhaps also English literary history – as a play, Hazlitt deems it a tragedy: “The interest has unavoidably decreased in almost every successive step of the progress, like a play that has its catastrophe in the first or second act” (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 320). Keats fully absorbed Hazlitt’s thesis. After Hazlitt argued on January 27th that Shakespeare “was the least of an egotist it was possible to be” (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 208), a jab apparently aimed at Wordsworth, Keats eagerly adopted the point as his own in a letter of February 3rd to J. H. Reynolds.⁵ Launching his own attack on his “Contemporaries,” Keats asks rhetorically, “are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist.” By the end of his letter Keats declares, “I will have no more of Wordsworth or Hunt in particular,” dismissing Byron and “the 4th Book of Child Harold” in the bargain. The letter ends with a sweeping renunciation, as if declaring his own poetic independence: “Let us have the old Poets” (Keats 1958: 1. 223–5).

Hazlitt’s treatment of Shakespeare would have played particularly well in the lecture theater. Although his discussion of *Hamlet* concerns “reading” the play, and he states elsewhere that “We do not like to see our author’s plays acted, and least of all, *Hamlet*,” he characterizes Shakespeare’s imagination as fundamentally theatrical (Hazlitt 1998: 1. 147). “In reading this author, you do not merely learn what his characters say, – you see their persons,” he claims, explaining that “By something expressed or understood, you are at no loss to decipher their peculiar physiognomy, the meaning of a look, the grouping, the bye-play, as we might see it on the stage” (1998: 2. 209). The “bye-play” includes actors registering their reactions physically to what other characters say. Hazlitt offers as an example the scene in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern listen to Hamlet’s “fine soliloquy on life” and seem to respond with inappropriate amusement. When Hamlet concludes, “Man delights not me, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so,” Rosencrantz claims that as they were listening to him they were thinking of a troop of actors newly arrived in Elsinore. Hazlitt notes that it is “as

if while Hamlet was making this speech his two old schoolfellows from Wittenberg had been really standing by, and he had seen them smiling by stealth, at the idea of the players crossing their minds" (1998: 2. 209). Hazlitt emphasizes the spontaneity of conversation in *Hamlet*, underscoring the dramatic possibilities of not knowing what another person will say next: "the dialogues in Shakespeare are carried on without any consciousness of what is to follow, without any appearance of preparation or premeditation." Even one's own voice can carry the element of surprise; drawing an analogy between the stage and dream life, Hazlitt suggests that in both "we hold conversations with ourselves, make remarks, or communicate intelligence, and have no idea of the answer which we shall receive, and which we ourselves make, till we hear it" (1998: 2. 211). Hazlitt underscores the theatricality of spoken language, the way in which, as Walter Ong suggests, "all sound, and especially oral utterance which comes from inside living organisms, is 'dynamic'" (Ong 1982: 32).

Keats had the "dynamic" effects of Shakespearean dialogue on his mind even before Hazlitt's series began. His December 1817 review for *The Champion* of Kean's return to the stage after illness (as the title character in *Richard III* and as Luke Traffic in Sir James Bland Burges's play *Riches: Or, The Wife and Brother*) focused on the more general topic of "Edmund Kean as a Shakespearean Actor." Keats singled out from Kean's "numerous excellencies, the one which at this moment most weighs upon us": "the elegance, gracefulness and music of elocution." He is interested in how the art of speaking well can animate the words on the page: "The sensual life of verse springs warm from the lips of Kean" (Keats 2003: 530). According to Keats, the actor lends "a sensual grandeur" to "Shakespearean hieroglyphics," explaining that while print conveys the "spiritual" aspects of the text, only on stage do words become – as Hazlitt put it in regard to Shakespeare's characters, "flesh and blood" (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 211). Borrowing one of Hazlitt's key terms (wielded most famously in his 1816 essay "On Gusto"), Keats identifies "an indescribable gusto" in Kean's "voice." Quoting Othello's cry, "Oh blood, blood, blood," Keats suggests that Shakespeare's "very words appear stained and gory" once Kean's "voice is loosed on them" (Keats 2003: 530). As Joseph Roach notes, Kean's audience responded in kind: "Lurid accounts of the spectators who fainted dead away during his passion-swept and supposedly improvised tirades make for some of the liveliest reading in theatrical history" (Roach 1993: 168). Keats learned that print could become "flesh and blood" in a kind of theatrical transubstantiation of print of which both Kean and Hazlitt were capable, and that he would try to conjure in his own verse.

In the lecture theater, Hazlitt (who famously championed Kean) may have recalled the actor to the minds of auditors. In recalling Hazlitt's lectures at the Surrey Institution, Bryan Waller Procter reports that "Keats, the poet, who used to go there to hear him, remarked to a friend of mine that he reminded him of Kean" (Procter 1830: 473). After reading lectures in manuscript from Hazlitt's second series, Keats observed that they displayed his "usual abrupt manner, and fiery laconiscism [sic]" (Wu 2008: 261). Mitford too noted Hazlitt's dramatic abilities, commenting that his "fine delivery" contained "a certain momentary upward look full of malice French and not quite free from malice English by which he contrives to turn the grandest compliment into the

bitterest sarcasm." When she read a printed version of his lectures, they seemed "so much civiller [sic] than my recollections." At first she believed that "he had softened and sweetened it from a well-grounded fear of pistol or poison," but she concluded that he had deliberately heightened the insult, concluding that "the man mind and body, has a genius for contempt" (quoted in Jones 1989: 285).

Both Keats and Mitford admired the aggressive, masculine performance styles of Kean and Hazlitt. As audience members, they held a silent, and thereby feminized, role in relationship to them. Their responses demonstrate, however, that the auditor's role did not preclude independent thought and even irreverent commentary. Keats registered his dissent from his "intellectual mentor" in a letter written during Hazlitt's series that explores the "passive and receptive" position of the flower's relationship to the bee and that offers the blank verse sonnet in which the poet simply listens to a thrush. Both the epistolary passage and the poem embrace the quality of "indolence" that Hazlitt had lamented in a recent lecture on James Thomson's poetry. Countering Hazlitt, Keats celebrates the quality that Susan Wolfson calls "[t]he most volatile character of Keats's self-definition," one defined in his work by its "shifting genders" (Wolfson 2006: 234). In considering the feminized positions of flower and listener, Keats exploits the gendered "volatility" of "indolence" and simultaneously asserts his own critical and poetic authority.

In a lecture "On Thomson and Cowper" (February 10), Hazlitt characterizes Thomson as "the most indolent of mortals and of poets," claiming that "[h]e seldom writes a good line, but he makes up for it by a bad one." (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 244). *The Castle of Indolence* is therefore not Thomson's "best poem," although "[h]e has in it, indeed, poured out the whole soul of indolence, diffuse, relaxed, supine, dissolved into a voluptuous dream" (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 246). Keats initially reports only that Hazlitt had "praised Cowper & Thompson [sic] but he gave Crabbe an unmerciful licking" (Keats 1958: 1. 227). In a letter written days later (February 19), however, he revisits Hazlitt's critique, picking up his key term of "indolence." Pursuing his own, independent line of thinking, Keats ignores both Hazlitt's complaint that Thomson "takes no pains, uses no self-correction" and his praise, that he "is the best of our descriptive poets" (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 244–5). Focusing instead on Hazlitt's key term of disapprobation, Keats mounts a defense of "delicious diligent Indolence" (Keats 1958: 1. 231).

Keats's recuperation of Thomson's "indolence" resonates with concerns about his own poetic career. He closes his letter of February 19 to Reynolds by confessing a desire "to excuse my own indolence" (1958: 1. 233). In a letter to his brothers written two days later (February 21), he confides "I have been abominably id[l]e," even though "I am reading Voltaire and Gibbon" and "I hear Hazlitt's Lectures regularly" (1958: 1. 235–7). His sense of doing nothing may have been related to nervousness about *Endymion*: "If Endymion serves me as a Pioneer perhaps I ought to be content," he tells Taylor several days later (February 27), adding "I am anxious to get Endymion printed that I may forget it and proceed" (1958: 1. 239). Although it may have begun as an excuse for "indolence," Keats's letter to Reynolds develops critical claims – and a set of images – that would assume a life their own in the letters and poems.

In a famous passage that reads like a lecture, complete with rhetorical questions and critical claims, Keats proclaims the receptivity of the flower equal to the activity of the bee: “The f[l]ower I doubt not receives a fair guerdon from the Bee – its leaves blush deeper in the next spring – and who shall say between Man and Woman which is the most delighted?” He answers his own question with a counterclaim to Hazlitt’s: “let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive” (1958: 1. 232).⁶ Like a science lecturer with an orrery, Keats introduces a poem that demonstrates his claims: “I was lead into these thoughts, my dear Reynolds, by the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of Idleness – I have not read any Books – the Morning said I was right – I had no Idea but of the Morning and the Thrush said I was right – seeming to say – ” (1958: 1. 232). He then seamlessly shifts from prose to blank verse without titling his poem:

O thou whose face hath felt the winter’s wind,
 Whose eye has seen the snow clouds hung in mist,
 And the black-elm tops ‘mong the freezing stars,
 To thee the spring will be a harvest-time.
 O thou whose only book has been the light
 Of supreme darkness which thou feddest on
 Night after night, when Phoebus was away,
 To thee the spring shall be a tripple morn.
 O fret not after knowledge – I have none,
 And yet my song comes native with the warmth;
 O fret not after knowledge – I have none,
 And yet the evening listens. He who saddens
 At thought of idleness cannot be idle,
 And he’s awake who thinks himself asleep.

If the poem is separated from the letter, it may be read as a conventional lyric with a human speaker, perhaps a poet, and an unseen, silent auditor. Keats did not publish the poem, however, and within the context of a letter in which he left it, the identities of the speaker and auditor are clear: it is a silent poet who listens to a thrush sing. Keats is true both to the sonnet’s genealogy – it is, in fact, a “little song” (*sonetto*), and to birdsong. He dispenses with a “knowledge” of conventional rhyme schemes while preserving repetition at the beginning of lines: each of the phrases “O thou,” “To Thee,” “O fret,” “And yet” is repeated twice. Keats thereby imitates not only the thrush’s short, melodic and repetitive bursts of song but also the orator’s use of *anaphora* to capture auditors and impress its points upon them.⁷

Despite its lack of end rhymes, the thrush’s argument takes sonnet form, employing the Petrarchan form’s *volta* and two Shakespearean quatrains with a final couplet. The bird addresses its auditor twice in doubled quatrains – “O thou,” “O thou” – as it rehearses the auditor’s prolonged period of remaining “passive and receptive,” simply feeling “the winter’s wind” and watching the night sky. The auditor will be rewarded,

the bird suggests, precisely because he has been “feeding” rather than producing, making his natural environment the only “book” he reads. Anticipating the bounty of “To Autumn,” the bird promises, “To thee the spring will be a harvest-time . . . To thee the spring will be a tripple morn.” Offering proof of its claims in the sestet, the thrush persuasively aligns its convictions with the inevitable return of spring: despite its own lack of “knowledge,” its “song comes native with the warmth.” Like a lecturer underscoring a thesis, the bird reiterates its main point: “O fret not after knowledge – I have none.” Despite this lack, the thrush has accomplished everything that the poet desires: its “song comes native with the warmth” and “the evening listens.” The thrush may direct its lessons to the silent listener, but it boasts all of nature as its audience in a natural amphitheater with columns of elm trees and candelabra of stars caught in their uppermost branches. Practicing what it preaches, the bird’s poetry comes “as naturally as the Leaves to a tree.”

The thrush maintains a steady cadence of iambic pentameter in the octave, but after the volta, several caesurae and at least one line of tetrameter stagger the lines, as if using rhythm for dramatic closure. It pauses twice for emphasis in the central, repeated line – “O fret not after knowledge – I have none” – and presents its final piece of evidence with a full stop, mid-line: “And yet the evening listens.” The sonnet continues with a loose final couplet: “He who saddens / At thought of idleness cannot be idle, / And he’s awake who thinks himself asleep.” In the last line the bird asserts what the speaker of “Ode to a Nightingale” will doubt (“Do I wake or sleep?”) and leaves as its best evidence the poem itself, composed while the “idle” poet was simply listening.

In the letter, Keats immediately makes light of the poem’s defense of “idleness” by assuring Reynolds, “I am sensible all this is a mere sophistication, however it may neighbour to any truths, to excuse my own indolence” (1958: 1. 233). But the “truths” the bird articulates nevertheless hold: not only the value of “indolence” for poetry, but also Keats’s rejection of his own earnest participation in the pursuit of “knowledge” that defined the culture of public lectures. In a gentle parody of Hazlitt’s critique of Thomson, the sonnet employs the lecture’s argumentative structure to unravel that culture’s claims on him as an aspiring poet. In doing so, he simultaneously defines his own authority against the entire enterprise of cultivating his worthiness for the true “fame” that Hazlitt described. In a series of ironies, the lectures gave Keats a chance to rebel against his own determination and in the process gain confidence that he would “be among the English Poets after my death” (1958: 1. 394). He nevertheless found in the weeks that followed Hazlitt’s series that he could not maintain the letter’s commitment to “idleness.” Settled with Tom in Teignmouth, completing his corrections to *Endymion*, he renewed his commitment to “follow Solomon’s directions of ‘get Wisdom – get understanding.’” In late April Keats rededicates himself to the arduous pursuit of “knowledge” by stating that his “road lies though [for through] application study and thought” (1958: 1. 271). A few days later (April 27) he charts his path: having sent for “some Books,” he plans to “learn Greek, and very likely Italian” as a way to “prepare” himself “to ask Hazlitt in about a years time the best metaphysical road I can take” (1958: 1. 274).

Despite these successive tacks in (professional) direction, the thrush's lesson on remaining "passive and receptive," particularly in listening to another's voice, exerted a persistent influence in the poems. Walter Jackson Bate argues that Keats's self-understanding as a poet "began with unexpected suddenness this spring" and that this "new self-clarification" involved a poetics that was at once "turned more to the inner life" and "altogether dramatic" (Bate 1963: 321–2). Keats was interested in writing for the stage in this period; when he hastily left London shortly after Hazlitt's series ended to join Tom in Teignmouth, he was forced to cancel a meeting with Peter Moore, "one of the managers at Drury Lane, with whom he had hoped to discuss his theatrical ambitions" (Motion 1997: 235). Bromwich argues, however, that "if one looks in romantic poetry for a Shakespearean fullness, and a Shakespearean gusto in dialogue, the place to find them" is Keats's odes, because they "have answering voices that are not merely echoes." Bromwich suggests that by borrowing a Shakespearean sense of drama, Keats "opened up the romantic lyric from within," arguing that "Keats had come to a new understanding of a how a writer's voice might implicate a reader's fate" (1983: 401). I agree, but I would shift this claim's focus away from the "reader" of Keats's printed volumes to, more appropriately, the listener within the poems, who is the poet himself. Keats wanted to capture the driving force of the poem's other voices by having the poet himself absorb their import like a stage actor or a lecture auditor.

Keats uses dialogue in *Endymion*, the poem he was revising across Hazlitt's series. Book III, in particular, features Endymion's reactions to Glaucus's rehearsal of his history, which parallels Endymion's own. Endymion's reaction when Glaucus initially greets him borders on melodrama. "Thou art the man!" Glaucus exclaims twice, and "Endymion started back / Dismay'd," asking "What lonely death am I to die / In this cold region? Will he let me freeze, / And float my brittle limbs o'er polar seas?" (iii. 255–60). In this passage, Endymion has a physical reaction to what he hears – he leaps backward – but his response is primarily verbal. By May 1819, when he composed "Ode to a Nightingale," and in the summer that followed, when he began "The Fall of Hyperion," Keats had learned to infuse his lines with a far more integral sense of drama by featuring a consequential act of listening that is registered physically.

"Ode to a Nightingale" charts the consequences of a double act of hearing, as the speaker attends to the bird's song before catching the sound of his own voice. The nightingale, unlike the thrush, proves to be an "immortal" bird, and their songs tell the difference, since the thrush's message is entirely comprehensible to the poet, while the nightingale's song remains untranslated. Helen Vendler reads the poem as Keats's "examination of the limits and powers of wordless, abstract, and non-representational music" (1983: 105). Those "powers" include the nightingale's command of an audience as chronologically vast as the thrush's was geographically wide: the nightingale has comforted the biblical figure of Ruth long before the poet listens. The bird's "immortal" fame eventually separates it from the speaker: were he to die "Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain – / To thy high requiem become a sod" (ll. 59–60). The speaker realizes that the nightingale's song will leave him cold, just as he begins to listen – not to the bird's voice, but to his own, human words. "Forlorn!" he exclaims,

repeating himself, “the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!” (ll. 71–72). The poet then asks himself, rather than the bird whose “music” has “fled”: “Do I wake or sleep?” (l. 80). He is surprised when his own voice jolts him out of his absorption in the bird’s song back to a consideration of his own state, “Here, where men sit and hear each other groan” (l. 24). Although he may still be unable to see “what flowers are at my feet” (l. 41), his own mournful notes ground him, leaving him fully aware of his mortal state, if dazed. Hazlitt’s comment on Shakespeare and dreams resonates in Keats’s ode: “we hold conversations with ourselves, make remarks, or communicate intelligence, and have no idea of the answer which we shall receive, and which we ourselves make, till we hear it” (Hazlitt 1998: 2. 211).

In *The Fall of Hyperion*, the poet encounters another “immortal,” but Moneta grasps the implications of his mortal state and speaks to it. Like the thrush, her voice carries authority; she too lectures the poet, offering definitions and distinctions between “poets” and “dreamers.” Like the thrush (and unlike the nightingale), Moneta speaks directly to the poet. Although she uses “an immortal’s sphered words” (i. 249), she understands that she must “humanize” her tale of the Titans for the poet:

Mortal, that thou may’st understand right,
I humanize my sayings to thine ear,
Making comparisons of earthly things;
Or thou might’st better listen to the wind,
Whose language is to thee a barren noise,
Though it blows legend-laden through the trees —
(ii. 1–6)

The nightingale’s song certainly comes “legend-laden through the trees,” bearing tales of “faery-lands forlorn,” but the poet finds it cannot speak to his plight as well as she does by speaking of “earthly things.” By approximating a human voice as best she can, Moneta has a forceful effect on the poet that is registered in thoroughly dramatic terms.

In *The Fall*, as in *Hamlet*, listening is potentially traumatic, a possibility that Keats registers in explicitly physical, and even medical, terms. Although he will be transfixed by her face, the poet hears Moneta before he sees her, and her voice arrests him. In yet another scene of unexpected address, he recalls: “I heard / Language pronounc’d.” Moneta then issues a challenging command: “If thou cannot ascend / These steps, die on that marble where thou art” (i. 106–8). The poet’s response is immediate, involuntary, and physical: “suddenly a palsied chill / Struck from the paved level up my limbs, / And was ascending quick to put cold grasp / Upon those streams that pulse beside the throat” (i. 122–5). In response to Glaucus’s speech, Endymion articulates his fear that he might “freeze” where he stands; in *The Fall*, in contrast, the poet’s temperature is measured internally, as the cold moves through his bloodstream. It is as if the poet has no chance to process Moneta’s words; they simply transform him physically. “Suddenly” he is fighting for his life: “I strove hard to escape / The numbness; strove to gain the lowest step” (i. 127–8). The poet also reacts to Moneta’s words by crying out involuntarily: when she

articulates her distinction between the poet and the dreamer – “The one pours out a balm upon the world, / The other vexes it” – the poet recalls, “Then shouted I / Spite of myself, and with a Pythia’s spleen, / ‘Apollo! faded! far flown Apollo!’” (i. 199–204). The traumatic sound of his own voice is registered physically: as the “chill” reaches his throat “I shriek’d,” and “the sharp anguish of my shriek / Stung my own ears” (i. 125–126). In both “Ode to a Nightingale” and *The Fall of Hyperion*, the poet’s own words pain him, and in the latter they are as wounding as Kean’s Shakespearean characters. All three poems – sonnet, ode, and fragmented epic – feature a listener who finds himself in an auditorium in which “The spoken word is ... an event” (Ong 1982: 75).

The lessons on listening that crystallized in Keats’s unrhymed sonnet also had an after-life in his letters. The thrush became a complex figure whose song brought with it a host of associations. Writing to his brothers two days after he composed the sonnet, he reports that “The Thrushes and Blackbirds have been singing me into an idea that it was spring, and almost that Leaves were on the trees – so that black clouds and boisterous winds seem to have muster’d and collected to a full Divan for the purpose of convincing me to the contrary.” He soon shifts to concerns about his career, closely linking the bird to his own hopes surrounding *Endymion*’s publication: “Taylor says my Poem shall be out in a Month ... The Thrushes are singing now – af it [*for as if*] they would speak to the Winds because their big brother Jack, the spring was’nt [*sic*] far off” (Keats 1958: 1. 236–7). As if buoyed by the thrush’s confidence, Keats assumes its authority, predicting a professional and seasonal springtime. Several days later, he acts on that confidence, explaining to his publisher that although “I have most likely but moved into the Go-cart from the leading strings” with the poem’s completion, he has “a few Axioms” of his own. In articulating them, Keats gently lectures his publisher. Invoking the sonnet’s imagery in his third “Axiom,” he assumes the thrush’s confident authority, declaring “That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (1958: 1. 238–9). Although the seed of this “Axiom” may have come from Hazlitt’s essay “On Posthumous Fame,” it only flowers in the letters in response to Hazlitt’s lectures (Bromwich 1983: 363–4).

Two years later, in Keats’s final spring, the thrush’s song came to figure a diminished hope for his own survival. Writing in February 1820 to Fanny Brawne – who had herself become associated with his poetry in the late poems written to and about her – Keats concludes “that there is something wrong about me that my constitution will either conquer or give way to.” “Let us hope for the best,” he charges her, enlisting the bird’s support: “Do you hear the Th[r]ush singing over the field? I think it is a sign of mild weather – so much the better for me.” Retroactively, his blank verse sonnet becomes a love poem: “That Thrush is a fine fellow I hope he was fortunate in his choice this year” (Keats 1958: 2. 265). “There’s the Thrush again,” he writes to her in March, “I can’t afford it – he’ll run me up a pretty Bill for Music – besides he ought to know I deal at Clementi’s.” Making a joking reference to the London “music publishers and makers of musical instruments,” Keats shows that he still hears the bird’s admonition to “fret not” (1958: 2. 278 and n.).

SEE ALSO

Chapter 17 “Leigh Hunt’s Cockney Canon: Sociability and Subversion from Homer to *Hyperion*”; chapter 18 “Poetry, Conversation, Community: *Annus Mirabilis*, 1797–1798”; chapter 26 “‘The feel of not to feel it,’ or the Pleasures of Enduring Form”; chapter 30 “Sexual Politics and the Performance of Gender in Romantic Poetry”

NOTES

- 1 P. P. Howe identifies the crowd that surrounded Keats as John Hunt and his son Henry, John Landseer and his sons Thomas and Edwin, William Bewick, and Charles Jeremiah Wells. He adds, “Of Bob Harris I am not aware that we know anything” (1923: 241–2). Robert Gittings provides the correction of “Rox,” which should be “Cox,” for who was Keats’s “old medical bookseller” (Howe 1923: 186; Gittings 1970: 56n).
- 2 Keats attended lectures at both Guy’s and St Thomas’s because from 1768 to 1825 Guy’s “was linked to the existing school at St Thomas’s. Educational responsibilities were divided between the two sites: anatomy, dissection and surgery were taught at St Thomas’s, chemistry and material medica at Guy’s” (Motion 1997: 76).
- 3 In his first literary series, the print versions of the lectures (from which I quote) seem to follow closely the scripts from which he spoke at the Surrey Institution. It is important to note, however, that there may have been some variation between the oral and print versions; see Duncan Wu’s edition of the lectures (Hazlitt 1998: passim) for his careful comparison of the available manuscripts with the print editions.
- 4 An annual subscription rate of £3 3s 0d for “Gentlemen recommended by a Proprietor” was announced in the *Morning Chronicle* (March 18, 1809); the rates for their sons and for women were slightly less, but all subscribers needed both personal connections and sufficient funds.
- 5 David Bromwich identifies Hazlitt as the “event” that would “advance him from the novice who took Hunt and Byron as his patterns, to the author who taught himself to admire Shakespeare and Milton and to enter the lists with Wordsworth” (Bromwich 1983: 362).
- 6 Anne-Lise François persuasively traces a persistent strain in Romantic poetry of a closely related quality, which she defines as “the open secret of fulfilled experience” that finds “fulfillment not in narrative fruition but in grace” (2008: xvi).
- 7 Keats probably heard either a Song or a Mistle Thrush, and if so he seems to have been listening carefully. Brunn and Singer describe the song of the more melodic of the two, the Song Thrush, as “flute-like and varied, tending to repeat short sections” (1970: 264). Peterson and Hollom describe the Song Thrush’s song as “loud and musical, the short, varied phrases repeated 2–4 times, between brief pauses” (1966: 270). Thanks to Jay Zimmerman for these references.

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Laboring-Class Poetry in the Romantic Era

Michael Scrivener

If laboring-class poetry is seen in terms of what Foucault called the author-function, then two different kinds of poetry emerge, one of which is attached to an author with a biography and career (Burns), and another which is part of a social discourse (Luddite songs). Furthermore, there is not a persuasive argument to exclude ventriloquized laboring-class poetry, which is not necessarily authored by laboring-class writers but which is constructed to provoke readers to experience the writing as though it were from the laboring class. The popular three-volume *The Universal Songster* (1825), for example, includes many dozens of songs that represent mimetically the voice and language of laboring-class people of various ethnicities and geographical regions: Jews, Africans, Irish, Scots, Welsh, and residents of London and Yorkshire. Many of these songs are anonymous, pseudonymous, or authored by writers whose names are too obscure to infer anything about them. It is conceivable that some of the numerous “Jew Songs” in the *Songster* were written by Jews but there is no way to tell, and even if one could find out, the reader faces over fifty songs with overwhelmingly similar qualities, regardless of who seems to be the author. When we read the politically radical poetry from the Spencean *Songbook*, the periodicals like *Politics for the People; or, a Salmagundy for Swine*, and Luddite documents, the identity of the author is less significant than the verse’s social meanings. If we want to make sense of Olaudah Equiano’s religious poem included in his *Interesting Narrative* (2001: 210–23), we have to turn to Methodist and Dissent hymns, the most meaningful context for such writing, even though we know things about the author. Most Romantic-era religious poetry, some of it written by laboring-class people, much of it written for them, has been ignored by scholars, but when it begins to be studied, the biographies of the authors – when they are knowable – will be less helpful than the overall religious discourse that prevailed at the time.

It seems that the category of laboring-class poetry has invited interpretive approaches that rely on author-centered ways of reading to validate the political agency or to

inspire the cultural pride of the laboring class. With a few exceptions and until very recently, the approach to laboring-class poetry has been biographical and ideological, highlighting the difficulties of the poet's life and making central the conflict between the poet's resistance and resignation to structures of established power. Perhaps the author-centered approach has lost some of its appeal if the recent special issue of *Criticism* (Landry and Christmas 2005) devoted to laboring-class poetry is any indication. The editors, Donna Landry and William Christmas, two prominent critics of laboring-class poetry, announce that aesthetic issues – not the biographical, political, or ideological – and long neglected religious poetry require the most attention now. Biographical, political, and ideological concerns are not wholly jettisoned in the special issue, to be sure, for going back to a formalistic “New Criticism” is not an option, but the relative neglect of aesthetic concerns and the almost total neglect of religious poetry is beginning to be rectified. A critic like Brian Maidment, who several decades ago resisted interpreting laboring-class poetry with Marxist and radical emphases, invites a reconsideration with this new turn to the aesthetic. Maidment's anthology even omitted the word “class” from the title of his book: *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian England*. He identified three separate traditions of working-class poetry: politically radical; Parnassian; and “homely,” in dialect or vernacular (1987: 14–15). In Maidment's discussion of Chartist and radical poetry, he stressed formal and generic issues rather than biography and political commitment. Even explicitly political Chartist poetry was read by Maidment not as political action but as sublimated aggression and psychological catharsis, a vehicle for creating and extending “group identity and political solidarity” (Maidment 1985: 37). Maidment's movement from the political to the aesthetic, from ideology critique to formal description, which countered the spirit of the times in the late 1980s, now seems more mainstream. However valuable Maidment's contributions to our understanding of laboring-class poetry, his work is weak where the biographical and ideological criticism is strong. The critical task now is to read the aesthetic ideologically and read the ideological aesthetically, giving full weight to the entire meaning of the poetry.

The most popular and influential laboring-class poets of the Romantic era, Robert Burns (1759–96), Robert Bloomfield (1766–1823), and John Clare (1793–1864), should be located within the historical process aptly described by Raymond Williams as the “long revolution,” the slow, uneven, and complicated democratization of political, economic, and cultural institutions. Of the social backgrounds of the major English writers during the Romantic era, Williams notes a comparative decrease in aristocrats and Oxbridge graduates and a notable increase in the number of those from families of “tradesmen, craftsmen, poor farmers and labourers” (1965: 260). The collection of laboring-class poetry published by Pickering & Chatto – six volumes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century verse with historical and literary commentary and notes (Goodridge 2003; 2006) – marks a new moment in the study of this once neglected poetry. The editors routinely complain that it was difficult deciding whom to exclude and sensibly make no effort to fill space in the volumes with the work of poets like Burns, Bloomfield, and Clare, the lattermost who has been treated with a magnificent edition by the Oxford

University Press. The early and middle Clare poems occupy six volumes, a sign – as if we needed one – that the “peasant poet” is a main literary figure of the nineteenth century. Since becoming the national poet of Scotland soon after his death, Burns has long been a canonical figure, never suffering a period of neglect as did both Bloomfield and Clare – Bloomfield after his death, Clare after his early publication success.

In addition to these “big three” laboring-class notables, Pickering & Chatto have included an impressively large number of poets who wrote and published between 1780 and 1830, the half-century period usually designated as the Romantic era: John Freeth (1731–1808), Edward Rushton (1756–1814), David Love (1750–1857), William Job (fl. 1785), William Newton (fl. 1785–90), Ann Yearsley (1753–1806), John Frederick Bryant (1753–91), George Campbell (1761–1818), Gavin Wilson (fl. 1788), John Walker (fl. 1789), Elizabeth Hands (1746–1815), David Sillar (1760–1830), James Wheeler (1718–88), Alexander Wilson (1766–1813), Elizabeth Bentley (1767–1839), John Learmont (fl. 1791–1818), William Lane (b. 1744), Janet Little (1759–1813), Ellen Taylor (fl. 1792), Samuel Thomson (1766–1816), Thomas Spence (1750–1814), Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg) (1747–1826), John Forster (fl. 1797), Robert Anderson (1770–1833), William Gifford (1756–1826), Ann Candler (1740–1814), William Holloway (1761–1854), Nathaniel Bloomfield (b. 1759), Thomas Bachelor (fl. 1804–09), Charlotte Richardson (b. 1775), James Hogg (1770–1835), George Bloomfield (1757–1831), Mary Bryan (fl. 1815–29), John Mitford (1782–1831), James Chambers (1740–182?), Robert Millhouse (1788–1839), Ebenezer Elliott (1781–1849), William Smith (fl. 1819–26), John Shaw (fl. 1824–36), James Bird (1788–1839), Thomas Wilson (1773–1858), John Nicholson (1790–1843), and Robert Franklin (fl. 1809–51). (I have not listed the various anonymous and pseudonymous authors also included by Pickering & Chatto.) Furthermore, to illustrate just how large the field of authors actually is, I will list some laboring-class authors who published poetry and who have received some critical treatment but who are not included by Pickering & Chatto: Robert C. Fair (fl. 1815–20), Edward J. Blandford (fl. 1817–20), Robert Wedderburn (1762–1835?), Allen Davenport (1775–1846), and Richard “Citizen” Lee (fl. 1795). These are authors for whom we have names but many of the poets publishing their work in Romantic-era radical periodicals like *Black Dwarf*, *Sherwin’s Political Register*, *Theological and Political Comet*, and *The Medusa* used pseudonyms (Gregory Grunter), initials (F. A. C.), or anonymity. The authors of the Luddite songs and poems included in Kevin Binfield’s book omit reference to their real names in order to protect themselves from getting hanged (Binfield 2004: 1–7). If we also include the category of text I identified as ventriloquistic or anonymous, then the field of laboring-class poetry is as capacious – and as difficult to define – as Romanticism itself.

The category itself of laboring-class poetry has long been unclear. The Pickering & Chatto editors, aware of the phrase’s difficulties, opted for the term and defended its accuracy for the poets in their collection by calling attention to the self-conscious identification of the poets with one another as constituting an alternative but “overlapping” canon. Furthermore, John Goodridge provides other essential criteria by which

they are to be understood as belonging to a “laboring class”: the poets come from “lower-class or working families and did not receive a classical or university education”; occupations include artisan, independent workers such as some shopkeepers, various wage-laborers and “itinerant sellers” (Goodridge 2003: 1. xiv). There are, then, three components comprising the classification: an act of conscious identification with other poets, a particular kind of education (or lack of a privileged education), and location within a stratified social hierarchy. Some of the poets selected for the Pickering & Chatto anthology fulfill at most only one of the criteria. William Gifford (1756–1826), eminent Tory satirist, classical scholar and editor, who came from an impoverished background, was apprenticed as a shoemaker until patronage and a scholarship sent him to Oxford where he excelled. A conundrum as old as Marxism itself is the connection between social being – one’s location in the social hierarchy – and social consciousness. Leftist theory, which expects laborers to have the sociopolitical consciousness appropriate for their role in the class struggle, needs to account for the *actual* consciousness of laborers, which only sometimes corresponds with what their “social being” determined. From classical Marxism and its theory of ideological false consciousness to Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, and cultural materialism’s synthesis of several theories, politically engaged criticism has tried to account for the degree and style of resistance or resignation to dominant power structures by those in the laboring class. The Pickering & Chatto editors are to be congratulated for including the vehemently antidemocratic and intellectually talented Gifford, who hardly fits into a narrative based on class struggle and class consciousness, but who is too important a literary figure to ignore.

To call Romantic-era poets like Burns, Bloomfield, and Clare “laboring-class” rather than plebeian (Thompson 1993a; Janowitz 1998; Christmas 2001) or self-taught (Maidment 1987) is convenient and practical, but no label is entirely satisfactory and each of the three has an important truth. “Laboring class” emphasizes manual labor, “plebeian” social subordination, and “self-taught” writing’s integral connections with educational institutions and privileges. Among the canonical Romantic poets Keats and Blake have been called working class occasionally, but scholars have long viewed Keats, although outside the Oxbridge network, from a lower-middle-class background, as more properly designated as “middling class,” and Blake was an artisan whose exclusion from the Pickering & Chatto volume does not seem justified; his name should have been noticed, if nothing else. The instance of Keats raises the issue of class in terms of the discourse about poetry and culture, as Keats was infamously attached to the “Cockney School” of poetry in Lockhart’s notorious review in *Blackwood’s* (1817). Genteel literary culture repelled threats to its power by mixing social and aesthetic criteria. Although Keats was not a laboring-class poet in a sociological sense, in the discourse about poetry he sometimes functioned as one, as did other middling-class writers like John Thelwall (1764–1834), who was treated by Francis Jeffrey, prominent critic of the *Edinburgh Review*, precisely as if he were a laboring-class writer trying to intrude where he did not belong: he characterizes Thelwall’s poetic ambition as “impatience of honest industry,” and “presumptuous vanity,” concluding that Thelwall

should remain behind the shop counter (Jeffrey 1803: 197–200). The examples of Keats and Thelwall add weight to Gareth Stedman Jones's provocative argument that "class" is an entirely discursive formation. By characterizing the early nineteenth-century and Chartist laborers as hopelessly befuddled by the illusions of parliamentary reform and artisanal individualism, Jones also practiced a rigid form of ideological criticism in his alignment of the Marxist categories of social being and social consciousness (1984: 90–178). Nevertheless, attending to the role that class plays in social discourse and how class concepts are linguistically manufactured is a way to gain some critical perspective on something that is difficult to think about clearly.

Dominating the discussion of class is the three-class paradigm – aristocracy, middle class, working class – that serious scholars consider not wholly applicable for English society 1750–1850 but not wholly irrelevant either. The Marxist historian R. S. Neale has developed a useful five-class model applicable for the late eighteenth century and early decades of the nineteenth century, the "formative phase of industrial capitalism": the exclusive, authoritarian landowning upper class; the deferential middle class; the socially blocked, less deferential, and often politically insurgent middling class; the working class seeking state protection; and finally the deferential and politically passive working class (Neale 1981: 130–3). With Neale's model in mind, one can take another look at the three major laboring-class poets of the Romantic era. Tenant farmer Burns, who also received much more than a minimal education, is perhaps as much middling as laboring class, while Bloomfield's urban experiences as a shoemaker placed him in contact with London radicalism, dominated by the middling class. As an agricultural laborer, John Clare would fall into Neale's working class, more materially dependent on landowners than Bloomfield. According to Neale, after mid-century industrialization had diminished the role of the middling class, as working-class and bourgeois radicalism were ascendant, but in the period from 1800 to the 1840s the middling class was "the central, most unstable and most significant political class in England" (1981: 134–5). The cultural insurgence of the middling class is evident in the case of not just Burns but Blake, Keats, Thelwall, the London Corresponding Society, and the various permutations of Painite artisanal radicalism that dominated the reform movements from the 1820s to the collapse of Chartism. Favored occupations for worker-intellectuals and poets were shoemaking, tailoring, and printing, as these forms of labor required relatively less concentrated attention than other skilled trades and permitted relatively more leisure for reading and writing (Ranci re 1983: 1–2, 11). As printing technology was less capital-intensive than it would become after the steam press became dominant, the early nineteenth century was a golden age of independent printers (Vincent 1981: 10; Hearn 1978: 246). It is also notable that agricultural labor rather than factory work dominates Romantic-era laboring-class poetry, mostly because few adult men worked in factories until the 1830s.

Poet laureate and former 1790s radical Robert Southey wrote the first critical treatment of laboring-class poets in his long introduction to the poetry of John Jones, an old servant. Far from seeing plebeian poetry as a threat to the established cultural order, Southey dismissively claims that what he calls "bad poetry" cannot cause any

harm, and sometimes the work of the “uneducated” poets is considerably better than bad (1925: 163). His adjective “uneducated” is ideologically pointed, as he is claiming for the Oxbridge gentleman the only “education” worthy of the name, but on the other hand, “education,” however defined, is a cultural and political issue, something that could be changed. The older class attitude assumed that laborers were essentially different as human beings. According to Southey, if writing poetry, good or bad, makes laborers happy and provides an outlet for their aspirations, all well and good. Jones’s poetry, for example, displays “humility,” “good character,” and literary attainments sufficient to make him cheerful and not “discontented with his station” (1925: 11–12). His version of literary history assumes two tiers, one that is refined and polished, reflecting the overall “improvement” of manners, morals, and intellect after the Middle Ages, and the one occupied by the laboring-class poets (1925: 13–15). Part of the normal functioning of modern society, according to Southey, throws up talented children of the poor who should become scholarship students trained for the church; aiming for the highest honors in poetry, however, does not seem reasonable (1925: 88–9). Southey concludes that the increase in laboring-class poetry is a good thing but he hints at a possible danger: “I would have said something here concerning the March of Intellect, and the beneficial direction which might be given it by those who are not for beating it to the tune of *Ça ira*” (1925: 167). The Poet Laureate, then, allowed a space for the laboring-class poets, some of whose efforts were occasionally even good, but poetry by the “uneducated” he viewed largely as harmless opportunities for self-expression and humanitarian occasions for dispensing charity to the deserving poor. Anything linked to the political aspirations hinted at in the French revolutionary song that Southey cites is obviously far out of bounds, but the enterprise itself of poor people writing and even publishing poetry is politically innocuous.

Thomas Carlyle in his essay “Corn-Law Rhymes” (1832) challenges Southey’s dismissive concept of uneducated poet by attacking Southey’s normative “education” as exclusively aristocratic and socially privileged; Carlyle finds in the reformist poetry of Ebenezer Elliott (1781–1849) a socially renovating energy and power. Carlyle also blurs the distinction between laboring-class and elite poetry by attending to the new cultural situation in which plebeian writing plays a central not a marginal role. “For a generation that reads Cobbett’s Prose, and Burns’s Poetry, it need be no miracle that here is a man [Elliott] who can handle both pen and hammer like a man” (Carlyle 1915: 140). Carlyle’s “Burns” (1828) pairs the “peasant poet” and Scottish “ploughman” with the noble Byron as the two most important poets of the age. Carlyle’s Burns is a poet with the power to reconcile opposites and contain conflicting forces:

There is a decisive strength in him, and yet a sweet native gracefulness: he is tender, he is vehement, yet without constraint or too visible effort; he melts the heart, or inflames it, with a power which seems habitual and familiar to him. We see that in this man there was the gentleness, the trembling pity of a woman, with deep earnestness, the force and passionate ardour of a hero. Tears lie in him, and consuming fire; as lightning lurks in the drops of the summer cloud. He has a resonance in his bosom for every note of human

feeling; the high and the low, the sad, the ludicrous, the joyful, are welcome in their turns to his "lightly-moved and all-conceiving spirit." (Carlyle 1950: 15)

The quotation ending the passage is from Carlyle's own translation of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (Book II, chapter 2), specifically where the prophetic and godlike powers of the great poet are extolled. Carlyle is not treating Burns as a "freak of nature" (Maidment 1985: 157) but as a representative figure of the new, anti-aristocratic age in which as a matter of course the most creative energies are coming from plebeian writers. According to Anne Janowitz, the "polite" Robert Burns was a genius of nature, a one-of-a-kind individual, an anomaly without sociopolitical significance, but for working-class readers Burns was a popular poet with representative power (1998: 67); Burns became the model of the "peasant poet" for nineteenth-century laboring-class poets like Bloomfield and Clare, just as Stephen Duck had been the model in the eighteenth century (Christmas 2001: 15). Carlyle's Burns is closer to the working-class Burns than the polite Burns, who was detached from the plebeian literary tradition most effectively by Francis Jeffrey of the *Edinburgh Review* (Christmas 2001: 33). A follower of Thomas Carlyle, Edwin Paxton Hood (1820–85), twenty years after Southey's *Uneducated Poets*, makes high claims for laboring-class poetry, admiring Robert Nicoll (1814–37), despite his radicalism, as a second Burns, and calling John Clare the "Wordsworth of Labour" (Hood 1851: 75–127, 155). Highlighting the "dignity of labour," Hood moralizes and aestheticizes unsystematically like his mentor but not nearly as eloquently as Carlyle.

Carlyle's sense of the historical transition away from aristocratic domination is also articulated by the historian Michael Davis, who points out that, although the London Corresponding Society (1792–9) did not achieve its political goals of annual parliaments and radical parliamentary reform (universal manhood suffrage), it exerted considerable cultural influence in terms of overall literacy and education (Davis 2002: 1. xxxvii). Even before the French Revolution, plebeian cultural creativity accompanied other politically insurgent moments – Wilkes and Liberty in the 1760s, sympathy with the American Revolution in the 1770s, slavery abolition and parliamentary reform in the 1780s. It cannot be an accident that so much of the laboring-class poetry of the second half of the eighteenth century was rebellious. As William Christmas argues, "plebeian poets were capable of articulating ideological resistance against the dominant culture within poetic discourses that were both publishable and marketable in the period" (2001: 22).

While there was an inexorable movement against aristocratic domination in all fields, there was also the residual power of patronage, an aristocratic form of relationship that the middle-class elite exercised extensively in the eighteenth century. One of the first laboring-class poets, Stephen Duck (1705–56), famously received the patronage of Queen Caroline after his well-received *The Thresher's Labour* (1730) had been published. After Duck's suicide, he became a negative example of the dangers of patronage and excessive ambition. The patronage relationship was not uniformly oppressive or demeaning but entailed a variety of configurations. One of the most

talented laboring-class poets, Mary Leapor (1722–46) enjoyed what appears to have been a friendly relationship with her patroness Bridget Freemantle (Andrews 2007: 94–5), but the most contentious patronage relationship was that between Hannah More (1745–1833), a poet in her own right, and Ann Yearsley (1752–1806), the “Milkwoman.”

The Bluestockings Hannah More and Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800) assisted Yearsley and her family, which was desperately impoverished, and brought to publication by subscription *Poems, On Several Occasions* (1785), with a preface by More. After the successful volume brought in £350, Yearsley challenged More over the disposition of the money, which More controlled. Yearsley made the dispute public, people took sides, and finally More and Yearsley ended their relationship. Even without More’s assistance Yearsley continued to write and publish with notable success: another volume of poetry (1787), a play that was produced in Bristol and Bath (1789), and a novel for which she was paid £200 (1795). A cache of Yearsley manuscripts recently discovered has become a source for greater insight into Yearsley and patronage. Moira Ferguson, who wrote on the unpublished Yearsley poems held in the Bristol Library, emphasized Yearsley’s rebellion against and independence from the patronage relationship and its oppressive class power (Ferguson 1993), but Mary Waldron and Frank Felsenstein challenged this interpretation as ahistorically feminist. Yearsley’s dispute with More was over specific abuses of power and poor judgment, not patronage itself. Felsenstein cites extensively from the Thorp Archive in Leeds, a hitherto unknown source of Yearsley correspondence, to illustrate that Yearsley sought other, more reliable patrons, with some of whom she enjoyed rewarding intellectual friendships. Although Yearsley sometimes tormented herself with shame and self-hatred over the need for patronage, she ordinarily accepted patronage as a structure within which she knew how to operate effectively (Felsenstein 2002; 2003). As Kerri Andrews explains, the literary market and patronage were not mutually exclusive but options writers could and did utilize (2007: 93). The treatment of patronage by Felsenstein and Andrews is helpful because it preserves the historically specific social institutions within which literary production took place and does not impose anachronistic narratives about personal autonomy. A reader can appreciate the talent and courage of Yearsley without neglecting the social network, which she cultivated and which enriched her writing.

Like Yearsley, Robert Bloomfield came from the countryside, and also like Yearsley, he did not stay there, for he spent much of his life after the age of eleven in London as a shoemaker, exposed to the cosmopolitan currents of urban life available to an artisan. With access to an assortment of newspapers, listening at the Old Jewry chapel to the radical sermons of Joseph Fawcett (1758–1804), attending with his brother the debates at the Coachmakers’ Hall, studying the older English poets in the cheap editions available during the “brief copyright window” of 1774–1808 after the Donaldson case (St Clair 2004: 53), Bloomfield was positioned to integrate various strands of plebeian culture. Bloomfield’s astonishingly popular *The Farmer’s Boy* (1800) – over 26,000 copies sold in three years (Christmas 2001: 278) – undercuts complacent images of pastoral harmony by not repressing the physical difficulties of labor – “Oft doom’d in

suffocating heat to bear / The cobweb'd barn's impure and dusty air" (Bloomfield 1971: 58) – and by representing vividly the suffering of farm animals, and perhaps most importantly by protesting strongly against the new practices of farming that violate the ancient ties between rich and poor. Bloomfield records the transition to a new market-based norm from the older norm of class reciprocity, what E. P. Thompson called the "moral economy" (1993a: 185–351).

The most dramatic defense of the moral economy during the Romantic era came during the Luddite insurgency (1811–13), described eloquently in E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Kevin Binfield has recovered the textual history of the most powerful laboring-class rebellion in the Romantic era (2004). His study and anthology of Luddite texts from the Midlands, Yorkshire and the Northwest richly supplement the interpretation of the Luddites in Thompson's study. The leaders of the weavers, framework knitters and stockingers had petitioned Parliament for regulation of their industry, only to see the old Elizabethan laws struck down in the name of the free market. They became "Luddites" only after they witnessed the systematic dismantling of the moral economy as it used to apply to them. A song of 1812 clearly states the conflict:

Let the wise and the great lend their aid and advice
Nor e'er their assistance withdraw
Till full fashioned work at the old fashion'd price
Is established by Custom and Law
The Trade when this arduous contest is o'er
Shall raise in full splendor it's head
And colting, and cutting, and squaring no more
Shall deprive honest workmen of bread.

Binfield 2004: 99–100; ll. 41–8)

If this song is a rhetorical petition, the following set of verses is a threat:

The poor cry aloud for bread
Prince Regent shall lose his head
And all the rich who oppress the poor
In a little time shall be no more
With deep regret, I write these things,
They'll come to pass in spite of kings.

(Binfield 2004: 183; ll. 1–6)

The final couplet, with each line in heavily iambic tetrameter, provides witty and epigrammatic closure to the previous two couplets of threatened violence, either making the threats seem entirely symbolic or lending the threats credibility. Whether the audience for the threatening poem is other Luddites to encourage solidarity and unity or the established powers is hard to tell. The following song seems clearly designed for fellow Luddites:

You Heroes of England who wish to have a trade
 Be true to each other and be not afraid
 Tho' the Bayonet is fixed they can do no good
 As long as we keep up the Rules of General Ludd.

As we have begun we are like to proceed
 Till from all those Tyrants we do get freed
 For this heavy yoke no longer can we bear
 And those who have not felt it ought to have a share.

And then they can feel for anothers woe
 For he that never knew sorrow, sorrow doth not know
 But there is Cartwright and Atkinson also
 And to shew them justice sorrow they shall know.

Though he does boast of the deeds he has done
 Yet out of our presence like a Thief he Does run
 It is the Laws of England to stand in our defence
 If he comes in our presence him we'll recompence.

(Binfield 2004: 229–30; ll. 1–16)

An author's name is attached to this song, Charles Milnes of Halifax, Yorkshire, at whose trial the song was used as evidence. Whether Percy Shelley knew the song, some of its qualities can be seen in his *Mask of Anarchy* (1819): not fearing the soldiers, relying on the old laws of England, encouraging solidarity, and symbolically repudiating the morality of the tyrants and upholding the Luddite community's sense of justice. Threatening their oppressors – Cartwright and Atkinson – with retaliation is not in the nonviolent spirit of Shelley's poem, but some parts of that poem are certainly violent, as when the "Horse of Death" grinds to "dust" the "murderers" (ll. 130–4). The Luddite song, however, depicts the violence as "sorrow" and "woe" – emotional devastation – as well as morally justified response – "recompence."

The Luddite poetry, even when authored by an identifiable person, is meaningful in terms of its social not subjective and private intentions. Its form as rhymed songs makes them characteristically "communitarian." The Romantic lyric, according to Anne Janowitz, has two paradigmatic models, one communitarian and one individualistic. The latter, realized famously in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," assumes a solitary reader and an isolated lyrical subject, whereas the communitarian lyric exploits the resources of customary plebeian tradition. The tension in Romantic poetry is between the lyrical and the balladic forms and their attendant energies. The ballad is connected with oral tradition, song, communal settings of performance, and public meanings, whereas the lyrical explored more private realms of experience. At the formal level, the five-beat iambic blank verse line suited the lyrical turn to subjectivity, whereas the four-beat line of rhymed songs and ballads characterized interventionist and communitarian poetry (Janowitz 1998: 33–66). Janowitz is one of few critics who has written critical commentary on Romantic-era plebeian poets such as Thomas Spence, John Thelwall, Edward Blandford, Robert Fair, and

Allen Davenport. Moreover, she has a “communitarian” reading of Shelley’s *Mask of Anarchy* which links the poem to politically insurgent songs (Janowitz 1994).

The Luddite songs are only one example of what Janowitz has called the “self-consciously counter-hegemonic tradition” (1998: 116). The poetry of the artisanal London Corresponding Society in the 1790s and the parliamentary reform movement of the 1810s and 1820s took many forms. Songs and poetry were published as broadsides, in radical periodicals and newspapers, in pamphlets, and in single-authored books. Allen Davenport, a shoemaker and a follower of Thomas Spence, published in the radical periodicals and authored *The Kings, or Legitimacy Unmasked. A Satirical Poem* (1820), as well as the collection of poetry, *The Muse’s Wreath* (1827). Defending the verse of Percy Shelley in prose and poetry, Davenport also used Wordsworthian models, as one can see both the lyrical and the balladic in his work. Davenport did not achieve the fame enjoyed at least briefly by Bloomfield or even more briefly by Clare, but he was well known in radical circles and he was a respected literary figure among his fellow Chartists, so that when he published his autobiography in 1845, he was hardly an anonymous figure. Davenport, however, was the exception to the rule of the relative anonymity of most laboring-class poets, and he escaped anonymity more from his political activism than his poetry. More typical would be a poet like Elizabeth Hands, a servant, who wrote effective satirical poetry along with a long religious poem, *The Death of Amnon* (1789). Her intelligent wit and eye for social incongruity were not enough to get her a second volume of poetry, as she was one of the many one-book poets. Being talented alone did not guarantee literary success, for one had to have some luck also – or perhaps Hands did not have the stubborn determination and energetic zeal of Ann Yearsley, who knew how to work the patronage system.

The ventriloquized laborers depicted in the *Universal Songster* collection are neither the lyrical voices of Wordsworthian subjectivity nor the balladic voices of political insurgency but rather the stylized and theatrical voices of urban culture. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Jews were among the poorest groups living in London and the most common labor they performed was street peddling. Although Jews were a small minority in Romantic-era London, Jewish pedlars, hawkers, and old-clothes men were an integral part of the overall London cityscape. One kind of textual representation of the frequent and commonplace interactions between Jewish pedlars and non-Jewish Londoners can be found in the “Jew Songs” in the *Universal Songster*. The numerous “Jew Songs,” which are taken from plays and broadsides, deploy various stereotypes, especially the Shylock stereotype, represent Jewish speech as comically un-English, and in general emphasize the moral, physical and cultural inferiority of Jews. However, some songs admire Jewish customs and praise the very Jewish difference that most of the songs deride. There is a range of Jewish representations of the pedlar, not all of them stereotypically negative. The *Universal Songster*, reprinted several times throughout the nineteenth century, has a consumer-oriented classification system for its categories of songs: ancient, amatory, bacchanalian, comic, Dibdin’s, Irish, Jews, Masonic, Military, Naval, Scotch, Sentimental, Sporting, Welsh, Yorkshire and Provincial, and of course Miscellaneous. There are six times as many

Irish songs as Jewish, and four times as many Scotch as Jewish, and twice as many Jewish as Welsh. The Irish and Jewish songs are filled with coarse ethnic stereotypes, but the Scotch and Welsh are not. Reflecting the influence of abolitionist discourse, most representations of blacks portray them as innocent victims whose represented speech is not in dialect. Many other songs, however, not just the Jewish and Irish, mock linguistic difference in the areas of accents and pronunciation, but almost every Jewish song calls attention to a supposedly distinctive Jewish speech: p's for b's, v's for w's, d's for th's, sh's for s's and ch's, c's for g's, as well as the Yiddish "mit" for "with." The songs accent Jewish difference with negative stereotypes of the greedy Shylock who is dishonest in business dealings with the innocent Gentiles. Of the fifty-two "Jew songs" in the *Universal Songster*, twenty-one or 40 percent depend on harshly negative stereotypes about Jewish noses, love for pork, criminality, exploitation of Gentiles, business dishonesty and lack of morality. About 30 percent of the songs, even when they access stereotypes, focus on sentimental or humorous situations that do not severely scapegoat Jews, and their relative mildness leads me to classify them as moderately stereotypical; let there be no mistake, however, that they are not philo-Semitic, and one could without much effort classify most of them with the anti-Semitic songs. Another 30 percent of the songs undermine the stereotypes to the point where the Jewish characters, despite their odd dialect, possess a kind of positive Englishness. It would be going too far to call them sympathetic but the songs include Jews in the London cityscape with a mixture of acceptance and disdain. My label for this last class of song is ambivalent.

I want to look at two songs, a negative and an ambivalent song. First, a not untypical negative song entitled "The Jew in Grain; or, The Doctrine of an Israelite," depicts a Jewish speaker who proudly confesses his dishonesty in business and his love of pork (*Universal Songster*: 1. 262–3). Here is the first stanza:

I once was but a pedler, and my shop was in my box,
 So sure as I'm a smouch, and my name is Mordecai;
 And I cheated all the world, in spite of whipping-posts or stocks,
 For I never sticks for trifles when dere's monies in the way.
 I had good gold rings of copper gilt, and so I got my bread,
 With sealing-wax of brick-dust, and pencils without lead,
 In my pick-pack, nick-nack, shimcrack, tick-tack, tink lum tee,
 And de shining chink to clink is de moosick still for me.

(ll. 1–8).

In a song like this the Jewish pedlar lacks the morality or conscience that a Christian would presumably possess. Immune to correction by legal punishments or social shame, the pedlar cheats the world by manipulating appearances, experiencing pleasure only in the moments of profiting from exploitation of obtuse Gentiles who exchange good money for shoddy goods. A recurrent theme of the most negative songs is that Jews lack a soul and the natural emotions because they are rendered inhuman by their

maniacal love of financial gain and their contempt for Gentiles. The obsessive focus on eating pork serves several functions: it indicates that Jews cannot control their appetites, that they are no better than Christians who eat nonkosher food, that the Jewish religion is a sham that is not really observed, and that Jews secretly desire what the Christians highly value.

An ambivalent song would be “The Cook and the Old Clothes Man” (*Universal Songster* 1. 408). In this song Mo the old-clothes man sings of his misadventure with a Gentile cook whom he was romancing when the “great Irish footman came blustering in” and treated the amorous Mo rather roughly.

He took me right up like a piece of a rag,
 Clothes sale, &c. [clo, clo clo]
 And popp'd me head foremost plump into my bag,
 Clothes sale, &c.
 And a mud-cart, just passing, the unfeeling soul
 Threw me in, vere I looked like a toad in a hole,
 O dear, vat a row!
 Vith my clothes sale, &c.

The men took me out, and my Becky came by,
 Vith her clothes sale, &c.
 And hearing the tale broke my head very nigh,
 Clothes sale, &c.

So, our peoples, beware of great fat tempting cooks,
 And ven you puy pargains, remember the cooks,
 For I do I know,
 Vith my clothes sale, &c.

(ll. 25–41)

Because sexual humor is a staple of plebeian culture, the song is not accessing a stereotype of Jewish sexual excess. Rather, the song is having fun with the spectacle of a pedlar romancing one of the women with whom he does business, even eating the cooked meat she gives him, which he calls “trypher” – that is, treyf, nonkosher. Although this song surely has a stereotypical old-clothes man and an amorous, treyf-eating Jew, it also represents some of his quotidian difficulties, such as harassment on the street: “As I valk the boys teaze me about pits of pork, / Vich they say, though they lie, that they’ve stuck on a fork, / But on I do go, / Vith my clothes sale, &c” (ll. 5–8). In fact, it is the cook who invites him for an intimate conversation; he does not initiate the encounter. Also, the Irish footman humiliates him, certainly, but he is not severely injured, and the comic turn of events is reinforced when his wife witnesses his humiliation. Mo is depicted as weak and ineffectual, a shlemiel, but altogether human. The more harshly negative songs drain the Jew of any humanity at all.

Finally, I want to turn to the curious figure of Wordsworth’s Pedlar, a central character in *The Ruined Cottage* and a major character as the Wanderer in *The Excursion*, one of Wordsworth’s best-known ventriloquized members of the laboring class. As is

apparent from the manuscript evidence and his own Fenwick notes, Wordsworth identified himself increasingly with the character of the Pedlar. While critics have pointed to the parallel of peddling household goods and peddling poetry, the figurative connection with Jewishness has gone unremarked. First, the epithet “wandering” has long been attached to Jews, at least from the Middle Ages if not earlier, and in the Romantic period the Wandering Jew enjoyed numerous textual resurrections. Wordsworth’s pedlar assumes the role not out of the economic necessity that motivated the poor Jewish immigrants but because he could not control his wandering thoughts as a schoolteacher, his initial job. The parallel would be Wordsworth’s turning down a clergyman’s position for the more unsettled position as poet. The actual wandering of real Jews was anything but Romantic, but at a figurative level Jews were associated with wandering. When the cultural associations of peddling were predominantly Jewish, Wordsworth chooses as his philosophical spokesman a country pedlar who is religiously pious, passionately committed to texts, and although a member of the community also markedly different from that community. His Pedlar attracted severe and harsh criticism from the defenders of genteel literary culture, notably from Francis Jeffrey, who famously commented on *The Excursion* (1814): “This will never do,” and asked, “Why should Mr. Wordsworth have made his hero a superannuated Pedlar?” (Jeffrey 1846: 2. 504, 538). It is worth pointing out, however, that Wordsworth identified the best poetry with his imagined if not the real laboring-class: the Pedlar, Michael, Leonard, Betty Foy, Simon Lee, Margaret, Robert, the leech-gatherer, et alia. The best language of poetry, according to Wordsworth, derived from the speech of the rural laboring class.

Wordsworth’s turn to the laboring class, a move rarely appreciated by those who identify him exclusively with monological subjectivity, participates in the same cultural movement as the Luddites when they defend the moral economy, or John Clare when he protests enclosure and the destruction of “Swordy Well.” For Wordsworth’s own ideological reasons – initially “Jacobin” and later Tory – he identifies his own interests – emotional, political, and social – with the rural laboring and middling class, at least as he imagined it to be, for he sees as most threatening the insurgent individualism of political economy, and utilitarian and bureaucratic styles of governance.

The example of Wordsworth’s ventriloquized laborers brings us back to the actual laborers who wrote and published poetry in the Romantic era. If the biographical approach to laboring-class poetry has reached its limit of usefulness, one can examine laboring-class representations regardless of where they came from, not ignoring their genesis, but attending more to their overall literary realization. Although Wordsworth’s laboring-class figures are another “version of pastoral,” as William Empson so aptly phrased it, the shape and logic of that pastoral were and are highly influential. The poetry of actual laborers, regardless of how much they suffered in their lives and how sincere were their efforts, is not free from social pressures and contingencies; it should not be used as the “real” to counter the merely literary and represented, a maneuver that would only repeat Wordsworth’s own strategy to capture the “real.”

SEE ALSO

Chapter 5 “Ballad Collection and Lyric Collectives”; chapter 9 “The Romantic Georgic and the Work of Writing”; chapter 15 “Celtic Romantic Poetry: Scotland, Ireland, Wales”; chapter 16 “Anglo-Jewish Romantic Poetry”; chapter 21 “Poetry and Illustration: ‘Amicable strife’”

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Celtic Romantic Poetry: Scotland, Ireland, Wales

Jane Moore

There has been much recent work in Romantic studies on Irish, Scottish and – to a rather lesser extent – Welsh poetry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As well as books and essays paying renewed attention to such well-known figures as Thomas Moore and Robert Burns, this body of criticism also includes the literary archaeology which has recovered the work of previously ignored poets, the likes of Welsh hymnist Ann Griffiths (1776–1805) and the Scottish balladeer Robert Tannahill, the “Weaver Poet” (1774–1810) for instance. These critical and editorial projects have been accompanied by the rise of “archipelagic” theory – to use John Kerrigan’s influential term (2008: 89) – a critical position which stresses that “British” culture (which in its nineteenth-century sense includes Irish literature) is comprised of “four nations” rather than just one. In the same manner in which feminist scholarship argued against the traditional model of Romanticism with its emphasis upon the voices of the “Big Six” canonical male poets, and the New Historicism politicized and problematized what was seen as the critical internalization of high Romantic concepts such as the “creative imagination” and called for a more historically and culturally inflected understanding of the period, so advocates of poetry from Scotland, Ireland or Wales have stressed the importance of what one might label the “Celtic” poetry of the late Georgian age (that is, for the purposes of this essay, poetry from Scotland, Ireland and Wales) of what were once patronizingly dismissed as regional voices in the mainstream of Romantic-era poetry.

Although it is not possible to do justice within the confines of this essay to the history of the term “Celtic” and the contestation surrounding it (signaled here by the distancing commas, though I shall dispose of these hereafter) it is important nonetheless to introduce at the outset, however briefly, the complications of the field. In 1867 Matthew Arnold published his influential essay *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, which imposed from the outside, so to speak, a definition of what Arnold saw as the Celtic (as compared with the Anglo-Saxon) temperament and aesthetic. Later scholars have

insisted, however, that beyond its description of cultures and their languages, the word “Celt” has no authentic meaning. Joep Leerssen, for example, maintains that “no ‘Celts’ have ever gone on record as identifying themselves under this name. Native Irish have identified themselves as *Gaedhil*, native Welshmen as *Cymri*, Bretons as *Breizbiz* ... but that all these should belong together ... is not part of an authentic native tradition” (Leerssen 1996: 4). He goes on to remark that “The concept of ‘The Celts’ is, then, a *construct*. That is not to say that the term is valueless or wrong; rather, it means that its appearance is a product of discursive and cogitative activity, that its emergence can be historically (roughly) dated and that it carries the imprint of a number of connotations and ideological presuppositions” (1996: 4).

Historically, the concept of Celticism can be located in the cultural revivals that took place in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales in the 1770s and 1780s as part of the vogue for antiquarianism which saw a coming together of scholars keen to recover ancient Gaelic cultures as evidence of a pre-British source of cultural identity and authority. Among the key literary texts of eighteenth-century antiquarianism are James Macpherson’s hugely successful “Ossian” poems (published between 1760 and 1765), which fused translations of ancient Gaelic poetry with much writing of Macpherson’s own contrivance. Although Macpherson himself claimed to offer authentic translations of ancient sources, his contemporaries accused him of playing fast and loose with the original surviving fragments, adapting them to his own style. The challenge, first made by Samuel Johnson, came in part from Irish antiquarians such as Charles O’Connor and Sylvester O’Halloran who, Fiona Stafford observes, attacked Macpherson for his handling of ancient Irish legend. His supposed crimes included the confusion of stories from the Irish Fionn and Ulster cycles, the appropriation of the Irish hero “Oisín” for Scottish antiquity, and a refusal to accept the notion that the Scots originally hailed from Ireland (Stafford 1996: vii). Even in one of its earliest literary manifestations, then, Celticism was surrounded by a damning controversy. To say this is not, however, to detract from the impact of an eighteenth-century antiquarian movement on the development of nineteenth-century European Romanticism and its role in the formation of Irish, Scottish and Welsh literary Romanticisms.

The following pages portray the general picture of Irish, Scottish and Welsh verse in the Romantic period in the light of current scholarship. Rather than providing encyclopedic coverage – a task beyond the chapter’s limits – it offers a focus on Robert Burns, a figure who shaped, and arguably formed, British Romanticism, and upon three other representative poets, James Hogg, Thomas Moore, and Felicia Hemans, which also situates their writing within the wider poetic and cultural contexts of Scotland, Ireland and Wales, countries which were home to some of the most vibrant poetry of the Romantic period.

I

The founding document of the poetry of Romanticism was a slim book of verse that appeared toward the end of the eighteenth century and which can be seen as marking the beginning of a new poetical age. Printed in the provinces, well outside

the metropolitan mainstream of contemporary eighteenth-century publishing, this collection of lyrics, tales, and other poems, composed in a vivid and straightforward idiom, was simultaneously experimental and also looked back to medieval balladry in a manner foreign to the dominant “Augustan” eighteenth-century literary tradition which had appealed for its authority to the age of Greece and Rome. This groundbreaking volume, which valorized the experience of the rural poor in a manner unprecedented in English verse and was politically liberal in articulating the voices of socially marginalized groups who had not hitherto featured in conventional poetry, quickly became a work that directly influenced a generation of Romantic poets.

Though the foregoing narrative could easily be applied to William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* (published in Bristol in 1798), a book seen in much conventional literary history as the starting point of Romantic-era verse, it could just as easily describe an earlier collection, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), by Robert Burns (1759–96), now generally referred to as the “Kilmarnock edition” after the Ayrshire town in which it was published. This powerful volume, published a decade before the *Lyrical Ballads*, anticipated and in part underpinned the Lake poets’ later work. Indeed, to a certain extent mid to late eighteenth-century Scottish poetry, particularly in Burns, but also in the slightly earlier tradition – inspired by James Thomson (1700–48), author of the *The Seasons* (1726–30), once generally referred to as a master of “pre-Romantic verse” – of James Beattie (1735–1803), “Ossian” (James Macpherson, 1736–96) and Allan Ramsay (1684–1758), was a bedrock of early Romantic poetry, in its indebtedness to the ballad tradition, in its fascination with the experience of the peasantry, and in its shaping of specific regional and national literary identities. Such Scottish poetry emphasized – like much English Romanticism after it – the local, the traditional, the superstitious, the medieval, and the folkloric. Scotland, indeed, has a strong claim to be seen as the cradle of Romantic poetry in Great Britain and Ireland.

The most important voice in this emergent tradition is that of Burns, his verse in turns idealizing, fiercely satirical, and homely; a poetry that is ideologically innovative, learned, and canonically allusive in simultaneity. We see in his work many things but, throughout, a close engagement with Scottish peasant life. Whether in the vivid idiom of his valorization of cottage ways in “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” (“To you I sing, in simple Scottish lays, / The *lowly train* in life’s sequester’d scene”; ll. 5–6), or in the revival of the political ballad in the Jacobite manner, in such stuff as “Robert Bruce’s March to Bannockburn,” popularly known as “Scots, wha hae,” or in songs of romantic sociability, notably that timeworn favorite “Auld lang Syne” (“We’ll tak a cup o’ kindness yet ...”; l. 3), there is throughout Burns’s oeuvre an unapologetic reveling in Scottish life and the everyday language of the Scots “mither tongue.” Simplicity of diction would later define the poetical experiment that was the *Lyrical Ballads*, but it was Burns, over a decade before Wordsworth and Coleridge, who rejected the overelaborate poeticisms of eighteenth-century neoclassicism, what Wordsworth would deride as “poetic diction” (Wordsworth 1954: 390), in favour of a plainer, less adorned idiom.

Take, for instance, Burns's most famous lyric, "A Red, Red Rose," a work heavy with the Scots. Before citing it, it should be pointed out that Robert Burns – of all British poets the one most associated with a "nonstandard dialect" – used his Scots as a matter of choice. He could easily write standard (southern) English poetry, as that great poem "The Cotter's Saturday Night," which uses both idioms with ease, demonstrates. But in this lyric Burns was writing out his linguistic birthright:

O MY Luv'e's like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June;
O my Luv'e's like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune.—

As fair art thou, my bonie lass,
So deep in luv'e am I;
And I will luv'e thee still, my Dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.—

(ll. 1–8)

Setting aside their beauty and power, if we look closely at these lines, one might say that in the poetic tradition of Donne, Shakespeare, and even Pope, which foregrounded witty and striking metaphors (Donne's "At the round earth's imagin'd corners" and the like), the figurative content of these lines is homely, perhaps to some readers even threadbare. And yet the power of Burns's stanzas lies in their very refusal to work, so to speak, from the copybook of poetic technique. Love, in the poet's account, is so important that self-congratulatory figurative brilliance should give way to good honest metaphor – the real poetic "language of men," to borrow Wordsworth's famous phrase (1954: 390). Sharp metaphoric formulation – in the Renaissance and Augustan tradition – has yielded to a new Romantic sensibility, which presents itself as true, poignant, and as the very expression of the heart.

Take also for instance, the aforementioned "Scots, wha hae," a poem which relates in a robust vernacular medieval Scotland's struggle to retain its independence. The opening stanza depicts King Robert the Bruce leading the Scottish army against the English at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314:

SCOTS, wha hae wi' WALLACE bled,
Scots, wham BRUCE has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,—
Or to victorie.—

Now's the day, and now's the hour;
See the front o' battle lour;
See approach proud EDWARD's power,
Chains and Slaverie.—

(ll. 1–8)

Here, as elsewhere, Burns's idiom is plain, forcefully direct, and affective, a balance of strengths which was manifest in the next few years in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789–94) as well as in the *Lyrical Ballads*. It is also, like its successors, quietly controlled and powerful.

The emotion and simple imagery of Burns's verse anticipates Wordsworth's use of balladry and his emphasis – the phrase warrants repetition – upon “the real language of men.” That said, it might also seem at first to divide his poetry from his admirer's highest manner, in Wordsworthian blank verse's attention to the creative imagination and its privileged concepts of inwardness and transcendence. Yet, as the contemporary Scottish novelist Andrew O'Hagan points out, we see in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) Wordsworth's desire – similar to Burns's – to “embed romantic nationalism in the experience of working life and to raise a sense of that life's moral worth in the language and diction of his poems” (O'Hagan 2009: 4). Indeed, it was Wordsworth who, in the opening book of the 1805 *Prelude*, recalled his (unfulfilled) notion of writing an epic poem on “How Wallace fought for Scotland, left the name / Of Wallace to be found like a wild flower / All over his dear country” (Wordsworth 1979: 1805 *Prelude* i. 213–15).

Burns, in turn, had his own take on what the Lake poet was to describe as his moral fascination with the “self-sufficing power of solitude” (Wordsworth 1979: 1805 *Prelude* ii. 78). The eponymous Tam O'Shanter, it might be remembered, is at his most impressionable – “pissed and horny” as the modern reader might say in an update of the colloquial Burnsian manner – when, after an evening spent boozing in the local tavern, he is alone and journeying home on his mare and frightening himself with his night visions of “bogles” (phantoms or goblins) and witches conjured by an overlubricated imagination. Certainly this is not a pure or “holy” state in the Wordsworthian egotistical mode, but solitude, indubitably significant here, is the condition nonetheless of what Donald A. Low has described as Burns's “habit of surrendering in imagination to dark possibilities of local legend” (1975: 7). No less than Wordsworth, Burns's Romantic imagination creates poetry out of local detail, out of images and tales familiar from life and the local communities they inhabited. Both poets accept the possibility of the otherworldly and the irrational (the “little maid” of Wordsworth's moving poem “We Are Seven,” for instance, published in the first volume of *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth 1975), dismisses the narrative voice's logic that the death of two of her siblings has reduced her brothers and sisters to five in number, imperturbably insisting “Nay, we are seven!” (l. 69)).

Robert Burns's Tam also defies rationality in resisting the poem's moral not to spend time drinking whisky and musing on short skirts (“take heed: / When'er to drink you are inclin'd / Or cutty-sarks run in your mind,” ll. 220–2). Tam's only spoken words in the poem, indeed, “Weel done, Cutty-sark!” (l. 189), challenge respectability and ignore sententiousness. The phrase has been presented by Murray Pittock as a joyous cry of national liberty, roared out as it is in local dialect, as contrasted with the orthodox Anglo-Scots voice of the narrator (Pittock 2008: 162–3).

If Burns's influence on Wordsworth and Coleridge was implicit rather than directly acknowledged, then his effect on James Hogg (1770–1835), the most powerful of his

Romantic-era Scottish successors, was more direct. Hogg, who considered himself Burns's natural poetic descendant, a man whose verse was deeply indebted to his predecessor's blend of Scottish folklore, superstition and song, presented himself as an untutored child of nature, a peasant poet in the manner of his master. Born in the Ettrick Forest, in the Scottish border town of Selkirk, the poet grew up as a farm worker and initially portrayed himself as the "Ettrick Shepherd" – possibly a conscious echo of the sentimental contemporary image of "Burns the ploughboy." This was to prove, however, a somewhat frustrating identity for Hogg, who in spite of his relatively humble origins rose to become a figure of literary significance and who eventually chafed against the limits of the "Shepherd" persona.

In 1817 Hogg joined the crew of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, the most brilliant, witty and satirical Tory periodical of the Romantic era, to which he made numerous contributions, notably the initial draft of the notorious "Chaldee Manuscript," the scandalous cod-biblical assault of November 1817 upon what "Maga" saw as the Whig hegemony of the wider Scottish society and the liberal politics of the *Edinburgh Review*. Hogg initially both colluded in and was eventually tired by *Blackwood's* image of him in a series of imaginary conversations (principally by John Wilson), the *Noctes Ambrosianae* (1822–35), as a kind of Scottish noble savage (despite the fact he had once encouraged such an image, both in his appearance – he regularly wore the traditional plaid and was rarely painted without his shepherd's staff at his side – and in his rural living; he was given a farm by the Duke of Buccleuch in Yarrow in 1816 where he remained for most of the rest of his life).

As with Wordsworth, Hogg composed, or so he maintained, in a spontaneous manner, catching ideas as they came: "Let the piece be of what length it will, I compose and correct it wholly in my mind, or on a slate, ere ever I put pen to paper; and then I write it down as fast as the A, B, C" (Hogg 1972: 11). Like Burns before him he turned back to an earlier age for poetic inspiration, to the "runder times of a nation," as he put it, which he claimed were the "period of invention," and to the energetic idiom of medieval Scots, the "ancient stile" as he calls it in *The Queen's Wake* (1813). Let us take as an example from that volume "The Witch of Fife," a grotesquely comic tale about a greedy husband who gatecrashes the nocturnal revelries of his wife and her coven as they flit across the border into England, penetrating by their magic the iron gates to the wine-vault of Carlisle castle:

They flew to the vaultis of merry Carlisle,
 Quhair they enterit free as ayr;
 And they drank and they drank of the byshopis wyne
 Quhill they culde drynk ne mair.
 (Hogg 1986; ll. 843–6)

Here, Hogg, as per "Tam O'Shanter," revels in the comic potential of the supernatural, his heady brew of ancient Scots dialect and medieval gothic atmospherics creating a bawdy tale – *à la* Burns – which delights in sexual discord and excess:

The auld gude-man he grew se crouse,
 He dancit on the mouldy ground,
 He sang the bonniest sangis of Fife,
 And he tuzzlit the kerlyngs round.
 And ay he percit the tither butt,
 And he suckit, and he suckit se lang,
 Quhill his een they closit, and his voice grew low,
 And his tongue wold hardly gang.

(ll. 847–54)

Left behind by the “kerlyngs” (witches), who flee with the “mornyng wynde,” the husband is woken from his hangover the following day by “five rough Englishmen,” demanding to know how he got through “lokkiis and barris of steel” to the bishop’s vault. On hearing the luckless husband cry “I cam fra Fyfe,” and “I cam on the midnycht wynde,” they punish him mortally, jabbing him with knives and torturing the old fool before eventually burning him to death:

They nickit the auld man, and they prickit the auld man,
 And they yerkit his limbis with twine, [... jerked ...]
 Quhill the reid blude ran in his hose and shoon, [Till ... shoes,]
 But some cryit it was wyne.

They lickit the auld man, and they prickit the auld man,
 And they tyit him till ane stone;
 And they set ane bele-fire him about, [... burning fire ...]
 And they burnit him skin and bone.

(ll. 877–84)

The poem’s final stanza warns readers against copying the husband’s “lawless greide” (“Let never an auld man after this / Rin post to the deil for wyne”), a conclusion which could be seen as a somewhat dour ending to a riotous tale, but more likely is a homage to the mock-moralizing of Hogg’s idol Burns’s own great poem of grotesquery “Tam O’Shanter.” In 1819, however, Hogg revised the ending of his poem so that his wife, the witch, with whom he flies into the ether, cocking a merry snoop at his English persecutors, rescues the “auld man”:

They vanisht far i’ the liftis blue wale, [... lifting blue veil]
 Ne maire the English saw,
 But the auld manis lauche cam on the gale, [... old man’s laughter ...]
 With a lang and a loud gaffa.
 May everilke man in the land of Fife
 Read what the drinkeris dree; [... boozers endure]
 And nevir curse his puir auld wife,
 Rychte wicked altho scho be. [... though she ...]

(ll. 933–40)

This both delivers a jocular blow at the “auld enemy” south of the border and strikes a defiantly Bacchanalian pose against the pieties of the contemporary Scots churches, whether Presbyterian or Calvinist. The revised moral (which might be glossed as “husbands do not curse your wives, however wicked they might be”) underlines the poet’s humanitarian celebration of life and his acceptance of human frailty (though it also demonstrates his willingness to defer to Scott, who asked him, “why in the name of wonder did you suffer the gude auld man to be burnt skin and bone by the English? . . . What had the poor old carl [fellow] done to deserve such a fate? Only taken a drappy o’drink too much at another man’s expense; which you and I have done often” (Hogg 1909: 102)).

If, as contemporary critics have argued, Hogg played out his own anxieties about authorship and poetic identity through acts of pastiche and imitation, then he put his gift for imitation to brilliant effect in *The Poetic Mirror* (1821), a superb series of parodies of the likes of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Scott, Wilson, and cheekily, Hogg himself (many of these are republished in Graeme Stones and John Strachan’s five-volume edition, *Parodies of the Romantic Age* (1999)). Included therein (volume 2) is Hogg’s marvellous parody of Wordsworth’s *Excursion*, “The Flying Tailor,” which sees the poet Wordsworth finding the mystery of the universe in a simple pair of breeches.

A pair
Of breeches to his philosophic eye
Were not what unto other folks they seem,
Mere simple breeches, but in them he saw
The symbols of the soul – mysterious, high
Hieroglyphics! such as Egypt’s Priest
Adored upon the holy Pyramid,
Vainly imagined tomb of monarchs old,
But raised by wise philosophy, that sought
By darkness to illumine, and to spread
Knowledge by dim concealment – process high
Of man’s imaginative, deathless soul.

(ll. 250–61)

Hogg, the subject of mockery in the *Noctes Ambrosianae*, here ridicules, albeit affectionately, another acutely self-conscious poet. It is as if the shade of Burns had replied to his great English follower, and a measure of Scots skepticism is applied to what has generally been seen as the “mainstream” of British Romantic poetry.

II

Stylistically and thematically strong cross-cultural currents link Scottish poetry of the Romantic period to that of Ireland and Wales represented here by the “Bard of Erin,” Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* (1808–34), and by Felicia Hemans’s *Welsh Melodies*

(1822). This intertextual and transnational fluidity is evident in the stress laid in the poetry of all three nations upon the figure of the “bard” or “minstrel” as the embodiment or incarnation of the national spirit, and in the idealization of the “wild notes” of lyre and song as a marker of national identity. On the other hand, the cheerful bawdiness of Scotland, itself a measure of Scottish selfhood in the ballads of Hogg or Burns (or, indeed, the picaresque eighteenth-century novels of Tobias Smollett before them), is notably absent from the comparatively sanitized lyrics of Hemans’s and Moore’s national melodies, which both reach back to the tradition of classical eighteenth-century elegy and to what might be called the “pre-Romantic” Celticism of Thomas Gray’s “The Bard” (1757), James Beattie’s *The Minstrel* (1771) and James Macpherson’s “Ossian” poems.

Katie Trumpener, in *Bardic Nationalism* (1997), credits Gray’s “Bard” with popularizing “bardicism” in England and the poem has been seen by other critics as marking a decisive moment in the shift of meaning from bard as poet, in a general sense, to bard as a distinctive and immediately recognizable Celtic type – the primitive, hirsute, poet-prophet portrayed against the backdrop of a rugged sublime landscape:

On a rock, whose haughty brow
Frowns o’er old Conway’s foaming flood,
Robed in the sable garb of woe,
With haggard eyes the Poet stood;
(Loose his beard, and hoary hair
Stream’d, like a meteor, to the troubled air)
And, with a Master’s hand, and Prophet’s fire,
Struck the deep sorrows of his lyre.

(ll. 15–22)

The implacable Bard, possessed of the instruments of prophecy and of political oratory – a “Prophet’s fire” and the bardic lyre – here curses the Saxon conqueror and his army on their return from Snowdon before dramatically hurling himself off the mountain to an unpleasant death.

In his tragic and heroic demise, Gray’s Welsh bard anticipates Macpherson’s “Ossian” bard, whose melodramatic blend of idealized bravery and intense sorrow proved immensely influential on the development of what we have termed Celtic Romantic poetry. It is a shaping presence on Moore’s *Irish Melodies* and became a touchstone for antiquarians and poets interested in reclaiming Celtic material from Samuel Ferguson and Douglas Hyde through to William Butler Yeats, who in 1889 published his version of the Ossian myth as the title poem of *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*.

The “Ossian” poems provided a sophisticated eighteenth-century audience with a recreation of the Gaelic past that successfully captured the “noble savagery” of the ancient Celts and their world – a world where, as Robert Welch puts it, “heroism and poetry went together; and one in which sensibility and bravery did not cancel each other out” (1988: 1). Herein lies the work’s appeal. The warriors (both male and female) are imagined as idealized lovers, melodramatically intense and faithful to the end.

Take the following depiction from the section “Carric-thura” of the death of Crimora (the name means “a woman of great soul”) who having accidentally slain her lover in battle swiftly follows him to the grave:

Crimora, bright in the armour of man; her yellow hair is loose behind, her bow is in her hand. She followed the youth to war, Connal her much-beloved. She drew the string on Dargo; but erring pierced her Connal. He falls like an oak on the plain; like a rock from the shaggy hill. What shall she do, hapless maid! – He bleeds; her Connal dies. All night long she cries, and all the day, O Connal, my love, and my friend! With grief the sad mourner dies.

Earth here incloses the loveliest pair on the hill. The grass grows between the stones of the tomb; I often sit in the mournful shade. The wind sighs through the grass; their memory rushes on my mind. Undisturbed you now sleep together; in the tomb of the mountain you rest alone. (Macpherson 1996: 165)

This rendition of the lovers entombed within the green grass on the hill does not anticipate some Romantic-era piece of neo-Pantheist optimism such as Wordsworth’s vision of the dead Lucy “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course”; neither does the sound of the wind sighing through grass signal the poetic renewal of the breeze which moves the Coleridgean Aeolian harp; rather what we have here is the powerful sound of grief made audible. Sensibility here is the similitude of a martial force and the harp is its kindred spirit:

Thou dweller between the shields that hang on high in Ossian’s hall, descend from thy place, O harp, and let me hear thy voice. – Son of Alpin, strike the string; thou must awake the soul of the bard. (Macpherson 1996: 263)

For Macpherson, the harp is both the sound of battle and the voice of the nation’s soul – as it also is for Thomas Moore, a poet directly influenced by the “Ossian” poems. Witness his portrait of the minstrel as the incarnation of the national psyche in “The Minstrel Boy,” first published in the fifth number of *Irish Melodies* (1813):

The Minstrel Boy to the war is gone,
 In the ranks of death you’ll find him;
 His father’s sword he has girded on,
 And his wild harp slung behind him. –
 “Land of song!” said the warrior-bard,
 “Though all the world betrays thee,
 One sword, at least, thy rights shall guard,
 One faithful harp shall praise thee!”

The Minstrel fell!—but the foeman’s chain
 Could not bring his proud soul under;
 The harp he lov’d ne’er spoke again,
 For he tore its chords asunder;

And said, "No chains shall sully thee,
 Thou soul of love and bravery!
 Thy songs were made for the pure and free,
 They shall never sound in slavery."
 (Moore 1910; ll. 1–16)

Song, sword and harp are inseparable in Moore's auditory imagining of an Irish epic past, captured in the strongly rhythmical beat of the iambic tetrameter lines and the powerful symbolism of the harp. The adjective "wild," a synonym for the authentic force or passion of the harp, as contrasted with the febrile excitement of the Regency *bon ton*, in whose drawing-rooms the *Melodies* were often performed, places this melody on the primitivist register of the "Ossian" poems. Much in the manner of Macpherson, Moore treats the symbolic harp of Erin as a kind of poetical metaphor for the land and for Ireland's ancient glory.

Poetical metaphors of past greatness become literalized, as it were, for the present moment through their rendition in song. Performances of the *Melodies* (often by Moore himself) could connect their contemporary fashionable drawing-room audiences through auditory emotion to a shared historical memory of glory. Indeed, Ronan Kelly has suggested that they served as a kind of music therapy, a "compensation" for the "degraded present" of post-Union Ireland (2008: 164). For William Hazlitt, however, writing in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), the case was lost. In his view, the excessive sentiment of the *Melodies* destroyed their purpose:

If these national airs do indeed express the soul of impassioned feeling in his countrymen, the case of Ireland is hopeless. If these prettinesses pass for patriotism, if a country can heave from its heart's core only these vapid, varnished sentiments, lip-deep, and let its tears of blood evaporate in an empty conceit, let it be governed as it has been. There are here no tones to waken Liberty, to console Humanity. Mr Moore converts the wild harp of Erin into a musical snuff-box! (Hazlitt 1930–4: 7. 234)

One can argue *à la* Hazlitt that the *Irish Melodies* delivers even a gentle subversion, that its sentimentality is contrived and surface-deep, and its language similarly artificial and showy. However, it is perfectly possible to make a case for their political resonance. It is true that the *Melodies* have a performative, even a mawkish, aspect (after all, they were written initially to be sung and, indeed, to inculcate emotion in the listener: national feeling in the Irish; sympathy among the English) but they are no less politically driven for that. There are United Irishmen echoes in a good number of them; take, for instance, "Let Erin remember the days of old," first published in the second number of *Irish Melodies* (1808):

Let Erin remember the days of old,
 Ere her faithless sons betray'd her;
 When Malachi wore the collar of gold,
 Which he won from her proud invader,

When her kings, with standard of green unfurl'd,
 Led the Red-Branch Knights to danger; –
 Ere the emerald gem of the western world
 Was set in the crown of a stranger.

(ll. 1–8)

The symbolic green of Erin is a clear reference to the tradition of United Irish song and would have been evident to contemporary Irish nationalists, while its sentimental version of “Old Erin” had a potent appeal for many English Whigs, from the powerful dignitaries at Holland House downwards. These people, it is worth remembering, represented Moore’s best hope for practical reform in Ireland rather than the Tories who had returned to power in the year before the publication of the first number of *Irish Melodies* in 1808 (after the brief Whig–Tory coalition “The Ministry of All the Talents” had collapsed). The *Melodies* plead the case of Ireland in song, drawing-room sedition perhaps, but sedition nonetheless.

Although Moore’s reputation today rests in large part on the *Irish Melodies* and, perhaps, *Lalla Rookb* (1817), he was also highly regarded in his own time as someone who made his name as an author of amatory verse, most notably the lubricious *Poetical Works of the Late Thomas Little* (1801), but who also achieved greatness as a radical political satirist. Just as Hogg both contributed to and parodied the canon of Romantic poetry, so Moore courted the muse of lyric and satire in simultaneity. For forty years and more the poet wrote satire: in Bermuda, England, France, Ireland, and the United States, in Juvenalian, Horatian and Menippean modes, in book-length satire and newspaper squib, and in novel, poem and burletta. Months before Leigh Hunt’s damning indictment of the Regent (“this *Adonis in loveliness*, was a corpulent gentleman of fifty!” (2003: 221)), and rather more in the same mordant vein (which landed him in gaol for two years’ imprisonment), first to the satirical coconut shy was Thomas Moore, with his “Parody of a Celebrated Letter.” A witty yet forceful indictment of the Prince, the work is a parody of the Regent’s letter to his brother the Duke of Clarence of February 1812, widely printed in the newspapers of the day, defending his decision on the grounds of filial loyalty to keep his father’s Tory ministry in power (and this in spite of his famous longstanding defiance of his father and his championing of Whig and liberal causes). Up to this point the Regent had been considered to be a friend both to Ireland and to the Catholic cause (he had after all taken a Catholic “wife” – Maria Fitzherbert – even if the union was considered constitutionally invalid).

The Regent’s choicest phrase, “I have no predilections” – much quoted in the newspapers of the day as an explanation for his surprising decision to retain a Tory ministry – is rendered laughable by Moore, who satirically resituates the heir-regnant’s words in the context of his womanizing:

I am proud to declare I have no predilections;
 My heart is a sieve, where some scatter’d affections
 Are just danc’d about for a moment or two,
 And the *finer* they are, the more sure to run through:

(ll. 79–82)

The barely veiled reference in the phrase “scatter’d affections” to the Regent’s catalogue of cast-off mistresses brands the philandering heir presumptive as a man devoid of principles and unfit to govern. The “Parody” – the first of many subsequent works in similar mordant vein – secures Moore’s place in an alternative Romantic canon, joining Burns and Hogg in the tradition of Romantic-era satire in which Byron wears the palm. Our critical focus on the lyrical evocations of both Irish and Scottish verse should also be accompanied by an attention to that body of work’s satirical potency.

III

Many are the Welsh poets who have blushed unseen outside the pages of anthologies of British Romantic verse, authors such as Ann Griffiths, a leading hymn writer in the eighteenth-century Welsh Methodist tradition, and William Williams (1717–91) – or “Pantycelyn” to use his bardic name – a poet claimed by Saunders Lewis (celebrated author and a founding member of the Welsh Nationalist Party, later Plaid Cymru) to be among the first major exponents of Romanticism in European literature (Lewis 1927). Modern Welsh scholarship is redressing the critical neglect of such figures but to date the only poet with any real connection to Wales who has been well served by “mainstream” anthologies of Romantic literature is Felicia Hemans.

Felicia Dorothea Hemans (*née* Browne, 1793–1835) considered Wales her home. At the age of seven, she moved with her parents (her Irish father and Venetian-German mother) from her birthplace in Liverpool to North Wales, to Abergele, where she lived for the next twenty-seven years. Although she did not write poetry in Welsh she learned both to read and to speak it – Cymraeg would have been the language of her Abergele neighbors. Her first published volume of verse, *Poems*, appeared in 1808 when the poet was just fourteen and contained several poetic addresses to the beauties of the Wales, with such titles as “The Vale of Clwyd” and “Written in North Wales.” Mostly these poems are jejeune and derivative and are omitted from modern anthologies of Hemans’s verse, but they are interesting nonetheless as illustrations of the poet’s early sense of her Welshness. Witness her poeticizing of the “Vale of Clwyd”:

The lovely vale is Cambria’s pride,
 Luxuriant garden of the land;
 There plenty smiles on every side,
 There bright and fertile meads expand.
 (Browne 1808; ll. 1–4)

Alongside the Welsh material, *Poems* also contains several verses celebrating British military victories. “To Patriotism,” for example, which opens “Genius of Britannia’s land,” jostles for attention with those hymning the beauties of Wales. From the beginning of her poetic career, Hemans appears to have been writing within at least two contemporary national traditions.

In 1821 Hemans composed the lyrics to accompany the volume *A Selection of Welsh Melodies*, published in 1822, for which the airs had been collected and edited by the popular Welsh composer John Parry (who wrote music for several volumes of both Welsh and Scottish melodies); her contribution consisted of some twenty intensely patriotic poems that romanticized Cambria's proud martial history (in "Owen Glyndwr's War-Song," for example), and celebrated her bardic culture (in such titles as "The Harp of Wales" and "Taliesin's Prophecy"). Hailed by the Welsh societies of the day as a "poet for Wales," she was made an honorary member of the Royal Cambrian Institution and in 1822 delivered a poetical address "The Meeting of the Bards" to the London Eisteddfod. As with many of Hemans's Welsh poems this is not included in the modern anthologies of the poet's verse edited by Susan Wolfson (Hemans 2000) and Gary Kelly (Hemans 2002).

WHERE met our bards of old?—the glorious throng,
 They of the mountain and the battle-song?
 They met—oh! not in kingly hall or bower,
 But where wild Nature girt herself with power:
 (Hemans 1881; ll. 1–4)

The meeting of *Gorseddau*, or bards, occurred in the open air rather than in "kingly hall or bower." Here we see Hemans not only identifying herself with the bardic tradition, as Jane Aaron points out, through the use of the first-person plural possessive adjective "our," but also publicly aligning herself with a poetry that is inspired by resistance to English rule, by "battle-fields of days gone by" and by the "tombs of heroes," as the poem has it (Aaron 2007: 54):

Well might bold Freedom's soul pervade the strains,
 Which startled eagles from their lone domains,
 And, like a breeze, in chainless triumph, went
 Up through the blue resounding firmament!
 Whence came the echoes to those numbers high? –
 'Twas from the battle-fields of days gone by!
 And from the tombs of heroes, laid to rest
 With their good swords, upon the mountain's breast.
 (ll. 21–8)

Echoes of Macpherson's "Ossian" poems and Moore's *Irish Melodies* resound through Hemans's Welsh verses. Let us take as another example the first verse of "Taliesin's Prophecy," from the *Welsh Melodies*:

A VOICE from time departed yet floats thy hills among,
 O Cambria! thus thy prophet bard, thy Taliesin, sung:
 The path of unborn ages is traced upon my soul,
 The clouds which mantle things unseen, away before me roll,
 A light, the depths revealing, hath o'er my spirit passed,

A rushing sound from days to be, swells fitful in the blast,
 And tells me that for ever shall live the lofty tongue,
 To which the harp of Mona's woods by Freedom's hand was strung.
 (Hemans 1881; ll. 1–8)

“It is new-strung and shall be heard”: this motto adopted by the United Irishmen movement of the 1790s, which took the harp as its insignia, resonates here. Indeed, the poem also echoes in tone and temperament the poetry collected and translated by Charlotte Brooke in her *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789), a response in part to Macpherson’s “Ossian” poems in its reclamation of an ancient Irish Gaelic heritage. Brooke’s work as a cultural translator is worthy of brief mention here as part of the broader picture of non-English Anglophone Romantic poetry.

Unlike Charlotte Brooke, Felicia Hemans was not born in the country whose poetry and military heroism she commemorates, and neither was her loyalty exclusive to one nation. Instead, as William D. Brewer has suggested, Hemans’s poetry, like that of her contemporary Lord Byron, possesses a “cosmopolitan” vision (Brewer 2003: 169). Her martial verse celebrated British victories in the Peninsular war (both her husband and her brother were soldiers in Wellington’s army) as well as the heroism of the Greek, German, and Spanish armies. Besides which, critics could say, of the very many works of poetry she composed (Hemans published books of verse by the yard, so to speak, and rivaled even the aforesaid Byron in sales) the vast majority of her narratives are located outside her adopted country – in England and still further afield, in Greece, North America, Spain, and India – in such volumes as *England and Spain; or, Valour and Patriotism* (1808), *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* (1816), *Modern Greece* (1817), and *The Siege of Valencia* (1823).

Other critics have viewed Hemans as less a cosmopolitan poet than as the voice of English imperialism and jingoistic patriotism. Certainly it is difficult to reconcile Hemans’s English sentiments (in poems such as “The Homes of England” and “England’s Dead”) with those of her *Welsh Melodies*. “The Homes of England,” published in the volume *Records of Woman* (1828), established Hemans’s popularity during the Victorian period as an English nationalist poet par excellence and the preserver of an ideology of domesticated femininity rooted in the concept of home:

The free, fair Homes of England!
 Long, long, in hut and hall,
 May hearts of native proof be rear’d
 To guard each hallow’d wall!
 And green for ever be the groves,
 And bright the flowery sod,
 Where first the child’s glad spirit loves
 Its country and its God!
 (Hemans 2002; ll. 33–40)

Hemans’s Welsh poetic predecessor Jane Brereton (1685–1740) frequently referred to herself as “Cambro-Briton” (Welsh-British) and the same could be said of Hemans. If, as Jane

Aaron asserts, "It would appear that Hemans served as the national poet of two nations at once" (2007: 54), then this duality is also what makes her an interesting figure around which to study the intersection of poetry and nationalism in Wales, Scotland and Ireland during the Romantic age. In this light, the following anecdote told by Aaron is revealing:

In 1819 Hemans defeated fifty-seven competitors, including James Hogg, to win first prize in a Scottish poetry competition held "to give popularity ... to the memory of Wallace." The prize poem is very similar in its rhetoric to that of her *Welsh Melodies*: in it William Wallace persuades Bruce to take up arms against England by forcefully instilling in him the conviction that Scotland "is no land for chains ... / The soul to struggle and to dare / Is mingled with our northern air." The *Edinburgh Monthly Review* welcomed the judgement, rejoicing in the fact that "a Scottish prize, for a poem on a subject purely, proudly Scottish, has been adjudged to an English candidate," because it "demonstrates the disappearance of those jealousies which, not a hundred years ago, would have denied such a candidate any thing like a fair chance with a native." (Aaron 2007: 55)

The comments of the *Edinburgh Monthly Review* may well illustrate the existence of a more fluid concept of nationalism during the Romantic era than our modern age is prepared to admit but which Byron (born in London, raised in Scotland, and who died in the cause of Greek independence), Hemans, the Anglo-Welsh Briton, and perhaps even Moore, "Ireland's Minstrel" (a fellow traveler of Byron who spent most of his adult years in England while writing constantly about Ireland), could testify.

At the same time, it is likely that Hemans's poetry, and indeed that of Moore, Burns and Hogg, will be moved even further to the critical fore by the current wave of what might be called "transnational" archipelagic criticism. A focus on the cross-cultural currents simultaneously connecting and dividing the poetry of four nations (England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) has the capacity to rethink national differences in terms of "fusion" and "transformations," to cite Kerrigan, rather than "crying up difference as in itself a source of value" (Kerrigan 2008: 89).

SEE ALSO

Chapter 5 "Ballad Collection and Lyric Collectives"; chapter 6 "Satire, Subjectivity, and Acknowledgment"; chapter 14 "Laboring-Class Poetry in the Romantic Era"; chapter 30 "Sexual Politics and the Performance of Gender in Romantic Poetry"

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16

Anglo-Jewish Romantic Poetry

Karen Weisman

In 1968 Bertrand Bronson, in a well-known critique of Romanticism that sought to valorize the ethics of neoclassical poetic idioms, notoriously asserted that for the neo-classicals, “generalization was one of the chief ways in which man transcended his private experience and became adult” (1968: 147). At the height of the New Criticism, becoming a child, that is, unlettered and unsophisticated, had often been taken as the *modus operandi* of Romanticism. And champions of Neoclassicism like Bronson sought to salvage the grown-up precursors of the Romantics by reading Romantic particularity as an ethical flaw, as a transgression against the civility of consensus. This complaint about self-interest has resurfaced in sundry ways over the years, though I suspect that few scholars would be willing to grant their affinity with Bronson’s literary moral code. The problem of generalization, of course, has never really gone away, even when detached from the quotation that was Bronson’s immediate catalyst: “to Generalize is to be an Idiot” (Blake 2008: 462). Any reading of Romantic lyric is of necessity pulled between the Scylla and Charybdis of generalization and self interest, but a focus on *Jewish* poetry of the period complicates the story. A focus on Anglo-Jewish poetry of the early nineteenth century complicates it even further, for here we confront the stark realities of how the demands of subjectivity are served by generalization; that is, the self who is read as a foreign race, who is alienated from the history upon which the succors of British hearth and home depend, knows something else about generalization: what they know is that those who have an uncomplicated relationship with their nation’s history, those who are recognized as part of the generalization of the normative human, or the British, have their selfhood guaranteed within various stable structures of identity. Though the Jews in the early nineteenth century still suffered under various civil disabilities, their regard for the country was still generally positive, a regard that did not fail to acknowledge the relative safety and even increasing power of their existence. The cultural conditions of what they lacked, however, are among the most

important idealizations of Romantic ideology: a reliable history in a land whose landscape thereby demands its allegiance. The tension inherent in this history resolves itself into a tension about cultural authority: can the particularity of lyric utterance be claimed by the very Jewish figures who reflectively worry its fraught implications?

This chapter will interrogate two key figures in the early history of Jewish literature in Romantic England. Grace Aguilar and Emma Lyon were self-identified practicing Jews, deeply learned in both English and Hebrew texts, and fully aware of the subtler tensions realized in their allegiances both to lyric self-expression in English and their particular inflections of Jewish cosmopolitanism. There are other poets who could also stand to represent trends in Romantic Jewish poetry, Hyman Hurwitz, Celia Moss, and Marion Moss chief among them; however, I read Aguilar and Lyon as paradigmatic of the central tensions of Anglo-Jewish Romantic poetry.

The history of the Jews in England is a complicated one, and it offers a story that belies present ease. They were expelled from England altogether in 1290, and allowed limited reentry in 1656 under Cromwell. It is indeed true that European Jewish history generally is a story of difficult sojourn, exile, and civil disabilities. Certainly the great shattering Spanish exile of 1492, until which time the Jews in Spain had enjoyed an immense flowering of cultural production and power, is part of the mainstream cultural memory. What is perhaps less well understood is that the banishment of the Jews from England in 1290 in fact was the first wholesale expulsion (from an entire country) of its kind in Europe, and that it set an important precedent, one with momentous consequences in history. Some Jews did not survive the 1290 expulsion. What became of those who did survive is not known with certainty. The immediate post-1290 history of the Jews in Europe centers prominently on Spain and Portugal, major centers of Jewish learning and culture that came to bitter ends in the Inquisition. Most Jews in England during the period of the resettlement were of Spanish or Portuguese extraction. They came seeking safe haven and understood themselves to have largely found it. In the terms of the larger history of expulsion and escape, this was a circularity not lost on many of them. In Romantic-era England, the entire Jewish population numbered between 12,000 and 15,000 (see Endelman 1979: *passim*, esp. ch. 4).

As Jewish numbers increased through the nineteenth century, agitation for relief from the Jewish civil disabilities became an increasingly public concern. These included, among other disabilities, an inability to vote or to trade in the City and on the Exchange, exclusion from membership in Parliament, and exclusion from standing for Mayor of London. Even before the abrogation of these disabilities, however, like their seventeenth-century predecessors, British Jews in the nineteenth century tended, within various qualifications, to recognize England as a land of relative freedom, indeed of refuge. The characteristic stance of British Jews was one of gratitude for safe haven, even if that haven had its thorny protrusions. For Jewish writers, one of those thorns was represented by their exclusion from study at Oxford or Cambridge, a situation that was not remedied until much later in the nineteenth century, with the abolition of the University Tests Act. And since the Jewish mass migration tended fortuitously to follow on the heels of literary Romanticism, much of the poetry produced by British Jews engaged a Romanticism that was not quite their inheritance, but not quite a forum for simple rejection either.

Emma Lyon is certainly one of the earliest Romantic-era poets. She was born in 1788 and died in 1870. She published only one volume of verse, at the age of twenty-three, in 1812. She was the daughter of a very prominent Hebrew teacher, Solomon Lyon, a teacher who had taught Hebrew at institutions no less august than Cambridge, Oxford and Eton, but who as a professing Jew could not be given secure employment in any of them. He suffered temporary but prolonged blindness, which was the immediate occasion of Emma Lyon publishing her poetry: with fourteen siblings, the family desperately needed money during their father's incapacity, and her volume was sold by subscription at ten shillings six pence a copy. There were over 350 subscribers, virtually all from Oxford, Cambridge and Eton, and very few of them, in fact, seem to have been Jews. Like virtually all women writers of the time, Jewish and otherwise, she offers a strenuously apologetic preface apologizing for her presumption, proclaiming financial necessity in spite of her modesty as her primary motivation, and generally disclaiming any talent or indeed right to present her verse in the public domain. As a Jewish woman, Emma Lyon's access to formal higher education was severely limited. There is anecdotal evidence that she became well read all the same, and her poetry is obtrusively dense with allusions to the classics whose authority she putatively cannot appropriate, indeed whose contents her poetry laments not knowing. She was herself a Hebrew teacher, so it is certainly clear that her father would have taught her Hebrew well. (For details about Lyon, see Cream 1993 and 1999–2001; see also Scrivener 2005: esp. 105–9.)

It is not simple presumption, however, for which she apologizes in her volume. The apologetic frame of reference is centered on access, which is as much to say that its focus is on the authority conferred by right of entry – to education, to the fields of learning, to great poetry, to the depths of culture. “It will soon be perceived that my education has been confined, and that nature has not been so munificent towards me, as to supersede the necessity of cultivation” (Lyon 2002: viii). The disclaimer about her talent and, more important, about her cultural authority is offered first in the poetic dedication and then in the preface. The dedication is offered to Her Royal Highness, The Princess Charlotte of Wales, who was the daughter and only heir to the Prince Regent, the future George IV. The dedication enacts a subtle protest, especially in light of the progression of the volume. Charlotte is an important figure for the Jews because, as heir to the throne, granddaughter of a madman, daughter of a banished mother and unpopular, overly controlling father, she was widely regarded as the oppressed figure of the brighter future. Charlotte as royal heir to the throne of England came, through various iconographic media, to be represented as Britannia, but a Britannia with a more expansive and generous largesse, one with authentic empathy for the disenfranchised and the disappointed. The poetic prefatory dedication to Charlotte is, then, particularly suggestive.

While thought unbending wings thy playful hour,
 Say, lovely Princess! Dares my Muse advance?
 Or hope, mild beaming in thy studious bow'r,
 From thy bright eyes one momentary glance?

(Lyon 2002: v)

The references to Milton are unmistakable and qualify the apologetic disclaimers: in appropriating the quintessence of Britannia as her feminine Muse, she establishes an identification that works in diverse, indeed mutually contradictory, ways: deferential but still presuming to confer blessing upon the princess, an abject subject invoking protection, she is also the self-declared heir of the author of *Paradise Lost*: “Say, lovely Princess! Dares my Muse advance?” Milton pleads, demands actually, “Sing, Heav’nly Muse” because

I thence
 Invoke thy aid to my advent’rous song,
 That with no middle flight intends to soar
 Above th’Aonian mount, while it pursues
 Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.
 (*Paradise Lost* i. 12–16)

Here is Emma Lyon addressing Charlotte, unhesitating in her appropriation and internalization of the Miltonic poetic line:

What spirit leads to thy august abode
 My daring, unpremeditated flight?
 All unsolicited my numbers flow’d,
 Soon as thy name allur’d my wond’ring sight.
 (Lyon 2002: v)

In asserting implicitly to whom she would be poetic heir, she establishes the grounds for asserting a literary inheritance. Her assertion of a literary inheritance establishes the ground of her literary authority; the identity she would construct from such an authority, however, knows itself to be partly an assertion of textual finesse.

Lyon establishes the importance of the literary inheritance she claims for herself even while situating herself as alienated from it. The poetry comes to establish the inextricable meaning to her subjectivity of that literary negotiation; an implicit mourning is enacted for the very expressive resources that at once centrally define her and from which she is, at least in part, alienated. When she finally signals a readiness to move beyond the apologetics of the disenfranchised and undereducated, a self-fashioning that is always self-consciously performative, the triumph of her authority signals a severing of the ties which bind her to the mainstream literary community in the only way she could have carried it off. I am referring to her translations from the Hebrew Psalms at the end of the volume. The volume as a whole follows a narrative progression: there are 57 poems over 152 pages, nine of which, the concluding nine poems of the volume, are paraphrases of Psalms which, I argue, function as consolation for self-mourning, but with a difference. She begins in a sentimental idiom, peopling her poetic landscape with mad women, abstract personifications, and rustic images. Many of her poems reveal self-conscious abjections in verse (for example, “An Ode on the Fear of Criticism,” “Sonnet on Hope,” “An Ode to Indifference”): unlettered,

longing for the inspiration of her muse and yet feeling always the impoverishment of her learning and hence of her literary resources. She asserts her lot in conventionalized rustic terms to describe her unlettered state, but this rusticity is more than just a signal of alienation from high art. It is also a way of claiming while qualifying the pastoral, of identifying with the land even while detached from it, of establishing a connection to the landscape of a land in which she has no stabilizing history. Her claim to the rustic is a claim that at once announces a way into a cultural authority even as it signals a further alienation from it, from the default forum (rustic because unlettered) that finally cannot possibly have her. Neither leech-gatherer nor wanderer nor learned don, she speaks from the no-man's land of the Jewish cosmopolite, a space with little recognized history in her country. The pastoral for the Romantics was already highly qualified by 1812, of course, and its redemptive powers rigorously ironized by the Romantics themselves. Still, however ironized, place remains a value term, and in the pastoral as inherited in early nineteenth-century England, the landscape defines the stable rootedness, the warranty against self-loss in the external world, that defines also pride in British nationalism. The landscape and the land of England are joined in the dream of stability, which becomes an ethical dream. Home here means not only hearth but also history. Or rather, hearth depends upon a reflective history.

The landscape as locus of objectivity depends, however, upon a history of stable rootedness, which is one reason why the Protestant poetics of redemption upon which pastoral consolation in the post-Reformation elegy depends is an alienating inheritance for the Jews. The Romantic peripatetic is not the same as the Wandering Jew, is not the same as the exilic cosmopolitan, and the horizon in which they meet signifies in vastly different ways. "Fresh woods and pastures new" is the famous consolatory *telos* to which Milton's "Lycidas," which in 1637 established the form of the pastoral elegy in England, is propelled. Lyon's "An Ode on Death" tries out a melancholy mood, one very much in line also with Thomas Gray's mid eighteenth-century "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," but it becomes a meditation on the muse, on poetry, on how this poet can make death a subject fully answerable to her tortured relationship with poetic inheritance, which stands as the tortured relationship with the landscape:

My muse contemplative delights to stray,
Where the green sod conceals the mould'ring clay:
In hallow'd shades she glories to recline,
And pensive bend before thy sable shrine!

(Lyon 2002: 17)

The prefatory poem asks, "Forgive the maid that with a rustic smile / Intrudes upon thine ear unpolish'd praise" (2002: vi). A similar dynamic can be found in "Lines Addressed to the University of Cambridge":

Not unamaz'd my wandering eyes survey'd,
By me unsung, sweet Cam! Thy classic shade.

Yet oh! What flow'rets can my Muse provide,
To deck the mansions of her earliest pride?
Far too unletter'd is my rural verse,
Immortal Cam! Thy glories to rehearse.

(2002: 83)

Announced on the advertisement of the volume is that Emma Lyon is the daughter of Solomon Lyon, Hebrew teacher. This address to Cam is not from the amazed shepherd swain. It is from the Jewish woman whom they will not let in. The rustic simplicity of pastoral life is no more Emma Lyon's to claim than is the immortal Cam. She has a history in neither, subtly claims in fact a history of exclusion from both.

Of perhaps greater concern for my immediate purposes is the translation debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The King James Bible was of course the standard source of biblical knowledge for most English subjects, including British Jews. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, a torrent of debates raged over the subject of biblical translation. Proprietary ownership of the word of God was the central ethic around which these polemics raged. The call for specifically Christian translators and Christian translations of Hebrew texts went hand in hand with increases in Jewish immigration into England. Though translation of the Psalms occupied a somewhat different context, Emma Lyon's turn to Psalm translations for the last nine of her poems introduces a new voice and a new claim to authority. Of the nine she chooses, none, as Michael Scrivener has pointed out, are Penitential Psalms, General hymns, or laments (and more than half of all the Psalms are within these three subgenres). Rather, they are bold claims for justice, wisdom psalms, and didactic psalms (Scrivener 2005: 117). She translates freely, boldly announcing, for those in the know – for those, that is, who can read the Hebrew well enough to know her liberties with the text – that she is the real thing, both a real translator, a real Jew who knows the original sacred text, and a real poet, presumptuous enough to play with diction and syntax, indeed to alter, when she so chooses, the original altogether to suit her needs. If the forty-eight poems that precede the Psalms are largely sentimental odes and meditations preoccupied with doomed learning and rustic simplicity, then the Psalm translations are prophetic assertions of cultural authority. For here there are no images of rusticity apologizing for its diction, no emphasis at all, in fact, upon the landscape. There were plenty of Psalms that might have accomplished an alternative pastoral authority, but the boldness of Lyon's Psalmist translations are striking precisely because they transfer cultural authority out of the landscape and into the text.

I would suggest that this holds the clue to the proliferation of personified abstractions and neoclassical odes in the earlier sections. The poetry of Emma Lyon is poised unevenly between a neoclassical decorum and an early Romantic aesthetic. Her engagement with odic form (odes to Autumn, Melancholy, Death, Sympathy, and so on) hovers over a Horatian meditative quiet and a Pindaric dialectic, but the hovering favors the quiet, favors the simpler closure of consensus. The personified abstraction depends for its efficacy on a common acceptance of the meaning of its object of address. It depends upon generalization. Lyon's appropriation of this common neoclassical form, one that is overlaid

with an early Romantic rustic apologetic, itself signals a negotiation of the common problem of consensus for a Jewish woman writer who would participate in a culturally sanctioned ethic. We would do well to recall Bertrand Bronson's claim: "generalization was one of the chief ways in which man transcended his private experience and became adult." Emma Lyon's generalizations present competing versions of her own subjectivity, or at least prepare for a reading of the Psalms she translates as the consolatory answer to the implicit lamentation over her cultural poverty. The Psalm translations complicate the aesthetic of the volume; we cannot but reread the earlier poems retrospectively and palimpsestically: the quivering address to the British princess is made by the translator of and the emender of David himself. The address to royalty is counterpointed by the address to God, and the disclaimer about speaking to Charlotte from the depths of her rustic soul is ironized by the translator who chooses psalms that do not highlight the pastoral, that showcase instead ethics, justice and inspired prophecy. In context of the translation debates that vilified the Jews as unredeemed translators of the Hebrew Bible, this palimpsest becomes all the more resonant. Psalm 73 becomes a valuable case in point. The closing lines of the original are as follows (I give the JPS translation): Asaph, the author of this Psalm, recoils from his envy of others and concludes,

Yet I was always with You,
 You held my right hand;
 You guided me by Your counsel
 and led me toward honour.
 Whom else have I in heaven?
 And having You, I want no one on earth.
 My body and mind fail;
 but God is the stay of my mind, my portion forever.
 Those who keep far from You perish;
 You annihilate all who are untrue to You.
 As for me, nearness to God is good;
 I have made the Lord God my refuge,
 that I may recount all Your works.

(JPS 2003: 1502)

The differences in Lyon's translation are instructive:

Oft have I follow'd all the ways they trod,
 And lost in wonder, ask'd with dubious eye,
 "Where are the righteous judgments of my God?
 Where is the Ruler of the sky?"

But lo! The justice that dispels the gloom,
 And to his altars bids me lowly trust;
 I see descend the swift avenging doom,
 I see the glories of the just!

(2002: 142)

Lyon does not take up an explicit translation of “having you, I want no one on Earth,” though to be sure, the biblical emphasis on the things of this earth being superseded by the faith in God is prominent. I would compare Psalm 73 with one of Lyon’s earlier pieces, “Lines to the Muse,” which does situate her in a pastoral retreat, does invoke a muse she is not certain she can rightfully claim, and which very strangely charges those who do not respond to the poetic muse with a criminal disposition:

I sing thy praise: unblest, alas! Is he,
Whom fate relentless alienates from thee!
Whose soul ne’er tastes the soft melodious rhyme,
Is form’d from earliest infancy to crime,
To horrible confusion, deeds of ire,
and thoughts too dark for the recording lyre.
But he, blest infant! whom the fates incline
At thy lov’d voice to thrill with joy divine,
To heavenly lore and contemplation born,
Shall hail thee as the sweet approach of morn;
With innocence shall wing the gladsome hours,
And trace thy footsteps through the dews and flowers.
(2002: 15–16)

If the muse saves from horrible confusion and deeds of ire, and if Emma Lyon has no cultural authority on which to claim a muse, then the author has a soul in peril. If she can claim a cultural authority, though, the reward, in the logic of this poem, is to trace thy footsteps through the dews and flowers. The right to succor staked in the Psalm is the right of the righteous, the reward of the good, and this is clear in the original. In her translation, Lyon dispenses with the lengthy qualifications or even ponderings. This represents a departure from other, older Psalm translations still familiar during the period: Isaac Watts in his famous Psalter invokes justice and Christian worship and humility, while Sternhold-Hopkins calls down vengeance against transgressors while remembering the succor of the Lord. Lyon goes right to the heart of transgression: she does not linger on reward, nor on the progressive revelation of the vanity of envy. She is startlingly succinct: “I see descend the swift avenging doom, / I see the glories of the just!” She does not have to qualify with any strenuous activity the uses of earthly pleasures. Her consolations are not within the flowers and dews of her Muse. She makes no apologies. She denudes the biblical text of its slow searching. Instead, she pronounces. The pain of cultural poverty is met by a sloughing off of the terms by which culture is valued. The highest authority on earth is hers. The sacred is her very domain. The ruler of the Sky, in Lyon’s translation, recalls the classical Pantheon only to remind that it has no place here – and the “here” pronounced is the Here and Now of textual authority. If the earlier poems present a persona whose expressive resources are a source of alienation, then the Psalmist translations become the guarantee of expressive authority.

This discussion of Lyon could only end with further questions: if the cultural authority longed for in the earlier sections defines the consensual point of reference for

authority, then what degree of self-canceling, rather than self-affirming, is being staged? Once one accepts that a qualitatively new value system is being put in place to affirm the identity and centrality of Emma Lyon as Poet, once one recognizes that the regrets of the earlier sections are answered in the later Psalms, is there still a move that cannot quite let go of that earlier self-constitution? I have been describing an implicit mourning for expressive resources that both define the poet and are denied the poet. But do the Psalm translations kill off an earlier self, that is, the one whose unlettered simplicity helped her to fashion common cause with British standards of value? The authority of the Psalm translations move well beyond rusticity; they move too beyond the pastoral of Wordsworth. In the dynamic I am describing, the bold Psalm translations kill off the one fashioning of self that granted Emma Lyon community in the great Pantheon of English poets. Neither chronicler of rustic simplicity nor unlettered rustic, this translator of the Psalms is of the disenfranchised foreign race whose cultural authority herein is absolute. This is an authority that further sets her apart even as it defines and elevates her. We are still meant to read the Psalms in the knowledge that their locus of authority is under threat of death; the cry against the criminal mind of the one who does not seek the muse, who is as a result struck by "thoughts too dark for the recording lyre" (2002: 15), is the cry of the poet moving toward denial of one poetic system of value. The implicit celebration of her ultimate cultural authority undermines the ethic of rustic simplicity. You don't need pastoral ease to lay bare that which is most permanent and important in human existence (to recall Wordsworth's prescriptions in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1984: 597)). You need literacy, knowledge, language. If Lyon is elegiac at this point, it is because she must mourn the losses inherent in her refusal to mourn.

If Emma Lyon moves between the poles of unlettered rustic and erudite scholar, then Grace Aguilar moves forward into an easier future that still defiantly refuses to forget the past. In fact, her assertion of poetic authority depends upon the urgency with which she assimilates a complicated Jewish history to present concerns; the point of reference, however, is always historical precisely because she knows of the deep historical implications of lyric utterance. One aspect of that knowledge is signified in the complicated response to presumptions of pastoral ease. In 1886, the Jewish author Amy Levy offered a wonderful diagnosis of Anglo-Jewish engagement with the land that could have applied brilliantly to both Aguilar and Lyon: in context of a discussion of Heine and Jewish humor, Levy opined, "[The Jew] hardly has left, when all is said, a drop of bucolic blood in his veins" (1993: 523). The question relentlessly becomes, then, what of the Jew whose expressive resources depend upon the British literary history for which the bucolic is an integral part?

Grace Aguilar was born in 1816, and she died in 1847 after a lifetime of ill health. Her parents, practicing Portuguese Jews, came to England in flight from the Inquisition, not an uncommon situation at the time. Aguilar thus took her place as the British child of Portuguese parents who had once been so-called crypto-Jews, Jews who hid their religious identity from public scrutiny, but who continued secretly to identify themselves as Jewish. Britain was recognized as the place where, at least superficially, they

could be themselves. It is no surprise that the nineteenth-century debates about British nationalism should find such powerful resonance in the work of Aguilar and other Anglo-Jewish writers. The subject of nationalism for British Jewish subjects, however, was never an easy affair. My reading of Aguilar must be prefaced by a brief discussion of the Jewish Naturalization Bill of 1753, the so-called "Jew Bill" that was in fact repealed almost immediately after it was passed. It produced one of the most fiery political clamors of the eighteenth century, and some of its resonances were felt into the nineteenth century. Its tremors were hardly earned, however; as things stood at the time, there was no legal recourse for Parliament to naturalize professing Jews. The Jew Bill sought to change the constitutional requirements that would grant Parliament the right to confer naturalization; this process could only have been granted, however, through a private act of Parliament, an expensive and inevitably rare prospective occurrence (Perry 1962: 1). The bill passed, and it erupted into the loudest political and religious clamor of the eighteenth century. It was quickly repealed before ever once being resorted to, and still its tremors raged. Eventually the storm died down, with very little real political fallout. But the deep terror of the remote possibility of a Jew or two potentially becoming, in some ill-defined future, a British citizen, produced a clamor whose implications, even a century later, could not be entirely forgotten. As Thomas Perry observes in his book-length study of the Jew Bill, "Surely a violent political-religious controversy is one of the last things we should expect to find in the tolerant and sleepy 1750's ... And what are we to make of the undignified spectacle of Parliament, in the period of the Whig supremacy, scrambling to repeal an act that it had solemnly passed only six months before?" (1962: 3). The tolerant and sleepy 1750s are still today so understood. The Jew who hath not a drop of bucolic blood in his veins must also be the Jew whose cosmopolitanism, to recall the infamous Stalinist slur, is rootless.

Grace Aguilar briefly discusses the Jew Bill in her "History of the Jews in England" (Aguilar 2003), where she notes in particular that the City of London was vehemently opposed to the Bill and loudly participant in the clamour surrounding it. All the same, this is a history published in 1847 which clearly struggles to find in the vexed history of the Jews in England a telos of final arrival and ultimate sanctuary. It struggles because it clearly cannot do so entirely, looking to America as the locale of presumed greatest emancipation, and ending with a prayerful hope for acceptance. The Jew Bill clamor supplies an important background framework. I have introduced it here mainly as a paradigmatic, rather than plainly formative, case. Its subtle resonances remain subtle but portentous, both symbolic and practical in their consequences.

In 1845 Aguilar published "Dialogue Stanzas: Composed for, and Repeated by, Two Dear Little Animated Girls, at a Family Celebration of the Festival of Purim." Purim is a festival that occurs in spring. It is a holiday marked by a reading of the Book of Esther, a biblical book, in which the Jews' escape from King Ahasurus's evil minister Haman is told. The holiday occurs in the Hebrew month of Adar, a month during which, because of the festival of Purim, Jews are *commanded* to be happy. Traditionally such happiness is expressed in raucous exuberance, and during the reading of the Book of Esther, the names of Haman and his children are literally drowned out in a cacophony

produced by noise-making objects. In the Book of Esther, Esther is commanded to marry King Ahasurus, which she does. He does not yet know that she is Jewish. Esther's nephew Mordechai refuses to bow down to Haman, insisting that Jews bow only to God, never to temporal potentates. Haman vows death to all of the Jews, but Esther intercedes, and reveals her heretofore concealed Jewish identity to the king, who subsequently has Haman hanged on one of the very gallows he built for the Jews. Now Ahasureus, one of the minor heroes in the Purim story, shares a name with Ahasureus the Wandering Jew, perhaps more familiar to Romanticists (the romanization of the spelling varies somewhat, as do the various literary legends associated with the name). Aguilar's choice of this story to engage elegiacally with Wordsworth is no coincidence. Aguilar's "Dialogue Stanzas" (Aguilar 2003) has the two little girls debating the relative merits of frolicking in the spring pastoral scene, on the one hand, and the persistent need, on the other, to read about a "cruel foe" who "swore vengeance on our race" (l. 11). The two girls end up convincing one another, and the poem ends on a relatively facile note, in keeping with the youthful pratter of two girls who cannot quite fathom their history. The final two stanzas are spoken by alternating girls:

"Yes, yes, sweet sister, you are right, not only is to-day
For idle mirth, and noisy games, and merry thoughtless play.
We'll love our mother more and more, and all our dear kind friends,
And grateful be that hours of dread, no more our Father sends;
That we may sport amid the flowers as happy as a bee,
And cruel foes can never come, to mar our childish glee."

"See, see! I'm ready, sister dear – I've put the book away;
Come while the sun so brightly shines, we'll weave our garland gay.
What joy! – what joy! this happy day shall see us all together,
E'en those dear friends, whom time and space so long from us did sever;
Oh! many, many happy years, still spare us to each other.
Sweet sister, come! I'm ready now – the garland for our mother."

(ll. 25–36)

The "garland for our mother" motif pervades the poem: the frolicking girl – the girl who would at first turn from the text and forget history – wishes to celebrate the season and celebrate the Jewish commemorative festival by weaving a garland for their mother, a gift to the mother of mother nature's bounty from the very earth that sheltered our mothers. The gift of Nature here has become the signature of History. This is a poem that virtually consumes Wordsworth's "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned": the engagement with them is at once deeply vexed and directly explicit, in fact the thematic center of a poem that is not quite sure if it wants to be ironic. Wordsworth's Matthew and William debate the relative merits of reading and quiet contemplation against the splendors of pastoral frolicking and of wise passiveness in the bosom of nature, not because the contemplation of human nature is less worthy than exultation in physical nature, but because "one impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man, / Of moral evil

and of good, / Than all the sages can" ("The Tables Turned," ll. 21–4). So says William, sure of the ethical ground of the landscape, sure that the throstle singing is no mean preacher, answering Matthew's indignation about his booklessness:

"Where are your books? – that light bequeathed
To Beings else forlorn and blind!
Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed
From dead men to their kind."
(“Expostulation and Reply,” ll. 5–8)

The next stanza, a little less persistently quoted by undergraduates, haunts Aguilar's 1845 poem most directly:

"You look round on your mother earth,
As if she for no purpose bore you;
As if you were her first-born birth,
And none had lived before you!"
(ll. 9–12)

Aguilar's dialogue with Wordsworth is elegiac in so far as it mourns the self-canceling gestures of her own expressive resources. Her Purim girls, scholar and frolicker both, enter a landscape that functions as trapdoor, as it were: the scene of pastoral merriment becomes a site of warning that is freighted with local historical resonances. The joy commanded in the Jewish festival is a reveling in the text. It admits no disjunction between *carpe diem* and the book. The studious one of Aguilar's poem must warn the merry-maker: "A little while and I will come, – I only want to know / What pass'd upon this very day – a long time ago" (ll. 7–8). Not murdering to dissect – not reading the right book – might well mean being murdered. It is not simply the relative merits of nature learning and book learning that are at stake here: what is at stake for the girls of the poem is the historical memory figured by the landscape, and the landscape is at once threat of exile and/or death and the dream of tranquil restoration putatively supplied by its soothing qualities, its moral anchorage. If Wordsworth's is the poem's Romantic antecedent, then what passes here, here in a conjured scene of pastoral harmony, is a nostalgia for a harmony under threat already for Wordsworth, under threat enough to warrant a nostalgia insisting on its rights. Aguilar cannot cleave to the healing thoughts of a land which writes also the story of her renunciation, even though she plays with the seductive allure of instantiating her subjectivity within it. Aguilar responds ironically to what in Wordsworth is already wistfully ironic.

All the same, this scenario composes, for Aguilar, an alienation from expressive resources that she would still claim, at least in part. The figuring of her own estrangement from her own familiar, her own soil, her own literary history which is neither her only familiar nor only history, is the ultimate and most powerful source of the elegiac aspects of the poem's dialogue with Wordsworth. This is the Jew who would well rather claim all sorts of drops of bucolic blood in her veins, but the author of the first

Jewish History of England also knows that she can poorly digest the English sustenance she has swallowed.

When one girl convinces the other, the gratitude for deliverance from Haman clearly rings with other sources of deliverance that still carry a bad taste:

“Yes, yes, sweet sister, you are right, not only is to-day
For idle mirth, and noisy games, and merry thoughtless play.
We’ll love our mother more and more, and all our dear kind friends,
And grateful be that hours of dread, no more our Father sends.”

(ll. 25–8)

The Romantic pastoral, however conceived, figures both a longing for inclusion and the sign of a persistent alienation. The self-alienation that is the yield of such self-contradiction relies precisely on the inaccessibility to Aguilar of the spring-like *carpe diem*, the pastoral nostalgia that Wordsworth himself may well partly ironize, but which becomes the dislocated specter Aguilar can only mourn. Purim is a spring festival, one commemorated precisely by recitation of a book. In fact, it is a specific positive commandment that the entire Book of Esther be read twice, and that every word – save the name of Haman and his sons, which must be recited and drowned out at the same time – be heard by all Jews. It is a festival of spring that demands that history be heard, and that commands as religious duty merriment in the book.

The distant nightmare that threatens the girls’ ease is the focus of their dialogue about the relative merits of playing in the landscape and reading the book. It is a dialogue that Matthew and William do not have because they have never needed to have it. This is the pathos of Aguilar’s poem. Her dialogue about the ease of the landscape, and her implicit dialogue with the poetic precursors that structure it, are burdened with the history that must, of necessity, ironize it once and for all. Aguilar’s “Dialogue Stanzas” signals the death of the symbolic value of a landscape that was never hers anyway. The history book – the Book of Esther – that commands her to rejoice in an escape from death commands her to understand a dialogue between history and poetry. And that is a dialogue, finally, that plays itself out in her own efforts at self-definition.

In “Of National Characters,” published in 1753, the very year of the Jew Bill, David Hume, who had written his own history of England, tries to define the peculiar character of the English in the very midst of an encomium to its virtues:

But the English government is a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The people in authority are composed of gentry and merchants. All sects of religion are to be found among them. And the great liberty and independency, which every man enjoys, allows him to display the manners peculiar to him. Hence the English, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character; unless this very singularity may pass for such. (Hume 1987: 207)

Is the very lack of a national character the defining significance of Englishness, but only where Englishness defines a site of tolerance? Such is the great dream of those who

would put down an anchor of stability into the soil of the landscape, an anchor that, all the same, cannot prevent stormy seas for the wandering Jews.

If Aguilar's stance with respect to England betrays signs of ambivalence, her remembering of the great golden age of the Spanish Jews makes of that ambivalence a potent anxiety; if even their beloved Spain turned so utterly against the Jews, what real stability could even England secure? The poem is entitled "Song of the Spanish Jews, During their 'Golden Age.'" It was written in 1843, four years before her death. It is prefaced by a quotation from Milman's *History of the Jews*: "It was in Spain that the golden age of the Jews shone with the brightest and most enduring splendour. In emulation of their Moslemite brethren, they began to cultivate their long disused and neglected poetry; the harp of Judah was heard to sound again, though with something of a foreign tone" (Aguilar 2003: 195). The poem itself is written in quatrains consisting of rhyming couplets. It follows an eleven-beat line, its generally iambic beat interrupted often and obtrusively by trochaic substitutions, with many lines demonstrating a hypercatalectic ending. The metrical discord makes contact with an almost aggressive ironizing of at least one Romantic credo of place, which in fact joins hands with the belief in England as refuge. The poem can only function as dramatic monologue insofar as it is an encomium to Spain's generous sheltering of the Jews, its ability to secure them with a long horizon of stable rootedness. Under Spanish auspices the Jews indeed produced a literary and musical heritage of remarkable distinction. The golden age of the Jews in Spain ended, of course. First vicious persecution, and then the Jews were expelled in 1492. In Aguilar's poem, the hymnic encomium to the Spanish land as dramatic monologue becomes an ironic elegy, one that marks an ethical conundrum. She begins not simply with praise for Spain's sheltering generosity, nor even with praise for the beautiful landscape. Neither does she begin directly with an exhortation for those sheltered Jews to appreciate their bounty. Instead, the poem begins with ominous foreboding, as it chastens any withholding of Jewish gratitude owing to the host country:

Oh, dark is the spirit that loves not the land
Whose breezes his brow have in infancy fann'd,
That feels not his bosom responsively thrill
To the voice of her forest, the gush of her rill.

(ll 1–4)

If Coleridge in "Dejection: An Ode," having seen but not felt the delicate beauties of the horizon, finally learns that "we receive but what we give" (l. 47), Aguilar ups the ante: the specter of nonresponsiveness becomes tinged with the shadow of exile, real physical exile. The aggressively ironic stance of the poem transforms it into elegy not so much for the land of Spain lost to the Jews when they were expelled from this once paradise, but for the Jews' alienation from the expressive resources that define Romantic standards of value. Given the retrospective, what would meeting nature halfway here possibly mean? As she continues with the hymn-like praise of the particularities of the landscape, so she sustains an imagined castigation of those who refuse the immersion

within the culture of Spanish pastoral tranquility, or more precisely, the culture that knows to praise the pastoral.

Who hails not the flowers that bloom on his way,
 As blessings there scattered his love to repay;
 Who loves not to wander o'er mountain and vale,
 Where echoes the voice of the loud rushing gale.

(ll. 5–8)

In other words, if you cannot feel the power of the pastoral assertion, if it does not make you feel “that in this moment there is life and food / For future years” (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” ll. 64–5), if you cannot accept that this is the “green isle” that “needs must be / In the deep wide sea of Misery” (Shelley, “Lines Written among the Euganean Hills,” ll. 1–2), then you are defective, cold, ungrateful, in short, responding to the land in an unethical fashion. The point here is that the poet’s longing to appropriate the pastoral hymn becomes a longing to instantiate a subjectivity defined precisely by the very expressive resources from which the Jew is alienated. It may well be a dark spirit whose bosom will not responsively thrill to the voice of the forest, but the Jews of England were almost never *in* the forest. The unstable hospitality that is being alluded to here by Aguilar, in the midst of an ironic but still wistful encomium to the Spanish landscape, itself complicates even the irony. If the wandering Jew and the Romantic peripatetic share anything in common, then the figure in which they meet is the horizon. For the Jew of this poem, the longer view of the horizon figures expulsion and exile. Walking is not the same as running away, and we should not forget that Aguilar’s parents came to England on the run from the Inquisition, which was not officially extinguished in Portugal until 1821. In this sense, land becomes transformed, for the cosmopolitan Jew, from landscape into an issue about land ownership and of hospitality within foreign lands. It thereby speaks also to the ethical implications of how we figure the relationship to the land in which we dwell.

In 1844, Aguilar wrote a poem more direct in its anguish and less vexed in its ethical import, “The Hebrew’s Appeal, on Occasion of the Late Fearful *Ukase* Promulgated by the Emperor of Russia.” There had been many *ukases*, or decrees against the Jews by Russian emperors, beginning with Catherine the Great’s in the 1790s. Aguilar’s poem responds directly to Nicholas the First’s dissolution of all Jewish communal organizations and exiling of the Jews into the Pale, which was on the border of Russia and Poland. Alluding to England’s abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and to the fact that England in 1837 ended all slavery throughout the British Empire, she asks:

Will SHE who gave to Liberty the slave,
 For God’s own people not one effort make?
 Will SHE not rise once more, in mercy clad,
 And heal the bleeding heart, and Sorrow’s sons make glad?

(ll. 27–30)

And from a later stanza: "Oh England! Thou hast call'd us to thy breast / And done to orphans all a mother's part" (ll. 37–8). What are the ethical imperatives of mother to child? Adapting a common Romantic nostalgic maneuver, and perhaps thinking directly of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," whereby the beloved land, in its obtrusive stability, stands for the very mother who first conferred the child's security and locus of identity, Aguilar tilts the trajectory. Will the mild mother, the gentle breast to starving orphans, please not take to her bed? Will she please become the firm but loving rebuker, "send her voice all thrillingly afar" (l. 32), especially "when her rebuke might shake / With shame and terror, e'en the tyrant Czar?" (ll. 33–4). Aguilar's call to the mother here is a call that she knows will go unheeded, and it is in the very unheeding, in the clear foreknowledge of the unheeding, that the arrogation of England as maternal figure to the wandering Jew is called in question. Aguilar's speaker is alienated from the very imagery she would appropriate, indeed alienated from the very rhetorical repertoire that is all the same her natural point of reference, her natural point of departure. The worrying of the natural here is precisely the point.

Will England sleep, when Justice bids her wake,
 And send her voice all thrillingly afar?
 Will England sleep, when her rebuke might shake
 With shame and terror, e'en the tyrant Czar,
 And 'neath the magic of her mild appeal,
 Move Russia's frozen soul for Israel to feel?

(ll.31–6)

Neither guest nor full citizen, neither pastoral poet nor cosmopolitan citizen peripatetic, the Jew inhabits a space between, which here is the space of a longing that cannot be properly named.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 7 "‘Stirring shades’: The Romantic Ode and Its Afterlives"; chapter 8 "Pastures New and Old: The Romantic Afterlife of Pastoral Elegy"; chapter 10 "Shepherding Culture and the Romantic Pastoral"; chapter 14 "Laboring-Class Poetry in the Romantic Era"

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Leigh Hunt's Cockney Canon: Sociability and Subversion from Homer to *Hyperion*

Michael Tomko

In a September 1819 letter to his brother George, John Keats provides a concise account of his poetic relationship with Milton: "Life to him would be death to me" (1958: 2. 212). In order to grow in poetic strength and realize a lasting individual artistic achievement, the aspiring Keats and others of his generation had to wrestle agonistically with the blind prophetic poet, find their own voice amid the grand inheritance of his classically contoured blank verse, and eventually overthrow him to claim their own vocation. Critics during the Romantic-era culture wars, however, provided "Johnny Keats" with a less august forebear, the politically provocative and poetically experimental Leigh Hunt (Keats 2009: 273). According to the infamous "Cockney School" articles in *Blackwood's Magazine* and the like-minded conservative screeds in the *Quarterly Review* and *British Critic*, Keats's *Endymion* (1818) revealed "a copyist of Mr. Hunt; but he is more unintelligible, almost as rugged, twice as diffuse, and ten times more tiresome and absurd than his prototype" (Keats 2009: 277 (*Quarterly Review*, April 1818)). These critical attacks smothered Keats and Hunt for their "Shibboleth of low birth and low habits;" their attempts as the "most vulgar of Cockney poetasters" to rival the stately Wordsworth and Byron; their aspirations to be "future Shakespeares and Miltons;" their effeminate pretense as "uneducated and flimsy stripplings" who know "absolutely nothing of Greek, almost nothing of Latin"; their objectionable experiments in "wit, poetry, and politics"; their loose morals expressed in the "gross slang of voluptuousness" and the "spoken jargon of Cockneys"; and their looser poetic form that could not make "a complete couplet inclosing a complete idea."¹ As Hunt's "bantling" who had "already learned to lisp sedition," Keats was indicted by *Blackwood's* for belonging "to the Cockney School of Politics, as well as the Cockney School of Poetry" (Keats 2009: 276 (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August 1818)).

The excoriating focus on Hunt in these reviews pays a backhanded tribute to the so-called "King of the Cockneys." In 1818, not Keats, but Hunt was the prominent,

daring writer who awakened the cultural and political anxieties of the conservative press. Born to a humble and later indebted London family, Hunt worked his way from a charity boy at Christ's Hospital School to the editorship of the *Examiner*, a weekly periodical that called for parliamentary reform and opposed the repressive Tory ministries of George III and the Prince Regent. The pages of the *Examiner* featured theater reviews, current events, works by promising new poets like Shelley and Keats, and Hunt's acerbic or slyly evasive political leaders. The government, after three unsuccessful attempts, finally convicted Hunt of libel in 1812 for deflating the ministerial press's praise of the Prince Regent, who had apostasized from his youthful liberal leanings in favor of his father's prowar, antireform government (Mahoney 2003: 18–21). Yet while Hunt suffered physically and psychologically in Surrey Jail for calling the Regent a "corpulent gentleman of fifty" and a "violin of his word" without a "single claim on the gratitude of his country or the respect of posterity" (Hunt 2003: 1. 221 (*Examiner*, 22 March 1812)), he was not silenced. Hunt continued the *Examiner* and transformed his cell into a salon, complete with books, flowery wallpaper, and a bust of Milton. He gained the admiration of Shelley and Keats and entertained William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, Thomas Moore, and Byron, who poetically memorialized "the wit in the dungeon." This marks the beginning of the "Cockney School" or "Hunt circle," a network of friendship and intellect among the second-generation Romantics centered on Hunt, the *Examiner*, and his home in Hampstead Heath (Cox 1998: 4–8, 11–12).

Hunt's imprisonment made him a cultural icon and martyr for the left, and it provided time to focus on poetry. In *The Story of Rimini* (1816), Hunt sympathetically retold the life stories of Paulo and Francesca, Dante's damned lovers, as victims of a mendacious patriarchal society. In his revised versions of the *Feast of the Poets* (1814, 1815), Hunt jocularly needled established poets to give up their grave pretensions and reactionary politics to enjoy Apollo's radiant and progressive company. *The Descent of Liberty* (1814) is a metaphysical, democratic mask that supersedes triumphs over Napoleon with a call for further reform. *Foliage* (1818), a collection of poems featuring communal interplay and a philosophy of "cheer," has been described as a Hunt circle manifesto (Cox 2003: 60). These works represent bold experiments with received genres and even bolder moves in poetic form. Hunt loosened the syntactic and metrical strictures on the heroic couplet to allow for a more natural, ebullient, and conversational line; performed a Dionysian rewrite of Greek and Roman myths that had previously been markers of class and establishment dominance; viewed poetry not as a codified articulation of values or tradition, but an opportunity for interpersonal exchange; bent rhymes to fit the vital "Cockney" vernacular of spoken English; and infused high cultural forms with the impudence, playfulness, and humanity of the people of London. In 1832, Hunt looked back on the significance of *Rimini* to reflect that before he "had become aware of the inestimable value of the love of truth, as the foundation of every thing finally good, in poetry, philosophy, and the government of the world, I had unconsciously been giving a lesson upon it in a poetic form" (Hunt 1923: xxv). According to *Blackwood's*, Keats's 1817 poems, dedicated to Hunt, and *Endymion* show that the young Romantic learned too much in Hunt's "Cockney school

of versification, morality, and politics" (Keats 2009: 274 (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August 1818)). This broad vision of social and literary reform motivated conservative reviewers' attacks on "Cockney poetry" as the "most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language" (Keats 2009: 277 (*Quarterly Review*, April 1818)).

Critics of Romanticism, however, have tended to pay *Blackwood's* and the *Quarterly Review* a backhanded tribute for deriding Hunt's influence. Walter Jackson Bate's formational assessment was that Keats had adopted Hunt's "utmost laxity and liberality of expression" and needed to "rid his verse of this negligent slackness" (1945: 42). Aileen Ward continued in this vein: "Keats's adulation of Hunt could not last, of course, and while it did it had some regrettable effects" (1963: 80). Even recently, Duncan Wu not only exonerates the reviewers from Byron's charge of snuffing out Keats's life with an article, but also credits them for helping Keats mature: "Far from being his assassins, these critics played a vital role in nurturing Keats's early promise" (2001: 50). Keats's letter on Milton could be restated as a truism in Keats studies: "Life to Hunt would be death to Keats." Keats's occasionally dismissive letters about Hunt are partially responsible for this narrative, and he seems to describe a break with him in December 1818. Yet Keats resided with the Hunts in 1820 and published "La Belle Dame Sans Mercy" in Hunt's later journal, *The Indicator*. H. E. Rollins judiciously notes that Keats still signed himself "Your affectionate friend" and that Keats's missing letters to Hunt "would probably give a truer idea of what Keats really thought" (Keats 1958: 1. 78). Even in his cutting letter, Keats remarked that Hunt was "a pleasant fellow in the main when you are with him" (1958: 2. 11).

A new school of criticism has attempted to give a "truer idea" of Hunt's place in Keats's life and in Romantic studies. Emphasizing how Hunt made "literature act on and in politics" (Woodring 1962: 62), two landmark studies, Nicholas Roe's *Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (1997) and Jeffrey N. Cox's *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School* (1998), provide rich accounts of the crossings between poetic form and history within the Cockney School. Subsequent studies have understood Hunt's life and writing on its own terms, most notably in the six-volume edition of his selected works (Hunt 2003) and Roe's *Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt* (2005). Within this framework, the collected essays in *Leigh Hunt: Life, Poetics, Politics* (Roe 2003) focus on a Huntian aesthetic that upends many of our assumptions about Romanticism. Hunt reverses Coleridge's privileging of the transcendent Imagination over the homelier Fancy (Robinson 2003: 156, 164–5), delights in the "gardenesque" suburban landscape instead of an Alpine sublime (Jones 2003: 84–91), and recreates spontaneity and intimate chatter, not internalized lyric intensity (O'Neill 2003: 135; Stabler 2003: 95–9).

Yet Hunt is no idiosyncratic exception to the "spirit of the age," but a participant in Romanticism's "collective acts of collaboration and contest" (Cox 2003: 59). A revised understanding of Hunt invites a revision of his influence, especially on Keats. In his article on Keats's early awareness of Hunt's use of Cockney dialect and his subversive intrusion of working-class London "cheek" into medieval settings, Greg Kucich calls for further attention to "the persistence of Huntian inflections" and the "increasingly complex applications of Hunt's example" in Keats's later poetry (Kucich 2003:

130). Following this approach, this essay will suggest that Hunt's engagement with blank verse and the English epic tradition influences the fragmentary Book 3 of Keats's *Hyperion* (1820). Paralleling his redaction of classical myth and the romance tradition, Hunt attempts to interrupt and break down epic form in order to halt an ongoing cycle of retributive violence. This belligerence stems from classical heroism but persists in the Romantic epic's internalized, individualized quest to "define the god within" (Curran 1986: 174). To avoid the perils of this egotistical task, Hunt seeks to return combatants and poets to a sociable setting of pacifying dialogue. After examining Hunt's recovery of the younger Milton and his 1818 translations of *The Iliad*, I will argue that Keats's conclusion to *Hyperion* recalls Hunt's domestication of the epic's energies and thus follows his example in ways of which Keats himself may not have been entirely conscious.

Reviving Milton

Hunt defies not only traditional Romantic emphases on isolated sublimity and lyric interiority but also any critical assumptions that divorce text from author. Lucy Newlyn has aptly characterized Hunt's "dialogic method" that playfully undermines the claims of "high Romanticism" in a Bakhtinian mode (Newlyn 2000: 180). Yet, this may not fully capture the abiding conversational dialectic in Hunt's writing and verse. For Hunt, literature was a site of conviviality between author and reader, a place where personality persisted, and otherwise disparate and distanced hearts and minds met, even across generations. He embodied this sense of textual sociability in his anthology *Imagination and Fancy* (1844), whose annotated poems, notes, and introductions were designed for "co-perusal" (Hunt 2003: 4. 3). The selections and glosses attempt to create an intimacy that put the reader and editor side by side in the type of shared hermeneutic event that Hunt had once described to Shelley in Italy as involving "a book or two, a basket of fruit, and (oh vain flattered friend!) Leigh Hunt" (Hunt 1998: 99). "Co-perusal" appealed to the inherent nature of all books, which were meant for discussion in a room full of friends (Hunt 2003: 3. 24 (*Literary Examiner*, July 5, 1823)). In mediating distance between readers, literature and poetry could "triumph over time and space," and possibly death. For Hunt, poetry and material objects provide a kind of imminent immortality, a means by which the personality of the author can momentarily return to join the gathering (Hunt 2003: 3. 36–7 (*Literary Examiner*, July 12, 1823)). In offering a toast in *The Indicator* on Shakespeare's birthday in 1820, Hunt confesses a telling slip:

The poorest may call [Shakespeare] to mind, and drink his memory in honest water. We had mechanically written health, as if he were alive. So he is in spirit; – and the spirit of such a writer is so constantly with us, that it would be a good thing, a judicious extravagance, a contemplative piece of jollity, to drink his health instead of his memory. (Hunt 1928: 112 (*Indicator*, May 3, 1820))

Both literary reliquaries and material objects enjoin the move from memory to vitality. An “exquisite dry, old, vital, young-looking, everlasting” laurel from Vaucluse can connect Hunt to Petrarch and Laura (Hunt 1928: 115 (*Indicator*, July 12, 1820)). Ultimately for Hunt, literature serves as an indispensable part of living together that brings readers and writers into community and allows that community to rejoin a living past and extend into a hopeful future.

Hunt's ideal of poetic communion finds expression in his sonnet on a lock of Milton's hair. The poem first appeared in *Foliage* as the middle of three sonnets written in thanksgiving to Dr Robert Barry for the gift of the lock:

It lies before me there, and my own breath
 Stirs its thin outer threads, as though beside
 The living head I stood in honoured pride,
 Talking of lovely things that conquer death.
 Perhaps he pressed it once, or underneath
 Ran his fine fingers, when he leant, blank-eyed,
 And saw, in fancy, Adam and his bride
 With their heaped locks, or his own Delphic wreath.
 There seems a love in hair, though it be dead.
 It is the gentlest, yet the strongest thread
 Of our frail plant, – a blossom from the tree
 Surviving the proud trunk; as if it said,
 Patience and Gentleness is Power. In me
 Behold affectionate eternity.

(Hunt 2003: 5. 232)

The sonnet is an instantiation of the synchronic sociability Hunt envisioned, placing it among poems inscribed to Keats, Shelley, Hazlitt, and Lamb that textually recreate the Hunt circle (Cox 2003: 60–1). Hunt showed the lock to Keats, who recorded his own reverent reaction in verse within an 1818 letter to Bailey: “Chief of organic Numbers! / Old scholar of the spheres! / Thy spirit never slumbers, / But rolls about our ears / For ever and for ever” (Keats 1958: 1. 211). There is also a diachronic thread within Hunt's sonnet. The persistent “love in hair” draws the deceased Milton into this circle as well. The hair is the medium and the poem the place for summoning the ancestral spirit into Hunt's study, as if his bust had come to life.

There is a touch of Cockney insolence in the gesture. Not only does Hunt claim ownership of the nation's epic bard, he does so with a level of familiarity that borders on irreverence. The first quatrain puts the Cockney Hunt and the “old scholar” together in the same room, for a chat. The diction here is not imitative grand style as in Keats's awe, but that of vernacular gossip as the two Londoners hold forth in the parlor about “lovely things” and the “heaped locks” of Adam and Eve. This is the use of a “common, idiomatic style” against which Byron had cautioned Hunt (Hunt 1998: 67). Counterbalancing this laxity, however, Hunt respects the structure of the legitimate sonnet as an inheritance from Petrarch, though his use of a closing couplet is exceptional

by his own estimation in *The Book of the Sonnet* (1867) (Bate 1945: 10; Hunt 2003: 4. 295). There are several enjambed lines (ll. 1–2, 2–3, 5–6, 7–8) and inversions of the initial iamb into a trochee (ll. 2, 4, 6, 13). These seem far from haphazard, however, as they mark moments that connect the two poets across time: Hunt's breath stirring the hair into life, and Milton running his fingers through the same hair that now sits before Hunt. Highlighted by these metrical variations, the poetic community across time at the heart of the poem is made possible by a combination of intelligible form and relaxed prosody. "One touch of *Sonnet*," Hunt would later claim, "makes *all parties kin*" (2003: 4. 313). In contrast to Blake's spiritually sublime summoning of Milton's spirit into his foot in *Milton* (Blake 1982: 115 (pl. 21); Mee 2003: 264–82), Hunt offers a sense of Cockney decorum, a variance of form that can range from the excessive, ludic, and lax to the intimate and conversational depending on the context and purpose of the poem, or, as Hunt's 1844 essay "What is Poetry?" summed up, "the feeling demanded by the occasion" (Hunt 2003: 4. 32). Hunt is not out to unleash Milton's prophetic spirit, but to bring his better self back down to earth.

Even as Hunt revered Milton, he feared that his abstraction from society, particularly after his blindness and the Restoration, resulted in an egotistical self-absorption and withdrawn pride (Hunt 2003: 4. 80). For Hunt, Milton's verse is always impressive, but it imposes "too great a sense of consciousness on the part of the composer" (2003: 4. 33). In *Imagination and Fancy*, Hunt argued that the poet's psychological darkening, combined with a cheerless Puritanism lacking a "faith in things" (2003: 4. 80), produced thunderous blank-verse rhythms imbued with dangerous resolve and a resentful urge to dominate, both formally and ideologically. In *Paradise Lost*, despite its many beauties and metrical harmonies, "all is accompanied with a certain oppressiveness of ambitious and conscious power" (Hunt 2003: 4. 80).

Milton's "proud self-esteem" and isolated "self-worship" (Hunt 2003: 4. 80) particularly vexed Hunt because he saw a parallel will to power in the political and poetic protagonists of Napoleonic-era Europe. After their apostasy from their youthful commitment to liberty, Wordsworth and the Lake poets were most guilty of this tendency. In the 1814 version of *The Feast of the Poets*, Apollo mocks Wordsworth's recital of a pseudo-lyrical ballad and then wraps him up alone in a blinding mist: "The bard, like a second Aeneas, went home in't, / And lives underneath it, it seems, at this moment" (Hunt 2003: 5. 39; ll. 280–1). Embarrassment yields isolation and embittered verse, written under a proverbial cloud. Hunt alludes to Poseidon's spirited away a vulnerable Aeneas from Achilles under a fog in *The Iliad*, providing a deeper layer to the joke. Aeneas is saved so that he can "rule the men of Troy in power – / his sons' sons and the sons born in future years" (*Iliad* xx. 369). This prophecy provides the founding myth of the Roman Empire and the justification for Vergil's triumphant *Aeneid*. This suggests that surmounting violence and a cyclical pattern of defeat, clouded withdrawal, and a resurgent will to power are propagated within the epic tradition. Hunt feared that European politics were following a similar path. In an 1808 *Examiner* article, Hunt expressed little hope that the defeat of Napoleon would bring about millennial peace but predicted a cycle of tyranny in which European nations "have in general

much more to fear from themselves" and from politicians "unable to look or to move out of their little sphere" and the "privileges of their mental dungeon" (Hunt 1962: 86 (*Examiner*, September 11, 1808)). In 1810, a series of monarchical successions meant little as "not one" of the next generation of kings evidenced a "promise of better government, a dawning ray of intellect or of enlarged feeling indicative of better days" (Hunt 1962: 112 (*Examiner*, September 23, 1810)).

Hunt's solution for this proud and abstracted egotism, at both the political and the poetic level, was a recall to conviviality and sociability. These cycles of withdrawal, resentment, and triumph had to be interrupted. Jocularly and conversation were needed to dispel the illusions of self-worship and ambition. This occurs in Hunt's 1815 revision of *The Feast of the Poets*, in which Apollo gives Wordsworth another chance. Instead of storming off, the Lake poet successfully charms the audience and thereafter his "cloud rolled apart, and the poet came forth, / And took his proud seat as was due to his worth" (Hunt 1923: 154; ll. 364–5). Hunt cuts the reference to Aeneas, and the epic recriminations make way for the joys of the sitting room. In *The Descent of Liberty*, Hunt likewise tries to break the cycle of epic succession by interrupting the post-Waterloo apotheosis of national representatives athwart Homeric chariots with the call of the enslaved and disenfranchised "sable genius" (Hunt 2003: 5. 119). In the *Examiner*, Hunt even envisioned recalling the Prince Regent to true conviviality from enclosed mental blindness, inviting him to "Rise ... from the dreams that weigh upon luxury and disturb your faculties ... Be just, be temperate, and forget every thing in the happy tears of a forgiving people" (2003: 1. 72–3 (*Examiner*, August 21, 1808)).

The second quatrain of Hunt's sonnet dramatizes a reclaiming sociability and interrupts an epic propagation of power. Hunt portrays the older Milton, the Milton composing *Paradise Lost*, the Milton "forced inwards by disappointment" (Hunt 2003: 4. 80). Yet he captures a moment when this older Milton is himself recalling the "young and happy" Milton described in the preface to *Foliage* and characterized in *Imagination and Fancy* as "in better spirits with all about him" (Hunt 1956: 136; 2003: 4. 80). In the sonnet, Hunt is trying not only to bring Milton back into the mollifying conversation of society but to return him to "the wiser, more cheerful, and more poetical beliefs of his childhood" that were "undegenerated into superstition" (2003: 4. 80). The key to this recollection within a recollection lies in Milton's stroking his hair while conceiving Adam's "parted forelock manly" and Eve's "golden tresses" that "waved" in "wanton ringlets" (*Paradise Lost* iv. 302, 305–6) joining as "heaped locks" in their famous Edenic sexual encounter (*Paradise Lost* iv. 492–502). Biographic reflections on the "Handsom" young Milton note his own "Light Brown" hair that he "wore Parted a-top, and Somewhat Flat, Long, and Waving, a little Curl'd" and that may have contributed to his effeminate schoolboy nickname "The Lady of Christ" (Darbishire 1932: 202). Hunt loved this long-haired Milton the younger as much as he feared Milton the elder. In a series of 1823 articles on Milton in the *Literary Examiner*, Hunt painted the young poet as a gregarious fellow, who frequently enjoyed "*sinuosi pompa theatri*" – singularly translated by Hunt as "the pomp of the *bosomy* theatre" (1956: 180

(*Literary Examiner*, August 30, 1823)). The child of Cheapside ogled girls, delighted in their “beautiful figures, faces, hairs, and complexions,” entertained “amatory notions,” and wrote Latin and English poetry replete with “voluptuousness” (1956: 180, 194, 187 (*Literary Examiner*, August 30 and September 6, 1823)). Politically, he was “as decided and practical a Reformer as can be conceived” and even held “inquiring, independent, and philosophic” views of religion (1956: 183 (*Literary Examiner*, August 30, 1823)). In short, he was a Cockney who would have made fit company for Hunt, Hazlitt, Shelley, and Keats.

While Hunt confesses his preference for Milton’s early works, he could not ignore the power and the glory of *Paradise Lost*. He does not simply leave the epic untouched, just as he ultimately will not leave Wordsworth alone to plait in blank verse. Rather, Hunt goes inside the epic, samples and splices selections, and recasts the poem as a whole. In the 1818 sonnet, Hunt only highlights Adam and Eve’s eros in Paradise and resists any hint of Miltonic preponderance by using feminine caesuras (“fingers, | when”; “in fancy, | Adam”) to arrest the quatrain’s flow and ensure a conversational tone. In the preface to *Foliage*, he claimed that the unfallen couple’s “bridal happiness” and the allusions to Greek mythology are the “most refreshing things” in Milton’s epic. They “are not merely drops in the desert; they are escapes from every heart-withering horror, which Eastern storms and tyranny could generate together” (Hunt 1956: 136). In *Imagination and Fancy*, Hunt takes this further, reducing the epic to an anthologized series of such “refreshments.” The fragmentary passages submitted for the co-perusal of the reader virtually constitute a new version of the poem (Hunt 1845: 174–9). Just as Hunt’s sonnet recaptures Adam and Eve’s love-making “in fancy,” his parsed epic rescues the fanciful elements from a predominating grave and oppressive imagination. The epic is externalized, moving from the “god within” to the delights and beauty of nature and humanity to be found without.

The moral creed for this compact redirection occupies the closing sestet of Hunt’s sonnet on Milton’s lock. His description of the reliquary hair as a “blossom from the tree / Surviving the proud trunk” expresses the bodily continuity and spiritual community that Hunt feels with Milton, Barry, and Keats. In a poem about Milton and *Paradise Lost*, however, it must also allude to “Man’s first disobedience and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree” (*Paradise Lost* i. 1–2). Yet Hunt switches emphasis from the prohibited fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to its “blossom.” What is the blossom or flower of this famous tree? In Hunt’s imaginary, it seems to represent the remaining delight, grace, and joy available in the postlapsarian world. Such flowers are to be found, embraced, and celebrated, to the greatest degree possible. Enjoying the “blossom” of experience is connected with poetry, which Hunt defined in the preface to his 1832 *Poetical Works* as “the flower of any kind of experience, rooted in truth, and issuing forth into beauty” (Hunt 1923: xviii). This sonnet on Milton revisited can thus be seen as a poetic contribution to the cheerful anthropology for fallen creatures articulated in the preface to *Foliage*: “We should consider ourselves as what we really are – creatures made to enjoy more than to know” (Hunt 1956: 132).

Recasting Homer

Hunt's sonnet on Milton's hair offers some of his major techniques and ideas in miniature: reconciliation through sociability, interruption of cyclic violence in the epic, recasted fanciful fragments to make the epic anew, and redirection of culture toward Cockney enjoyment. While some of these themes would not be fully developed until Hunt's later writing on Milton, they all play important roles in the *Foliage* volume. They extend beyond his sonnet on Milton into Hunt's translations of *The Iliad* and represent a Cockney reconstitution of the cultural canon. Amid the recovery of Hunt, focus has been directed toward his original poems, even though Hunt stated in his preface to *Foliage* that the translations in the second half also proceeded from the "love of nature" and the "cause of cheerfulness" (Hunt 1956: 138). Yet why *The Iliad*? Why would Hunt include selections from the poem that "lives and moves and has its being in war" (Knox 1990: 35) at a time when he was critiquing warmongering and attempting to redirect classicism from the heroic to the erotic (Cox 1998: 159–61)? In *Imagination and Fancy*, Hunt would claim that only those who "admire power in any shape above truth in the best" would prefer *Paradise Lost* over early Milton (Hunt 2003: 4. 80). With this distrust of power-worship, why include Homer's "poem of force" (Weil 2003: 45) among the cheerful leaves of *Foliage*? This apparent frisson signals that the translations must be transforming rather than merely transmitting. As in his revival of Milton, Hunt was reclaiming the true poet, not from the misrepresentation of "ordinary biographies" (Hunt 1956: 179 (*Literary Examiner*, August 30, 1823)), but from misleading renderings of his Greek. At the thematic and metrical levels, Hunt attempts to subvert the rage of Achilles and to highlight a wondrous moment of sociable forgiveness that interrupts the Trojan War.

As with Adam and Eve's "bridal happinesses" in the sonnet and the "refreshing" passages from *Paradise Lost* in *Imagination and Fancy*, Hunt makes strategic selections from *The Iliad*. His three passages provide a counternarrative to the harsh heroism of the public schools' classical curriculum that trained Britain's elite (Colley 1992: 167–70). The first two frame parallel, problematic psychological states. The first describes Achilles' vengeful grief after the death of Patroclus and his terrifying war cry announcing his return to battle. The second portrays Priam's resentment of his surviving children who cannot rescue the corpse of Hector from an avenged Achilles. The final passage depicts Priam's secret trip to Achilles' tent to recover Hector's body and the king's successful appeal to a common humanity while shedding tears on Achilles' "terrible hands, man-slaughtering, / Which had deprived him of so many sons" (Hunt 1923: 386). The first two passages capture powerful men driven into self-absorbed bitterness and resentment stemming from a desperate loss. It is a reaction to violence that begets more violence, whether in the carnage of Achilles that blocks up a river with Trojan bodies or in Priam's verbal attack against his children: "Would ye had all been killed, / Instead of Hector" (Hunt 1923: 386).

The gods – even the Cockneys’ favored Apollo, god of poetry and healing – are implicated in perpetuating the warfare that stems from this isolated, recriminatory mental condition. Athena, goddess of wisdom, and Iris, goddess of the dawn’s natural beauty, wrap the head of Achilles in “the glory of a golden mist, / For which there burnt a fiery-flaming light” (Hunt 1923: 386). In an epic simile, Achilles’ burning visage is compared to a signal fire that is visible as “soon as the sun / Has set” (1923: 384). Homer portrays Achilles rising god-like to become a second Apollo, blazing on the scene of battle after the god of the sun has descended. This succession makes sense as Apollo has twice intervened in the battle of Troy in like manner. In Book 1 of Homer’s *Iliad*, a jilted Apollo cuts down the Greeks with arrows of disease, a plague that causes the division between Achilles and Agamemnon. In Book 16, Homer shows Apollo stunning and disarming Patroclus so that Hector can finish him off. In Hunt’s translation, there is thus a poetic and psychological logic for Achilles appearing upon a trench above the fray like a new sunrise. He avenges himself by routing Apollo’s favored Trojans with his “effulgence” and his shout like the “clear voice of a trumpet”:

And when they heard the brazen voice, their minds
 Were all awakened; and the proud-maned horses
 Ran with the chariots round, for they foresaw
 Calamity; and the charioteers were smitten,
 When they beheld the ever-active fire
 Upon the dreadful head of the great-minded one,
 Burning; for bright-eyed Pallas made it burn.
 Thrice o’er the trench divine Achilles shouted;
 And thrice the Trojans and their great allies
 Rolled back; and twelve of all their noblest men
 Then perished, crushed by their own arms and chariots.
 (Hunt 1923: 385; ll. 84–94)

“Divine Achilles” has usurped the solar position of Apollo. The “great-minded one” enrapt in his cloud inflicts damage on vulnerable mortal bodies with the oppressive power of his voice.

Not only does Hunt focus on a swelling epic mentality, he also experiments metrically with humanizing a blank-verse form that, in Milton’s hands, produced the sense of “an invincible spirit roaming at large” (Hunt 1956: 234 (*New Monthly Magazine*, October 1825)). In “What is Poetry?”, Hunt calls for a prosody based not on counting syllables but on the tuned ear’s ability to judge the musical beat of the line. Instead of systematic enumeration that renders less than the “dry bones” of poetry, Hunt claims poetics is an organic art of surprising secrets revealed by genius:

You might get, for instance, not only ten and eleven but thirteen or fourteen syllables into a rhyming, as well as blank, heroic verse, if time and the feeling permitted; and in irregular measure this is often done; just as musicians put twenty notes in a bar instead of

two, quavers instead of minims, according as the feeling they are expressing impels them to fill up the time with short and hurried notes, or with long[.] (Hunt 2003: 4. 30)

The implications for blank verse are evident in Hunt's *Iliad* translations, which the essay references. This approach allows for an "overloaded" line of more than ten syllables when the subject matter demands. In the intense passage above, only four lines contain ten syllables (ll. 84, 88, 92–3), while there are three with eleven (ll. 85–6, 91), two with twelve (ll. 89, 94), and even one with thirteen (l. 87). While significant as an example of an aesthetic of Cockney excess, Hunt also draws the personality of the poet back into blank verse. It is the "feeling" of the poet that shapes the line, and Hunt's emotive and musical blank-verse composition requires an immediate and personal presence. A sensitive reader will feel this imminent poetic voice and the poet's personality. "O lovely and immortal privilege of genius!", Hunt exudes in "What is Poetry?" after quoting his own translation of Priam's appeal to Achilles, "that can stretch its hand out of the wastes of time, thousands of years back, and touch our eyelids with tears" (2003: 4. 19).

The blank verse in Hunt's third translated passage both brims with emotion and depicts a mollifying encounter that enables the proudly embittered characters to regain their humanity. The meeting begins with an epic simile that ventures back to the sitting room of Achilles:

And as a man, who is pressed heavily
For having slain another, flies away
To foreign lands, and comes into the house
Of some great man, and is beheld with wonder;
So did Achilles wonder, to see Priam;
And the rest wondered, looking at each other.

(Hunt 1923: 386–7; ll. 15–20)

The final three lines are "overloaded" with eleven syllables, but there is a different type of intensity than in the cry of Achilles. As in the second quatrain of the Milton sonnet, Hunt interrupts the rise of the blank-verse rhythm with two lines featuring feminine caesuras ("wonder, | to see"; "rest wondered, | looking"). The unexpected pauses highlight the thrice-repeated word "wonder." The true wonder in Hunt's reduced version of *The Iliad* comes not in a bloody *aristeia* or the prophecy of another empire, but in a personal and proximate sociable encounter. In this amazing exchange, "God-like Achilles" relents before the humbled king's appeal "to think of thine own father, / Who is, as I am, at the weary door / Of age" (Hunt 1923: 387). This moment delineates for the reader a way out of the epic's cyclic violence of past wounds leading to ambitious and dangerous self-worship. The intimate domestic encounter has brought Priam and Achilles out of their solipsistic bitterness and spread communally as the "whole house" heard their shared moans (Hunt 1923: 387). Hunt himself marveled at the detailed, realistic closing line in which Achilles took "Pity on his grey head and his grey chin"

(Hunt 1923: 387). Emphasized with an initial inversion, “pity” replaces power or force as the ultimate impression in Hunt’s excerpted and recast epic.

Commenting on these passages in “What is Poetry?”, Hunt writes that conveying emotional vitality is a universal charism of literature. Writers with the “greatest passion and power,” who are “capable of expressing the feeling,” invariably find there is “enough sensibility and imagination all over the world to enable mankind to be moved by it, when the poet strikes his truth into their hearts” (Hunt 2003: 4. 19). There is again, a bit of Cockney cheek in using his own translation to exemplify the power of the poet, whose pen – not sword or spear – strikes the hearts of readers. Yet this redefinition of power was Hunt’s theme in *Foliage*. The closing couplet of Hunt’s sonnet on Milton’s hair encapsulates this ethos: “Patience and Gentleness is Power. In me / Behold affectionate eternity.” There is a Cockney solecism even in this axiomatic statement. The plural subject “Patience and Gentleness” syntactically requires the plural form “are” rather than “is.” Yet here Hunt seems to suggest that even these virtues cannot stand alone. If patience, gentleness, and pity are truly to define “power,” even they must be united in community. Redirecting epic pride to softening sociability has been Hunt’s message for the Greek combatants, Wordsworth, Milton, and the princes of Europe; furthermore, it can be seen guiding the path of Keats’s Apollo.

Rescuing Apollo

If Hunt’s Homeric translations and “refreshing” version of *Paradise Lost* represent recovered Romantic contributions to the post-Miltonic epic tradition in England, Keats’s blank-verse *Hyperion* has long been a standard work in that canon. It is, of course, a stunted epic whose third book ends abruptly. Keats’s oeuvre has often been a subject of developmental readings, with the Miltonic *Hyperion* demonstrating a step beyond the Huntian *Endymion* toward the truly Keatsian odes. For Bate, *Hyperion* unsuccessfully attempts to “combine so many different things,” but the failed exercise nevertheless provides the “strength” to ascend to the height of poetic achievement (Bate 1964: 410). Lucy Newlyn encapsulates psychological readings derived from a Bloomian interpretation of Keats’s agonistic struggle with Milton: “The burden of the past is in this case openly acknowledged, by a poet whose ambitions for himself were unusually intense: aside from Cowper, Keats is perhaps the most straightforward example we have of the anxiety of influence” (Newlyn 1993: 27). The shared assumption in these critical legacies is that Keats emerges from *Hyperion* with a newfound poetic power, understood by Bate as “force” and by Bloom as joining the “strong poets” (Bate 1945: 42; Bloom 1973: 9). Placing Keats within the Cockney Circle offers the alternative possibility that Book 3’s fragmentation is not a failure but rather an appropriate conclusion for a Huntian critique of the poetic and political power of the epic. Hunt himself seemed to perceive this in his 1820 review of *Hyperion* in *The Indicator*. While Hunt, as a reader, desired that Keats finish the epic, he speculated that perhaps Keats “feels that he ought not” (Hunt 2003: 2. 304 (*Indicator*, August 9,

1820)). Rather than lamenting an incomplete text, Hunt goes on to compare Keats to Milton and George Chapman, the Elizabethan translator of Homer, and to praise his unique poetic “faculties” that are “ambitious, but less directly so,” more “social, and in the finer sense of the word, sensual,” and “coloured by the modern philosophy of sympathy and natural justice” (Hunt 2003: 2. 305 (*Indicator*, August 9, 1820)). In other words, *Hyperion* reforms Milton’s and Homer’s flaws. Keats does not strive for Miltonic or Wordsworthian poetic strength that consists of egotistical or oppressive ambition, but he does realize a Huntian power characterized by patience and gentleness.

In addition to Hunt’s 1820 assessment, contextual and formal elements suggest that Hunt’s and Keats’s revisions of the post-Miltonic epic should be viewed in tandem. The first recorded reference to *Hyperion* comes in a letter to Haydon on January 23, 1818 (Keats 1958: 1. 207). On the same day, he writes to Bailey recounting Hunt’s presentation of Milton’s lock of hair two days earlier and includes the ode on Milton’s relic composed spontaneously at Hunt’s behest (Keats 1958: 1. 209–12). Reminiscent of their earlier sonnet contests, this intersection suggests that the Miltonic *Hyperion* may have originated, or at the very least became intertwined with, the poets’ discussion of the lock, Milton’s legacy, and Hunt’s resulting sonnets. Keats ends *Hyperion* in April 1819 and ceases work on the revised version now known as “The Fall of Hyperion” in September 1819. On September 24, in a letter to George Keats, he articulates his need not to give further life to Milton and makes similar comments about forced “Miltonic verse” in a September 21 letter to Reynolds (Keats 1958: 2. 212, 167). The end of the project may have recalled the initial forecast in his poem for Hunt on Milton’s hair: “For many years my offerings must be hush’d: / When I do speak I’ll think upon this hour” (Keats 1958: 1. 212). Memories of Hunt were included in his letter on September 20, 1819 as he recalled his squabbles with Georgiana Keats. In the next day’s letter, Keats articulates a form of unconscious influence, of sociable habituation, much different than Bloom’s: “Men who live together have a silent moulding and influencing power over each other – they interassimilate” (Keats 1958: 2. 208). Keats is directly referring to George and the difficulties of maintaining their transatlantic friendship, but this sense of persistent interconnection could equally apply to his relationship with Hunt. That Keats considered publishing *Hyperion* in a volume with Hunt’s poetry underscores his sense of their “interassimilation” (Keats 1965: 2. 234).

Structurally, *Hyperion* parallels Hunt’s revision of the epic in the 1818 *Foliage* volume. Rewriting *Paradise Lost*’s depiction of the fallen angels in Hell, *Hyperion* surveys the fallen titans, defeated and listless in shadowy exile, struggling to make sense of their past and future amid the competing plans of the bellicose Enceladus and progressive Oceanus. Hyperion, the sun god, has not shared in their defeat and journeys to meet them and their despondent leader, Saturn. The conclusion of Book 2 seems to signal that the plot was headed for an insurrection or counterrevolution. As Bate remarks, “Enceladus indeed calls for a new conflict, and Hyperion seems to agree” (1964: 405). An illuminated Hyperion’s arrival above the plain of defeated titans mirrors Hunt’s Homeric passage describing the radiant return of Achilles to rally the routed Greeks:

It was Hyperion: a granite peak
 His bright feet touch'd, and there he stay'd to view
 The misery his brilliance had betray'd
 To the most hateful seeing of itself.
 Golden his hair of short Numidian curl,
 Regal his shape majestic, a vast shade
 In midst of his own brightness[.]

(ii. 367–73)

In addition to the symbolism, the effect is similar. Just as the battle cry of Achilles ensures that the Greeks will continue the war, Hyperion's call of "Saturn!", returned by "all the Gods," implies more grim violence will follow (*Hyperion* ii. 388–91).

Attempted vengeance, however, never comes, at least within *Hyperion*. Instead, in Book 3, Keats changes the tone and shifts the scene to Apollo: "For lo! 'tis the Father of all verse" (iii. 13). In this exclamation, Keats creates a Huntian sense of proximity and spontaneity. The newly invoked "weak" muse (iii. 4), not suited to the resentful cries of the rallying titans, sets forth a banquet of Cockney conviviality:

Let the red wine within the goblet boil,
 Cold as a bubbling well; let faint-lipp'd shells,
 On sands, or in great deeps, vermilion turn
 Through all their labyrinths; and let the maid
 Blush keenly, as with some warm kiss surpris'd.

(iii. 18–22)

Instead of the onslaught of Achilles or Priam's bitter grief, Keats turns to Apollo amid a social, sensual scene. Bate and others have been frustrated by the sudden pivot, diagnosing uncertainty in plotting (Bate 1964: 405–8). Worse still, stylistically Keats seems to have rewound to *Endymion* as the intonation of Hunt inserts itself into the Miltonic verse. Instead of ascending the "cliff" to poetic strength, Book 2 quickly begins to "descend" and "to return almost all the way to the Hunt valley" (Bate 1964: 410).

In light of Hunt's challenge to the epic tradition, however, Keats's style, his depiction of Apollo, and even the fragmentary conclusion, all fit a Cockney decorum. Behind the rise of Jupiter and the Olympian gods is a chain of patriarchal violence in which Saturn overthrew his tyrannical father Cronus only to become a tyrant himself. Keats catches Apollo in the historical moment before Jupiter makes minions of the other Olympian gods and forms the repressive heavenly regime Shelley portrays in *Prometheus Unbound* (1819). Apollo thus stands as a middle figure between Hyperion's counter-revolution and Achilles' belligerent rage in the epic's ongoing violence. For Homer, Apollo propagates the conflict and, without his intervention, *The Iliad* neither starts nor continues. Nor do future poets – Virgil, Milton, Wordsworth – get caught in its drum beat. If Keats, like Hunt, wants to disrupt the epic's violent cycle, he must rescue the god of poetry from these war cries – "Leave them, O Muse!" – and from the sixth-syllable masculine caesura ("It was Hyperion: | – a granite peak") that gave

Hyperion's first two books their Miltonic power (Bate 1964: 409). Poetically and politically, ascending to strength must give way to descending into sociability, to the wine, kisses, and conversation of Book 3.

Yet Keats recognizes the recurrent pull toward ambition that would draw Apollo away from the Huntian valley of enjoyment. The mere appearance of Mnemosyne, one of the titans, prompts Apollo's divinizing ascent that would establish Apollo and the Olympians as a new *ancien régime*. Crucially, Apollo's titanic temptation by knowledge, not enjoyment, originates entirely from within, not from any words of Mnemosyne:

“Mute thou remainest – | Mute! Yet I can read
A wondrous lesson in thy silent face:
Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.
Names, deeds, gray legends, | dire events, rebellions
Majesties, | sovran voices, | agonies,
Creations and destroyings, | all at once
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,
And deify me, | as if some blithe wine
Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk,
And so become immortal.”

(iii. 111–20; caesuras added)

Apollo is not enjoying the convivial cup of “red wine,” but is intoxicated by his own self-image and prospective self-worship. Yet, even in this seductively scaling passage, Keats undermines the ascent through Hunt's metrical subversion of blank verse. A stentorian Miltonic list (“Names, deeds . . .”) is an “overloaded” line of more than ten syllables. More thoroughly, Keats breaks the powerful rhythm of the sixth syllable masculine caesura by offsetting Apollo's speech with preemptive, repeated feminine caesuras. As with the similar prosody in the second quatrain of Hunt's sonnet on Milton's hair and translation of Priam's supplication, the metrical irregularities destabilize the incipient rise of the blank verse with a conversational intonation. Ultimately, to save Apollo and his “golden tresses” – an unlikely recollection of Eve's “golden tresses” – from this proud “glow of aspiration” (*Hyperion* iii. 131; *Paradise Lost* iv. 305; Hunt 2003: 2. 304 (*Indicator*, August 9, 1820)), Keats narrates a *deus ex machina*, vanishing the god before he can burn like Achilles or become rapt in mist like Wordsworth. Memory – the literal translation of Mnemosyne – is not allowed to speak the prophecy that will dictate the future. Instead, Keats and Apollo will escape from the past, aspire for beauty not might, and do so outside of the epic tradition.

Following from his comments on *Hyperion* in *The Indicator*, Hunt cites Keats's “calm power,” “energy,” “voluptuousness,” and “high feeling of humanity” as evidence that his genius is fully realized (2003: 2. 305 (*Indicator*, August 9, 1820)). He gives the “young” Keats a “seat with the oldest and best of our living poets” (2003: 2. 305 (*Indicator*, August 9, 1820)). This image of a seated party of poets undoubtedly recalls *The Feast of the Poets* with its Huntian Apollo presiding sociably, “twiddling a sunbeam as I may a pen” (2003: 5. 33 (*Indicator*, August 9, 1820)). Yet Hunt also bestows a

grander compliment, the type of posthumous place among the “English Poets” for which Keats yearned (Keats 1958: 1. 394). After comparing Keats to Chapman and Milton, Hunt could not simply have meant elderly contemporaries when ranking Keats among the *oldest* and best *living* poets. Instead, as he would do with Shakespeare and Petrarch, Hunt seems to have made another literary revival of Milton and Chapman, bringing the writers of the English epic from death into life. Writing several months before Keats’s death, Hunt thus honors his fellow Cockney with a seat next to them at Apollo’s table in a poetic afterlife of “affectionate eternity.”

SEE ALSO

Chapter 2 “Archaist-Innovators: The Couplet from Churchill to Browning”; chapter 3 “The Temptations of Tercets”; chapter 13 “The Thrush in the Theater: Keats and Hazlitt at the Surrey Institution”; chapter 25 “Milton and the Romantics”; chapter 30 “Sexual Politics and the Performance of Gender in Romantic Poetry”

NOTE

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Poetry, Conversation, Community:
Annus Mirabilis, 1797–1798

Emily Sun

*Seit ein Gespräch wir sind
 Und hören können voneinander.*

Friedrich Hölderlin, “Friedensfeier”

*(Since we are a conversation
 And can hear from each other.*

Friedrich Hölderlin, “Peace Celebration”)

*I know that the world I converse with in the cities and in the farms is not the world
 I think. I know that difference and shall observe it.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience”

The year 1797–8 is widely designated an *annus mirabilis* in English literary history. During this year, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth collaborated on poems, created and laid plans for new forms, modes, and genres, and developed ideas about poetry that would decisively change the way poetry was enjoyed and appreciated by their contemporaries and by future generations of readers and writers. The outcome of their efforts was *Lyrical Ballads*, often regarded as the single most important volume of the period, the “seminal” or “inaugural” volume of English Romanticism in relation to which earlier texts such as Robert Burns’s *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* (first edition 1784), and William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794) would be considered preparatory. The *annus mirabilis* of 1797–8, according to a widespread consensus among literary historians, marks the very beginning of English Romanticism.

In this essay, I would like to retell the story of the poets’ collaboration and review the poets’ claims for the radical newness of their experiments in poetry and poetics. Paying

attention to the fact of conversation between the two poets as a necessary condition for the astonishing creativity of the *annus mirabilis*, I would like to examine specific poems for the critical light they shed on the means and ends, and conditions and limits of human conversation. Through the reimagination of the language of man speaking to men, the poets jointly and separately enact new claims to community. The result and effect of the year's creativity may be deemed "miraculous," in keeping with the etymological implications of the term *annus mirabilis*, insofar as the poems continue to serve as sources of critical wonder, joy, and provocation.

The central friendship of the *annus mirabilis* began in the autumn of 1795, when Wordsworth and Coleridge met in Bristol, having already heard of each other and read each other's work. The meeting was followed by an exchange of letters, then of visits. Wordsworth dropped by to see Coleridge in Nether Stowey in the spring of 1797 on his way back from meeting the publisher Joseph Cottle in Bristol. Coleridge literally entered the presence of Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy in leaps and bounds when he visited them at Racedown Lodge in Dorset in June. He stayed for over three weeks, during which the poets read aloud to each other from their works-in-progress, *Osorio*, *The Borderers*, and "The Ruined Cottage." The three friends found each other's company so invigorating that the Wordsworths moved in July from Dorset to take up residence at Alfoxden House in Somerset, four miles from Nether Stowey, where Coleridge was living with his wife, Sara, and their infant son, Hartley. Dorothy explains simply their decision to move thus to her friend and future sister-in-law Mary Hutchinson: "Our principal inducement was Coleridge's society" (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1967–93: 1. 190). With this move the *annus mirabilis* may be said to begin in July 1797 and to extend into the next summer with the composition in July of "Tintern Abbey." During this year, Wordsworth and Coleridge met almost daily to converse with each other, traded ideas about poems while taking walks, read each other's work and fed each other lines and stanzas, generally finding inspiration and delight in each other's company. The idyllic setting of the Quantocks evoked the very Arcadia of pastoral tradition that the poets were reinventing in what Wordsworth would call in the Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads* their poetic "experiments."

In 1797, though two years younger at twenty-five, Coleridge was the more established of the two poets, having already made a name for himself as a Unitarian preacher, the editor of a political journal, *The Watchman*, the author of *Poems on Various Subjects*, and coauthor with Robert Southey of a tragedy, *The Fall of Robespierre*. Wordsworth, in contrast, had published only *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*. Temperamentally, the two men could not have been more different. Coleridge was charming, talkative, digressive, and voraciously intellectual, interested in theology, philosophy, and abstract thought, while Wordsworth was reserved and focused in his interests, showing little taste for systematic philosophy. Despite his accomplishments and greater fame, Coleridge insisted on Wordsworth's genius and superior poetic talent, describing the latter "as a very great man – the only man, to whom *at all times & in all modes of excellence* I feel myself inferior," and generously devoted his energies to the improvement of Wordsworth's work (Coleridge 1956–71: 1. 260). Besides their passion for poetry, the two men also shared political sympathies. Each had been an enthusiastic supporter of

the French Revolution and active among Jacobin circles in England. Wordsworth had spent the year 1791–2 as a revolutionary sympathizer in France, an experience he would later recount in books 9 through 11 of the 1850 *Prelude*. And Coleridge had in 1794–5 planned with Southey to found a utopian “pantisocratic” commune on the banks of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania, a plan that, perhaps fortunately, never came to fruition. By 1797, both Wordsworth and Coleridge remained supportive of the aims of the French Revolution but were disappointed with the violent and expansionist course the Revolution had taken – sentiments Coleridge expresses most explicitly in “France: An Ode,” written in February 1798.

Wordsworth and Coleridge were, of course, the principal actors in the *annus mirabilis*, the principal creative forces in the project that resulted in *Lyrical Ballads* as well as such poems as “Kubla Khan,” “Frost at Midnight,” *Christabel*, and the plan for *The Recluse*. But they were surrounded also by a community of family, friends, visitors, and neighbors whose society was crucial to their writing and left traces and inflections in their work. This circle included, preeminently, Dorothy Wordsworth, whose detailed observations of nature in her Alfoxden Journal inspired passages in the poems, and who figures as an interlocutor apostrophized by both poets in their work; Coleridge’s son Hartley, the basis for “Nature’s playmate” in “The Nightingale”; Basil Montagu, the charge of the Wordsworths who was the model for the child speaker in “Anecdote for Fathers.” In contrast, Coleridge’s wife Sara was, by all accounts, a much less inspiring member of the familial circle. From his neighbor John Cruikshank Coleridge borrowed a dream to use as source material for “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Friends and visitors included William Hazlitt, supposedly the basis for “Matthew” in “Expostulation and Reply”; Charles Lamb; John Thelwall, the poet and political radical who had been tried and acquitted of treason in 1794; and Thomas Poole, Coleridge’s friend who was a political radical and tanner from Nether Stowey. The prevalence of Jacobin inclinations in the community prompted Pitt’s government to send an agent to investigate the goings-on in Somerset. The agent’s report of the circle as nothing more than “a Sett of violent Democrats” was evidently enough to allay any further suspicions and bring the investigation to a close (Roe 1988: 260–1).

By the time *Lyrical Ballads* was published anonymously in the fall of 1798, the Wordsworths and Coleridge were in Germany – the Wordsworths in Goslar to study German language and literature and Coleridge in Ratzeburg, and then Göttingen, to study the new critical philosophy. In at least the narrow chronological sense, the *annus mirabilis* – as a period of intimate and energetic collaboration – had concluded.

In the familiar account I have transmitted by and large intact above, the *annus mirabilis* resembles a mythical golden age, and the Quantocks a paradisaical *locus amoenus*, the site for the flourishing of friendship and a collaborative poetry that aims to reimagine modes of human community. Without cynically denying that the year indeed deserves its exceptional designation, I would like to issue the reminder – *et in Arcadia ego*. The shadow in the collaboration manifests itself, for one, in the striking disparity between the number of poems by each poet in *Lyrical Ballads*: of the twenty-three poems, four were by Coleridge, and nineteen by Wordsworth. This asymmetry would increase in the second edition, which features besides the Preface by Wordsworth also an entire

second volume of thirty-seven more poems by Wordsworth and, startlingly, the single attribution on the title page – “by W. Wordsworth.” To “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” Wordsworth appended furthermore in the 1800 edition a distancing and apologetic note, commenting that “[t]he Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character . . . : secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon; thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated” (Wordsworth 1992: 791). Significantly, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” had started out as a joint composition, well before the two poets even had an inkling that they would write *Lyrical Ballads*, but, as Wordsworth recalls in remarks to his scribe Isabella Fenwick in 1843, “As we endeavoured to proceed conjointly . . . , our respective manners proved so widely different that it would have been quite presumptuous in me to do anything but separate from an undertaking upon which I could only have been a clog” (1992: 348).

Both poets would revisit in their later writings the developments of 1797–8. Wordsworth would do so most fondly at the end of *The Prelude*, where he pays tribute to Coleridge and enumerates the sites in the Quantocks where each poet recited various compositions, recalling “the buoyant spirits / That were our daily portion when we first / Together wantoned in wild Poesy” (1850 *Prelude* xiv. 418–20). Coleridge would give an account of their collaboration that year in chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), then polemicize in chapter 17 against several of the claims Wordsworth makes in the 1800 Preface regarding the poetic principles governing *Lyrical Ballads*. Through writing the Preface and the revisions for the 1802 printing, Wordsworth had emerged as the critical front man elaborating the claims to newness of his own as well as their joint efforts.

Wordsworth’s claims in the Preface can be briefly summarized as follows: their poems would espouse the use of everyday language for poetry, fitting to metrical arrangement “a selection of the language really used by men” (Wordsworth 1984: 597). In this tendency, with the exception of meter, their poetry would aspire to the condition of “good prose.” For this “real language of men,” the language of rustics would be privileged as paradigmatic, for “such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent and far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art” (1984: 597). In favoring the everyday language of “man speaking to men,” the poets would turn away from “poetic diction,” the traditional conventions and devices handed down as the “common inheritance of Poets.” Finally, formal and stylistic innovations would serve to give prominence to *feeling* as that which essentially and above all these poems attempt to communicate. “Poetry,” in Wordsworth’s memorable definition, “is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity.” In *Lyrical Ballads*, feeling takes precedence over and gives importance to action and situation, rather than, as was traditionally the case, vice versa.

In chapter 17 of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge objects to Wordsworth’s idea that the language of rustics should constitute the “best” and “most philosophical language,”

for he finds, rather, that the “best part of human language . . . is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself [and] formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man” (Coleridge 2004: 502). Furthermore, he finds in Wordsworth’s term “real language” a mystifying equivocation, arguing that

the language so highly extolled by Mr. Wordsworth varies in every county, nay in every village, according to the accidental character of the clergyman, the existence or non-existence of schools; or even, perhaps, as the exciseman, publican, or barber happen to be, or not to be, zealous politicians, and readers of the weekly newspaper *pro bono publico*. (2004: 504)

According to Coleridge, the language of low and rustic men that Wordsworth professes to imitate and take as “real,” as if it were substantive grounding for a new poetic language, does not exist but has the status, rather, of a metaphysical invention. For the term “real language,” then, Coleridge proposes to substitute “*ordinary*, or *lingua communis*,” and he recommends that it should be the task of the poet-as-citizen actively to cultivate this *lingua communis*, for “[a]nterior to cultivation the *lingua communis* of every country, as Dante has well observed, exists everywhere in parts, and nowhere as a whole” (2004: 504).

These and other instances of revision and revisitation suggest that the *annus mirabilis* was not just a year of collaboration in which the two poets completed each other’s thoughts but a year of latent tension and disagreement. One dimension of this disagreement, as it came to light over the years of a friendship that would become famously vexed (including the serious falling-out that occurred in 1810), appears to be the question of the relationship between poetic language and extra-poetic, common language, call it the language proper to life as it is lived-in-common. Both poets harbored nothing less than the aspiration to reform, through poetry, the language of the community. I would like to consider more closely the convergences and divergences in their allied trajectories.

In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth asks, “What is a poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him?” and he begins to answer these questions by writing, “He is a man speaking to men” (1984: 603). Fundamental to these remarks is a conception of poetic language as address, and implicit as well is an understanding of poetry as conversation, that is, as everyday speech involving more than one speaker, or speech that takes place among plural speakers. In this sense, a background of conversation may precede and inform even such an ostensibly solitary utterance as Wordsworth’s “Lines Written in Early Spring.” Indeed, Wordsworth’s questions may themselves be seen as emerging out of the discursive context of conversation, for the *annus mirabilis* of 1797–8 is predicated on the fact of intense and regular conversation between primarily Coleridge and Wordsworth, but also significantly between others of their circle in the Quantocks.

Many of the poems of 1797–8 simulate conversation in their colloquial and often intimate tone and diction. Obvious examples are Coleridge’s “conversation poems,” including for that year “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” “Frost at Midnight,” “Fears in Solitude,” and “The Nightingale.” Wordsworth writes “Expostulation and Reply” as a reproduction of a conversation, and he explores permutations of the conversational mode with children (e.g. “We Are Seven,” “Anecdote for Fathers”) and wanderers (e.g. “Old Man Travelling”) – and, for Coleridge, the Ancient Mariner – as interlocutors. What distinguishes these poetic experiments with conversation is the introduction of “Nature” as not just theme or topic but, indeed, as uncanny *partner* in human conversation.

“Expostulation and Reply” literally simulates a conversation between the narrator and his “good friend” Matthew that the narrator, William, recalls having taken place one morning by Esthwaite Lake. The poem begins with questions that Matthew uses to rouse his friend to the reading of books and purposeful action. To Matthew’s hectoring William replies by calling attention to a conversation of another kind that Matthew has not been aware of – namely, the conversation that William has been having with what in the following poem, “The Tables Turned,” he will call “Nature.” Towards the end of “Expostulation and Reply,” William asks Matthew:

“Think you, mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?

– Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may,
I sit upon this old grey stone,
And dream my time away.”

(ll. 25–32)

In the spirit of “wise passiveness,” William has been letting the senses – “the eye,” the ear,” “our bodies [that] feel” – take in more, or something other, than what the mind wills. It is precisely through such receptivity that he aims to “feed this mind of ours.” “Expostulation and Reply,” then, appears to be a poem about the relationship between two conversations: in the foreground, the exchange between William and Matthew, and, submerged in the background, the conversation between William and “this mighty sum / Of things for ever speaking.” This latter “speaking” is what Matthew does not let himself hear (or see or feel), and it is what William brings to the fore and makes perceptible in his conversation with Matthew. The poem, in turn, brings to light how a nonspeaking, inhuman element inhabits human speech, marking the disjunction between sense and sense perception, and shows how this alien element informs and potentially opens up the terms and parameters of human conversation. In “The Tables Turned,” William takes his turn to hector Matthew by instructing him to close his books and “[l]et Nature be your teacher” (l. 16).

The poems of 1797–8 insist on a receptivity to “Nature” as that which may “teach,” “lead,” “feed,” and “inform” our minds. “Nature” figures throughout the poems as Wordsworth and Coleridge’s preferred shorthand for the disjunction between sense and sense perception, which manifests itself in language as a kind of speechlessness within human speech that can potentially renew and activate speech. I would like to turn now to Coleridge’s “The Nightingale” as a poem that pursues the paths opened up to human interlocutors fascinated by the nonspeaking voice of a nightingale.

Subtitled “A Conversational Poem,” “The Nightingale” is colloquial, even associative in diction, tone, and structure. The situation of the utterance is a walk on a balmy night in spring when the speaker and his friends hear the song of a nightingale. This song becomes the focus of the speaker’s ruminations, which are addressed to his friends and which include evocation of the absent figures of a “gentle maid” and the speaker’s infant babe. The poem advances a central argument that the nightingale’s song is not melancholy, as earlier poets have claimed, but merry and joyous, according to the “different lore” the speaker and his friends have learned. Through the in-itself meaningless voice of the nightingale, the poem both thematizes and dramatizes the emergence of a new poetics.

The poem’s allusiveness displays the poet’s familiarity with the poetic conventions he advocates superseding. Upon first hearing the bird’s song, the speaker cries, “And hark! The Nightingale begins its song” and quotes immediately from Milton’s “Il Penseroso”: “‘Most musical, most melancholy’ Bird!” (l. 13). What follows is a satirical passage in a deliberately “poetical” style on poets who, imitatively adhering to convention, have characterized nightingales as melancholy and have done so precisely without coming anywhere near the birds, and the poetical youths and maidens in “ball-rooms and hot theatres” (l. 37) who “heave their sighs o’er Philomela’s pity-pleading strains” (l. 39). In echoing conceits from previous poems, “The Nightingale” expresses an anxiety of influence and originality at the same time as it tries to exemplify and clear the way for a new kind of poetry.

The apostrophe to “My Friend, and my Friend’s Sister!” (l. 40) announces the transition from an old to a new poetics. This act of address interrupts the speaker’s satirical repetition of poetic conventions to mark a difference between old and new. It separates the speaker, his friend, and his friend’s sister from the community of poetical youths and maidens. Simultaneously, the apostrophe interrupts the reader’s complicity with the poetical youths and maidens by addressing him or her as reader of *this* poem and its kind as friend among friends. Concomitantly, the speaker now characterizes the nightingale’s song as “merry.” In illustration of a new poetics that favors unmediated contact with and direct description of its objects, Coleridge writes of the moonlit scene of a gathering of nightingales in a nearby grove. The birds stir “the air with such an harmony, / That should you close your eyes, you might almost / Forget it was not day!” (ll. 62–4). His remarks here may be taken as commentary on the power of his own preceding lines to make present to the reader what is for him or her an absent scene. The poet then evokes another visitor to the grove, an imagined “gentle maid” silently familiar with the “minstrelsy” of “those wakeful Birds” (ll. 79–80). Critics typically

object that Coleridge commits in the poem the same pathetic fallacy in attributing mirth to the nightingale's song that he'd accused earlier poets of making when they "nam'd these notes a melancholy strain." To what degree might Coleridge have been self-conscious and ironic in thus using the nightingale's voice as a pivot in poetic tradition? And what would be the strategic purpose of such irony, such willful, even hammy use of the pathetic fallacy?

Between attempts to bid farewell to his friends and to the nightingale (ironically, highly stylized and conventional gestures), the poet ends the poem with the evocation of a final figure – his infant son. Imagining his son's mute attentiveness to the nightingale's song, he recalls an episode in which his crying child is mysteriously comforted and cheered by the sight of the moon. At this point, Coleridge interjects, "Well – / It is a father's tale" (ll. 105–6). In a limited sense, the interjection may comment on the anecdote, but, in a wider sense, on the poem of "The Nightingale" itself, which ends beyond the father's tale with the utterance of a father's wish: namely, that "his childhood shall grow up / Familiar with these songs, that with the night / He may associate Joy!" (ll. 107–9). The father's wish is here directed towards the future, with the child functioning as figure of futurity, and the father's tale would serve, then, as the means of opening up the future.

The poem sets up a contrast between an older poetic tradition and the new poetry that the speaker and his friends advocate by means of the voice of the nightingale. To participate in the older tradition is to imitate the convention of deeming the nightingale's song "melancholy." To embrace the new poetry would seem to involve exiting the finite, mediating framework of poetic convention in order to experience and represent the perceptible world as new and as infinite – to expose oneself to, rather than to foreclose, the disjunction between sense and sense perception. Perhaps it is in this latter attitude or disposition that Coleridge locates the experience of joy, rather than in an anterior and interior psychological condition that is then narcissistically projected onto the world. In this sense, the poem may be said to open up a future of joy that goes "beyond joy and melancholy," that is to say, beyond joy and melancholy conceived of as symmetrically alternative affective states.

In his recent study, *The Story of Joy*, Adam Potkay observes that Coleridge seems "[i]ncapable of pure or immediate joy" and tends to appear in his poems vicariously dependent on the joy of others (2007: 141). In Potkay's analysis, Coleridge often figures himself as spectator of the immediate joy of another, deriving aesthetic pleasure from the contemplation of such joy, for example of Charles Lamb in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," the "gentle maid" and the infant Babe in "The Nightingale," Sara Hutchinson in "Dejection: An Ode," and, one might add, the infant Babe in "Frost at Midnight." The distinguishing feature of all these figures, according to Potkay, is that they do not speak: they do not themselves communicate by speaking what Coleridge views them as experiencing (2007: 146). If Coleridge tends to position himself as witness to the unspoken affective experience of others, and to align the reader likewise as witness, Wordsworth seems to do the opposite in "Tintern Abbey" by calling upon his sister – and, by implication, the reader – to bear witness to his experience.

Written in July 1798, “Tintern Abbey” bookends the *annus mirabilis* in a chronological sense and serves as the culminating poem of *Lyrical Ballads*. It shows affinities with Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” written earlier in the year in February as an autobiographical lyric concerned with the function of memory that involves towards the end of the poem an address to a beloved family member. Notably, in the context of Wordsworth’s development, “Tintern Abbey” may be said to initiate the poet’s career-long turn to autobiography as well as his assumption of the mantle of “prophet of Nature.”

The poem begins by thematizing the act of literal revisitation as the poet returns to a site he had visited five years ago: “again I hear / These waters” (ll. 2–3), “once again / Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs” (ll. 4–5), “Once again I see / These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows” (ll. 15–16). The speaker gives a topographical description of the site in the first section, the significance of which for his memory and imagination he will analyze as he revisits the scene again and again later in the poem. In the five years between his visits the landscape has become an internalized object, described as “forms of beauty” to which “in lonely rooms, and mid the din / Of towns and cities” he has “owed” “sensations sweet” (ll. 24–8). Standing once again at the site, the speaker contrasts his former appetitive self, the “thoughtless youth” who had enjoyed “coarser pleasures,” in relation to the scene with the man who has since developed the ability to derive enjoyment from the same scene in memory and imagination. “The picture of the mind revives again” and mediates his present experience as he stands at the site, anticipating how this very moment will itself become in turn the source of “life and food / For future years” (ll. 65–6).

The most widespread reading of the poem remains the reading Wordsworth himself offers in the poem itself: namely, that he celebrates the power of memory and imagination to transcend and become independent of – to “wean itself from,” as it were – particular sensory experience upon which, paradoxically, the mind nevertheless depends for “life and food.” It is due to this paradoxical structure that he claims triumphantly and climactically in the poem,

Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

(ll. 103–12)

Wordsworth expands here the message his speaker had given Matthew in “The Tables Turned” – to “let Nature be your teacher,” though “Nature” here is prismatically refracted as “anchor,” “nurse,” “guide,” “guardian,” and “soul.” Wordsworth does not

use the singular substantive “Nature” here but the phrase “nature and the language of the sense,” which appears to operate as a hendyadic construction. “Sense” here seems to denote sensory perception, in contrast to “thoughts,” as the passage crescendoes in the poet’s claim about his “moral being.”

Students are sometimes surprised that the poem continues after this majestic, rolling crescendo. In the final section of the poem, Wordsworth turns to address “my dearest Friend, / My dear, dear Friend,” “My dear, dear Sister,” whom we now find has been standing by his side the entire while. In her voice he catches “[the] language of my former heart” and his “[f]ormer pleasures in the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes” (ll. 117–20). She seems to him now what he was then. In her he finds an asynchronous parallelism with his own experience and development. What he discovers now so shall she: “in after years, / When these wild ecstasies shall be matured / Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind / Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms” (ll. 138–41). And, beyond making this discovery for herself, she will remember the significance of this “green pastoral landscape” for both their sakes.

In this final section of the poem, Wordsworth extends his personal discovery into a generalization about individual psychological development. In discovering the logic of his narrative of himself, he discovers a logic for the narrative of self. It is in this section that he capitalizes “Nature” as personified abstraction:

Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us.

(ll. 123–7)

In turning here to the first-person plural, he includes his sister with himself as a “worshipper of Nature.” Implicated within the “we” is the reader too as “friend,” addressed by the poem as a “worshipper of Nature” who is similarly constituted in relation to “Nature” and who, through this poem, is simultaneously interpellated as witness of the speaker’s experience.

In their poems of the *annus mirabilis*, Wordsworth and Coleridge figure and configure “Nature” again and again as mysterious, generative source of creativity. Issuing from the noncoincidence between sense and sense perception, that which the poets call “Nature” seems to operate as a speechlessness within language that opens up language to new, unforeseen possibilities. For Coleridge, the fulfillment “Nature” promises tends to remain prospective and situated outside the self. He tends to locate in others what he himself does not have. In contrast, Wordsworth inscribes the generative power of “Nature” within the narrative of his own self, and universalizes such an operation. At stake in their differences are different conceptions of the relationship between language, subjectivity, and community, the implications and consequences of which call for further investigation.

In chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge offers a retrospective account of the division of labor between the two poets at the inception of *Lyrical Ballads*. He recalls that "[t]he thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural. . . . For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life" (Coleridge 2004: 490). Coleridge took on the former, and Wordsworth the latter. On a simplistic, literal level, only "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Goody Blake, and Harry Gill" may be said to feature supernatural incidents and agency, which would seem to diminish the usefulness of the taxonomic division in the first place. But, as Coleridge elaborates further, the supernatural and the ordinary appear not so much to be discrete and stably opposed categories but rather to be mutually implicated. His taking on supernatural material would have as its object "to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief . . . which constitutes poetic faith" (Coleridge 2004: 490). Wordsworth's attention to "things of every day" would, on the other hand, "excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us" (Coleridge 2004: 490). It is through the uncanny implication of the supernatural with the everyday that their poems are supposed to defamiliarize the reader's perceptions of the world and open up for him or her the world as new.

This opening up or, in Coleridge's idiom, "awakening" takes place via an excitation of feeling, an interesting of the affections, that necessarily appears, from the perspective of the mind encumbered by custom, "supernatural" insofar as it exceeds the mind's capacity for comprehension. Coleridge describes this awakening as an awakening to "wonder," without which he claims, "we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand" (2004: 490). He echoes here passages repeated in Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, in turn repeated by Jesus in the Gospels and Paul in Acts and Romans. The poems of *Lyrical Ballads*, then, would perform such a messianic, miraculous function.

The historiographical term *annus mirabilis*, or "year of wonders," seems to attest to the very ambitions Coleridge describes. It is unclear when this term was first applied to 1797–8, and, interestingly, it is unclear when exactly the term emerged in historiographical usage. Indeed, it is quite possible that John Dryden coined the term in titling his panegyric to Charles II "*Annus Mirabilis*" in 1666. Dryden scholars contend that the poet may have been responding polemically to a series of antiroyalist *Mirabilis Annus* tracts that appeared in 1661–2 (Hooker 1946: 53–62; McKeon 1975: 190–204; Gee 2005: 90–5). These tracts deal with a number of rationally unaccountable phenomena – "apparitions seen in the air, strange reversals and perversions of natural laws, the sudden expiration of well-known men" – that had occurred in the Restoration year of 1660. In chronicling such occurrences, they participate in a wave of "dissenting prophecy" by subjects critical of "the return of Stuart monarchy and Anglican episcopacy" (McKeon 1975: 194). With the similarity between 1666 and the number of the

Beast in Revelation 13:18, eschatological anxiety was rife at the time. To extend the trail further back chronologically, one finds that the anonymous authors of the “*Mirabilis Annus*” tracts may in turn have derived their title from Francis Bacon’s 1625 essay, “Of Prophecies,” which cites Regiomontanus, a fifteenth-century Franconian mathematician, astronomer, and astrologer, as having predicted the English defeat in 1588 of the Spanish Armada in prophesying, “Octogessimus octavus mirabilis annus” (Bacon 1985: 114). Interestingly, the term *annus mirabilis* seems to have emerged in early modernity out of the intersecting practices of reading the stars and reading human history, and to retain aspects of religious historiography in its transposition to secular historiography.

In a secular age of reason, the miracle, as an event that defies rational explanation, appears like an outdated embarrassment. But that which is deemed “miraculous” may shed light precisely on the limits of reason’s grip on reality, and have effects on our existence that necessarily elude our understanding. “In order to free ourselves from the prejudice that a miracle is solely a genuinely religious phenomenon,” writes philosopher Hannah Arendt,

it might be useful to remind ourselves briefly that the entire framework of our physical existence ... rests upon a sort of miracle. For, from the standpoint of universal occurrences and the statistically calculable probabilities controlling them, the formation of the earth is an “infinite improbability... [W]henver something new occurs, it bursts into the context of predictable processes as something unexpected, unpredictable, and ultimately causally inexplicable – just like a miracle. (Arendt 2005: 111)

The miracle, according to Arendt, is a new beginning, “new” precisely because its occurrence interrupts an otherwise automatic process and reveals as old the framework or logic according to which the process was calculable. Miracles open up the possibility, then, for the introduction of a radically new logic consequent on the new beginning it initiates.

Wordsworth and Coleridge’s poems of 1797–8 may enact something of a “miracle.” They inaugurate a new beginning in poetry, dismantling the classical hierarchy of styles and the principle of decorum. The poets experiment with formal and stylistic strategies to convey and to elicit the powerful excitation of feeling. Poems such as “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “The Thorn” stage allegories of their own reading insofar as they address the reader in relation to the embedded listeners within the poems – the Wedding-Guest, the unnamed interlocutor vis-à-vis the narrator of “The Thorn,” even the narrator vis-à-vis Martha Ray. They thereby engage the reader as witness to the pathos not just of the Mariner and the mad abandoned woman, but to the pathos as well of those who come into contact with these figures. Insofar as the poems of 1797–8 take as their origin “Nature” as blind spot within knowledge, as incompleteness within speaking, and that functions nonetheless and paradoxically as the very condition of knowledge and speech, they take their cue from the unexpected, the unpredictable, and the causally inexplicable.

As a coda, I would like to recapitulate briefly how the political implications of *Lyrical Ballads* have since the volume's publication formed a central focus of critical debate. In his 1825 *Spirit of the Age*, William Hazlitt observes that Wordsworth's poetry

is one of the innovations of the time. It partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments. His Muse ... is a levelling one. It proceeds on a principle of equality, and strives to reduce all things to the same standard. (1930–4: 11. 87)

Hazlitt's remarks here indicate the extent to which, since 1798, Wordsworth, working conjointly with Coleridge, had upset the classical hierarchy of styles, the principle of decorum dictating the fit between genre, diction, and the social rank of the personages involved in a poem. However, Hazlitt's seeming praise is qualified by irony and ambivalence throughout much of the rest of his remarks on Wordsworth, whom he regarded in 1825, as he did Coleridge and Southey, as traitors to the political radicalism they had espoused in the 1790s. Byron, who called Wordsworth an "apostate," would share with Hazlitt and with Shelley this sense of disappointment over the growing conservatism of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

The politics of *Lyrical Ballads* and the legacies of Wordsworth and Coleridge have attracted particular critical attention in late twentieth-century Romantic scholarship. I would like to highlight a few key developments in this critical conversation. In *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971), M. H. Abrams offers a powerful synthesis of British and German Romanticism in both its literary and philosophical manifestations, locating the specificity of Romanticism as an artistic and philosophical movement in its secularization and naturalization of the traditional Judeo-Christian messianic reading of history and politics. The Romantics displaced their millennial expectations from politics to the sphere of aesthetics and philosophy, staging a subjective turn whereby the notion of "changing the world" requires not so much direct political action as it entails critical reflection on the processes of imagination and cognition, which constitute the very sense of "world" in the first place. Abrams's account may be seen as repeating and, in effect, parsing Wordsworth's address to Coleridge at the end of the thirteen-book *Prelude* that they should be "Prophets of Nature," who will speak a "lasting inspiration, sanctified / By reason and by truth," and who will teach

how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things,
(Which, 'mid all revolutions in the hopes
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of substance and of fabric more divine.

(1805 *Prelude* xiii. 446–52)

Romantic poetry continues, then, the messianic work of the French Revolution by secularized and naturalized means.

If Abrams synthesizes the Romantics' own claims, the so-called "Yale School" readers of Romanticism Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom likewise remained oriented by the Romantics' own claims, but draw attention in their readings to the *aporiai* that ultimately frustrate the authors' very attempts to recover, through the exercise of the visionary imagination, a metaphysical condition of primordial unity or wholeness. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality," De Man associates the latter assumption, in particular, with Coleridgean aesthetics (1983: 187–208). In his work on Wordsworth, Hartman employs the psychoanalytic notion of "the uncanny" to analyze the haunting quality of Wordsworth's lyrics and the dark power of *The Prelude's* "spots of time" (1964: 141–62). Hartman's work provides a conceptual vocabulary for analyzing the *pathos* of Wordsworth's poetry, and seems to locate Wordsworth's originality in the uncanny communication of feeling. Hartman's and De Man's readings expose the discontinuity between the epistemic claims of the text and its actual literary practice, the interminable undoing of the former by the latter. Their readings also effectively affirmed Wordsworth's centrality for Romanticism, in revision perhaps of the New Criticism's appropriation of a Coleridgean aesthetics.

Wordsworth thus emerged alongside the Yale School as the principal culprits in the New Historicist rereading of Romanticism. In *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), Jerome McGann discerns a complicity between Romantic writers and the most influential readers of Romanticism, accusing both of evading history and politics and displacing fundamental questions concerning freedom, happiness, and community into the sphere of aesthetics – a displacement figured simultaneously in the poems as a retreat into nature as sanctified space. Wordsworth and Coleridge's very transposition of political revolution into an aesthetic register prepared the way, according to New Historicists, for an ultimate occlusion and betrayal of the modern democratic political project of liberation from hierarchy, oppression, and poverty. Notwithstanding the new and pronounced interest both poets showed in many of their poems for socially and economically marginalized figures (the insane, the exploited, the decrepit, the poor), New Historicists focused on "Tintern Abbey," the concluding poem of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, as test case for Romantic aesthetic ideology. Kenneth Johnston and Marjorie Levinson both suggest to different degrees in their readings of the poem that the Wordsworthian speaker's celebration of his imaginative power in relation to "nature" is predicated on a bracketing of the conditions of the vagrants living near the site of Tintern Abbey (Johnston 1983: 8–10; Levinson 1986: 37–53).

New Historicist readers of Romanticism have been faulted for their inattentiveness to the specificity of literary texts and often criticized for an unquestioning naïveté with respect to the received historical narratives they retrospectively, with the benefit of textbook hindsight, accuse the Romantics of ignoring or repressing. Nevertheless, the energetic intervention of New Historicism has provoked students and scholars of Romanticism to raise deeper questions concerning what constitutes "history," and what constitutes "politics" *au fond*, and to investigate how Romantic writers may have been

more unsettled by these questions than they were complacent about their determinations. There are signs of a return to the poems as partners in a critical conversation of rethinking the relationship between politics and aesthetics in nonoppositional terms.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 12 “‘Other voices speak’: The Poetic Conversations of Byron and Shelley”; chapter 13 “The Thrush in the Theater: Keats and Hazlitt at the Surrey Institution”; chapter 23 “‘The science of feelings’: Wordsworth’s Experimental Poetry”

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Part III

Contemporary Contexts
and Perspectives

Spontaneity, Immediacy, and Improvisation in Romantic Poetry

Angela Esterhammer

At first glance, spontaneity seems part and parcel of the value system of Romantic poetry. Wordsworth's definition of "all good poetry" as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is arguably the most famous phrase in the most famous Romantic theorization of the poetic process. Many Romantic poems highlight the immediacy of emotional response, and most Romantic poets at one time or another lay claim to the power of extemporaneous composition. According to the Romantic ideal, the poetic genius creates poetry naturally, without long labor or study. Figures and scenes of spontaneous composition populate the Romantic canon; they can be found in Blake's "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence*, in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and at the outset of Wordsworth's *Prelude*. The immediacy of inspiration is central to Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, while Keats writes in his letters of poetry coming as naturally as the leaves to a tree.

Yet contemporary critics representing a variety of theoretical perspectives have called attention to the *constructed* quality of Romantic spontaneity. In other words, the very quality that is supposed to manifest the natural creative genius of the Romantic poet is now read as a trope, a textual effect. Clifford Siskin writes, with notable typographical emphasis, of the "sense of 'natural' spontaneity" in Wordsworth, Keats, and the greater Romantic lyric (1988: 27–8, 108). He argues that spontaneity is a prime example of the lyric "effects" that came to be newly valorized at the end of the eighteenth century, thereby helping to define a new Romantic discourse. Michael O'Neill begins an essay on Leigh Hunt's sense of spontaneous composition with the ironic observation that "spontaneous risings of originality were the result of much contrivance in poetry of the Romantic period" (2003: 135). If the analytical perspective of contemporary criticism inevitably puts more emphasis on the construction of textual effects, these critics are nevertheless picking up on ambiguities that are already present in Romantic-era discourse. Romantic poetry itself represents spontaneity as a complex and multivalent phenomenon. Sometimes it is

evidence of naturalness, genius, or overflowing emotion; but it can also be associated with convention, artificiality, and performance.

There is, to begin with, an intrinsic difficulty in the idea of *representing* immediacy or putting spontaneity on display. A poet who represents a scene of spontaneous composition within a poem necessarily recollects and theatricalizes that scene, at least to some degree. Yet, arguably, the act of extemporizing or improvising a poem is only meaningful if someone witnesses it; otherwise, how could anyone other than the poet ever tell whether the thoughts really are spontaneous and their expression immediate, or whether they derive from premeditation? The idea of putting extempore composition on display for an audience is most highly developed in the tradition of poetic improvisation found in Mediterranean countries, especially in Italy – a tradition that gained widespread popularity across Europe during the Romantic period. By the early nineteenth century, these performances took a theatricalized form that bears a certain resemblance to modern “improv” or poetry slams, whereby *improvvisatori* extemporized poems, often quite long and often with musical accompaniment, on topics selected by their audiences. The popularity of poetic improvisers during the Romantic era testifies once again to the value this era placed on spontaneous composition. However, framing poetic improvisation as performance presents a challenge to the ideal of naturalness: can poetic genius be theatricalized, can it be exposed to a viewer’s or even a reader’s gaze, without succumbing to artificiality and convention? The present essay will examine the evolution and interaction of these various (possibly antithetical) forms of spontaneity, extemporaneity, and improvisation, as manifested in Romantic poetry itself and, secondarily, in theory and performance. The consequences of these intersecting currents are especially remarkable in the 1820s, at the height of the English fascination with the literary-cultural figure of the (male) *Improvvisatore* and the (female) *Improvvisatrice* – poets who claim, paradoxically enough, to *perform natural spontaneity*.

Early in the Romantic era, the “Introduction” to Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* (1789) imagines a spontaneous origin for poetry in the encounter between a poet (the “Piper”) and a figure of inspiration (a child on a cloud). Even if it is quite possible to find disturbing undertones in the poem’s rapid progression from the immediacy of music to the more distanced medium of a written text, the dominant impression left by this short lyric is that the Piper’s responses correspond immediately and exactly to the promptings of the heavenly child:

Pipe a song about a Lamb;
So I piped with merry cheer,
Piper pipe that song again –
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe
Sing thy songs of happy cheer,
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear

(ll. 5–12)

The immediate correspondence between word and reality that characterizes God's speech-acts in the creation story in Genesis ("God said, Let there be light: and there was light") seems transposed here into a myth about the origin of poetry. More precisely, this is a miniature myth about the origin of Blake's book itself: the "book that all may read," produced by the Piper at the end of the poem, is the *Songs of Innocence* that we are engaged in reading at this moment. The poem describes a scene of spontaneous composition even as it enacts the immediate communication of that composition to the reader.

Blake's "Introduction" to *Innocence* gains a darker counterpart in the corresponding "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience* (1794), which juxtaposes the encounter between the Piper and the child with a more complex, more disturbing, more theologically resonant scene of poetic creation. The "Introduction" to *Experience* represents the origin of poetry as equally immediate, but the speaker here is a self-proclaimed "Bard" who hears and echoes a disembodied, ominously prophetic "Holy Word" (ll. 1, 4). To the extent that the Bard's speech claims a certain spontaneity, it does so by evoking a tradition of prophetic utterance and divine inspiration that will be called on still more explicitly in Blake's later poetry, especially his Prophetic Books. The immediacy and urgency of the poet's voice in these texts characterize his poetry as inspired utterance that claims to give access to a spiritual universe. It is in this visionary sphere that – according to Blake's *Milton* – "the Poets Work is Done: and all the Great / Events of Time start forth & are conceivd in such a Period / Within a Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery" (plate 29, ll. 1–3).

But the concept of inspiration, with its connotations of muses and divinities, spirituality and prayer (cf. Clark 1997), leads in a different direction. In most cases, when Romantic writers suggest that "the Poets Work is Done ... Within a Moment," the accent is on the compression or elision of time itself. For a variety of reasons, Romantic poems present themselves as *ex-temporaneous* (i.e., "outside of time") or *im-pro-vised* (i.e., "unforeseen" according to the normal past-present-future progression). Such poems claim to be in and of the moment; they claim a mode of composition radically different from the process of meditation or reflection that is usually associated with the creation of a literary work, where the pace of writing can vary and the writer can turn back with second or third thoughts. Especially when improvisation is performed orally before an audience, it becomes clear that this compression of time seeks to elide the difference between thought and its verbal expression. Improvisation, whether in poetry, music, or other art forms, is a mode in which composition and expression occur simultaneously.

In the same era as Blake's *Songs*, a different kind of spontaneity comes to prominence in the poetry of the English Della Cruscan. Sentimental, sociable, semi-erotic, overcharged, and theatrical, Della Cruscan verse enjoyed wide circulation in newspapers and periodicals of the 1780s and 1790s. Taking its name from the poet Robert Merry, who published under the pseudonym "Della Crusca," this poetic style drew its inspiration from Italy, as Merry's pen-name indicates in alluding to the longstanding Italian Accademia della Crusca. In 1785, a group of English expatriates that included Merry and Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi drew on the sociable and often improvisational

verse-forms that they encountered in the literary salons of Florence to compile a multilingual anthology of original poetry entitled *The Florence Miscellany*. The lyric poetry featured in this anthology locates itself amidst a circle of male and female poets who compose emotionally effusive verses addressed to one another, often in response to shared occasions or in order to capture ephemeral moments of experience. The *Florence Miscellany* contains numerous examples of impromptu verses in English and Italian, under such titles as “Versi sciolti, improvvisamente scritti al lume d’una chiara notte d’estate” (Free verses, written extempore in the light of a clear summer night) (Piozzi 1785: 170–2). Poems from this anthology circulated widely in England when they were reprinted in the *European Magazine*, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, and *London Chronicle* over the next few years. They were soon followed by the extremely popular poems of the Della Cruscan circle that first appeared in the London newspaper *The World* and were later collected in the two-volume *British Album* (1790). Befitting its appearance in daily or weekly papers, the periodical verse of the Della Cruscans often calls attention to its own occasionality and its rapid composition, with titles echoing the “Versi . . . improvvisamente scritti” of its forerunner, the *Florence Miscellany*. Even when collected in book form in the *British Album*, for instance, many of the poems retain the date of their original appearance in the newspaper, or carry a headnote specifying that a certain poem was “received forty hours after the publication of the preceding Elegy,” to which it is a response (*British Album* 1790: 1. 24).

The London actress, royal mistress, and celebrity poet Mary Robinson plays a central role in the Della Cruscan group, and her publications aptly illustrate the Della Cruscan tendency toward extemporized forms. Spontaneous composition figures prominently in Robinson’s poetry, both in reality and as a poetic convention. Framing material such as titles, subtitles, and headnotes or footnotes often emphasizes the unusual rapidity with which her verses were composed. The long poem “Ainsi va le monde,” for instance, appears in Robinson’s *Memoirs* of 1801 prefaced by the note: “This work, containing three hundred and fifty lines, was written in twelve hours, as a reply to Mr. Merry’s ‘Laurel of Liberty,’ which was sent to Mrs. Robinson on a Saturday; on the *Tuesday following* the answer was composed and given to the public” (Robinson 2000: 103). The contextualizing material thus takes pains to emphasize that the verses were written in a rush of creativity brought on by the poet’s enthusiastic response to the reading of another text. The spontaneous origin claimed for “Ainsi va le monde” is all the more significant in light of the poem’s length, its relatively high degree of formal structure (iambic pentameter rhyming couplets), and its grandiose ambitions: to construct and enshrine a new canon of English poetry and art that reaches from Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton to Joshua Reynolds and Robert Merry, and to celebrate the ideal of freedom as manifested in the recent French Revolution. The overall effect is to intensify Robinson’s enthusiastic paean to freedom by presenting it as an immediate, irresistible overflow of patriotic fervor. Robinson’s attempt to shape national identity in a long yet spontaneously composed poem contrasts, in turn, with her brief, light, affectionate, witty “Impromptu” poems, verses triggered by ephemeral incidents such as the “Friend Who Had Left His Gloves, by Mistake, at the Author’s

House on the Preceding Evening” (Robinson 2000: 358–9). Together with many similar “Impromptus” and “Effusions” by other hands, Robinson’s verses filled the pages of a growing number of periodical publications in the last two decades of the eighteenth century.

The mode of spontaneity self-consciously evoked and enacted in Della Cruscan verse is emerging as a significant factor in the evolution of Romanticism. Coleridge, for his part, not only imitated but participated in the Della Cruscan style in his early poetry. In early 1798, for instance, his sentimental verses entitled “The Apotheosis; or, The Snow-drop” appeared in London’s *Morning Post* newspaper as a response to Mary Robinson’s “Ode to the Snow-drop,” published in the same paper a few days earlier. But Coleridge and Mary Robinson also shared more enigmatic experiences of poetic composition as a result of medical problems and opium addiction. Robinson’s poem “The Maniac” appears in her *Memoirs* framed, once again, by notes that emphasize how rapidly it was composed. In fact, the scene of composition claimed for this poem is one of quasi-automatic dictation during an opium-induced trance: Robinson “lay, while dictating, with her eyes closed, apparently in the stupor which opium frequently produces, repeating like a person talking in her sleep,” dictating the poem “faster than it could be committed to paper” (Robinson 2000: 122). The account is eerily similar to the near-contemporaneous experience that Coleridge describes as the origin of his “Kubla Khan”:

The author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. (Coleridge 2001: 511)

Like the headnotes to many poetic performances of the Della Cruscan group, Coleridge’s preamble to “Kubla Khan” valorizes the immediacy of the creative impulse and thereby demands that the poem be read under the rubric of spontaneity. It thus anticipates, on a metalevel, the spontaneous act of creation thematized within the poem itself, whose first verse-paragraph shows Kubla Khan’s garden and pleasure-dome springing instantaneously out of the natural setting, as if Kubla’s “decree” had the power of divine fiat:

In Xanadu did KUBLA KHAN
 A stately pleasure-dome decree:
 Where ALPH, the sacred river, ran
 Through caverns measureless to man
 Down to a sunless sea.
 So twice five miles of fertile ground
 With walls and towers were girdled round;
 And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills
 Where blossom’d many an incense-bearing tree;

And here were forests ancient as the hills,
 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.
 (ll. 1–11)

The presence of workers or slaves who presumably put Kubla Khan's commands into action, along with the time that their labor presumably takes, are completely elided from the poem. Instead, a passive construction ("were girdled round") makes the act of creation seem effortless; the gardens, rills, and sunny spots seem to appear instantaneously of their own accord. The poem's last verse-paragraph juxtaposes this initial creation of Kubla's garden with the creative act of the poet:

A damsel with a dulcimer
 In a vision once I saw:
 ...
 Could I revive within me
 Her symphony and song,
 To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
 That with music loud and long,
 I would build that dome in air ...
 (ll. 37–8, 42–6)

The poet's re-creation of Kubla's dome springs with equal spontaneity from his vision of the mysterious damsel with a dulcimer. If both acts of creation, Kubla Khan's and the poet's, are represented as immediately effective, both also depend on nothing more substantial than words or voice: Kubla's decree, the damsel's song, the poet's music. The poem thus associates spontaneous creation with fragility and ephemerality, again echoing Coleridge's preamble, which gives "Kubla Khan" the status of an unmediated but unstable dream-vision that dissipates at the touch of everyday reality like images on the surface of a stream.

If Coleridge's experiments with spontaneous composition, whether Della Cruscan or drug induced, resemble those of his contemporary Mary Robinson, other Romantic poets react against the Della Cruscan style in order to develop a very different notion of spontaneity. Wordsworth, for instance, sets himself in opposition to Robinson's poetics in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. In Wordsworth's famous dictum, "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," the connotations of "spontaneous" are highly ambiguous: does the word refer to temporal immediacy, or, drawing on eighteenth-century moral philosophy, does it mean something closer to "natural," or perhaps "voluntary ... of one's own free will" (cf. Magnuson 1978: 101–3)? Whatever the provenance of his terminology, Wordsworth immediately adds a crucial qualification: "but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply" (Wordsworth 1984: 598). In the less often quoted continuation of the same passage, he expands further on the

mutually modifying relationship between feelings and thoughts, claiming that this relationship eventually becomes automatic, to the point where the associations between emotional stimuli and reflective thoughts are “habits of mind” that the poet obeys “blindly and mechanically.” Finally, this automatic process of the creative mind finds expression in terms of the now-famous formula “emotion recollected in tranquillity”: “the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind” (Wordsworth 1984: 611). Wordsworth’s rather complex theory of spontaneity thus involves automatic or “mechanical” habits of association that are inculcated by repetitive practice, that draw on a long and profound period of preparatory thought, and that connect immediate impressions to a storehouse of memory. Moreover, he insists that the spontaneous overflow of feelings takes place in tranquility and solitude; its products may be for public consumption, but the act of creation itself is internal and private. These conditions of solitude and recollection contrast strikingly with the spontaneity of Della Cruscan poets, whose creativity is spurred by impromptu responses to occasional events, be they momentous or trivial, and by the sociable stimulus of other poets and poems.

The opening scene of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, first written in the era of the *Lyrical Ballads* and their Preface, aptly illustrates Wordsworth’s ideal of spontaneous composition. These present-tense verses express the poet’s immediate response to his natural surroundings during a solitary walk, in circumstances that trigger feelings of joyful creativity and poetic potential:

Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
And from the sky: it beats against my cheek,
And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives.

(i. 1–4)

Only at line 55, after his initial effusion, does the poet reveal that the preceding passage represents a rare instance of spontaneous composition, a moment when he has – unusually for him – made “A present joy the matter of my Song” (i. 56). At this point, the poem shifts into the past tense and then delves ever further into the past, as Wordsworth recalls his difficult search for an epic subject and finally finds it in the form of an inquiry into how his personal history has prepared him to become a poet. Once Wordsworth sets the opening episode in context, the beginning of *The Prelude* turns out to be, paradoxically or even parodically, the *recollection* of a spontaneous improvisation. It’s not that there “is” blessing in “this gentle breeze,” as the first line of *The Prelude* would have it, but that there once *was* blessing in *that other* breeze that Wordsworth remembers. Rather than witnessing a moment of enthusiastic poetic creation, readers are shown a remembered scene that could not have been witnessed at the time, since it is essential to the poet’s creativity that he be alone and unobserved.

Despite the different modes of creativity they invoke, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and Blake's "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* all draw on an image of the poet as natural genius – one who may be untaught or socially marginalized, but to whom, in any case, poetry comes in a spontaneous manner. The genius poet takes on historical and philosophical resonances in the most important text of poetic theory from Romanticism's second generation: P. B. Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*. Depicting the poet as "a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds" (Shelley 2002: 516), Shelley's *Defence* valorizes an instantaneous inspiration according to which "the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness" (2002: 531). The image of the fading coal encapsulates Shelley's belief that a poem is better and more authentic the more quickly it arises from the transitory moment of inspiration. The temporal extension of the process of composition, Shelley goes on to claim, is only a necessary accommodation to the weakness of human abilities:

I appeal to the greatest Poets of the present day, whether it be not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study. The toil and the delay recommended by critics can be justly interpreted to mean no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments, and an artificial connexion of the spaces between their suggestions by the intertexture of conventional expressions; a necessity only imposed by the limitedness of the poetical faculty itself. (2002: 531–2)

Although the creation of poetry, for Shelley as for Wordsworth, is a mental-spiritual process that takes place in solitude, Shelley's transhistorical model of the poetic faculty also gives a certain performative quality to the role of the Poet. It is these flashes of genius, he implies, that manifest genuine poetic identity; the greatest poets may be recognized by their unpremeditated verse.

Less programmatically, but no less self-consciously, John Keats invokes the notions of natural genius and spontaneous composition when he writes, in a letter of February 27, 1818, "if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all" (Keats 1970: 70). Spontaneity, by implication, is essential to good poetry; thus, it also guarantees the poet's identity as a natural genius. In this sense, it is important to Keats's construction of his own poetic identity that he is able to extemporize poetry when an incident or occasion presents itself. This spontaneity is textually marked, once again, in titles that name the trigger which sets the poet's creativity in motion: "Lines on Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair," "On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt," "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Keats's interest in spontaneity as a quality to be cultivated and practiced for its own sake is shown by those of his poems that arise under artificially time-limited conditions. Along with Leigh Hunt, P. B. Shelley, and other friends, Keats revives extempore composition as a poetic game, as it often was for the Della Cruscan and in eighteenth-century salon culture. Thus Shelley's "Ozymandias" was the product of a friendly competition to see who could write the best sonnet under artificial time constraints, and similar

challenges produced sonnets written by Keats in a quarter of an hour: “Vulgar Superstitions,” “On the Grasshopper and Cricket,” and “To the Nile.” In the sonnet “On Receiving a Laurel Crown,” which may have been written under similar conditions, Keats interestingly uses the time pressure of composition as a structuring principle, beginning the octave with the words “Minutes are flying swiftly” and the sestet with “Still time is fleeting” (Keats 1978: 55).

A form of immediacy in which thought and its expression arise together is characteristic of Keats’s poetics. His poetry has been studied from this perspective by Jack Stillinger, who demonstrates that Keats’s manuscripts show few substantial revisions; often, his thought already takes its completed form in the rapidly jotted first drafts (Stillinger 1992). Biographical information confirms the evidence of the manuscripts and the claims contained in their titles. In one famous example, Keats’s sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” was composed while he was walking home from visiting Charles Cowden Clarke, starting out at an October dawn and finishing the sonnet in time for Clarke to receive it at his breakfast table by the ten o’clock post (Keats 1978: 423). Not unlike Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” this sonnet also thematizes visions of a new world and the sudden expansion of thought (“a wild surmise”) that accompanies them:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
 When a new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He star’d at the Pacific – and all his men
 Look’d at each other with a wild surmise –
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

(“On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” ll. 9–14)

“Kubla Khan” and “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” form intriguing pendant poems on the subject of Romantic spontaneity: both are composed extemporaneously; both are triggered by the poet’s reading of another historical-literary work; both juxtapose poetic creation with the instantaneous creation or discovery of a visionary landscape. Keats’s line “Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold” answers Coleridge’s “A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I heard,” and indeed Keats’s sonnet, written in October 1816, answers Coleridge’s fragment, which was published for the first time a few months earlier. In both poems, the instantaneous creation or discovery of a new realm forms an analogy for the poet’s act of creation, thereby contributing to an image of poetic genius.

That these instances of extempore composition are actual – that “Keats’s thoughts,” as Stillinger writes, really “came *while* he was creating” (1992: 318) – makes the sense of immediacy no less a self-conscious aspect of Keats’s identity. Especially when it is a matter of artificially time-limited conditions for sonnet-writing, his rapid composition of near-final drafts looks very much like a deliberate performance of his identity as an authentic natural genius. Michael O’Neill describes the mode of spontaneity

“which Keats inherited from Hunt” (2003: 138) in terms that echo and nuance the tension between naturalness and performativity. In Leigh Hunt’s “improvisatory aesthetic,” according to O’Neill, “the valuations he makes are inseparable from the performances in which he makes them” (2003: 148). Hunt and Keats share a mode of thought and writing in which spontaneity involves giving free rein to disparate impulses and unresolved ideas, to “what is alive, momentary, creatively budding, vivid, imperfect, refusing subordination in some hierarchical scheme” (O’Neill 2003: 153). This late-Romantic spontaneity is distinctively different from the “spontaneous overflow” that triggers Wordsworth’s dialectic between emotion and recollection, and it is not surprising that Leigh Hunt responded critically to the poetics of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* and their Preface: “For Hunt, such a poetry can seem strained, and his own efforts are devoted to releasing a flow (not overflow) of natural (rather than powerful) feelings” (O’Neill 2003: 146).

Reacting to immediate impressions and expressing natural feeling – yet hyperconscious of passing time and of the presence of auditors – the style of Keats and Hunt lends itself to comparison with the “extempore effusions” that become closely associated with late Romantic and early Victorian poetry by women. But other influences are even more relevant to the characteristic spontaneity of nineteenth-century women’s poetry: the impact of Byron, and the Italian tradition of improvisation that Byron helped bring to English verse. Even though Byron often revised his manuscripts extensively before publication or between editions, he is almost universally credited with the ability to compose poetry extempore. This phenomenon is due in part to the tradition of poetic improvisation that Byron encountered in Italy and that he incorporated, at least as an ironic pose, into his writing. Like many of his generation of post-Waterloo travellers and expatriate writers, Byron witnessed theatrical performances by renowned *improvvisatori*. His response, though often skeptical, reveals a marked empathy with the conditions that circumscribe the creative process of these extemporizing oral poets. “The inspiration of the *improviser* is quite a separate talent,” Thomas Medwin quotes Byron as saying, “a consciousness of his own powers, his own elocution – the wondering and applauding audience, – all conspire to give him confidence” (Medwin 1824: 206–7). Byron recognizes that the *improvvisatore* is a social and public poet, whose verses – in stark contrast to the Wordsworthian condition of solitude and recollection – arise out of the imminent challenge to perform and the immediate relation to an audience. When Byron develops his affinities with the *improvvisatore* in later poems like *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, this “consciousness of relation” (Joseph 1966: 189–90) or “communicative exchange” (McGann 2002: 120) between poet and readership evolves into an outstanding characteristic of his style.

The Italian tradition of improvisation resonates with Byron’s self-construction as a poet who responds to immediate impressions and contingencies and records these in a vivid, digressive style. For his contemporaries and for many modern readers his voice counts as markedly improvisational, in his written poetry just as in his much-reported oral conversation (Robson 1963; Waters 1978; Angeletti 2005). Byron’s talent, Medwin claimed simply, “is that of an *improvvisatore*”: “He hardly ever alters a word for

whole pages, and never corrects a line in subsequent editions” (1824: 418). A long review of Medwin’s *Conversations* in the November 1824 issue of the *London Magazine* quotes this passage and comments further:

Such, therefore, as [Lord Byron’s] poetry was, such must have been his conversation, for both were unpremeditated, spontaneous effusions of the perennial spring within his bosom. . . . He was an *English* Improvisatore, and when we say this, we do not mean that he was a mere stringer of musical sentences; but such an Improvisatore as an Englishman might and an Italian could not be. (p. 452)

The vogue of improvised poetry in the Italian style reached its height in London in 1824, the year of Byron’s death, and this historical coincidence probably brought the comparison of Byron with an *improvisatore* all the more readily to mind. The reviewer in the *London Magazine*, above, achieves a striking conjunction of the associations that had by then clustered around the figure of the poetic improviser, from the “unpremeditated” verse that echoes Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to the late Romantic and often feminine genre of the “effusion.”

Byron contributes to the myth of his carelessly spontaneous style, especially in *Don Juan*, by ironically adopting the persona of an “Improvisatore” (xv. 160) and describing his manner of composition as unpremeditated and haphazard:

I ne’er decide what I shall say, and this I call
 Much too poetical. Men should know why
 They write, and for what end; but, note or text,
 I never know the word which will come next.
 (*Don Juan* ix. 41)

In contrast to good, purposeful writing (“men *should* know why / They write”), this narrator disparages his own writing as “too poetical” – thus implying an identification between poetry, improvisation, and purposelessness. Yet the performance of the passage belies its semantics, as the neat rhyme-word “next” completes the stanza perfectly, implying that the narrator *did* know all along what the “text” would generate “next.” Writing in *ottava rima*, the traditional verse-form of Italian *improvisatori*, Byron also makes use of their structuring techniques, letting the rhyme-words determine the phrasing and even the meaning of the poetry. Recently, various critics have reevaluated “the presumed or assumed ‘carelessness’ of Byron’s style” (Angeletti 2005: 172) – including the chatty and digressive tone of *Don Juan*, the poem’s attention to historical contingencies and audience expectations, and the narrator’s use of immediate, embodied reactions to places and circumstances – in light of Byron’s exposure and response to the Italian tradition of improvisation (Angeletti 2005; Esterhammer 2006, 2008).

The self-conscious, often artificial performance style of the Italian *improvisatore* forms a striking contrast to the Wordsworthian or Keatsian idea of natural genius. Yet, as the Continental style of improvisation exerts an influence on English poetics during the early nineteenth century, these two contrasting paradigms of spontaneity interact

and, paradoxically enough, sometimes merge. The persona of the poetic improviser, already known to English readers since the late eighteenth century from the reports of Grand Tourists and English expatriates, took on new life after 1820 when a significant number of Italian literati emigrated to England as a result of political unrest during the early Risorgimento. Because several of these Italian expatriates were themselves *improvvisatori* who continued to exhibit their talent in England, audiences were able to witness live performances of extemporized oral poetry in London during the 1820s and 1830s (Esterhammer 2008: 71–7). However, by far the most influential model of poetic improvisation reached English literature through a different route, mediated by the French writer Germaine de Staël and her tremendously popular 1807 novel *Corinne*, whose heroine is an *improvisatrice*.

Almost single-handedly, *Corinne* forged an association between women's poetry and a certain kind of spontaneity. The abilities of the *improvisatrice* Corinne, represented in memorable scenes in Staël's novel and thematized when Staël has Corinne express her own theory of improvisation (Book 3, chapter 3), promote a model of female creativity that is lively, engaged, conversational, responsive, and emotional. "For me," Corinne says, "improvisation is like a lively conversation. . . . Sometimes the passionate interest aroused in me by a conversation on the great, noble questions about man's moral being, his destiny, his objective, his duties, his affections, raises me above my powers, enables me to discover in nature, in my own heart, bold truths, expressions full of life, which solitary reflection would not have produced" (Staël 1998: 45–6). What Corinne (and, through her, Madame de Staël) describes here is neither an extemporized performance that dazzles a theater audience nor an overflow of private emotion, but, instead, a sociable mode of creativity in which original thoughts arise in the very act of expressing them in dialogue. Yet, since Corinne also functions in Staël's novel as a tragic heroine destroyed by an ill-fated love affair, readers quickly came to associate the *improvisatrice* with the outpourings of a female poet's passion, especially on the subject of unhappy or unrequited love. Ironically, Staël's Corinne, far from drawing on her passion as a source for poetic creation, ceases to be able to improvise when she is overcome by personal emotion. Her performance of an extemporized poem about Neapolitan landscape and history at Cape Miseno (Book 13, chapter 4) breaks down into an "uninterrupted flow" of formless expression when she becomes distracted by ominous thoughts about her hopeless love (Staël 1998: 236). At the end of the novel, once Corinne's lover is definitively lost to her and she is dying of a broken heart, she can no longer improvise at all; instead, another singer must perform her farewell poem in her place. The trend-setting novel *Corinne* thus manifests another acute juxtaposition among different modes of poetic spontaneity: improvised poetry as brilliant public performance; the passionate but formless overflow of private emotion; and the creativity triggered by a stimulating conversational environment.

Imitations of the Corinne persona in English poetry by women, especially during the 1820s when improvisation and Italian culture were in vogue, gave this foreign paradigm a domesticated form that merged with the late Romantic and early Victorian image of the "poetess." Letitia Elizabeth Landon's long poem *The Improvisatrice* (1824)

is the most elaborate and popular example of the English reception. Landon's unnamed speaker, a "daughter" of Florence, is gifted with "Genius" yet limited to "a woman's power." From the beginning of the poem, her "shades" (i.e., her paintings) are associated with an outpouring of emotion and a prophecy of woe:

My power was but a woman's power;
 Yet, in that great and glorious dower
 Which Genius gives, I had my part:
 I poured my full and burning heart
 In song, and on the canvass made
 My dreams of beauty visible
 ...
 Sad were my shades; methinks they had
 Almost a tone of prophecy –
 I ever had, from earliest youth,
 A feeling what my fate would be.

(ll. 25–30, 37–40)

In the course of the poem, as the *Improvvisatrice* performs interpolated songs on a variety of subjects and in a variety of verse-forms, she is revealed as a multi-talented young woman – a painter, poet, singer, and improviser – who nevertheless pines away, like Corinne, when her lover Lorenzo marries another woman to whom he was previously engaged. With Landon's *Improvvisatrice*, a figure who is further developed in her later poems "Erinna," "A History of the Lyre," and "Corinne at the Cape of Misena," the focus moves away from the spontaneous creation of poetry and sometimes has little to do with the poetic process at all. Rather, Landon's *Improvvisatrices* are visual artists as much as they are poets; still more often, they are themselves the subjects depicted in paintings or statues. The lively responsiveness previously associated with improvisation is arrested, at the end of a poem like *The Improvvisatrice* or "A History of the Lyre," into a static pose, as the dead or dying poetess is replaced by her portrait hanging above a funeral urn or a statue marking her grave.

In these poems of Landon's, and in others such as Felicia Hemans's "Corinna at the Capitol" (1827), the legacy of the *improvvisatrice* Corinne involves a powerful awareness of the woman poet's public role and the demands of celebrity. The type of immediacy that comes to the forefront here is the immediate, demanding presence of an audience. At the same time, poetry of the 1820s adopts the figure of the male *improvvisatore* to reflect on the poet's relation to present auditors or future readers, as well as the sources of the creative impulse and the ephemerality of its products. In Hemans's "The Dying Improvvisatore" (1828), which depicts an Italian *improvvisatore* extemporizing a final poem on his deathbed, improvised oral poetry comes to represent the ephemerality of poetry in general. Spontaneous and harmonious as his words are, this lyric implies, the improviser's voice will die with him. Similarly, Coleridge's "The Improvvisatore" (1828) reveals his ongoing engagement with the idea of spontaneous composition. The

unnamed “Improvisatore” in this text, an older gentleman who is a thinly veiled and gently ironic version of Coleridge himself, engages in wise and witty conversation with two young ladies at a Christmas party. The last section of Coleridge’s text shows the Improvisatore in the act of extemporizing a four-strophe lyric poem for the ladies on the subject they have requested: the constancy of love over time. Formally, this lyric uses irregular variations on a predominant four-stress line, making it resemble the verse-form of Landon’s recent *The Improvisatrice*. Thematically, the most remarkable feature of the inserted “ex improvise” poem is that it explicitly meditates on the *idea* – or rather the “fancy” (l. 4) – of being in love. Encouraged by the young ladies to confess that he has personal experience of true love, the Improvisatore instead avows only that he “fancied” he had it (l. 2). By extemporizing a poem on nothing but a fancied feeling, the Improvisatore heightens the sense that the verses themselves – rhymes, rhythms, images, and conceits pulled spontaneously out of the air – are all there ever is. Love, in Coleridge’s lyric, is “the meteor offspring of the brain” (l. 9) – just like its improvised medium. “The Improvisatore” as a whole puts an act of poetic improvisation on display by inserting it into a miniature dramatic scene; resonances between the theme of the improvised poem and the mode of its composition generate reflections on the insubstantiality of poetry. Besides mimicking Coleridge’s lifelong talent for developing his ideas spontaneously in oral conversation, the “ex improvise” composition that takes place in “The Improvisatore” also reflects the origin of the text itself, which Coleridge produced in haste and sent off to the editor of the annual publication *The Amulet* the day it was written (Coleridge 1971: 699).

The self-reflective and self-dramatizing aspect of “The Improvisatore” parallels that of Landon’s *The Improvisatrice*, inasmuch as Landon herself was perceived as a poet whose natural mode was improvisation. For many of her nineteenth-century readers, this involved a type of spontaneity characterized by confession, sincerity, and artlessness, an irresistible impulse to produce an involuntary flow of verses whose subject was, almost inevitably, love. Thus, the nineteenth-century editor George Bethune suggests in his introduction to the 1848 anthology *The British Female Poets* that the name “Miss Landon” is shorthand for a style of extemporized, hastily written verse that does not admit of revision or second thoughts: “As the line came first to the brain, so it was written; as it was written, so it was printed” (Bethune 1848: ix). But for Landon and her contemporaries, the Improvisatrice persona does not only – and not even primarily – connote free-flowing emotion or a “liberated” style characterized by associative linking of ideas and grammatical imprecision. More profoundly, the figure of the improviser allows these poets to reflect on their own relation to an audience, the often vulnerable status of poets and poetry, and the problematics of celebrity (cf. Stephenson 1995 121–4). They thereby bring about an acute confrontation between improvisation as natural emotive effusiveness and the improviser as a performative persona answerable to an audience. The late-Romantic Improvisatrice embodies the paradox of a public pose defined by naturally overflowing private emotion. A similar pose of spontaneity appears in Coleridge’s self-conscious “The Improvisatore”; in a more diffuse form, it underlies Keats’s occasionally artificial enactment of poetry that “comes naturally.”

During the period 1785–1835, spontaneity in Romantic poetry thus takes a variety of forms, generating one another sometimes by imitation, sometimes by antithesis. For different generations and genders of Romantic poets, spontaneity can involve inspiration or improvisation, solitude or sociability, dreaming or performing. Wordsworth's spontaneity of recollected emotion, in particular, represents a very different poetic process from the Italian mode of improvising in public, as reflected in the Della Cruscan style or the figure of the *improvvisatore*. Yet, in the context of an era that casts the poet as a natural genius, spontaneity – even as a contested term – becomes widely recognized as a value that attaches to good poetry and to the genuine poet. Expecting the poet to manifest this spontaneity, Romanticism goes so far as to construct a poet-improviser who performs natural spontaneity on stage or in writing. The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings thus becomes, far beyond what Wordsworth may have intended in 1800, a profound but paradoxical aspect of Romantic and poet-Romantic notions of genre, performance, and poetic identity.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 12 “‘Other voices speak’: The Poetic Conversations of Byron and Shelley”; chapter 20 “‘Celebrity, Gender, and the Death of the Poet: The Mystery of Letitia Elizabeth Landon””; chapter 25 “Milton and the Romantics”; chapter 29 “The Matter of Genre in the Romantic Sublime”

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Celebrity, Gender, and the Death of the Poet: The Mystery of Letitia Elizabeth Landon

Ghislaine McDayter

*Those sweet and wandering birds, that make its spring
So happy with their music, – these are gone:
All scared by one, a vulture, that doth feed
Upon the life-blood of the throbbing heart –
The hope of immortality! – that hope,
Whose altar is the grave, whose sacrifice
Is life – bright, beautiful, and breathing life.*

Letitia Landon, *Poetical Portraits*

The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.

Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”

“Do you know the story of L.E.L.?” wrote Virginia Woolf to Lytton Strachey in a 1927 letter, “– the poetess who committed suicide, as some say; but others feel sure was murdered?” A mutual friend of theirs, E. N. Enfield, “has written a life of her” which the Woolfs published in the following year (Woolf 1978: 418). But while it might be the “life” of Letitia Elizabeth Landon that was written by Strachey’s “blue stocking Hampstead friend,” it is actually her *death* that has captured the imagination of her critics and biographers. Even Enfield’s biography was entitled *L.E.L.: Mystery of the Thirties*, drawing immediate attention to the controversy over the poet’s death rather than to her literary life. The poet’s body of work, it is implied, was important to document only inasmuch as it shed light on that far more interesting “body” – the near-dead body of L.E.L. discovered stretched upon the floor of her room. Having sailed off to Cape Coast in Africa with her mysterious new husband, Governor George McLean, she was found close to death three months later, with an empty bottle of prussic acid in her hand. Whether she died of an accidental overdose, suicide, or murder at the hands of her husband or his previous mistress remains as complete a mystery today as

it was at the time of Enfield's biography. Even though we have three substantial volumes of her writing, both poetry and prose, and know close to nothing about her death, the death continues to resonate more powerfully than her life. As Glenn Dibert-Hines remarks, we are all too "willing to eschew interpreting L.E.L.'s art in favor of discussing the 'tragedy' of Landon's life" (Himes 2010: 1).

Readerly fascination with the material body of a dead poet is hardly unprecedented, and I have written on this subject in relation to Byron's body elsewhere (McDayter 2007). Both were celebrities in their own day, both were at the center of sexual scandals, and both were widely considered to be poets who "prostituted their art" for the sake of fame; Landon was even referred to as the "female Byron" by her contemporaries. Few critics have retrospectively interpreted Byron's "gothic" literary productions or his doomed trip to Greece as tell-tale evidence of suicidal impulses, but the connection between Landon's death-ridden poetry and her own early death in Africa is insisted upon as important and, in some way, causal. The implication is that in order to be redeemed as an "authentic" poet, Landon herself must be shown to have felt the misery and passion that she depicts in her poetry. For Elizabeth Barrett Browning, among many others, Landon lost all artistic credibility because she did not live the life about which she so often writes. Having read Laman Blanchard and Emma Robert's memoir of Landon, Browning wrote to Mary Russell Mitford in disillusionment: "Where is the true deep poetry which was not felt deeply and truly by the poet?" Landon's passion, Browning concludes, was clearly "pasteboard from the first" (Lawford 2000: 37).

There is considerable precedent for this critical correlation between a female celebrity and her tragic end. Two other female "celebrity" poets of the period, Mary Robinson (1757–1800) and Mary Tighe (1772–1810), both came to suitably miserable ends that seemed to validate their literary association with Sappho. Indeed, the death of the female Romantic poet seems almost obligatory if critics and readers are to accept the popular success of these women poets as evidence of genuine inner turmoil and not as mere pandering to their public. If death does not come through disease, as was the case with both Robinson and Tighe, then the poet must seek it out in order to justify her position in the female literary canon. (For an excellent reading of these female celebrities, see Linkin 1997 and Ty 1998.) Hence, Linda Peterson argues that Landon actually writes herself into her own fatal plot as if incapable of escaping such a tragic destiny.¹ For these female celebrities, it was imperative that life and literature, corpse and corpus, collapse into each other.

There are significant critical problems with this reading of all the Romantic female celebrity poets, but particularly Landon in the light of recent discoveries made by Cynthia Lawford concerning the poet's "secret" sexual life. Far from being an inexperienced virginal naïf, Lawford has discovered that Landon was not only "experienced" but had three children by her editor (Lawford 2000: 36). The critical response to this important revision has been illuminating in terms of just how central female sexuality and death are in our assumptions about literary genius and posthumous fame. Indeed, it is Landon's sexuality that has come under attack again by her most recent critics, revealing how much the issue of a female poet's sexuality continues to matter in our reading of celebrity and poetic authority. The tradition of reading a female celebrity as

authenticated only by her tragic end has been vigorously contested by feminist critics for the last two decades. Such readings, initiated by critics such as Germaine Greer, argue that Landon's repeated and "obsessive" portrayal of dying young women is clear evidence of a masochistic inability on her part to disengage herself from the damaging gaze of patriarchal ideology (Greer 1982: 16). Far from authenticating her poetic career, the poet's death and subsequent fall from the canon is, for Greer, the deserved consequence of her heroines' literary deaths, governed as they were by patriarchal imperatives of proper feminine behavior.

What follows will challenge both the insistence that a female poet must live the life she writes in order to be authentic and the assumption that she is utterly inauthentic should she fail to do so. Neither critical position accounts for the complex intersections between Landon's specific use of death imagery in her poetry and the literary culture within which she lived and worked. In opposition to Greer, I would argue with Elisabeth Bronfen that such "theoretical insistence on a direct, unambiguous and stable analogy between cultural images and experienced reality defuses both the real violence of political domination and the power of representations" (Bronfen 1992: 59). What it *is* essential for the critic to understand is exactly "how these two registers come to be conflated and confused" (Bronfen 1992: 59), and it is this task that I set myself in this essay. It is easy, albeit problematic, to argue that Landon's fascination with poetic death led to her own, but there is clearly something about the connection between these two realms of death that requires analysis. Why has it been so seductive and so natural for us to read these two narratives of death – one literal and one figurative – as intimately related?

For Landon, I would like to argue, death is a *structural* necessity to the creative process. It is part of her poetic, rather than prophetic, imagination and any authorial "death" foreseen by the writing of her melancholic narratives shares more with Barthes's figurative death of the poet than real death. For Landon, poetry as a creative process *kills*. It turns even our most passionate, breathing emotions into artifice, and the very flesh of those we love into memorial. Far from being a Wordsworthian, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," poetry for L.E.L. is a process utterly committed both to the objectification and the commodification of emotion. Poetry doesn't simply "sell" passion – poetry actively manufactures it.

An Improvising Art

The claim that Landon's poetic philosophy was one of manipulation was well established during her own life, albeit from a different angle. Many of her harshest critics found both her and her female contemporaries in the Della Cruscan movement, specifically Mary Robinson and Hannah Cowley, guilty of being simple phrase-makers, reliant on pretty but often incoherent language that replicated the verse and themes of other greater poets (Pascoe 1997: 81). Having said this, the dominant critical narrative of L.E.L.'s work during the height of her fame was as the very voice of passion itself, sung with immediacy and sincerity. Frederic Rowton, editor of *Female Poets of Great*

Britain (1848), found her to be the very embodiment of passionate poetic form, likening her in this respect to Byron:

L.E.L. may, I think, be considered the Byron of our Poetesses ... [her genius] is distinguished by very great intellectual power, a highly sensitive and ardent imagination, an intense fervour of passionate emotion, and almost unequalled eloquence and fluency. Of mere art she displays but little ... We cannot believe her sadness to have been put on like a player's garb: to have been an affectation, an unreality ... we must suppose that she felt what she wrote. (Rowton 1848: 424–7)

This poetic persona of sensibility and sincerity was associated with the entire corpus of Landon's work, but was first established by her signature poem *The Improvisatrice* (1824); this work introduced many of the "passionate emotions" soon to become so associated with Landon's work and life and also the poetic expectations of emotional authenticity made famous by the first great fictive improvisatrice, Madame de Staël's *Corinne* (1807). The improvisatrice, as Angela Esterhammer shows in her essay in this volume, became a recognizable literary type in England. Created by Staël, herself a female celebrity, these fictional female artists were able to compose poetry spontaneously based either on the suggestions of her audience or on the circumstances and emotions pressing upon them at the moment of composition. Moved to sudden poetic inspiration by the force of her emotion, the improvisatrice is called upon to speak the voice of passion itself, unmediated and unpoliced by literary imperatives or restrictive psychic barriers. As Landon writes of her own improvisatrice, such poetry demands that we "pour [our] full and burning heart in song" never bothering in Wordsworthian terms, to mop up the messy "overflow" of our emotional spontaneity (cited in Landon 1997: 28).

Based on such passages, this does indeed seem to be an unapologetic poetry of pure expression unviolated by conservative literary tradition or by patriarchal repression. Rather than seeing the dignified power of the poet as a Wordsworthian "man speaking to men" about his recollected emotions, the spontaneous articulations of the improvisatrice were meant to spellbind and overwhelm her audience precisely by the immediacy of her passion. There was no interest in tranquility of thought, or even in recollection. Thus, argues Glennis Stephenson, for her critics, "LEL is a fountain, not a pump. The flow is from nature not art," and, as such, the poet's identification with her "gushing" heroine proves her own emotional authenticity (Stephenson 1992: 5). As the unnamed reviewer of *The Literary Magnet* (1824) enthused, Landon "appears to be the very creature of passionate inspiration; and the wild and romantic being whom she describes as the Improvisatrice seems to be the very counterpart of her sentimental self" (cited in Landon 1997: 295).

For many other critics of the period, the female poet's spontaneity was more a function of her gender than her literary philosophy, and the concept of the improvisatrice was simply a more direct ideological expression of the patriarchal norms already in circulation. George Bethune, coeditor of the 1853 edition of *Female Poets of Great*

Britain, argued that women poets simply were more emotionally spontaneous and authentic: “[Women] write from impulse, and rapidly as they think ... As the line came first to the brain, so it was written: as it was written, so it was printed. Mrs. Hemans’s melody was as much improvisation as Miss Landon’s” (cited in Stephenson 1992: 4). All women are thus improvisatrices to a certain extent. What makes Landon so very seductive a writer for figures like Bethune is the fact that the *specific* emotion expressed with such immediacy happens to take the form of a highly charged and eroticized passion. The gratification to be had from the emotional immediacy of Mrs Hemans’s much admired poems in her 1812 collection, *The Domestic Affections* (“My Eldest Brother,” for example), is one thing. Personal access to the spontaneous and unmediated sexual expression of the fascinating and mysterious L.E.L. (in poems like “Love’s Last Lesson”) is quite another, offering a far more titillating form of readerly gratification.

If, to use Isobel Armstrong’s wonderful term, such examples of the “gush of the feminine” (1995: 13) might seem to mitigate any need for recollection on the poet’s part, it is equally evident that any textual moment of immediacy experienced by the poem’s Improvisatrice is of course carefully drawn and rendered by Landon herself. It is true that the Improvisatrice’s spontaneous effusion entitled “The Indian Bride” (a narrative embedded within the larger frame poem) does warn its readers that “There are a thousand fanciful things / Link’d round the young heart’s imaginings” (Landon 1856: 29) that can only be felt by the immediacy of youth and love. Here, the Improvisatrice composes the tale of a young Indian Bride who foresees the death of her betrothed:

In its first love-dream, a leaf or a flower
Is gifted then with a spell or flower
A shade is an omen, a dream is a sign
From which the maiden can well divine
Passion’s whole history. Those only can
Who have loved as young hearts can love so well.
(1856: 29)

Such passion, we are told, must be *felt* – it cannot be recollected from the comfort of old age. And yet even here, in what is clearly a self-conscious echo of Wordsworth’s “Strange fits of passion,” we are shown how this new and “spontaneous” poem is actually mediated and made possible by just such an older literary recollection. Not only is this emotion recollected; it was never actually experienced by the narrator in the first place. This celebration of authentic passion through poetic experience is wholly and openly manufactured. As a result, it is not at all clear that Landon privileges genius over craft, the feminine over the masculine, or immediacy over recollection.

L.E.L. was brilliant at blurring these lines both within her poetry and without. While her poetic heroines utter lines such as “It was not song that taught me love, / But it was love that taught me song” (*The Improvisatrice*, ll. 151–2) and while her publisher and

lover of many years, William Jerdan, insisted that her poetry cannot be understood without understanding the poet's passionate love attachment (presumably him), it is equally true that Landon positions herself in her poetry as its producer rather than its subject. As she noted rather archly in her Preface to *The Venetian Bracelet* (1829), it would be impossible for her actually to have written about her own feelings in her poetry considering her own "sheltered" life, and her heroines' rather more varied experiences:

With regard to the frequent application of my works to myself, considering that I sometimes pourtrayed [sic.] love unrequited, then betrayed and again destroyed by death – may I hint the conclusions are not quite logically drawn, as assuredly the same mind cannot have suffered such varied modes of misery. However, if I must have an unhappy passion, I can only console myself with my own perfect unconsciousness of so great a misfortune. (cited in Landon 1997: 103)

Thanks to Lawford, we now know how disingenuous such comments may have been. If Landon was indeed "unconscious" of her misfortune it was only because she had repressed it.

Personal experience and poetic memory as a source of authentic creativity is thus rather more complicated for Landon than her coy references either to Wordsworthian memory or to her own "sheltered" life might suggest. And while Lawford has suggested that the "truth" of Landon's passionate life licenses an autobiographical reading of her poems, I would disagree (Lawford 2000: 36). Landon is clearly playing with these readerly assumptions about the unmediated and spontaneous nature of poetic inspiration, but her poetry suggests a rather different relationship between poetry and memory than that of many of her contemporaries. Wordsworth's recollected memories may be the conduit by which we gain access to a world of emotions once lost, and now regained in all their immediacy and power – a place in which we resurrect our "true" identity – but for Landon the living memory must in a sense be killed in order to create the work of art to survive. As the remaining portion of this chapter will show, Landon's poetry is remarkable for creating a lyric style *devoid* of emotional subjectivity, using a poetic memory unconnected to any living source. Poetry in Landon's work transforms all living history into artifact, all flesh into stone. Far from representing the artist's true feelings, her "passionate" poems are figured instead as the product of *read-erly* fantasy and imagination.

Let me offer a few examples. The conclusions of many of Landon's poems are frequently peopled with lover figures who turn into "statues" and "cold portraits" as a result of lost love. While many critics have argued that these figures show Landon's understanding of the phallic gaze as it objectifies the female artist and victimizes women in general, the operations of the gaze are more triangulated than this. For while the heroine can certainly be identified with these statues and frozen images, they just as frequently appear as representations of the poet's *male* lovers and readers. These frozen figures become enthralled by the poetry performed and, in their enthusiasm, they

lose themselves in its fantasy. When Lorenzo listens to the Improvisatrice's song of the Indian Bride, he "stood / Spell-bound" and our poet ultimately finds him posed amidst the Italian statues like one of her own busts (ll. 893–4). The Improvisatrice ponders how "human art should ever frame / Such shapes so utterly divine!" (ll. 927–8) but the reader isn't quite sure if she speaks of Lorenzo or of the statues since, in another instant, Lorenzo is explicitly described in terms of the marble figures that surround him:

He leant beside a pedestal.
 The glorious brow, of Parian stone,
 Of the Antinous, by his side,
 Was not more noble than his own!
 They were alike: he had the same
 Thick clustering curls the Roman wore –
 (ll. 933–8)

So has the Improvisatrice's gaze turned Lorenzo into a statue as well? Landon borrows this depiction of the power of the gaze in the creation of art from Staël's *Corinne* – what Toril Moi has referred to as Staël's use of theatrical "absorption" (2002: 147) and what Harriet Linkin refers to as Mary Tighe's "reciprocal objectification" (1997: 167). For this heroine and poet, art is never wholly the expression of the artist but it borrows from and transforms the emotions, and memories of others. Thus Corinne remarks without hesitation that her own art, while authentic, is a form of spontaneity that draws not upon her own memories or emotions, but rather of the emotions of *those who listen to her*. When asked by her future lover whether she prefers "the work of reflection or the work of inspiration on the spur of the moment" (Staël 1987: 44), Corinne answers that she never really creates a poetry of self-expression because she always draws on the emotions of her audience and their applause: "I go along with the impression my listeners' interest makes on me, and it is to my friends that I owe most of my talent ..." (1987: 44).

Staël describes this relationship between the poet and her rapturous audience as a kind of "conversation" between friends, but Landon's references to this relationship are rather more cold-blooded. In her work, the lover/reader becomes so identified with the emotions expressed that he is absorbed by and becomes part of the poem itself – an artifact. The moment a hero of Landon's poems moves beyond admiration for the poet's art into a passionate investment in her every word, he shifts from being her audience/lover, into being part of her work of art.

Perhaps the best example of this relationship between the artist and her lover can be found at the end of *The Improvisatrice*. The Improvisatrice herself is dead at this point, and her bereaved lover Lorenzo is described by an unknown narrator as a shadowy relic of his past Parian glory. While still referred to in terms of statuary, he is no longer a figure divine, but rather a melancholic ruin.

His brow, as sculpture beautiful,
 Was wan as Grief's corroded page,

He had no words, he had no smiles,
 No hopes: – his sole employ to brood
 Silently over his sick heart
 In sorrow and in solitude.

(ll. 1539–44)

Lorenzo seems to spend most of his time standing guard beside the ashes of his “Minstrel Love,” which are contained in a funereal urn perched underneath a self-portrait of his beloved Sappho’s face. And yet it is worth noting the stark contrast between the representation of the dead artist and her living lover. The self-portrait of the Improvisatrice reveals her to be glowing within the frame:

She look’d a form of light and life; –
 All soul, all passion, and all fire;
 A priestess of Apollo’s, when
 The morning beams fall on her lyre;
 A Sappho, or ere love had turned
 The heart to stone where once it burned.

(ll. 1567–72)

Even when contained within a picture, she is described as fully alive with young love before it has turned to stone. Lorenzo, on the contrary, is lifeless marble whose sole purpose is to memorialize and guard the living passion of his past love in the form of a small urn graven with the words “Lorenzo to his Minstrel Love.” He has become her reliquary, her ornament and a *product* of her imagination and memory. He has literally become her “Grecian Urn” of Keats’s ode, his skin the vessel on which her life and vitality are drawn as an example of art in its most static and immortal form.

Landon’s poetry insists that spontaneity, passion, and immediacy *must* be ossified and fixed by the eye of the artist to ensure that they remain eternal. The figures of Keats’s urn must be dead to become art and love eternally. Similarly, love is always fatal for Landon not because she is a victim of patriarchal assumptions, capitalism, or her collusion “in her own objectification” (Blain 1995: 41), but because the subject of passionate love memorialized in song lends itself so well to her larger poetic theme – that all art must monumentalize. It kills the living, passionate moment in order to become art. Poetic genius for Landon is not about recollecting past emotion in all its freshness; it is about recognizing that any act of “recollection” is itself a fiction mediated as much by our *literary* memory as it is by our most passionate experiences. Similarly, her collection of short verses inspired by the *Literary Gazette*’s reproductions of ancient medallion wafers, “these slight things [that] preserve many of the most beautiful forms of antiquity,” clearly partakes in the contemporary fascination with Hellenic antiquities found in Keats’s “Grecian Urn” but with a significant difference. While Landon tells the readers of her “Medallion Wafers” that the images are “devoted to verse, on the supposition that they have been employed as seals to lovers’ correspondence,” they actually sealed nothing and were but reproductions of the works of the nineteenth-century sculptors Canova and Thorwaldsen, both of

whom specialized in copies from antique originals (Landon 1997: 43). While she asks us to imagine that the reproductions of the wafers were once the “seals to lovers’ correspondence,” they were in reality copies of copies, unconnected with any historical lovers, classical or otherwise. Landon’s resulting love verse is not inspired by the words of the historic lovers, or even by their passion. Their “imprint” upon these poems is fantasmatic, and the supposed authenticity of the objects, memories, and emotions described in the poem is thoroughly exploded even before the reader begins to pore over them.² The poet here performs the role of the interpreter of emotion while making it very clear to her readers that this is indeed a performance manufactured solely for the benefit of the (modern) reader. Like Corinne, the power of art for Landon is as much based on the performance and reconstruction of the emotions of others – other poets, other readers, other pasts – as it is by the artist’s expression of any inner “truth.”

It is perhaps for this reason that Landon frequently draws on and is inspired by the great women stage actors of the day when creating her own representations of artists. She knew that the artist had become as much of a commodity as his or her productions – especially the female artist who has been objectified and consumed by her audience for over a century. Judith Pascoe has argued that the actress Sarah Siddons (1755–1831) is an important signifier of this new cultural investment in the theatrical pose of the poet: “When women poets adopted theatrical poses, they were tapping into the transformative power of the actress, fashioning themselves as author *as well as* performer, a conflation of roles less easily appropriated by male writers of the period” (1997: 19). While I would agree with the gendering of this statement in general, the salient exception to its rule was Lord Byron, Landon’s most persistent influence. Landon avidly studied Byron’s poetry and career, and would have been very conscious of the ways in which the social role of the poet had transformed in recent years from that of a Shelleyan nightingale singing to cheer its solitude to a celebrity engaged in complex negotiations for control over both his or her writing and poetic persona with a newly articulate audience. Women artists and actresses like Mary Robinson and Sarah Siddons had long been engaged in such negotiations, and what made Byron’s step into celebrity so significant was that, for the first time, a male artist had to contend with the same objectifying forces that women had been battling for such a long time. In her poem “A History of the Lyre” Landon presents precisely this perceived shift from the traditional artist to the modern celebrity:

Trace the young poet’s fate:
Fresh from his solitude, the child of dreams,
His heart upon his lips, he seeks the world,
To find him fame and fortune, as if life
Were like a fairy tale.

(ll. 279–83)

The vision is anything but rose-tinted, and yet there is also a sense that the tragedy and disillusionment of the poet would not be felt if he were in any way realistic about what it means to be an artist in modern times. So while many conservative critics attacked Landon

for being the product of a frightening modernity – a new breed of mass-produced artist who becomes a poet “with as little exertion of intellect, as is employed in manufacturing a stocking in the loom” (cited in Pascoe 1997: 240) – Landon’s point is that such an insistent denial of the realities of literary culture can only end in failure and bitterness for the poet. On the contrary, what her poetry forcefully suggests is that the poet of the mid-1820s, in stark contrast to that of the minstrel of the mid-1600s, was inescapably commodified whatever his or her gender. Wordsworth’s vision of the poetic process is an anachronistic and potentially dangerous fantasy for the modern poet to believe. For Landon, art has ceased to be (if it ever was) the expression of internal, authentic passion; like the artist, it is the product of societal “manufacture” and this is something that only the most naive and self-destructive of poets would deny. The fantasy of the artist as a mystical and isolated figure who lives apart from society only encourages the demonization and, ultimately, eradication of the poet as a participant in the realities of life. Landon, then, should be recognized not as a female artist who “sells herself” in an inauthentic relationship with her audience, but rather as an artist who understands the operations of production in the modern literary world and sees it as a part of her poetic process. Art in the modern era is always on some level *about* artifice, and the older Romantic “fairy tale” of the poet as the voice of authentic passion – no matter how much we may wish to believe it – is as much a product of commodification as the poem itself.³

This is not to say, returning to the claims of such critics as Peterson, that Landon acknowledged on some unconscious level that she too as a “true” artist was destined to die tragically, unlamented by a heartless and fickle readership. But I would argue that the “death of the artist” *is* inevitable for Landon in a rather more theoretical sense. It is true that the poets in her texts who deny modern literary reality usually die in an attempt to have revenge on an audience which cannot understand the true depths of its creative being. But there is nothing to suggest that Landon shared such a view of the artistic life for herself. On the contrary, her real-life demeanor was consistently cheerful and pragmatic. The many deaths of her poet-heroines and heroes do not reflect a poetic frustration with her audience; they are poetic statements about the relationship of the poet to her art in a modern world. The reader now becomes an active participant in the unfolding of the poetic narrative, and (to return to my opening epigraph from Barthes) the birth of this new powerful reader comes at the cost of the death of the author. Attempts to trace the poem back to the “true” and “authentic” meaning of the poet become both irrelevant and impossible, since the poet herself is presented as only one of the many lifeless and shifting signifiers within the text that produces its meaning. Once Landon’s heroine/poet has produced her art and displayed it to her public, she becomes dead to it. Her voice shifts from living discourse into that of memorial, and her once lively words can now only be found etched upon the monuments of her corpus (and her corpse). The reader, no less than the characters within the poem, is asked to interpret both “lifeless” bodies in an attempt to find meaning, and in so doing resurrects these inert remains into living, meaningful bodies of knowledge. Recollection in tranquility does not describe Landon’s philosophy of the creative process, but it may very well describe that of her readers.

Read in this light, “A History of the Lyre”, one of Landon’s lesser known poems, becomes a fascinating commentary on the performative nature of the poet and her relationship to the inauthentic, to the commodified, and to death. The tale is loosely based on the plot of Staël’s *Corinne*, in that we are again introduced to an Italian poet, Eulalia, famous for her inspired verse. She briefly becomes the lover of an Englishman, the narrator, who ultimately leaves her for a sweet and modest woman of his own country. He returns with his young English bride, Emily, to find his ex-lover, Eulalia, near death. The tale is simple and rewrites her early *Improvisatrice*, but it achieves a far more mature and cutting commentary on the issues of the poetic process and its relationship to authenticity and “truth.” In earlier poems, L.E.L. had at least attempted to present the poetess as a woman who wholly succumbs to the passion of the moment, but there is little effort to create any such spontaneous authenticity for Eulalia. This is a poet who performs the role of poet with a self-consciousness that is almost breathtaking in its calculation. Wandering through ancient Roman ruins while composing new poetry, Eulalia plays the role and dresses the part of the oracular poet when most likely to be spotted by her public. She strolls through the cypress trees that rise “like a funeral column o’er the dead,” dressed in the simple tunic and unkempt dress of an ancient priestess:

her robe

Was white, and simply gather’d in such folds
As suit a statue: neck and arms were bare;
The black hair was unbound, and like a veil
Hung even to her feet; she held a lute,
And as she paced the ancient gallery, waked
A few wild chords, and murmur’d low sweet words,
But scarcely audible, as if she thought
Rather than spoke: – the night, the solitude,
Fill’d the young Pythoness with poetry.

(ll. 69–78)

Eulalia is described here as the Delphic oracle, speaking in rhymes to those who wish to know their fate. She is certainly described as “fill’d” with her poetry as if mystically impregnated by a divine presence, and there are no signs of the artist as producer of commodities here. This seems to be a vision of poetry untouched by the tawdry demands of a literary market, so natural as to be almost supernatural. But things are not as clear upon closer inspection. While Eulalia is described as solitary, she is actually being watched by two men, one of whom is the narrator (soon to be her lover), with his companion as they take a walk through the ruins. Whether she is aware of their presence is unclear – certainly the companion warns the narrator to “hush” as she approaches – but her performance is as staged and polished as if she had been the famous Sarah Siddons in one of her most demanding roles. The English narrator is impressed by her performance as the mystic poet and, conversely, disappointed when he sees her at a gathering the next evening without the trappings of the oracular virgin: “I could not image aught so wholly chang’d” he notes with distaste, observing

her bright, fashionable clothing, highly dressed hair and “converse light” (l. 93). As she moves about the salon with confidence and grace, speaking with the many guests who crowd around her, the narrator grapples with the change in her persona from authentic, solitary poet to artificial public performer. Her costume is again worth noting: in the ruins she appears in virginal white of Apollo’s Pythoness, but her hair is described as being dressed in “grape-like curls” and vine leaves when in public (l. 96). This change embodies the Apollonian/Dionysian split between the sacred hysteric who speaks the word of the god in virgin purity and the sensual maenad who crosses the boundaries not only of feminine purity and modesty, but also of performance. Enacting the role of a classical oracle in a nineteenth-century setting is arguably a far more self-conscious performance than playing the social butterfly at a party, but the narrator’s expectations of the artist are those shared by his culture. The oracular poet of vision has the force of tradition behind her. For the narrator, she speaks her art with the voice of timeless “truth” whereas her modern descendant speaks only the mundane trivialities of the present. If Eulalia is to prove herself authentic to her new admirer, she must become a living echo of a long-dead past, embodying it as if she were one of those funereal cypress trees that marks the site of the dead in the realm of the living.

Authenticity and artifice are thus the central concerns of this poem from the beginning, and it is worth noting that, although the title of this poem is “A History of the Lyre,” the word “lyre” itself does not appear once in the poem; the word “lute” is used whenever the musical instrument is referenced. L.E.L. here reminds us that poets are “liars,” but also alerts us to the possible “inauthenticity” of a narrator who so closely adheres to these antiquated assumptions about artists and their art. He began this tale with the clear moral lesson that the truly authentic female poet cannot live, either literally or metaphorically. She must exist in a fantastic antique realm, a memorial to past artistic authenticity. As such, her voice is referred to as an “echo sorrowful” that “recall[s] other times” (l. 61) and the narrator claims that the ruins where he has seen Eulalia are now as if “a haunted shrine, / Hallow’d by genius in its holiest mood” (ll. 87–8). In his mind, she is a curiously spectral figure who nonetheless brings forth authentic articulations of this dead past with her “scarcely audible” voice (l. 75).

But Eulalia herself seems to have no illusions about the authenticity of her role as a poet/performer and she makes it very clear that she is aware of the “publicity” machine that makes a poet first famous and then despised. She is equally clear about the dangers of succumbing to romantic and outdated visions of poetic fame, recognizing that such fairy tales of poetic sincerity and authenticity can only lead to disaster:

I am distrustful – I have been deceived
And disappointed – I have hoped in vain.

...

My days are past
Among the cold, the careless, and the false.
What part have I in them, or they in me?

(ll. 242–3, 249–51)

L.E.L.'s heroine here echoes Hamlet's famous lines about Hecuba and the performance he has been watching, thus drawing our attention once more to "the part" the poet must constantly play to her audience. Even when we have a brief moment of Wordsworthian inspiration in this poem, we are immediately tripped up by the poet's own words of disengagement. She notes for example, that

Remembrance makes the poet: 'tis the past
Lingering within him, with a keener sense
Than is upon the thoughts of common men.
(ll. 311–13)

Only nine lines later, however, she complains that:

"I have sung passionate songs of beating hearts;
Perhaps it had been better they had drawn
Their inspiration from an inward source."
(ll. 323–5)

Once more, the poet seems to quote Wordsworth only utterly to pervert his meaning. The poet's art does not flow with inspiration from within – rather she is a creature of surface, of appearance, and of lies. The "inspiration" that the narrator had so glowingly staged for us when describing his Pythoness of Apollo now appears in a different light. She channels no divine utterance that "fills" her inner being with an immortal truth. We should remember at this point that the oracle was herself a fraud, a performer, and – equally – an artist. Her genius was to make her mortal, carefully crafted words *appear* to be the articulation of spontaneous, divine truth. Indeed, even if we are to accept the narrator's view that Eulalia is at her most "authentic" when appearing as a Pythoness, this very authenticity is specious if her words are not inspired as if from some "inward source" – a fact that she tells us quite openly.

That this poem is largely a vehicle for a discussion about the poetic process is made clear by Landon's placement of an extended debate on the subject by her two lovers at the heart of the poem. The narrator refers to poetic production in terms of natural metaphors, specifically flowers, while Eulalia refers to it as the realm of artifice and memorial. She remarks at length upon art as that which inhabits a realm of immortality thus ensuring the artist a form of eternal life in death:

"Tis this which makes
The best assurance of our promised heaven:
This triumph intellect has over death –
Our living words yet live on others' lips; our thoughts
Actuate others. Can that man be dead
Whose spiritual influence is upon his kind?
He lives in glory; and such speaking dust
Has more of life than half its breathing moulds."
(ll. 137–44)

For Eulalia, the death of the artist signals not the end of her art, but the assurance of its endurance. The “dust” of the dead has a far greater capacity to speak for eternity than does the breath of the living and this might then begin to explain her own willingness to enact the living death of the poet-Pythoness so cherished by the narrator. She recognizes that in a very real sense her personal artistic vision is utterly irrelevant to her fame or poetic reputation. When the narrator celebrates Eulalia’s natural genius, the object of his idolatry is not Eulalia but his own vision of the artist as genius projected on to her. When he can no longer sustain his fantasy of Eulalia as an eternal poet/Pythoness – after she appears as a professional artist in a modern salon – he hastily abandons the language of eternity and truth as inappropriate to her newly fallen status. Throughout their following discussion on the subject of the poet’s immortality, the narrator insists rather rudely:

“Your songs sink on the ear, and there they die,
A flower’s sweetness, but a flower’s life.
An evening’s homage is your only fame;
’Tis vanity, EULALIA.”

(ll. 148–151)

We are again presented with the representation of “true” art and the “true” artist as necessarily ephemeral and fleeting. To be “natural” is to die, just as to be a female genius is (ideally) to suffer a tragic end. No surprise, then, that Eulalia celebrates the artificial and manufactured over the natural and spontaneous; death in the “authentic,” natural realm means obliteration and extinction, whereas in the realm of artifice it leads to eternity and fame.

By the end of the poem Eulalia seems to achieve her desire by being literally transformed into an eternal memorial of herself. Just before her apparent death, she shows the narrator and his young wife her tomb, under the shade of a cypress:

There was a sculptured form; the feet were placed
Upon a finely-carved rose wreath; the arms
Were raised to Heaven, as if to clasp the stars
EULALIA leant beside; ’twas hard to say
Which was the actual marble ...

(ll. 432–6)

At first glance it might appear that Eulalia has succumbed to what so many of Landon’s critics refer to as her ideological bad faith. But if we push a little further, we hear a somewhat different narrative unfold. Eulalia describes her effigy:

“Yon statue is my emblem: see, its grasp
Is raised to Heaven, forgetful that the while
Its step has crush’d the fairest of earth’s flowers
With its neglect.”

(ll. 442–5)

This passage could indeed be read as a reinforcement of Eulalia's failure, since the poem establishes the parallel between the blooming flower and a woman's proper role as helpmeet to man. But the discussion of immortality cited above leaves room for a rather more subversive reading as well. The statue's foot spurns and crushes the flower that emblemizes the narrator's description of fame as a transitory state. Eulalia's statue, on the other hand, reaches up to the stars and becomes a monument to her own genius. But perhaps the real irony here is that not only does Eulalia undermine the narrator's views, she does so by drawing on his own fantasy of feminine genius established at their first encounter. Thus, her monument to her eternal fame appears shaded under that cypress so closely identified with Eulalia's natural genius at their first meeting. But whereas during this first encounter the narrator's gaze had transformed her into an antique relic of a dead past, a Pythoness, insisting that even Eulalia's dress resembled that which would "suit a statue," it is *she* who has now taken control of the representation of creativity. Her emblem stands before him, the embodiment and reflection of his own vision of female genius, but it is her simulacrum that falls under his gaze. It is Eulalia who has become the agent of creation, ossifying and formalizing the fantasy figure of the woman artist that she previously merely enacted so convincingly for him in the garden. In drawing attention to the artifice of her previous performance as the artist, she undermines the fantasy of authenticity and the natural so cherished by her ex-lover as the essence of the female genius. In short, there is little difference for Eulalia between the one "artistic" creation in flesh and the other in stone. Both must be read as the products of readerly fantasy and desire, and both demand her own death in order to exist as art.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the Eulalia's death is a conclusive sign either of her failure as a poet or of her victimization as a woman. We cannot even be confident that she does actually die in the poem (despite the narrator's pompous assurances of her demise), precisely because of the language he uses to describe it. Having recorded his last encounter with Eulalia at the side of his silent wife – a sickly woman who is herself described as a flower showing signs of "young decay" – there is a break in the text and we are told that Eulalia's "prophecy was sooth" (l. 446). She sleeps her final sleep and he prays for peace for this being that "fed upon itself" (l. 450). This reinvocation of Eulalia as oracle is not coincidental. For the narrator, this is no tale of a liar/lyre; Eulalia is indeed a seer who is "true," her early death seemingly vindicating the narrator's judgment of her genius as necessarily natural and transient as evidenced by her return to the antique funereal realm of the cypress groves. But we should remember, even as we mourn the death of our heroine, that this death might just as easily be yet another oracular performance by the Pythoness. She staged her first appearance as the oracular poet, why not her last? For while the narrator insists that she "fed upon herself," thus dying of a kind of artistic consumption seen in the epigraph that opens this essay, we have already been told by the poetess herself that she never, in fact, drew her inspiration "from an inward source." On the contrary, as we have seen above, she quite shamelessly fed upon the desires and fantasies of others for her creation – in this instance the narrator himself.

Landon's brilliance as a poet lies in this awareness of the ways in which we lie to ourselves about the nature of the artist and his or her poetic process. We have little interest in seeing the "true" living woman, a witty and vivacious figure who produces compelling narratives of passion for her livelihood. We would much rather see her "sooth," which is to say, the fantasy of the poet as ancient seer who brings forth divine words, only to die young and tragically, the victim of her own desire to speak the eternal. For Landon, the death of the artist is as much a commentary on the state of art as it is a commentary on the situation of the artist. By the late 1820s, the famous poet had come to occupy a new cultural niche in British society; she became the celebrity who, far from feeding upon herself like a Chatterton, or even being fed upon by a voracious audience like a Byron, now feeds upon the fantasies of readerly desire in the creation of her art. But this too is a kind of death for the artist precisely because she has come to recognize that the artist must surrender control over her creation if it is indeed to "live" on after her.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 19 "Spontaneity, Immediacy, and Improvisation in Romantic Poetry"; chapter 30 "Sexual Politics and the Performance of Gender in Romantic Poetry"

NOTES

- 1 Peterson argues that both William Howitt, Landon's biographer, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were astute enough to recognize that "Landon's self-construction as a Sapphic poetess destined her for an early death, that she more or less wrote herself into that fatal plot" (1999: 122).
- 2 While I would agree with Daniel Riess's premise that Landon is so important a poet for the 1820s because she holds a remarkable place in relationship to the intensifying commodification of the literary market (Riess 1996), I would not agree that she tries to maintain the fiction of artistic authenticity. My own sense is that she was remarkably self-conscious of the inauthenticity of art, and chose to foreground this artificiality as part of her own poetic production.
- 3 Here I am in full accord with Judith Pascoe regarding "the artificiality of authenticity" (Pascoe 1997: 2).

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Poetry and Illustration: “Amicable strife”

Sophie Thomas

Late in his life, William Wordsworth wrote a sonnet on the subject of “Illustrated Books and Newspapers” – not, however, to celebrate their growing popularity, but to decry the apparently stupefying effect of pictures in books and periodicals on the reading public, and the consequent unpopularity of “serious” reading:

Discourse was deemed Man’s noblest attribute
 And written words the glory of his hand;
 Then followed Printing with enlarged command
 For thought – dominion vast and absolute
 For spreading truth, and making love expand.
 Now prose and verse sunk into disrepute
 Must lacquey a dumb Art that best can suit
 The taste of this once-intellectual Land.
 A backward movement surely have we here,
 From manhood – back to childhood; for the age –
 Back towards caverned life’s first rude career.
 Avaunt this vile abuse of pictured page!
 Must eyes be all in all, the tongue and ear
 Nothing? Heaven keep us from a lower stage!

(Wordsworth 1963: 3. 75)

Wordsworth, in 1846, was not merely playing the curmudgeonly old man. Although the sonnet reflects his preference for a more complex approach to the joint work of the eye and the imagination, it also registers the extraordinary expansion of the market for illustrated reading material that had taken place over his lifetime. The technologies of stereotyping and mechanical papermaking, along with the steam-powered press, reduced the costs of printing substantially, opening the way to more affordable and more widely disseminated books: the same techniques made possible the mass

reproduction of higher-quality images. Book illustration, specifically, played an important role in the expanding domain of the mass-produced image, in popular culture as in "high" culture. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that literary illustration had a close relationship to painting as well as to the print and book markets, and that the relationship between text and image – as between the "sister arts" of poetry and painting – was not simply taken for granted, but was also challenged and reconfigured.

Wordsworth's sonnet, then, aptly illustrates a set of tensions around verbal-visual relations proper to the period in question. It relates to a strong feeling, at least among serious writers, that the interests of poetry were not well served by the addition of illustrations. This feeling had been clearly expressed by Charles Lamb in a sonnet he published in *The Times* – "To Samuel Rogers, Esq., on the new Edition of his 'Pleasures of Memory'" (December 13, 1833). This new edition included numerous illustrations by J. M. W. Turner and Thomas Stothard, both prominent illustrators and artists of the day. Lamb laments that the text, now "O'erlaid with comments of pictorial art / However rich or rare" leaves nothing "Of healthful action to the soul-conceiving / Of the true reader ..." (Lamb 1935: 1098). Lamb positions his polemic in class terms – the book will feed "with luxury / The eye of pampered aristocracy" – but the threat to the work of the imagination (figured as modest, moral, and abiding) is clear. Lamb and Wordsworth were not alone: certainly other cultural commentators expressed the view that illustrations appealed to the eye rather than the understanding, and that this tended toward a worrying debasement of the text. As Wordsworth's sonnet suggests, and as an article on "Illustrated Books" in the *Quarterly Review* unequivocally asserted, this tendency was regressive – "a partial return to baby literature – to a second childhood of learning" ("Illustrated Books" 1844: 171).

This chapter will explore a number of issues surrounding the popularity of illustrated books of poetry in the Romantic period, beginning with contextual matters related to the history and culture of book production. Overall, the impact of illustration on the poetry of the period can be understood as a product of developments in technology, the marketplace, and the changing tastes of readers, just as it can be understood in terms of the dialogue between the poetic imagination, or "vision," and popular forms of the visual – with all its tensions and controversies, as well as its new possibilities. These concerns apply to major illustrated editions of the work of Romantic poets and to illustrations of other English poets produced in the Romantic period. Several key instances of the relationship between poetry and the visual arts will be addressed here, from Blake's illuminated books, to Wordsworth and Coleridge's engagement with illustration, to Turner's designs for the poetry of Byron and Scott. Meanwhile, in the phenomenon of the literary galleries, the prominence of ekphrastic poems (poems that describe or represent works of art), and in the enormously popular literary annuals, the close relationship between verbal and visual modes is clearly assumed and exploited, as well as redefined. This is, in fact, a very large field to map, and while some of my specific examples will inevitably appear arbitrarily chosen, their function should perhaps be taken as indicative – or illustrative – of a broad set of concerns.

It is worth pausing here over the definition of the term "illustration." In the first instance, it means to light up or shed light on – to illumine. More familiarly, it means

to elucidate, explain, or exemplify, as in the illustration of a subject or a book pictorially. However, the pictorial sense of illustration that is now common was not the dominant meaning until the 1820s, before which “illustration” was a more fluid term referring generally to exemplification and enhancement, or as Martin Meisel puts it, to “the extension of one medium or mode of discourse by another” (1983: 30). Strictly speaking, then, pictorial illustration is only one kind, and there is no reason why a text may not “shed light” on an image – indeed, as we shall see, much illustration in the Romantic period runs precisely in this direction. Thus, the principles of illustration are caught up in the very process of embodying or representing an idea, which raises the question of its independence. Should an illustration simply follow or “copy,” mimetically, the text it relates to, or should it introduce an expressive dimension of its own? Implicit here is the status of the illustration as adornment or decoration on the one hand (and thus, because derivative, in a position of comparative dependence), and, on the other, an independent response to the text with its own semantic integrity. In either case, illustration always tends to be viewed as secondary, or supplementary, to the text.

The extent to which the illustrator is fulfilling either an artistic or a mechanical function relates in turn to a larger, more complex, question about the purpose of illustration. Hodnett argues, in *Five Centuries of Book Illustration*, that illustration serves to decorate, to inform, and to interpret. In the case of literary illustration, the central aim is generally interpretation, or rather, “realization” (1988: 1). If the point of imaginative literature is not simply to inform or persuade (not, then, to do with technical matters) but to evoke emotion, thought, response – then the point of the illustration is too. Illustrators must convey through their own technical and expressive means “the emotional effects evoked” by the author, while producing drawings that are both competently executed *and* a source of independent interest and pleasure (1988: 3). They may even go further: the 1844 article on “Illustrated Books” in the *Quarterly Review* distinguished, interestingly, between “real” and “ideal” illustration, where the former represents things that exist (as encountered in books of scripture, travel or history), and the latter, the imaginary creations of poetry and fiction – where the artist may *also* be imaginative, “and his fancy as unbridled as the poet’s own” (1844: 195). Thus it is not surprising that in the most effective literary illustration there is often a close match between the style or approach of the writer and that of the artist, as we find between Cruikshank and the humorous texts he often worked on, or between Turner and Byron.

One final preliminary point to consider is that texts are to some extent visual entities, while visual images are also textual: we see text, just as we read pictures – a fact of which Blake was keenly aware. This is amply borne out by reactions to the work of William Hogarth. Charles Lamb, arguing for Hogarth’s unique genius, claims “His graphic representations are indeed books; they have the teeming, fruitful, suggestive meaning of *words*. Other pictures we look at, – his prints we read” (1935: 309). Coleridge, meanwhile, remarked in his notebooks that details such as the spider web in Hogarth’s *Rake’s Progress* series, suspended on the poor box, is “one proof of a hundred that every thing in Hogarth is to be translated into *Language* – words – & to act as words, not as Images” (Coleridge 1973: 3. 4096). Hogarth is perhaps a special case,

since his images contain such an explicit narrative thrust; yet it is worth taking note, with Meyer Shapiro, that "a great part of visual art in Europe from late antiquity to the eighteenth century represents subjects taken from a written text" (1973: 9). Thus one might say that the history of Western art has been shaped by acts of illustration. The Romantic period, however, witnessed a coming together of literature and art, that reached its closest point of contact in the early nineteenth century and the mid-Victorian era (Altick 1985: 246). For the purposes of a volume such as this, thinking about poetry and illustration together – those instances in which people were imaginatively engaged with both visual and textual treatments of the same subject – gives us an opportunity to consider more fully the dimensions of Romantic poetic practice.

Book Production and the Literary Marketplace

Historians of the book, and of book illustration in particular, suggest that while illustration had been a constant feature of book publishing since the fifteenth century, the early decades of the nineteenth century constituted "the great period of English book illustration" (Hodnett 1988: 107). This was primarily because of the numbers and prominence of literary illustrators at work at this time, and the large quantity of magnificent books they produced – but also perhaps because, as we have seen, the technology of book production rendered the whole process, including illustrations, increasingly affordable. At the end of the eighteenth century, the most common mode of producing illustrations was through the use of engravings, mainly on copper, which had to be printed separately and inserted into the text. While Thomas Bewick experimented with engraving in relief on woodblocks – which, because the height of the image could be aligned with the height of the type, made it possible to print text and image together – this innovation, with its economic advantages, was not widely taken up until much later. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, steel engraving came to replace copper as the dominant technique, along with aquatinting; many of the most beautiful illustrated books came from Rudolf Ackermann's *Repository of the Arts in the Strand*, which exploited fully the commercial appeal of hand-colored aquatints.

Meanwhile, a growing middle class created a demanding new market for printed books, such that the expensive folio editions of books designed for purchase (by subscription) by the nobility and gentry were gradually replaced by large editions of cheaper books in smaller formats. Pocket books of British poems, novels, and classics, were popular choices. Many were published as serials, such as Bell's *Poets of Great Britain* (1777–82), and Cooke's *Cheap and Elegant Pocket Library* (1794–1805). The works of many authors were repackaged in the late eighteenth century, after legislation in 1774 overturned the practice of asserting perpetual copyright. This reprint industry created many opportunities for artists and illustrators, since it became standard practice to include an engraved title page, frontispiece, and possibly a portrait of the author. A series such as Bell's defined and endorsed the English literary canon, while giving it the "dressing" it deserved. In the process, many of the best-known artists of the period, such as Thomas Stothard, Henry

Fuseli, John Opie, J. M. W. Turner, and Richard Westall, came to prominence by being employed to produce designs for illustrations (St Clair 2004: 134).

Broadly, popular authors for illustrated editions included Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and increasingly, eighteenth century and contemporary poets – such as Scott, Burns, and Byron, who is said to have been the most extensively illustrated Romantic poet in his lifetime. Illustrations became more widely available and affordable, however, in many genres and subject areas – not least in novels, but also in art and architectural studies, scientific and technical material, travel and tourism (with illustrated guide books and lavish visual accounts of picturesque tours), and books about nature and natural history – for example Bewick’s much-admired *British Birds* (1797–1804), the book Charlotte Brontë put into the hands of her young heroine Jane Eyre. At one end of the market were quality prints and illustrations derived from original art – and at the other, the world of chapbooks, broadsides, pamphlets and tracts. Perhaps somewhere in the middle of the market one would locate the wide range of periodicals and annuals where poetry and illustration would increasingly feature prominently.

The Literary Annuals and Popular Verse

The literary annuals, which became very popular in the 1820s and 1830s, make a particularly interesting case. They were beautifully bound and presented volumes, which aimed to include poems and essays by serious as well as popular writers. They were also generous with illustrations that took advantage of the possibilities offered by the introduction of steel engraving. Produced once a year, they were gift books aimed at the Christmas market, when high-volume sales would counter high production costs – in sum, they were a clever joining of “art, profit and sentiment” (Manning 1995: 47). Ackermann’s *Forget Me Not* (1823) was the first to appear, followed by the *Literary Souvenir* in 1825, but there were many others. The most popular, the *Keepsake*, began publishing in 1828 (its inaugural volume sold 15,000), and in 1829 managed to secure contributions from a surprising number of prominent poets, such as Wordsworth, Scott, Coleridge, Southey, and (posthumously) Shelley.

One of the more interesting features of the annuals was that the pictures often came first, and were to be “illustrated” subsequently by the writer engaged to compose the text; to this extent the picture was of central importance. One estimate suggests that three-quarters of the poems in the annuals were illustrative of the engravings (Erickson 1996: 31 n41); and it was these fine engravings of fashionable people (often women) and famous paintings that largely attracted readers. Indeed Southey described the annuals as “picture books for grown children” (cited in Erickson 1996: 30). The plates were time-consuming and expensive to commission and prepare, thus relegating the poets’ efforts to a kind of task-work, which led ultimately to a distinct lowering of poetic standards. Wordsworth would later refer to the “‘ornamented annuals’ as ‘those greedy receptacles of trash, those Bladders upon which the Boys of Poetry try to swim’” (Manning 1995: 68). Nevertheless, for the legendary *Keepsake* volume of 1829, Coleridge wrote “The Garden of Boccaccio” to illustrate a picture of Stothard’s, and Wordsworth “The Country

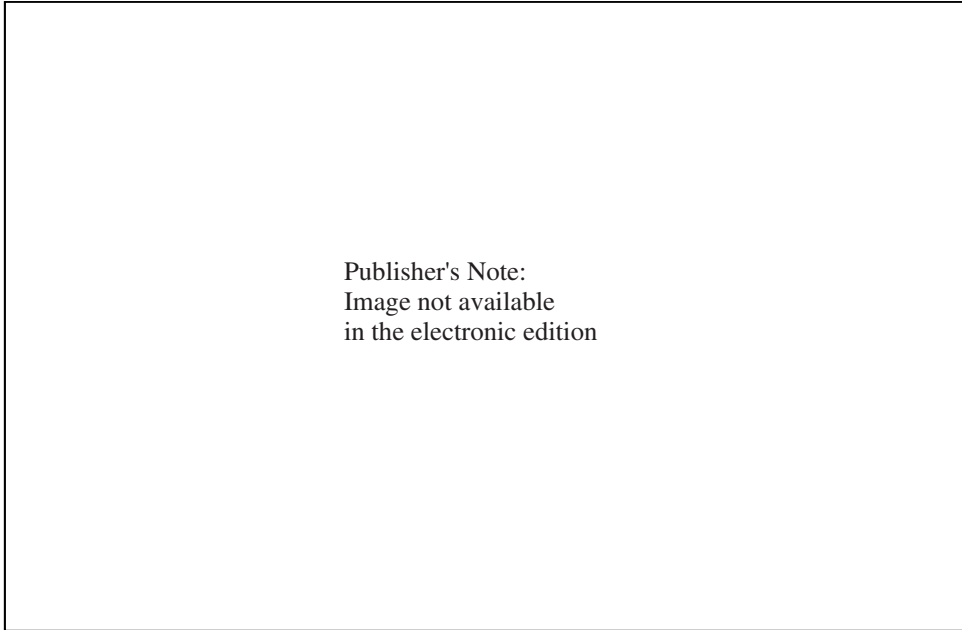


Figure 21.1 Thomas Rowlandson, "Doctor Syntax Sketching after Nature"; etching from William Combe, *The Tour of Dr Syntax, In Search of the Picturesque. A Poem* (3rd edn., London, 1813), vol. 1, plate 17.

Girl" to accompany a picture of the same name by James Holmes. Southey wrote poems, also for the *Keepsake*, in response to drawings by J. M. Wright and J. M. W. Turner.

Many other popular texts in the period functioned in this way, such that there might be an explicit dialogue, even contest, between text and image. The "Doctor Syntax" series are interesting examples because it is Rowlandson's illustrations that principally tell the story, and the accompanying verse, written by William Combe, that supplements it. One of the best known was *Doctor Syntax's Tour in Search of the Picturesque* (1809) (figure 21.1), which neatly captures their appeal: as in the depiction of "Dr Syntax Sketching after Nature," the prints convey moments of humour and pathos, that are spelled out by light narrative verse. In another of their collaborations, *The English Dance of Death* (1816), each entry was published separately – produced in "successive numbers" – then collected into two volumes. The advertisement spells out their *modus operandi*, in which Rowlandson prepared the images, then passed them on to Combe, for him to compose his verse.

The Literary Galleries

The close relationship between visual images and the printed word is abundantly clear in the long tradition of literary painting, of subjects drawn explicitly from the world of books. Richard Altick points out that such pictures could be seen as "extensions of the books themselves," or "detached forms of book illustration," that give rise to "a new

kind of imaginative activity in which the separate experiences of reading and beholding coalesced” (1985: 1). Indeed readers, as Henry Fuseli aptly put it, were to become spectators, which was literally the case in the literary galleries of the late eighteenth century, such as John Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery, for which Boydell approached leading painters and invited them to undertake representations of scenes from Shakespeare’s plays. These would be first exhibited in the gallery, and then used as the basis for a lavish, illustrated folio edition of the plays. The gallery opened in Pall Mall in 1789 with thirty-four oil paintings completed; the project was extended over several years, with new work added each spring, and the published editions followed. But what makes a good painting – or a good play – is not necessarily what makes a good illustration. Charles Lamb expressed a distaste for the whole enterprise that was shared by others: “What injury (short of the theatres) did not Boydell’s Shakspeare [sic] Gallery do me with Shakspeare? . . . to be tied down to an authentic face of Juliet; to have Imogen’s portrait; to confine the illimitable!” (1935: 1019). In Lamb’s view, the “sister arts” of painting and poetry should not be combined, but permitted to “sparkle apart.”

Thomas Macklin’s “Poets’ Gallery” was another attempt to commission and engrave artworks drawn directly from literary subjects, and to explicitly showcase poets of Great Britain. The poets whose work was to be illustrated by prominent artists, with a view to gathering subscribers for a series of a hundred “illustrative” prints, included not just Shakespeare but Spenser, Chaucer, Pope, Collins, Thomson, Gray, Barbauld, and many others – poets whose work tended also to feature regularly in the paintings and catalogues of the annual exhibitions. The third and final important project of this kind was Henry Fuseli’s own Gallery of the Miltonic Sublime, which displayed pictures from Milton, all of his own creation. It opened in 1799 with forty-seven pictures but was not a commercial success. Arguably, the literary galleries were a fascinating testing ground for the popular eighteenth-century faith in *ut pictura poesis* (as a painting, so also a poem), which held that the two forms were inherently comparable, and that their key differences related to medium rather than message. This contention however was widely debated in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, and the differences increasingly emphasized – among them the fact that one is temporal and diachronic, the other spatial and synchronic. Blake’s work, as we shall see, was alive to the myriad ways poems and pictures operate as independent representational modes. As Boydell himself acknowledged, Shakespeare “possessed powers [of creative imagination] which no pencil can reach,” and one reason why the literary galleries were not on the whole successful enterprises may be traced back to the essential incommensurability of poetry and painting (Altick 1985: 46).

Blake and the “Sister” Arts

It is in the work of William Blake that the so-called sister arts receive their most powerful expression and their toughest challenge, most explicitly in his own work, in the designs he created for his own texts – his “illuminated books.” Blake was also a prolific illustrator of the work of others, and the number of major texts that he tackled is

impressive: it includes Young's *Night Thoughts* (1797), Gray's *Poems* (1797–8), Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1807–8), Robert Blair's *The Grave* (1808), and the Book of Job (1821). He left unfinished at his death sets of illustrations for Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Jean Hagstrum estimates that Blake is known to have produced around 1,200 illustrations for the work of others, and 375 illuminated pages of his own poetry (1964: 119). Blake's work as an illustrator tells us a great deal about his view of the image as an independent entity; pictures, for Blake, speak for themselves, and Blake used his illustrations as a way of commenting upon, even "correcting" (in the case of *Paradise Lost*) the text. His illustrations for *Night Thoughts* (figure 21.2) reveal his imaginative approach to the work of others, not least in his creative deployment of figures in relation to the text, where they can both be concealed by, and emerge from behind, the words – surely a suggestive reflection of the relationship of one realm to the other.

Blake was simultaneously the author, designer, engraver, printer, and publisher of his own work, and someone who knew precisely how to bring into play all the possibilities of "visible language" (Mitchell 1994: 114). Beginning with the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789–94), he composed and engraved his own "illuminated books," using a technique of relief etching that he developed, and hand-colored them afterwards. He announced the significance of this innovation in one of his own prospectuses: "If a method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet is a phenomenon worthy of public attention, provided that it exceeds in elegance all former methods, the Author is sure of his reward" (Blake 1965: 670). At stake however is not just a combination of different art forms, what Northrop Frye referred to as a "radical form of mixed art," or Jean Hagstrum, a "composite" art, but something like "an energetic rivalry, a dialogue or dialectic between two vigorously independent modes of expression" (Mitchell 1978: 4). Image and text do not simply complement or translate each other, but interact in ways that can be contrary and resistant; each derives from its own visionary conception and employ distinct symbolic systems.

Blake asserts this in several different ways. Often his "illustrations" make few, if any, explicit associations with the text, and are positioned not as acts of visual translation, but as "pictures in a world of pictures" (1965: 5). The title page for *The Book of Thel* (figure 21.3) shows this at work, for it does not represent an event that takes place in the poem but alludes, in the scene of seduction and capture depicted in the lower right, to the abstract and thematic issues of the poem, in which the "Innocent" Thel encounters and rejects "Experience" in a variety of forms. Indeed, illustrations in the illuminated books often operate in reference to a text that does not exist, or one that is placed at some remove. Another key feature of Blake's work is the way the shape, form and disposition of his text is highly visual, and handwritten words can take on pictorial features by containing or sprouting forms that oblige us to read them in pictorial terms. The words on the title page for *The Book of Thel*, for example, take on features of the vegetation framing the image. Meanwhile, as Mitchell points out, Blake's work has a profound way of making us rethink what "pictorial" terms really are: his pictures are not simply a function of sense impression or natural perception, but rather, to be seen as "'mental things' or intellectual vision" (1994: 146). His images represent "whole conceptions" rather than material objects.

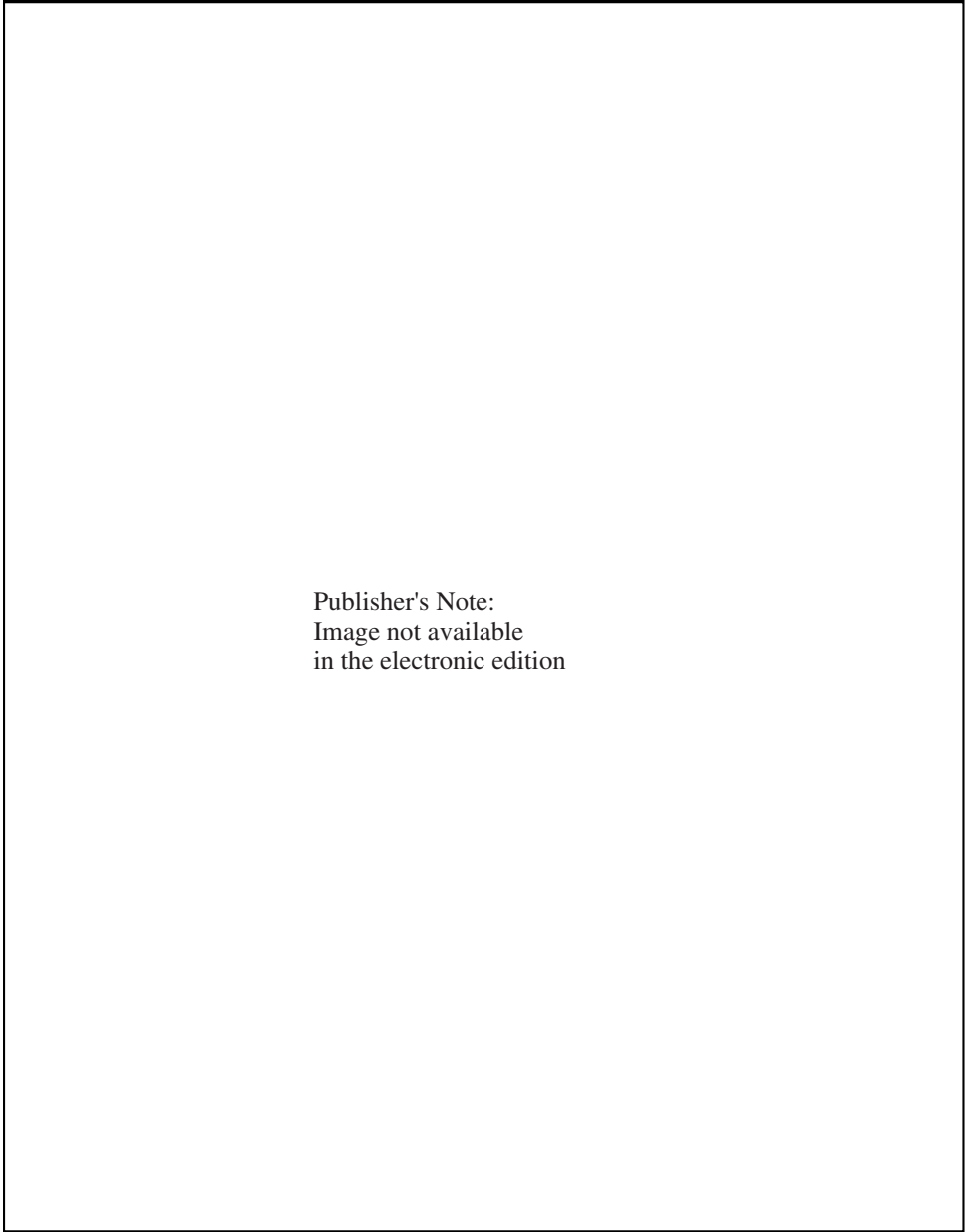


Figure 21.2 William Blake, illustration for Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1797); pen and watercolour on vellum, 38.8 x 30 cm.

The familiar premise of *ut pictura poesis* that underpinned the “sister” arts underwent a decisive modification in Blake’s work. No longer are poetry and painting united on the grounds of an inherent complementarity, by which ideas could be translated, and techniques transferred, across media – the very premises that were at work in the literary

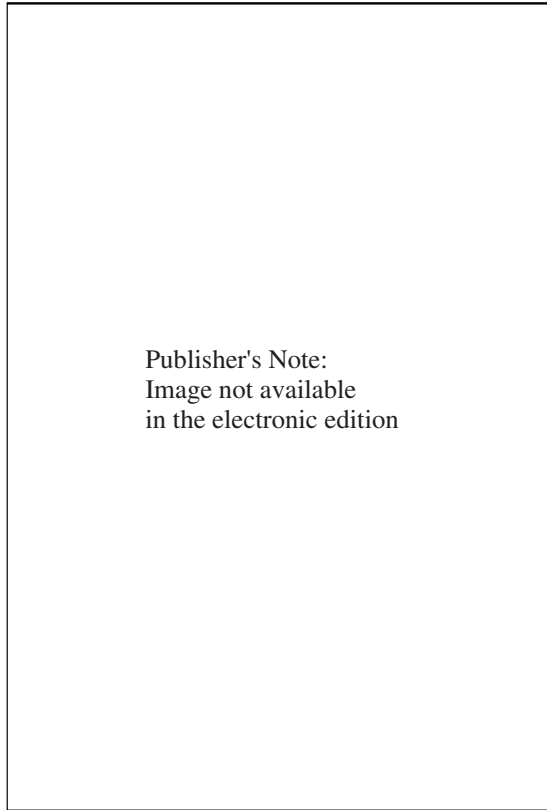


Figure 21.3 William Blake, title page for *The Book of Thel* (1789); hand-colored relief etching, 28.1 x 22.5 cm.

galleries, and in much book illustration. There is a certain irony in this, since Blake, as simultaneously the writer and illustrator of his own work, is also the consummate unifying figure. Perhaps it was this experience however that led him to insist on the distinct force of image and text, and on the unrepresentability, at least in material or identifiably "natural" forms, of his conceptions. Implicit here is a comment on what it is to "see," as Blake's visionary universe contains much of what he referred to in his *Descriptive Catalogue* as "mythological and recondite meaning, where more is meant than meets the eye" (Blake 1965: 522). Blake's polemical position regarding visual perception would make any act of illustration far from straightforward with respect to his own work; it also very pointedly indicates the limits of illustration, as commonly understood.

Coleridge and the Pictures of the Mind

Although Coleridge's work would have provided rich material for the illustrator, he did not, it seems, encourage artists to illustrate his poems. This gives rise to a certain irony in the case of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," which was to become the

most widely illustrated poem in the Romantic canon, and indeed, with over ninety illustrated editions in English alone, of *all* English poems (Beare and Kooistra 2002). But before Gustave Doré's engravings, produced in the 1870s, which had a significant impact on the reception of Coleridge on the Continent, only two artists had undertaken it – David Scott in 1837, Noel Paton in 1863. These illustrations have been described as characteristically Victorian in their approach, and Paton's in particular reflect the revived interest (to which the "Mariner" itself had contributed) in medievalism in the Victorian period, and in the pre-Raphaelite movement (Soubigou 2007) – an interest that made the subjects of Keats's poems, such as "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," so attractive to the painter D. G. Rossetti. David Scott's, however, show the influence of his father's admiration for Blake, evident in his somewhat fluid and abstract renderings of scenes from the poem. Scott's illustrations for the "Ancient Mariner" were the only ones Coleridge himself ever saw and they were not commissioned, but undertaken by Scott out of a strong personal interest in the poem. He wrote to Coleridge – who graciously accepted "the compliment paid to me, in having selected a poem of mine for ornamental illustration, and an alliance of the sister arts, Metrical and Graphic Poesy" – to ask advice about seeking publication. But five years would pass before the twenty-five designs were accepted by a publisher in 1837 (Scott 1850: 48–50).

The poem is of course intensely visual, though in an imaginary rather than a literal way. Intriguingly, W. M. Rossetti, in a critical memoir included with Moxon's 1872 edition of Coleridge's *Poetical Works* (which included five illustrations by Thomas Seccombe), commented that the poem is "a most striking and thrilling invention," when "considered as a picture" (though rather more "meagre" fare, "when considered as a train of causes and effects in the poetic domain" (Coleridge 1872: xxvi)). Although Coleridge was pleased with Scott's designs, he expressed reservations about the very possibility of illustrating a poem such as "The Rime." The artist's brother, in his *Memoir of David Scott*, recounts Coleridge's opinion, expressed upon the occasion, of the difficulties inherent in illustrating poetry:

Dividing poetry as Descriptive, or dealing with outward nature, and Imaginative, or dealing with the forms of things in the mind, he thought the first of these classes was to be illustrated directly by the painter, and that the one and the other should be coincident in their impressions. But in the latter class – that of the purely Imaginative – illustration by the painter was infinitely more difficult – that exact circumstantial illustration of such works was none at all, and that the only way in which the artist could work with them was by an adequate expression of the same imaginative sentiment, different in form or mode, according to the differing nature of his art. (Scott 1850: 204–5)

Illustrations to poems such as Coleridge's, then, would work best when they make analogous rather than "coincident" statements, as Scott concludes: "undoubtedly, the great effort of the illustrator of works of imagination must be to give a parallel, and not a transcript" (1850: 205). With Scott's illustrations, the prevailing view is that

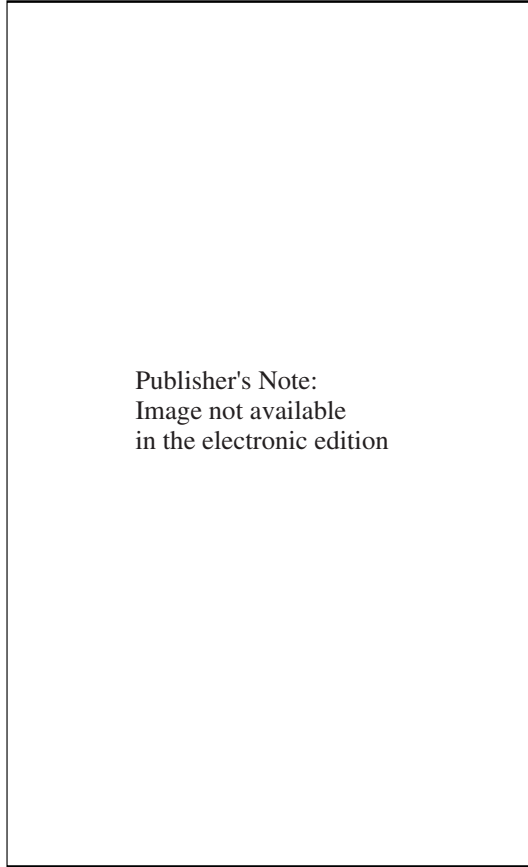


Figure 21.4 Thomas Stothard, illustration for "Christabel"; engraved by Augustus Fox for *The Bijou*, 2 (1829), p. 286.

they are effective at capturing the more abstract and metaphysical aspects of the poem. His depiction of the mariner as a kind of suffering, solitary, artist figure, led Dante Gabriel Rossetti to suggest that his visual rendering of the poem is in "the truest Coleridgean vein" (Beare and Kooistra 2002: 56).

In spite of Coleridge's assessment of the limits of illustration, Stothard was commissioned in 1828 to produce a plate for "Christabel," for *The Bijou; or, Annual of Literature and the Arts* (figure 21.4). The lines selected for this undertaking were 564–91 of Part 2, where we find Bard Bracy recounting his prophetic dream of the dove and the snake. A key exchange of glances follows: Geraldine turns from Sir Leoline, who has just vowed to "crush the snake," to look "askance" at Christabel. At this moment, the demonic nature of Geraldine is caught in the sudden shrinking of her eyes in her head – "Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye" – and the malicious look causes the innocent Christabel to stumble and hiss in a "dizzy trance." Stothard, in his lively if decorous arrangement of the four figures, opts more for an air of elegance and chivalrous feeling rather than

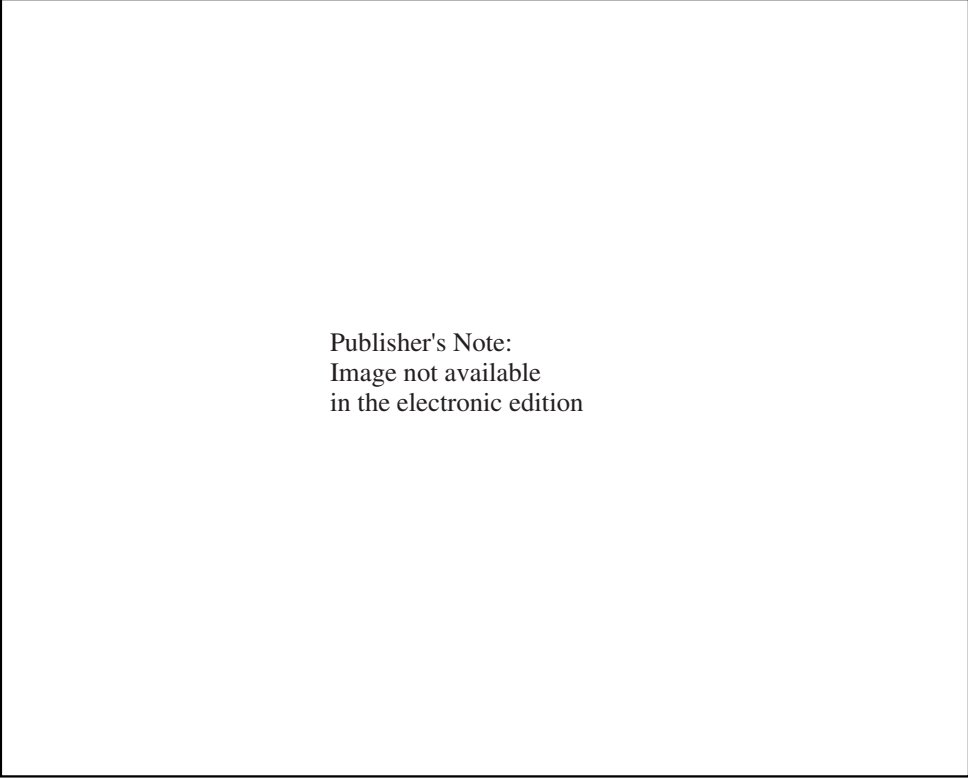
supernatural horror – Geraldine is more the artful beauty than the malevolent force. However Coleridge, when shown the design, approved of it. A reproduction of the image has been included in G. E. Bentley Jr's short article on this illustration, where there is also an extensive discussion of an unsigned letter, perhaps written by the publisher, commenting on the project: "I cannot but look forward with pleasure to the completion of a work which will unite in a most amicable strife the talents of our very first poet & painter" (Bentley 1981: 114).

Coleridge's poetry was not published in a fully illustrated volume until 1907, when John Lane commissioned illustrations by Gerald Metcalfe and an introduction by E. H. Coleridge, in which the latter comments upon this delay with some surprise, given the intensely visual nature of his grandfather's poems. He cites D. G. Rossetti's assessment of Coleridge as "a pictorial artist, a spiritualized Turner" (Coleridge 1907: v), and reports Coleridge's claim that "my mind makes pictures." But his identification of the key visual aspects of Coleridge's work makes clear the challenge they pose to the illustrator: "The 'Ancient Mariner' and the first part of 'Christabel' translate into audible language a succession of pictures which flashed upon '[Coleridge's] inward eye' and which seem to have taken place in an unseen world before they were reported and embodied in verse" (1907: vi). These pictures of the mind, elusive and unseeable, are at the heart of Coleridge's poetic achievement.

Wordsworth and Beaumont

For Wordsworth, as for Coleridge, appreciation of the graphic arts drew greatly from his acquaintance with Sir George Beaumont, who was a prominent painter and an avid collector. Beaumont exhibited a painting illustrating "The Thorn" at the Royal Academy in 1806, the first such representation of an English Romantic poem; and in 1815, Wordsworth used two of Beaumont's paintings as illustrations, one for *The White Doe of Rylstone* (figure 21.5) and another in the edition of his *Poems* also published that year. Beaumont's *Peele Castle in a Storm*, reproduced in the 1815 *Poems*, predated the poem Wordsworth wrote in response to it, his "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont." The painting from which the engraving was made for the *White Doe*, however, was undertaken at the poet's suggestion, and reflected the instinctive poetic sympathy developing between them (see Davis 1996). Both poems are concerned with life-after-loss, with moving from a state of sorrow towards an experience of peace; *The White Doe*, was, Wordsworth felt, a spiritual rather than a narrative poem, requiring great sensitivity on the part of Beaumont to body forth. The business of the illustrator in relation to poetry, as Beaumont stated in a letter, is "to make the poetry yourself and he who cannot perform this will in vain attempt to echo the poetry of another" (Davis 1996: 198).

Despite this fruitful collaboration, Wordsworth's poems appeared more often as the source for mottoes in the exhibition catalogs than for the paintings themselves, and most of those appeared after his death in 1850 (Altick 1985: 422). Although the



Publisher's Note:
Image not available
in the electronic edition

Figure 21.5 George Beaumont, frontispiece for Wordsworth's *The White Doe of Rylstone* (1815); engraving of the original oil painting by J. C. Bromley.

chapbook versions of "We Are Seven" and "Lucy Gray" contained illustrations, the first extensively illustrated edition of Wordsworth's work came very late in the poet's life: *Select Pieces from the Poems of William Wordsworth* in 1843. As Mark Reed relates, the volume was originally intended for a student readership, but ended up being directed towards the luxury market, as the generic and decorative nature of the borders and vignettes bears out (Reed 1997). The collaboration with Beaumont however tells us much about how poetry, painting, and illustration all inform each other during the Romantic period. Beaumont's original painting for *The White Doe* has been lost, but the engraving for use in the publication included below it a selection of relevant verses, namely two passages from the first canto that emphasize the mysteriousness of the doe. Many plates used to illustrate books were produced in this way, which made them stand-alone entities, verbal-visual composites that were detachable, and marketable separately as prints.

A related phenomenon, that also juxtaposed an image with an extract from a text, was the use of poetic quotations in connection with paintings – the extracts inserted into the exhibition catalogues at the Royal Academy, and even, by the mid nineteenth

century, inscribed on the picture frame (as in, for example, Arthur Hughes's "The Eve of St. Agnes" which displayed nine lines from Keats's poem). When the picture came to be reproduced as an engraving, the relevant lines were generally inscribed at the bottom of the print. Turner was the first to do this regularly, and approximately a quarter of the paintings he exhibited over the course of his career were "illustrated" (or simply embellished) in this way. The inclusion of poetic fragments in the catalogues could qualify as well as suggest a range of possible meanings, making it possible for viewers to engage in an activity of imaginative association as they toured the galleries. Not unrelated to this practice was the composition of "iconic" poems, inspired by pictures currently at the exhibitions, such as those of Laetitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L.) – or indeed Wordsworth himself (Altick 1985: 194).

Turner, Byron, and Scott

J. M. W. Turner is so well known to us now as one of the most important painters of the Romantic period in England that we tend to be less aware of how many hundreds of drawings he produced for books. Indeed, Turner is a very good example of how closely aligned the work of a painter could be with book illustration in the early nineteenth century. His work in this area tends to fall into two categories: books about the sights and scenery of Britain, Italy and France, and books of poetry. Turner produced a number of vignettes for Samuel Rogers' *Italy: A Poem* in 1830, which were followed up by illustrations for his *Poems* of 1834; for both volumes the task was shared by Stothard, with Turner concentrating principally on the landscapes.¹ Apart from designs for a six-volume *Poetical Works of John Milton* in 1835, Turner's most extensive work was arguably for editions of Byron and Scott. It has been suggested, however, that Turner's influence on book illustration was modest compared to his role in "initiating and maintaining the Romantic way in which the English were learning to view the world around them" (Hodnett 1988: 141–2). Wonderful though his illustrations could be, it is certainly the case that his topographical imagery reflected as well as fed public interest in landscape of a picturesque or sublime nature.

The stirring narratives and evocative scenes of Byron's poems, particularly the Oriental tales, made them attractive subjects for illustration, with the earliest of many paintings on Byronic subjects appearing at the Royal Academy in 1814. Turner though was the "most distinguished and prolific of Byron's illustrators" (Brown 1992: 12), and his views on art, history, and politics resonated with Byron's. His work was to feature in what was the foremost edition of the poet's life (Thomas Moore's seventeen-volume *Life and Works of Lord Byron*), and he was involved in another key Byron publication of the 1830s, William Finden's *Landscape Illustrations*, which offered a survey of the Byronic landscape by depicting both settings for his poems and specific places associated with the author. Finden in particular appears to have intuited the commercial value of illustrating Byron with "places rather than narrative episodes" (Brown 1992: 43), since much of the poet's appeal drew precisely from his status as a traveler

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Figure 21.6 J. M. W. Turner, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage – Italy*, exhibited at the Royal Academy, 1832; oil on canvas, 142.2 x 248.3 cm.

in distant lands, an exile with his own Romantic tale of scandal and heroism. Many of Turner's Byron illustrations centered, not surprisingly, on scenes from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and his sensitivity in general to the poet's "mental and physical landscape" gave rise to pictures of lasting interest that offer "a definitive panorama of the Byronic world" (Brown 1992: 63). Turner's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage – Italy* (figure 21.6) is a good example though of how location triumphs over event, particularly as it evokes an imagined, ideal Italy, rather than an actual place. When Turner exhibited this painting at the Royal Academy in 1832, he attached the lines from Byron's poem in which Childe Harold meditates on the power of the place: "and now, fair Italy! / Thou art the garden of the world ... / Thy wreck a glory, and thy ruin graced / With an immaculate charm which cannot be defaced" (iv. 26).

Turner's work for Walter Scott's poems and novels presents a similar case because of the profound impact it had – not just on sales of Scott's works, but also on tourism in the Scottish Highlands. Scott himself professed no particular knowledge of art, but painters found extensive inspiration in his work, for it has been noted that over a thousand works exhibited at the Royal Academy and the British Institution between 1805 and 1870 drew their subjects from the visual richness of his work. As the *Quarterly Review* argued in May 1810, "Never has the analogy between poetry and painting been more strikingly exemplified than in the writings of Mr. Scott" (Wood 2001: 174). Scott however explicitly admired Turner's artwork for the new edition of Rogers' *Italy*, referring to it as "a rare specimen of the manner in which the art of poetry can awaken the muse of painting" (Altick 1985: 417). Turner's illustrations for Scott's multivolume *Poetical Works*, prepared in the early 1830s, also engage less with the specific content of

the poems (characters and events) than with their physical settings, such as the dramatic scenery of Loch Katrine for *The Lady of the Lake*. The frontispiece image for that poem cleverly referred to the moment in the opening canto when the hunter-king gazes with amazement – from a prospect highly recommended by the guidebooks – upon this very landscape, with Loch Katrine rolling out gloriously beneath him (see Wood 2001: 181–2). *The Lady of the Lake*, after its original release in 1810 (sales in excess of 20,000 made it the best-selling poem in history), brought tourists to the Highlands in droves. Turner’s 1831 illustrations, like his popular annual *Tours*, are thus documents one can associate with the rapidly expanding Romantic tourist industry. Unlike the pictorial interest of Byron’s poetry, with its scenes of a world abroad, Scott’s – in Turner’s hands – transports the willing reader to the wilder reaches of home.

Conclusion: Ekphrasis and Illustration

Turner reflected, on the occasion of lectures for the Royal Academy in 1811–12, that “poetic description [the] most full, most incidental, and display[ing] the greatest richness of verse is often the least pictorial” (Ziff 1964: 199). Turner’s views would no doubt have met with broad agreement among many Romantic poets for whom pictures and visual perception were the source of anxiety as well as pleasure. The often-expressed emphasis on the activity of the imagination, as a powerful and primary force behind human perception, would appear to stand firmly apart from the activity of visualization explicit in illustration. Not surprisingly, it is a longstanding view that the historical relation of the “sister arts” of painting and poetry was not only revised but to some extent abandoned in the early nineteenth century, and precisely, one might observe, at a time when the possibilities for exploiting that relationship (both technologically and culturally) were at their height.

Turner’s remark is also interesting when considered alongside the prominent place of ekphrastic poems in the Romantic canon, as examples of the attractiveness of explicitly visual objects as poetic subjects. Though it would justify separate treatment, ekphrasis deserves brief consideration here in conclusion because although it is distinct from illustration, it is also a site of productive contest between verbal and visual forms, and may even be seen as a form of illustration in reverse. Ekphrasis has been defined as the “verbal representation of graphic representation” (Heffernan 1991: 299), and the best-known examples of it in the Romantic canon include not just Wordsworth’s “Elegiac Stanzas” on Beaumont’s painting of Peele Castle, but Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Shelley’s “Ozymandias” and his lines “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery,” and Byron’s passages on sculpture in the fourth canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*; furthermore, in addition to Keats, Leigh Hunt and Felicia Hemans were prolific writers of ekphrastic verse (see Simonsen 2005).

James Heffernan’s view of ekphrasis is that it has the effect of releasing, from graphic art, an “embryonically narrative impulse” (1991: 301–2). W. J. T. Mitchell, in

"Ekphrasis and the Other," pushes this observation further and addresses the inherently anxious and agonistic nature of ekphrastic texts, which on the one hand embody the hope that the incommensurability of text and image can be overcome – that the power of poetic language can stimulate or simulate the visual imagination – while recognizing that any successful re-representation of the visual, and recreation of the (static) visual object, would paradoxically threaten to freeze the dynamic temporal movement of language (Mitchell 1994: 152–60). Elements of resistance and of counterdesire thus characterize the contest between word and image, in a way that thoroughly problematizes any act of "illustration" that might otherwise be enacted.

Ekphrastic poems, broadly speaking, aim to demonstrate the superior power of poetry to create an image in the mind (while being indebted to, even in thrall to, the visual object that makes that demonstration possible in the first place) and also to outlive the material object, as though the latter were more vulnerable to destruction. In spite of the fact that experiments with ekphrasis offered an occasion for Romantic poets to work through their fascination with visual representation, and, as in Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas," with questions of memory and loss – or, in Keats's famous ode, with larger questions about the permanence and value of art – such poems tend to reassert the primacy of poetry for its capacity to produce more nuanced representations. Coleridge argued in an 1808 lecture that great poets have the "power of so carrying on the Eye of the Reader as to make him almost lose the consciousness of words – to make him *see* everything – & this without exciting any painful or laborious attention, without any *anatomy* of description" (1987: 1. 82). While poetic representation might reasonably concern itself with visual matters, it is clear that for many poets the assumptions about representability inherent in illustration were another matter entirely.

Coleridge's views were far from unique to him, or to his time, for over a hundred years later Mallarmé would declare "I am for – no illustration, everything a book evokes having to pass into the mind or spirit of the reader" (1945: 878). The reiteration of this worry, that the performative power of words would be diluted by the presence of illustration, suggests its connection with a historically persistent set of concerns, yet it has its modern roots in the extraordinary growth and popularity of illustrated books in the early nineteenth century. "Strife," to return to the example of "Christabel," has perhaps always characterized relations between the literary text and the image: and while that strife may be, at least occasionally, "amicable," debates about the illustration of poetry in the Romantic period tell us as much about dominant poetic or aesthetic values as they do about public taste and the evolution of the market for printed books.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 14 "Laboring-Class Poetry in the Romantic Era"; chapter 31 "Blake's *Jerusalem*: Friendship with Albion"

NOTE

- 1 The 1830 edition of *Italy* has been called “a landmark in the history of the illustrated book.” Earlier editions of the poems had met with no success, but largely on the strength of

Turner’s vignettes, this lavish new version sold 4,000 copies in the first two weeks after publication (Altick 1985: 416).

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Romanticism, Sport, and Late Georgian Poetry

John Strachan

*the reel of them on frozen Windermere
As he flashed from the clutch of earth along its curve
And left it scored.*

Seamus Heaney, "Wordsworth's Skates"

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the period of British Romanticism, were also notable as the first great era of sporting literature. Sport resounded through the print and periodical culture of late Georgian England, from the publication of Peter Beckford's *Thoughts on Hunting* in 1781 to the *succès fou* of Pierce Egan's pugilistic history *Boxiana; or Sketches of Modern Pugilism* (1812–29), and from the fox-hunting journalism and novels of "Nimrod" (C. J. Apperley) and the youthful R. S. Surtees to the first classic of Victorian literature, Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7), which was initially conceived of as a series of Cockney sportsman sketches. The age possessed a rich written culture pertaining to sport – journalistic, imaginative, and polemical – not just in verbatim match reports but also in novel, prose essay, and biography. In newspaper, literary journalism and satirical jeremiad, and in fiction, graphic caricature and broadsheet, the sporting preoccupations of the English were celebrated, reported, and sometimes condemned.

Sporting literature in this period also frequently engaged with poetry. The above mentioned "Nimrod" included commemorative verse in his most famous work, the first best-selling sports biography, the *Memoirs of the Life of the late John Mytton, Esq.* (1835), and throughout his treatise Peter Beckford quotes sporting verse extensively, drawing particularly upon William Somerville's hunting mock epic *The Chace* (1735). However, it was Pierce Egan himself who was poetry's most visible sporting devotee. Egan was a poet of some facility who published dozens of poems on sporting themes in his boxing histories, sporting journalism and novels. He also contributed poetry on sporting matters to the *Weekly Dispatch* and the *Sporting Magazine*: sporting periodicals

were peppered with verse in this period (the *Sporting Magazine*, for instance, featured a poetry section in each monthly number). Egan was not alone in his predilection – many sporting authors of the day were also enthusiastic amateur versifiers. The Reverend William Baker Daniel, for example, opens the first volume of his *Rural Sports* (1801–13) with an epic poem on fishing, and includes other, shorter pieces to complement the prose of his instruction manual with didactic poetry. Similarly, “Piscator’s” *The Angler: A Poem. In Ten Cantos* (1819) offers a verse treatise on the art of fishing in its ten books (only two short of what John Milton found necessary for *Paradise Lost*, it might be pointed out). The literature of sport was shot through with poetry in this period.

Just as sporting authors were fascinated by poetry and frequently included it in their books, so some of the most notable canonical poets of the age were keen sportsmen who sometimes engaged with their pastimes in their verse. We do not normally think of our favorite (male) Romantic poets and essayists as devoted to sports; but many of them were fascinated by such amusements, sometimes as participants and sometimes as observers. Consider the boy Wordsworth fishing, skating and trapping birds, and, indeed, the adult poet angling with his ill-fated brother Captain John in the early 1800s or accompanying Thomas De Quincey and others on a fishing party organized by the poet and satirist John Wilson in 1809. Consider also the poet Keats shooting at tom-tits on the heath at Hampstead or following press reports of famous prize fights, William Hazlitt’s obsession with the fives court, Lord Byron’s love of boxing, and P. B. Shelley in Italy, sneaking off to practice shooting behind his lordship’s back, the better to defeat him in a contest of marksmanship. As well as being part of their social lives, sport sometimes informed the work of men such as these. That great essay “The Fight” (1820) is at the heart of the Hazlittian canon, Tom Moore’s boxing-related burlesque *Tom Crib’s Memorial to Congress* (1819) is one of his most notable satirical achievements, and there are references to pugilism in Byron’s work from *Hints from Horace* (1811) to *Don Juan* (1819–24). John Clare’s poetic meditations on rural sports in such works as the macabre narrative “The Badger” (1835) are well known, and in the work of Wordsworth, in *The Prelude* and elsewhere, the representation of sport moves the pulse of what has generally been seen as the heart of the Romantic canon.

Perhaps it might be surprising that poetry also engaged with sport in the Romantic period. However, the age’s verse frequently addressed sport, both in print ephemera and in composition fashioned with an eye for posterity. This chapter examines both modes, in its account of the manner in which poetry was used by contemporary sporting authors and the way in which now canonical Romantic-era authors, Wordsworth in particular, addressed sport. This was a period in which verse and sport intermingled with intensity unseen since the days in which Pindar celebrated the heroes of the ancient Panhellenic Games. There were good reasons why this was so. In an age of war, the violent nature of much modern sport possessed an undeniable metaphoricality to sporting authors such as the journalist-poet Egan, seeming to them to possess the very image and tenor of the British state in conflict. In like manner, in an epoch in which the experience of the child was so important to a nascent Romanticism, it is not too much of a leap of thought to consider that sport – claimed by many of its partisans as

a cradle of masculinity – was also considered – to borrow a phrase from that poet and enthusiastic sportsman William Wordsworth – “a fructifying virtue.”

I

As it was in classical times, and, indeed, as it is today, sport was ideologically charged during the Romantic period, an activity which generated much literary debate about its social and philosophical significance. The amusements of the people were simultaneously celebrated as morally improving, pedagogical in their inculcation of a noble, courageous and manly spirit, and yet also condemned as the empty pastimes of the wastrel which offered decidedly darker lessons: a brutish relish for cruel and squalid spectacle, a taste for gambling, and carelessness of the sufferings of animals. Then, as now, there were those who sought to identify the national temper in terms of sport. Writing in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1819, John Wilson declared that “The character of a people is to be sought for and found in their amusements” (1819: 280). Similarly, the sporting author John Badcock (“John Bee”) identified himself in 1823 as one of those “who see the *English character* in English sports, and would sustain the former by upholding the latter.” To Badcock, sport was an educative force, teaching boys how to be men, in his celebration of “those much-loved athletics, which even in childhood form the truly *British character*, and ... create the boasted British feeling of independence, love of country, and despication of foreign manners” (Badcock 1823: 13). The sporting child, in such accounts, was father of the sporting man.

The diversion which John Wilson identified as most emblematic of the British spirit was that most contentious (bloodsports apart) of all contemporary pastimes, bare-knuckle boxing. For pugilistic pressmen such as Wilson and Pierce Egan, the fighter represented the national character stripped to white breeches: boxing became a highly literary sport in the late Georgian age, albeit one praised and damned in equal measure. Here, as so often in the period, sport became an arena for debating issues of national character, for exploring matters of identity and masculinity and those of race, social class, and gender.

Pierce Egan saw sport – and boxing in particular – as a national sacrament, declaring in the first volume of *Boxiana* that boxing was “a national trait”: “we feel no hesitation in declaring, that it is wholly – BRITISH” (Egan 1812: 14). “The manly art of boxing,” according to Egan, has conditioned the martial spirit of the nation – warlike but humane, fierce but honorable – having “infused that true heroic courage, blended with humanity into the heart of Britons” (1812: 13). This writer’s chronicles of concussion are well known to sports historians, but what is less familiar is the fact that Egan was also a prolific poet who included an anthology of pugilistic verse in the first volume of the *Sketches of Modern Pugilism* and also peppered his hugely successful novel *Life in London* (1821) with comic and lyrical poetry. That the leading sporting journalist of the age so frequently turned to song is emblematic of the remarkable link between sport and poetry in early nineteenth-century England.

For men such as Egan, boxing was more than just a game. While the charm of pugilism for some late Georgians was the hope of seeing fractures and life-threatening injuries, to him it was an elevating, thrilling and, indeed, morally educative sport. In proselytizing for boxing, Egan used both prose and poetry. Why should this have been? In part, the answer lies in the fact that boxing had something to gain from its flirtation with poetry. The cultural cachet of poetry dignified modern sport, moving it from one level of cultural status to another, reinscribing a boxing match or a game of cricket in aesthetic, even philosophical terms. The laurel of verse ennobled the quotidian and allowed sporting authors – anxious that theirs might not be a gentlemanly trade – to dignify themselves. Pierce Egan the journalist also presented himself in the more prestigious guises of poet and historian, complementing his prose with boxing verse, much of which reiterated in metrical form the polemical convictions of his journalism and historical writing.

Egan's prose and verse sing from the same hymn sheet, all articulating his conviction that settling disputes with the "naked fist" was a particularly British and honorable custom, especially when contrasted with the perfidious continental who ended an argument by pulling out a knife. "BRITAIN," declares Egan in the first volume of *Boxiana*, is "a country where the stiletto is not known – where trifling quarrels do not produce assassination, and where revenge is not finished by murder. Boxing removes these dreadful calamities; a contest is soon decided, and scarcely ever the frame sustains any material injury" (1812: 3). Egan makes the same point in verse in "A Boxing We Will Go," his imitation of the old song "A Begging We Will Go" (previously – and famously – sportingly imitated by Henry Fielding in "A Hunting We Will Go" (1734)). This begins in the usual style of the drinking songs of the Fancy by toasting maiden fair and boxer brave, and in particular Thomas Cribb, champion of England from 1809 to 1822, but moves on to tavern philosophizing about the honest Briton and the foreign stabber:

Come move the song and stir the glass,
 For why should we be sad?
 Let's drink to some free-hearted lass,
 And CRIBB, the boxing lad.
 And a boxing we will go, will go, will go,
 And a boxing we will go.

Italians stab their friends behind,
 In darkest shades of night;
 But Britons they are bold and kind,
 And box their friends by light.

The sons of France their pistols use,
 Pop, pop, and they have done;
 But Britons with their hands will bruise,
 And scorn away to run.

Throw pistols, poniards, swords aside,
 And all such deadly tools;

Let boxing be the Briton's pride,
 The *science* of their schools!
 And a boxing we will go, will go,
 And a boxing we will go.

(Egan 1812: 495)

Drunken pothouse sing-along though this might be, it also has a certain combative logic. Here Egan's conviction that boxing embodies the good-natured temper of the national spirit, in contradiction to the Mediterraneans' perfidy, is given poetic shape, part of his assault on the national consciousness on behalf of pugilism.

Britain was, of course, at war with France when Egan wrote these words. Boxing was in more senses than one a serious game during the Napoleonic period. In "A Boxing We Will Go," Egan enthusiastically drives his ethical hobbyhorses; here once again boxing is clearly linked to the notions of "Britishness" and "manliness":

Since boxing is a manly game,
 And Briton's recreation;
 By boxing we will raise our fame,
 'Bove any other nation.

(Egan 1812: 496)

Egan portrays pugilism as a matter of national pride, and the supposed connection between boxing and the martial ethos is confidently invoked. The spirit of boxing, it was frequently argued in the Napoleonic period, was of real utility in time of war, and Egan's poem gives metaphorical life to this notion, whimsically imagining the boxers of England defeating the French Emperor, as if Tom Cribb's fists were instruments of British military power rather than just its symbol (figure 22.1 shows a contemporary portrait of Cribb which portrays him as the bull-like epitome of British masculinity in action). A roaring patriotism fills the air:

If Boney doubt it, let him come,
 And try with CRIBB a round;
 And CRIBB shall beat him like a drum,
 And make his carcase sound.

Mendoza, Gulley, Molineaux,
 Each nature's weapon wield,
 Who each at Boney would stand true,
 And never to him yield.

(Egan 1812: 496)

Interestingly, Egan's anti-Gallican cohort is a rainbow coalition of Jew, Caucasian and black: Thomas Cribb the West Countryman Champion, Daniel Mendoza the Jewish East Ender who fought as the "Hebrew," and "the tremendous man of colour," the gifted black Virginian pugilist and freed slave Tom Molineaux who fought two epic



THOMAS CRIBB (CHAMPION OF ENGLAND).

Figure 22.1 Portrait of Thomas Cribb, the British Champion, 1811.

bouts with Cribb in 1810 and 1811. If the granitic Molineaux had the misfortune to be born outside Albion's shores, and a "Negro" to boot, in his pluck and bottom he has shown himself capable of behaving like an Englishman. In Egan's poetic conceptualization of boxing, sport united the nation, both native and immigrant.

II

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, Pierce Egan contributed to the *Sporting Magazine*, a periodical notable as Britain's first national sporting journal. This had been established in October 1792 to exploit the growing taste for writing about sport which had developed in the wake of Beckford's publishing triumph twelve years previously. From the start, alongside reports of notable hunts, pugilistic contests, feats of angling and cricket matches, the magazine featured poetry in every issue (including some of Egan's verses which were later republished in *Boxiana*). Indeed, the 1792

“Prospectus” to the *Sporting Magazine* declared that “lyric Compositions” would be “allied to the objects of our Miscellany,” and for several decades the *Magazine* featured a monthly poetry section which celebrated such things as the pleasures of the chase, the joys of cricket and the contemplative delights of angling. As per Egan’s assuming the mantle of poet and historian, there was an element of elevation by association here, in sporting literature’s appeal to the most prestigious artistic form of the day. There was a degree of cultural anxiety among contemporary sporting writers about their trade: even C. J. Apperley, who earned a great deal of money from the *Sporting Magazine* in the 1820s (writing under the scriptural pseudonym of “Nimrod”), once described the journal as a “Cockney concern.” Poetry made the magazine more *gentlemanly*.

The poetry section of the *Sporting Magazine* appeared under the neoclassical banner of “The High Court of Diana” (neoclassicism served a social as well as artistic purpose for the *Sporting Magazine*, as it did for Leigh Hunt and the so-called “Cockney School” twenty years later). The “High Court” carried sprightly Pindarics, comic narratives, mock-heroics and didactic salutes to the morality of British sport. In 1815, for instance, the *Magazine* published the Reverend M. Cotton’s “The Noble Game of Cricket,” which begins thus:

Great Pindar has bragg’d of his heroes of old,
Some were swift in their race, some in battle were bold;
The brows of the victor with olive were crown’d.
Hark! they shout, and Olympia returns the glad sound.

Assist all ye Muses, and join to rehearse,
An old English sport, never prais’d yet in verse.

(Cotton 1815: 190)

This has a certain exemplary status, typical as it is of the neoclassical preoccupations of contemporary writing about sport, and of the mock-heroic salute to a favored pastime so common in verse dealing with sports such as cricket and boxing. The invocation of Pindar, the Ur-sporting poet, leads to the invocation of the muses nine, who will fashion a new poetry of English sport, most particularly of cricket, here, as so frequently in the period, described as a “noble” amusement. The fact that cricket did not feature in the Olympic Games is immaterial to such jovial polemic. This modern sport, possessed of a significant number of semiprofessional players and bearing close links to the gambling which had shaped its development, is presented as if were the subject of one of the *Olympic Odes*. However, perhaps this is only appropriate. Pindar was nothing if not a praise poet, and he too portrayed modern-day sportsmen (who would be lavishly rewarded in their home city-states) as if they were the heroes of mythology. Painting his *agon*, so to speak, Pindar celebrated the wearers of the laurel as the new Achilles, Hercules, or Jason, and so did the late Georgian panegyrists.

Here, as so often in Romantic period, prosaic writing about sport and its attendant ethical system was accompanied by poetic and often comic complements: “The Noble Game of Cricket” is also an exemplary in its moral tendency:

'Tis cricket I sing, of illustrious fame,
 No nation e'er boasted so noble a game.
 Derry down, &c.

(Cotton 1815: 190)

The poet, his lines mock-heroic but not mocking (it should not be forgotten that much English burlesque writing is unaccompanied by satirical intent), summons the terms customarily used in the moral approbation of modern sport: cricket is “noble,” “old,” and “English.” Again, the fact that King Alfred did not, as far as we know, burn the cakes because he was preoccupied by a cricket match is of no consequence: the sport is presented as if it were one of England’s simple games of yesteryear: an “old English sport.” And how English it is! “No nation” can match our noble game. Sporting poetry apes the triumphalist philosophy of its prose equivalent and here echoes much of the character of that writing: an innate sense of national superiority, xenophobia, neoclassicism, drollery and a semifacetious but heartfelt appeal to the ethical nature of sport.

This notion of the “manliness” of cricket is common in the sports-related poetry of the age. John Spelman Munnings’s *Cromer. A Descriptive Poem* (1806), for instance, rhapsodizes about the sports of the village green, where “The sons of labour freed from toil” play “The manly game of cricket.” Munnings’s poem is also archetypal in its emphasis upon sport as pedagogical in its tendency:

By manly exercise, and sports like these,
 And others foreign from the muse’s song,
 Are taught the youth of Britain to despise
 The sea’s rough dangers, and the toils of war.
 Robust his frame, and nerv’d his vig’rous mind,
 The humblest peasant boasts a dauntless soul.

(Munnings 1806: 49)

It is as if James Thomson had rewritten *Boxiana*. British youth is “nerv’d” by manly sport, taught lessons of martial utility by the sports of the village green.

The mixture of poetry, wit and rough-hewn politics and philosophy evident in the pages of the *Sporting Magazine* and Pierce Egan, the manner “between jest and earnest” as William Hazlitt labeled contemporary sports writing in 1819, began to influence verse nearer to what one might call the poetic mainstream, especially in the vogue for boxing-related poetry evident in the post-Napoleonic period. Much of this body of writing was prompted by the 1818 reissue of the first volume of Pierce Egan’s *Boxiana* and the appearance in the same year of the second in the series. Late Georgian satirists were always quick to seize on contemporary social epiphenomena, and in the wake of Egan’s triumph boxing for a short period became a principal vehicle for satire in works such as Thomas Moore’s highly successful *Tom Crib’s Memorial to Congress* (1819) (the variant “Crib” was often used in contemporary writing about the champion) and John

Hamilton Reynolds's reworking of Tom Moore's formula in *The Fancy: A Selection from the Poetical Remains of the late Peter Corcoran* (1820), a spoof biography of the life and death of a poetic pugilist, and in a significant number of poems in the leading satirical journal of the day, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. "Maga's" John Wilson declared, "The man who has not read 'Boxiana' is ignorant of the power of the English language," and time and time again his journal returned to the sport. Pugilistic poetry and prose such as Egan's had a special appeal for *Blackwood's*, that most combative of all late Georgian magazines, and this particular aspect of the despised "Cockney" culture escaped its derision.

Several boxing-based poems appeared in *Blackwood's* in the early 1820s: a Wordsworthian parody "On the Battle between Mendoza and Tom Owen, at Banstead Downs" (1820), a parody of Southey "An Idyl on the Battle" (1823), and the mock-elegiac Menippean masterpiece, the "'Luctus' on the Death of Sir Daniel Donnelly, Late Champion of Ireland" (1820). To give but one example of *Blackwood's* sporting verse, Egan's mixture of joviality, patriotism and philosophy was imitated in "Ye Pugilists of England" (1819), attributed by Blackwood's bibliographer A. L. Strout to J. G. Lockhart, which buys into *Boxiana's* school of national eloquence in portraying pugilism – *à la* "A Boxing We Will Go" – as England's bulwark:

Ye Pugilists of England
 Who guard your native sod,
 Whose pluck has braved a thousand years,
 Cross-buttock, blow and blood,
 Your corky canvass sport again,
 To mill another foe,
 As you spring, round the ring,
 While the betters noisy grow;
 While the banging rages loud and long,
 And the betters noisy grow.

(Lockhart 1819: 668)

English boxing is here granted an unlikely thousand-year provenance. What the sport offers, inevitably, is a "guard" for the bold island race. That said, it is also linked to earthier matters; here the nationalistic and the financial imperatives intertwine as the shouts of the gamblers provide background music to the violent ballet within the ring.

"Maga" also borrows the clothes of Pierce Egan in proudly endorsing the noble-hearted Briton's disdain for the European's blade:

A Briton needs no poniards,
 No bravos 'long his street –
 His trust is in a strong-roped ring,
 A square of twenty-feet.
 With one-twos from his horny fists,
 He floors the coves below,

As they crash, on the grass,
 When the betters noisy grow;
 When the banging raged loud and long,
 And the betters noisy grow.

(Lockhart 1819: 668)

The Prize Ring is an impromptu court of justice, not fit for the continental stabbers and stiletto-wielders. No, the manly Brit contents himself with only the similitude of steel: “Your manly hearts shall glow, / As you peel, true as steel” (Lockhart 1819: 668). Here Egan’s songs of the Pugilistic Club reach the pages of *Blackwood’s*.

Pierce Egan also influenced Moore’s brilliant satire *Tom Cribb’s Memorial to Congress, with Preface, Notes and Appendix, by One of the Fancy* (1819), which grants boxing mock-heroic a satirical charge hitherto lacking. Moore, by his own account, “read *Boxiana* to store my memory with cant phrases” before writing the *Memorial*, immersing himself the lexicon of “flash” language and the culture of pugilism. His volume presses the contemporary vogue for boxing writing into the service of wider sociopolitical satire on the state of post-Napoleonic Europe, envisaging the European dignitaries who had overseen the negotiations of the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) in 1818 becoming pugilists under the tutelage of Tom Cribb himself. Cribb writes to the statesmen of Aachen suggesting a new way to resolve European quarrels. Instead of sending armies into battle on their behalf, kings and statesmen, trained by Cribb himself, could fight it out like men in the prize ring:

What think you, great *Swells*, of a ROYAL SET-TO?
 A *Ring* and fair *fist-work* at Aix-la-Chapelle,
 Or at old Moulsey-Hurst, if you likes it as well –
 And that all may be *fair* as to *wind*, *weight*, and *science*,
 I’ll answer to train the whole HOLY ALLIANCE!

(Moore 2003: 198)

Cribb offers an example of what might be achieved along these lines in a spoof press report which envisages the Prince Regent and Czar Alexander sorting out their differences in a fight, or, *Eganice*, a “GRAND SET-TO BETWEEN LONG SANDY AND GEORGY THE PORPUS.” As the participants strip, the “gnostics” – the knowing ones – gasp at the size of the Prince’s “crummy,” his vast paunch, sadly immune to Cribb’s training regime:

Both *peel’d* – but, on laying his *Dandy-belt* by,
 Old GEORGY went *floush*, and his *backers* looked *shy*;
 For they saw, notwithstanding CRIBB’S honest endeavour
 To *train down* the *crummy*, ’twas monstrous as ever!
 Not so with LONG SANDY – *prime meat* every inch –
 Which, of course, made the *Gnostics* on t’other side flinch.

(Moore 2003: 201)

Despite his advantage in weight terms, Prinny is humbled as the imperial Russian fights dirty. The Regent relies solely on his huge stomach to crush his opponent but his obesity is no match for Sandy's "ruffianing" work and the Emperor humbles the Prince.

Tom Moore's choice of targets here is unsurprising. Prince George was, alongside Viscount Castlereagh, the customary *bête noire* of the parliamentary opposition and its literary supporters. The Prince of Wales had maintained the Tories in office in 1812 after being made Regent after his father, George III, descended into mental incapacity, thereby ensuring his overnight transformation in the eyes of the Whigs from a wise and judicious friend of the people to a corpulent, womanizing drunkard. Here Moore relies heavily on the satire of the somatic, stressing the Regent's greed and obesity as so many contemporary satirists had done before. Perhaps this is unsurprising; while crop failure and the post-Napoleonic economic recession threatened famine in mainland Britain in this period, Moore implies that the rulers of the United Kingdom and Europe hogged the Continent's wealth and resources, a heedless greed summarized in the Prince of Wales's huge girth. Moore – Ireland's famed poet and biographer of Lord Byron – and Egan, tavern philosopher, have more in common than one might initially think. Sport united them. Like Pierce Egan, Thomas Moore contrived to make pugilism a matter of state. In the late Georgian period, pugilism was a space in which matters of European politics could be debated in verse, whether in Egan's cheerleading against Napoleon or Moore's indictment of the post-Napoleonic settlement.

III

The link between nation, sport, and war in contemporary poetry was not restricted to the likes of Pierce Egan and his satirical pasticheurs. Though we might on the face of it consider high Romantic argument as something remote from such amusements, canonical Romanticism has more to do with sports and their popular and literary ideological manifestations than one might at first think. Consider those representative figures of both cultural forms, Egan and Wordsworth (if Pierce Egan was the presiding spirit of late Georgian sporting literature, then William Wordsworth, historically speaking, has generally been seen as the spirit of Romanticism incarnate). These two poets have more in common than one might initially imagine, inasmuch as both men were capable of portraying sport as synecdochic of national spirit and as something with the capacity to shape the adult personality. In 1802, for instance, returning with his sister Dorothy from a trip to France during the Peace of Amiens, Wordsworth celebrated arriving back on Albion's shore by delivering himself of a sonnet, "Composed in the Valley near Dover, on the Day of Landing" (later published in his *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807)):

Here on our native soil, we breathe once more.
The cock that crows, the smoke that curls, that sound
Of bells, those boys who in yon meadow-ground

In white-sleev'd shirts are playing by the score,
And even this little river's gentle roar,
All, all are English. Oft have I look'd round
With joy in Kent's green vales; but never found
Myself so satisfied in heart before.
Europe is yet in bonds; but let that pass,
Thought for another moment. Thou art free
My Country!

(Wordsworth 1983: ll. 1–11)

In his celebration of a “free” England, in contradistinction to France and continental Europe which languished in the thrall of emperors old and new, Wordsworth offers a survey of all that is quintessentially “English” in the Kent countryside: the peal of church bells, the crowing cock, the rural cottage, the flowing river and the boys playing cricket. Here sport is depicted, as it was in the poetry of *Boxiana*, as one of the defining characteristics of England, a country seen, also as in Egan, as a bulwark against European belligerence. Wordsworth’s salute to the sporting landscape as “English” shares the sporting patriotism and nation worship found in the sporting journalist’s verse.

It might also be said that Wordsworth’s idealized view of cricket anticipates the generality of nineteenth-century writing about that particular game. The village sport cherished by the poet was frequently seen in the Victorian and early twentieth centuries as symbolic of all that was good about the national character, and, with Wordsworth, as a quintessentially English sport. In *The Cricket Field* (1851), the Reverend James Pycroft portrays his favorite amusement as deeply connected with the English psyche. “Cricket is essentially Anglo-Saxon,” he declares: “foreigners have rarely imitated us” (“English settlers everywhere play at cricket; but of no single club have we heard that dieted either with frogs, saur-kraut or macaroni”) (Pycroft 1851: 17). Wordsworth’s sonnet, written by a poet whose nephew Charles was the Oxford captain in the first Varsity cricket match in 1827, is proleptic of the tenor of much nineteenth-century writing about sport.

William Wordsworth was not just a sporting spectator; from his boyhood to old age, he participated in noncompetitive physical activity. Even late in life, he “sported,” to use the late Georgian phrase. The museum at Dove Cottage has a pair of skates in its permanent collection, once the property, towards the end of his life, of the Poet Laureate and expert skater who once resided there. Certainly there are contemporary records of Wordsworth’s fondness for skating. The Reverend Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley’s entertaining *Reminiscences of Wordsworth among the Peasantry of Westmoreland* (1882), with its memorable, if grudging, accounts of a poet always “mumbling to hissel’ along t’roads,” had few positive testimonials to the author in his middle and old age (one exception is the old wrestler George recalling his pleasure at Wordsworth’s comment after the poet had been “a-lookin’ on” at an Ambleside wrestling match in the 1830s: “he kep’ a saying, ‘He must be a powerful young man that. He must be a strong young man’”). However, at least Wordsworth’s skating was the subject of

approbation among the lower orders. Indeed, his prowess on the ice impressed the rural folk rather more than his poetry: “He was a ter’ble girt [great] skater, was Wudsworth now; and he would put ya [one] hand i’ his breast (he wore a frill short i’ them daays), and t’other i’ his waistband, same as shepherds dea to keep their hands warm, and he would stand up straight and swaay and swing away grandly.” There were, it seems “noan better in these parts why, he could cut his own naame up’ the ice, could Mr Wudsworth” (Rawnsley 1884: 147).

Perhaps this twilight prowess was not so surprising, for Wordsworth had, of course, decades of experience, having skated as a lad at Hawkshead Grammar School. And, more importantly to the present purpose, his early experience informed some of his most notable poetry, in which the imagination, so to speak, is inscribed upon ice. In Book 1 of the 1799 version of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes his boyish experience of skating with his school friends on a frozen Esthwaite:

All shod with steel
 We hissed along the polished ice, in games
 Confederate, imitative of the chase
 And woodland pleasures, – the resounding horn,
 The pack loud-chiming, and the hunted hare.
 So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
 And not a voice was idle.
 (Wordsworth 1979: 1799 *Prelude* i. 156–62)

The boys’ play has a dual sporting resonance with their skating imitative of the chase (a pastime then more clearly identified as a “sport” than it would be today). I shall return to the significance of this episode but, for now, the key fact to remember is that Wordsworth’s sporting activities as a boy – skating, angling, sailing, hunting woodcocks, and so on – echo through much of *The Prelude*. Indeed, the poet’s youthful vigor led some commentators in the decades after his death to commend his schoolboy persona as the very model of the manly youth idealized in Romantic-era sporting philosophy. One Edwardian school textbook noted with approval that “Some poets, like Thomas Gray, have been . . . shy and sickly boys at school, writing Latin verses instead of playing cricket. Wordsworth, however, played the games and had all the fun with the other boys” (Copeland and Rideout 1909: 70). This of course is based on Wordsworth’s own description of his youth and it has a certain logic in terms of what Robert Penn Warren once called Wordsworth’s occasional “Romantic anti-intellectualism” (1947: 13). However, and more importantly, the poet’s autobiographical emphasis upon the visceral experience of the boy is part of his division between the instinctive child, with what “Tintern Abbey” calls his “glad animal movements” (l. 75), and the adult who is both a devotee of nature but also sensitive to the “still, sad music of humanity” (l. 92).

Many of the sports of the late Georgian age – and some of *The Prelude*’s, like angling, one of Wordsworth’s particular favorites – seemed not to possess humanity’s

music, involving as they did the suffering and destruction of animals. There might seem on the face of it to be a contrast between Romanticism's tender-heartedness – its antipathy to slavery and sympathy for marginal societal groups (the rural poor, the insane, children, and so on) – and the sanguine nature of the pleasures of contemporary sport. Indeed, the nineteenth-century publisher and miscellanist Robert Chambers once confessed his bafflement that authors possessed of an “amiable sentimentalism” should delight in “sports which infer the destruction, and, what is worse, the torture of the humbler animals” (1864: 1. 1734). But Wordsworth saw no cruelty in fishing, and nor was it separate from his sense of the natural world and his place within it.

In this enthusiasm for angling, Wordsworth was not alone, and nor was his tendency to view it in philosophical terms. It is important to realize that literary enthusiasts for sport did not always invoke the manly or the martial spirit in their apologia. In the case of angling, devotees often made an appeal to more rarefied emotions. Poetic representations of angling often characterized it, to borrow T. H. Hulme's famous phrase, as a kind of “spilt religion” (1924: 118), or even, to adapt the same phrase, a kind of spilt Romanticism. While partisans of boxing and cricket stressed their social cohesiveness or exemplary manliness, angling, devoid of audience and competitor, was often represented as a more solitary activity, and one in which the individual communes with nature against a backdrop of natural beauty. In late Georgian accounts of fishing there is, as in Romantic nature poetry, a frequent concentration on the notion of solitude before the face of the landscape. In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth describes the poet meditating on the relationship between the individual and nature “by the sides / Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams” (ll. 69–70), and angling, enacted in the same natural arena, was often seen in similar terms.

It might be pointed out that the spiritualization of fishing is nothing new, and dates back at least as far as Izaak Walton's great seventeenth-century meditation on the subject, *The Compleat Angler, or The Contemplative Man's Recreation* (1653–76), which maintains that “the very sitting by the river's side is not only the quietist and fittest place for contemplation, but will invite a man to it.” William Wordsworth esteemed Walton highly, composing two sonnets in his memory, “Walton's Book of Lives” (1822) and the lines “Written upon a Blank Leaf in ‘The Complete Angler’” (1819). The second Walton sonnet celebrates *The Compleat Angler* as a “sweet Book”:

While flowing rivers yield a blameless sport,
 Shall live the name of Walton: Sage benign!
 Whose pen, the mysteries of the rod and line
 Unfolding, did not fruitlessly exhort
 To reverend watching of each still report
 That Nature utters from her rural shrine.
 Meek, nobly versed in simple discipline,
 He found the longest summer day too short,
 To his loved pastime ...

Fairer than life itself, in this sweet Book,
 The cowslip-bank and shady willow-tree;
 And the fresh meads – where flowed, from every nook
 Of his full bosom, gladsome Piety!

(Wordsworth 2004: ll. 1–9, 11–14)

Walton is here seen in religious terms, as a “Sage” whose book, to quote the characteristic Wordsworthian litotes, does “not fruitlessly” encourage its readers to “reverend watching,” leading them, indeed, to worship at the “rural shrine” of nature. Walton’s “Piety” is eulogized, and the physical realities of fishing, which the author nowhere attempts to evade in *The Compleat Angler*, are ignored (Walton’s unsqueamishness, in such stuff as his advising readers to break a frog’s legs before using it as live bait to catch pike, led Lord Byron to label him a “old, cruel coxcomb” in the thirteenth canto of *Don Juan* (1823) (Byron 1986: 556). In Wordsworth’s account, the emphasis is upon the wisdom of the sporting mystic, and the moral lessons to be learned from his work.

Walton’s greatest literary devotee – to use the terminology of the author of *The Compleat Angler* – saw the river as a place for recreation as well as contemplation. As a boy, in his “glad animal” days, Wordsworth was a keen angler (in a note to the *Sonnets on the River Duddon* (1820) the poet declared that “in early boyhood [u]pon the banks of the Derwent, I had learnt to be very fond of angling” (Wordsworth 2004: 99)). And for the adult Wordsworth, sports like angling had symbolic meaning, and could become what the nightingale over the heath was to Keats or the laudanum bottle was to De Quincey, becoming one of those “alembic[s],” in Charles Lamb’s fine phrase, “which in these plodding days sublimised our imaginations” (Lamb and Lamb 1903–5: 1. 259–60). In Book 8 of the 1850 version of his masterpiece, Wordsworth describes his youthful occupations as a “rambling schoolboy” in the meditation on the Lake District shepherd in his rural grandeur and solemn sublimity:

thus

I felt his presence in his own domain,
 As of a lord and master, or a power,
 Or genius, under Nature, under God,
 Presiding; and severest solitude
 Had more commanding looks when he was there.
 When up the lonely brooks on rainy days
 Angling I went, or trod the trackless hills
 By mists bewildered.

...

Thus was man

Ennobled outwardly before my sight,
 And thus my heart was early introduced
 To an unconscious love and reverence
 Of human nature.

(Wordsworth 1979: 1850 *Prelude* viii. 256–64, 275–9)

Amidst the lowering storm and the Lakeland brook, “lonely” in human terms but also shot through with piscine life, Wordsworth is introduced to the “love and reverence” of both the natural world and of human nature. The imagination, indeed, is itself a kind of literary fishing pool, which both overflows – Wordsworth’s own watery metaphor in the “Preface” to the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* – and provides a teeming resource in which the mind can angle for its own imaginative catch.

In *The Prelude*, the poet explicitly links his angling with the perception of the tutelary presence of the sublime shepherd, part of learning, albeit unconsciously, how to hear what he would later denominate as “the music of humanity.” Indeed, James Wilson, zoologist and brother of John Wilson of *Blackwood’s*, quotes from that very passage from “Tintern Abbey” in his sporting memoir *The Rod and Gun* (1844), in arguing that there was an inevitable link between the love of angling and the love of nature: “The Sportsman was – and how could he be otherwise – what Wordsworth somewhere calls ‘A lover of the meadows, and the woods, / And mountains’” (Wilson 1844: 293). Both poet and angler learn “natural piety” from the landscape. Wordsworth stands, in “Tintern Abbey,” “on the bank of this delightful stream” as a “worshipper of Nature,” one who “hither came . . . with far deeper zeal / Of holier love” (ll. 153–6). In Wordsworth’s great poem, the River Wye, warmly commended in *The Compleat Angler* for its abundance of salmon, yields up another form of catch, an imaginative “tribute,” to borrow Shelley’s phrase “br[ought] of waters” (“Mont Blanc,” ll. 5–6).

Though it would be foolish to imply that sport is at the heart of Romanticism, in the skating passage of *The Prelude* of 1799, which culminates in Wordsworth’s meditation on the significance of the “spots of time,” it occupies a space very near to what we generally see as the philosophical heart of that great cultural form. The sports writing of his day stressed the notion that sport tutored the mind of the child and here Wordsworth, in manner analogous, sees boyish sport as an instrument in the fashioning of the creative imagination of the adult. The 1909 verse anthology for children quoted above, in its discussion of young Wordsworth’s childhood games, declares that “The joy and excitement of such active play first woke and stirred the deep impulses of genius” (Copeland and Rideout 1909: 71), and this is actually on the best authority, for it was the poet himself who in *The Prelude* describes Nature “haunting me thus in my boyish sports” (Wordsworth 1979: 1805 *Prelude* i. 295). Putting aside the tasks of Latin conjugation and geometry, the Hawkshead schoolboy’s play allows free range to his inward eye. And so, indeed, do his peers, as their sport, skating, is “imitative” of another, the chase. As in so many contemporary accounts of sport in this period, here it possesses the similitude of something else. The boys on Esthwaite, to borrow a phrase from Virginia Woolf’s review of a 1932 edition of Nimrod’s *Memoirs of the Life of the late John Mytton, Esq.*, “hunt in imagination” (Woolf 1932: 113).

To the boys of the Grammar School, skating was spilt hunting, an activity which, like contemporary boxing, was often itself characterized as a proxy of war and manliness. However, though the chase, as David Perkins has written, “had a special meaning for [Wordsworth’s] imagination” (2003: 78), here the poet moves away from this association, at least as far as his own childish experience is concerned. Not for the first time, the boy Wordsworth learns different lessons from his peers. Whereas Pierce

Egan, who always saw sport as a symbolic preparation for the battle of life, would have made the connection between skating, hunting and the martial spirit explicit, Wordsworth, even as a boy, sees something more obscure. The poet views his youthful self as singled out from the rest of the boys. While enjoying the sense of fun, vigor and speed which they experience on the ice he then pulls up sharp, “stopping suddenly short” as the critic Jonathan Wordsworth puts it, “to feel the imaginative experience of being at the still point of the turning world” (Wordsworth 1985: 14)

And oftentimes,
 When we had given our bodies to the wind,
 And all the shadowy banks on either side
 Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still
 The rapid line of motion, then at once
 Have I, reclining back upon my heels,
 Stopped short – yet still the solitary cliffs
 Wheeled by me, even as if the earth had rolled
 With visible motion her diurnal round!
 Behind me did they stretch in solemn train,
 Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched
 Till all was tranquil as a summer sea.

(Wordsworth 1979: 1799 *Prelude* i. 174–85)

Wordsworth moves from the communal to the singular, in both senses of that term, notably in the particularity of his solipsistic response to the natural world, which, in this moment of the “egotistical sublime,” seems to turn around him. This is a kind of inverted kinesthesia in which Wordsworth feels the movements of the natural world rather than the corporeality of his own physical being; perhaps surprisingly, sport, to use a phrase from S. T. Coleridge, leaves him “less gross than bodily.”

Wordsworth concludes his account of this sporting spot of time with a famous peroration:

Ye powers of earth, ye genii of the springs,
 And ye that have your voices in the clouds,
 And ye that are familiars of the lakes
 And of the standing pools, I may not think
 A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed
 Such ministry – when ye through many a year
 Thus by the agency of boyish sports,
 On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,
 Impressed upon all forms the characters
 Of danger or desire, and thus did make
 The surface of the universal earth
 With meanings of delight, of hope and fear,
 Work like a sea.

(Wordsworth 1979: 1799 *Prelude* i. 186–98)

The sublime shepherd who taught the young angler the love of nature is complemented here by less physical, but no less tutelary, presences. Nature teaches the mind and the imagination through “the agency of boyish sports”; like contemporary sporting authors Wordsworth shares a conviction of the educative power of sport. “This theme,” as Book First of *The Prelude* has it with reference to the Esthwaite escapade, “of exercise and play” informs both sporting literature and Romanticism. Wordsworth, in loading skating with philosophical resonance goes like the poetry of Pierce Egan after him beyond the physical immediacy of sport in search of its symbolic resonance. Romanticism and late Georgian sporting verse may perhaps be two very different things, but sometimes they were deeply philosophically interconnected.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 6 “Satire, Subjectivity, and Acknowledgment”; chapter 23 “‘The science of feelings’: Wordsworth’s Experimental Poetry”

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“The science of feelings”: Wordsworth’s Experimental Poetry

Ross Hamilton

The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet’s art as any upon which it can be employed.

Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

Intellectual Communities

Multidisciplinary studies are beginning to dissolve the boundaries that have separated the sciences and the humanities since the early nineteenth century, yet it remains difficult to grasp the full extent of the disciplinary permeability that characterized the intellectual climate of the 1790s and early 1800s. Erasmus Darwin, familiar now as a botanizing physician who described the sex lives of plants in couplet form, was most famous among his contemporaries as a poet (“thought by many to be the equal of Milton or Shakespeare,” King-Hele 1986: 13). Wordsworth met Darwin and was familiar with his work, but his circle included a number of men who pursued both literary and scientific interests. As an omnivorous reader, Coleridge fully engaged the intellectual ferment surrounding natural philosophy, but in addition he pursued a “multitude of minute experiments with Light & Figure” so feverishly that Wordsworth begged him to stop for the sake of his health (Richardson 2001: 47). Humphry Davy, who became famous with his chemical lecture-demonstrations and made electrochemistry the premier area of research within the Royal Society, helped Coleridge and Wordsworth edit the *Lyrical Ballads* and initially conceived of a career as a poet. John Thelwall practiced painting, was involved in the theater, and supported his family with literary journalism before joining the Physical Society of Guy’s Hospital in London. By 1792 he was lecturing on republican politics to crowds of over 500, illustrating his speeches with his own satirical ballads. Numerous lines from his novel, *The Peripatetic*, which Wordsworth read by

1797, prefigure details found in “Tintern Abbey” (Scrivener 2001: 214–15; Thelwall 2001: 47 n23). The essay that follows will consider Wordsworth’s poem as an exemplary poetic experiment – one that commingles contemporary excitement over scientific discovery with poetic discoveries of his own.

References to Newton’s theory of light and color in “Tintern Abbey” reflect both Wordsworth’s own familiarity with the *Opticks*, which he had discovered as a student at Hawkshead, and his reading of Edward Young’s poetic popularization of Newton in *Night Thoughts*. He also owned a copy of John Bonnycastle’s *Introduction to Astronomy* (1786), a typical Cambridge textbook that illustrated Newtonian ideas with quotes from Milton, Thomson, and Young (Johnston 1998: 160, 164). However, the issues involved in the scientific understanding of perception were complex and subject to argument. For example, Newton’s experiments revealed that light passed through prisms split into invariant colors and each possessed its own refractive angle. Thus, for Newton, a color such as green, which painters obtained by mixing blue and yellow pigments, was a “pure” color. Moreover, his discoveries countered subjective perceptions, for apart from theories of light versus pigment mixture, the eye perceived “green” as homogeneous in nature. In this context, Wordsworth’s repetition of the word “green” in the opening lines of “Tintern Abbey” carries implications beyond its descriptive function.

These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Among the woods and copses lose themselves,
Nor, with their *green* and simple hue, disturb
The wild *green* landscape. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms
Green to the very door, and wreathes of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees ...

(ll. 11–19, emphasis added)

In these lines the “simple hue” of the cultivated ground cannot disturb the “wild green landscape.” It serves as the common denominator between human society and untrammelled nature, a point of intersection between the empirical mastery over nature implicit in scientific understanding and the divine ordination implicit within traditional natural philosophy.

When John Constable began to incorporate Newtonian light and color theory into his paintings in order to produce “the evanescent effects of nature’s chiaroscuro,” he realized that the traditional colors of the landscape artist’s palette precluded matching those in nature and embarked on what he viewed as a series of experiments. One of his discoveries was that using more green (formerly thought to disrupt the tonal gradation) could evoke the convincing image that he sought (Gombrich 1960: 48–9). In other words, he capitalized on inventing formal techniques that could express a relative (because subjective) truth about nature. Constable and Wordsworth were acquainted through Sir George Beaumont, a landscape painter and connoisseur who was an enthusiastic admirer of the

poet's work. Beaumont read "Tintern Abbey" to Constable in 1804 and the two men probably met in 1806 and again in 1807. As a result, some conjecture that the poet influenced the painter's development (Peckham 1970: 111; Noyes 1968: 78). But James Heffernan persuasively rebuts this argument, noting that Constable was unimpressed when he met Wordsworth and Wordsworth and Dorothy disliked the exhibition of his paintings they attended. Moreover, Beaumont's conservative tastes made him unsympathetic to Constable's radically original work and thus an unlikely person to facilitate any rapprochement between the two men (Heffernan 1984: 229–35).

Nevertheless, apart from the hypothesis of direct influence from poet to painter, Heffernan recognizes that their common goals met in the treatment of landscape. In many ways the two men envisioned their work in comparable terms. Both called on science to justify their experimental methods. In Wordsworth's note to "The Thorn" (1800), he reminded the reader that "Poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings" (Wordsworth 1984: 594). For his part, Constable affirmed, "Painting is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments" (Gombrich 1960: 33). In addition, they both effected an internalization of external phenomena, for they shared a temperamental response to remembered encounters with nature from childhood. If Wordsworth committed the entire *Prelude* to this project, he prefigured it in "Tintern Abbey:"

I cannot paint
 What then I was. The sounding cataract
 Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me
 An appetite: a feeling and a love ...

(ll. 76–81)

Constable echoed these sentiments in defining his painterly vocation: "The sound of water escaping from mill-dams, etc., willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brick-work, I love such things ... I shall never cease to paint such places ... painting is with me but another word for feeling, and I associate 'my careless boyhood' with all that lies on the banks of the Stour, those scenes made me a painter" (Gombrich 1960: 383).

Of course, in one sense, Constable *could* paint "what then he was." In addition to adjusting his palette to greater brightness, he found new ways to employ chiaroscuro and composition to capture the transient, atmospheric qualities that so moved him in the landscape: "my 'lights' – my 'dews' – my 'breezes' – my *bloom* and my *freshness*," he wrote, "no one of which qualities has yet been perfected on the canvas of any painter in the world" (Heffernan 1984: 26). Coleridge described the effect of hearing Wordsworth recite "Guilt and Sorrow" early in their acquaintance in terms that are remarkably similar: he was most struck by the poet's "original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms,

incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom has bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle, and the dew drops” (Heffernan 1984: 143). Although Constable could translate Newtonian discoveries about light and color more directly into the medium of paint, nevertheless, his dew (which consists of white flecks of paint that signify moisture) is rendered in the language of his art. For Wordsworth, the problem was more complex; beyond anecdotal references to Newtonian optics lay an exploration of the nature of perception, not only in terms of vision, but also in terms of human communication. He had to shift from seeing to saying, from the language of the eye to the language of the tongue.

Development of the Sensorium

Considerable advances in the study of the brain and nervous system were made during this period. The seventeenth century had conceived of prelapsarian senses as extraordinarily acute. As Joseph Glanvill argued in *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661):

Adam needed no Spectacles. The acuteness of his natural Opticks (if conjecture may have credit) shew'd him much of the Cœlestial magnificence and bravery without a Galilæo's tube ... Whereas we patch up a piece of Philosophy from a few industriously gather'd, and yet scarce well observ'd or digested experiments, his knowledge was compleatly built, upon the certain, extemporary notice of his comprehensive, unerring faculties. (Halmi 2007: 28)

The idea that close attention to nature would enable man to comprehend God's design was understood as a manner of recuperating the losses of the Fall. If some perceived theological dangers adhering to the process of scientific investigation, most people understood evidence of universal laws operating in nature as a confirmation of heavenly order. In popular culture, the notion that the evidence of the senses would confirm the teachings of religion lasted well into the nineteenth century. Thus, a review of Wordsworth's "Excursion," published in the *British Critic* in 1815, asserted that "by considering all things sensible with respect to some higher power, we are more likely to get an insight into final causes, and all the wonderful ways of Providence ... It would be a very engaging task to trace the progress of descriptive poetry with a view to this principle" (Jager 2007: 15).

By 1727, the year of Newton's death, his mathematical description of a self-sustaining universe governed by simple laws of matter in motion was generally accepted as something that could be discerned and applied. Nevertheless, a fully persuasive explanation of what enabled gravity to move material objects remained elusive and interpretations of perceived phenomena contradictory or ambiguous. Newton had speculated that a "rare, subtile and elastic" medium he called "aether" might be this hypothetical agent, but his ideas remained in manuscript until 1757. While he did not believe "aether" exercised a mechanical force, his successors conjectured that it

might serve to transmit heat, light, magnetism, and electricity (Wylie 1989: 28–32). Natural philosophers, including Joseph Priestley and Thomas Beddoes in England, began to concentrate on subjects such as these, grounding their investigations in experimentation rather than mathematics. And they produced striking discoveries. The capacity to generate electricity, for example – demonstrated by Benjamin Franklin and brought to England during his appointment as ambassador from the American colonies – not only led to interest in potential medical and climatological applications but also to explorations in the plant world and Priestley's discovery of the principle of photosynthesis. These exciting revelations shifted the center of scientific exploration from the Royal Academy in London to Bristol where Coleridge was engaged in a lecture series that entwined ideas about religion with recent experimental theories.

In his lectures, Coleridge adopted the position Ralph Cudworth had advocated in his *True Intellectual System* (1678), in part because it supported the Unitarian belief Coleridge held in the late 1790s. For Cudworth, a body of knowledge given by revelation had passed into classical antiquity, influenced the Early Christian Fathers, and been revived during the Renaissance by Hermes Trismegistus and Zoroaster. In this narrative, Moses had learned astronomy, geometry, music, medicine, and occult philosophy from the Egyptians and transmitted this knowledge through lost scriptures known to Pythagoras and Plato. Cudworth argued that atomistic theory (as developed by Newton's followers to explain nonextended centers of force) partook of this revealed knowledge. Therefore, it could not lead to atheism (Wylie 1989: 13–19). Many disputed these claims, and Coleridge's evolving criticism of Newton recognized that the main problem in describing the cause of motion lay in the contradiction between belief in "active" nature and the empirical method. In other words, the question was one of perception.

Experimental philosophers addressed the question of perception in terms that were inherently material. Anatomists such as Luis Galvani and John Hunter provided evidence that "animal electricity" determined the movement of the body, and these discoveries were applied to the nervous system (Jackson 2008: 54–5). For example, Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia* (1794) asserted that the brain received ideas through "motions" in the nerve fibers: "If our recollection or imagination be not a repetition of animal movements, I ask, in my turn, What is it? You tell me it consists of images or pictures of things. Where is this extensive canvas hung up?" (King-Hele 1986: 77–8). Although the experimental philosophers could present dazzling spectacles to the public, as Davy did in 1802 with the lectures on electrochemical phenomena that made his reputation as a "new Newton," much of the new science appeared counterintuitive. Optical technologies might serve to extend the limits of vision, yet the loss of sensible intuition – what Nicholas Halmi calls the "rupture between experience and reason" – was deeply felt. For Halmi, the result was a Kantian appeal to the mind's capacity "to see and tell of things invisible to mortal sight" (Halmi 2007: 47–8). In 1811 Wordsworth echoed this thought by giving primacy to the perceiver's emotional response to the object perceived: "The true province of the philosopher," he wrote in his essay on the sublime, "is not to grope about in the external world ... but to look

into his own mind and determine the law by which he is affected" (Wordsworth 1974: 2. 357). "Tintern Abbey," however, shows the poet still exploring the problem of the correspondence between the physiological mechanism of sight and the generation of ideas associated with the perceived object.

For Erasmus Darwin, "animal motions of the organ of sense" provided a physiological explanation for the generation of ideas. In the section of his *Zoonomia* entitled "Motions of the Retina," he claims that although the organ of vision is rarely destroyed completely, blind men never dream of visible objects (King-Hele 1986: 77). Wordsworth complicates this observation in "Tintern Abbey." Unlike a blind man, he holds sights experienced five years earlier vividly in his memory. In the poem he recounts their impact on what might be called a dreaming state and the way in which they condition what he sees in the present. The poem's opening lines define a space replete with sound (the "inland murmur" of the mountain springs) and framed by "steep and lofty cliffs," yet open to the "quiet of the sky." Verbs of perception ("hear," "behold," "impress") encompass the natural motion of the scene – the rolling stream, for example – within this aesthetic perception, giving an effect of almost photographic stillness (Murray 1967: 61–3). But the landscape present to the eye is also mediated by a mental image from the past. More potent than a blind man's memory of place, it has the power to send sensations through the poet's body, to create feelings through the "animal motions of the organs of sense":

Though absent long,
 These forms of beauty have not been to me,
 As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
 But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
 Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
 In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
 Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
 And passing even into my purer mind
 With tranquil restoration: – feelings too
 Of unremembered pleasure ...

(ll. 23–32)

Wordsworth calls his memory a "picture *of* the mind," suggesting that it is something intrinsic to the mind's function. As Heffernan notes, it represents the mind's possession, painted where only the poet can see, study, and interpret it, something he can employ as a lens through which to perceive – however faintly – "what he then was" (Heffernan 1984: 24).

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
 With many recognitions dim and faint,
 And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
 The picture of the mind revives again ...

(ll. 59–63)

Neurological research was one active part of the international scientific culture during the 1790s and into the nineteenth century that was readily incorporated into philosophical and literary discourse. The ideological stakes were high. At this time, most accepted that David Hartley's physiological explanation for psychological phenomena was correct in principle although limited by the science of his era. Hartley had proposed a system of vibrations drawn from Newton's *Principia* and early work by Thomas Willis, the first natural philosopher to posit that the soul was limited to the brain. A persuasive mixture of observation and hypothesis contained in Willis's books stimulated research into how the brain exercised control over the body. No topic in physiology was more important than determining how the nerves could carry out this expanded range of brain functions. Darwin's *Zoonomia* supplemented and updated Hartley's argument for the importance of unconscious mental functioning and his hints at the role of internal sensation in mental life (Richardson 2001: 11–14).

Most of the new research was carried out by medical doctors (notably E. J. Gall in Austria, Pierre-Jean-George Cabanis in France, and Charles Bell as well as Darwin in England). All agreed in locating the mind in the brain (terminology Wordsworth frequently adopts at this time although he reemploys "mind" in later work) and all emphasized the mind as an active processor of experience (Richardson 2001: 5–6). In this active conception they differ from John Locke's passive interpretation of the mind as a "blank page" written on by experience. Alan Richardson agrees with H. W. Piper (*The Active Universe*) in hypothesizing that Wordsworth may have encountered Cabanis in France. Clearly he would have been exposed to daring theories about human nature being proposed by Darwin, Thelwall, and also James Tobin, Davy's assistant at the Beddoes' clinic in Bristol. Both Darwin and Cabanis agreed that sensations provided by internal as well as external organs constitute the construction materials of the mind, a position reflected in the lines from "Tintern Abbey" quoted above. (Richardson 2001: 67–71)

Intellectual turmoil surrounding new neurological theories characterized other scientific endeavors. William Herschel's discovery of the infrared spectrum and Davy's work on light and colors raised the question of how extending the spectrum might revolutionize chemical theory, yet Herschel's work did not fit in with contemporary chemical theory (strongly conditioned by the groundbreaking yet imperfect system of classifying elements that Antoine Lavoisier codified in 1789 in his *Traité élémentaire de chimie*) because it explicitly related heat, light, and chemical action to one another. When Davy published an essay proposing a relation between the powers of matter and light, it was ridiculed by the press (Levere 1981: 26–7). Coleridge, who attended Davy's lectures in 1802, did so because he believed that chemical changes could only be described metaphorically. According to historian of science Trevor Levere, "the structure of chemical metaphor – combination, exchange, saturation, affinity – embedded in the language and grammar of chemistry, reflected for [Coleridge] the structure of psychology, the structure of human thought and of human language" (1981: 28). By 1807, Coleridge would write to Dorothy Wordsworth that Davy's discovery of an identity between electrical and chemical affinities had given him the

ability to decompose “*ponderable*” (italics in the original) compounds and through increase of electric energy recombine them in new combinations (Levere 1981: 34).

“Ponder” functions to some degree as such a metaphorical element. From the Middle English meaning to judge the worth or estimate the value, it was recomposed to signify weight (in a material sense) and later to weigh words or to think over carefully. By the early seventeenth century it acquired the meaning “to think deeply or reflect upon.” Thus, when Wordsworth ponders his double vision of the landscape of the Wye, he compounds physical sight with feelings through a process of fusion. The expenditure of neurological energy within the mind amalgamates light, water, and air to a universal law:

And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply *interfused*,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean, and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and *in the mind of man*,
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, *all* objects of *all* thought,
 And rolls through *all* things.

(ll. 94–103, emphasis added)

Thus, poetic imagination functions as a synthetic power. This idea was equally familiar in the visual arts. Constable wrote, “It is the business of a painter not to contend with nature & put this scene (a valley filled with imagery 50 miles long) on a canvas of a few inches, but to make something out of nothing, in attempting which he must almost of necessity become poetical” (Heffernan 1984: 52). But Davy expressed this power within the context of his own multivalent experience: “We use Words for Ideas as we use signs for collections of units in algebra ... if we were accurately to examine the progress of intellect we shall find that ... the Laws of the universe have owed their origin more to the combination of terms and propositions than to the perpetual consideration of ideas representing facts” (Levere 1981: 29).

Roger Murray’s analysis of Wordsworth’s style sees concrete metaphor as the means that allows him to meld the bodily eye and its natural objects with the separate realm of what might be called a spiritual eye and the spirit of nature (Murray 1967: 141–2). Just as landscapes remain intact after they have been translated into paint or move into the mind’s eye, memories remain concrete. They permit the sensed object to blend with the sensation to form not only a new alphabet of symbolic images but also a foundation for mature experience.

Therefore am I still
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,
 And mountains; and of all that we behold

From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
And what perceive ...

(ll. 103–7)

Perception is conditioned by what has been seen. Memory conditions what the poet thinks and feels when he returns to the Wye. But feelings associated with what has been seen may exercise a tyranny of their own, for they may obscure perceptions of reality. They may impose their content on the "outward sense." In Book 11 of the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth contrasts the "despotic" eye associated with youthful experience and the later mastery of the mind.

The state to which I now allude was one
In which the eye was master of the heart,
When that which is in every stage of life
The most despotic of our senses gained
Such strength in me as often held my mind
In absolute dominion.

(xi. 170–5)

This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
Among those passages of life in which
We have had deepest feeling that the mind
Is lord and master, and that outward sense
Is but the obedient servant of her will.

(xi. 268–73)

These passages reflect a Lockean concept of association. In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke gave the example of an adult conditioned to abhor honey as a result of an "over dose" of honey consumed as a child (1975: 397). Of course, not every child would eat too much and not every adult would be imprinted by such sensations. However, in making his argument for poetic election, Wordsworth acknowledges both the process of imprinting (as it evolved in the famous "spots of time") and the extent to which the passage from material to mental is both arbitrary, in the sense that it is not a universal experience, and unstable (in the sense that the potent experience is neither sought nor certain).

If what has been seen and remembered can be considered tyrannical, acute observation also allows the poet fresh insight by providing standards of comparison. The idea that each time a painter undertakes a subject he attempts to forget the manner in which others have striven to capture nature is a convention in the fine arts. Constable claimed he did this, and Chardin and Poussin said something similar. Nevertheless, wiping earlier models from the mind denies the artist a species of visual classification system that increases his awareness – and that acknowledges the relative truth of any representation. Gombrich makes this point by discussing how Constable, an artist renowned for his depiction of clouds, relied on schemata for portraying cloud

formations that he copied from Alexander Cozens (Gombrich 1960: 178). Heffernan observes the same process in Wordsworth, noting that Hazlitt was much struck when the poet remarked the beautiful effect of the sun setting on a *yellow* bank of grass. To make this “discovery,” as Hazlitt called it, Wordsworth had to suppress his knowledge that grass is normally labeled green. That knowledge was a precondition for his perception of the bank, but what he saw transformed what he “knew,” and he recognized not only the effect but also the transformation (Heffernan 1984: 148–9). The result appears in “The Tables Turned,” written two months before “Tintern Abbey”:

The sun above the mountain's head,
A freshening lustre mellow,
Through all the long green fields has spread,
His first sweet evening yellow.

(ll. 5–8)

Experiments in Language

Wordsworth's early poetry pursues comparable experiments in transformation within the parameters of poetic diction. The *Lyrical Ballads* opposed aspects of formulaic oral poetry (the communal ballad) and the literate – often written – words to a song (the private lyric) in an attempt to devise fresh modes of communication with readers. Employing a variety of meters and forms both ancient and new, these poems resisted the artificiality that had distinguished Poetry from everyday speech. In other words, this “chemical combination” fused elements of meter, emotion, and performance into a fresh “ponderable” compound. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800/1802), Wordsworth described its language in terms of orality, pleasure, and music:

The first volume of these poems ... was published as an *experiment*, which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in the state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart. (1984: 595, emphasis added)

Early in the eighteenth century, the simplicity and directness of ballad and song forms began to find favor over the artificial regularity of the iambic pentameter that dominated English verse, and by mid-century, it was possible to conceive of form being determined by content. In 1784 Charlotte Turner Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* revived the possibility that interior emotion might be expressed through form. Five years later, William Lisle Bowles's “Fourteen Sonnets written chiefly on Picturesque Spots during a Journey” linked emotions to landscape (Stewart 2008: 54–7). Along with the Miltonic legacy of enjambed blank verse, therefore, such models formed a portion of the background from which Wordsworth worked. In “Tintern Abbey” the novelties

are as evident as the echoes. For example, the poem blends borrowings from Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (vi. 426; "And half create the wondrous World they see") with the scientific implications discussed above. The poem is composed in blank verse and references the "evil tongues" from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (vii. 25–6), yet the paragraphs function as analogues of the strophe, antistrophe, and epode of an ode. The full title repeats the formula "lines written" found in numerous poems from the *Lyrical Ballads*, where they accentuate not only the written and printed form in contrast to the oral ballad, but also "the obvious disjunction between the particularized time and place of the writing and its 'record' in the printed volume" (Langan and McLane 2008: 249). In "Tintern Abbey," moreover, this location displaces the ruined abbey (a major tourist attraction at the time) with the poet's own emotional relation to the Wye.

Both Darwin and Cabanis alluded to a universal response to metrical language as a pleasurable mental activity. According to Darwin, the body's store of neural energy must be expended through the action of the senses and musical time, rhyme, and alliteration capitalized on a propensity for repetition. The power of association, he believed, made repeated actions the most pleasurable source of relief for the mind (Darwin 1794–6: 1. 250–1). Davy's notebooks reveal a comparable concern with the "connections between our sensations and words," particularly the way in which language might be made more persuasive by connecting it with "some sensation or idea [of] pleasure or pain" (Jackson 2008: 44–5). Wordsworth's habit of composing while walking on a straight gravel walk (Stewart 2008: 59) and performing his verse in a "chaunt" (Richardson 2001: 79) underscores his physical sensitivity to rhythm. A striking passage from the 1799 *Prelude* adopts Newtonian language to describe the neural energy the child draws from his mother's heartbeat. Passing "along his infant veins," these sensations endow him with his initial sensibilities by interfusion of the "gravitation and the filial bond / Of Nature that connect him with the world" (1799 Part Two, ll. 292–4; see Sperry 1987).

In his note to "The Thorn" Wordsworth explained the importance he attached to the musical aspects of poetic diction:

[N]ow every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feeling without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language. During such efforts there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character. There are also various other reasons why repetition and apparent tautology are frequently beauties of the highest kind. Among the chief of these reasons is the interest which the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passion, but as *things*, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion. (1984: 594)

If Wordsworth's imagery in this note echoes Darwin's notion that the mind might be relieved by repetition, the idea that communication involves active stimulation of the senses was common among radical politicians during the 1790s. They followed Burke in comparing revolutionary sentiment to a swift, unseen, yet potent force acting on the senses and even compared it to delivering an electric charge to the nervous system. For example, every sentence of Thelwall's lectures of 1795 was said to dart "from

breast to breast with electric contagion” (cited in Jackson 2008: 53). His *Rights of Nature* (1796) praises the press as a conductor of intellect that can deliver the electric shocks that will catalyze social change and awaken the public from its “sluggish and insensate” torpor (Jackson 2008: 47–51). Although the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* lacks Thelwall’s overtly political aim, the characterization is parallel.

Many commentators remark the extent to which Wordsworth prized poetry above science. Insisting on a separation between poetry and science in the Preface was not merely an abstract moral position, for Wordsworth knew that Thelwall had been tried and might have been executed for his radical politics in 1794, and had spent nine months in the Tower. By the time he visited Wordsworth and Coleridge at Alfoxden in 1797, he had taken precautions to mute his political activity and ultimately turned his scientific interests to speech therapy (Roe 1988: 146–7; Thelwall 2001: 49–50 n46). Giving primacy to poetry, therefore, provided Wordsworth with a means of safely depoliticizing his stated aim of rousing the public. Yet even while making comparisons, he employed concepts and language that were drawn from scientific theory:

The knowledge both of the Poet and of the Man of Science is pleasure; but the knowledge of the one cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance; the other is a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings. The Man of Science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. (Wordsworth 1984: 606)

A search for truth conducted in words necessarily engaged another topic of active investigation among natural philosophers, the formation of language. As with other scientific studies, theories were proposed and debated into the nineteenth century. Locke’s *Essay* was one of the examination texts at Cambridge and would have been familiar to Wordsworth (Johnston 1998: 159). In contrast to the Adamic theory of language in which divinely given meanings were stable (whether recognized or not), for Locke, words stood primarily for ideas and only secondarily for things. As arbitrary signs colored by association, they were always in danger of becoming subjective and private. If more mental operations were required to interpret them, they were more likely to be misunderstood. For that reason metaphoric language lent itself to linguistic corruption. However, in *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1703–5, published 1765), Leibniz resurrected the theory that Adam had received language as a divine gift, asserting that words were linked to objects of nature and originated in natural sounds and movements of the vocal organs. This view of a “natural” language occurred in Rousseau as well as Herder, who agreed that words contained presymbolic vestiges from natural cries and sensory experience. Yet in *Origin and Progress of Language* (1774–92), James Burnet, Lord Monboddo, argued that as an acquired “art,” language required vast prior social and intellectual development (Keach 1993: 98–107).

Wordsworth was in France when Condillac was at the height of his fame, so presumably he encountered the theories published in *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746), in which Condillac attempted to prove that sensation is not only the source for basic ideas, such as colors, tastes, or perceptions of hot and cold – those Locke defined as sensations – but is also the origin for the processing steps implicit in Locke's notion that complex ideas are composed through a process of reflection. Thus, language responds both to social determination and the constitutive acts of the individual mind (Keach 1993: 98–107). Richardson argues that Wordsworth forged an unsystematic language theory from elements taken from both Locke and Condillac but within a fundamentally organic understanding of language. He remained, Richardson says, "haunted by a fear that speech may drift free of common experience." Thus, his use of emotive interjections, metrics, rhyme, alliteration, and figurative language is designed to link his own elementary feelings with those of his audience through a medium that cannot be independent of the human body (Richardson 2001: 84–92). Traces of both the dangers inherent in the communicative power of words and an association with its grounding in physical phenomena appear in Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1810–12):

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts ... Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve. (Wordsworth 1974: 2. 84–5)

The Dream of the Arab in Book 5 of the *Prelude* – a passage constructed around complicated mental operations – directly engages the disquieting dominion of words. Its perceptual ambiguities include the question of the dreamer's identity, the connection between the Arab who is not, yet also is Don Quixote, and perhaps most problematically, the stone and the shell presented as symbolic books containing all human knowledge:

the arab told him that the stone –
To give it in the language of the dream –
Was *Euclid's Elements*. "And this," said he,
"This other," pointing to the shell, "this book
Is something of more worth."

(v. 86–90)

What Wordsworth does in this passage is set up what Murray calls the "common vanishing point of two experiences," a paradox of perception tied in part to recognizable objects and sensory experiences, like that of holding a shell to the ear, but at the same time, stretching perception into new categories through the "the language of the dream" (Murray 1967: 22–3). The effect resembles that of a pictorial illusion in which blinking reveals the face of an old hag in the profile of a fashionable woman – an optical trick Wordsworth has translated into words. The stone and the shell are simultaneously ordinary and unusual, inanimate and animate.

The paradox is one of association as well as connection, for the Arab values the worth of geometry below that of poetry. Yet as he expands his description of the contents of the stone and of the shell, their relative value blurs:

“... he himself
 Was going then to bury those two books –
 The one that held acquaintance with the stars,
 And wedded man to man by purest bond
 Of nature, undisturbed by space or time;
 Th’ other that was a god, yea many gods,
 Had voices more than all the winds, and was
 A joy, a consolation, and a hope.”

(v. 102–9)

Here Wordsworth seems to contradict the distinction in his 1802 Preface that science seeks knowledge that is difficult of access and isolated from ordinary experience while poetry seeks knowledge that is integrative in its universality. At a superficial level, he was proficient enough in geometry to pass the first year exams at Cambridge with ease and little additional study (Johnston 1998: 188–91), but while Book 6 (ll. 115–67) provides one example of the consolation of geometry, in Book 2 (ll. 208–36), the dissecting aspect of geometry stands for everything that checked the continuity of his autobiography and threatened the integrity of his mind. Elsewhere in Book 5 (ll. 294–342), his rendering of the infant prodigy critiques an intellect deformed by scientific study. Heffernan postulates, therefore, that Wordsworth held a double view. On the one hand, geometry represents an analytic science that measures and dismembers the world. On the other, it represents a set of dispassionate and timeless principles that join men by the “purest bond of nature” – a capacity to perceive enduring patterns in the universe. The knowledge contained in the shell is equally multivalent in its powers: it opposes traditional yet rigid logic that resists change (a parallel to Locke’s attack on the term-parsing and convolutions of thought he ascribed to Scholasticism) not simply with poetry but with evolutionary and progressive knowledge aligned with the shell’s open-ended spiral shape and articulated by natural processes (Heffernan 1984: 186–7).

The sound coming from the shell is cacophonous, yet the dreamer can interpret it as a message of disaster. In this way, he stamps the dream world with his mind’s image, just as he clothes it in symbols as unquiet as those Wordsworth would condemn in the *Essay on Epitaphs* for the shell is also a voice of passion (Miller 1985: 99–100). Thus, the binary opposition of stone to shell or geometry to poetry carries a further set of associations, opposing the knowledge printed in man-made books to the understanding of nature as a book written by God. Hartley had theorized that although speech had become corrupted after the Fall, as natural philosophers completed their work, mankind would be brought closer to the prelapsarian state of knowledge and regain the original state of natural speech. Then God would speak directly through nature and the natural and social world would be reconciled. On the flyleaf of his copy of Priestley’s *Hartley’s Theory of the Human Mind on the principle of*

the Association of Ideas (1775), Coleridge wrote, "Ideas may become as vivid & distinct, & the feelings accompanying them as vivid, as original Impressions – and this may finally make a man independent of his Senses, – one use for poetry" (Wylie 1989: 85). By allowing objects of nature to speak within the context of a dream and even more ambiguously in the mouth of a narrator of uncertain provenance and substance, Wordsworth exposes this hope as a fantasy of human imagination (Galperin 1993: 108–10; see also Fry 2008: 136).

Space or Time

As representatives of kinds of knowledge, the stone and the shell also may connote a more individual sense of evolution. The stone is an artifact that acquires its form through external abrasion or polishing. The shell acquires its form in conjunction with the growth of the creature living within it. In the context of mental development, this is analogous to the contrast between externally imposed learning (the process of intense study and training that Wordsworth decried in his description of the infant prodigy) and an instinctual response to a combination of inner need and environmental circumstance (the process combining physiological stimuli, association, and reflection theorized by Locke, Hartley, Darwin, and Condillac). The evolution of the shell, in other words, resembles the process Wordsworth described as the source of his poetic voice.

Serving as a prefatory narrative of that growth process, "Tintern Abbey" spirals through a series of images that turn in upon themselves yet remain in many ways unfixd. Actual perception, scenes derived from a remembered past, and imagined visualizations of a future time conflate or superimpose one impression with another. An imagined hermit inhabits the woods; external sensations penetrate the physical body with transforming power; the passions of youth are transmuted across time; and a predictive fusion blends his sister's memories with his own. His diction works a kind of verbal chemistry on the "stuff" of experience, separating elements within a scene and then recomounding them. In the lines addressed to the Wye, for example, the poet heats his dark interior vision with exclamation marks and repetitions ("how oft" twice repeated and then resolved into "how often") to synthesize a delicate personification of a natural object:

how oft,
 In darkness, and amid the many shapes
 Of joyless day-light; when the fretful stir
 Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
 Have hung upon the beatings of my heart,
 How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee
 O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods,
 How often has my spirit turned to thee!

(ll. 51–8)

The line break that follows reinforces a shift from memory to the present perception of the remembering narrator as a boundary to be crossed. From a memory of consolation the poem shifts to one of formative energy in which, as Heffernan says, a desire to discern or encompass natural forms elicits from them a vision of transcendent permanence (Heffernan 1984: 171–3). Wordsworth structures that vision not only in time but also in a space that is both physical and psychic. His angle of vision shifts from an elevated view (“a few miles above Tintern Abbey”) to one shared with Dorothy “upon the banks / Of this fair river” (ll. 115–16). The actual geography of the poem is a construct, for it alters the location of the cliffs and displaces the ruined abbey (Galperin 1993: 56–61). In that sense, too, the process of meditation and creation expands the literal space to fit evolving conceptual needs. As an historical artifact, the ruined Cistercian site (a “stone” in our mental analogy) symbolizes theology transmuted through time into a natural theology – the book of nature. It figures as an ornamental adjunct to the interior landscape that dominates the poem.

The spatial organization of the poem reflects this inward curving of experience. It unfolds in three planes: the historical background (hidden in “wreathes of smoke”), the middle ground supplied by nature, and the true foreground of the traveler, the visualizing eye (Liu 1989: 10–11). Spatial framing acts as a carapace to protect the vulnerable sensorium from the “heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world” (“Tintern Abbey,” ll. 40–1), but it also facilitates focused attention, the quiet eye that can “see into the life of things” (l. 49). Many portions of the *Prelude* adopt a particular angle of vision during a formative moment. In the rowing scene, a trick of perspective makes the “mighty cliffs” appear to stride after the boy’s boat. In the skating scene, motion induces another illusion that culminates in a dizzy experience of transcendence. By rendering the landscape mysterious and haunting, the shrouded elevation from which the boy watches in the Christmas-time spot works to elevate the mind.

Wordsworth’s account of climbing Mount Snowdon in the final book of the *Prelude* dramatizes space as a creation of imagination working through the eye. The framed semblance of a seascape is immense yet ethereal, but it exists in clear contrast to “the real sea”:

The moon stood naked in the heavens at height
Immense above my head, and on the shore
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which meek and silent rested at my feet.
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still ocean, and beyond,
Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the sea, the real sea, that seemed
To dwindle and give up its majesty,
Usurped upon as far as sight could reach.

(xiii. 41–51)

A situation in which a traveler is arrested by a radiantly illuminated landscape is a frequent motif in the paintings of the German Romantic, Caspar Friedrich, who shares Wordsworth's dual emphasis on the specificity of nature and the intervening subjectivity of a mediating figure (Koerner 1990: 183–5). In pictures containing such a *Rukenfigur*, this internal spectator appropriates the direct experience of the landscape, just as the *Prelude*'s narrator portrays his own vision of nature. In Friedrich's paintings what the actual viewer experiences becomes a retrospective construction formed by a prior gaze. This is precisely what Wordsworth achieves in his verbal manipulation of space and time. Koerner (1990: 8) equates Friedrich's framing of the gaze with the construction of an altar, an interpretation that coincides with the artist's avowed pietism. But Wordsworth's vision on Mount Snowdon assumes a comparable function, for the conclusion of the *Prelude* recounts how in his meditation later that night, the scene appeared as "the perfect image of a mighty mind." This formulation recalls the goal initially set forth by Enlightenment natural philosophers who believed their scientific quests would ultimately enable them to decipher the book of nature: it equates that power Nature "thrusts forth upon the senses" with the "glorious faculty" possessed by "higher minds" (ll. 86–90). In 1798–9 Wordsworth celebrated his understanding of this power in a fragment which further celebrates the climactic insight of Book 13:

There is creation in the eye,
Nor less in all the other senses; powers
They are that colour, model, and combine
The things perceived with such an absolute
Essential energy that we may say
That those most godlike faculties of ours
At one and the same moment are the mind
And the mind's minister.

...

and when

Our trance had left us, oft have we, by aid
Of the impressions which it left behind,
Looked inward on ourselves, and learned, perhaps,
Something of what we are.

(Wordsworth 1949: 5. 343–4, ll. 1–8, 12–16)

The power of the senses – framed not by the limits of the physical eye but by the creative energy of the imagination – embodies Wordsworth's understanding of the underlying mechanism capable of supporting a poetic science. In this vision, the invisible force of imagination allows the mind to order its universe with a control as absolute as the laws of gravity.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 18 “Poetry, Conversation, Community: *Annus Mirabilis*, 1797–1798”; chapter 22 “Romanticism, Sport, and Late Georgian Poetry”

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Romanticism, Gnosticism, and Neoplatonism

Laura Quinney

Romantic Platonism was a significant topic in the early to mid twentieth century, at the time when mainstream academic criticism began to take the philosophical ambitions of British Romantic poetry seriously. In addition to general studies, such as M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism*, that covered the Romantic reaction to Plato and his followers, there were John D. Rea's and Herbert Hartman's source-critical articles on Neoplatonic influence in Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as book-length treatments of Shelley's Platonism in C. E. Pulos's *The Deep Truth* and James Notopolous's *The Platonism of Shelley*, and of Blake's Neoplatonism in Kathleen Raine's *Blake and Tradition* and George Mills Harper's *The Neoplatonism of William Blake*. Romantic Platonism lay close to the surface and plainly solicited investigation. Tantalizing connections dot the literature. Charles Lamb remembered meeting the boy Coleridge as he loitered in the corridors of Christ's Hospital reading a volume of Iamblichus (Lamb 1896: 61); Coleridge describes his youthful infatuation with Neoplatonism, and its importance to his reception of German Idealism in *Biographia Literaria* (Coleridge 1985: 1. 144–5); Wordsworth's *Intimations Ode* draws unapologetically on the concept of Platonic *anagoresis* and the Neoplatonic descent of the soul; Shelley, having encountered some Plato in translation while he was still at school, learned to read Greek and translated the *Symposium*; in "A Defence of Poetry," he calls Plato a poet, whose "truth and splendour" in imagery, and whose "melody" in language "is the most intense that it is possible to conceive" (Shelley 2002: 514); Blake, though in later years critical of Plato, nonetheless shares with Plotinus and other Neoplatonists the notion that there is a true, impersonal "soul" to be recovered behind the accretions of a false, worldly "Selfhood."

What made these connections – a better word might be "identifications" – possible? British university culture of the eighteenth century was Latin rather than Greek centered, and Plato was not featured in the curriculum (Evans 1943). As part of their reaction against received Enlightenment opinion, the Romantics joined in the late eighteenth- and

early nineteenth-century rediscovery of Plato. Coleridge and Shelley knew the work of Thomas Taylor, who in the 1790s first translated all the dialogues into English. Wordsworth and Blake probably had read Taylor, too, and Blake may have known him personally (see Evans 1940). But Taylor himself was a symptom of a prevailing change in intellectual and cultural temperament. The time was ripe for a shift from the stern materialism of the empiricists to a discourse that honored higher aspirations, and the three Romantic poets I am discussing – Wordsworth, Blake and Shelley – either were or would have been attracted to the Platonic tradition without the help of Thomas Taylor. Still, it requires some further work of discrimination to say what it was exactly that they were attracted to – if indeed there is any common thread. (For the purposes of this essay I concentrate on these three because their work clearly “reveals the assimilative rather than the imitative use of Platonic doctrines,” to borrow a phrase with which Notopoulos characterizes the *Intimations Ode* (Notopoulos 1949: 165). It is to be hoped that James Vigus’s new book, *Platonic Coleridge*, will show us the way to a deeper understanding of Coleridge’s engagement with Plato.)

I must begin by bracketing some parts of this large topic – in other words, by saying straightforwardly what I will be addressing, and what I will omit to address. For there are obviously many points of contact between Platonism and British Romanticism – any number of ideas and images were borrowed or overlap – and quite a few of these are covered effectively in the titles I cited above. There is also one general claim, the literary commonplace stipulating that the recovery of Plato allows for the recovery of Spirit, and for a revival of Idealism. In what follows, I will counter that equation of Romantic Platonism with philosophical optimism. I cast the net very wide by including both Platonism and Neoplatonism under the general rubric of “Plato and his followers,” with the gathering of another participant, “Gnosticism,” in my title. (Gnosticism enters the study of Romantic poetry first, through Blake’s wholehearted embrace of the charge that he was a Gnostic (see below) and then, more fully, through Harold Bloom’s lifelong meditation on the Gnostic character of Romanticism in general (see Bloom 1982). I will return to these subjects below.) Though related, the three “isms” – Platonism, Neoplatonism and Gnosticism – are not identical, and it barely makes sense to treat them as one coherent source. I will not be doing so, but will be following out a single strain they share, and for a cogent genetic reason: Platonism is a legacy of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism; they are its sibling descendants.

Though Neoplatonism arguably has the more sophisticated philosophical breadth, both Gnosticism and Neoplatonism are essentially religions of personal salvation, emerging at more or less the same time as Christianity. Like Christianity, Gnosticism arises out of the intellectual ferment of the Second Temple period, with its explosion of religious experiment in Jewish literature, and it is crossed with Hellenistic influence. Neoplatonism responds to the same atmosphere of cultural anxiety; it comes out of the Hellenistic academy (Plotinus studied in Alexandria) but takes a distinctly religious turn, sometimes tending toward mysticism. Gnosticism and Neoplatonism share a basic Platonic heritage in that each treats the mundane world as degraded in relation to a transcendent reality, and each represents the soul as having descended or fallen into the degraded world which is not its true home and from which it seeks to

reascend. In Gnosticism, the soul is a “divine spark” of the true God who is hidden, his place usurped by a false God who created the material world in which the soul is at present entrapped. In Neoplatonism, God is the impersonal One whose bounty overflows into progressively lower orders of being, like a graduated fountain; the soul’s proper home is just below the One, in the order of the “All-Soul,” but it has temporarily fallen into the lowest order of being, the material world.

In his treatise “Against the Gnostics,” Plotinus insisted vigorously on the distinction between the Gnostics’ absolute repudiation of the material world as an order of being unrelated to the divine, and his own endorsement of the beauty of the material world, which is after all an emanation of the divine, however lowly (Plotinus 1991: 108–32). Plotinus claims that unlike the Gnostics, he is not anticosmic. Yet, as Hans Jonas points out, this claim is undermined by his account of the soul, sorrowfully imprisoned in an earthly existence which threatens to erode its spiritual integrity (Jonas 1974). In moral terms, Plotinus cannot explain its descent into this life of evil and suffering by his fountain metaphor of automatic “emanation,” but instead has to resort to a psychological explanation of the kind employed in Gnostic mythology: the soul descended by its own fault, through hubris. Souls fell because of their “boldness and the entering into becoming (genesis) and the first otherness and the will to belong to themselves” (quoted in Jonas 1974: 330–1). Though the material world may represent a distant emanation of the divine, from the soul’s point of view it is an unredeemed place of punishment and exile.

I will concentrate on one particular strain of Platonism, Neoplatonism and Gnosticism: their shared concept of the exile of the soul. In his major account, *The Gnostic Religion*, where he makes the case for the psychological purchase of Gnosticism, Jonas argues that this concept addresses the state of “existential alienation,” and in an influential epilogue, he relates it to what he terms similar concepts in Heidegger and existentialist philosophy. The exile of the soul is a very old idea in the West; it descends to Gnosticism and Neoplatonism from Plato; but it descends to Plato and Socrates, in turn, from Orphic and Pythagorean religion. The Orphics punned on the Greek words “soma sema” – the body is a burial mound – and both the Orphics and the Pythagoreans rely heavily on the metaphor of the body as a prison (see Courcelle 1965 and 1966). Plato picks up the metaphors but enlarges on what it means for the soul to be buried or imprisoned in the body. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates argues that the soul is immortal, a fellow of the Ideas and the gods of the intelligible world; its aspiration after knowledge and truth is impeded by material reality. Therefore, “all those who actually engage in philosophy aright are practicing nothing other than dying and being dead” (Plato 1993a: 9, paragraph 64a). In the *Republic*, he is plainer still in his evocation of the soul’s pathos, restless in its sojourn here and longing to be free. When Glaucon remarks that the perfect city is merely visionary, Socrates replies, “It may be, however, that it is retained in heaven as a paradigm for those who desire to see it and, through seeing it, to return from exile” (Plato 1993b: 343, para. 592b). A visionary construction is worthwhile because it satisfies the soul’s deepest desire: to return to what shares its nature. The Greek word Plato uses, “katoikein,” means “to go home.” But consequently, the

soul is in the meantime not at home; it is alone, wandering, adrift, ill at ease. These terms characterize the state of “existential alienation” which Gnosticism and Neoplatonism adduce, and it is so pervasive in them as to be easily adduced. Plotinus, for example, writes of the soul’s “longing to break away from the body and live sunken within the veritable self,” and he interprets the wanderings of Odysseus as an allegory of the soul’s pining for a spiritual *nostos*: “Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland’: this is the soundest counsel” (Plotinus refers to *Iliad* 2. 140; Plotinus 1991: 54). Gnostic literature more poignantly insists that the soul’s plight is like that of an orphaned child, an exile from the sweets of home. In the words of a Mandaeen hymn, “I remain a stranger in their world. / I stand among the wicked like a child without a father. / Like a fatherless child, an untended fruit” (Barnstone and Meyer 2006: 562). Jonas names “dread” and “anxiety” as the affects that subtend these metaphors. They draw for their psychological purchase on the disconcertion and loneliness of the phenomenal self, burdened by a sense of supra-mundane vocation – a vocation beyond the given reality – that it does not know how to fulfill.

Now that I have used the term “supra-mundane,” meaning “transcendent,” the connection with Romantic poetry comes clear. The connection, however, is not with the idea of *finding* but with that of *longing* for the transcendent, in other words, not with a religious or philosophical concept but with a psychological representation. It is not a question of metaphysics or ontology but of the psychology of the subject *as a subject*. Romantic poets do not turn to Gnosticism and Neoplatonism for religion, but for the adducement of affects linked to the subject’s experience of its own being: anxiety, bewilderment and frustration. One of the attractions that Platonism and particularly its religious descendants exercised upon Romantic poets – I would argue that it is one of the most important attractions – is that it provided imagery for adumbrating the everyday alienation of the subject, bewildered by the intuition that its subject-life does not fit in the world and it ought instead to be directing that life toward an end it cannot fathom. The religious paradigms are mythologies designed to explain where these feelings come from – the soul’s descent is thus a figure of thought – and the Romantic poets I am discussing cheerfully adopt the religious paradigms, for the most part, *as* mythologies. The exception is Blake, who really did believe in something like the impersonal Plotinian soul and its participation in the All-Soul, but not in the immortality of the soul, or in the afterlife, or in the existence of anything divine outside of human being.

There is a limit to how much Romantic poetry I can cite to demonstrate the truth of this claim, but I shall discuss some of what I consider to be central and symptomatic examples, even though I may run the risk of appearing to marshal the evidence selectively. The chief counterargument lies less in particular passages I fail to quote as in a general view of Romantic poetry either as confident of our harmonious being in nature, or as celebrating a secure relation to transcendence. Many of the very poems I discuss are or could be interpreted in a manner exactly opposite to my own, by a Matthew Arnold (1922) or an M. H. Abrams (1973), a Jerome McGann (1983) or an Alan Liu (1989). Let the reader decide. I shall begin with Shelley, whose Platonism is probably

the frankest of any Romantic poet's. Notopoulos's scholarly book gives a detailed list of Platonic echoes in Shelley's poetry and prose, as well as providing an account of their "direct" and "indirect" sources. It is a commonplace of the criticism, more generally, to speak of Shelley's "search for the Ideal" as a Platonic aspiration. We can, however, flip this interpretation of Shelley upside down. For he is less likely to celebrate Platonic desire than he is to meditate on the motive power and the intensity of its frustration.

"Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," though it honors the moral force of the "Spirit of Beauty," reminds us of its tantalizing evanescence: "Why dost thou pass away and leave our state, / This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?" (ll. 16–17). Notopolous believes that Shelley did not come by the term "Intellectual Beauty" directly from Plato, but from Plotinus's Sixth Tractate, "Beauty," by way of Spenser's Platonic *Fowre Hymnes* (Notopoulos 1949: 196). Certainly his treatment of Intellectual Beauty is more Plotinian, that is, more tentative and pessimistic than Plato's, who suggests in the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium* that our approach to it will always be asymptotic, but not that it is out of our power to ascend toward it: it is a mental concept after all, and therefore we may put our minds to trying to work to reach it. But Shelley's Intellectual Beauty is a force that comes and goes unpredictably, at its own will, and the human agent is reduced to helplessness in relation to it. We may make ourselves receptive, and we may wish and pray for its appearance (as Shelley does at the end of the poem), but we cannot secure its appearance by our own labors. Shelley indicates that there is something fully paradoxical in our relation to it – that it asks to be grasped though it is ungraspable – when he says that it is nourishment to human thought "Like darkness to a dying flame!" (ll. 44–5). Shelley in no way suggests that the aspiration it inspires is futile, but already in the comparatively simple formulations of the Hymn, we see an emphasis on the suspended and restless state in which aspiration leaves the aspirant.

Later poems treat this state more analytically and describe it more subtly. In the visionary *Prometheus Unbound*, the impasse of despair is surmounted, but not before we are firmly reminded of its "intellectual" origin. The Furies taunt the Titan hero with the failure of his philanthropy: he has aroused aspiration in human beings which they cannot fulfill.

Dost thou boast the clear knowledge thou waken'dst for man?
Then was kindled within him a thirst which outran
Those perishing waters: a thirst of fierce fever,
Hope, love, doubt, desire – which consume him forever.

(I. 541–4)

The word "thirst" is specifically Platonic. In Shelley's translation of the *Symposium*, Love is defined as "that which thirsts for the beautiful" (Shelley 1880: 211, para. 201b). Shelley had used the metaphor with a similar inflection earlier in his career, in a fragment his editor entitled "Unsatisfied Desire," which begins "To thirst and find no fill ..." (Shelley 1970: 549). But in the Furies' speech the figure bursts out of this

cliché into a tortuous paradox. A thirst like a fever exceeds the strangely “perishing” waters that might have sated it. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates compares souls with intemperate appetites to the Water-Carriers of Hades – maidens condemned to carry water in a leaky sieve. (An image of frustration parallel to the myths of Sisyphus and Tantalus.) For Shelley, desire – Eros itself – is insatiable. Shelley interpreted the *Symposium* in this light, understanding it to argue that Love is that which thirsts *vainly* for the beautiful. (This is the Lacanian definition of desire as lack *avant la lettre*.) But Shelley’s metaphor insists on a further implication: desire is both unappeasable *and* irrepressible. The thirst cannot be filled, and in its insatiability it becomes a “fierce fever” – the metaphor changes in midstream – a fire within which “consumes” the human agent. To spread this process of unwitting self-consumption out along a line, is life. We might compare Ashbery’s bitter reflection that “Dreams prolong us as they are absorbed” and thereby “Something like living occurs” (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Ashbery 1975).

Shelley incisively conveys the necessity of frustration and disappointment in a related image from *Adonais*, where he makes use of explicitly Plotinian terms:

That Light whose smile kindles the Universe,
That Beauty in which all things work and move,
That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse
Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love
Which through the web of being blindly wove
By man and beast and earth and air and sea,
Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of
The fire for which all thirst; now beams on me,
Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality.

(ll. 478–86)

The idea of the smiling Light – identified also with “Beauty,” “Benediction” and “Love,” a stream of soul sustaining and transcending the malicious “web of being” – derives from Plotinus. The end of the passage translates the Beauty into “fire” which is no longer the form of our thirst, but, disturbingly, its object. Now we reach the apex of Shelley’s paradoxical formulations, in which we thirst for a fire we obviously cannot “drink.” Nor can we even behold the fire, because all the things of the world, even other people, form only teasing “mirrors” or simulacra of the inaccessible source. Yet we are not free to desist from desire. No clarity of understanding nor any extreme of frustration can suspend its quixotic demand. Shelley often renders this demand as the tug of a mysterious, unrealizable vocation – a genuinely Platonic loyalty to transcendence that, unlike Plato’s, has no means of application. Shelley reflects on the sense of inner contradiction that results in poems spanning his mature career, from *Alastor* to *The Triumph of Life*. It is most subtly represented in the self-description of *The Triumph*’s “Rousseau,” subject to an exquisite sense of self-division. He says he has been so corrupted by “Earth” as to have been disfigured, and now wears a “disguise” corrupting or “staining” that within “which still disdains to wear

it" (ll. 205–6). So the spark remains, but as a nagging prompt to guilt and unfulfillment. The conventional reading of Shelley's Platonism represents him as entertaining – borrowing, endorsing, questioning – Platonic doctrines. Sometimes his poems are said to champion an optimistic Platonic idealism, and then to reject it. I argue that it is not Platonic doctrine he is drawn to but rather the implicit psychology of the Platonic tradition. Many of his poems explore the inner forces and stresses of our highly problematic "immortal longings." He uses the Platonic and Neoplatonic figures – the mythology of Love and the One on high – to name and represent this feature of subject-life – its restless desire to be other than it is. In the idiom of natural psychology, this is "existential alienation" – the sense of displacement and incompleteness, the unfulfilled vocation, the longing and solitude of the phenomenal self. That Shelley focuses on this kind of psychological experience requires no demonstration.

It may seem less intuitive to say that Wordsworth deals with "existential alienation," or that he adduces it by means of imagery drawn from the Platonic tradition. Certainly in the bulk of his poetry written by 1805, including *The Prelude*, he works to lift the burden of the subject's solitude by means of federation with "Nature" (or what the Greeks and the Gnostics would have called "the cosmos"), characterizing the interrelationship of subjectivity with the natural world first in an empiricist and later a Kantian vocabulary. "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her," he avers in "Tintern Abbey" (ll. 102–3), and rather more programmatically explains, in "Expostulation and Reply":

I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our mind impress
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

(ll. 21–5)

In poems of the 1790s (including "The Two-Part Prelude"), Wordsworth adapts the empiricist vocabulary of external stimuli and sensory impressions to work out his intuitions about how we acquire spiritual education through natural experience. By the time he wrote the concluding book of *The Prelude* in 1804, with its emblematic scene of the ocean beyond Snowdon "Usurped upon as far as sight could reach" by a "huge sea of mist," and the imagination finding its likeness in "the homeless voice of waters" rising through the dark chasm in the mist (Wordsworth 1979: 1805 *Prelude* xiii. 51; xiii. 43; xiii. 63), Wordsworth has settled upon a more complex, if more problematic model, in which the mind outgrows nature by discovering its own superiority, though they remain on friendly terms. In a curious subduction of his old empiricist vocabulary, Wordsworth says the "power" which Nature sometimes "Thrusts forth upon the senses" no longer serves to shape the imagination, but merely to remind it of itself (xiii. 86). Patently demoted, nature in its power has become a "counterpart / And brother" of imagination (xiii. 89–90).

The Intimations Ode, arguably Wordsworth's most influential poem, breaks with this project of reconciliation, employing explicitly Neoplatonic terms to propose that the subject is properly of a higher order and permanently estranged from the material world and material existence. (Rea suggests that Wordsworth garnered the doctrine of "descent and gradual forgetfulness" from Proclus by way of Coleridge (Rea 1928: 208)). In fact, the specter of an impassable gulf between the subject and the world is already adumbrated in the startling interpolation of Book 6 of *The Prelude*, where "Imagination" rises up to impede Wordsworth's "song" like "an unfathered vapour" (kin to the orphan and "homeless" voice of waters (Wordsworth 1979: 1805 *Prelude* vi. 525–7)). Geoffrey Hartman suggests that Wordsworth expresses a fearfulness about imagination in this passage, for it threatens to precipitate "an apocalyptic moment in which past and future overtake the present, and the poet, cut off from nature by imagination is, in an absolute sense, lonely" (1964: 67). Wordsworth has sought to avoid being plunged into this state of utter loneliness, or existential alienation. He has been involved in a project of internal resistance, and was always truest to himself, not in formulating solutions, but in characterizing the anxiety and unease that provoked him to desire them. Such anxiety remains unresolved. It suffuses poems of seemingly settled assurance, like "Tintern Abbey," and leads naturally to the adoption of antithetical views, including palinodes of the kind to be found in the Intimations Ode.

Blake delighted in the Neoplatonic passages in the Ode. According to Crabb Robinson who read the poem aloud to Blake in his old age, he endorsed the poem's argument with "the same half crazy crotchets about the two worlds," rejoicing that Wordsworth had finally given up nature-worship, "which in the mind of Blake constituted Atheism." "For," said Blake, "Nature is the work of the Devil" (Bentley 1969: 544). When Robinson pointed out that the God of Genesis created Nature, and found it good, Blake embraced heresy: "I was triumphantly told that this God was not Jehovah, but the Elohim; and the doctrine of the Gnostics repeated with sufficient consistency to silence one so unlearned as myself."

Blake seems to have discerned accurately that, though the ontological doctrine of the Intimations Ode is Neoplatonic ("Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting"), the poem in spirit is anticosmically Gnostic. Material existence spells a bleak separation from the divine; all the "glory" it may seem initially to possess does not belong to it at all, but represents only a refraction of the newly descended soul's memories, conveyed fadingly from the other world. Natural experience cannot be redeemed and Nature is an obtuse foster-mother, who "doth all she can / To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man, / Forget the glories he hath known, / And that imperial palace whence he came" (ll. 81–4). Material existence is thus a prison, and later in the poem, a tomb: the baby is born knowing and fast unlearning the truths "Which we are toiling all our lives to find, / In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave" (ll. 117–18). Plotinus was indignant with the Gnostics because they are "capable of such raving as to disown the tie with the Sun and the powers of the Heavens and the very Soul of the Cosmos" (Plotinus 1991: 131). We ought similarly to be shocked, still, at Wordsworth's

volte-face, his summary dissociation from Nature, in the Intimations Ode. He is wise enough to count his blessings at the end of the poem; but at bottom his devaluation of natural experience leaves him lonelier and forces on him a greater introversion. Henceforth he will commune not with Nature but with his own mind, spurred by contact with the world to think not of the world but of higher-order realities – to think “Thoughts too deep for tears” – like any true Platonist.

As Crabb Robinson’s story indicates, Blake was perfectly willing to identify himself as a Gnostic, though his reaction to Platonism itself was more ambiguous. In his early satire of London salon culture, he appears to have lampooned Thomas Taylor, as a flighty pseudo-philosopher, under the name “Sipsop the Pythagorean.” Later comments about Platonism were overtly hostile. In essence, Blake believed that Greek culture by contrast with Hebrew elevated rationality and belittled revelation. His address “To the Deists,” which opens the third chapter of *Jerusalem*, castigates the Enlightenment for following Plato in its baleful overestimation of natural reason: “your Greek philosophy ... teaches that Man is Righteous in his Vegetated Spectre: an Opinion of fatal & accursed consequence to Man” (Blake 1982: 200). On the other hand, his selective attacks on Platonism do not accurately reflect the totality of his engagement with it. As Harper (1961) and Raine (1968) showed, Blake perspicuously employed a number of Platonic concepts and images – especially Neoplatonic ones – including the idea of the soul’s divinity, its anomalousness in a material world, and the danger of its obscuration by the accretions of a false, worldly self. In *Witness against the Beast*, E. P. Thompson vigorously countered this view of Blake’s intellectual sources, arguing that he was not the student of an elite esoteric tradition but an enthusiastic follower of heretical ideas ready to hand in the form of English radical religion (Thompson 1993: passim). Thompson’s is a useful corrective, but it is worth pointing out that Blake drew upon similar ideas from both innovative ontologies, in which “God” disappears into the human soul, and that with respect to this idea, ancient heterodox religion (i.e., Gnosticism and Neoplatonism) are distant forebears of English radical religion. Blake scholars now agree that he took whatever he wanted from whatever sources he found and freely adapted it.

Such is the case in his relationship to the Gnosticism he zealously endorsed. Many critics have remarked that Blake’s Urizen is a version of the deluded Gnostic demiurge, the creator-God of Genesis, arrogant, solipsistic, “jealous,” and power mad. It is crucial, however, that Blake treats the Gnostic creation-myth – which says that the material world was devised, either incompetently or viciously, by this lesser deity – as precisely that – a myth – from which he proceeds to abstract a psychological significance. In other words, he does not simply quote or adopt the Gnostic apparatus but calls it up in order to analyze the existential condition it emblemizes. For in Urizen Blake personifies the grasping, defensive ego (“Selfhood” is his name) that, he would say, dwells in every psyche and tries to dominate it. Every man his own Demiurge: that is the truth encoded in the Gnostic myth. (I use the male pronoun advisedly, since Blake figures the ego as a hypermasculine personality.)

The other Gnostic image important to his psychology is the flip side of the evil Demiurge: the lonely soul embedded in a malign Creation, ill-at-ease here and burdened with transcendental longings. Blake had a fierce quarrel with Lockean empiricism, the philosophical status quo of his own milieu, and his antagonism to it is usually described as resistance to its elevation of reason and experience at the expense of imagination. But it is better understood as a profound psychological critique of the passivity and isolation to which empiricism abandons the phenomenal subject, by virtue of its insistence on the primacy of material reality, the emptiness of the newly minted mind, the automatic processes of learning and thought, and the irrelevance of subject-life to the mechanism of nature. In *The Book of Thel*, Blake dramatizes the predicament of the subject seeking to find a value for subjectivity within the confines of materialism. Thel's search is notoriously unsuccessful; it ends in her complete collapse, as she encounters a "voice" from her own grave ventriloquizing a horrific autonomous Lockean body, impervious to the desires of the soul, all the orifices of its senses open to violent ingressions – and she flees back shrieking to the vales of Har.

In the section of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* which addresses the subject of "Personal Identity," Locke said firmly that if there is a soul we have no intuition of it and can know nothing about it, and he hints that the concept of soul is therefore obsolete. Blake sees that empiricism thereby requires the subject to discount its transcendental longings, and this, from his point of view, is truly an opinion "of fatal and accursed consequence to Man," because we cannot rid ourselves of transcendental longings by force of will. Empiricism would thus impose upon us a state of roiling self-division and bad faith, or what Hegel would later call "unhappy consciousness." Blake encapsulated the predicament of the Lockean unhappy consciousness, forced to disown transcendental longings it cannot silence, in the lament of Tharmas, in *The Four Zoas*, who experiences his own subjectivity as an insoluble contradiction: "I am like an atom / A Nothing left in darkness yet I am an identity / I wish & feel & weep & groan Ah terrible terrible" (Blake 1982: 302). Empiricism stipulates that he define his being in materialist terms – he is an "atom," punctual, solitary, insignificant – yet he feels himself to be a center of consciousness and of urgent emotional forces. Laboring under this incoherent sense of self, he is paralyzed, and so, instead of fulfilling any species of human vocation, he sinks "down into the sea a pale white corse" (Blake 1982: 302). Blake deeply resented the skeptical prejudices of his time that – inhumanely, he thought, and complacently and superciliously – reduced transcendental longings to wish-fulfillment and fantasy. He was "delighted" with the *Intimations Ode* because in it Wordsworth finally confesses that transcendental longings cannot be denied.

It is Blake's contention that transcendental longings cannot be simply renounced; they persist, and must be put to creative use. They are the source of human creativity, and thus of the "Eternal Great Humanity Divine" – that is, the *only* form of the divine. In this respect, Blake is dismissive of Christianity, obviously, but also severe with Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, because he rejects belief in any "heavenly Father . . . beyond the skies"

(Blake 1982: 114), including a Hidden God and impersonal One. “All deities reside in the human breast” (“The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” Blake 1982: 38). I believe also that he does not accept the idea of the preexistence of the soul or of life after death. The reason he favors Gnosticism and Neoplatonism over orthodox Christianity is that they highlight the plight of existential alienation, offering no immediate, childish consolations, but giving moral support to the subject in its painful awakening to estrangement from the material world, its initial bewilderment, and its struggle to forge a new vocation. The solution lies within, in self-remaking, not in the incorporation of received ideas. The first step is to “Withdraw into yourself and look” (Plotinus 1991: 54), as we see Blake’s Milton doing in the epiphanic work of self-discovery that launches his reformation.

I am arguing, then, that the appropriation of Gnostic and Neoplatonic rhetoric in these three Romantic poets arises not out of their attraction to religious or philosophical doctrine, but out of their shared recognition that the terms can be employed to dramatize a fundamental feature of psychological experience. Let me summarize by redefining this “existential alienation” as a certain state of the subject not only in relation to the material world, but to itself – a certain self-relation, or moment in the subject’s experience of itself, in which it questions the nature and purpose of subjectivity. It does not know what it is, what it is related to or what it is meant to be; and yet it intuits that whatever it is meant to be, it is not succeeding. Wordsworth, Shelley and especially Blake sometimes propose cures, therapies and solutions for this existential vertigo – or ways of rethinking it – but their focus is on the persistence and urgency of the state itself. The moment can be described in a philosophical or religious discourse, but the Romantics understand the psychological situation to be primary. This means that when they make use of Gnostic or Neoplatonic rhetoric to adduce the moment, it is not the doctrine but its psychological resonance they mean to invoke.

Naturally, critics tend to discuss the Romantic relation to Gnosticism and Neoplatonism in terms of a harmony or disharmony of ideas. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, for instance, M. H. Abrams maintains that the Romantics reject the “hopeless nostalgia” of Neoplatonism, which sees the awakened spirit sojourning pointlessly through material existence. The Romantics preferred the Hegelian paradigm of “progressive self-education,” “an ideal of strenuous effort along the hard road of culture and civilization” (Abrams 1973: 185). This is cogent as an account of *Zeitgeist* and even of paraphraseable intellectual commitments, but it brackets the Romantic exploration of the drama in the inner life, which need not be immediately attended with prescriptions for improvement. Wordsworth, Blake and Shelley draw variously upon Gnostic and Neoplatonic “ideas” when they want – precisely – to represent the condition of “hopeless nostalgia,” the pressure and frustration of transcendental longings. The image of the orphaned wanderer, in all its pathos, is just the ticket. Harold Bloom, the most important commentator on Romantic Gnosticism, underscores the psychological purchase of Gnostic ontology, with its separation of “cosmic soul” from “acosmic self,” and its honoring of that divine “spark” within, “a figurative expression for which we ought

not to seek an empirical referent" (1982: 7). Bloom is most engaged by the Gnostic and Romantic exaltation of the divine spark, with their consequent endorsement of autonomy, individualism, heterodoxy, and personal religion. Again, this is a cogent view of Romanticism. I differ in that I emphasize the summoning of anxiety rather than sustenance in Romantic Platonism. Wordsworth, Blake and Shelley judge that the subject begins with the intuition of being a stranger in the world, and this disquieting intuition cannot readily be overcome.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 25 "Milton and the Romantics"; chapter 29 "The Matter of Genre in the Romantic Sublime"; chapter 31 "Blake's *Jerusalem*: Friendship with Albion"

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Milton and the Romantics

Gordon Teskey

John Milton's great epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, was completed by 1665 and published in 1667 and 1674, the year of the poet's death, over a century before the artistic and literary-critical movement we call "English Romanticism" began. The *Paradise Lost* (as they called it) was seen by the Romantics as one of the twin summits of English poetry (an image Coleridge made use of on more than one occasion), the other being the plays of Shakespeare. This high estimation of *Paradise Lost* was not new. It went back to the first appearance of the poem, which was hailed by Dryden, and it grew throughout the eighteenth century, when one hundred editions of it were published and "Time, the Avenger," as Byron said, acknowledging a fellow persecuted bard, made the word "Miltonic" mean "*sublime*" (*Don Juan*, "Dedication," l. 76).¹

A century and more may have helped this sublimity, this amalgam of grandeur and terror, fully to come into view. It was one of the central concerns of the Romantic critics on Milton. But from the beginning "that majesty which through thy work doth reign," as Andrew Marvell put it in the poem published with the 1674 edition, was there for all to see (Marvell 2003: 183; l. 31). It was recognized as something new in English poetry and was the reason Dryden ranked Milton with Homer and Virgil (Dryden 1962: 424). Spenser could dial up sublimity and terror when he wanted to, though invariably for some definite rhetorical purpose, usually in the context of strong disapproval, and usually briefly. Shakespeare could give sublimity and terror on the storm-swept, lightning-blasted heath of *King Lear*. But not until Milton is grandeur, grandeur especially of the physical world and of the powers of nature, elevated from a circumstantial effect to a general atmosphere, a pervasive, defining mood, or *Stimmung*, something as necessary to poetry as knowledge from books. Breaking off a period of severe study, much of it devoted to Milton, Keats took his walking tour to the English lakes, Scotland and Ireland to "gorge wonders" and "to load me with grander Mountains, and strengthen more my reach in Poetry" (Keats 1958: l. 268). Few poets before the

Romantics believed that hard and prolonged travel in wild nature is necessary to extend one's reach in poetry. The Romantics were greater travelers and walkers than any English poets before or since: they found their landscapes in the world, not in books. What they inherited from Milton, however, was the recognition of the indispensability to poetry of a sense of the earth as a defining artistic concern, developing it in their individual ways. Blake alone among the Romantic poets didn't travel, except to Felpham, for his "three years slumber on the banks of the Ocean" (Blake 1978: 418, *Jerusalem*, plate 3). He was a Londoner and a cockney, like Keats. But he was also a visual artist, and the mental landscapes of his prophecies can be more astounding than the realistic landscapes of the other major Romantics.

The Romantic poets found grandeur as well in Milton's imaginary landscapes, in the violent abyss of chaos, in the vast gothic landscape of Hell, and in the still vaster landscapes of Heaven, over which, in the air, armies join battle with explosive force, like thunderheads at sea. Nor is Milton's featureless anti-landscape less imposing, that "boundless continent" formed by the outer convex surface of the universe on which Satan touches down after his voyage through chaos: "Dark, waste, and wild, under the frown of Night / Starless exposed, and ever threat'ning storms / Of chaos blust'ring round, inclement sky" (iii. 423–5). Milton compares that featureless vast to "the barren plains / Of Sericana where Chineses drive / With sails and wind their cany wagons light" (iii. 437–9). As Satan traverses this plain, searching for a way into the universe and at length to earth, intending to enslave and destroy the human race, he is characterized in a sublime geographical comparison:

As when a vulture on Imaüs bred,
Whose snowy ridge the roving Tartar bounds,
Dislodging from a region scarce of prey
To gorge the flesh of lambs or yeaneling kids
On hills where flocks are fed, flies toward the springs
Of Ganges or Hydaspes, Indian streams ...
(iii. 431–6)

These supernatural landscapes are made the more real for us, as in this simile, by the accuracy as much as by the sweep of Milton's terrestrial landscapes. He shows us, accurately, the mountains and plateaus of central Asia; the torrid sands of Libya vacuumed up into storms; the volcanic regions of southern Italy; the Atlas Mountains soaring beyond the Straits of Gibraltar; the snake-infested Balearic isles; the ice-fields and violent winds of the Arctic; and the dangerous sea-route around Africa and the "Cape of Hope" into the Indian Ocean, where the mariner is greeted – so Milton imagines – by the aroma of spices wafted from "Araby the blest" (iv. 153–71). Even the relatively small area of the Promised Land is made sublime and exotic by the very accuracy with which Milton delineates its bounds, from "Paneas to Beërseba," and from the soaring heights above "the fount of Jordan's flood" – Mount Hermon – to the southwest and southeast respectively, "Egypt and th'Arabian shore" (iii. 535–7). Geographical references such as these, with their evocative names – Imaüs, Sericana, Ganges and Hydaspes, Paneas and

Beërseba – are more frequent in *Paradise Lost* than the biblical and classical allusions for which the epic was famous in the eighteenth century, and for which it remains famous now, neglecting this more important, geographical aspect, in which every place mentioned feels invested in a mantle of stories, most of them remaining to be told. Milton traveled on the Continent, but his passion for geographical knowledge, like Coleridge's, was built up by study and extended far beyond his personal experience. He was unfailingly accurate about the geography of Greece, for example, which he never saw. One is not greatly surprised to learn that, years after he had gone totally blind, Milton was negotiating the purchase of the latest, most advanced atlas to appear on the Continent, and joking ruefully about its cost: "It must be the Mauritanian mountain *Atlas*, not a mere book, which is to be bought at so huge a price" (1936: 82; trans. modified).

It was the major Romantic poets – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, to whom we may add Sir Walter Scott – who recognized Milton's geographical sublime as an achievement even more striking than his appropriation of the classical tradition. They gratefully took up Milton's hair-raising vistas and mixed them with a world of fantasy and adventure drawn from eastern and northern exotic tales, which, as we have noted, Milton encodes with a single phrase or place-name, such as "Araby the blest." The Celtic and other northern myths that lay behind the Ossianic epics, the eastern tales gathered in *The Thousand and One Nights*, and exotic travel narratives from Herodotus to Marco Polo, Mandeville, Purchas, and Hakluyt are only the most obvious ingredients (cooked under pressure) of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Lowes 1927), but some of them are also present at the creation of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and his eastern tales, such as *Lara*, *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos* and, to include the still exotic, because still Muslim, eastern Mediterranean, *The Corsair*. Realistic landscape and fantastic tales contribute to the atmosphere of Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* and *Prometheus Unbound*, of Keats's *Hyperion* and still more *The Fall of Hyperion*. The same may be said, with modifications, of Wordsworth's rural scenes, haunted as these are by local memories, local legends and local presences, which in their very nearness ("almost as silent as the turf they trod"; *The Prelude* (1805 here and throughout) i. 332) hold a sense of distance equal to that of Arabian tales. Much of the terrain of *Paradise Lost* is described in this way, joining the substantial and particular to the insubstantial and allusive; but in *Paradise Lost* the tales are suggested by single words alone. The Romantic poets open up the tales. It is not unreasonable to assert that a Romantic poem is made by evoking the substantial presence of the earth and by juxtaposing to it the insubstantial presence of a tale.

In addition to the geographical sublime, the Romantics had before them the example of Milton's characters' speech, above all the "high language," as Shelley called it in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, of Milton's Satan, the most stunningly original, eloquent and contradictory character in epic literature since Homer's Achilles (Mahoney 2003: 3–4). An extensive prosopography of Romantic rebels – from Blake's Orc to Byron's Childe Harold, his Cain and his Manfred, to Keats's Hyperion and Shelley's Prometheus and Demogorgon, not omitting the monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* – are all of the family tree of Milton's Satan and share the sullen exaltation

of his speech. But hardly less thrilling than Satan's speech is the haughty virtue of Milton's righteous angels; the soaring eloquence of Adam and Eve's hymns to their Creator (like the songs of the Romantic *improvisatori*, these hymns are to be seen as more purely *creative* for their being spontaneously composed), and even the lower eloquence of Adam and Eve's common conversation, which is noble and yet familiar, ornate and yet direct, and which is closer than might at first be supposed to what Wordsworth called the language of men speaking to men.

To achieve these effects Milton employed the superbly flexible instrument of blank verse, "English heroic verse without rhyme," as he called it in a note added to *Paradise Lost*, adapted from the later manner of Shakespeare and "our best English tragedies," and much refined technically. It is a ten-syllable line using frequent enjambments, with longer pauses in the caesura, so that complex rhythms may be built up above the level of the individual line, which as a result seems always to be bursting at the seams with an inner, forward-driving power. The lankier lines of Blake's prophecies and the looser blank verse of Coleridge's conversation poems and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* are unimaginable without the blank verse of *Paradise Lost*, although each adapts blank verse to his own purposes and needs. Even when the Romantics returned to what Milton called "the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming" (for Milton, *modern* was not a flattering word; 2005: 2, "Note on the Verse"), as Keats did in abandoning *Hyperion* and as Shelley admitted doing in *The Revolt of Islam*, the reason for doing so was defined by Milton. Shelley admits to avoiding "the blank verse of Shakespeare and Milton" because "there is no shelter for mediocrity; you must either succeed or fail" (1973: 35). Keats abandons his blank verse epic *Hyperion* because it is too obviously Miltonic. "There were too many Miltonic inversions in it," he said in a letter, observing more ominously of Milton, in a letter written three days later, "Life to him would be death to me" (Keats 1958: 2. 167; 2. 212). Note that this comment is not said about Milton generally but about Miltonic blank verse.

"Miltonic inversions" are the least of Keats's problems with Milton in *Hyperion*. The entire conception of the work is too closely modeled on the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, especially the "great consult" of devils (i. 798), imitated in the harangues of Keats's titans, and it is doubtful Keats had any clear conception where he would take the story from there. The words of Keats's Saturn could equally be his own: "I am gone / Away from my own bosom: I have left / My strong identity, my real self" (i. 112–14). Even so, *Hyperion* is a most impressive experiment, and shows Keats on "a new level of writing," as Walter Jackson Bate demonstrated (1963: 388–417). But it is writing, for the most part, not poetry. In contrast, the introductory frame Keats added to *The Fall of Hyperion*, its manner being Spenserian rather than Miltonic (despite its being composed in blank verse), is unmistakably Keats. As usual, Spenser helps the Romantic poets be themselves.

In dedicating *The Corsair* (1814) to Thomas Moore, Byron warns that "in Blank verse – Milton Thomson and our Dramatists are the beacons that shine along the deep but warn us from the rough & barren rock on which they are kindled" (1973–82: 4. 13; cf Byron 1996: 249). Yet Byron composes splendid blank verse for his own

dramatic poems, *Manfred*, *Marino Faliero*, *Cain*, and *Sardanapalus*. Five years after the letter to Thomas Moore, in a reply to Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine*, Byron's wariness of blank verse has become so extreme he feels bound to warn Milton himself away from that rough and barren rock:

with all humility, I am not persuaded that the *Paradise Lost* would not have been more nobly conveyed to posterity, not perhaps in heroic couplets, although even they could sustain the subject if well balanced, but in the stanza of Spenser or of Tasso, or in the terza rima of Dante, which the powers of Milton could easily have grafted on our language. ("Reply to Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine*"; cited in Wittreich 1970: 518)

With the exception of Blake and the partial exception of Wordsworth, both of whom composed epics without rhyme, the Romantic poets were committed to rhyme in their major works, unlike Milton. Keats's return to rhyme between April and September of 1819, his last and greatest year of composition, in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," "Ode to Psyche," and the great odes – "On a Grecian Urn," "On Melancholy," "To a Nightingale," "On Indolence" – was one of the miracles of Romantic creativity. Milton, it would appear, has little to do with this achievement, except in the negative sense of being an example from which Keats at last fought free. Even so, the vivacity of the rhymes in "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," the mastery of the slant rhymes and assonances in "Lycidas," and the still more remarkable art of the internal rhymes and assonances of *Samson Agonistes*, were richer examples to the Romantic poets than "like endings" in English poetry between Milton and the Romantics. The exception is the greatest rhymester of the Romantics, Byron, who revered Dryden and especially Pope. But when it came to running up one's colors, even Byron couldn't leave Milton out: "Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope; / Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey" (*Don Juan* i. 205).

Wordsworth was the only Romantic poet who was able to rise to Milton's height in blank verse, to sustain himself there for as long as Milton did, and to transform Milton's style into an expressive instrument distinctly his own. Many passages of *The Prelude* recall Milton, some intentionally, some not, though they never seem unduly derivative. There is the famous tribute to Milton in third book of *The Prelude*, the one devoted to studies at Cambridge, when while visiting friends in Milton's rooms Wordsworth poured a surplus of libations to the "temperate bard" (iii. 294–306).² He recollects the event with mock shame, but not before invoking the Milton of later life, who was for Wordsworth, as for all the Romantics, a symbol of political courage:

Yea, our blind poet, who, in his later day
 Stood almost single, uttering odious truth,
 Darkness before, and danger's voice behind –
 Soul awful, if the earth hath ever lodged
 An awful soul – I seemed to see him here.

(iii. 284–8)

Wordsworth's views on Milton, a poet to whom he owed a "debt immense of endless gratitude," in Milton's Satan's phrase, are complex and inconsistent, as is to be expected of someone who wishes at once to acknowledge the debt – "still paying! still to owe!" – and to discharge it at last, so as not to be thought inferior to his master forever (iii. 52–3). From some carping annotations to *Paradise Lost* and some injudiciously candid remarks to Hazlitt and others, we might conclude Wordsworth's relation to Milton, whose bust he kept on his desk, was wholly emulous, if not envious. Hazlitt reports of Wordsworth, though with no friendly voice, that he thought "the only great merit of the *Paradise Lost* was in the conception or in getting rid of the horns and tail of the Devil, for as to the execution, he thought he could do as well or better himself" (cited in Wittreich 1970: 119). But Wordsworth sometimes expressed warm appreciation of Milton's art, even in *Paradise Lost* (he thought *Paradise Regained* the more polished work, not entirely without reason), and Dorothy Wordsworth's journals reveal that she and her brother often read Milton aloud to each other.

But in the end Wordsworth much preferred to admire Milton as a figure of political courage and "republican austerity," singling out his "manly and dignified" political sonnets, which are "undisfigured by false or vicious ornaments." The latter phrase is perhaps a shaft directed at *Paradise Lost*, perhaps not. When he praises Milton Wordsworth usually cannot withhold technical complaints, even when speaking of the political sonnets, which are dearest to his heart, but which he finds "in several places incorrect, and sometimes uncouth in language, and perhaps, in some, inharmonious" (cited in Wittreich 1970: 134 and 110).³ Much virtue in that *perhaps*. These are criticisms for which it is hard to find corroborating evidence in Milton's political sonnets, which inspired Wordsworth to his best-known and finest tribute to the poet, "London, 1802":

Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
 Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
 Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart:
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,
 In chearful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on itself did lay.

This sonnet underlines an important point about Milton I have mentioned already: that he was for the Romantics, as he still is for most English readers, and increasingly for North American readers, more important as a political symbol than as a poet. Even so,

Wordsworth could bring himself in *The Excursion* (1814) to sing of Milton's "mighty orb of song" and of Milton's achieving "the highest, holiest, raptures of the lyre; / And wisdom married to immortal verse" (Wordsworth 1949: 5. i. 249, vii. 535–6).

I said it is impossible to imagine the blank verse of *The Prelude* without the achievement of Milton behind it, and the debt is apparent in the passage below, which recalls some lines from the Milton's narrative of Creation – "Immediately the mountains huge appear / Emergent and their broad bare backs upheave / Into the clouds" (vii. 285–7) – from the episode of Eve's dream and, from the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, the famous invocation of the Spirit, which "Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss / And mad'st it pregnant" (i. 21–2). The debt owed to Eve's dream is less obvious, perhaps, although it is a passage that resonates with much Romantic poetry:

Why sleep'st thou, Eve? Now is the pleasant time,
The cool, the silent, save where silence yields
To the night-warbling bird that now awake
Tunes sweetest his love-laboured song. Now reigns
Full orb'd the moon and with more pleasing light
Shadowy sets off the face of things – in vain
If none regard! Heav'n wakes with all his eyes
Whom to behold but thee, Nature's desire.

(v. 38–45)

For any frequent reader of Milton Wordsworth's obvious and honorable borrowings upheave their backs above a sea of resonances, the characteristic *lexis* and rhythm of Milton's verse. The miracle Wordsworth achieves in the following passage is in its preservation of the Miltonic tone even as it emerges wholly independent of Milton:

I panted up
With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts,
...
When at my feet the ground appeared to brighten,
And with a step or two seemed brighter still;
Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,
For instantly a Light upon the turf
Fell like a flash. I looked about, and lo,
The moon stood naked in the heavens at height
Immense above my head, and on the shore
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which meek and silent rested at my feet.
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still ocean, and beyond,
Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves,
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the sea, the real sea, that seemed
To dwindle and give up its majesty,

Usurped upon as far as sight could reach.
 Meanwhile, the moon looked down upon this shew
 In single glory, and we stood, the mist
 Touching our very feet; and from the shore
 At distance not the third part of a mile
 Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,
 A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which
 Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
 Innumerable, roaring with one voice.

...

it appeared to me
 The perfect image of a mighty mind,
 Of one that feeds upon infinity,
 That is exalted by an under-presence,
 The sense of God, or whatso'er is dim
 Or vast in its own being. ...

(xiii. 31–2, 36–59, 68–73).⁴

Much more modest claims could be entered for the contribution of Milton's blank verse to the masterly yet informal eloquence of Coleridge's conversation poems, especially "Frost at Midnight," for some few passages in Keats's *Hyperion* and for some in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. But a rather different and difficult case must be made for Blake's independent achievement in verse. In the preface to *Jerusalem*, Blake condemns Milton's blank verse even as he echoes Milton's words in defense of it. Blake says he first considered for his poem a "Monotonous Cadence like that used by Milton and Shakespeare and all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming." What Milton saw as a breaking free of the modern bondage of rhyming Blake saw as an extension of it: "as much a bondage as rhyme itself." "I have therefore produced," Blake went on to explain, "a variety in every line, both of cadences and number of syllables ... the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts, the mild and gentle, for the mild and gentle parts, and the prosaic, for inferior parts; all are necessary to each other, Poetry Fetter'd, Fetters the Human Race" (1978: 420, *Jerusalem*, plate 3). Milton would agree with that last statement, and said as much when he spoke in his note on the verse of "an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming" ("Note on the Verse," in Milton 2005). The same association – or shall we say, "confusion"? – of metrical freedom with more important kinds of freedom may be seen in Romantic verse across the Atlantic, in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, which is full of Miltonic cadences and echoes, and which reads as if the energy barely contained by Milton's measure has at last burst its confines. Modern free verse, inheriting the spontaneous spirit of the Romantics, owes more to Milton's verse than is generally acknowledged. Only Byron, as we saw, stood out against the example of Milton's blank verse for a long, quasi-epic poem, writing *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in Spenserian stanzas and *Don Juan* in *ottava rima*.

The influences we have so far observed flowing from Milton to the Romantics are the physical landscapes that stretch the imagination of the reader; the entanglement with these landscapes of Romantic tales sparked by exotic names; the cultivation of a high language more sublime than that afforded by the rhetorical tradition; and the refinement of blank verse, which is a positive influence in some cases, especially Wordsworth's, a negative one in others, notably Keats's and Byron's (except that he actually wrote it well), and a mixed influence in at least one case, Blake's. Having also remarked the influence of the freer use of rhyme in Milton's early poems and in the choruses of *Samson Agonistes*, we may turn now to another influence of which the reader has perhaps been expecting to hear sooner, although it was mentioned in connection with language: Satan.

We should perhaps not speak of the *influence* of Milton's Satan so much as of the *example* of his rebellious integrity. As his Shelley says in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Satan shows "courage and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force" (Shelley 2002: 207). It is important to note that this is more than a matter of language, thrilling as Satan's soaring rhetoric is, especially in the early books of *Paradise Lost*. The virtues of courage and patient opposition to omnipotent force are what Byron saw in Milton's Satan as well, reproducing those virtues in the figures of Lucifer and Cain, although, as his letters and statements in defense of *Cain* show, Byron's judgment of the devil is more nuanced than that of his youthful, fiery friend Shelley – if by "nuanced" we intend cunningly inconsistent and opportunistically worldly. Byron said in conversation with Thomas Medwin, "Will men never learn that every great poet is necessarily a religious man?" (cited in Wittreich 1970: 524; cf. Medwin 1966: 198). This may be true, but the point is what religion is in question. Byron may have been of the devil's party more than half the time in his private life, if drinking out of human skulls is indication of a religion, but a fair reading of *Cain* shows only that the devil has a case to make, which he must if the drama is to be any good. As several of the Romantics justly observed, it was entirely Milton's innovation to represent Satan, the great enemy of the good throughout the Christian tradition, not as the repulsive monster of medieval art and literature, chewing and excreting the damned in Hell, but as what Baudelaire called "the most perfect type of virile beauty" (Himy 2003: 480–1). "Nothing," wrote Shelley in his "Essay on the Devil and Devils," "can exceed the grandeur and the energy of the character of the Devil as expressed in *Paradise Lost* . . . [the devil is] a moral being far superior to God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent, in spite of adversity and torture"; and Shelley noted Milton's originality in divesting the devil of horns and hoofs in order to clothe him "with the sublime grandeur of a graceful but tremendous spirit" (Shelley 1988: 267, 268).⁵ Even so, Shelley's idea of Satan is not as unambiguously admiring as is supposed when he is enlisted among the fathers of the "Satanist" reading of *Paradise Lost*.

This is most clearly seen in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, in a passage worth considering more closely, for it anticipates the argument of William Empson's *Milton's God*: that the problem for Shelley lies not in Milton's art but in the Christian religion to which

Milton committed his art. “The character of Satan,” Shelley says, “engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs, and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure. In the minds of those who consider that magnificent fiction with a religious feeling it engenders something worse” (2002: 207). By those “wrongs” perpetrated on Satan which “exceed all measure” Shelley means what in “On the Devil and Devils” he calls God’s “vindictive omnipotence,” which “in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, – not from any mistaken notion of bringing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the open and alleged design of exasperating him [Satan] to deserve new torments” (1988: 267). The “something worse” that is engendered in the minds of Christian readers of *Paradise Lost* is the belief that inflicting unending torture on a defeated enemy is an act of sacred wisdom. But even for the nonbelieving reader of *Paradise Lost* the tendency to excuse Satan’s “faults” (though this is surely a light word for them) because they are outweighed by the monstrous punishment inflicted on him by God is a “pernicious casuistry.” However revolted we are by Milton’s God, Shelley is saying, it is pernicious to excuse Satan’s crimes. To avoid that error, Shelley chooses a classical hero, Prometheus, who is free of Satan’s faults. For Shelley, it is Prometheus, not Satan, who is “the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends” (2002: 207).

But of course the Satan of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is not defying an illusion: he is defying the real God, who is *a priori* good, however many difficulties this basic assumption draws the poet into. For this reason, within its Christian context, the Satan of *Paradise Lost* must be portrayed as evil, embodying, as Shelley says (again, somewhat mildly), “envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement” (2002: 207), to which we should add the intention to kill the human race, and enslave it after. Shelley’s admiration of Milton’s Satan begins only when the example of Satan’s defiance is removed from the Christian frame in which such defiance can only be evil. But once the example is removed from its frame – and Shelley may have felt, as Empson did, that Milton himself began this dislodgement – Satan becomes innocent revolutionary power. To avoid confusion on this point, Shelley renames him, *Prometheus*.

Blake’s relation to Milton’s Satan, and of course more broadly to Milton, after whom Blake’s revolutionary epic prophecy *Milton* is named, is a more complicated, not to say enormous subject. But the outlines are reasonably clear, once we understand the depth of Blake’s revolutionary ideas and his sense of being on a mission to complete a revolution that Milton began. It is a revolution in the human mind, throwing off the chains of mystery and sadism for which all the religions of the world up to Blake’s time, and not only or even especially traditional Christianity, are responsible. But traditional Christianity is certainly responsible, too, and it is nearest to hand, being in Blake’s view the cause of all European wars and of the progressive spiritual destruction of individual life in his time. And yet Blake was a Christian. That is what made him revolutionary: his intention not to attack Christianity from without but rather from within, turning it upside-down, which is what the word *revolutionary* means. For Blake,

the only place to stand outside Christianity is in atheism or deism – they are not much different in his eyes – that is, in materialist science governed by the principle of reason, which is set up as God. Blake’s figure for this god, this deified principle of reason, is *Urizen*, an old man in the sky with an immense white beard. This is obviously the God the Father of Christianity, the principle of reason separated from energy and given absolute authority to command and to create. (The name *Urizen* suggests both “reason” and “horizon,” since for Blake reason is the horizon, or outward circumference of energy. The most famous of Blake’s engravings, the frontispiece to *Europe*, shows Urizen, “The Ancient of Days,” drawing the circumference of the universe with compasses (1978: 204 and 222 n1; *Europe*, plate 1).) Blake concludes that to try to find a secure place to stand outside Christianity is to fall back into the worst of the illusions for which traditional Christianity is responsible: the deification of reason as God, having the absolute power to demonize energy and to condemn to Hell everyone who does not keep the moral law, which is devoted to suppressing desire and further promoting this alienated reason. It is not possible, therefore, to regard traditional Christianity simply as error, erroneous as much of it is: there is too much living truth buried in it. That is why a revolution is necessary, to release the truth of Christianity which traditional Christianity itself has buried in a prison called “Hell.”

From what has been said so far it should be clear that Blake is the only Romantic poet to engage Milton on the terms Milton himself thought most important: Christianity. Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Byron all admire Milton’s “morals” and especially his principled firmness throughout the English Revolution and after the Restoration, when the poet was “In darkness and with dangers compassed round” (*Paradise Lost* ix. 27). Milton’s Christianity, however, is an embarrassment to them. Yet what was most important to Milton in justifying the ways of God to men was the achievement of the Kingdom of God on earth with the second coming of Christ, bringing

respiration to the just
 And vengeance to the wicked at return
 Of Him so lately promised to thy aid,
 The woman’s Seed, obscurely then foretold,
 Now amplier known thy Savior and thy Lord
 (xii. 540–4).

Vengeance to the wicked! The major Romantic poets treat Milton’s Christianity as little more than a superstition, like the Olympian religion of Homer, but without the aesthetic appeal of the latter. But Milton really means what he says, respiration for himself and the other just, and eternal vengeance to the wicked, which vengeance will aid his respiration. For the Romantics, Milton is essentially four things, all of them true, but none of them central because none has anything to do with Milton’s red-hot Christianity: (1) blank verse; (2) antimonarchical, republican politics, or rule by the most virtuous; (3) an organic vision of nature with the power of growth dwelling

within; and (4) inspiration. Blake alone tackled what is most obvious and central to Milton: Christian ideology. More surprising still, he makes Milton himself the savior who will return to the world.

Before turning to *Milton*, which was written and engraved between 1804 and 1808, we should note Blake's most famous remark about the poet, which was made in an earlier work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, dating from 1790–3: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it" (1978: 80, plate 6). The speaker of this remark, which is so often attributed to Blake's authorial voice, is himself the Devil, eager to have the poet on his side. This of course does not mean that what the Devil says isn't true, or that Blake doesn't think it true. But it does call for caution and for some investigation of context.

In the preceding passage, beginning on plate 4 under the heading "The Voice of the Devil," the Devil is clearly Blake's mouthpiece, exposing errors that Blake also thinks are errors and affirming truths Blake also thinks truths. The errors are that Man is a body and a soul; that energy is evil and reason good; and that eternal torment in Hell awaits those who follow energy, which they encounter through their desires. The truths – or, as they are called, the *contraries* – are that Man is entirely soul, and the body is that part of the soul which the five senses discern; that energy is life, and reason merely the "outward circumference" of energy; and that energy, creative power, is "Eternal Delight," or what Christianity calls "Heaven" (1978: 78). But traditional Christianity condemns this creative energy to Hell. Recovering creative energy from the Hell to which it has been condemned, and revealing that this energy is Heaven, or "Eternal Delight," is what Blake means by the *marriage* of Heaven and Hell.

On the following plate, number 5, Blake surprisingly relates these claims of the Devil to *Paradise Lost*: that what is usually called "evil" is energy, which is in truth good; and that what is usually called "good" is reason, which, when separated from energy and set up on its own, is in truth bad. Blake regards *Paradise Lost* as a "history" of the development of these errors: the demonizing of energy and the deification of a principle of reason that has been removed from its life-source in energy ("Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy"). It is important to understand that Blake's purpose in the passage is not to interpret *Paradise Lost* on its own terms, which terms Blake regards as erroneous: it is to interpret *Paradise Lost* on Blake's terms and above all to say something not just about one poet, Milton, but about *poets*. As Blake says on plates 5–6, poets give form to energy and are therefore always on the side of desire, the energy that gives poetry life. But conventional religions seek to restrain desire with common morality, not because desire leads to sensual indulgence – sensual indulgence is what conventional religion wants, in order to control energy within the economy of sin – but because in poets the freeing of desire leads to prophecy, which is the greatest threat to conventional religion. Conventional religion therefore enlists what it calls "reason" on its side, although this reason turns out to be preoccupied mostly with the repression of desire and the murder of prophets:

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling.

And being restrained it by degrees becomes passive till it is only the shadow of desire [i.e. reason].

The history of this is written in *Paradise Lost*, & the Governor or Reason is call'd Messiah.

And the original Archangel or possessor of the command of the heavenly host, is call'd the Devil or Satan and his children are call'd Sin & Death. ...

But in Milton; the Father is Destiny, the Son, a Ratio of the five senses, & the Holy-ghost, Vacuum!

Note. The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it. (1978: 79–80, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 5)

In this passage Blake is discussing what happens to traditional Christian ideas and images when they enter into Milton's epic and are all but exposed by their starkness: God the Father is Destiny (the inescapable consequences of an implacable reason) and God the Son is "a Ratio of the five senses," which is reason working up from mere sense impressions, instead of following vision. For Blake, the Jehovah of the Hebrew Scriptures, who becomes God the Father of Christianity, is the principle of evil we call "Satan," seeking the death of the prophets and the repression of desire. And what we have learned to call "Satan" is the demonized mask of energy, imagination and poetic power. Milton's error, as we are told in the "Note," is that he believed the demonic mask (though not entirely: hence his Satan being the perfect type of virile beauty) without seeing what is concealed behind the mask – his own poetic power. Milton therefore found himself writing about Satan in the first two books of *Paradise Lost* "with liberty," that is, with energy and power, without knowing why he was writing so well. He wrote "in fetters" when he wrote of "Angels and God" because these figures are the masks of what is in truth repression – the repression of poetry and prophecy. Blake's claim that Milton is a "true Poet" and therefore "of the Devils party without knowing it" means that what is best in Milton opposes the repressiveness of traditional Christianity, which is a wicked distortion of the teachings of another true poet: Jesus.

However we interpret Blake's remarks on Milton in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he clearly did not regard them as final, and returned to what we may call "the problem of Milton" in the poem he named after that poet. Blake was displeased with his earlier idea that Milton was wholly ignorant of the true nature of the Christian ideology he expounded in *Paradise Lost*. For Blake, Milton is a prophet and deserves more respect than he was accorded in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which the conscious Milton is wholly on the side of his rationalistic God, parodied as Blake's Urizen. But Milton was also a "true poet" and according him respect means reading him with broader awareness than is shown in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. But for Blake this also means – to take us beyond mere reading – Milton deserves to be appealed to in person. That is what happens in *Milton*. But where is Milton, to receive this appeal? Part of

him is in Hell, for Satan is his specter, an alienated part of himself, his energy, awaiting recuperation. But as a “true Poet” Milton is also in Heaven. He is appealed to in person to make a terrible journey back into the world as a prophet, risking eternal death to correct his mistakes and vindicate the liberating truth buried in *Paradise Lost*. This he does, descending through a bizarre, Dantesque landscape and passing through Albion’s heart into the “tarsus” of Blake’s left foot, a location signifying the erroneous point from which Milton left the world, that is, a sinister religion of vengeance and Pauline repression (Saint Paul was from Tarsus):

Then first I saw him in the Zenith as a falling star
 Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or swift:
 And on my left foot falling on the tarsus, enterd there:
 But from my left foot a black cloud redounding spread over Europe
 (1978: 347–8, *Milton*, plate 14).⁶

Milton rises from thence to become one with Blake. The old prophet is now taken up into the new, for the express purpose of correcting the old prophet’s mistakes, with Blake’s help. What are Milton’s mistakes? The first ones have already been exposed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: the polarization of the universe into Heaven and Hell; the separation of reason from energy and the placing of reason above it; the alienation of this principle of reason to Heaven, deifying reason as God; and the banishing of poetic energy, which is the source of this reason, to Hell. The other errors of *Paradise Lost* have been more apparent to readers: the subordination of women and the existence of hierarchy in the objective world as a permanent principle, justifying social distinctions as natural, rather than as according to merit. To this we may add Milton’s materialism, the most inimical to Blake of all Milton’s ideas. Even so, Milton’s materialism is monistic, which means he does not accept the division of creatures into bodies and souls, or of the universe into spirit and matter. “Materialism” is here the belief that there is an absolutely featureless, extended substance from which all things are made: “one first matter all,” as it is called in *Paradise Lost* (iv. 472). Milton’s materialism is therefore more nearly allied to Blake’s monist belief that all is spirit than to the dualism both poets abhorred.

This matter comes ultimately from God, is alienated from God to become the whelming abyss of materials in chaos, and is worked on by God to create the Son, the angels, the world and mankind (vii. 168–73). Because the matter of chaos is valueless as it is, being raised out of chaos by creation introduces the first step in a hierarchy, whereby all things on the ladder of being tend up to God “if not depraved from good” (v. 471). Milton is fairly clear about Eve being lower on this hierarchy because she is closer to nature and to plants, so that her vision of God is not direct but through Adam, who is made in God’s image. Milton’s Eve is made not in the image of God but in the image of Adam’s desire (iv. 288–311). Blake saw that Milton’s cosmology inevitably leads to social distinctions of rank; to the devaluing and impoverishment of artists; to the oppression of women; to commerce based on

greed; to the enslaving of a large part of humanity; to an abstract, deistical religion based on the senses (for everything, including God himself, is matter, not vision); to empirical science as the foundation and ultimately the substitute for such religion; and to ceaseless war, excellence at slaughter being regarded as the human activity most deserving of praise. All these forces working together to enslave mankind make up the wheels of what Blake calls "dark Satanic mills" (1978: 318, *Milton*, plate 2).

At the same time, Blake recognizes Milton as the greatest prophet of liberty in the modern world before Blake himself. Milton was against bishops and kings; Milton was for marriage as a union of minds; Milton was for poetry and prophecy as the voices of wisdom; Milton was for the visions of the individual spirit over the practices of organized religion (having attended no church in his adult years); and Milton spoke out against "wars" as the only proper subject for a poem, "hitherto the only argument / Heroic deemed" (ix. 28–9). For Blake, no prophet can be entirely in the right, for every prophet is as encumbered with errors as he or she is possessed of truths. That is why there must be a *tradition* of prophets: one prophet is never enough. As each prophet carries the truth forward in time to the next, each is also a spiritual help for those who went before, as Blake is for Milton. That is why Milton can speak as he does in the following passage from *Milton* but could never speak this way in any poem he might have written in his own life:

"What do I do here [in Heaven] before the Judgment? without my Emanation?
With the daughters of memory, & not with the daughters of inspiration?
I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One!
He is my Spectre! in my obedience to loose him from my Hells,
To claim the Hells, my Furnaces, I go to Eternal Death."

(1978: 344, *Milton*, plate 12)

In the end, however, Milton seems less important for the English Romantics than is commonly supposed, and less important than the Romantics themselves supposed. The reason is the Romantics were more original than they knew. Milton was a classicist and a Christian. None of the Romantics, in his actual work, was both of those things, and few were even one such that it mattered to the poetry. It is not enough to say that the Romantics felt the burden of the past, as if feeling the burden of the past (or of the father) were the common lot of poets. It is this *peculiarity* of the Romantics, their retrospective anxiety, which needs explaining. Milton never felt the burden of the past: he took it prisoner. Spenser never felt the burden of the past: he was on top of it, and excavated downwards. Chaucer never felt the burden of the past: its authors were his literary friends. As for Milton's Satan, who like the Romantics is also neither a classicist nor a Christian, he represents the heterogeneous element within Milton's system which the Romantics could seize on in order to pry open a window and escape. But what were they doing in there in the first place? Hunting the sublime.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 4 “To Scorn or To ‘Scorn not the Sonnet’”; chapter 8 “Pastures New and Old: The Romantic Afterlife of Pastoral Elegy”; chapter 17 “‘Leigh Hunt’s Cockney Canon: Sociability and Subversion from Homer to *Hyperion*’”; chapter 19 “Spontaneity, Immediacy, and Improvisation in Romantic Poetry”; chapter 24 “Romanticism, Gnosticism, and Neoplatonism”; chapter 28 “‘Strange utterance’: The (Un)Natural Language of the Sublime in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*”; chapter 29 “The Matter of Genre in the Romantic Sublime”; chapter 31 “Blake’s *Jerusalem*: Friendship with Albion”

NOTES

- 1 Compare “Milton’s the prince of poets – so we say; / A little heavy, but no less divine” (*Don Juan* iii. 91), and “The Immortal wars which Gods and Angels wage, / Are they not shown in Milton’s sacred page?” (*Hints from Horace*, ll. 105–6, cited in Wittreich 1970: 515). All students of the Romantics and Milton owe Wittreich (1970) an immense debt of gratitude for his work, which covers the six major Romantic poets, but also surveys Romantic criticism, by Wordsworth and Coleridge, of course, but also by Charles Lamb, Walter Savage Landor, William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, and Thomas De Quincey.
- 2 As an undergraduate in the 1620s Milton did not have “apartments” at Christ’s College, nor is it probable he had a room to himself. Tradition has him in a dormitory adjoining the gate.
- 3 The phrase “republican austerity” is from a letter to Walter Savage Landor, April 20, 1822 (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1978: 125–6), the other quotations from a letter to an unknown correspondent, November 1802 (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1967: 379).
- 4 In the 1850 *Prelude* Wordsworth hews more closely still to Milton’s words and speaks of a mind “that broods / Over the dark abyss” (xiv. 71–2). Cf. *Paradise Lost* i. 21.
- 5 Byron on more than one occasion speaks of his appreciation of the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, meaning the soaring language and audacity of Satan: “Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is, as a whole, a heavy concern; but the first two books of it are the finest poetry that has ever been written in the world – at least since the flood” (Byron 1973–82: 4. 84).
- 6 In what follows I have benefited from Armand Himy’s chapter on Blake’s *Milton*, “Une quête de soi” (Himy 2008: 187–216).

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Part IV

Critical Issues and Current Debates

“The feel of not to feel it,”
or the Pleasures of Enduring Form

Anne-Lise François

I saw her singing.
Wordsworth

And when Ulysses approached (the Sirens) the potent songstresses actually did not sing, whether because they thought that this enemy could be vanquished only by their silence, or because the look of bliss on the face of Ulysses, who was thinking of nothing but his wax and his chains, made them forget their singing.

But Ulysses, if one may so express it, did not hear their silence; he thought they were singing and that he alone did not hear them. For a fleeting moment he saw their throats rising and falling, their breasts lifting, their eyes filled with tears, their lips half-parted, but believed that these were accompaniments to the airs which died unheard around him.

Kafka, “The Silence of the Sirens”

One either hears him ... moaning or ... sees him dead.
Lessing, *Laocoön*

The trope of self-bondage and willing if partial surrender of power recurs in Romantic reflections on lyric forms, perhaps most notably in Wordsworth’s and Keats’s self-reflexive sonnets on the sonnet (“Nuns fret not”; “If by dull rhymes our English must be chain’d”) – highly rhetorical exercises in finding pleasure in bondage, in putting x (a feminized “Poesy”? but also oneself as poet?) in formal fetters and deriving verbal grace from the very chains that bind (it? one?). The uncertainty of whether to say for x “linguistic power,” “the English language,” “some kind of preverbal ‘Muse’” or simply “oneself,” points to the impossibility of giving an antecedent object to the work of binding – of saying what “it” is before “it” emerges as beauty bound. Indeed while Keats’s sonnet may dramatize a male speaker putting a feminine object in bondage,

what appears as the opposition of masculine reason or form to a feminine energy in need of domination and control, however gentle, is itself already the result of a nonpresentable struggle or prehistory to reason, evidence that the latter has conquered (itself) and “pained loveliness” has taken shape as a “sonnet.”¹ Here and in the other allegorical scenes of self-bondage more closely examined in this essay, the masculine/feminine binary is itself the effect of the foreclosure by which the appearance of “poetry” or “art” coincides with and is inseparable from its containment and feminization: it only ever appears bound, shorn of destructive power, neutralized of its full potential.

This notion of art as the taming by feminization of some other, itself unrepresentable × just as frequently appears as its inverse as the idea of “art” as the “consolation prize” for woman escaped. Thus Barbara Johnson in her remarkable essay “Muteness Envy” draws on Froma Zeitlin (1991) commenting Keats’s *Urn* and Peter Sacks (1985) commenting Apollo and the laurel he ultimately holds in Daphne’s place to reconsider poetry’s origins as an all too still, ironically possessable token wrested from a failed rape – both the reminder of and substitute for the failure either to catch the “maiden loth” or possess the enigma of her desire. For readers who remember with Johnson the fate reserved Daphne – saved from one kind of sacrifice only by another that puts her beyond all response – the violence of loss cannot begin with the substitutive act by which the mourner/lover is made to give up his quest in exchange for something called “the aesthetic”; instead the aesthetic emerges as the “sacrifice of sacrifice” along a substitutive chain to which no beginning or end can safely be assigned. Moreover, because “muteness envy” involves the projection onto women of a power of silence by which they (are seen to) keep the secret both of their pleasure and suffering, the “silence in the place of rape” to which “the aesthetic is inextricably bound” cannot simply signify a negation or blockage of desire as it does for Apollo; instead it registers on at least three different levels – as the double sign of violence permanently deferred and of a wrong nevertheless irrevocably done, and as something else entirely – the trace of a pleasure possibly already and still secretly enjoyed (Johnson 1998: 135–7).

Johnson’s emphasis on the persistence of the element of fantasy in renunciation itself helps clarify the sense in which I will be using the term “form” in this essay, not as that which endures, inured to the effects of time, but as that which requires “enduring” – the object of a transitive, ongoing action as well as a verb in its own right, rather than the finished shape supposed capable of outlasting the history from which it has emerged.² My focus will be thus less on Keats’s experiments with conventional lyric forms than on his dynamic sense of the nonbinary relations between passion and form, potency and conjugated action, desire and stasis, as I follow him trying to put back into time the “feel” of the unrealized power of sensation named by the line in my title from “In drear nighted December,” a line by itself indicative of Keats’s special place in the story, fundamental to Romanticism and Western aesthetics more generally, of how the pursuit of intense sensory experience arrives at the same perceptual blank as the renunciation of sensual gratification, and aestheticism and asceticism become nearly indistinguishable, in meaning as well as sound.

Highlighting the complex gender politics behind the notion of art as a cheat by which one has the thrill without paying for it or pays the price without gaining the

prize, Johnson's account is suggestive of all the different ways to think of aesthetic experience as the "feel of not to feel it," of which the first but least interesting would be as the "feel of *almost* to feel it" – the fate to which the dialectic of anticipation and frustration proper to desire conceived as pursuit condemns the urn's "happy lover." But modern critical idiom affords at least three other versions of this story of the ironic predication of aesthetic experience on ascesis – on a voluntary self-binding, partial stopping of the senses, and readiness not to know its object. The first corresponds to the critique, most sharply pursued by Pierre Bourdieu, of Kantian "disinterested" aesthetic judgment as "pleasure without sensuousness" – as an exercise in what Adorno once called "castrated hedonism" allowing you to look at but not touch (let alone eat or take possession of) the object of aesthetic pleasure (Adorno 1997: 11). The second comes in response to the first and argues that the materialist critique of aesthetic ideology itself repeats the defensive gesture of which it accuses high aesthetics – that of denying itself a fully (or, on the contrary, merely) perceptual response to the art object. The third would be the skeptical denial, found in de Man and de Manian readings of Romanticism, of the very possibility of aesthetic experience if by such is understood the dream of making knowledge perceptible through a coincidence of "a concrete aspect of the work ... with a sensorial or semantic dimension of the language" (de Man 1983: 31). Finally Keats's own definition of "negative capability" as the capacity to hold oneself "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats 1987: 43) inadvertently supplies the terms of a fourth version – the notion according to which aesthetic "mastery" is conditional on the abandonment of cognitive mastery (and by extension of rational or historical truth-claims) – an exercise in suspense, in doing without knowledge, at least of the kind that can be put into words.

As no more than a "pastime," the trope of form as pleasurable prison belongs to this aesthetic tradition as does the habit of figuring lyric poetry as complaint sublimated into song through the "image" of an unseen nightingale "singing of summer in full-throated ease," deaf to the freedom that it wastes as pure sound. Thus in his "Defence of Poetry" Shelley likens the poet to "a nightingale, who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds" and the poet's auditors to "men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why" (2002: 516) – descriptions echoed by John Stuart Mill in "On Poetry" when he figures poetry as the "lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen in the next" (1976: 14). Part of Mill's famous definition of poetry as "overheard" speech free of rhetorical design (1976: 12), the figure of the unseen embowered voice overheard by passively transfixed auditors allegorizes the way in which an apparent impossibility of dialogical relation between speaker and reader yields the possibility of pleasure (or pain) in form. Surrendering the power to know and be known in exchange for a pleasure without consequence, Shelley's and Mill's motionless auditors invite obvious comparison with another iconic figure for lyric experience as barred, bounded reception – Odysseus as he passes the Sirens unhurt and without power of return in Book XII of *The Odyssey*. Hearing only on condition of not seeing, they get

only half – and in a certain sense nothing – of what the Sirens scandalously offer together – sensory fulfillment and knowledge. An ordinary enough conjunction for the Greeks but precisely what Enlightenment, as Adorno and Horkheimer use the term, will demand one choose between, thereby making of bourgeois “art” the shadowy remains of an alternative but foreclosed-upon enlightenment. Keats himself famously was barred the classics; not only did not read Homer in the original Greek, but listened to Charles Cowden Clark read Chapman’s Homer to him. In this essay I will deliberately heap scene upon scene of near but non possession, first to illustrate the identification of aesthetic pleasure with the impossibility of exchange and nonconvergence of the senses, on the one hand, and with the repeatability or returnability without return of form, on the other; and second to demonstrate something about the peculiar relation that Keatsian form as a figure of potentiality maintains toward passing time.

In context, the line refers to the special capacity that humans have for lack – that “negative capability” or strangely inactive power to miss, to continue to apprehend the in-felt absence of *x*, whose more familiar face is the imagination’s positive ability to supply the place of the missing, to fill the place of what is absent. According to the poem’s conceit, leafless tree and frozen brook remain doubly cold because dead – “steeled” – to their own temporary lifelessness, so that whatever nature’s promised return to life, in the poem’s chiasmus there is only either being dead to the past (and its potential return) or alive to its death:

But were there ever any [girl or boy]
 Writh’d not of passed joy?
 The feel of not to feel it,
 When there is none to heal it,
 Nor numbed sense to steel it,
 Was never said in rhyme.
 (ll. 19–24)

The rhetorical question makes a commonplace of the startling idea that what one mostly does with joy is writhe of it when “passed.” Thus the tortuous syntax of the triple negatives (“any,” “not,” “passed”) accords no time to the present of “joy,” but only because it is never more active, never more productive of pleasure-like effects, than as a convulsion-inducing memory.³ One could say this of Keats more generally – that the paucity of present-tense verbs in the indicative tells us nothing of the state of progressive action, since Keats’s idiosyncratic past participles enjoy a peculiar ongoingness such that *x* is not finished for having reached its limit or budded to its fullest. Take the sequence from the “Ode to Psyche,” for example, “Mid hush’d, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed” (l. 13), where the last epithet causes the syntax to trip and fold back on itself, embedding and enclosing the noun within the string of participles. Rather than moving it forward, “fragrant-eyed” completes the line with a kind of swallowed climax, for if flowers have “eyes” – points at the center visible only when full-blown but most fragrant when not – such eyes never open on anything even when fully opened.

The use of participles to indicate actions no less ongoing for being incapable of further temporal declension in this sense accords with the doubled infinitive of "the feel of not to feel it." Elsewhere Keats famously refers to "the feel I have of Anthony and Cleopatra" (1987: 84) – a phrase suggestive not so much of the substitution of an emotive for intellectual response to artworks with which "Romanticism" is still sometimes reductively identified, nor even of the idea that Shakespeare's plays carry with them a specific "feel" as certain seasons or times of day do (the way the sun might be felt on closed eyes), but rather of the experiential quality of a drama still *in potentia* – held in the head rather than acted out, unfolded or realized in time. Writing to the painter Benjamin Haydon, Keats uses the phrase synonymously with "the abstract Idea [he has] of an heroic painting," as if the condensation of propositional content and indifference to narrative extension or conjugation in real time common to both intense sensation and abstract conception could make them interchangeable:⁴

I have ever been too sensible of the labyrinthian path to eminence in Art (judging from Poetry) ever to think I understood the emphasis of Painting. The innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of Beauty – I know not you[r] many havens of intensesness – nor ever can know them – but for this I hope not [*for* nought] you atchieve is lost upon me: for when a Schoolboy the abstract Idea I had of an heroic painting – was what I cannot describe I saw it somewhat sideways large prominent round and colour'd with magnificence – somewhat like the feel I have of Anthony and Cleopatra. Or of Alcibiades, leaning on his Crimson Couch in his Galley, his broad shoulders imperceptibly heaving with the Sea. (Keats 1987: 83–4)

The intertextual source for this image is Plutarch's account of Alcibiades' scandalous behavior as a maritime war hero who from "indolency and rashness" "caused the planks of the poop [of his galley] to be cut and broken up, that he might lie the softer" (Plutarch 1676: 171; cited in Sen 1999: 49). But the image is also readable through countless of Keats's own, especially those images of power in repose and suspended climax that explain why the concept of "negative capability" is so often understood literally as inoperative power – power no less real for not being in use. Thus Keats's definition of poetry from the early "Sleep and Poetry" – "'tis the supreme of power; / 'Tis might half slumb'ring on its own right arm" (ll. 236–7) – almost invariably appears alongside the passage from the letter to Haydon in discussions of "negative capability" as an "ideal of dynamic poise, of power kept in reserve" (Bate 1963: 246). Yet like Plutarch's Alcibiades, Keats's images also refuse the expected disciplinary choice between suspense and taking possession and thereby trouble our habit of thinking of potential as a "not yet" preliminary to the thing itself. Indeed one way to describe the Keatsian "leap / Of buds into ripe flowers" ("I stood tip-toe upon a little hill" ll.110–11) might be as a growing downward (rather than up and out) – a flowering inward into a fuller latency that, far from delaying realization or postponing the

moment of climax, completes it on a nonvisual level, in another sensory register. Here, for example, the image of Alcibiades “leaning on his crimson couch” comes to a rest in something unavailable to pictorial representation – in the imagined detail of his “broad shoulders imperceptibly heaving” in time “with the Sea,” a detail which at one stroke “re-mortalizes” Alcibiades – puts him back in time, exposing his luxuriance as nothing more than the taking and release of breath – and just as surely figures his deadness to come, since even if the movement were perceptible, one could never tell from the outside whether he was breathing in time with the water’s swell or simply being lifted, corpselike, by it.

But the view from outside is never the point, as an earlier generation of Keats critics has already taught us, because eyes do something other than see in Keats; there to be touched and acted upon (“heated,” “awaken’d,” “shut with kisses”), they find their telos without opening – “shut softly up alive” – according to the oddly reversed tempo of Keatsian desire, which is to end rather than begin in an embryonic, as yet unbudded state, as the following passages attest:⁵

He sprang from his green covert: there she lay,
Sweet as a muskrose upon new-made hay;
With all her limbs on tremble, and her eyes
Shut softly up alive.

Endymion iv. 101–4

Till in the bosom of a leafy world
We rest in silence, like two gems upcurl’d
In the recesses of a pearly shell.
“Sleep and Poetry,” ll. 119–21

As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.
The Eve of St. Agnes, l. 243

Unmistakably Keatsian is the use of “alive” at the end of the phrase to modify the entire sequence, as if (1) things were only ever “alive” when enfolded or still enclosed, and (2) she were only *now* “alive” – as if the sexual act had brought her to life without breaking the seal. The impossible wish to “see” eyes that have disappeared from the phenomenal world of manifest appearance recalls the lines from Shakespeare about Imogen’s eyes as “enclosed lights” quoted by Hazlitt in his lecture “On Poetry” (1930–4: 5. 4):

“– The flame o’ th’ taper
Bows toward her, and would under-peep her lids
To see the enclosed lights” –

Just so when Porphyro beholds Madeline already dreaming of him, he desires not to bring her out of her dream and forward into reality but to transmute himself into her idealized image of him:

he arose,
Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star
Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;
Into her dream he melted, as the rose
Blendeth its odour with the violet, –
Solution sweet.

(*The Eve of St. Agnes*, ll. 317–22)

The masturbatory element in these scenes of some kind of consummation with a still dormant body is so self-evident that it is easy to forget that the odder perversity of this fantasy of penetrating another being as she sleeps lies less in its sexual content than in the movement of coming to potentiality at the end.⁶ We could call this longing to accompany something in its shuttiness to itself and bring it to fruition without bringing it to consciousness the desire of "negative capability," so as to distinguish the concept from any idea of "disinterestedness" or "impersonality" as the opposite of self-absorbed passion. Indeed as W. J. Bate made clear many years ago, Keats's grand confession of poetic nonidentity and indifference to particular content – "A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body" (Keats 1987: 157) – cannot be heard apart from the sense of form as a suspended process of "informing" and passion for "waiting close" given in his margin notes to Book IX of *Paradise Lost*:

Satan having entered the Serpent, and inform'd his brutal sense – might seem sufficient – but Milton goes on "*but his sleep disturb'd not.*" Whose spirit does not ache at the smothering and confinement – the unwilling stillness – the "*waiting close*"? Whose head is not dizzy at the possible speculations of satan in his serpent prison – no passage of poetry ever can give a greater pain of suffocation. (Quoted in Bate 1963: 254)

This figure of a penetrated yet still undisturbed sleep doubles even as it inverts Keats's other equally famous transposition of Milton – "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth" (Keats 1987: 37); either there is rupture and one goes on sleeping; or one wakes up and there is no interruption. Keatsian latency in this sense offers an alternative to our usual way of scanning the tempo of nonfulfillment, as a fall from anticipation to retrospection or from hope to memory. The question of Keats's relation – ironic or still mystified – to the somnambulist romance tradition he rewrites has, of course, long been a topic of debate in Keats criticism, and fully to address his way of thinking enchantment and enlightenment non-agonistically – as a reiterative succession of one on the other rather than as a fall or a progress – remains beyond the scope of this essay. Instead I want to return to the question of form as the site of checked desire and sensory or cognitive blockage with which I began, by further examining the trope of proximity without reciprocity as it appears in canonical Enlightenment and Romantic discourse about aesthetic experience, in particular discourse about the (non)relations between the plastic and temporal arts and visual and aural imaginations, discourse that, even while opposing "eye" and

“ear,” conceives of both as midway points of suspense between one kind of grasping – the will to know or reaching after cognitive mastery that Keats famously rejects in his “negative capability” letter – and another – the desire to touch and take possession of the object and surrender to immediacy identified with mere sensual (as opposed to aesthetic) pleasure.

When Hazlitt uses the figure of “flame bend[ing] to flame” to describe poetry as a penetrative protean force impatient of all achieved and manifest forms – “poetry represents forms chiefly as they suggest other forms; feelings, as they suggest forms or other feelings” (1930–4: 5. 3) – he is implicitly rejecting the idea of poetic form as the masterful containment of an otherwise uncontainable erotic energy. This unsettling of the merely contemplative aesthetic tradition is even clearer in the essay “On Gusto,” where Hazlitt criticizes paintings in which “the eye does not acquire a taste or appetite, for what it sees” (1930–4: 4. 78) – a line repeated in Keats’s complaint about paintings in which “there is nothing to be intense upon; no women one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality” (1987: 42). Yet the thought that “whenever we look at the hands of Correggio’s women or of Raphael’s, we always wish to touch them” (Hazlitt 1930–4: 4. 78) does not so much violate what Adorno calls the “taboo on art” forbidding that “one take an animalistic stance toward the [art] object” and “dominate it by physically devouring it,” as it does reveal the dialectic of suspended desire at art’s core:

There is no art that does not contain in itself as an element, negated, what it repulses. If it is more than mere indifference, the Kantian “without interest” must be shadowed by the wildest interest, and there is much to be said for the idea that the dignity of artworks depends on the intensity of the interest from which they are wrested. (Adorno 1997: 11)

Adorno’s direct reference here is to Kant’s exclusion of hunger (and even “healthy appetite”) from the exercise of aesthetic taste as the “one and only disinterested and *free* delight” (Kant 1982: 49), but the way in which both Keats and Hazlitt take the measure of unachieved desire by pushing each sense to the limit of what it can do – making eyes want to eat and touch – also evokes Lessing’s famous proscription of climax or total revelation in the visual arts in his *Laocoön*:

The more we see, the more we must be able to imagine. And the more we add in our imaginations, the more we must think we see. In the full course of an emotion, no point is less suitable for this than its climax. There is nothing beyond this, and to present the utmost to the eye is to bind the wings of fancy and compel it, since it cannot soar above the impression made on the senses, to concern itself with weaker images, shunning the visible fullness already represented as a limit beyond which it cannot go. Thus if Laocoön sighs, the imagination can hear him cry out; but if he cries out, it can neither go one step higher nor one step lower than this representation without seeing him in a more tolerable and hence less interesting condition. One either hears him merely moaning or else sees him dead. (Lessing 1984: 19–20)

While these options – one either hears him alive or sees him dead – appear mutually exclusive, there is also a sense in which one possibility comes to conjure the other so that imagined sound becomes the apotropaic experience of the sight of death (as of the death that sight itself spells for the active imagination). Indeed Lessing's concern in privileging the moment just before "climax" is less for the mortal condition of the represented human subject than for the aesthetic "life" of the perceiving subject who must be left something to do so he may actively participate in the scene he views, imaginatively supplying what the visual object fails to represent. Similarly Hazlitt will later privilege poetry over painting for its temporal and temporizing powers both to reintroduce the perceiving subject's desire (conceived as movement toward a temporal end) into the scene of representation and to give that subject a "resting place" in the midst of the "progress of events."⁷ The passage from *St. Agnes* describing Porphyro gazing at Madeline's empty dress, where she herself once was, even as he listens to her near-by breathing, represents one such "resting place" – a holding together of two fetishes or metonymic substitutes that nevertheless don't make a whole:

Stol'n to this paradise, and so entranced,
Porphyro gazed upon her empty dress,
And listen'd to her breathing, if it chanced
To wake into a slumberous tenderness.

(ll. 244–7)

Porphyro's listening goes where his gaze cannot, but to say that he keeps his eyes averted merely from strangely lascivious modesty would be to miss the way in which this divided attention permits a concentration even closer than direct contact.

Neither quite viewers nor listeners, Lessing's and Hazlitt's aesthetic subjects, like Keats's lover, might be termed "readers" if by "reading" is understood seeing invisible things and hearing silent music, a catachretic trope filling the void of the two negated halves – how else, after all, can one hear something so quiet as a statue's sigh? Their imagination stimulated by sensory or representational blockage, these "readers" resemble Kafka's Ulysses who, unlike Homer's hero, has filled his ears with wax and for this reason can imagine anything he likes, except that there may be nothing to hear as he passes the Sirens. Kafka's Ulysses lacks imagination on two counts: he never doubts the efficacy of his stratagems for triumphing over the Sirens even though "it was known to all the world that such things were of no help whatever" (Kafka 1971: 431). And once he has performed this self-mutilation and sacrificed the chance to hear their beautiful song, he can't imagine that there might have been nothing to miss, nothing for which to sacrifice his hearing. But in between these two failures of imagination, Kafka's Ulysses presents a sort of caricature of the strongly imaginative or speculative reader who, renouncing the sensory for the immaterial in the face of a limited and partial body of evidence, is able to listen to "unheard melodies" with an inward ear and supply the mute page with "ditties of no tone."

Kafka's joke on his hero is to double his deafness with the Sirens' silence: Ulysses cannot hear and there is also nothing to hear (since in his version at least they choose for once not to sing). This passage from an ear that imagines itself deaf, cut off by physical or historical or willfully imposed obstacles, to one that even in the midst of its nonperception would remember to imagine a soundless present is like what occurs in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in the move from the second stanza's claim for the greater sweetness of "unheard melodies" to the fourth stanza's sudden intimation not of a greater fullness but of the little town's desolation of potential and evacuation of even merely imagined space:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

...

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
 What little town by river or sea shore,
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

(ll. 11–14; 31–40)⁸

In his paradigmatic essay on the poem as a mode of "history without footnotes," Cleanth Brooks does not distinguish between these two imaginative exercises – the more familiar one of filling in the blanks and abstracting from particular blockage to universal plenitude – and what I want to suggest is the more specifically Keatsian gesture of subtracting from art's perpetual experiential blank a finite loss:

If the earlier stanzas have been concerned with such paradoxes as the ability of static carving to convey dynamic action, of the soundless pipes to play music sweeter than that of the heard melody, of the figured lover to have a love more warm and panting than that of breathing flesh and blood, so in the same way the town implied by the urn comes to have a richer and more important history than that of actual cities. Indeed, the imagined town is to the figured procession as the unheard melody is to the carved pipes of the unwearied melodist. (Brooks 1947: 162)

But on this logic, the communal consensus promised by aesthetic experience means our wasting tears on a town that never existed; to take the "imagined town" as simply another version of an "unheard melody," as Brooks does, makes Keats a representative

of the "Romantic ideology" that Jerome McGann (1983) and others have criticized as an escape from history into a transcendent ideal as barren as it is open, admitting of no adequate particular iteration. Yet the little town, although purely imagined, unavailable to empirical perception, is not simply analogous to the "unheard melody"; the famous Keatsian surmise of the fourth stanza by which, according to Helen Vendler, the speaker liberates himself from enslavement to the figures represented on the urn, follows no more than materialism's law of a closed, finite economy (according to which x can't be in two places at the same time): if the people leading the heifer to sacrifice are here, then they are NOT somewhere else, just as the Elgin marbles appear in London because removed from Greece, their victorious manifestation the suppression of another history. Precisely at the moment the urn depicts the deferral of sacrifice, Keats renounces equivocation and the Edenic condition of as yet unmade choices. Previously he has been "sweating" the ideal, heaping instance after instance of denied/immortalized desire, only now suddenly to "fall" from the "high" ecstasy of burning virginity to the proleptic summation of irrecoverable loss. This moment of harvesting a negated future carries the same rhetorical ironies as the passage cited by Hazlitt as an example of Shakespeare's power to render "passions in a state of projection," where Iago announces Othello's disenchantment in terms so enchanting he seems to be singing him to the sleep he will never again enjoy: "Look where he comes! Not poppy, nor mandragora, / Nor all the drowsy syrups of the East, / Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep / Which thou ow'dst yesterday" (Hazlitt 1930-4: 5. 51-2).

In the Ode the buried pun on "urn" in the promise of no more "return" closing off a stanza otherwise free of the word gives the lie to the logical error Keats's speaker commits when he collapses onto the urn the two rhetorical levels of representation and represented or, in narrative terms, the uncannily timeless time of discourse and the ordinary, linear, earth-bound time of deigesis, and declares the little town forever desolated as if its inhabitants in being depicted on the urn had also been transported, evacuated to it without possibility of return. But if their representation could not have dispossessed the town at the time, the statement remains proleptically "true" since the "folk" are now dead in any case, and what was once a temporary, contingent and easily reversible absence has become definitive and irrevocable. The floating elegiac utterance telling us of what there is "not a soul to tell" marks the void between one kind of incapacity for (or unawareness of) death and another – that of the people who, oblivious to their own vulnerability to sacrifice, left the town with the certainty of returning to it that night, and of the urn that can do nothing but turn on itself. For one kind of promised turning – the uncertain and never guaranteed, quotidian power to come and go, for days, nights and seasons to follow on one another in close but irreversible succession – Keats substitutes the urn's power of pure reversibility, and between the two draws a line of no return. In this sense the only implied, itself hushed threat of irrevocably breaking a hitherto unbroken quiet with which the Ode opens – "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness" – finds itself oddly realized, and at the same time transmuted, in the explicitly verbalized (although still not quite audible if silently read) vow declaring eternal the town's temporary vacancy and consigning its streets to a

henceforth unbreakable silence. This sudden transition from the indefinite and intransitive present without progress of statuary to the definite, transitive and utterly finished effects a change in potential only – a passage from a “not yet” to a “never to be” (once “still unravished,” x now never will be) – and represents the inversion of the coming to potential I’ve been studying so far in this essay.

As if singing the little town to sleep with the story of its own dispossession, Keats’s speaker here repeats both the oddly self-reflexive opening gambit of the “Ode to Psyche” – “pardon that thy secrets should be sung / Even into thine own soft-conched ear” (ll. 3–4) – and the *mise-en-abyme* in *The Eve of St. Agnes* when Porphyro arouses Madeline in the double sense of exciting and waking her up by singing to her another of Keats’s poems:

Awakening up, he took her hollow lute, –
 Tumultuous, – and, in chords that tenderest be,
 He play’d an ancient ditty, long since mute,
 In Provence call’d, “La belle dame sans mercy”:
 Close to her ear touching the melody; –
 Wherewith disturb’d, she utter’d a soft moan:
 He ceased – she panted quick – and suddenly
 Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone:
 Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone.
(ll. 289–97)

In the Homeric story of which Kafka’s parable is a revision, the Sirens make Odysseus the same kind of strangely redundant promise of something we might suppose he already possesses – knowledge of “all things whatsoever [that] / were in wide Troy labour’d, whatsoever there / The Grecians and the Troyans both sustain’d” (Chapman 1967: xii. 278–80). Odysseus importantly hears only what the Sirens promise about their song: “none past ever but [our song] bent his eare” and “left him ravishd and instructed more” (xii. 275–6). Rendering this more literally as “when he has had delight he goes on his way with increase of knowledge,” W. B. Stanford notes “the difference in force between the aorist and perfect participles,” the only hint of tension in a phrase otherwise presenting as a mere matter of course the far from straightforward relation between satisfaction and departure (Stanford 1947: 412). Either the listener’s instruction includes learning how to tell “when he has had delight” – when of the Sirens’ pleasure he has had his fill, when of “too much” there has been “enough” and he may go “on his way” again. Or the Sirens are making no secret of their disastrous lure – “when he has had delight” – but that precisely will never happen since no one, once tempted, can ever get enough.

Given the self-reflexivity whereby the Homeric text competes with the Sirens’ promised but undelivered song and becomes for us at least the site of that promise’s displaced fulfillment, the episode has long served as an allegory for art’s role both as a vehicle for historical knowledge and as the means of its erasure.⁹ “Long since mute,” predicated of an ancient ballad we know as Keats’s own, produces a similar slippage

between the time of deigesis and that of narration (or discourse): has the "ditty" been "mute" (or of "no tone") since the time of its original until the time that Porphyro revives it? Or since the time of Porphyro's playing it to Madeline, in which case it is "mute" not from neglect but because read – enshrined as art rather than incanted as magic? Of the multiple ironies at stake in this question of the ballad's repeatability or potency to work its charm a second time, one concerns the surprising role that an apparently empty self-referential song – incapable of pointing beyond or outside itself except to another poem and to a poem itself about a dumb enchantment from which there is no escape – plays in effecting a return to reality and "disturbing" Madeline (as Satan in the serpent does not) sufficiently to draw her out of her dream. Precisely what would seem to ensure its status as pure fiction – the song's self-referential character – also makes it the means of its own dissolution – all that is needed to undo its own spell – and in this sense a measure of its relation to truth.

On this account, Madeline's call for reiteration – "Give me that voice *again*" (l. 312, emphasis added) – is something more complicated than a mere wish to go on dreaming – a longing to hear again the song that pierces through her dream to bring it to an end (in the double sense of fruition and ruin). Her cry is in this sense comparable to the sign Homer's Odysseus makes to be liberated from the inconsequence of his pleasure so he can consummate his encounter with the Sirens and hear their song to its end. For as Homer's readers well know, Odysseus's partial surrender remains instead a mode of self-possession and his self-binding a form of mastery, since he abandons himself to the Sirens' "honeyed voices" (Fagles 1996: xii. 203) only on condition of not giving himself up entirely. Incapable of leading anywhere beyond itself and denied the possibility of return, his hearing can only oscillate somewhere between "pure" and "mere" pleasure: what might seem a purely reiterative enjoyment (since without progress and without power to seize, appropriate or respond on his part) is not even that since he hears only on condition of not stopping to listen. Thus Adorno and Horkheimer can use the story not simply to tell the origin of the bourgeois conception of art as a separate, self-contained sphere, its assertion of autonomy indistinguishable from its relegation to insignificance, but to expose the rational self-interest behind the original experience of disinterested pleasure:

What Odysseus hears is without consequence for him; he is able only to nod his head as a sign to be set free from his bonds; but it is too late; his men, who do not listen, know only the song's danger but nothing of its beauty, and leave him at the mast in order to save him and themselves. ... The bonds with which he has irremediably tied himself to practice, also keep the Sirens away from practice: their temptation is neutralized and becomes a mere object of contemplation – becomes art. The prisoner is present at a concert, an inactive eavesdropper like later concertgoers, and his spirited call for liberation fades like applause. (Horkheimer and Adorno 1999: 34)

According to the cruel irony of this last image, the oarsmen themselves cannot but aestheticize Odysseus's own silent appeal to them as the expression of pure pleasure: what he sends out as a last call for help, they misinterpret as a blissful "ah" or more

farcically, a spirited cry of “encore” or “oh that was so good; let’s have another.” But if at the time no one heeds the mute pantomime of his eyebrows, Odysseus’s own retrospective first-person account remains almost as opaque because he can only express his desire (whether for reiteration, completion or liberation) by splitting his listening across a blocked internal organ of understanding – something Homer’s translators variously translate as “heart,” “spirit,” or “soul” – and his open ears, which ostensibly already hear the song (although Butler at least simply renders it as a quantitative desire for more of the same across time: “I longed to hear them further” (1952: 252)):¹⁰

So they sent their ravishing voices out across the air
and the heart inside me throbbed to listen longer.

(Fagles 1996: xii. 208–9).

They raised that beautiful song and my spirit was longing
to hear much more.

(McCrorie 2004: xii. 192–4)

Chapman’s translation is of particular interest here for the way he runs the internal and end rhymes together so densely as to make his lines difficult to parse except as an undifferentiated stream of sound mimetic of the blockage and flow that Odysseus may enjoy as much as he does suffer:

This they gave accent in the sweetest straine
That ever open’d an enamour’d vaine –
When my constrain’d heart needs would have mine eare
Yet more delighted, force way forth, and heare.

(xii. 284–7)

The peculiarly Keatsian figure of a musical strain opening an enamored vein, as if it were veins and not ears that had to be opened to hear music and melody had the power to penetrate the arteries and swell them, carries over into the next couplet both through the repeated sound of “strained” and the image of the “constrained heart” itself, with the effect of making an otherwise trite figure for Odysseus’s subjectivity more vividly corporeal both by its proximity to “vein” and by the visual pun (of which Keats was fond) on “ear” in “hear” and “heart.”¹¹ The awkwardness of Chapman’s syntax reflects the difficulty of giving content to a desire whose end has already been reached (Odysseus wants only to be “yet more delighted”) or hasn’t even begun to be fulfilled, since “and heare” coming at the end of both the couplet and sentence makes hearing anything at all the greatest, perhaps still unattained achievement, rather than something merely preliminary to spiritual consummation as in Pope’s “My soul takes wing to meet the heaven’ly strain” (1902: 177).

Part of the difficulty here concerns the inadequacy of teleological models of desire that can only figure their end as a movement toward an as yet unattained x when applied to

aural experience, the most common trope of which is of music as a "stream" or liquid to be poured – its ongoing loss impossible to cut or separate from its equally constant arrival. Precisely this impossibility of giving listening an object, of figuring its climax except either as a mere "more" – a reiteration of what has just passed – or as a passing out of sensory experience altogether, is dramatized in the sixth stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale" when, following the fifth stanza's surmise of nearby but unseen flowers, Keats remembers to imagine his own deafness at the height of sensory reception:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
 I have been half in love with easeful Death,
 Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
 To take into the air my quiet breath;
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
 In such an ecstasy!
 Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –
 To thy high requiem become a sod.

(ll. 51–60)

According to the famous ambiguity highlighted by Cynthia Chase, the "still" of "Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain" can be carried over to modify the second clause as well as the first, so that far from marking a contrast between his present state and his imagined death (as in "you would continue singing but I would not be there to hear you"), Keats would be admitting that even when alive he only has ears "in vain": he cannot use them to make sound intelligible or there is nothing for him to hear (the Nightingale, like Kafka's Sirens, does not sing, or does not sing for him) or to "listen darkling" is already to overhear superfluously, wastefully (Chase 1986: 72). "To thy high requiem become a sod" – the aesthete at the height of his powers here becomes indistinguishable from the thick-headed bourgeois who might pass the Elgin marbles or what have you, nose to the ground without looking up. For, more than a defensive inversion of the bird's indifference to him, this fantasy of being nothing to someone else's *jouissance* – of being the "nothing" whose impossible address at the point of no response would guarantee the purity of this other being's sacrifice or expenditure without return – arguably takes to its logical conclusion the aesthetic principle of disinterestedness, according to which the perceiver takes nothing from the art-object and the object cares nothing for the subject. It is almost impossible to disentangle this fantasy of proximate non-exchange from the seemingly opposite dream of reciprocity, of implied but suspended mutual address, that Chase takes Keats's poem to dismantle – the dream or hope that sound-making brings with it the reverse capacity to hear and thereby respond and "listening" implies the power of "voice" (Chase 1986: 69).

The difficulty arises because this latter fiction – the fiction that an addressable and addressing presence inhabits and motivates linguistic signs – while it assumes an easy translatability between ear and eye, whereby to hear a voice is already to see a face and

vice versa, does not rely on anything so obvious as a face-to-face, symmetrical exchange (no one, for example, is supposed to believe Keats and bird are actually talking to one another). On the contrary, the one-way substitutive chain or system of correspondences by which Keats's "darkling" absorption of Milton's words comes to figure our reading of his poem does not lose its seductive charm for being put in the negative, if, for example, we say literary bird and poem are doubles to one another because the latter no more addresses us than the former does listen to Keats. Indeed, as the examples of Kafka's deaf Ulysses or Mill's unseeing eavesdroppers or Keats's own suspenseful hanging in "embalmed darkness" would attest, partial blockage and muted or deferred responsiveness may be necessary conditions for the surmise of voice that Chase takes to be everywhere operative including and most especially in the renunciation of figural presence and reliance on half-guessed-at, ordinary sense "perception" for which Keats's readers praise him. For Chase as for Paul de Man, the "trope of address" is inescapable – the secret figurative dimension of any transition or transfer "between cognition and perception" (Chase 1986: 69). At best one can induce the same skeptical crisis "over the possibility of *bearing* writing – of hearing a voice in, and putting a face or a name to, linguistic signs" (Chase 1986: 68) as Kafka's parable does over the possibility of interpreting movements as significant expressions. Her argument in this sense has the extraordinary effect of getting us to "see" the seemingly ordinary passage "from a sign to a sound and a sense" as a process at least as hallucinatory as that whereby Kafka's Ulysses hears the Sirens singing by looking at them: "For a fleeting moment he saw their throats rising and falling, their breasts lifting, their eyes filled with tears, their lips half-parted, but believed that these were accompaniments to the airs which died unheard around him" (Kafka 1971: 431). Arresting us before the signs that Ulysses can only arbitrarily take to indicate the presence of "song," Kafka's prose anticipates de Man's and Chase's skeptical denial of the continuity between perception and interpretation – precisely that continuity presupposed by the aesthetic project of giving phenomenal, perceptible form to thought.¹² Cited in this context, the line from Wordsworth that I took as my epigraph – "I saw her singing" (from the poem to which Keats alludes in the next stanzas of the Nightingale Ode) – also becomes newly strange: its synaesthetic crossing of sight and song, far from an exceptional, harmonious blending of the senses achievable only in poetry, a way of figuring the itself unfigurable crossing that at every moment makes possible reading without the power to make itself legible. To see it may be all one can do with singing, first because there is no such thing as an uncrossed act of perception, no such thing as "pure listening," and then (and on the contrary) because only thus can utterance become "singing" – pure in the sense of devoid of communicative content.

In this sense the definitive aorist tense of completed action "I saw" in Wordsworth's line "I saw her singing at her work," ("The Solitary Reaper," l. 27) would indicate neither cognitive mastery nor avoidable delusion but an irreconcilable gap with the progressive, unfinished tense of singing and working. My point is not to locate receptive pleasure on one side and active work on the other, as this would only be to rehearse the deadly division of labor and separation of backward-looking enjoyment

from telos-bound work that the Sirens' episode in Adorno and Horkheimer's reading comes to allegorize, with the bound Odysseus, the impotent concert-goer, on one side, and the fiercely rowing sailors on the other, cut off from the enjoyment of their labor, the sound of their oars in the water perhaps all that Odysseus hears as "pure" or objectless sound. On the contrary, as I have argued throughout these pages, a peculiar kind of pleasure derives from the farcical element in all these scenes of unshared, divergent timeframes as if our pleasure itself lay in the split awareness of incommensurables, whether of the single, completed act "I saw" and its unrepresentable object, or of the form of Odysseus's facial expressions and the enjoyment of which his men think these expressions are the sign.

As I have also tried to show, this richly ironic sense of simultaneous proximity and noncoincidence of form and content is more peculiar to Keats than to any other Romantic poet, and is due in large part to his sensitivity to the possibilities of knowing one sense by another, most obvious in his experiments in ekphrasis, but everywhere at work. "All is cold beauty; pain is never done": the paratactic line from the sonnet "On Visiting the Tomb of Burns" (l. 8) names the ongoingness of pain as the inversion of the timelessness of form. Symmetrical reflections of one another, the two halves of the line – the one headed by "All," the other by "pain" – make a syntactic chiasmus of two mutually exclusive types of totality (for "beauty" is "cold" precisely because it excludes "pain") – the positive "All" with which the line begins and the negative temporal absolute "never done" with which it ends. The wished-for sense is that to awaken beauty – to make it pant as in Apollo's promise to "flit into [any star] with [his] lyre, / And make its silvery splendour pant with bliss" (*Hyperion* iii. 101–2) – would also spell the end of suffering, but the effect is merely circular since to stop feeling (pain) would only to be cold again. The sonnet opens with the fiction that Beauty has been cast under a spell of timelessness until the end of pain: "The town, the churchyard, and the setting sun, / The clouds, the trees, the rounded hills all seem, / Though beautiful, cold – strange – as in a dream" (ll. 1–3); in his later work, Keats will revise this as the dream that beauty's cold and changeless form can keep time with, or rather, for pain.

Thus the bright star/bright eye conceit of the sonnet "Bright Star" rests on an intimated relation between beauty's timelessness and an ever-waking consciousness. For the cold and locked beauty waiting to be released of the sonnet on Burns, the later sonnet substitutes the star's eye that keeps watch and reduces, in a kind of strong abstraction, time to its own dreamless present:

Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art –
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask

Of snow upon the mountains and the moors;
 No – yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
 Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
 To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,¹³
 Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
 Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
 And so live ever – or else swoon to death.

The poem proceeds by sumptuous negation – by a kind of apophasis related to the false surmise of Milton's Homeric similes in its power to conjure and linger with what it claims not to mean and not to have – a claim to privation that knows this more precisely, and more richly than any positive possession ever could. A succession of intensely ironic, paratactic exchanges of antithetical identities ("Bright Star" for Fanny Brawne / eye for I / gaze for touch / the sexless cold of stars and snow for breathing passion), the poem comes to one resting point after another, and never stops: even the enjambed lines taken by themselves can stand alone, so that each time the reader registers both the possibility of grammatical closure and its nonoccurrence. In the turn from octave to sestet, the speaker returns to the earthly time and to his seemingly forgotten human love – returns, in fact, without having been unfaithful, without infidelity, but the turn itself produces the effect of something being yielded up for all time. The eternity of form becomes a way of knowing the ongoingness of loss and keeping time if not catching up with the perpetually threatened event of death, as the dash that indefinitely extends the caesura splitting the third foot of the last line – "And so live ever – or else swoon to death" – opens onto and crystallizes the chance of dying as both the antithesis to the lovers' projected idyll, and hence a kind of paratactic equivalent to the star's "lifelessly living beauty" (Adorno 1974: 121), and at the same time as the very condition of the lover's pillowed existence since every breath could be the last. The first more commonsensical reading follows the convention of a lover's "all or nothing" gamble: "if my wish be denied, let me die; life without you is death to me"; the second switches from an exclusive to an inclusive "or" as in "I would rather be mortal and near you, even if it means certain death, than immortalized among the stars."

But it would be a mistake simply to plot the poem according to the sestet's turn away from visionary heights as a renunciation of myth (as hinted at by the invocation of "priestly" tasks) and an embrace of "natural," demystified or ordinary time. For like the syntactic halves of "all is cold beauty; pain is never done" (and the doubled, mutually voiding infinitives of the last line), octet and sestet produce an oscillation between the recognition of their mutual exclusion and the continued experience of the one as the memory of the other, mirrors to one another in their power to empty time and evacuate the world of all but its most diurnal, quotidian doings. Thus if the poem plays on the common anthropocentric illusion that nothing happens and time moves more slowly under the light of the stars, the image of tidal motion as a kind of nightly planetary washing also allows the rotation of the night-sky for all its slowness to seem equivalent to a moment's breathing-space. Keats here both invites and complicates the familiar

critique of the simultaneously telescopic and reductive powers of abstraction by which lyric poetry escapes from human history into something either too big or too small to its scale. The complication lies in Keats's habit of reminding us – perhaps most famously in the lines from "Nightingale" that make a verb of "pain" ("and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense," ll. 1–2) – that pain shares in poetry's power to make a blank of everything but itself; this is the difficulty of historical witnessing – that human suffering's chief effect may be to obliterate consciousness of its causes, so that poetry's own tropes of erasure and abstraction (such as snow or even "ablution") become one way of figuring or bearing witness to these oblitative effects. The ambiguity as to whether poetry's "abstract images" offer an escape from the intensity of someone else's suffering and from the unachievable task of bearing witness to it or, on the contrary, present only another form of doing the "nothing" of which this task consists – is especially clear in the letter where Keats describes writing poetry as the only activity with a power of absorption equal to the claims made upon him by his nearby dying brother Tom:

I wish I could say Tom was any better. His identity presses upon me so all day that I am obliged to go out – and although I intended to have given some time to study alone I am obliged to write, and plunge into abstract images to ease myself of his countenance his voice and febleness – so that I live now in a continual fever. (Keats 1987: 153)

This image of Keats writing while nursing Tom underscores why "Bright Star" never recovers from the irony of defining "steadfastness" as an oddly asymmetrical vigil – a keeping awake while the other sleeps – and of measuring such faithfulness against an itself blind and irrecoverably distant source of light. "Keeping faith" here means remaining true to a split consciousness or double awareness of planetary and bodily time; one cannot even say that Keats "sees" all that lies before the unseeing star + something else – his lover's own mortality – nor that his vision is more all-encompassing than any satellite's, since what supplements the star's unseeing gaze is not in the first place on the order of the visible. Thus Porphyro gazes at the empty dress, listening to Madeline's nearby breathing. Eyes on the road, hand on the hard-on, so the rock-song of "Bright Star" version might go. The shock here lies not in the language of porn but in the sudden switch in perspectives – the reduction or expansion of century to instant and vice versa – leaving us somewhere between the infinitive of form's suspense and the continued presence of an irrevocably finished history. We could call this, following Keats's own praise for the actor Kean, a passion for time: "There is an indescribable gusto in his voice, by which we feel that the utterer is thinking of the past and future, while speaking of the instant" (Keats 2007: 75). Hazlitt praises Shakespeare's drama in remarkably similar terms, locating his originality in the way he presents the relation between "knowing" and "seeing" – between retrospective understanding and the witnessing of events as they unfold – not as an antithesis but as a necessary if impossible simultaneity, something I have been arguing is also true of Keats: "The passions are in a state of projection. Years are melted down to moments, and every instant teems with fate. We know the results, we see the process" (Hazlitt 1930–4: 5. 51).

SEE ALSO

Chapter 1 “Mournful Ditties and Merry Measures: Feeling and Form in the Romantic Short Lyric and Song”; chapter 4 “To Scorn or To ‘Scorn not the Sonnet’”; chapter 13, “The Thrush in the Theater: Keats and Hazlitt at the Surrey Institution”; chapter 27 “Romantic Poetry and Literary Theory: The Case of ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’”; chapter 30 “Sexual Politics and the Performance of Gender in Romantic Poetry”

NOTES

- 1 For analyses of the gender politics of the poem see Swann 1988: 91 and Wolfson 1997: 170–2.
- 2 The tendency to oppose form as a principle of aesthetic autonomy to the unmanageable workings of desire seems to be a legacy of reductive readings of Kant’s concept of disinterested pleasure. Even so subtle a reader as Susan Wolfson, for example, continues to present the relation between form and content as a kind of master/slave dialectic, even if it is to argue that form’s will to mastery is always eventually mastered by the unruly passions it would contain. Paul de Man’s account of form as “never anything but a process on the way to its completion” to which Wolfson herself refers in this context better describes Keats’s temporal sense of form as a verb and a process (de Man 1983: 31–2; Wolfson 1997: 192).
- 3 On the special relation between feeling and negation implied by the “feel of not to,” see Cameron 1979: 216; Terada 2001: 14.
- 4 For John Jones, who discusses the phrase at length, Keats’s “end-stopped feel” epitomizes a deliberate “stuntedness” or foreclosure on narrative development (1969: 10). The verbal idiosyncrasy was apparently not lost on Keats’s contemporaries; Jones cites Woodhouse’s quip: “I plead guilty, even before I am accused, of an utter abhorrance of the word ‘feel’ for feeling (substantively). But Keats seems fond of it and will ingraft it ‘in aeternum’ on our language. Be it so” (1969: 8).
- 5 For the idea, as well as examples, of Keatsian eyes as an organ of touch see Jones 1969: 12.
- 6 This fantasy, which put crudely is of making her come without waking her up, finds an echo in the exclamation from Rilke’s second *Sonnet to Orpheus*: “Singender Gott, wie hast / du sie vollendet, daß sie nicht begehrte, / erst wach zu sein? Sieh, sie erstand und schlief” (“Singing God, how did you complete her that she did not desire first to be awake? See, she arose and slept”; my translation) (Rilke 1974). On the narcissistic character of Porphyro’s desire see Levinson 1988: 107, 160.
- 7 “Painting gives the object itself; poetry what it implies. ... as it relates to passion, painting gives the event, poetry the progress of events: but it is during the progress, in the interval of expectation and suspense, while our hopes and fears are strained to the highest pitch of breathless agony, that the pinch of the interest lies ... It is for want of some such resting place for the imagination that the Greek statues are ... marble to the touch and to the heart. They have not an informing principle within them. In their faultless excellence they appear sufficient to themselves” (Hazlitt 1930–4: 5. 10–11).
- 8 Helen Vendler’s reading of this moment as a negatively capable “capitulation to mystery” (1983: 145) exemplifies the story of reading as a self-imposed sacrifice wherein one learns to renounce the dream of full transparency and total vision. But like Kafka’s Ulysses, Vendler’s Keats can only find the heroism of his sacrifice of the will to knowledge on there being something not to know, some mystery to respect.
- 9 Thus David Ferris draws on both Homer’s and Kafka’s versions to frame his *Silent Urns, Romanticism, Hellenism, Modernity* (2000: xi–xiii).
- 10 On the ambiguity as to whether Odysseus has even begun to listen see also Ferris 2000: xii.

- 11 See Keats's translation of Ronsard: "Love poured her beauty into my warm veins" (Keats 1987: 153).
- 12 See de Man's "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" in de Man 1996: 70–90, and Terada 2007.
- 13 Variant: "fall and swell."

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Romantic Poetry and Literary Theory: The Case of “A slumber did my spirit seal”

Marc Redfield

“Romantic poetry” and “literary theory”: an obscure affinity links these two familiar nominal clusters. They conjoin easily – we feel intuitively that the copula makes sense – but we may not be sure why. And indeed, a glance at the usual syllabi, reading lists, and anthologies marketed under the rubric of “theory” might lead us to conclude rather quickly that the notion of an elective affinity between Romantic poetry and literary theory brushes against the grain of the evidence. Most of the most obvious key texts of a generic theory course – texts like *Of Grammatology*, *The History of Sexuality*, *The Political Unconscious*, *Gender Trouble* – have nothing explicit to say about Romantic poetry, or for that matter any sort of poetry (Derrida 1976; Foucault 1980; Jameson 1982; Butler 1990). Narrative prose would seem to be the favored literary genre. Only a handful of the post–New Critical texts anthologized in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* concern themselves with poetry, and of these texts, only two (essays to be discussed at length below) spend time examining a poem that would be classified as “Romantic” by a standard anthology.¹ To be sure, one could imagine a revised edition of the Norton (or a different collection, since there are certainly plenty of them on the market) featuring a few more anthology-worthy theoretical essays focused on poems (e.g., Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss 1982); and of course once we abandon the artificial confines of a hypothetical introduction-to-theory course, we can wander into an archive replete with theory-driven readings of Romantic poems.² Still, it seems fair to say that the theory canon, in its major institutional manifestations in the Anglo-American academy, does not appear particularly invested either in Romanticism or in poetry.

The gravitational field of literary theory, however, has the power to warp appearances. Shadowing the routinized marketing and teaching of theory in the academic workplace is the specter of theory as a cultural event. Theory emerged as a media phenomenon in the late 1970s for reasons that still await full cultural-historical explication, becoming phantasmatically identified with “deconstruction” both inside and

outside the academy. The polemical representation of theory-as-deconstruction as a certain excess or excrescence of reason can then be traced back, as David Simpson (1993) has noted, to counterrevolutionary polemics of the 1790s – to Edmund Burke’s influential characterization of the French Revolution as “a Revolution of doctrine and theoretick dogma,” perpetrated by “men of theory” (Burke 1993: 208; 1986: 128). Our modern notion of “literature” as a self-reflexive textual performance – “literature producing itself as it produces its own theory,” to cite Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s well-known account of the “literary absolute” (1988: 12) – also dates, not coincidentally, from the Romantic era. Keeping these discursive filaments in mind, we begin to glimpse tangled lines of force at work in the four-in-hand ensemble “Romantic poetry”/“literary theory.” All four of these words waver between general and specific meanings, particularly when they intersect with each other. *Romantic* functions as a transhistorical style marker as well as a period metaphor (hence the endless turns in twentieth-century scholarly polemics around the paradox that “not all romantic-era literature is romantic”); *poetry* signifies a specific kind of writing and yet also becomes (during the *Romantic* era) coextensive with human imagining (“Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be ‘the expression of the Imagination’, and poetry is connate with the origin of man” (Shelley 2001: 511)); *literary* signifies a specific kind of writing (as opposed to the nonfictional, scientific, subliterate, etc.) but also names the inflationary spiral that *poetry* undergoes during the *Romantic* period; and *theory* means the grounding of discourse via a “systematic conception or statement of the principles of something” (to cite one of several relevant definitions from the *OED*), yet also, when used negatively (in the line that runs from *Romanticism* onward), the disturbance of such discursive grounding. It thus becomes tempting to wonder whether Romantic poetry, to the extent that it forms part of the historical announcement of the literary, might have some intimate, ambiguous, and partly repressed link to literary theory.³

This link would not consist in the subordination of a (literary) example to a (theoretical) truth: a subordination that theory (in the “negative,” deconstructive sense) itself works to complicate. We may take as an exemplary “theoretical” question one posed by Jacques Derrida which interrogates the status of the example and the exemplary per se: “For example: What happens in the psychoanalytic deciphering of a text when the latter, the deciphered itself, already explicates itself ... inscrib[ing] in itself additionally the scene of deciphering?” (Derrida 1987: 414). Derrida’s example (Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” purloined from Jacques Lacan) is of course not a poem. As we have seen, it would be absurd, both on theoretical and practical grounds, to claim that a proper structure of exemplarity links (Romantic) poetry and (literary) theory. But one might nonetheless legitimately expect to find a Romantic poem surfacing now and then – a buoy bobbing at the intersection of powerful cross-currents – when the referential grip of theory is being strenuously disputed or affirmed. And that has happened: probably the most famous debate about authorial intention in Anglo-American literary-theoretical history is the one that has spiraled around William Wordsworth’s “A slumber did my spirit seal” (1799, pub. 1800) for the past fifty years. This minitradition includes the two essays I mentioned earlier as the only

post–New Critical texts in the Norton theory anthology focused on a Romantic-era poem: E. D. Hirsch’s “Objective Interpretation” (2001: originally published 1960) and Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels’s “Against Theory” (2001: originally published 1982). If we want to press further into the thicket of uncertainties and compulsions that grows at the crossroads of Romantic poetry and literary theory, we might do well to look closely at a text that Orrin Wang characterizes as “*the* poem that numerous critics use throughout the last century to argue over what an interpretation of a poem might actually mean” (2005: 24).

I

Wordsworth wrote “A slumber did my spirit seal,” along with other important lyrics and an early draft of *The Prelude*, during a cold, lonely winter in Goslar, a town in the foothills of the Harz mountains in Lower Saxony where Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy had repaired to save money (which they did) and learn German (which they did not). One minor but not wholly nugatory reason why this poem has played a prominent role in theoretical argument is that it is short:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
 I had no human fears:
 She seemed a thing that could not feel
 The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
 She neither hears nor sees,
 Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course
 With rocks and stones and trees.

“A slumber” presents editors with few difficulties. No original manuscript exists (Wordsworth’s letter to Coleridge containing the poem has been lost), and Wordsworth’s revising of the text over the course of his lifetime was minimal. As an editorial object, at least, the poem pretty much is what it is. As an object of traditional literary-historical scholarship, it begins to become a more complicated entity. The degree to which Wordsworth intended readers to associate this poem with other “Lucy poems” is uncertain; traditional scholarly efforts to trace “Lucy” back to a historical person have had to settle for vague compromises;⁴ and though such modest referential difficulties are common enough in literary scholarship, they shade into more disturbing complexities as they edge closer to the central problem, easily evaded but never definitively repressed or solved, of all literary exegesis – the problem of reading what such a text tells us about reading.

It is easy enough to accept that scholars will never know, nor need to know, whether Wordsworth was thinking of any particular woman or girl while writing these lines (always assuming – and this is an assumption, albeit a strong and reasonable one – that

the “she”s of lines 3, 5, and 6 all refer to a person separate from the presumptively male narrator, rather than to the “spirit” of line 1).⁵ It can be a little more disturbing to discover that trained readers have reached opposite conclusions about what the poem means, or what Wordsworth meant his poem to mean. The necessity of judging between competing interpretations forms the context in which this text first became an iconic display text for twentieth-century literary-theoretical debate, in Hirsch’s “Objective Interpretation.” Hirsch counterposed two well-known interpretations of “A slumber” by Cleanth Brooks and F. W. Bateson, sharpening to the point of irreconcilability the differences between the two critics’ readings of the poem’s last two lines. Bateson interprets “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, / With rocks and stones and trees” as an affirmation that “the pantheistic universe is solidly *one*” (1950: 34): “Lucy is actually more alive now that she is dead, because she is now a part of the life of Nature and not just a human ‘thing’” (1950: 80–1). Brooks, in contrast, reads these lines as part of the narrator’s bitter recognition of the loved one’s “utter and horrible inertness” in death (1951: 736; the essay was originally published in 1949). Hirsch sternly refuses the notion that these divergent readings can be synthesized or otherwise reconciled:

While Bateson construes a primary emphasis on life and affirmation, Brooks emphasizes deadness and inertness. No amount of manipulation can reconcile these divergent emphases, since one pattern of emphasis irrevocably excludes other patterns, and, since emphasis is always crucial to meaning, the two constructions of meaning rigorously exclude one another. (Hirsch 2001: 1698)

Having set up an interpretive choice (both of these critics offer coherent accounts of the poem, but both cannot be right; interpreters must choose), Hirsch goes on to propose that interpretation ask and seek to answer the question, “What in all probability did the author mean?” Meaning is authorial meaning; and though “no one can establish another’s meaning with certainty,” the interpreter’s goal “is simply this – to show that a given reading is more probable than others,” by demonstrating that a given context is more probable than others (Hirsch 2001: 1703).

This commonsensical hermeneutic project, however, suffers a curious twist as Hirsch concludes his essay. He favors Bateson’s interpretation because, based on the contextual evidence, in 1799 Wordsworth’s “characteristic attitudes are somewhat pantheistic” (Hirsch 2001: 1705). But though Hirsch approves of Bateson’s method (interpretation as the construction of probable historical, psychological, and biographical contexts), he concedes “the apparent implausibility of Bateson’s reading” (2001: 1706). It is hard to believe, Hirsch admits, that the poem’s second stanza is really celebrating “pantheistic magnificence” (Bateson 1950: 33). The correct method produces the less plausible reading. Beginning with one sort of textual aporia – a poem that generates two opposing, mutually destructive interpretations – Hirsch ends up with another sort – a poem that generates an opposition between what Hirsch believes to be correct interpretive theory, on the one hand, and what Hirsch believes to be plausible interpretive results, on the other.⁶

II

Was “A slumber,” then, a bad example for Hirsch to have chosen? If so, what – apart perhaps from an admirable willingness to face up to a difficult case – might have drawn him to this recalcitrant example? Let me leave that question hanging while I pursue a little further the story of literary theory’s dalliance with Wordsworth’s poem. In the late 1970s, as “theory” was becoming the synonym of “deconstruction” in the American academic and high-cultural imagination, J. Hillis Miller published a reading of “A slumber” that subsequently inspired a much-referenced exchange between Miller and the great Romanticist and literary historian M. H. Abrams.⁷ Miller’s reading sets out to show that “in a given work of literature . . . metaphysical assumptions are both present and at the same time undermined by the text itself” because the text’s play of figurative language “leaves an inassimilable residue or remnant of meaning, an unearned increment, so to speak, making a movement of sense beyond any unifying boundaries,” leading to “the experience of an aporia or boggling of the mind” (Miller 1986: 101). Miller first offers a detailed and generally traditional account of “A slumber” as the story of a masculine speaker’s movement “from innocence to knowledge through the experience of Lucy’s death” (1986: 103). Then – miming the turn from the first to the second stanza in Wordsworth’s text – he shifts to yet darker terrain: “As the reader works his or her way into the poem, attempting to break its seal, however, it comes to seem odder than the account of it I have so far given” (1986: 105). Miller notes the disappearance of the first stanza’s “I” into the second stanza’s impersonal assertions: “It is as though the speaker has lost his selfhood by waking to knowledge. He has become an anonymous impersonal wakefulness, perpetually aware that Lucy is dead and that he is not yet dead. This is the position of the survivor in all Wordsworth’s work” (1986: 105). A little later in his essay, Miller situates the speaker’s identification with death within a play of identifications between the survivor and the lost object: “The speaker was ‘sealed,’ as she was. Now he knows. To know, however, as the second stanza indicates, is to speak from the impersonal position of death. It is to speak as death” (1986: 108). The narrator, therefore, is not a stable locus of impersonal, grievous wisdom (which would be one way of understanding his becoming “an anonymous impersonal wakefulness”), but rather a figure dependent upon an unstable commerce with the lost “she”. Miller offers these observations as part of his larger claim that the poem stages “a constant slipping of entities across borders into their opposites” (1986: 107). In the final section of his essay, he reads Lucy’s death as troping the instability of metaphysics itself: “Lucy’s name of course means light. To possess her would be a means of rejoining the lost source of light, the father sun as logos, as head power and font of meaning.” But the poem’s unstable reversals perform “the loss of the logos, leaving the poet and his words groundless” (1986: 109).

This detailed and (deliberately) extravagant close reading raises, in its way, the same question that Hirsch’s does: what is it about “A slumber” – apart from its brevity, of course – that makes it so attractive to readers with theoretical ambitions? It is all very

well for Miller to claim that “in principle and in fact, a Greek tragedy, an episode in Ovid, in Dante, or in *The Faerie Queene* would be as good a testing ground” for his theoretical claims “as any Romantic or post-Romantic poem” – but in the end, like Hirsch before him, Miller *did* take this “well-known text from English Romanticism as [his] example” (1986: 101), and one can reasonably ask whether “A slumber” really is the innocent, value-neutral example that both Hirsch and Miller suggest it is. Both the theorist seeking to build a theory of valid interpretation and the theorist seeking to show that texts reiterate “the loss of the logos” seem drawn to “A slumber” in ways that neither theorist quite makes explicit.

Part of what draws them may be the poem’s seeming simplicity. Both critics – Miller of course more flamboyantly – are taking pleasure in demonstrating that literary language exceeds or falls short of our ordinary notions of simplicity or complexity. This poem’s ballad meter, simple diction, and apparently straightforward plot promise near-effortless reading – a pastoral affirmation of song as a gift of nature, a gift given before and beyond all labor. And there is indeed a sense in which the poem fulfills that promise in the same moment in which it makes it and takes it away. A well-educated twenty-first-century English-speaking twelve-year-old, told what “diurnal” means, can read and make sense of “A slumber” – but then comes the theorist’s nontrivial question: what is this strange act called reading, so easily accomplished, and yet so vulnerable, so unsure of itself? Cast thus, the question arrives, to be sure, from Miller’s rather than Hirsch’s lexicon (I have been, am now, and shall in the future be suggesting that literary theory and Romantic poetry converge in the shadowy spaces of “deconstruction,” that uncertain epitome of “theory”). Yet we should not be misled by labels: Hirsch, balancing “A slumber” between Brooks’s and Bateson’s interpretations, has asked, in his own way, just as stark a question about reading as Miller has. What is the meaning of being rolled around with rocks and stones and trees? This poem’s limpidity is equally its opacity. We might therefore be led to characterize the poem’s attractiveness thus: by telling the story of a passage from naïveté to wisdom, “A slumber” offers theorists an allegory of their own ambition. It seems such a simple thing, this poem; but theorists can show you it is not. They can follow out its turns and, reiterating the poem’s dramatized passage from innocence to experience, they can unfold the true difficulty of reading.

Or can they? At the very moment that they propose their reflections on “A slumber” as examples of a general theory of interpretation, are these theorists also worried about slipping back into a slumberous confidence in the legibility of the poem? There is a peculiar tentativeness to Hirsch’s claim to an achieved wisdom (he feels the poem is doing the contrary of what a wise reading would describe it as doing), and a peculiar assertiveness to Miller’s (if the poem is dramatizing the loss of the logos, should the commentator sound so sure of himself?). The theorist, repeating the poem’s plot, falls into a curiously unsteady stance of wisdom. Perhaps the poem’s plot is trickier than it appears – perhaps it forms a Möbius loop taking us from the seeming disenchantment of the second stanza back to the seeming mystification of the first. Yet if that is true, how could any reading, even one wise enough to be alert to the possible disqualification of its own wisdom, avoid repeating the spiral of doubt and overconfidence? Miller’s

reading can in a sense be trumped (I shall try to suggest later a few ways in which “A slumber” is even more figuratively unstable than he claims it is) but only at the risk of repeating the problematic that both Hirsch and Miller enact. For no reading involved with the problem of “theory” can avoid claiming some sort of skewed exemplarity (that is, some sort of generalizable wisdom) for its text and its reading-procedure – even if one’s reading is claiming (as mine will, and as Miller’s does) that the text’s “scene of deciphering,” to recall Derrida’s phrase, is ultimately indecipherable.

The predicament of feeling oneself scripted by a potentially illegible text can express itself as an anxiety about borders. We may feel uncertain whether we are “inside” or “outside” a text if we feel we have been repeating its terms without even being sure what they are. In his reply to Miller, M. H. Abrams couches his opposition to deconstruction (that is, “theory”) as a concern for proper limits. It is a concern animating many, perhaps all, readings of this poem (as a recent interpreter of “A slumber” frankly if perhaps a touch impatiently puts it, “Somewhere there must be a stop” (Baker 1997: 122)). Abrams worries that Miller “dissolves the ‘unifying boundaries’ of the poem as linguistic entity,” thereby merging the text “not only with Wordsworth’s other writings, but into the textuality constituted by all occidental languages taken together” (Abrams 1986: 153). For Hirsch, the loss of authorial intention as a goal leads to interpretive wildness; for Abrams – at least in this essay (for his emphasis here sits oddly with his commitment to a broad historicism) – the loss of textual identity as a goal leads to interpretive wildness. If Miller personifies the poem’s “I” as a survivor, Abrams more exotically personifies the *poem* as a survivor: “Literature has survived over the millennia ... I am reassured, however, by the stubborn capacity of constructed texts to survive their second-order deconstruction” (1986: 157–8). The organic body of the text, Abrams suggests, limits its textuality; the spirit of the text is thereby sealed. In an extravagant gesture, oddly evocative of the preprofessional days of belles-lettres and oratory, Abrams closes his essay by simply quoting, yet once more, Wordsworth’s poem. “Let’s put the text to trial,” are his text’s final words. There follows “A slumber,” quoted this time not as the prelude to more paraphrase and analysis, but as the manifestation of the poem itself as its own last word – as the survivor of all its iterations, untouched by time as a ballad-maiden, pure as a stone rolled up on a beach, washed by a wave.

III

That last conceit is not properly mine, of course; it is the fantastic story told in Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels’s position paper “Against Theory” in order to illustrate a radicalized version of the Hirschean thesis that all meaning is authorial meaning. “By ‘theory,’” the authors explain, “we mean a special project in literary criticism: the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general” (Knapp and Michaels 2001: 2460).⁸ There exist two versions of this project: positive (the Hirsch-style effort to obtain a method productive of objective interpretation), and negative (the Miller-style effort to demonstrate that correct

interpretation is impossible – though Knapp and Michaels do not mention Miller, preferring to address an essay by Paul de Man on Rousseau). Both positive and negative versions of theory, Knapp and Michaels declare, “rest on a single mistake, a mistake that is central to the notion of theory per se”: that of trying to separate inseparable terms. The “clearest example” of such false separation arises when “authorial intention” is distinguished from “the meaning of texts” (Knapp and Michaels 2001: 2461). All meaning is intended meaning, and furthermore “all meaning is in fact the author’s meaning.” Whenever we register meaning, we willy-nilly assume that an author intended it. Even if we know nothing about the author, we assume a fundamental intending-to-speak or *vouloir-dire*: “as soon as we attempt to interpret at all we are already committed to a characterization of the speaker as a speaker of language. We know, in other words, that the speaker intends to speak; otherwise we wouldn’t be interpreting” (2001: 2463). By clinging to this rudimentary definition of authorship, Knapp and Michaels can accuse Hirsch of forgetting his own insight. To distinguish between author-based meaning (as in Bateson’s approach to “A slumber”) and text-based meaning (as in Brooks’s approach to “A slumber”) is to produce a “theory” of meaning via a false distinction (that is, one falls into the trap of imagining that a formalist like Brooks has actually identified a meaning separate from intention, whereas he has in fact simply inferred a different authorial meaning from that of Bateson, based on different contextual information). For reasons that Knapp and Michaels never quite explain, this false distinction, as they see it, has proved stubborn enough to generate a discursive tradition called “theory”: “In debates about intention, the moment of imagining intentionless meaning constitutes the theoretical moment itself” (2001: 2463).

Knapp and Michaels then set out to show, by way of a parable, how “radically counterintuitive” the notion of intentionless meaning is. “Suppose that you’re walking along a beach and you come upon a curious sequence of squiggles in the sand,” spelling out the first stanza of “A slumber”:

This would seem to be a good case of intentionless meaning: you recognize the writing as writing, you understand what the words mean, you may even identify them as constituting a rhymed poetic stanza – and all this without knowing anything about the author and indeed without needing to connect the words to any notion of an author at all. You can do all these things without thinking of anyone’s intention. (2001: 2464)

But now a wave washes up and recedes, leaving in its wake the *second* stanza of “A slumber.” The question of intention now becomes urgent, Knapp and Michaels claim; and they ventriloquize various possibilities (“Are these marks mere accidents, produced by the mechanical operation of the waves on the sand ...? Or is the sea alive and striving to express its pantheistic faith? Or has Wordsworth, since his death, become a sort of genius of the shore ...?”):

You might go on extending the list of explanations indefinitely, but you would find, we think, that all the explanations fall into two categories. You will either be ascribing these

marks to some agent capable of intentions (the living sea, the haunting Wordsworth, etc.), or you will count them as nonintentional effects of mechanical processes (erosion, percolation, etc.). But in the second case – where the marks now seem to be accidents – will they still seem to be words?

Clearly not. They will merely seem to *resemble* words ... In one case, you would be amazed by the identity of the author – who would have thought that the sea can write poetry? In the other case, however, in which you accept the hypothesis of natural accident, you're amazed to discover that what you thought was poetry turns out not to be poetry at all. It isn't poetry because it isn't language; that's what it means to call it an accident. (Knapp and Michaels 2001: 2464)

Having established what they see as the intuitively obvious difference between language and marks-that-resemble-language, Knapp and Michaels offer a closing scene for their drama in which “you” experience a final revelation:

Suppose, having seen the second stanza wash up on the beach, you have decided that the “poem” is really an accidental effect of erosion, percolation, and so on, and therefore not language at all. What would it now take to change your mind? No theoretical argument will make a difference. But suppose you notice, rising out of the sea some distance from the shore, a small submarine, out of which clamber a half dozen figures in white lab coats. One of them trains his binoculars on the beach and shouts triumphantly, “It worked! It worked! Let's go down and try it again.” Presumably, you will now once again change your mind, not because you have a new account of language, meaning, or intention but because you have new evidence of an author. The question of authorship is and always was an empirical question; it has now received a new empirical answer. (2001: 2465)

In a brilliant commentary on Knapp and Michaels's article, Peggy Kamuf notes and puts pressure on the odd status of the term “author” in this scenario. On the one hand, the author of these wave-inscribed lines ought to mean “Wordsworth”; on the other hand, the whole point of the final movement of Knapp and Michaels's fantastic fable is to provide those little figures in lab coats as an answer to the “empirical” question of authorship.⁹ The story about the submarine is in fact, Kamuf notes, a story about “a mechanical or technical process for inscribing marks on a distant surface” (Kamuf 1986: 6). Formalizing authorship down to intent-to-mean, Knapp and Michaels produce a parable that formalizes intention down to intent-to-inscribe; for the experiment would have worked with any iterable mark – a geometrical figure, or a meaningless squiggle (“meaningless” except as signifying an enacted intent).¹⁰

Why, then, tell a story about a poem – and not just any poem, but “A slumber did my spirit seal,” the repeatedly re-cited display text of intentionalist argumentation? Kamuf diagnoses Knapp and Michaels's recourse to it as symptomatic. Poems, unlike geometric figures, have authors, and this famous poem has a famous author; this allows the word “author” to continue to refer both to originary intent and to citationality. For what Knapp and Michaels are warding off is the “detachability of words or marks from finite intentions” – a detachability that is nonetheless symptomatically “illustrated

and acted out by the fable,” with its multiplying authors and ever more amazing scenes of inscription (Kamuf 1986: 8). Kamuf refers us to one of the most powerful conceptual moments of “literary theory,” Jacques Derrida’s account of iterability as the possibility of communication:

For a writing to be a writing it must continue to “act” and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, be it because of a temporary absence, because he is dead, or, more generally, because he has not employed his absolutely actual and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his desire to say what he means, in order to sustain what seems to be written “in his name.” (Derrida 1977: 193–4)

Knapp and Michaels imagine, as we have seen, that “the moment of imagining intentionless meaning constitutes the theoretical moment itself” (2001: 2463); but in fact the Derridean analysis “*at no time* . . . invoke[s] the absence, pure and simple, of intentionality” (Derrida 1977: 193). Intentionality, as meaning, occurs thanks to a structure of iterability – of repeatability-elsewhere – that composes intention, yet also divides it from itself. If one pares down the concept of the author to intent-to-mean, and that of authoring to intent-to-inscribe, the essential iterability of signification still generates an unstable oscillation between origination and citation within authorship, as Knapp and Michaels (against their own stated intention) demonstrate. The second stanza, rolling in on the waves, is supposed to shock the “you” into realizing the inseparability of meaning from authorial intention, but Kamuf suggests that this shock is also compulsively figuring “the death of the ‘present’ speaker” – a death inscribed in the iterability that forms the condition of possibility of all signs, and of all intentions-to-signify. Knapp and Michaels’s commentary “is thus unable to block Wordsworth’s ghost, a certain ‘she,’ from taking over the text” (Kamuf 1986: 12). Spinning a fantastic story in the name of common sense, the anti-theoretical theorists become ever more trapped in the web of a text that has already scripted them. Kamuf closes her reading with the suggestion that the third episode in the story – the emergence of the submarine – represents an attempt to break the spell. Yet “this third moment, when the fable seems to step outside the poem in order to manipulate its example from a safe distance, resembles nothing so much as a return to the illusion characterized by the first stanza . . . the illusion of a continuing presence (of intention) untouched by earthly years when it mistakes a (living) agent for a (dead) author.” We need have no human fears. For “‘the author’” has been magically “made to rise out of the sea, resuscitated, not dead, still able to speak and to sign” (Kamuf 1986: 13).

IV

Knapp and Michaels’s parable tacitly echoes a moment in the work of a precursor, P. D. Juhl. A couple of years before Knapp and Michaels published “Against Theory,” Juhl had published a study that similarly attempted to purify E. D. Hirsch’s position

into an axiomatic, arguing that “a statement about the meaning of a work *is* a statement about the author’s intention” (Juhl 1980: 12). Like Knapp and Michaels, Juhl had returned to the example of Wordsworth’s “A slumber,” and indulged in fantasies of the poem’s accidental production. “Now suppose that the poem I have quoted above is not in fact by Wordsworth but has been accidentally typed out by a monkey randomly depressing keys on a typewriter. (Or suppose that we found the lines as marks – on, say, a large rock – produced by water erosion)” (Juhl 1980: 71–2). So to our bundle of possible reasons why “A slumber” attracts theorists, we can tentatively add one more. Something about this text seems to spur certain theorists – theorists who want to ground interpretation in authorial intent – to imagine it written by chance. Why is that? This will be our last question to put to the poem and its readers: not, of course, because there are no more questions to ask, but because this particular essay has run out its time-clock, and must now approach some semblance of a conclusion.

Let us first return once more to Knapp and Michaels’s text. Although Peggy Kamuf brilliantly exposes the contradictions and tensions composing their notion of authorship, she does not spend much time discussing their strangest and most rhetorically interesting claim – the claim upon which everything in their conceptual narrative depends. “But in the second case – where the marks now seem to be accidents – will they still seem to be words? Clearly not. They will merely seem to *resemble* words.” Again and again, as they perform their ripostes to various antagonists, Knapp and Michaels reiterate this difference – this absolutely fundamental and deeply weird difference that their fable produces between language, on the one hand, and something-that-looks-just-like-language-but-isn’t, on the other. The claim is that when “you” see the first stanza, you recognize it as a stanza and (therefore) subconsciously imagine that (for instance) a human being had traced it in the sand with a stick; when you see the wave write the second stanza, you realize that what you are seeing isn’t a stanza, isn’t poetry, and isn’t language: “to deprive [the marks] of an author is to convert them into accidental likenesses of language” (Knapp and Michaels 2001: 2465). The difference is absolute and yet absolutely invisible, impalpable, and unsecurable. “You” can be fooled – indeed, “you” just were fooled, and perhaps, on this strange seacoast, you will be fooled again. Mistakenly imagining, for instance, that some human agent “authored” these wave-generated marks, you might mistakenly read and admire the poem you mistakenly think they compose; you might then mistakenly recite it to others, or even put it into a Norton anthology, where it would then mistakenly be read by others... As Orrin Wang comments, Knapp and Michaels leave unexplained in their fable this uncanny “*resemblance of meaninglessness to meaning*” (Wang 2005: 14, italics in the original).

Whence this perilously perfect mimesis of language and nonlanguage? – and, perhaps more pointedly: whence this driving need to imagine extravagant scenarios in which waves, monkeys, and typewriters – which is to say, natural, animal, and technical non-agents: the ancient, haunting doubles of the “human” – write poetry? For it must be emphasized that in composing their parable Knapp and Michaels are repeating, in the form of denegation, *exactly the “mistake” of which they convict everyone else.*

Throughout their essay they criticize “theorists” (including Hirsch and Juhl) for slipping back, at some point, into the illusion that intention can be added to (or subtracted from) language. Yet that “mistake” is precisely what Knapp and Michaels have to commit in order to imagine their wave poem and the drama it sets in motion. More fantastically than any of their precursors, they dream of marks that would be *exactly* like language – except that intention has been subtracted, or remains to be added in (by, say, the perception of a submarine with the men in lab coats). We now understand why Knapp and Michaels never really explain *why* all the critics they address (including their closest friends and allies) are constantly committing and recommitting the mistake they call “theory.” Knapp and Michaels are committed to this mistake more ferociously than anyone, precisely as a way of imagining themselves safe from it. Dreaming of an absolute difference between intentional language and nonintentional marks, they produce a hauntingly unstable doubling of intention and chance, meaning and inscription. “Language,” over the course of their narrative, threatens to become its own ghost or replicant, wavering between life and death as the intention that animates it wavers in and out of existence, while shuttling through variously fantastic figurative agents (the wave, the ghost of Wordsworth, the men in lab coats).

We may suspect that we are still well within the force-field of Wordsworth’s poem. If debate about “A slumber” has vacillated between pantheistic and reifying summations (Bateson, as it were, versus Brooks), this is because “A slumber” makes it impossible to determine the difference that must nonetheless constantly be drawn and redrawn: that between life and death, and between figurative and literal agency. Even Miller, as I hinted earlier, underrepresents the volatility of the text’s figurative exchanges. Because the “I” disappears in the gap between stanzas, Miller persuasively proposes that the second stanza speaks “from the impersonal position of death.” Yet the poem offers no guarantee that the “I” of the first stanza were ever alive. (After all, a slumber seals his spirit; he has no human fears; “she,” possibly meaning the speaker’s spirit, seems a thing. And since the “I” inhabits a poem, he is free to speak from the grave.) Like the “I,” the “she” of the first stanza is also perhaps already dead (for “seemed” can simply denote an appearance, and does not inevitably mean a false appearance). And the “she” of the second stanza is possibly *not* dead – and not just because of the pantheistic interpretive contexts that form part of the poem’s hermeneutic horizon of possibility, but because to be bereft of motion, force, hearing and seeing is not necessarily “the same” as death. (The living, too, are rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, and in all sorts of ways they can fail to hear or see.) The persistent but strangely uncertain difference between aliveness and deadness rolls through the entire text, its undecidability figured as the break between stanzas, where an urgent and unreadable difference occurs. The uncertain difference between life and death produces an unstable commerce between literal and figurative agency, which is to say between “living,” “real” intention, and “nonliving,” “fictional” personification. Only as a personification, of course, can an “I” speak from the grave – and yet who is to say who or what is speaking, when a poem seems able to haunt its critics to the point of speaking through them? For, generating an image of language uncannily

doubled between living intent and aleatory inscription, Knapp and Michaels produce a linguistic figure that powerfully repeats – and indeed in a sense “theorizes,” though certainly not from any position of mastery or exteriority – the hauntingly illegible story of “A slumber.”

If Wordsworth’s poem ghostwrites its own theory, its exemplarity as a text about Romantic poetry and literary theory can never be certain. As we read it, we might be inspired to recall other Romantic works that trouble the difference between life and death; other literary texts that roll readers round in an uncanny course; other theorists in the grip of their examples; other poems that blur the line between agency and personification, and between inspiration and chance. “A slumber” elicits generalizations about Romanticism, theory, literature, death, poetry, figuration, language, and intentionality, but no theory can master the text’s figurative turns – not even the negative theory that affirms this impossibility. Literary theorists continue to read and to be read by this Romantic poem because it models the way literary texts spur theoretical claims, while never quite becoming examples of them.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 1 “Mournful Ditties and Merry Measures: Feeling and Form in the Romantic Short Lyric and Song”; chapter 26 “‘The feel of not to feel it,’ or the Pleasures of Enduring Form”; chapter 28 “‘Strange utterance’: The (Un)Natural Language of the Sublime in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*”

NOTES

- 1 We come close with de Man 2001, an essay that turns at one of its moments on a reading of the closing lines of W. B. Yeats’s “Among School Children” – a poem easily assimilated to “Romanticism,” expansively thought. Other post–New Critical texts concerned in some direct way with poetry and collected in the Norton include Fish 2001, Bloom 2001, and Jakobson 2001, in addition to Hirsch 2001 and Knapp and Michaels 2001.
- 2 For a collection of essays featuring many prominent theorists and focused on lyric poetry, see Hosek and Parker 1985. See Redfield 2007 for an analysis claiming that, in the Anglo-American academy, the field of Romanticism has remained associated with “theory” for essential structural, institutional, and historical reasons.
- 3 For a fuller account of the internal fractures and the long and complex histories of three of these keywords (Romanticism, literature, theory), see Redfield 2003.
- 4 The other “Lucy” poems are “Strange fits of passion have I known,” “She dwelt among the untrodden ways,” “I traveled among unknown men,” and “Three years she grew in sun and shower.” Critics have often added other poems, e.g., “Lucy Gray,” to the group. For a classic study see Hartman 1934. As Brian Caraher cautiously remarks: “Wordsworth did not actively discourage an association of ‘A slumber’ with at least some of the poems in the ‘Lucy’ group” (1991: 41). For a summary of the biographical background, see Moorman 1957: 423–5.
- 5 It is possible to mount an informed and coherent interpretation of the poem according to which the “she” refers throughout to the narrator’s “spirit”: see Davies 1965, who also argues

- that Wordsworth did not in fact consider "A slumber" part of the "Lucy" sequence.
- 6 Bateson's position, though unsatisfactory to Hirsch, is by no means a dead issue, and has been updated by Levinson, who argues the case for "hearing the Spinozistic echo" in certain words and turns of Wordsworth's poetry (2007: 389–91).
 - 7 My compressed narrative leaves aside de Man's interpretation of "A slumber" in his important essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1969; repr. de Man 1983). De Man's remarks about the poem have been influential (and to some extent influenced those by Miller I am about to discuss), but their theoretical weight lies in their relation to the arguments about irony, allegory, and temporality that de Man develops throughout his essay, and that I cannot explore here. Perhaps the most intriguing point in his analysis is when he stresses the fictionality and nonpresence of the second stanza's "now," in a sentence that is itself slightly fragmentary: "The 'now' of the poem is not an actual now, which is that of the moment of death, lies hidden in the blank space between the two stanzas" (1983: 225).
 - 8 I should note that "Against Theory" inspired a vigorous debate that will *not* be summarized here among intentionalist and pragmatist critics in the pages of *Critical Inquiry*: see Mitchell 1985. Though that collection certainly repays study, it is being left aside in the present context because its contributors, most of whom agree with some portion or other of Knapp and Michaels's argument, do not address the challenge of deconstruction.
 - 9 Kamuf adduces and puts pressure on an affirmation Knapp and Michaels make in "A Reply to Our Critics": "What can the word 'author' mean if not the composer of the text?" (Knapp and Michaels 1985: 101; discussed in Kamuf 1986: 7).
 - 10 It is unclear whether Knapp and Michaels intend an allusion to paragraph 64 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*: "Suppose that someone coming to a seemingly uninhabited country perceived a geometric figure, say a regular hexagon, traced in the sand ... following reason, he would not judge that such a figure is made possible by the sand, the adjoining sea, the wind, or even animals that leave footprints familiar to him, or by any other nonrational cause" (Kant 1987: 248). One is also reminded of an interesting moment in the sixth chapter of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*: "and if the whole picture is intended to represent a landscape, letters of the alphabet are out of place in it since such objects do not occur in nature" (2001: 924).

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“Strange utterance”: The (Un)Natural Language of the Sublime in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*

Timothy Banti

Imagine an Aeolian harp. Take a board with some strings on it and hang it in a tree. Let the wind blow through and make music.

And that simplest Lute,
Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!
How by the desultory breeze caress’d,
Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now, its strings
Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
Over delicious surges sink and rise,
Such a soft floating witchery of sound
... // ...
O! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where –
... // ...
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
Is Music slumbering on her instrument.

(Coleridge 2003; ll. 12–20, 26–9, 32–3)

Coleridge’s production is apparently straightforward: the harp’s strings, “caressed” by the breeze, yield “notes” and “sound,” “rhythm” and a “warbl[ing],” in short, “Music.” But the Aeolian harp, while a real device popular in the eighteenth century, is, in its literal reality, just a gimmick. It must have made very minimal and irregular music at best. Yet as a metaphor, it plays more largely. Here, the harp is an instrument through

which a breeze blows and “warbles,” suggesting a bird’s *song*, and awakens “mute still air,” suggesting further that muteness might be transmuted into voice and speech. Might instrumental *natural* music become vocal *human* song?

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely fram’d,
That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweep
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

(ll. 44–8)

If “all nature” could be a self-animating Aeolian harp and “tremble into thought,” this thoughtful music that connects breeze, breath (*anima*), animation or inspiration, and soul (also *anima*), would become “intellectualized.” Mind, taking over the breeze from nature, now infuses nature with Soul and God: a theological sublimation. Can natural music achieve such elevated status without words and language – the *logos* in the theo-logical – being far behind?

Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp” is one of the earliest of what M. H. Abrams identified as Romantic poems of “the correspondent breeze,” which combine nature and lyric subjectivity in the coproduction of imaginative poetry, and which often feature an Aeolian harp (Abrams 1975). (Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode” and Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” are the best known.) In these poems, the harp is clearly in between nature and poetry, but at Shelley’s limit, there would no longer be any distance between nature’s breeze, the harp in nature’s trees, and the poet making poetry: “Make me thy [the addressed wind’s] lyre, even as the forest is” (l. 57). Behind this Romantic metaphor, then, lies the fantasy that nature could *speak* to us and through us.

Abrams is surely right in seeing the Romantic breeze as an important trope for the interaction (the “correspondence”) of nature and man, one with a long Judeo-Christian heritage. And the poetry that issues from such interaction covers a wide range that Abrams sketched, from calls for nature’s inspiration of revolutionary change on earth – from the political to the apocalyptic – to quieter claims of spiritual and poetic self-renewal drawing upon the impulses of nature’s reanimation. Often nature’s breezes and breaths arrive as sound or even as Aeolian music, and it is the inspired or reanimated poet who adds the words to their tune. In another strain of Romantic poetry, however, the breeze itself *comes as language*. Nature speaks. What does it say to the poet, and where does its message lead him? Wordsworth’s *Prelude* tells a grand story of the “correspondence” between a voice from nature and a poetic production. The present essay studies nature’s language in his autobiographical poem, in order to examine the Romantic sublime as the poetic structure of nature *as if* it could speak, and of language *as if* it could be natural. The oxymoron of “natural language” is at the basis of Wordsworth’s sublime, where nature and mind imaginatively challenge, contradict, and metaphorize one another. Their interaction is the source of some of English Romanticism’s greatest poetry.

I

Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze,
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
And from the sky; it beats against my cheek,
And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives.
O welcome messenger! O welcome friend!

(i. 1–5)

Thus begins *The Prelude* (cited throughout in the 1805 version). The breeze “seems half-conscious,” and so already seems half-human, half-personified; when it is then apostrophized as a “messenger,” it is implicitly attributed a *verbal* message. “[W]hat sweet stream / Shall with its murmurs lull me to my rest?” (i. 12–13). How verbal are “murmurs” already? We need not quibble – Wordsworth soon depicts an explicitly talking (personified) stream, as well as “The earth / And common face of Nature [that] spake to me” (i. 614–15). The immediate point, on the poem’s first page, is the “correspondence” with a nature that reanimates him: “I cannot miss my way. I breathe again! / ... / ... ‘tis shaken off, / That burthen of my own unnatural self” (i. 19–23). Wordsworth’s sublime will expose the irony of this self-confident “I cannot miss my way,” as well as the peculiar, because oxymoronic, mix of “my own unnatural self,” somehow both “one’s own” and “unnatural.” Here, what appears is happy, revivifying correspondence with a breezy nature. It is, in fact, the very set of lines that gave Abrams his image and essay-title:

if I may trust myself, this hour
Hath brought a gift that consecrates my joy;
For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven
Was blowing on my body, felt within
A corresponding mild creative breeze,
A vital breeze which travelled gently on
O'er things which it made, and is become
A tempest, a redundant energy,
Vexing its own creation.

(i. 39–47)

Curiously, the second breeze, the “corresponding” one “felt within,” is as endangering as it is creative: it goes over what it makes, “redundant” (the meaning derives from waves overflowing upon waves), and “vex[es] its own creation.” Recall Coleridge’s Aeolian “Lute”: “It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs / Tempt to repeat the wrong,” where the obvious amorous coyness of “no” meaning “yes” is couched in a strangely negative language of censure and wrong. Very early in the Coleridgean and Wordsworthian breezy correspondence, then, trouble lurks.

The correspondence of the lyric subject to the animating, inspiring natural breeze is, we surmise, a more complicated, perhaps dialectical relationship, at once receiving,

absorbing, and doubling the breath, and troubling or being troubled by it. Perhaps troubling precisely because doubling. What is “one’s own,” what is song or voice or poetry coming “naturally” to a poet, when it is unnatural for nature to speak, when nature *does* speak only via a non-naturalistic poetic personification, and when the responsive human is apparently dependent upon and submissive to the initiating speech of nature? After lines that brood upon the poet’s mind (“his own / Unmanageable thoughts,” “baffled by a mind that ... // ... feels immediately some hollow thought / Hang like an interdict upon her hopes”; i. 148, 149, 259–62), the poem famously asks after inspiration from nature in lines that were the actual beginning of the original 1799 “two-part *Prelude*”:

Was it for this
 That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
 To blend his murmurs with my nurse’s song,
 And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
 And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
 That flowed along my dreams? For this didst thou,
 O Derwent, travelling over the green plains
 Near my “sweet birthplace,” didst thou, beauteous stream,
 Make ceaseless music through the night and day,
 ... // ... giving me
 ...
 A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm
 Which Nature breathes among the hills and groves?
 (i. 272–9, 282, 284–5)

This time, a river’s murmurs are explicitly a “voice,” and the apostrophized river Derwent complements its “music” with the calming “breath” of nature’s hills and groves. This is the full package of Wordsworth’s Romantic nature, promised by an Aeolian harp: breezy breath, watery murmur, together yielding music and voice. And the package comes undone.

The sublime, to put it most generally, is an experience that elevates the mind above a certain limit. What kind of experience, what aspect or aspects of the mind, and what sense of a limit, are particulars that will be examined in the remainder of this essay. Before Wordsworth employs the word “sublime,” he introduces the topic in its code-language after Edmund Burke: “Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear” (i. 305–6), where the dichotomy means “by beauty and by the sublime.” Wordsworth’s three accounts of youthful theft, among the earliest texts of the earliest version of *The Prelude*, open onto the poem’s first sublime experiences. Our interest in these extraordinary passages (see Bahti 1984) is here in how the language of Wordsworth’s animating correspondence with nature – which, we have seen, is also of the troubling of that very correspondence – is repeated and recast on the brink of a sublime encounter with nature. First, after stealing birds from another’s traps at night, “I heard among the solitary hills / Low breathings coming after me, and sounds / Of undistinguishable motion, steps / Almost as silent as the turf they trod.”

(i. 329–32) – not a breezy breath, but a different, lower kind that does not rise up into music, but eerily joins with sounds that lower themselves still further, toward silence rather than music. Next, when “plundering” eggs from birds’ nests,

Oh, when I have hung
Above the raven’s nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill-sustained, and almost, as it seemed,
Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears; the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!

(i. 341–50)

The “gentle breeze” has become a blast, Wordsworth hangs on an edge of nature in mortal peril, and – having become what Shelley will wish for: a human-Aeolian harp – “With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind / Blow through my ears!” This “utterance” is language that issues from the encounter with nature, but too strange a kind to be called song or music; it is rather an unnatural or, better, de-naturalizing kind, whence “the sky seemed not a sky.”

At this liminal moment, with the Wordsworth-persona on the figurative edge of life and death, and nature denaturalized, the poet reverts to a comforting reprise of the language of “correspondence” that reverses the language we have just read: “The mind of man is framed even like the breath / And harmony of music” (i. 351–2), where the “framing” restabilizes what was precariously “hanging” in the immediately preceding passage. But even the poet is not entirely convinced by his intervention.

I believe
That Nature, oftentimes, when she would frame
A favoured being, from his earliest dawn
Of infancy doth open out the clouds
As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
With gentlest visitation; not the less,
...
Does it delight her sometimes to employ
Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable – and so she dealt with me.

(i. 363–8, 369–71)

We cannot but notice the strange image that combines “framing” and “gentlest visitation” with a terrifying “touch of lightning,” as if Semele could be comforted by Zeus’s lightning bolt. Once again, we are on the cusp of the sublime, which is also where

Wordsworth arrives after recounting the third theft, that of a row boat. As he rows into the “silent lake,”

from behind that craggy steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,
And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still
With measured motion, like a living thing
Strode after me.

(i. 405–12)

From beyond a limit (the horizon) appears a nature at once half-personified and altogether terrifying, with a “measured motion” not musical but monstrous. The thoroughly negative, privative state in which Wordsworth is left is as remarkably original in its language – among the most astounding lines in English poetry – as it is utterly bereft of all correspondence with nature:

for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
There was a darkness – call it solitude
Or blank desertion – no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
But huge and mighty forms that do not live
Like living men moved slowly through my mind ...

(i. 418–26)

This language is not natural, but counternatural. It is also – as we shall now see – recognizably of the sublime. It is brought about by an encounter with nature that is transformative of both nature and the poet. It marks a before-and-after moment, set as a below-and-beyond-the-limit experience. And the language that issues is unmistakably, unforgettably Wordsworth’s own – his “own unnatural” language, a radically poetic language dispossessing nature of all that is recognizably its own. How nature leads Wordsworth to its undoing is one of the itineraries traced in *The Prelude*, and his version of the Romantic sublime.

II

The eighteenth-century sublime is a complicated story, and fortunately, this is not the place to tell it all (Monk 1960; Weiskel 1976; Hertz 1985: 40–60). Here is a teleological summary leading to Wordsworth. A topic of high oratorical and poetic rhetoric

from Longinus's first-century introduction of the term through Boileau's 1672 translation of the *Peri hypsous*, the sublime became in the eighteenth century on the one hand a widely diffused appellation of certain aesthetic forms of wildness and gloominess in nature poetry and landscape painting (the landscape sublime was mixed together with the picturesque), on the other hand an emotional experience that non-artists could have during tours of awe-inspiring landscape in northern England, Wales, or on the Continent. Burke, in his 1757 *Enquiry*, put the term's psychologization on a firm sensationist footing – the sublime terrified one because it arose from pain, and its “delight” was in release from this pain – and he also wanted to establish a philosophical aesthetics that rigorously distinguished the sublime from the beautiful. Terror, “the ruling principle of the sublime” (Burke 1968: 58), also called horror and fear, is produced by obscurity, uncertainty, confusion, vastness, infinity, privations of all sorts (vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence), magnificence, difficulty, extreme light – extremes of all kinds, for that matter (loudness, suddenness) – and, above all and encompassing all, *power*, of which the greatest instance is the Deity: “to be struck with his power, it is only necessary that we should open our eyes. . . . we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him . . . [before] the terror that naturally arises from a force which nothing can withstand . . . a sort of divine horror” (1968: 68). We recall how the general qualities of obscurity and privation, uncertainty and power, pervaded Wordsworth's emotions after the theft scenes, as well as how his specific terminology of “There was a darkness, call it solitude / Or blank desertion” echoes Burke's own. But to understand what the full model of the sublime offers to Wordsworth and other travelers amidst extreme nature, we need to go a step further in its eighteenth-century development. Burke did not give much of a role for imagination to play in the experience, because he held that the faculty was merely combinatory or recombinatory (in memory) of sensations (1968: 16, 17 and *passim*), but a later philosopher introduced the faculty centrally into the sublime.

In the crucial sections 28 and 29 of Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgement*, the salient features of his argument are as follows. Confronted with instances of nature (and of related aesthetic representations that he calls the “mathematical sublime”) that verge on the “immeasurable,” our senses attempt in vain to grasp at a “determinate” perception. At this limit-experience of being sensibly overpowered (overawed), our faculty of imagination kicks in and triggers an imaginative response – not a perceptual image, but an imagined version of our “resistance” to the power of nature – that allows us to step up to a representation that, on its terms, equals, totalizes, and thus overcomes the sensuously immeasurable. “Therefore nature is here called sublime [*erhaben*] merely because it raises [*erhebt*] the imagination to a presentation of those cases in which the mind can make itself aware of the sublimity [*Erhabenheit*] proper to its own determination, even above nature” (Kant 1952: 111, 112, translation modified throughout). This “step-up” via the imagination yields ultimately not an image, but a thought:

In a literal sense . . . ideas cannot be presented. But . . . reason inevitably steps forward, as the faculty of the independence of the absolute totality, and calls forth the effort of the

mind, albeit in vain, to make the representation of sense adequate to these ideas. This effort, and the feeling of the unattainability of the idea by means of imagination, is itself a presentation of the subjective finality of our mind in the employment of the imagination for the mind's supersensible determination, and compels us subjectively to *think* nature itself in its totality as a presentation of something supersensible, without our being able to bring about this presentation *objectively*. ... this idea of the supersensible, which, to be sure, we cannot further determine – so that we cannot *know* nature as its presentation, but only *think* it as such – is awakened in us by an object the aesthetic estimating of which strains the imagination to its limit ... (Kant 1952: 119, 120)

Thereby, we gain access to the “moral sphere of the mind ... where reason has to impose its dominion upon sensibility. ... in the aesthetic judgement upon the sublime this dominion is represented as exercised through the imagination itself as an instrument of reason” (1952: 120). Thus – another version of his “thing-in-itself” – Kant grants us the thought of something we can never know: in this case, what we cannot know perceptually, we are able to think by the imaginative overcoming of our own having-been-sensibly-overcome. “For though the imagination doubtless finds nothing beyond the sensible to which it can lay hold, still precisely this thrusting aside of the sensible barriers gives it a feeling of being unbounded; and that removal is thus a presentation of the infinite” (1952: 127). Telegraphically put, the Kantian sublime moves from imagination to the idea of morality to God. The entire three-step process – being sensibly overpowered and terrified in the confrontation with the perceptually infinite; imagining ourselves beyond what we cannot determine in a perception; and thus being initiated to the thought of reason, morality, and God as greater, more awesome still – is the experience called “sublime.” “The sublime may be described in this way: It is an object (of nature) the *representation of which determines the mind to think of the elevation of nature beyond our reach as a presentation of ideas*” (1952: 119, emphasis in the original).

III

We now return to *The Prelude*. Wordsworth introduces the terms “sublime” and “sublimity” in books 2 and 3, and we will glance at a few sublime episodes on the way to the two major accounts of the sublime in books 6 (the Simplon Pass) and 13 (Mount Snowdon) that have long been correctly recognized as the crucial events in the poem's entire narrative (see Hartman 1964). The eighteenth century, in the developments we have rehearsed, cultivated the sublime as a kind of experience of character-formation via aesthetically induced emotional thrills, as well as one for arriving at intimations of God. In other words, it had psychological, moral, and religious dimensions. Its emotional and spiritual (if not theological) aspects were already in the original Longinian treatise. But the rhetorical, and that means *verbal*, basis of the experience, which had been Longinus's point of departure, had come to seem less obvious. Wordsworth, in the great poetry of *The Prelude*, returns the question of the sublime squarely to the matter of language, and specifically to a Romantic kind of oxymoronic

“natural language” that, at *its* sublime limit, is self-contradictory, self-canceling, and self-overcoming into “(un)natural language.”

Book 2 presents a version of a childhood experience of sublime nature as if it were without strain upon or interference from imagination – as if, in other words, it were a heightened version of an Aeolian harp’s natural song. It is introduced as

Sublimar joy. For I would walk alone
In storm and tempest, or in starlight nights
Beneath the quiet heavens, and at that time
Have felt whate’er there is of power in sound
To breathe an elevated mood, by form
Or image unprofaned; and I would stand,
Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are
The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
Or make their dim abode in distant winds.
Thence did I drink the visionary power.

(ii. 321–30)

When imagination is then added (without yet being named as such), it likewise seems an unstraining complement:

An auxiliar light
Came from my mind, which on the setting sun
Bestowed new splendour; the melodious birds,
The gentle breezes, fountains that ran on
Murmuring so sweetly in themselves, obeyed
A like dominion, and the midnight storm
Grew darker in the presence of my eye.

(ii. 387–93)

If there is a surmounting (“dominion”) of nature by the mind, it scarcely seems preceded by what Kant called “resistance,” but rather something more like a continuing “correspondence” between one “gentle breeze” and another.

This idyllic and ideal version of a way guided by nature, along which nature allows itself to be supplanted by imagination without disturbance –

One song [all things] sang, and it was audible –
Most audible then when the fleshly ear,
O’ercome by grosser prelude of that strain,
Forgot its functions and slept undisturbed.

(ii. 431–4)

– this way is not the true one. The true way, Wordsworth discovers, has to be found through loss. This corresponds to an Augustinian typology of autobiography (Augustine, Dante, Petrarch), but also to the structure of the sublime itself. That is, as

Kant sketched it, first sense must try to keep up with nature's magnitude, and lose in the effort; then imagination must try to "resist" this loss, and imagine the supersensible – *and also lose* ("the unattainability of the idea by the imagination"). Only then do the idea and the moral good and God emerge, on the far side of both sensuous and imaginative straining to the limit. The real sublime is, first, imagination leading beyond nature and the senses, then imagination leading beyond itself.

Loss can be figured in many forms, but it always – as already in the Augustinian model – prefigures death. The famous Boy of Winander episode (v. 389–422) itself prefigures the sublime of the following book in figuring two kinds of loss. First the boy, who was cast in the first-person in the 1799 draft of the episode (Wordsworth 1979: 492), and thus a poet-figure, blows through his hands, "as through an instrument" (like a pastoral oaten reed), to "mimic" the "silent owls," and gets by this imitation an equally sensuous sound out of nature: "And they would shout / Across the wat'ry vale, and shout again, / Responsive to his call" (v. 399–401). This is no longer the "corresponding breeze," but the corespondive call, each – the poet to nature, nature to the poet – calling to the other. But as the strictly sensuous experience multiplies and mounts to a crescendo, with all its repeated "ands" – "with quivering peals / And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud, / Redoubled and redoubled – concourse wild / Of mirth and jocund din" (v. 401–4) – the next step is reached by a loss of the first. The sensuous match of man to nature reaches a limit, the real sound is superseded by real silence, and then an imaginative version of nature kicks in: "And when it chanced / That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill, / Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung / Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize / Has carried far into his heart the voice / Of mountain torrents . . ." (v. 404–9). It is no accident, as one says, that this imaginative supplement is recognizably of sublime nature. But it is *also* no accident that the imaginative overcoming of the first, sensuous loss is paid for by a second loss: the boy's death ("This boy was taken from his mates, and died / In childhood"). The "hung" twice left hanging at the line-ends of Book 1's perilous theft scene (i. 330, 336) is here responded to, first in the enjambment of the suspended sensuous correspondence with nature ("Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung / Listening"), then, post mortem, in his death:

the churchyard hangs
 Upon a slope above the village school,
 And there, along that bank, when I have passed
 At evening, I believe that oftentimes
 A full half-hour together I have stood
 Mute, looking at the grave in which he lies.
 (v. 417–22)

There are deaths, and then there are deaths. When Wordsworth begins to recount in Book 6 the Alpine part of the "Grand Tour" that he and his friend Robert Jones made in 1790, the thrust and counterthrust between nature and the mind are first introduced with a surprisingly mournful and mortal vocabulary: "That day we first / Beheld

the summit of Mount Blanc, and grieved / To have a soulless image on the eye / Which had usurped upon a living thought / That never more could be" (vi. 452–6). Decoded, this says that actually, sensibly seeing the highest peak of Europe was a cause of grief, as if at a death, for the actual, perceptual "image on the eye" was "soulless," without any superadded contribution from the soul, intellect, or mind of man. That "soulless," which also means "inanimate," should suggest "dead" both follows from the "grieving," and is followed up by the claim of "usurpation upon a living thought," as if death has followed upon life. The "living thought / That never more could be" is the *imagination* of Mont Blanc, now undone by its actually having been *seen*. The awaited sublime experience was killed, or more properly aborted, because it was reversed: instead of leading from not-adequately-seeing to imagining, it has gone from seeing to the consequence of no-longer-being-able-to-imagine. The payoff has been not infinity (something "ever more about to be"), but its cancellation: "That never more could be."

But there are deaths, and then there are after-deaths. For in mid-line Wordsworth's account answers its loss: "The wondrous Vale / Of Chamouny did, on the following dawn, / With its dumb cataracts and streams of ice – / A motionless array of mighty waves, / Five rivers broad and vast – make rich amends, / And reconciled us to realities" (vi. 456–61). This is a verbal representation of nature ostensibly actually seen, and thus sublime nature evidently "did make rich amends" for its immediately preceding disappointment: Wordsworth's verbal image is, this time, sublimely rich, not denuded like the mere "soulless image." Specifically, it is full of the language of the imagination, beginning with the tag "wondrous," more powerfully so in the oxymorons of "dumb cataracts and streams of ice, / A motionless array of mighty waves," where there both is and is not sound and motion, moving water and frozen ice. Is this an image of the senses, or an image of imagination, or an imagined image of the senses? If the sublime were only a matter of aesthetic representation, Wordsworth could have stopped at just this poised ambiguity.

But the sublime is a process of thrusts and counterthrusts, of risings and resistances: it resists poise. The difficulty of reading Wordsworth's accounts of sublime experience in the Simplon and Snowdon passages repeats the difficulty of the encounters themselves, because they work precisely by working *against* themselves. Nature and mind are in collaboration in their antagonism. As an engagement rendered into language, represented verbally, the language works against itself. Nature's language – what it speaks to Wordsworth – *comes to mean the opposite of what it says*. It is its own counterthrust. Nature misleads Wordsworth – gets him lost – and his imagination has to straighten things out by reversing the reversal. Natural language, and then natural language re-presented by imagination, together mean something that unnaturally inverts the intuitive, the literal, the real.

There would appear to be nothing easier than to know which way is up, especially up a mountain as big as an Alp. Not so:

Far different dejection once was mine –
A deep and genuine sadness then I felt –

The circumstances I will here relate
 Even as they were. Upturning with a band
 Of travellers, from the Valais we had clomb
 Along the road that leads to Italy;
 ... / ... and, having reached an inn
 Among the mountains, we together ate
 Our noon's repast, from which the travellers rose
 Leaving us at the board.

(vi. 491–6, 498–501)

“Upturning” with the fellow travelers, Wordsworth and Jones “had clomb,” and the travelers “rose” again: up means up. But then Wordsworth gets it wrong.

Erelong we followed,
 Descending by the beaten road that led
 Right to a rivulet's edge, and there broke off;
 The only track now visible was one
 Upon the further side, right opposite,
 And up a lofty mountain. This we took,
 After a little scruple, and short pause,
 And climbed with eagerness – though not, at length,
 Without surprize and some anxiety
 On finding that we did not overtake
 Our comrades gone before.

(vi. 501–11)

The error – “we followed / Descending,” down instead of up – would be corrected by taking a new track “up a lofty mountain,” and indeed they “climbed,” but did not overtake the first climbers who “rose.” The path through nature had “there broke off,” and to find the way by a “track now visible” does not work. Once “rose” has been inverted into “followed descending,” “up” will no longer mean up. Nature's directions are misdirections.

By fortunate chance,
 While every moment now encreased our doubts,
 A peasant met us, and from him we learned
 That to the place which had perplexed us first
 We must descend, and there should find the road
 Which in the stony channel of the stream
 Lay a few steps, and then along its banks –
 And further, that thenceforward all our course
 Was downwards with the current of that stream.
 Hard of belief, we questioned him again,
 And all the answers which the man returned
 To our inquiries, in their sense and substance

Translated by the feelings which we had,
Ended in this – that we had crossed the Alps.
(vi. 511–24)

“Up” had to be reversed into “descend downwards,” in order to learn that their initial error of “followed descending” had meant that they had actually gone up as high as they could – they had crossed the Alps. The anticipated sublime event had occurred in omission – by inversion – of its sensuous experience. Nature, with its actual ups and downs, was the reverse or opposite of the sublime experience: the sublime was counterintuitive, counternatural.

What happened next on the hike in 1790 was that the nonexperiencing of the sublime event of crossing the Alps was compensated for by a sensuous experience to beat all others. The structure of this compensation repeats that of the Vale of Chamouny’s earlier “rich amends” for Mont Blanc’s “soulless image,” where nature without imagination gave way, as if naturally, to the following day’s image of sublime nature. Here, an equally “natural” sequel apparently really occurs:

The dull and heavy slackening that ensued
Upon those tidings by the peasant given
Was soon dislodged; downwards we hurried fast,
And entered with the road which we had missed
Into a narrow chasm. The brook and road
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy pass,
And with them did we journey several hours
At a slow step.

(vi. 549–56)

Notice that now the earlier disappointment with reversible spatial directions (up meant down, down meant up) is itself repeated and inverted by another reversal which, this time, reverses disappointment into the *ne plus ultra* of the sublime: descent (“downwards we hurried”) yields “height.”

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And everywhere along the hollow rent
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears –
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them – the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light ...

(vi. 556–67)

The way through nature, now corrected (“the road which we had missed”), yields a nature above itself, of sublime “immeasurable height.” It is countertemporal and oxymoronic (“woods decaying, never to be decayed, / The stationary blasts of waterfalls”), self-contradicting (“Winds thwarting winds”), unnatural or surreal: “The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky.” (Imagine a Magritte painting.) *And it is language, natural language*: “The rocks that muttered close upon our ears, / Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside / As if a voice were in them.” This language leads to the heavens, where, amidst radical antitheses – “Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light” – the line finally yields the predicate to this single, remarkably suspended sentence:

Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great apocalypse,
The types and symbols of eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

(vi. 568–72)

Where the natural sublime might have revealed this “mind” as imagination, it reveals instead the typological thought or allegorical reading (“characters”) of a divine “mind”’s apocalypse and eternity. This is Milton’s God, Burke’s Deity, or Kant’s God read directly out of the sublime Book of Nature as if it were the Book of Scripture – which also means, by the inversion operative here, read directly out of literary and biblical language as it were the sublime writing of nature. (Wordsworth’s line 572 echoes almost verbatim Milton’s description of God in *Paradise Lost* – “Him first, him last, him midst, and without end” (v. 165) – which itself echoes Revelations 22:13, “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.”)

The natural sublime might, as Kant would have it, have revealed the “mind” first in the form of imagination, then, via imagination, as supersensible ideas, including the idea of God. Here, imagination seems to have been short-circuited. But the reader will have noticed that the present account of Wordsworth’s Simplon passage has jumped a section. Lines 491–524 and 549–72 narrate a single day’s events in chronological sequence. The intervening twenty-four lines, however, were composed *after* these two passages, describing something that happened years later, at the time of their writing in 1804. (Hartman 1964: 31–69 appears to have been the first to make sense of this crossing of narrative and compositional chronology.)

Imagination! – lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my song
Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,
In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted without a struggle to break through,
And now, recovering, to my soul I say

"I recognise thy glory". In such strength
Of usurpation, in such visitings
Of awful promise, when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
There harbours whether we be young or old,
Our destiny, our nature, and our home,
Is with infinitude – and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.
The mind beneath such banners militant
Thinks not of spoils or trophies, nor of aught
That may attest its prowess, blest in thoughts
That are their own perfection and reward –
Strong in itself, and in the access of joy
Which hides it like the overflowing Nile.

(vi. 525–48)

Imagination arises "now," in the text's final narrative structure, *before* the natural sublime, and *as* the filter through which nature will immediately appear. Its "vapour" becomes the waterfalls and torrents; "that power came athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud" prefigures "winds thwarting winds" and "the unfettered clouds." At Mont Blanc, nature had "usurped upon a living thought / That never more could be," disappointingly displacing the imagined version of the peak; now "the awful [read: sublime] promise" of imagination's "strength of usurpation" counters that earlier, false usurpation, and is cause for glorying. The sublime is on the far side of the senses: "[W]hen the light of sense / Goes out in flashes that have shown to us / The invisible world, doth greatness make abode," are among the great lines of European sublime poetry, precisely because they state, fulfilling Kant, that the sublime is not nature, but the mind. "Our destiny, our nature, and our home / Is with infinitude, and only there," claims the sublimation of nature into human nature, a near-immeasurability of the Alps into a real infinitude of the sublime mind, a mind that enfolds itself in its own thoughts and power. It is this magnificence of self-representation and self-generated language that is then transposed, transmuted, and redisplayed in the following lines as nature yielding theology and eschatology.

A summary of Wordsworth's natural and unnatural language will be helpful before we turn to Book 13. Nature's messaging and ministrations to Wordsworth promised him a natural language, as if its Aeolian harp not only could play music, but could speak. Yet each time he entered upon sublime encounters with nature (we saw several with the thefts, but there are other early ones we have neglected, e.g., ii. 311–41 and iii. 97–129), the language turned unnatural – oxymoronic, contradictory, counterintuitive – "strange utterances" wherein "the sky seemed not a sky," with "a dim and undetermined sense of unknown modes of being," "no familiar shapes of hourly objects ... no colours of

green fields.” Does this mean that fields were not colored green, or that green fields were without color? We do not know, so strange is the utterance. Finally, motion and stasis are confounded (“a motionless array of mighty waves”), the elemental spatial directives – up, down – are inverted, the self-contradictions proliferate (“winds thwarting winds”), what came first and what later (nature and imagination, or rather, imagination and nature) are reversed, and the surreal supervenes upon the natural in the unnatural image of “torrents shooting from the clear blue sky.” Wordsworth’s language – anyone’s language! – cannot be more detached from natural language than “when the light of sense goes out.”

The concluding episode of *The Prelude* would straighten out Wordsworth’s story of the sublime by reversing the reversal we have just followed: by putting imagination in its place, between nature and God, and not before them both. There is no mistaking this dominant ideological argument in the Snowdon passage of Book 13. But what may be mis-taken, or not taken to account at all, is how tenuous its thematic representation is, how *unnatural* the language of this “reversal of the reversal.”

It is summer 1791, Wordsworth is again on a walking tour with his friend Robert Jones, this time in northern Wales (xiii. 1–119). The very introduction of the ascent of Snowdon sounds like it strangely reverses time and space: “I left Bethkelet’s huts at couching-time, / And westward took my way to see the sun / Rise from the top of Snowdon” (xiii. 3–5). He leaves at bedtime for a sunrise, he goes west to see an event that will come from the east, and the enjambment and syntax make it sound as if the sun will “rise from the top of Snowdon.” As they climb with their shepherd-guide, their upward way is through weather that encloses and resists, “a dripping mist / Low-hung and thick that covered all the sky, . . . // . . . Little could we see, / Hemmed round on every side with fog and damp” (xiii. 11–12, 15–16). Interiority is stressed – “silently we sunk / each into commerce with his private thoughts”(xiii. 18–19), and apart from the guide’s dog once barking, “Was nothing either seen or heard the while / Which took me from my musings” – and the ascent’s physical effort (“With forehead bent / Earthward, as if in opposition set / Against an enemy, I panted up / With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts” (xiii. 29–32)) is recounted in language that accents resistance toward “earth” on the one hand, an upward eagerness of “thought” on the other.

What occurs next happens in several steps, as did the Simplon experience. As if by chance – recall the “And when it chanced” of the Boy of Winander, and the “By fortunate chance . . . a peasant met us” at Simplon –

And I, as chanced, the foremost of the band –
 When at my feet the ground appeared to brighten,
 And with a step or two seemed brighter still;
 Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,
 For instantly a light upon the turf
 Fell like a flash. I looked about, and lo,
 The moon stood naked in the heavens at height
 Immense above my head . . .

(xiii. 35–42)

Having gone up for a sunrise, but looking down, self-absorbed, Wordsworth sees light at his feet, as if – unnaturally – from within the ground. Or is it, more strangely still, a *sunfall*? The verbs “appeared” and “seemed” question the reality of the illumination, and if in the Simpon passage imagination had “the light of sense go out in flashes,” here the “light upon the turf / Fell like a flash.” Significantly, this is an outlandish simile, for the only light that really “instantly” flashes in nature is lightning or the aurora borealis. The light is actually moonlight, which in nature is reflected light, and in romance and Romantic poetry, light that always stands for imagination. Here it appears additionally with the Burkean sublime attributes of nakedness and immensity. Call it imaginative or reflective light, if not light of the imagination, this “flash” of light illuminates an unnatural spectacle that appears as the reversals of physical properties. But such representation results from the *verbal* transfer of properties by way of metaphor. In the sublime, metaphors can transfer properties by unnatural reversal as well as by natural analogy. Here, mountain becomes shore, vaporous mist becomes a lower liquid sea, immobile hills become cetacean water creatures, and the mists become again, a final time, solid land.

and on the shore
 I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
 Which meek and silent rested at my feet.
 A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
 All over this still ocean, and beyond,
 Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves
 In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
 Into the sea ...

(xiii. 42–9)

This massive imaginative reversal – going up a mountain to find oneself at the seashore – is awesome, sublime, including in the programmatic sense that nature is diminished by its imaginative overcoming. The passage continues, “Into the sea, the real sea, that seemed / To dwindle and give up its majesty, / Usurped upon as far as sight could reach” (xiii. 49–51). The key word is once again “usurped,” here a usurpation of nature’s (“the real sea”’s) “majesty” by the metaphoric-imaginative sight that takes dominion over the entire extent of sensible perception (“as far as sight could reach”). However immeasurable or majestic nature can be, it “dwindles” before an imaginative sight. “Meanwhile, the moon looked down upon this shew / In single glory ...” (xiii. 52–3), where “shew” insists upon the sheer spectacle of what is seen, and “single glory” emphasizes the dominion even as it recalls the Simpon passage’s “Imagination ... ‘I recognize thy glory.’”

Imagine Wordsworth ending his account here. The “eager thoughts” of a mountain’s ascent would have culminated in a sublime experience: unnatural, imaginative, metaphoric – great poetry, usurping and dominating the natural order of things – a moonfall, not a sunrise. But the experience has a third part, following the actual, physical climb and the moonfall of transformative representation by metaphor:

and we stood, the mist
 Touching our very feet; and from the shore
 At distance not the third part of a mile
 Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,
 A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which
 Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
 Innumerable, roaring with one voice.
 The universal spectacle throughout
 Was shaped for admiration and delight,
 Grand in itself alone, but in that breach
 Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
 That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged
 The soul, the imagination of the whole.

(xiii. 53–65)

We recognize, I think, what is happening here. The “chasm deep and gloomy” recalls the “narrow chasm” and “gloomy pass” of Simplon, situated this time not in the earth but in the vapor. Out of it issue the formulaic sublime elements, “the roar of waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable.” The familiar Burkean vocabulary of gloom, infinity, and grandeur has superadded to it the Wordsworthian-Romantic vocabulary of *nature’s language*, for what mounts is not just a roaring noise, not even just a breeze or breath (“breathing-place”), but “one voice ... the homeless voice of waters.” Why “homeless”? The question appears to cancel itself as quickly as it is raised, because the voice is located, after all, in the conduit of “that breach” (chasm, fracture, breathing-place, thoroughfare), and is attributed to the agency and authority of “Nature.” Nature does the doing, and produces the “soul,” the “imagination” of the whole sublime shebang.

But the question persists: why “homeless”? Perhaps because the “voice” – natural language – has one source (Nature), one ventriloquist’s sibling (imagination), and no fixed address or abode. Why not? Because we would know the home address only if we knew about the coordinates of that “fracture,” a third of a mile from the “shore.” Our question becomes: which shore? The one of “the real sea” (mentioned five lines earlier), or that of “the sea of mist,” where “we stood, the mist / Touching our very feet”? The shore is radically undecidable: a literal shore re-usurping upon a metaphoric one, or the metaphoric still usurping upon a literal one. Natural or imaginative, this is familiar “natural language” unnaturally unfamiliar – undecidably “the shore.”

The remainder of the Snowdon passage makes abundantly clear Wordsworth’s ideology of the sublime: it comes from nature. Nature sensuously displays the appearance or “resemblance” of imagination, and thus together they point to or reveal God.

the scene
 ... appeared to me
 The perfect image of a mighty mind,
 Of one that feeds upon infinity,
 That is exalted by an under-presence,

The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
Or vast in its own being – above all,
One function of such mind had Nature there
Exhibited by putting forth, and that
With circumstances most awful and sublime:
That domination which she oftentimes
Exerts upon the outward face of things,
... // ... The power which these [minds]
Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus
Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express
Resemblance – in the fullness of its strength
Made visible – a genuine counterpart
And brother of the glorious faculty
Which higher minds bear with them as their own.
... // ...
Such minds are truly from the Deity ...
(xiii. 67, 68–78, 84–90, 106)

That the reader may definitively understand Wordsworth's retrospective argument here, the editors of our edition of *The Prelude* add a note: "Nature, as the sea of mist, has transformed the Snowdon landscape, usurping upon the sovereignty of the 'real sea,' the Irish Channel. In the process she has demonstrated by analogy ('Exhibited by putting forth') the power of the human imagination" (Wordsworth 1979: 462). Nature, in this account, is *both* the metaphoric and the real, doing the work of poetry on behalf of the human imagination. This really would be the fulfillment of the ideology of Romantic natural language, and the editors more orthodox than Wordsworth himself.

I have argued that, whatever is "demonstrated" or "exhibited" on Snowdon, it is anything but analogical. Wordsworth indeed wanted his language to be nature's, even at its most sublime. We have seen it become the unnatural, metaphoric (oxymoronic, antithetical, contradictory) language of imagination that then recasts itself as "from nature." It cannot be (mis)construed as natural language without displaying its unnatural qualities of sublime imagination, and it cannot be acknowledged as imaginative tropological language without the representation that it came from nature. When Paul de Man calls Wordsworth "a poet of sheer language" (1984: 92), the insight is overstated, for sheer language does not present nature as persistently as Wordsworth does. Even Mallarmé, arguably the poet who most relentlessly pursued sheer language in the entire Western tradition, cannot *not* continue to represent nature with virtually his every word. "Sheer language" after Wordsworth and Mallarmé might be Dada sound-poetry on the one hand, concrete poetry on the other, but the former is by its own avowal nonsense, while the latter is, at its limit, mere graphic icon. Neither has nature or imagination any longer, and without at least one pole, there is no sublime. The Romantic sublime at the end of its road is Adorno, for whom what is left of the sublime is the thought of its impossibility. It is Beckett, with his late story "Imagination

Dead Imagine.” It is Celan, with his neologism *Überabend* (“over-evening,” “super-evening”). Imagine Barnett Newman’s 1951 painting at the Museum of Modern Art, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. It is entirely red, save for five thin vertical strips ranging from white to maroon. Now imagine that Newman went into a paint store and asked not for “red” paint, but for “color.” The painting might be red, but Newman painted color: *imagine* that is what we are supposed to *see*. This, in imagination’s relation to sensuous nature, is the (un)natural language of the Romantic sublime.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 25 “Milton and the Romantics”; chapter 27 “Romantic Poetry and Literary Theory: The Case of ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’”; chapter 29 “The Matter of Genre in the Romantic Sublime”; chapter 33 “Ethical Supernaturalism: The Romanticism of Wordsworth, Heaney, and Lacan”

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The Matter of Genre in the Romantic Sublime

Ian Balfour

The essential nature of all lyric poetry is the portrayal of the infinite in the finite.
Schelling

The Australian poet John Kinsella published in 2008 a volume entitled *Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful*, a collection of some sixty poems, many of whose titles come directly from the section headings of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). When these poems, on occasion, do not explicitly take their cue from Burke in their titles, they do so in the body of the poems. Even the five-part division of Kinsella's book is taken over from Burke's original. It's a stunningly programmatic revival of a once and still influential template for thinking through (some of) the fundamental aesthetic experiences. Kinsella's thorough reworking of Burke in poetic form stands inside and outside its own time, enmeshed in the world of today but harking back to an older era.

No one could accuse the Romantic poets of being anywhere near so programmatic as Kinsella, neither with relation to Burke nor Kant nor any other thinker of the aesthetic. But the sublime was very much in the air in the Romantic era and almost as much on the page. The history of the sublime, as a category and a force in literature and the arts, is decidedly discontinuous: it has its entrances and its exits, its vogues and doldrums. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries certainly saw one of the high-water marks (or is it high-mountain marks?) of the sublime as a mode of cultural production and a concern of critical thinking. As far as aesthetic production is concerned, writers and artists hardly needed to be versed in the critical or philosophical literature on the subject: the models were there in abundance (the poetry of Milton or Homer, the *terribiltá* of Michelangelo), without any need for the supplement of an articulated philosophical or even just intellectual discourse about the sublime. And the Alps were there too, in actuality and in many texts and prints. To the extent that

the sublime is a matter of experience, it can just ‘happen’ to anyone at anytime, with or without any accompanying words. Yet once the word and concept of the sublime are intensely in circulation, that presence, the empirical evidence of the testimonies suggests, fosters concomitant production in the realm of the arts.

The sublime as an aesthetic experience or even an event is understood by Kant to be a matter of the unbounded, *Unbegrenztheit*, that which is without limits (2001: 105; 2007: 75). Yet even this sort of boundless experience comes to be shaped, if only in its discursive aftermath. Too often the sublime, almost by definition a matter of transcendence, has been assumed to operate as if transcendentally, always and everywhere the same. We would do well to attend more precisely to the shape and texture of the sublime as it functions in this or that poem as instances of certain genres, even when these genres are sometimes hard to fix and name.

“How sublime is it?” is not often the best question to ask of a poem. Few, if any, poets would set out from so simple and abstract a premise as to write “a sublime poem.” Yet the period saw a decided intensification in performing and reflecting on this aesthetic mode, whether it approximated Longinian transport, Burkean terror or the at once simpler and more conceptually weighty modes (mathematical and dynamic) of Kant. In what follows I address examples of sublime poetry mainly as they are articulated in some established genres: hymn, epic and, perhaps counterintuitively, the sonnet. This is to neglect a good many poems (and sorts of poems) for which there are not readily available, time-honored designations, the proliferation of which was a hallmark of Romantic poetry. Think of M. H. Abrams’s invention of the capacious category of the “greater Romantic lyric” that nonetheless helped identify and group together a good number of important poems of the period (1984). Or consider what was then the new phenomenon of titling one’s poem “Lines . . .,” an appellation, uncommon before the late eighteenth century but flourishing in the Romantic period, that indicates how the poem might swerve from the wide array of established generic markers available, naming instead just one of the basic units of poetry that could apply to anything poetic with two or more lines. (I take up one example of the “Lines” phenomenon below.) The period was, even more than most, embroiled in a dialectic of “tradition and experiment,” as Mary Jacobus phrased the dynamic apropos *Lyrical Ballads* (Jacobus 1976). Wordsworth affords an interesting case of someone well “versed” in the classical and vernacular forms established before his time and yet someone who clearly felt constrained by a too circumscribed nomenclature, inventing homespun categories.¹ Yet here we will stick to the established genres, with the possible exception of “Mont Blanc,” that hovers between ode and hymn without necessarily being either.

Kant maintained that one could not say of an object that it was sublime, rather at most that it “lent itself” to the sublime (2001: 107; 2007: 75). Precisely the same is true of literary genres. To judge from the history of criticism and taste, epic and tragedy would be the genres that have most lent themselves to the sublime, followed perhaps by the ode, especially in its Pindaric mode.² One would be far less inclined to accord the predicate of sublimity to pastoral or comedy or the villanelle, much less the epigram. Certain aspects of a given genre – heroism, say, or elevated diction – can be better suited

than some others to the mode of the sublime yet they stop short of guaranteeing a judgment of sublimity, not least because execution of the poem is a huge factor in determining responses to it. From the sublime to the ridiculous, it became proverbial to say, is only a step. The pages of literary history are littered with failed sublimity and in some genres more than others: epic appears to be the genre at which it is most common to fail, and to fail spectacularly, even for poets of the first order.

The principal examples under scrutiny here are by male poets. This is perhaps not as arbitrary and unjust as it seems, for there was a pronounced, gendered asymmetry in poetic production when it came to the modes commonly understood as sublime or lending themselves to it. Hardly any women writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries attempted to write epic (especially in the exalted line of Homer, Virgil, and Milton), nor did they often broach the Pindaric ode. This by no means implies that women were somehow constitutionally incapable of writing in these genres but as it happens they tended not to try their hands at them (see Backscheider 2005). Perhaps women avoided “war epics” for very good, politically upbeat reasons, as did William Blake. It’s not as if the entire eighteenth century shared Burke’s and Kant’s reductive alignment of women with the beautiful and men with the sublime, but it was a pervasive paradigm with which women had to contend (see Balfour 2006). It was primarily in the domain of the Gothic that women writers and sometimes their heroines embraced the sublime and even reveled in it. There are, to be sure, counterexamples: Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon* sonnet sequence or numerous poems in her “Progress” series, or Charlotte Smith’s “Beachy Head,” or tragedies by Joanna Baillie such as *Orra*. By and large, however, women writers left the perhaps riskily pretentious mode of the sublime to their male counterparts.

I

We begin with one of more unlikely genres to be a vehicle for the sublime: the sonnet. It’s hard to argue with Coleridge’s observation that the sonnet is “a small poem” (2001: 1235) or Samuel Johnson’s definition in his Dictionary that it is “short”: the sonnet is manifestly one of the smallest things on the scale of poetic genres. And the “small” is almost systematically associated, as explicitly in Edmund Burke, with the beautiful, whereas the sublime, on the opposite end of the spectrum, is linked with the vast and even the infinite. The sonnet, moreover, is a strictly circumscribed form, usually a scant fourteen lines, and the sublime is often thought, as in Kant, to be an affair of the unbounded. On the face of it, the aesthetic mode of the sublime and the strictly delimited genre of the sonnet would seem to be worlds apart. Yet a good many Romantic poets in Britain and on the Continent seized on this perhaps inauspicious form to exploit or mobilize it for any number of properly sublime pursuits (see Balfour 2002). The sonnet had been dormant a good long while, essentially for the century between the death of Milton and the birth of Wordsworth. Then something of a mini-revival occurred in the generation sometimes referred to as the “Pre-Romantics.” In their wake the Romantics themselves took up the newly revived form and ran with it:

Wordsworth would end up writing more than 500 sonnets, August Wilhelm Schlegel got into the habit of writing one a day.

How then did the Romantic sonnet come to be articulated with the sublime, a mode arguably antithetical to it? Certainly in the hands of a Donne or a Milton, the small form of the sonnet could confront big issues: death, God, the afterlife. A poem such as Donne's "Batter my heart, three person'd God" forcefully performs its sublime content from its opening phrase. The sonnet form of Milton became for Wordsworth "a trumpet," as he proclaims in "Scorn not the Sonnet." (1977: 635) Thus there were some precedents for a certain sublimity even in this unlikely form but nothing quite to rival the cultivation of the sublime in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that prompted the Romantics to mine the resources of the genre for performances in this mode. Think of Shelley's "Ozymandias," or Wordsworth's "Mutability," or the melancholy sonnets of Charlotte Smith, or Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," or any number of Mary Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon* sequence, such as the climactic one with Sappho, poised for suicide, gazing from "a dizzy precipice": one gets an immediate sense of the sublime possibilities. But how does a sublime sonnet unfold in its details?

On February 4, 1818 Leigh Hunt met Shelley and Keats and proposed a fifteen-minute, more-or-less friendly competition with each of them to write sonnets on the Nile, in the wake of an Egyptian exhibition at the British Museum. Hunt apparently stayed up until all hours of the morning, honing his effort, breaking the rules of the game but producing this remarkable lyric:

It flows through old hush'd Egypt and its sands,
Like some grave mighty thought threading a dream,
And times and things, as in that vision, seem
Keeping along it their eternal stands, –
Caves, pillars, pyramids, the shepherd bands
That roamed through the young world, the glory extreme
Of high Sesostris, and that southern beam,
The laughing queen that caught the world's great hands.
Then comes a mightier silence, stern and strong,
As of a world left empty of its throng,
And the void weighs on us; and then we wake
And hear the fruitful stream lapsing along
Twixt villages, and think how we shall take
Our own calm journey on for human sake.

(2003: 233)

The Nile in all its immensity is a ready-made topos for the sublime: vast, ancient and, for a European audience, exotic. A natural wonder of the world, its huge scope forbids it from being "taken in" or experienced as a whole: it challenges the senses and even the mind to comprehend it. At the outset we learn that the Nile is 'hushed,' silence being a frequent motif in the discourse of the sublime, and that the Nile flows silently

through the silence surrounding it. The slow flow of monosyllables of the second line suits the gravity and texture of the subject matter. And the whole octet is one long convoluted sentence, not the discursive equivalent of the Nile by any means, but long by the standards of the sonnet and lyric generally, a thought through which the reader has to thread her or his way. The attention to silence underscores the gap between the not-so-silent poem and its object. Yet this observed silence of the opening octet gives way at the *volta* to a “mightier silence” surpassing the grave hush of the inaugural lines. Where does *this* silence come from? Beyond the Nile that cuts through the blank sands of Egypt, the speaker imagines in a dream a starker, even absolute void, a world bereft of humanity of which he is nonetheless an observer. The figure in and of the dream gives way, in the final tercet, to a chord of tranquility, a counterpoise to the sublime but something commonly felt to succeed the sublime in its aftermath, as so often in Wordsworth when, as say in the boat-stealing episode or that of the drowned man of Esthwaite, he and the text will recover from the dislocations of the sublime to a renewed stability.

One way the sonnet can indulge in the sublime is to convey a sense of infinity (another of Burke’s and Kant’s hallmarks of the sublime), or at least a sense of a greater number of things than one can easily comprehend is by providing a list, by enlisting the trope of enumeration. All the better if the things enumerated are themselves “great.” The list that Hunt’s sonnet features stops short of the full-blown sublime, even as one might be led to believe it is coming. The sequence “Caves, pillars, pyramids . . .” seems to be rising from the enigmatic and the monumental to the ever more majestic only to have it end (provisionally at the end of the line) in “the shepherd bands,” bringing things back down to the pastoral earth. But the enumeration goes on, rises to heights again with the great Sesostris, said by Herodotus to have conquered the whole world. The force of enumeration here suggests something not easily contained by the poem or the mind. In the bounded form of the sonnet, Hunt thematically invokes and structurally performs the sublime, going beyond bounds.

The sublime sonnet need not pull out all the stops, packing each and every line with effects calculated to produce, in their small or big ways, sublime effects. Indeed, it sometimes suffices for a poem to pull out only one stop. John Clare, as John Barrell has argued, seemed often to link, at least implicitly, various modes of his “imprisonment,” with the bounded form of the sonnet (Barrell 1972: 166ff.). Yet Clare’s writing worked against some constraints of the genre, being homespun in several respects and on occasion he would seem to vault beyond the form from within. In this sonnet, he seizes on one of the predicates of the Burkean sublime as its topic and title:

Obscurity

Old tree oblivion doth thy life condemn
Blank & recordless as that summer wind
That fanned the first few leaves on thy young stem
When thou wert one years shoot – & who can find
Their homes of rest or paths of wandering now

So seems thy history to a thinking mind
 As now I gaze upon thy sheltering bough
 Thou grew unnoticed up to flourish now
 & leave thy past as nothing all behind
 Where many years & doubtless centurys lie
 That ewe beneath thy shadow – nay that flie
 Just settled on a leaf – can know with time
 Almost as much of thy blank past as I
 Thus blank oblivion reigns as earths sublime
 (1998: 256)

The poem begins quietly enough, engaging a time-honored theme of the transience that comes with time, familiar in sonnet history not least from Shakespeare (beauty, the lover). It registers its melancholy effects on the contemplative subject, “the thinking mind” of the poem, moving from a sense of time passing into unrecorded nothingness apropos a single tree to a profounder sense of our utter nonknowledge of natural history, culminating in the shocking conclusion that generalizes the oblivion felt in relation to one specific, old tree to the generalized sense of blank oblivion as the sovereign modality of the earth’s condition that the poet calls here, with a risky but earned word, sublime. A tension exists between the unrecorded history of the tree and the recording that is the poem but there is nothing in Clare of, say, the self-satisfaction of those Shakespearean sonnets that know, because they are in writing, that they will outlast the decaying objects of beauty they are ambiguously celebrating. The knowledge of the poet is, humbly, of a piece with creatures traditionally thought far lower down on the scale of things. Indeed, the poet is awed but chastened in a way that partly coincides with the posture of the hymnist, to which we now turn.

II

Coleridge’s much-maligned “Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouny” can serve as an example of a second lyric genre that lends itself to the sublime: the hymn, a genre that has affinities with another even more prominent in Romantic poetry, the ode. Originally a Greek term for song or poem, “hymn” soon came to connote most specifically a poem of praise. When the Septuagint translators invoked a number of terms for the biblical psalm, the Greek term *hymnos* was one of the appellations thought appropriate. In the centuries leading up to Romanticism in Britain the hymn was overwhelmingly associated with liturgical or para-liturgical psalms. For Coleridge’s audiences, the word “hymn” would have connoted primarily something in the orbit of the Christian or the biblical. Thus when Shelley entitles one of his most Platonizing poems “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” it is partly a polemical gesture, marking its difference and departure from the dominant Christian associations of the term in his day. It’s a perfectly correct use of the term “hymn” but there is an edge to it. Coleridge,

by contrast, is happy to tap into the tradition of the Christian hymn with its roots in the Davidic psalms, even if the setting that prompts it is natural or secular.

One of the principal sources for the discursive sublime for the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries was the Bible, to say nothing of religion more generally (Morris 1972).³ Within the Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures, so commonly and polemically called the Old Testament, tended to furnish examples of the sublime far more than the New Testament, with the possible exception of the Book of Revelation. The Book of Job especially but also the major prophets, Genesis, and the psalms were goldmines of poetic power and imagery. “Sublimity,” Coleridge pointedly remarked, promoting it above everything Classical, “is Hebrew by birth” (1917: 191). With the revival of critical interest in the category of the sublime, any number of intellectuals would offer passages from the Bible as examples and exemplars of the poetic sublime, Robert Lowth foremost among them, in his landmark *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, a text famous for its discovery of parallelism as an organizing poetic structure, but in fact far more given over to describing the power, passion, and explicitly the sublimity of biblical poetry.

Coleridge’s “Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouny” is considered by many to be a failed poem. Its reputation hardly ever got out of the blocks: De Quincey would charge its author with plagiarism and Wordsworth could, as Coleridge painfully recalled in a letter, deem this poem an instance of the “Mock Sublime” (Coleridge 1959: 974). Indeed, there is a certain hollowness to it. For starters, the opening twenty lines or so owe a good deal to a poem by an otherwise almost forgotten Dano-German poet, Friederika Brun. (Richard Holmes overstates the matter, and he’s not alone, when saying that Coleridge “incorporated . . . the actual text of a pious German lyric” (Coleridge 1996: 317). Actually, Coleridge adopts only some phrases and motifs from the poem and leaves aside numerous others.) Arguably more disconcerting than this, however, is the knowledge that the poem does not recount the experience it pretends to. As Coleridge wrote to Southey in September of 1802, after a visit to Scafell:

I involuntarily poured forth a Hymn in the manner of the *Psalms*, tho’ afterwards I thought the Ideas &c disproportionate to our humble mountains – & accidentally lighting on a short note in some swiss Poems, concerning the Vale of Chamouny, & it’s Mountain, I transferred myself thither, in the Spirit, & adapted my former feelings to these grander external objects. (1956: 864–5)

It’s not so clear why literary critics have trouble with this fiction, when they are so comfortable with the idea of improbabilities and impossibilities in any number of works, though in some genres more than others (comedy, romance). But when the “I” speaks in what appears to be his or her voice, describing what sounds like an actual experience, critics often bristle against violations of reference. One might have thought some would be relieved that Coleridge had not dwarfed the minor mountain of Scafell with his lofty and as it were, over-the-top, lines. Yet for many critics, the fictional transfer undermines the authenticity the poem might otherwise have had.

William Empson thought this hymn, first published in 1802, the first clear sign of a downturn in Coleridge's poetic achievement (1973: 88–91), though this perhaps has something to do with its content, with the poem's position of absolute submission to God, rivaling and sometimes exceeding in that respect the biblical psalms. Perhaps criticism of the past decades shares Empson's more or less healthy skepticism, finding the all-out submission to God cloying or worse.⁴ Still, our object here is to take the measure of the hymn as a performance in the mode of the sublime.

The poem engages its reader in various ways from the word "go." The opening question, one of dozens, is addressed to Mont Blanc but for a fleeting moment the "thou" of the poem could for a moment be the reader herself or himself, before it is specified otherwise:

Hast thou a charm to stay the Morning-Star
In his steep course? So long he seems to pause
On thy bald awful head, O sovran Blanc!
(2001: 720, ll. 1–3)

Hugh Blair had argued in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* that

the Poetical Figure, which, beyond all others, elevates the Style of Scripture, and gives it a peculiar boldness and sublimity, is Prosopopoeia or Personification. No Personifications employed by any Poets, are so magnificent and striking as those of the Inspired Writers. On great occasions, they animate every part of nature; especially, when any appearance or operation of the Almighty is concerned. (2005: 473–4)

The reader hears or overhears many questions addressed to the sovereign mountain or its subordinates, such as the "five wild torrents" of stanza 6. Numerous questions are asked in the mode of a catechism:

Who sank thy sunless pillars deep in Earth?
Who fill'd thy Countenance with rosy light?
Who made thee Parent of perpetual streams?
(ll. 36–8)

If the inaugural question of the poem could have gone either way, the subsequent questions are all rhetorical, all implying the same simple answer:

GOD! Let the Torrents, like a Shout of Nations
Answer! And let the Ice-plains echo, GOD!
GOD! Sing ye meadow-streams with gladsome voice!
Ye Pine-groves, with your soft and soul-like sounds!
And they too have a voice, yon piles of Snow,
And in their perilous fall shall thunder, GOD!
(ll. 58–63)

The resounding master term “God” begins and ends the stanza, framing everything. Internally, via anadiplosis (the figure naming the repetition of the closing word of one phrase as the beginning word of the next) the third line picks up right where the second line left off, with God as Omega and Alpha. The almost ubiquitous exclamation marks (there are thirty in a poem of eighty-five lines!) indicate the heightened, impassioned rhetoric, arguably in excess of itself, such that it can easily tip over into the “mock sublime.” Similarly, the insistent repetition (as in the fivefold anaphora of “Ye ...” at the start of all but one line in stanza 9) emphasizes the charged engagement of the speaker. What the hymn does *not* feature is a transfer of power from the source that triggered the sublime awe in the first place to the subject experiencing this. This typical Kantian trajectory, involving a turn inward to discover, after the initial felt breakdown of the imagination, the power of one’s own ability to reason beyond the realm of the sensible and thus to find a power superior to that by which one had been stymied, is not accomplished here. Neil Hertz has shown how often, from Longinus onward, the sublime entails such a transfer, however fictional, of such power (1985: esp 1–20). It makes sense though for the hymn, more than most genres, not to participate in this mode of the sublime to the extent that the hymn is one of praise to God. As such, it would be at least vaguely blasphemous to stage a transfer of power from God to any individual human. In a good many sublime scenarios, the subject is temporarily negated only to rise up again on the far side on the negation: elevated, ennobled, and empowered. There is a moment in the “Hymn” – in the second stanza – when it looks like something of this dynamic occurs. Indeed, the soul is “enrap’t, transfus’d, / Into the mighty Vision passing – there / As in her natural form, swell’d vast to Heaven” (ll. 22–4). But the hymnist remains subservient and submissive to the ultimate sovereign who stands behind and above the “sole Sovran of the Vale!”, the invisible force beyond the visible.

Whereas most critics and theorists who turned to the biblical sublime found it primarily in Job, Genesis, and the prophets, Hegel found the premiere examples, the sublime in its most proper, that is also to say “negative,” form in the Psalms. What sense did it make for Hegel to privilege above all else the sublime of the Psalms? In those forms of ancient biblical poetry Hegel saw the utter nullification of the subject in discursive terms. Hegel invokes as exemplary Psalm 90 with its familiar recognition of human finitude and transience “all flesh is grass” (1974: 376). Yet for one reason or another, Hegel interprets what might be construed only as finitude to be in fact the index of nothingness, *Nichtigkeit*. The Psalms so debase their own speaking subjects in the face (well, not actually the face) of the absent God, that it amounts to a recognition of nothingness, affording, at its limit, the most extreme contrast possible. The psalmist says, in effect, not just “I am not worthy” but even, more radically: “I am not.” Something of this extreme difference between the divine and the human is registered in Coleridge’s poem, even if, early in the hymn, the speaker’s dilated soul swells to Heaven. He does soon come down to earth, the earth recognized as God’s creation. The poem ends on the resonant monosyllable “God” and it looks, not only in retrospect, as if the whole poem had been leading up to just this conclusion, with the invocation of the sovereign deity that vaults above all its subjects, including the sovereign Mont Blanc.

III

If Shelley's "Mont Blanc" is not so simple to categorize in codified generic terms, that may have something to do with the experience at the poem's origin. Shelley describes his response to Mont Blanc as "an undisciplined overflowing of the soul" that "rests its claim for approbation on an attempt to imitate the untameable wildness and inaccessible solemnity" prompted by the feelings roused by the experience. Shelley stresses the immediacy of his response and yet the finished poem is mediated by, among other things, a response to Coleridge's "Hymn before Sun-rise . . ." (Shelley 1889: 197). The echoes are many and remarkable: the ceaseless raving, the motif of piercing the sky, the explicit thematization of passivity, the notion of sovereignty, and more. Some overlap might have been expected but the dialogue (well, monologue, since Coleridge's poem cannot answer back) makes the differences in the poems all the more pronounced, not just in terms of the gulf between their religious beliefs and nonbeliefs, but also in their generic textures.

The poem is classed by Stuart Curran, not only a Shelley expert but one of the foremost analysts of genre in the Romantic period, as a hymn (1986: 61), a judgment to which Paul Fry, a prominent student of the ode, also came (1980: 191). The poem does not call itself either hymn or ode. Its subtitle reads: "Lines Written in the Vale of Chamounix." A poem need not, of course, explicitly designate the genre into which it falls. Yet referring to the poems as "Lines Written . . ." not only stresses the occasion and site of its writing but that it consists of an indeterminate number of lines, not dictated by subgeneric determinants such as the number required for a sonnet. It is as if the length and shape of the poem is to correspond to the experience, feelings, and thoughts it prompted rather than to some generic model, as if it were a "legion of wild thoughts" that the poem itself invokes.

The poem certainly bears some hallmarks of the hymn form: apostrophic verses addressed to its object of awe, Mont Blanc, as well as what might be construed as praise or even veneration of its object. Yet in recognizing the power of Mont Blanc, as an instance or emblem of an even higher and vaster "Power," it demonstrates nothing of the submission to the higher power that Coleridge's hymn does or most hymns do. If numerous apostrophes push it in the direction of the ode, its structure is less "dialectical" than the high canonical odes, either in the Pindaric model or in Shelley's own practice in the poems explicitly called odes by him. The poem's unruliness, however, marks its affinity with the "irregular" ode, whose very irregularity is often linked with the high passion characteristic of the genre.

"Mont Blanc" has many unruly aspects: the five sections of the poem are of very different lengths and one might be forgiven if, after a reading or two, one had the impression that it was an unrhymed poem. Yet William Keach (1984: 195) has shown persuasively how the complicated, irregular rhyme scheme does provide a measure of order for what risks exceeding efforts to contain it. Three lines have no rhyme at all and often the rhyming word is delayed some five or so lines, such that one is never quite sure about what is to come next.

The opening section of the poem consists of a single sentence of twelve lines. What is much more, the second section runs a full thirty-seven lines before reaching its period. There are, to be sure, several semicolons and dashes but even so the immense period is literally breathtaking: it could not possibly be spoken in one go. The cascading lines take their distance from the hymn proper which tends to have at least a vestigial relation to something to be sung or chanted. The combination of few full stops and frequent enjambment confers on the “Lines” a swiftness and a mathematically sublime texture. The enjambment also contributes, as Keach (1984: 195) makes clear, to mute the rhymes, making the poem seem even less ordered than it technically is.

A further way the poem inculcates the sublime is by pronounced enumeration and accumulation (both are technical terms of classical rhetoric). We know that the setting is of “accumulated steeps” (Shelley 2002; l. 66) but this theme is frequently underscored by the piling up of one item after another:

The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,
 Ocean, and all the living things that dwell
 Within the daedal earth; lightning, and rain,
 Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane,
 The torpor of the year when feeble dreams
 Visit the hidden buds, or dreamless sleep
 Holds every future leaf and flower; – the bound
 With which from that detested trance they leap;
 The works and ways of man, their death and birth,
 And that of him and all that his may be;
 All things that move and breathe with toil and sound
 Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell.

(ll. 84–95)

One might well ask: what is *not* contained in this passage? After the phrase “*all* the living things ...” we might think the encompassing sequence is at an end. But the “lines” continue, listing more things, piling item and item, several of them sublime in themselves. The theme of totality is sound again in “All things that move and breathe ...”, a totality that can be posited but scarcely perceived or represented, only gestured at by the abstraction of “all.”

The final section, restating Mont Blanc’s presence and appealing to the “secret strength of things which governs thought” (ll. 139–40), is more serene and straightforward than the bulk of the poem, yet it ends, like many of Shelley’s poems (and some of Keats’s) but *not* like Coleridge’s hymn, with a question, a not quite rhetorical question that prompts thought to continue after and beyond the bounds of the poem:

And what wert thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
 If to the human mind’s imaginings
 Silence and solitude were vacancy?

(ll. 142–4)

IV

In the Romantic era the prestige of epic was riding high. In England with the *Aeneid*, via Dryden or the original, with the *Iliad*, via Pope or Cowper or the original, and especially with *Paradise Lost* ringing in the ears of the Romantics, there was an abiding admiration for epic: the most sublime, many thought, of the sublime modes. And there was still a burning desire to *write* epic. Virtually every major poet tried his hand at the genre and one after another failed, more or less spectacularly. Coleridge spent a good deal of his time not writing an epic on the Fall of Jerusalem, Keats's two Hyperion poems foundered, and when Blake first planned to write a traditional epic of twelve books only to realize he would come up very short, he erased the "1" from the number 12 on the plate he had engraved, leaving the number 2, an apt emblem of the disjunction between the Romantics' epic designs and their realization. But the will to epic could not have been more serious.

The Romantic period in Britain did feature a flurry of epics, long and brief, but they tend not to be epics that anyone reads any more, not even scholars. We have not only forgotten authors such as the 1790s Poet Laureate Henry Pye but also his main epic, *Arthur*. Herbert Tucker has provided a magisterial account of the epic tradition in the long nineteenth century, conveying the range and intensity of such projects, from the great to negligible (2008). As far as major Romantic poems go, by the time Byron writes *Don Juan* we are already in the domain of the post-epic, it being a quasi-epic in the mode of satire, which complains of the steady stream of epics from the pen of Southey. A death-knell had been sounded.⁵

Yet the preeminent poem of British Romanticism, Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, engages and reinvents in serious fashion the epic line from Homer to especially Milton. From the opening lines of the 1805 *Prelude* we are in the presence of a transformed epic, with its naturalized invocation of the muse, in the form of the "correspondent breeze" displacing a more traditional divine inspiration. Moreover, in the *Ur*-opening of *The Prelude* ("Was it for this / That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved / To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song" (1979: 1805 *Prelude* i. 271–3)), we see a natural version of a muse-like voice at the origin of the poet's growth and the poem's, with the inaugural phrase – "Was it for this?" – being Virgilian, to boot. Any number of episodes, Homeric similes, a huge array of allusions, and the general mode of Miltonic blank verse, with its lofty diction, all conspire to infuse *The Prelude* with an epic tonality. But is it epic?

Hegel argued that the hallmarks of epic had to do with the genre's commitments to present one or more versions of totality: the epic presents "the *whole* of a national outlook" (1974: 1055, emphasis added); Homer depicts "the *whole* sphere of the earth and human life" (1974: 1055) even in the single, singular image of the shield of Achilles, a veritable emblem of totality. When epic presents a particular society, it nonetheless renders a "*entire* nation" (1974: 1049) in such a way that makes visible the "universally human," and its

chief characters, themselves “*whole* men,” epitomize the nation, typically in the one sort of action – namely, war – that best summons the nation as a totality.

Does *The Prelude* live up to Hegel’s strictures for the genre? Wordsworth argues that his theme, despite all the poem’s variegated content, is “*single* and of determined bounds” (1979: 1805 *Prelude*, i. 669, emphasis added) and thus possibly totalizable. But what Wordsworth considered “a thing unprecedented,” namely, that someone should “talk so much about himself,” (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1967: 586) hardly seems the sort of totality Hegel envisioned. Yet the model of the self on offer in the poem turns out, against some if not all odds, to be one of infinite subjectivity and of a possibly epic sort. In this respect the crucial programmatic passage comes in Book 3, where the nonvisionary dreariness of residence at Cambridge prompts a good deal of retrospection on Wordsworth’s life and the poem that was increasingly the poem of his life, the high points of which are located in intense, imaginative acts. Wordsworth comments:

Of genius, power,
Creation, and divinity itself
I have been speaking, for my theme has been
What passed within me. Not of outward things
Done visibly for other minds – words, signs,
Symbols or actions – but of my own heart
Have I been speaking, and my youthful mind.
O heavens, how awful is the might of souls,
And what they do within themselves while yet
The yoke of earth is new to them, the world
Nothing but a wild field where they were sown.
This is, in truth, heroic argument . . .

(1805 *Prelude* iii. 171–82)

Wordsworth invokes the highly charged terms from *Paradise Lost*, “heroic argument,” to characterize his poem and project. We know he only settled on this theme after discarding any number of more traditionally epic possibilities. But there was no telling, given the whole of literary history up to his time, that a poet’s own life would turn out to be apt subject matter for an epic project. The decision can seem like the worst extreme of the “wordsworthian or egotistical sublime,” in Keats’s memorable phrase (Keats 2002: 194). And perhaps all the more so, if we recall Milton’s invocation of the terms “heroic argument.” In Book 9 of *Paradise Lost* when the subject is man’s revolt and disobedience, the narrator comments:

sad task, yet argument
Not less but more heroic than the wrath
Of stern Achilles on his foe pursued
Thrice fugitive about Troy wall; or rage
Of Turnus for Lavinia disespoused . . .

(ix. 13–17)

Milton's epic theme, with which Wordsworth sets his own on a par, not only equals, it exceeds the claim to heroic argument of *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, the most highly prized examples of the genre. So it is hard to overestimate the extravagance, in turn, of Wordsworth's claim to go beyond Milton.⁶ There had been *some* significant precedents for the voice of the subject, of the poetic "I," emerging in epic verse: Dante inscribes his own life in *The Divine Comedy* and not just to invoke the muse. Milton, at the highly charged openings of several books of *Paradise Lost*, speaks in his own voice and of himself. Still, the sustained inscription of the subject in Wordsworth is a marked departure from the more purely objective posture of traditional epic. Herbert Tucker notes that: "it is a commonplace that Romantic epics take the poetic self as their focus" (2008: 113). But the scandal of *The Prelude* is the way it so thoroughly takes the poet's own life as its epic subject matter, that the poem is epic and autobiography at the same time. If genres in general should not be mixed, there surely must be some special prohibition against mixing just these two. Further complicating this scheme is the uneasy coexistence of moments of lyric intensity, disruptive and interruptive, often sublime, with the encompassing narrative into which they are inscribed.

Pursuing the thematic focus on the Alps from Coleridge's hymn and Shelley's "Mont Blanc," the crossing of the Alps passage in *The Prelude* can help highlight the possibilities and the pitfalls of the genre. The famous episode was more rife than most with epic possibilities: crossing the Alps, after all, can conjure the example of Hannibal or Charlemagne or (after 1800) Napoleon. Yet it was, initially, anticlimactic, with Wordsworth crossing the Alps without even knowing. Then, prompted by nothing more than the discrepancy between his expectations about crossing the Alps and its pedestrian actuality, Wordsworth turns abruptly, interrupting the narrative, to address his own Imagination:

Imagination! – lifting up itself
 Before the eye and progress of my song
 Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,
 In all the might of its endowments, came
 Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
 Halted without a struggle to break through,
 And now, recovering, to my soul I say
 "I recognise thy glory". In such strength
 Of usurpation, in such visitings
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense
 Goes out in flashes that have shown to us
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
 There harbours whether we be young or old.
 Our destiny, our nature, and our home,
 Is with infinitude – and only there;
 With hope it is, hope that can never die,
 Effort, and expectation, and desire,
 And something evermore about to be.

The mind beneath such banners militant
Thinks not of spoils or trophies, nor of aught
That may attest its prowess, blest in thoughts
That are their own perfection and reward –
Strong in itself, and in the access of joy
Which hides it like the overflowing Nile.

(1805 *Prelude* vi. 525–48)

The experience of the self is couched in heroic terms and Miltonic inversion (“banners militant”), and if the textbook locus of the sublime, the Alps, had just failed to produce the desired effect, Wordsworth summons up another excessive natural wonder via a figure of speech: “the overflowing Nile.” This last phrase is one of many that, while technically constituting the end of the line, calls up something uncontainable, as in “our home, / Is with infinitude – and only there” or “something evermore about to be.” We move swiftly from the literal abysses of the Alps to what in the 1850 version of this same passage is called the “mind’s abyss” (1850 *Prelude* vi. 594).

The account of the Alps as Wordsworth begins his descent, with its paradoxical “stationary blasts of waterfalls,” and of the copresence of “tumult and peace, darkness and light” issues in a recognition of it as

all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great apocalypse,
The types and symbols of eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

(1805 *Prelude* vi. 568–72)

Once again ending on the motif of that which is “without end,” the passage displays part of Wordsworth’s epic strategy to transcend its possibly mere subjectivity by inscribing the particular into the universal (“one mind”), the posited universality of a subject, even in advance of the universal love of mankind said to grow out of the love of nature. The most all-encompassing text, the Bible culminating in its final Book of Revelation, comes to replace the imaginary (pre)text of the sublime Alps that had only served as the occasion for disappointment, and to ground the subject in an “object.” The poet and the poem summon, almost as if involuntarily, resolution and even a kind of closure on the far side of the defeat. But can this sort of epic sublimity be sustained?

In Wordsworth, we witness a preponderance of the subject and a different sort of totality from what Hegel took to be characteristic of the genre: a protracted presentation of all, or what counted as all, salient aspects of a given society, where the stakes of a whole nation or a whole people were on the line. Hegel’s older epic posited an objective totality; Wordsworth performs a nonobjective totality, as it were. Such a posture follows one strand of epic (whose structure Friedrich Schlegel characterized as “subjective-objective” (1957: 204)) yet tilting so much toward what we could call,

after Adorno, “the preponderance of the subject,” that it may no longer easily be called epic. It is, in Stuart Curran’s phrase, a “composite order” (1986: 180ff.) in which epic exists not so easily with any number of different generic impulses. Wordsworth achieved an epic sublimity beyond that of Blake and even Keats but objective historical forces got in the way of his sustaining it. The Romantics had essentially to choose between the objective, narrative epic mode of a Southey and a more literally self-centered approach. It is no accident that those who chose the latter included the greatest poets of their time who excelled at lyric and foundered at or in epic, the tradition of Homer, Virgil, and Milton to which they nonetheless aspired.

The Romantic epic, such as it is, in the spectacular hybrid of *The Prelude* and many lesser poems, is a far cry from the sublime sonnets with which we began. In juxtaposing these very different forms I hope to have shown, if only in schematic fashion, how what is putatively one and same aesthetic mode can nonetheless be inflected in significantly different ways when divergent instantiations are weighed in the light of their different genres or swerves from established genres.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 4 “To Scorn or To ‘Scorn not the Sonnet’”; chapter 7 “‘Stirring shades’: The Romantic Ode and Its Afterlives”; chapter 19 “Spontaneity, Immediacy, and Improvisation in Romantic Poetry”; chapter 24 “Romanticism, Gnosticism, and Neoplatonism”; chapter 25 “Milton and the Romantics”; chapter 28 “‘Strange utterance’: The (Un)Natural Language of the Sublime in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*”

NOTES

- 1 The matter of classifying poems under their kinds was a lifelong concern for Wordsworth, from the invention of the odd title and concept of *Lyrical Ballads* on. Rather few of Wordsworth’s categorizations correspond to the most time-honored ones that preceded him. A partial list of such designation reads: Poems Founded on the Affections, Poems on the Naming of Places, Poems of the Imagination, Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty, Evening Voluntaries, Inscriptions, Epitaphs and Elegiac Pieces, or this striking rubric from the 1807 poems: Moods of My Own Mind.
- 2 The ode is arguably the most discussed form of lyric under the rubric of the sublime and just for that reason I dwell on other genres here, with the exception of “Mont Blanc” which has
- 3 The hymn in a non-Christian mode is also well represented in the many translations by William Jones of ancient Indian examples (1993).
- 4 To my mind, the best reading of the poem remains that by Reeve Parker (1975). Parker takes the poem seriously and is concerned to elucidate its texture as meditative verse.
- 5 The epic hardly fared much better elsewhere in Europe. Even Goethe essentially shied away from the task, despite his facility in a dazzling number of genres and despite the epic gestures legible in *Hermann und Dorothea* or even *Faust II*. Some

powerful set of forces combined, almost all of a sudden, to make epic eminently admirable and scarcely writable (in successful fashion, that is).

6 For a good, synoptic study of Milton's massive influence on English Romantic writers, see Newlyn 1993.

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Sexual Politics and the Performance of Gender in Romantic Poetry

James Najarian

Fifty years ago an essay on Romanticism and gender would not have existed: the sexual and feminist developments in the larger culture began to affect Romantic literary study in the late 1970s. Romanticism (and it was referred to in the singular) was represented by a conglomeration of male writers, largely poets. Romanticism during this era can too easily be summarized as a canon of the “big six” (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats). As a representative anthology, *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* (1973) was innovative for its time – it displaced an emphasis on Keats for one on Blake and Shelley, and it represented poets beyond the Big Six, including William Lisle Bowles, John Clare, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, George Darley, and Hartley Coleridge. Yet none of these poets were women. The only Romantic-period female author included was Dorothy Wordsworth (*The Grasmere Journals*), the only Victorian ones Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. Barrett Browning was burdened with such a dismissive headnote it would have been better for her not to have appeared at all. I use the example of the *Oxford Anthology* not to congratulate ourselves on our progressiveness, but to give a picture of what a sophisticated version of Romanticism was three or four decades ago: it was wide, but it was not wide in the way we imagine the period now.

Initially, gender entered the study of Romantic literature in attempts to open up the canon to poets whose work hardly ever entered study in the twentieth century. Anthologists tried to recover lost or squelched female voices of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In response, scholars began not only to read women authors, but studied the role of gender in the works of both men and women authors. Michael Cooke noticed the importance of gender in the works of the high Romantics, and Margaret Homans traced the development of poetic identity in women writers of the nineteenth century (Cooke 1979; Homans 1980). One development of this kind of study in Romanticism in particular, which had suppressed female authorship for so long, was

to argue that male- and female-authored works of the period consisted of two separate strands or attitudes. Marlon Ross understood Romanticism as a series of male-authored and sponsored conventions (1989: 1–55), while Anne Mellor posited that women authors had different ones: “The canonized male-authored text of what we have been taught to call English literary Romanticism shares certain attitudes and ideological investments which differ markedly from those displayed by the female-authored texts of the period” (1993: 15). This approach can still be valuable; as Stephen Behrendt has recently shown, women writers of the period did respond to each other in significant and separate ways (2009: 1–36). But even in the same volume that Mellor established masculine and feminine Romanticism, she recognized the stances of male and female writers could not always be equally divided. Emily Brontë and John Keats took stances so liminal that she called them “ideological cross-dressers” (Mellor 1993: 171).

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were full of discussions of the proper roles of women and men. Reaction to the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars only made anxiety about a “feminine” and “masculine” citizenry more fraught: the mixing of gender roles gained special attention as civically and politically suspect. Susan Wolfson has recently expanded her explorations of gender in the era to what she calls a “mobile, less determinate syntax, tuned to such styles as the stylized ‘feminine’ poetess, the aberrant ‘masculine’ woman, the male poet deemed ‘feminine,’ the campy ‘effeminate,’ hapless or strategic cross-dressers of both sexes, and the variously sexed life of the soul itself” (2006: xviii). It is that “strategy” that I would like to explore in this essay. Often poets who were depicted as sexually liminal or sexually stereotypical are seen as the victims of an admittedly vicious early nineteenth-century critical machine, a machine largely in the hands of aesthetically and politically retrograde forces. Hemans’s verses were displayed in critical writing to endorse a series of limited feminine and domestic virtues, and Keats’s verses were labeled as effeminate and dangerous. The virulence of nineteenth-century criticism can be surprising. But at the same time the critics were in some ways right; Hemans *did* write domestic verse, and Keats *did* explore borderline states of sexuality in his work. Some authors took part in their own depictions in productive ways. Leigh Hunt in his famous yellow trousers could be entirely complicit in his depiction as a suburban dandy, though not as a pimp. These authors participate in their own performances of gender, liminal or not, and get from these what a psychologist might call a “secondary gain”: a stance by which to formulate a truly alternative poetics, whose real transgressiveness is not always apprehended.

Felicia Hemans and the Uses of Domesticity

Felicia Hemans has been regarded as the central Romantic-era poet of feminine domesticity for a long time. Arguably one of the most read poets of the Romantic period (St Clair 2004: 608), her reputation went into decline in the mid-nineteenth century. Her poetry for many readers represented the epitome of a certain kind of gendered poetics. Her lyrics are largely about the difficulties of women, households, and children.

Some, like “Casabianca” and “The Homes of England,” became standard pieces for children to elocute in homes and schools. Her themes and audiences were regarded as perfect in their way but also circumscribed. Francis Jeffrey’s limited praise of her work epitomizes this attitude.

We think the poetry of Mrs. Hemans a fine exemplification of Female Poetry – and we think it has much of the perfection which we have ventured to ascribe to the happier productions of female genius.

It may not be the best imaginable poetry, and may not indicate the very highest or most commanding genius; but it embraces a great deal of that which gives the very best poetry its chief power of pleasing; and would strike us, perhaps, as more impassioned and exalted, if it were not regulated and harmonized by the most beautiful taste. It is infinitely sweet, elegant, and tender – touching, perhaps, and contemplative, rather than vehement and overpowering; and not only finished throughout with an exquisite delicacy, and even serenity of execution, but informed with a purity and loftiness of feeling, and a certain sober and humble tone of indulgence and piety, which must satisfy all judgments ... (Hemans 2002: 460–1)

Jeffrey’s powerful classification of Hemans should not, of course, be the last word. But to deny her domesticity, rather than inspect its uses, also leads us astray. We can complicate the narrative of Hemans as the domestic poet by tracing the relationship of that domesticity to her career. Hemans wrote long dramatic and narrative pieces up to 1823; only after that does she become the lyric poet that she was known for in the rest of the century. As Stephen C. Behrendt has shown, the relegation of her work as the exemplary feminine poet only comes to the fore at the latter part of her career: we have inherited this reading of her poetry (Behrendt 2001). Jeffrey’s essay intervenes not only to label her work, but to police it. He recommends she limit herself to the lyric: “She must beware of becoming too voluminous; and must not venture again on any thing so long as the ‘Forest Sanctuary’” (Hemans 2002: 464). Susan Wolfson has mentioned that Hemans regretted the christening of herself and her work as typically feminine (Wolfson 2006: 71). But Hemans is not quite powerless here: she also helps create herself as the skilled poetess limited to a certain number of domestic subjects.

The market for poetry especially takes a dive after the steep fall in paper prices (after 1820). Thus perhaps Hemans’s station as the poetess, and of the domestic poets at that, works not only as classification by others, but as a strategy. This idea is most important for poetry, because the market for poetry does take such a hit; the long fantastic or epic poem of Campbell, Scott, Southey, and Byron ceases to exist in the 1820s. Its place is taken by the novel, which is suddenly available to a larger segment of the population in a much cheaper (and more disposable) format, after paper prices fall and paper is made by machine (Erikson 1996: 6–13). Felicia Hemans, the poet of the domestic affections – is an invention: the domestic poet is actually a creation of late in her career. After she stops writing long historical poems like *The Siege of Valencia*, she re-creates herself in the 1820s as a poet of home and hearth, as a poet of limitation. We can think

of Hemans as taking a niche that is at once commercial and literary. Hemans forwards a mask of domesticity that manifests itself as a stance of limitation. But at the same time, I will argue, it covertly criticizes or overtakes a “major” tradition in turn, chiefly the poetry of William Wordsworth.

It is hard to separate Hemans from her later reputation. Recently Hemans has been taken seriously – and as seriously canny, or in Tricia Lootens’s happy assessment: “Hemans’s verse is never simply Victorian; and where it is most Victorian, it is perhaps least simple” (1994: 239). Her poems seem at first glance entirely complicit with nineteenth-century feminine expectations and simultaneously witheringly doubtful about them. In Hemans’s poetry, women are destined for unhappiness, to be let down by the men upon whom they are forced to depend, to have their households blighted and separated by war and trade. The most complex poems, as Lootens notes, are her ambivalent patriotic works – which were later the most anthologized – including “Casabianca,” “The Homes of England,” “England’s Dead,” and “The Graves of a Household.” Interestingly, these were the poems that were left extant after what Wolfson calls the “shearing off” of a great deal of her work (2006: 47). Lootens’s brilliant examination of the poet’s “domestication of National Identity” shows how central the unstable combination of celebration and lament is to Hemans’s work. She names the “powerful, unstable fusion of domestic and military values” in “Casabianca,” and notes what has since become a chestnut in the study of Romanticism: how the world becomes an enormous graveyard for imperial and commercial efforts in “England’s Dead.” For Lootens, graves symbolize both the “general fact of loss and the specific battles of national heroes: these sites could render the rational and universal impulse of patriotism local and spiritual” (1994: 247). The national and the domestic come together in Hemans’s marking out of the private grave.

“The Graves of a Household” laments the destruction of the family – a family that seems to have been blown apart by the nation’s imperial reach. All of the family members are separated and eventually are buried in separate, distant locations:

THEY grew in beauty, side by side,
 They fill’d one home with glee; –
 Their graves are sever’d, far and wide,
 By mount, and stream, and sea.

The same fond mother bent at night
 O’er each fair sleeping brow;
 She had each folded flower in sight, –
 Where are those dreamers now?
 (ll. 1–8)

As ever, political and military developments are registered in the household. As Anne Mellor points out, the home in which Hemans invests so much in her poems is almost always absent or destroyed (1993: 127). Home is, for her, a contemporary impossibility. The graves are cut off from each other by distance; it has been quite some time since the household was ever together. Home is defined as a gathering around a mother.

The father has no role here, and the idea of home seems to end with earliest childhood. In the next few stanzas the poet is at once exact and vague about where these graves might be: one is in “the forests of the west,” presumably Canada; one is somewhere in the ocean (which ocean is unspecified); one in a “battlefield in Spain” in the Peninsular wars, with the British and Spanish armies resisting Napoleon; and one, the sole female, somewhere in Italy. One child probably died in Britain’s commercial empire, one at war, one at sea (it is not clear whether he was in merchant or military service), and one of an illness on the Continent. British imperial and commercial interests have separated the family, and in Hemans’s version to separate the family is to destroy it. The family is an actual physical unit that demands its members’ presence to exist; it is not merely an extended emotional bond. Once the household is broken up the family ceases to be. The family cannot be imaginatively reconstituted, and the poem is even one of doubt: “alas for love, if thou wert all” – if there is no afterlife, there can be no reuniting this family – and the family was separated even before death.

And parted thus they rest, who play’d
 Beneath the same green tree;
 Whose voices mingled as they pray’d
 Around one parent knee!

They that with smiles lit up the hall,
 And cheer’d with song the hearth,
 Alas! for love, if *thou* wert all,
 And nought beyond, oh, earth!

(ll. 25–32)

This inability to reconstruct the family takes on one particular poem, and surprisingly, that poem is Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven.” Wordsworth and Hemans became friends late in her life: she visited him and his wife Mary, and her letters about him are grateful, if slightly bewildered by his own sense of himself as an authority (Wolfson 2006: 50–3). His comments on Hemans are less polite than hers of him: he had a low opinion of her household talents and was bothered by her literary and intellectual conversation. Hemans’s domestic subject and manner enables her to criticize the elder and more respected male poet in covert terms. In “We Are Seven,” a rather obtuse speaker questions a girl of eight about the size of her family – she keeps repeating that her family consists of seven people, although two of her siblings are dead and the others are absent but (presumably) alive:

“Two of us in the church-yard lie,
 My sister and my brother,
 And in the church-yard cottage, I
 Dwell near them with my mother.”

“You say that two at Conway dwell,
 And two are gone to sea,
 Yet you are seven; I pray you tell

Sweet Maid, how this may be?"

Then did the little Maid reply,
 "Seven boys and girls are we;
 Two of us in the church-yard lie,
 Beneath the church-yard tree."

"You run about, my little maid,
 Your limbs they are alive;
 If two are in the church-yard laid,
 Then ye are only five."

(ll. 21–36)

Wordsworth's narrator notes that the girl regards her dead siblings – buried in the nearby graveyard – as living members of the household. In a conventional reading, the girl's imaginative construction of her family is more "true" than the questioner's rude insistence: "But they are dead; those two are dead!" (l. 65). Her untaught mind regards the family as eternal – as extant no matter what the circumstances. But there is another imaginative jump the girl is making unrecognized by her or the narrator. Two members of the family have traveled to Conway; and two have "gone to sea." It is not clear whether their absence has commercial or military causes. To presume that the two who have "gone to sea" are still alive, or will ever come back, is also quite optimistic.

What Hemans adds to the Wordsworth poem is a skepticism about the powers of the imagination: and it is a way of casting doubt on the poem's whole situation. This is, after all, a "cottage girl," – a member of the rural peasantry, who regards the speaker as a superior. Hemans seems to say that the situation that Wordsworth presents no longer exists or perhaps never existed. The little girl of eight, or someone like her, will have the family torn apart by the larger military and mercantile forces of England. The home cannot be reconstructed by imaginative means. The girl's situation, and not just the girl's wonderful imagination, is a manipulation on the part of Wordsworth the poet.

Even the innocent child of the poem has conditions for her imaginative reconstruction of the family. It is a condition that can only be fulfilled in the most rural, and falsely primitivized places:

"Their graves are green, they may be seen,"
 The little Maid replied,
 "Twelve steps or more from my mother's door,
 And they are side by side."

(ll. 37–40)

The family is alive to her because the graves "may be seen." She lives near them and works and eats at the graves every day. By contrast, the graves in Hemans's poem cannot be seen – they are invisible, and they cannot be located. One is somewhere in the ocean, the other somewhere in the battlefields of Spain. The grave in Canada is only known by "the Indian" (one particular Indian?). The only grave that can presumably

be found is the one in Italy. The work that the girl does in Wordsworth's poem is no longer possible in Hemans's scenario.

Lootens notes that the successors to Hemans are haunted by "England's Dead" – she mentions Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" and Thomas Hardy's "Drummer Hodge" (Lootens 1994: 249). I might also add Matthew Arnold's "A Summer Night," and any number of Kipling's poems or poems of the First World War. These poems have to deal with the imperial grave and must negotiate their way around Hemans's disappearance of it and Wordsworth's denial of it. The pose of disinterested and sentimental domesticity is what enables the poem to form an influential critique, one which certainly could not be done outright.

Contesting Masculinity in Leigh Hunt

Leigh Hunt was the center of a group of poets and journalists with radical politics who gathered together and published in liberal journals, such as Hunt's own *Examiner* and *Indicator*. Imprisoned for two years for libeling the Prince Regent, he became a radical hero; the conservative press accused him of all sorts of personal and political sins. In the literary politics of the time, the "Cockney School" represented a challenge to conservatives' control over what constituted taste and decorum, a decorum that was all but unreachable by people without expensive lands, collections, and upbringings. Hunt and his friends were admittedly middle-class, without the classical and university educations of previous poets (including Wordsworth). They were lambasted for their effrontery in accessing a classical tradition in translation, for their tastes, and for their general arrogance in not staying poetically silent. Hunt annoyed those interested in limiting aesthetic reception to an elite few. Disapprobation of Hunt continued well into the twentieth century, as critics dismissed Keats's disturbing sensuality as merely Huntian. Even Keats's contemporaries attributed Keats's sensuousness to Hunt, often for personal reasons.

Hunt's verse is frankly decorative, charmed by surfaces, ornament, interiors, and cozy suburban rather than empty rural landscapes. Rodney Edgecombe, who has written the most extensive work on Hunt's literary production, terms his poetics "rococo" (1994: 78–9). Elizabeth Jones has traced just how directly Hunt's scene-painting mirrors contemporary suburban taste. Hunt's poems praise interiors and exteriors eminently reachable by the middle class: they offer the middle class entry to a form of leisure and artistic appreciation – in miniature and in reproduction – that was entirely owned by the upper classes (Jones 2003: 84–90). For Ayumi Mizukoshi, the Cockney School was deeply involved in creating a middle-class aesthetics, one that aimed to seize poetry and its cultural heritage from the aristocracy. Led by Hunt, it did not oppose aesthetics to politics but tried to construct a middle-class aesthetic realm. Hunt offered poetry as a diversion, liberating verse from elite tastes and linking it to the discourse of the popular (Mizukoshi 2001: 17).

The poetry and its materialism, controversial but popular in his lifetime, are being reread today in light of our current interest in Romantic politics. For contemporary

readers, Hunt's charm has a political intention. Jeffrey Cox remarks: "Hunt's poems are designed to do more than evoke imaginative locales; they seek to provoke us into new practice, to argue that we should adopt what we might see as a counter-cultural lifestyle devoted to free nature, a liberated community and imaginative freedom" (2003: 63). Central to Hunt's oeuvre and his reputation is his *Story of Rimini*, an ambitious narrative poem in four books. Hunt dedicated the poem to Byron, who praised it while Hunt was at work on it. Hunt takes the original story from Dante: Francesca da Rimini is married by proxy to Duke Giovanni, but falls in love with the man standing in for him at the marriage – Giovanni's brother Paolo. In Hunt's first published version – he will go on to revise and reprint the poem in many different forms in the nineteenth century – the two brothers end up battling over Francesca: the younger throws himself on the older brother's sword so that the death can be labeled accidental. Francesca dies of shock, but the gracious and now tamed Duke consents to her being buried next to Paolo.

For the eager foes of Hunt, *Rimini* provided a wonderful opportunity to take him, his politics, and his poetics on at the same time. Nicolas Roe marks that it was "finely calculated" to unsettle his detractors (1997: 122). Its subject, of an affair between a sister and brother-in-law, was seen as indecent. The influential "Z" (John Gibson Lockhart), who was famously to skewer Keats, labeled it a "wicked and pernicious tale of incest" (Lockhart 1818a: 198). The condemnation of the tale's love affair is combined in the most right-wing critics' estimations with disgust at Leigh Hunt's class origins, his decorative style, and his emphasis on enclosed, tamed landscapes – interiors and gardens – that detractors saw as suburban. The moral effect of the poem is imagined or hysterical: "No woman who has not either lost her chastity, or is desirous of losing it, ever read 'The Story of Rimini' without the flushings of shame and self-reproach" (Lockhart 1818a: 200).

Hunt is depicted not only as degenerate but somehow less than masculine. As "Z" writes, "One feels the same disgust at the idea of opening Rimini, that impresses itself on the mind of a man of fashion, when he is invited to enter, for the second time, the gilded drawing-room of a little mincing boarding-school mistress, who would fain have an At Home in her house. Everything is pretence, affectation, finery, and gaudiness ..." (Lockhart 1817: 38). The implication is not only that Hunt has bad taste, but that his bad taste is somehow feminine in its inauthenticity and its concentration on decor. His verse mixed high poetic diction with conversational English and invented phrases – "clipsome waist" – that intentionally blurred notions of decorum. Hunt's literary fecundity is linked to untamed female sexuality" or, as "Z" puts it: "the odious and unnatural harlotry of his polluted muse" (Lockhart 1818b: 453).

Rimini is a serious poem as well as a decorative one. There is a reason why it became central to any discussion of Hunt and the Cockney School, and it is not because of the "incestuous" plot or its diction. *The Story of Rimini* only occasionally includes these offending neologisms. What is most striking about the poem is not its phraseology, but its theme of contested masculinity. The poem dramatizes the conflict between two kinds of masculinity and explores two male modes – the recognizably martial,

unemotional, and ruling mode of the Duke, and a “new” sympathetic and artistic mode of Paolo. The poem accentuates the conflict between these modes and comes down heavily in favor of a newly defined masculinity. This kind of masculinity – masculinity shorn of its most stereotypically masculine characteristics – works best in Francesca’s leisured milieu. It is the kind of masculinity that, after all, wins the girl. So while Lockhart and others might have objected to Hunt’s lapses of style and his dangerously sexual plot, the theme of the poem is far more threatening to the normative definition of man and the state.

From the very start of the action, when Paolo is sent in Giovanni’s stead to seal the marriage, the reader is instructed to interpret the brothers’ different appearances and personalities as two varieties of manliness, one conventional and military, associated with traditional social codes and the outdoors, and another affixed as a new type of cultured masculinity:

The truth was this: – The bridegroom had not come,
But sent his brother, proxy in his room.
A lofty spirit the former was, and proud,
Little gallant, and had a sort of cloud
Hanging for ever on his cold address,
Which he mistook for proper manliness.

(ii. 18–23)

Manliness here is “mistook” by Giovanni as distant, unemotional, and in the end ineffective with the ladies. But his “mistaken” cold manliness represents what many of his readers might recognize as “manly.” Hunt has to argue for Paolo’s alternative manliness in the face of it when comparing the two outright:

That of the two, Giovanni was the graver,
Paulo the livelier, and the more in favour.

Some tastes there were indeed, that would prefer
Giovanni’s countenance as the martialler;
And ’twas a soldier’s truly, if an eye
Ardent and cool at once, drawn-back and high,
An eagle nose, and a determined lip,
Were the best marks of manly soldiership.
Paulo’s was fashioned in a different mould,
And finer still, I think;

(iii. 28–37)

Paolo’s manliness has to be described in negatives. First there is nothing “exclusive” or “professional” about it – it eschews traditionally recognizable manly countenances of the aristocrat or the soldier, and it is also “no courtier’s” “no scholar’s” and “no soldier’s” (iii. 31–3). Hunt spends so much time trying to define the qualities of Paolo’s “finer,” and “refined” and yet “unaffected” countenance because it is something new. Giovanni’s

boldness, punctuality, precision, and “ill-tempered pride” (l. 57) are much more familiar to his readers. Giovanni rules and works with his army: Paolo can perform martial prowess when needed (in staged tournaments) but is also able to enter the culture newly available to the middle class – a culture of stories, domestic scenes, and domestic music-making. Both brothers are at different times described as “bold,” but Paolo is “bold, / When boldness [is] required” (iii. 26–7), and Giovanni is “bold, handsome” seemingly all the time. Paolo has learned how to deploy his masculinity in different outdoor and indoor, martial and domestic situations. For Paolo, boldness is an attitude; for Giovanni, a permanent condition.

Their two types of masculinity literally confront each other in the last book of the original version of the poem. Giovanni’s martial straightforwardness is countered by Paolo’s masculinity-as-strategy: Paolo is able to temper, qualify, and manipulate his swordsmanship in a way that Giovanni cannot understand, let alone replicate. This flexibility enables him to do a more “masculine” deed than Giovanni, whose instinct alone is to fight: he sacrifices himself to and for his brother.

Yet as the fight grew warm, ’twas evident,
 One fought to wound, the other to prevent:
 Giovanni pressed, and pushed, and shifted aim,
 And played his weapon like a tongue of flame;
 Paulo retired, and warded, turned on heel,
 And led him, step by step, round like a wheel.
 Sometimes indeed he feigned an angrier start,
 But still relapsed, and played his former part.
 “What!” cried Giovanni, who grew still more fierce,
 “Fighting in sport? Playing your cart and tierce?”
 “Not so, my prince”, said Paulo; “have a care
 How you think so, or I shall wound you there”.
 He stamped, and watching as he spoke the word,
 Drove, with his breast, full on his brother’s sword.
 ’Twas done. He staggered and in falling prest
 Giovanni’s foot with his right hand and breast:
 Then on his elbow turned, and raising t’other,
 He smiled and said, “No fault of yours, my brother;
 An accident – a slip ...”

(iv. 277–95)

Paolo’s suicidal sacrifice, intentionally made so Giovanni can remain innocent of murder, is the only way to outwit and outlast Giovanni’s purported masculinity. It is unarguably a braver act than simply fighting his opponent to the death. It preserves Giovanni’s position, reputation, rule, and family relationship through martial self-sacrifice. Moreover, it converts Giovanni from the old to the new masculinity: “He seemed to feel the clouds of habit roll / Away from him at once” (iv. 304–5). And Giovanni’s immediate eulogy praises Paolo for his completeness – he includes both the old martial and new domestic masculine virtues. Paolo becomes “the completest knight,” with the virtues of swordsmanship, beauty, kindness, and sociability with both sexes:

“... thou wert the best,
That ever for his friend put spear in rest;
And thou wert the most meek and cordial,
That ever among ladies eat in hall;”
(iv. 315–18)

Giovanni’s mark of his conversion is to let off speaking and to cry aloud for “the first time since infancy” – to show emotions his earlier self would never have thought to reveal.

That Hunt recognized the importance of the battle over masculinity is apparent in his revisions to the poem. As Hunt’s most recent editor John Strachan notes, Hunt revised and re-revised the poem several times (Hunt 2003: 161–4). He does take out the small phrases to which many readers objected, but the first and the most radical revision not only changes the diction, but removes the conflict over masculinity. In 1844, the last book is replaced with a shorter, more conventional and Dantesque ending: Giovanni kills Paolo without Paolo’s masculine sacrifice: he does not praise or weep for his brother, is not reconciled to the relationship and does not insist the two be buried together. In addition, a new, superfluous character, the Fop, is introduced as a rival for Francesca – someone recognizably unmasculine, without Paolo’s prowess in the knightly arts. The long passages of comparison are also removed. In the 1855 version, the contestation over masculinity is restored, though the diction is still cleaned up, so that the poem, rather than being a polemic for an aestheticized masculinity, becomes yet more ambivalent. But in 1857 and 1860, Hunt returns to the 1844 text.

This reading of *Rimini* shows how Hunt may be worthy of the attacks that his conservative critics made at his expense; they were right that his poetry undermined conventional values, though they did not understand just how they did or how much they did. Even with the revisions, one could argue, Hunt displays contested masculinity. But he contests that masculinity with himself.

John Keats and the Sexuality of the Poet

The sexualized critical reception of John Keats in the nineteenth century has been traced a number of times. Many nineteenth-century readers took Keats’s “luxuriance” as an offense against taste that also offended sexual norms. John Keats’s verse and person were labeled “effeminate” by his first hostile reviewers and by writers throughout the century. An unsigned writer in *Blackwood’s* of 1821 wrote shortly after the poet’s death: “he out-Hunted Hunt in a species of emasculated pruriency, that ... looks as if it were the product of an imaginative Eunuch’s muse” (quoted in Matthews 1971: 35).

As Susan Wolfson has noted, the conspicuous regression of Keats’s luxury was seen as infantile (Wolfson 1990: 330). Keats’s profusion of imagery makes some call his works “profligate”: he imagines too freely and injudiciously. For George Felton

Mathew, at one time Keats's friend, Keats's "extravagance" implied sexual immaturity: "We might transcribe the whole volume were we to point out every instance of the luxuriance of his imagination, and the puerility of his sentiments" (quoted in Matthews 1971: 53). Wolfson explains that Keats embodies an aspect of the feminine within masculinity itself (1990: 341). Levinson traces the harsh disdain for Keats to his lower-middle-class origins, and Roe connects the charge of immature sexuality to conservative stances about Keats's politics (Levinson 1988: 1–29; Roe 1997: 202–29).

Though biographers from Richard Monckton Milnes on have tried to create a narrative of a young man who gradually attains poetic and/or political maturity, another tradition, exemplified by Marjorie Levinson, Jerome McGann, and Christopher Ricks, has accepted the sensuous, "immature" Keats. Keats sometimes wrote and acted like the young man who was, as he put it "under six foot and not a lord" (Keats 2009 (to George and Georgiana Keats, Feb.–May 1819): 311). Richard Marggraf Turley's Keats is gleefully immature; Keats's "strategic infantilism" is a political stance (Turley 2004: 7). And Keats could perform that immaturity, as his original preface to *Endymion* advertises: "the reader . . . must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt rather than a deed accomplished" (Keats 2009: 147). Keats's intentions here (and his publishers tried to dissuade him from appending a preface) are not so much at issue as its results: Keats's reviewers took their main lines of attack from Keats himself.

One aspect of Keats's "immature" stance is particularly sexually charged. Keats's constantly praised receptive sensuousness over activity: "O for a Life of Sensations instead of Thoughts!" (Keats 2009 (to Benjamin Bailey, Nov. 27, 1817): 102). This aspect is most apparent in the letters (not available to nineteenth-century readers until 1848, and then only in excerpts), and his most opulent, less "mature" poetry, "Sleep and Poetry" and *Endymion*. Keats asks "Poesy" in the former poem for an eternity of passive sensation:

yet, to my ardent prayer,
Yield from thy sanctuary some clear air,
Smoothed for intoxication by the breath
Of flowering bays, that I may die a death
Of luxury . . .

(ll. 55–9)

"Luxury" can include scent, here the "clear air," but also implies the senses of touch and sound especially. These senses, unlike sight or taste, cannot be stopped by personal choice inspired by asceticism or duty. One can simply close the eyes and mouth, but not the ears or skin. Moreover, Keats's poetics of languor – of the passive experience of the senses – implies a passive acceptance not just of sensuousness, but of sensuality and implicitly sexuality, a passiveness stereotypically attributed to the feminine.

Keats distinguished his own poetics from that of his elder contemporaries, whom he found "pushed" their philosophic views on the reader: "It may be said that we ought

to read our Contemporaries, that Wordsworth &c should have their due from us. But for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist [?]" (Keats 2009 (to Reynolds, Feb. 3, 1818): 121). This egotism is congruent with what Marlon Ross identifies as the "masculine" construct of Romanticism and its questing poet (1989: 34–40). Keats will later distinguish his own method from Wordsworth's – what he called the elder poet's "egotistical sublime" (Keats 2009 (to Richard Woodhouse, Oct. 27, 1818): 295).

In elaborating his states of poetic reception, Keats interestingly implicates the feminine. As he writes to John Hamilton Reynolds in 1818:

let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there patiently from a knowledge of what there is to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive – budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every [sic] noble insect that favours us with a visit ... (Keats 2009 (to Reynolds, Feb. 19, 1818): 127)

Keats here places himself in the passive role, and implicitly the passive sexual role, as flowers are, after all, the sexual organs of plants. The bee is the active participant in transferring the pollen from the one flower to another. Keats does not write about pollinating, but about being pollinated; he recommends this experience to Reynolds, at that time also a young poet. He recommends a similar receptivity while describing one of his extended moods in the famous long journal-letter written to his brother and sister-in-law in Kentucky:

This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless: I long after a stanza or two of Thompson's *Castle of Indolence*. My passions are all asleep from my having slumbered till nearly eleven, and weakened the animal fibre all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness – if I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lillies I should call it languor – but as I am I must call it Laziness – In this state of effeminacy the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown. (Keats 2009 (to George and Georgiana Keats, Feb.–May 1819): 321)

This passage praises a state of receptive torpor that Keats himself identifies as ambivalently gendered or "effeminate." It is physically weak, it sleeps late, and it is "supremely careless." It is happily deficient in those codes of masculinity and self-purpose that are identified with citizenship, maturation, and good business: entirely opposed to the early capitalistic formulations of someone like Benjamin Franklin, who not only rose at five o'clock in the morning, but made sure his neighbors saw him do it. Keats celebrates a passive state of being that he marks as intersexual.

In the same letter in which Keats separates himself from the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime, he goes on to define the "poetical character." That character cannot be pinned down to conventional categories of class, rank, and culture:

As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. (Keats 2009 (to Woodhouse, Oct. 27, 1818): 294–5)

The poetical character that Keats represents or aims to represent enjoys all states of being, can experience all sensations, and elides societal classifications of higher and lower, better and worse, finer and coarser. And it can conceive equally of male or female, evil or good, experienced or innocent. The poetical character lacks gender; it can “become” active or passive, male or female. In a sense, Keats’s most hostile readers are right: Keats uses effeminacy, and strategically places himself in the feminine role. Though nineteenth-century critics found this move offensive because it transgressed normative boundaries, contemporary feminist readers such as Margaret Homans have found it disturbing that Keats appropriates the feminine for his own purposes – that he takes over or replaces the feminine (Homans 1990: 344–5).

Keats’s sexual flexibility comes to the fore in his “Ode to Psyche.” At the start of the poem, Keats imagines himself in a dream landscape where he interrupts the embracing couple of Psyche and Eros. Their sexual coupling has not quite started, but the speaker enters as something of a voyeur, just as the lovers are about to touch their lips: “Their lips touch’d not, but had not bade adieu.” Keats goes on to praise Psyche the goddess – who was a “late” development in Greek mythology and so was not worshipped. He promises to be the “temple” and “oracle” she never had, but at the same time seems to take the role from Psyche even as he says he will assist her: “I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired / So let me be thy choir, and make a moan” (ll. 43–4). Though he seems to ask permission from Psyche (“so let me be”), that permission is couched in performative language, and he asks for permission only after he has announced that he himself is his own inspiration – “by my own eyes inspired.”

Even as he says he will build a “bower” for Psyche, Keats seems to be silencing her at the same time as he is taking over her role. I want to examine how extremely interesting – or disquieting – this move could be. For Keats in the last strophe of the poem takes over her role not only as inspirer, but also as companion of Eros.

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
 In some untrodden region of my mind,
 Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
 Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
 Far, far around shall those dark-cluster’d trees
 Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
 And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
 The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull’d to sleep;
 And in the midst of this wide quietness

A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
 With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
 Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
 That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
 To let the warm Love in!

(ll. 50–67)

In a provocative work on sexuality in the poem, Daniel Watkins argues that Keats brings Psyche under his control. She becomes “the symbolic projection of the masculine poet’s dreaming ego” (Watkins 1996: 118). Throwing Cupid out of the original temple “drains the sexual energy and excitement away from Cupid and onto the identity of the poet” (Watkins 1996: 121). So Keats’s poetic identity is in part confiscated from Psyche. Watkins is on to something. Keats not only takes the place of Psyche even as he says he is asking permission to do so; he makes Cupid superfluous. He seizes much of Psyche’s role of sexual companion for Cupid, after all, if he encapsulates Psyche in his mind, and leaves the casement open at night “to let the warm Love in,” that love, as Eros or Cupid, is entering him as well as Psyche – in fact entering him before it does her. The voyeurism of the first stanza – where Keats becomes inspired because he glimpses the furtive coupling of the two – becomes partly participatory. Psyche’s experience of sexual reception – even of penetration – “to let the warm Love in” – becomes Keats’s experience too.

My aim here is to elaborate just how sexually charged Keats’s poetic is. Though his critics take on his person, his class status, and the sensuousness of his verse, they miss some of the most shocking aspects that Keats himself forwards. Keats takes part in his own borderline reputation – even pushes it to borderlines no one identified before.

Conclusion

Susan Wolfson writes, “Romanticism is nothing if not a various, ever-shifting force field of gender attractions and performances” (2006: 28). The intricate relationships among self-presentation, critical disdain or approval, and transgressiveness, are part of this ever-shifting force. Hemans, Hunt, and Keats all entangled themselves in their poetic representations. In remarkable ways, poets of the Romantic period transformed or appropriated their own gendered criticism, forging ever more complex stances.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 13 “The Thrush in the Theater: Keats and Hazlitt at the Surrey Institution”; chapter 15 “Celtic Romantic Poetry: Scotland, Ireland, Wales”; chapter 17 “Leigh

Hunt's Cockney Canon: Sociability and Subversion from Homer to *Hyperion*"; chapter 20 "Celebrity, Gender, and the Death of the Poet: The Mystery of Letitia Elizabeth Landon"; chapter 26 "'The feel of not to feel it,' or the Pleasures of Enduring Form"

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Blake's *Jerusalem*: Friendship with Albion

Karen Swann

I

In epic fashion, chapter 1 of William Blake's *Jerusalem* opens with an invocatory gesture:

Of the sleep of Ulro! and of the passage through
Eternal Death! and of the awaking to Eternal Life
(4.1–2)¹

Yet the lines break off here, before the expected apostrophe (“sing, heavenly muse”). In the passage that follows, the promised grand narrative – of a movement through Eternal Death to Eternal Life – gives way before an attentiveness to the structure of the “call,” the relational structure out of which an epic might, provisionally, unfold. The trajectory briefly heralded as the poem's theme finds its echo in habitual, repeated action, the poet's nightly sleep and daily awakening to the Saviour's dictation:

This theme calls me in sleep night after night, & ev'ry morn
Awakes me at sun-rise, then I see the Saviour over me
Spreading his beams of love, & dictating the words of this mild song.
(4.3–5)

The epic – the poem that would call into being the collective body of a people – is thus imagined to emerge out of a continuously renewed call and response, which in the next passage expands to include a broader, radically Christian and egalitarian community. “Awake! awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! Expand! I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine; / Fibres of love from man to man thro Albions pleasant land,” begins the verse (4.6–7) – and, for a moment, the voices of poet and savior

minge, and reader, poet, and Albion, all somnolent, all waking, all brothers and sisters in the family of God, are each in each, woven into the fabric of the mild song.

By the time Albion is identified and caught in the net, however, this vision has already “darkend” (4.13): his is not the circadian turn that comes as each night is followed by each morn, nor a passage with an assured telos, but a more resolute turning away. The mild song devolves into lamentation and in turn breaks off: and in response to its appeal, “the perturbed Man away turns down the valleys dark” (4.22). In the world from which Albion lapses yet over which his dead humanity presides, the “brother and friend” who claims to reside “in your bosoms [sic]” can become an internal irritant, an itch, a perturbation (4.18–9). Albion’s next speech recasts the “fibres of love” as “bonds” that “[bind] / Man the enemy of man into deceitful friendships” (4.24–5). His refusal of the friendly gestures of others can be seen as symptomatic of his errant, lapsed state. Yet the poem often seems to endorse this suspicion of the ones who would take their place in one’s bosom: later, the character Erin will lament that given the state of affairs in Albion’s land, “deep dissimulation is the only defence an honest man has left” (49.23). Excised lines over *Jerusalem*’s Frontispiece declare: “Half Friendship is the bitterest enmity.” But in a fallen Albion, the face of true friendship can look identical to enmity dissimulating itself; and the true friend may need to dissemble in service of his honest regard.

In *The Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida explores instabilities like these that befall the friend/enemy distinction, arguing that they inhere in a politics organized around models of friendship haunted by figures of consanguinity; he cites Blake as a fellow-traveler in this inquiry (Derrida 1997: 26, 72–3). Later I will return to these claims. My starting point and the focus of this essay, though, is an exploration of the difficulties that attend the singular yet exemplary friendship, central to *Jerusalem*, between the artist with epic or prophetic ambitions and the country he would address. Blake’s poem struggles with the question of how one can continue to be “a friend to Albion,” when Albion has fallen from his humanity into a “state” – the state of Ulro, or, we might say, a bristling nation-state.² The contemporary relevance of this question should not be lost on us, but it would also have been of particular pertinence for Blake’s generation of radicals who lived through the heady early 1790s into the first decades of the nineteenth century, when *Jerusalem* was composed; and it was of course of special pertinence for Blake himself during this period. Throughout his career, Blake’s concerns were deeply and tenaciously social and political: another way of putting this is that his *only* subject was Albion, if we understand this name to identify a “body” that can expand and contract and appear in different guises (mythic or quasi-allegorical figure, geopolitical entity, social organization or collectivity, and so on), but whose nexus of significations can always be traced back to the local and particular circumstances of the Britain he knew. And yet during the years of the poem’s composition, Albion seemed to respond to every overture with charges of sedition, or mockery, or neglect (Blake 1991: 9–13).

Albion’s turn away thus poses, in starkly dramatized terms, a problem of the Romantic epic: how is it possible to address a nation that is dead to one’s calls? *Jerusalem*’s difficulty and complexity – what might be termed its deeply dissimulative character – seems to tumble out of this impasse: during the course of this opening

plate, the mild song darkens to lamentation; it fractures as well into character drama, as “Saviour,” poet, “we,” and “Albion” split off into our several bounded identities. By the next plate, the sleeper who initially described himself awakened every day to a renewed loving call has morphed into the watchman who never sleeps, who sits “trembling . . . day and night,” “astonish[ing]” his friends; now without assurance he calls on the Saviour to “guide thou my hand which trembles exceedingly on the rock of ages” (5.16, 23). Guide my hand, he asks, while I write of what I see: of Albion dead and the sons and daughters of Albion in ascendancy, of Jerusalem wandering and lamenting, of Los’s furnace, and of Los, who almost as soon as he is introduced splits into his Emanation and the Spectre whose first words to him are, “Wilt thou still go on to destruction? / Till thy life is all taken away by this deceitful Friendship?” (7.9–10). This pair – the artist who carries on in unswerving loyalty to Albion, and the Spectre, the enemy within who appears without to lecture on the impossibility of that friendship – allows the work to go on; but it is the relation between the wanton, unmasterable, inchoate, *sui generis* body of Jerusalem and the petrific but perhaps redeemable Giant Man that attests more fully, I would argue, to the sticky dynamics of friendship between the patriot poet and the nation. Jerusalem, with all its recalcitrance, “emanates” from an impossible, inescapable relationship with Albion.

By the time we arrive at the first page of chapter 1 and its initial invocatory call, we too will have been drawn into this troubled intimacy (Easson 1973). The previous page, the prefatory “To the Public,” includes multiple gaps in its text that come from Blake having gouged out words and whole passages from the copper plate before printing it: the page thus flags what would have been an irreducible inaccessibility before modern scholarly reconstructions, its missing lines only legible as signs of authorial disappointment and collapse, of punishing or self-punishing rage, and as insults to the interest a reader might bring to the work. Modern editions allow us to see that what have been defaced are all imputations of a generous readerly disposition: “therefore [dear] Reader, [forgive] what you do not approve, and [love me] for this energetic exertion of my talents” (3).³ The “Reader” – that placeholder into which we tend thoughtlessly to insert ourselves – is rendered as closed to the artist, merely the one who by chance brings her or his eyes to this plate, whenever: neither William Hayley nor any member of a known or imagined circle, but any one of us, individually, “afar off” and foreign, unforeseen, unanticipated (4.18). To say, blandly, that the poem in this way forgoes a contemporary audience for the ideal fit few of posterity is to gloss over the way the holes in the text both testify to a traumatic and present disappointment and rebuff us, too, in advance – “we” are not the ones the artist had in mind (or if we are, he invests no hope in us).

Like the provocation of “SHEEP” and “GOATS,” however, belatedly scratched in by the artist on opposite sides of the top of the page, this shameless willingness to throw disappointment and hostility in our face also operates as a lure, a provocation to the prospective Friend: If I thwart you, will you persevere? How far can I go? How much can I demand of you? Will you follow me into hiding? Will you forgive me if I commit this act of injury? Do you have what it takes to become a “Member” of this “Public”?

(And what would this imagined community look like?) In order to hear these appeals *as* appeals, moreover – in order to understand the traumatic marks of the plate, the very places that remain most closed to us, as calls – would we not already have had to have been surprised into a discomfiting intimacy with the work? *Jerusalem* invites us to recognize the affinities between our experiences of countries and of books: to offer just one example, pertinent in this context, in each arena a critical or analytical project cannot but be informed by the volatility of attachment. These affinities sometimes take the stable form of (fallen) analogy. Yet at moments – unpredictable and minutely particular to each reader and each reading – *Jerusalem* would also call its readers into a reconfigured social body, a community schooled in the ways of impossible friendship.

II

“Without” in the world of *Jerusalem*, Albion has closed into a bounded physical space, the island of Britain, with its rocky cliffs and shrunken streams (“Albion is himself shrunk to a narrow rock in the midst of the sea!” (79.17)); at his peripheries, “Wales and Scotland shrink themselves to the west and to the north” (5.9). His “Affections appear withoutside,” as well, in the form of his Twelve Sons, administrators whose names are linked to the soldiers, judge, and witnesses at Blake’s 1803 trial for sedition and to the publishers Hunt, responsible for the sole and negative review of Blake’s 1809 exhibition (19.17–9). The activities of the Sons of Albion can be connected to the precise climate and history of Blake’s England: they enforce repressive moral and civil law, wage wars and execute vengeful peace treaties with France, and expand British imperial rule (Erdman 1991: 456–61). But the Sons also preside over a figural machinery – the Wheels within Wheels of systemic oppression exercised by the interlocking interests of State, Church, Commerce – that for some readers marks the poem’s prescient critique of a coming world in which all threatens to become intermeasurable, subject to technological power, social regulation, and economic reason.⁴ Another way of putting this: Albion, fallen, “closes” into the administered, sovereign-less form of the modern nation state.

This closing, especially the supplanting of sovereign authority by system, presents problems for the prospective friends of the land. The poet tells us that the Friends of Albion “endur’d, for Albions sake, and for / Jerusalem his Emanation shut within his bosom; / Which hardend against them more and more” (19.28–30). It’s not clear, however, what could possibly come from their continued attachment. How does one get the ear, get to the heart of the national body when it no longer displays a human countenance? When its human agents merely administer a power that emanates elsewhere? (In this context, it is telling that the Twelve Sons – Hand, Kwantock, Hyle, Koban, Scofield & company – bear mutant versions of the names of functionaries whose effects on Blake stemmed from their investiture with an authority not their own: common soldiers, a justice of the peace, a journalist, and so on.)

Blake’s partial response to this problem, of course, is to *give* Albion a human countenance and a degree of emotional accessibility, so that Albion is never completely

closed to us; periodically, and especially in the first two chapters, the poem pursues him to where he has fled “within.” The anthropomorphized “Albion” that the poem deposits within Albion suggests both the capacity and the limits of this figural strategy to negotiate an impasse of access and address. On the one hand, Albion-as-Giant-Man enables the poem’s production of a kind of back story and logic to the emergence of a dehumanizing modernity. Yet the access we get to Albion in these moments would seem to offer little help to the prospective Friend. Albion, described as having “founded his Reaction into a Law,” is an almost perfectly defensive character (29.14); Blake’s mythic figure, then, perhaps merely dramatizes a near-absolute intransigency at the core of the modern state.

The poem’s first exploration of Albion’s interiors comes in his protracted first death scene, at the end of chapter 1. As the scene opens, the melancholic Giant Man, who has fled within himself, happens upon Jerusalem, whom he has hidden in his bosom, “soft repos’d / In the arms of Vala, assimilating in one with Vala” (19.40–1). When Jerusalem pleads with him, “wherefore hast thou shut me into the winter of human life?” and goes on to remind him of a former “time of love” when she, Vala, and Albion “lov’d one-another” (20.41, 35), his lachrymose response suggests that her address only moves him into an old position:

O Vala! O Jerusalem! do you delight in my groans
 You o lovely forms you have prepared my death cup
 The disease of Shame covers me from head to feet: I have no hope
 Every boil upon my body is a separate & deadly Sin
 Doubt first assailed me. then Shame took possession of me
 Shame divides families. Shame hath divided Albion in sunder.

(21.1–6)

The source of Albion’s shame is undecidable. Is it triggered by this vision of the licentious assimilation of Jerusalem and Vala – and if so, is he ashamed of them or shamed by them, by an interest that excludes his own (see Hobson 2000: 150–62)? Is he recalling his own participation in a “time of love” he now recognizes as sin, despite Jerusalem’s shameless efforts to persuade him otherwise? Or does he suffer because he has “shut up” Jerusalem, reacted to love as though it were sin – and now, under the pressure of her questioning, he sees his shame as a shameful mistake? This volatility of affect and self-positioning (one can be ashamed of one’s interest but also of one’s shamed retraction; one can be shamed on behalf of the shamefulness or shamelessness of others, especially one’s children and the female members of one’s family; to recall one’s shame is to be possessed by it anew) is of course peculiarly characteristic of shame.⁵ Theorists of shame postulate that shame, in the first instance, arises from an unanticipated interruption of the baby’s still-lively interest in the world: where the baby expects to see an intimate, a stranger appears, and as a consequence, the baby’s thwarted extroversion becomes a “turn away,” in the infant, a literal aversion of the gaze. Subsequently, the perturbations of shame-effects – and consequent efforts to limit or preempt their occasioning

scenarios – can lead to strategic withdrawal from others (Tomkins 1995: 21). Thus Albion's self-pitying complaint also has some explanatory power: Shame is the cause of his self-division, his withdrawal, his hiding of the unruly female members of his family, and the disappearance of his Giant Humanity from the modern landscape of Britain.

Shame, Albion suggests later in this sequence, is foundational, although not primary:

We reared mighty Stones: we danced naked around them:
Thinking to bring Love into light of day, to Jerusalems shame:
Displaying our Giant limbs to all the winds of heaven! Sudden
Shame seized us, we could not look on one-another for abhorrence. the Blue
Of our immortal Veins & all their Hosts fled from our Limbs,
And wanderd distant in a dismal Night clouded & dark:
The Sun fled from the Britons forehead: the Moon from his mighty loins:
Scandinavia fled with all his mountains filld with groans

(24.4–11)

The recalled moment already involves a fantasy of relayed shame, in which aggressive masculine self-display would subdue or punish female liberty (“thinking to bring love into light of day, to Jerusalems shame”). Yet the strategy redounds on the perpetrators: with the retraction of Jerusalem, their nakedness is exposed to the cold, belittling eye of a newly distanced heaven. And thus, the story suggests, the ancient giants fell into the bounded nations of Europe.

According to this myth, shame calls into being the modern state. This is not, necessarily, to declare eighteenth-century Britain a shame culture: rather, Albion's memory of ancient times suggests that the regulatory mechanisms that mark the founding of a national body and culture originate from a desire to contain or reduce exposure to the potentially shame-inducing effects of the liberty of others. Following Silvan Tomkins, we could call Albion the maker of a strong shame-theory: exceptionally alive to potential triggers of shame, and exceptionally vigilant and inventive in avoiding such triggers, he isolates himself, “hides” his shameful intimates “within,” declares “Moral Law” and in its service promotes general social acquiescence to programmatic forms of cover-up, beginning with the construction of the female body and the ideology of chastity.⁶ “All is Eternal Death unless you can weave a chaste body over an unchaste mind,” he exhorts Vala shortly after he has accused her of delighting in his groans (21.11–12). The invaginated form would cover what offends, the freedom of interest that could fail to answer ones own desire. The consequence of this topography, however, is that every female form becomes a potential dissembler: immediately following his appeal to Vala he addresses Jerusalem as “dissembler Jerusalem!” and charges other Daughters with concealing their “secret gardens,” “secret loves,” “secret appetites” (21.18, 25, 26, 27). The cover, moreover, teases a desire to seek, and thus renews the call to “hide”: “O hide o hide!” says Albion; “Where shall I hide from thy dread countenance & searching eyes,” asks Vala; “Hide thou, Jerusalem,” says Albion; and to Vala, “let me hide in thy scarlet Tabernacle” (21.24; 22.13, 26, 30). Even a situation of complete compliance is dangerous, since when all is “hid” it becomes impossible to

anticipate potential insults. Promulgating obedience to the law, Albion multiplies the potentially shaming scenarios in which a stranger could show up where a familiar might be hoped to appear – and so must continually escalate his defences, since no degree of vigilance could fully defend him against the threats posed by potentially dis-simulating foreign and internal bodies.

The mythic figure of Albion hidden within Albion enables an explanatory account of Blake's Britain's defensiveness, the symptoms of which are its ever intensifying bellicosity and its proliferating mechanisms of social control; it also gets us some way toward understanding the binds of friendship in Albion, where honest, direct criticism is criminalized as sedition and even apparent obedience to the law does not free one from suspicion and surveillance. But the view we get of Albion doesn't necessarily bode well for transformation. Every effort, friendly or otherwise, to get him to change course only plunges him back into shame, and this is true whether the intervention produces denial or insight. When later in this scene Jerusalem charges him again with hiding her, he reacts by acknowledging his errors and her love, but his sense of culpability and awareness of her pity only renew a desire to "hide":

I have erred! I am ashamed! and will never return more;
I have taught my children sacrifices of cruelty: what shall I answer?
I will hide it from Eternals! I will give myself for my children!
Which way soever I turn, I behold Humanity and Pity!

(23.16–9)

Then, he takes to his deathbed. The poet reports his "last words" ("These were his last words, relapsing!") – no pithy, memorable statement but a protracted aria (23.26). His speech begins with a curse ("O manhood, if thou art aught / But a meer phantasy, hear dying Albions curse!" (23.36–7)), followed by a recoil ("What have I said? what have I done? O all-powerful human words. / You recoil back upon me in the blood of the Lamb slain in his children" (24.1–2)) and then, guilt and lamentation ("O Jerusalem, Jerusalem I have forsaken thy Courts ... / I have turned my back upon thee in the Wastes of Moral Law / There Babylon is builded in the Waste, founded in Human desolation" (24.17–25)), followed by a memory of what once was ("Yet thou wast lovely as the summer cloud upon my hills / When Jerusalem was thy hearts desire in times of youth and love ... / The footsteps of the lamb of God were there ..." (24.36–50)). And then, collapse and despair:

but now no more
No more shall I behold him. he is closd in Luvahs Sepulcher.
Yet why these smitings of Luvah the gentlest mildest Zoa?
If God was Merciful this could not be: O lamb of God
Thou are a delusion and Jerusalem is my Sin! O my children
I have educated you in the crucifying cruelties of Demonstration
Till you have assumed the Providence of God & slain your Father
Dost thou appear before me who liest dead in Luvahs Sepulcher

Dost thou forgive me: thou who was dead and art Alive?
 Look not so merciful upon me O thou slain Lamb of God
 I die! I die in thy arms tho Hope is banishd from me.

(24.50–60)

Albion dies of mortification, leaving his Friends with nothing to say: the voices that might call him from “without” only reinforce the shameful truths he has hidden “within.” Any exhortation to return to how things were, when Jerusalem and the nations walked freely in the exchanges of London, only brings home to him the dreadful pastness of the past; any lamentation about how things are – Jerusalem’s children sold to wage-slavery, “warshipped” to foreign lands, their souls baked into bricks – only produces self-blame and renewed going to death; any gesture of understanding, pity, or forgiveness only intensifies his feelings of unworthiness. Thus Albion responds reactively to all efforts, declaring his friends his enemies and renewing his allegiance to punitive civil law and aggressive foreign policies; in the manner of the impossible friend, he theatrically breaks down and then anticipates, rebuffs, and punishes all efforts of solace or exhortation.

In this reading, the impossibility of friendship with Albion follows from Albion’s impossible behavior: he makes a scene in order to take control of the scenes of shame, with an eye to keeping his friends at a distance. (The second time he goes to death, his “petrific hardness” is explicitly described as a deterrent to any who “should enter his bosom & embrace / His hidden heart”; shortly thereafter he declares, “my Friends are become a burden / A weariness to me, & the human footstep is a terror to me” (39.22).) To an extent this strategy works. When Albion dies once again in chapter 2, rather than pursuing him further the Friends to whom he remains closed accede to the frozen dynamics of shame and “become what they behold”: they acquiesce to his defensiveness, accept his distance, and fall into their own roles as the Cathedral cities, participating in an economy of the same even as they “assimilate with Albion,” their hollow, pious eulogies suggesting their embrace of the thanatopic logics of Church, State, and a narrow humanism (44.32–3; 45, 46).

“[T]he time will come when a mans worst enemies / Shall be those of his own house and family,” comments the poet after Bath’s and Oxford’s eulogies (46.25–6). If guarding against the contagion of shame they shut up Albion, the poet, in contrast, and in a gesture at once vengeful and implicated, renders and then exposes the Giant Man in all his flamboyant impossibility. In so doing he creates an opening for himself: for could one who so extravagantly declares his isolation and punishes all intrusions, especially those that come from his most enduring intimates, be entirely lost? Writing on shame, Eve Sedgwick speculates that “shame and exhibitionism are different linings of the same glove”: even in the case of the hypothetical infant, a withdrawal from the painful scene of sociality can function as an equivocal lure, perhaps, a display of a thwarted interest (Sedgwick 2003: 38). And who would know this better than the poet of *Jerusalem*, that other outrageously defended, shamelessly demanding Giant Form? The poet invents an Albion who theatrically

flags his mortification and obduracy in a way that opens him to the “terrible” intimacy of his “Abhorred Friend,” the artist who “most loves him.” *Jerusalem’s* path to Albion, I want to speculate now, moves through a discomfiting identification with an off-putting, equivocally appealing Humanity, toward an exploration of the more deeply dissimulative, more impossible intimacy that binds “man to man,” and artist to nation, in Albion’s land.

III

Immediately after his first death scene, Albion’s thoughts turn to art: when we meet him again at the beginning of chapter 2, the first words to follow his “last words” are a polemic against “ornament.” The poet catches us up:

Every ornament of perfection, and every labour of love,
In all the Garden of Eden, & in all the Golden mountains
Was become an envied horror, and a remembrance of jealousy:
And every Act a Crime. And Albion the punisher & judge.
(28.1–4)

Then Albion speaks from his “secret seat”:

All these ornaments are crimes, they are made by the labours
Of loves: of unnatural consanguinities and friendships
Horrid to think of when inquired deeply into.
(28.6–9)

During a period of reaction, Albion singles out the arts for special opprobrium. The passage makes preliminary sense of this turn by suggesting that the regulated giant body of the nation-state hides a core of revulsion for jealously remembered, only partially abjured pleasures that the criminalized ornament exposes and threatens. (The “ornament” at the top of the page seems wittily intended as confirmation of Albion’s fears; as Christopher Hobson points out, it also potentially refers back to the shame-inducing image of “Jerusalem assimilating in the arms of Vala” from the previous scene (Hobson 2000: 161).)

Indeed, we have just seen the poet of *Jerusalem* anatomizing, or as Tristanne Connolly suggestively puts it, “autopsying,” Albion: penetrating the petrific surface and exploring the hidden dynamics of the lapsed Body (Connolly 2002 21). The poem recounts two more excursions into Albion’s interior in chapter 2. The first is undertaken by Los’s Emanation and Spectre: these, we are told, had gone on “a visit to Albion’s children” and “alone are escaped” to tell of what they saw inside Albion – Albion prostrated in worship before his own “watry Shadow,” described as a kind of Church-of-England version of the Lord (30.5, 29.83, 29.41ff.). Dismayed by their account, Los himself then enters Albion’s bosom, “in all the terrors of Friendship” (31.4).

The first stop on his descent into the underworld is the city of the dead that is modern London:

Fearing that Albion should turn his back against the Divine Vision
 Los took his globe of fire to search the interiors of Albions
 Bosom, in all the terrors of friendship, entering the caves
 Of despair & death. to search the tempters out. walking among
 Albions rocks & precipices: caves of solitude & dark despair.
 And saw every Minute Particular of Albion degraded & murdered
 But saw not by whom: they were hidden within the minute particulars
 Of which they had possessed themselves: and there they take up
 The articulations of a mans soul. and laughing throw it down
 Into the frame. then knock it out upon the plank. & souls are bak'd
 In bricks to build the pyramids of Heber & Terah.

(31.2–12)

London is a world of simulacra, in which goods and the laborers who make them are all intermeasurable and where humanity is cannibalized by an agentless, rationalized system of production – what Morris Eaves, following Blake, might call the counter-arts conspiracy; or what Saree Makdisi, following Blake, might link to the workings of capital under the regime of “Universal Empire” (see Eaves 1992: 271 and Makdisi 1998: 196). Both critics admire Blake’s astute rendering and critique of alienating systems of exchange whose stamp is precisely the invisibility of the hand, or criminal, or agency. If he enters this world out of friendship for Albion, Los experiences here a “horrid solitude,” which he characterizes as the absence of a determinate bracing enemy (31.39) – the absence that political theorists suggest increasingly characterizes modernity, and that precipitates in Los a collapse of sense of agency:

What shall I do! What could I do, if I could find these Criminals
 I could not dare to take vengeance; for all things are so constructed
 And builded by the Divine hand, that the sinner shall always escape

(31.29–31)

In this state of drift and despair Los wanders toward the heart of the city; finally, the urban landscape opens to reveal Jerusalem and Vala, and Los sits on London stone as quite another sort of scene unfolds – now, the familiarly operatic goings-on of *Jerusalem’s* principals. He overhears Jerusalem refusing to be Albion’s wife or to cede her holy little ones to any master; Vala responds by claiming Albion as her own, but charging him with tormenting her Luvah; Vala then accuses Jerusalem of harlotry and finally declares her “turn[ed] forth” to “here,” her “secluded place” (35.43–61). Los then sees Albion about to fall into non-entity: as he watches, Albion turns his back to the Divine Vision and worships his Spectrous Chaos, who claims to be his rational power; in the Chaos appears Albion’s Emanation, which he had hidden in jealousy, “reflecting back to Albion in Sexual Reasoning Hermaphroditic” (33.28).

The emanation is revealed as Vala, and Albion dissolves orgasmically before her: “Art thou Vala? replied Albion. image of my repose / O how I tremble! How my members pour down milky fear!” (43.2–3). This last moment seems to trigger a second outburst from Los, now a reactive, punishing one: “O Albion why wilt thou create a Female Will? / To hide the most evident God in a hidden covert. even / that we might pry after him as after a stolen treasure” (34.31–4); immediately afterwards he creates Reuben, twisting his nostrils to the ground and rolling his eyes into two narrow circles, taunting:

If perceptive Organs vary: objects of Perception seem to vary:
 If the Perceptive Organs close: their Objects seem to close also:
 Consider this O mortal Man: O worm of sixty winters said Los
 Consider Sexual Organization & hide thee in the dust.

(34.55–9)

I want to draw attention to two related kinds of drift that occur in the course of Los’s journey into Albion’s interior. One concerns the sequencing of landscapes or stops on his travels: a blasted modern landscape described and critiqued in visionary but recognizably sociopolitical terms (a passage often singled out by admirers of Blake as a critic of systemic oppression) is followed by a scene of mythic characters involved in a murky and contentious ménage à trois, or quatre, or cinq (Albion, Jerusalem, Vala, Luvah, Spectre/Christ). A related drift occurs in Los’s critique or commentary: his initial insight into the working of social and economic violence gives way, in the second instance, to a protest about “Sexual Organization.”

This kind of sequence – a kind of slide from renderings and critiques of modernity understood in sociopolitical terms to renderings and critiques of sexual bodies and sexual organization – recurs in *Jerusalem* (there’s another example of it in Los’s speech to his Emanation and Spectre after they report on what they have seen in Albion’s interiors (30)) and we can try to make sense of it in different ways. On the one hand, the critique of sexual organization is of a piece with the poem’s sustained systems-analysis, which frequently extends to biopolitical phenomena: the “natural” body in Blake is always a cruelly fashioned body, “organized” to serve the interests of interconnected social, economic, and political regimes. If the first passage laments the human form made intermeasurable (like a brick) – and thus into fungible labor- and consumer-power – the second passage implicates sexual organization in this arrangement: the genitally organized, productive and reproductive body, disciplined to seek illusory satisfaction in what is hidden and forbidden, is a body whose very drives and desires can be enlisted to further the causes of consumption, exploration, conquest. The sexual body, then, “fits” various state interests; and thus it finds a kind of partner in the configuration of the nation, which is also sexually “organized” in ways the poem increasingly gives determinate form to: If Los’s children escape from Albion after having beheld “the Sexual Religion in its embryon Uncircumcision” (30.11) – still enwombed, unoutlined, “hid” – the poem gradually works toward the “Revelation” of the polypuses

and hermaphrodites that we might name the sexual-religious-military-industrial-corporate-complexes of modern state and international organization.

But this reading doesn't quite take into account Albion's recoil at art's genesis in "unnatural consanguinities and friendships" or the reactive character of Los's outbursts, both of which suggest the particular discomforts and embarrassments of immanent critique. For if Los, as in the first passage, sometimes adopts the posture of the lone free wanderer of London's chartered streets, marking the world's reduced particulars from the position of an observer, he is also "within" the giant body, and is perhaps even a singularly extreme case of withinness: he penetrates into Albion's secret seat and beholds and exposes what goes on there, participating in a construction of the giant body as organized around a hidden core, revealed to the organs of perception of the partisan artist. Los both sees and is implicated in Albion's shameful moments of abjection and self-display. His queasy identification with the giant body seems to prompt his reactive outburst – you could say, he becomes one of its ejaculatory members when he lashes out at the Female Will for "hid[ing] the most evident God in a secret covert" – and his creation of the bounded, defended, masculine form of Reuben. And his sticky position, at once without and within, in turn might prompt the special defensiveness Albion reserves for art. "Corporeal friends are spiritual enemies," Los's Spectre and Emanation see when they emerge from a visit to Albion's interiors (30.10): conversely, "spiritual friends" can appear as corporeal enemies when they are "unnaturally consanguineous" with the friend/host they explore.

In the course of Los's journey to the underworld of Albion, the petrific surfaces and rationalized organization of the modern island nation give way before another landscape, the stage on which giant forms pursue their ancient quarrels about who has rights to the holy city and to the natural world, contentions dire that spill over into Albion's torturous relations to Luvah/France, his brother/enemy, and his self-abasement before the spectrous chaos that claims to be his Reasoning Power. Los sees that within the interior of the dead Albion is Albion, again: Albion alive, and behaving shamefully. The ancient mythic figure of the nation endures as an embalmed precipitate inside the modern rationalized organization of the state. Los cannot fully anatomize this figure – its nerves and fibres are hidden from him (32.4). Neither can we, fully, although much exegetical work has gone into untangling and sorting through the contending stories – titillating, baffling, tedious – that Albion and company tell of the history of their family drama. But it is especially true of our most intimate, impossible friends, that a portion will always remain closed to us.

Readers who admire Blake as a prescient, even prophetic critic of modernity tend to single out passages in his work that pursue a brilliant systems-analysis (and to maintain a certain distance from the scandalous goings-on of the first family); readers who charge Blake with nationalism, or quietism, or failure to imagine a truly collective politics tend to cite the centrality in his prophecies of the mythic Giant Man.⁷ Yet the Albion who lives within Albion as an embalmed precipitate gestures to the myth inhabiting the modern state; a father/brother, he is an exemplary figure of the consanguinity that, Derrida claims, haunts the body politic, the politics of friendship. The

national body is formed around a figure of the One: and even its unruliest Members, like Jerusalem herself, are without and within that body, exiles exiled to “here.” As Benedict Anderson points out, the concept of the nation may be ideological, but it is experienced as a kinship group; the corollary is: no matter how sophisticated one’s thinking about the nation as ideological construct, or how resistant one is to one’s nation’s policies, its shame is one’s own (Anderson 1983: 1–7). Friendship with Albion is an inescapable relationship.

The Saviour’s speech at the beginning of the poem thus speaks a truth: I am in you and you are in me. It remains for *Jerusalem* to explore the stresses and discomforts of that intimacy. Resisting assimilation into the frozen dynamics of shame, Los, the friend of Albion who most loved him, sustains a painful and reactive aliveness to the national body. His journey into the interiors of the friend thus figures the aesthetic project of *Jerusalem*, which, I propose, would break open the dynamics of impossible friendship with the state, in part by forcing a recognition of our unnatural consanguinity with the furious, lapsed Humanity whose Reaction threatens to determine the world – a world, in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, perilously on the verge of having attained only “that capacity of proliferating, to the extent of its means, the ‘unworld,’” or, in the words of *Jerusalem*, a world going to Death (Nancy 2007: 34). Reversing that process, the poem suggests, involves the pain of awakening to our intimacy with what kills us: Los “striv[es] with Systems to deliver Individuals from these Systems: / That whenever any Spectre began to devour the Dead / He might feel the pain as if a man gnawd his own tender nerves” (11.5–7). For those who have suffered nerve damage, however, such tremors may be harbingers of the regeneration of the human form.

IV

A friend who does not give you the world, and a world which, because it exists, has form and limit, being this world and not another, gives you nothing.

Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*

Los would give Albion the world. If the Sons of Albion relentlessly assimilate all the Minute Particulars of life into an economy of the same, Los ceaselessly dis-simulates, breaking apart their stony abstractions on his anvil. From these rescued elements he creates the Mundane Shell, the spaces of Erin, the body of Reuben, the topography of Britain, the stubborn structure of the English language – all renderings of the lapsed world he is attempting to recall from death. The world of Albion goes into Los’s furnaces and “appears” there, in all its falsehood, monstrosity, and wondrous possibility – with the text sometimes claiming that art need only give a body to falsehood for the latter to be thrown off. This statement is often taken to describe Blake’s own aims: the gift of *Jerusalem* is to render Albion’s world so that its errors are exposed and controllable – so that Albion can be redeemed.

But how, precisely, would this redemption come about? *Jerusalem* ends with a messianic opening: roused from his sleep, at last aware of the danger facing the land, Albion leaps into the Furnaces of Affliction for the sake of his friend Los and is transformed (see Green 2007: 162–4). Los's work does not directly produce this result, however: throughout the poem Albion is indifferent or hostile to his friend's incessant hammering and building, his created spaces and forms, and the latter simply fall away at the end of the poem. Unlike the economy of exchange or the deal, in which I promise to give you the world if you promise to come back from the dead, the economy of friendship depends on there being no assured relationship between cause and effect, labor and outcome: friendships only stay alive if you give yourself over to working on them, although nothing kills a relationship like working on it too much; laboring away with some particular outcome in mind only increases the likelihood that you won't get what you want; all you can do is invest your time and hope that grace may happen, that the other may open to you in love or forgiveness as unpredictably as she or he can be "seized" by shame and turn away. And indeed, the incalculable opening to the other is that latter moment's reversed face: the former only arrives within the friendship that has endured, that has survived protracted exposure to the rough, mortifying world of the other's lapsed humanity.

The end of *Jerusalem* figures a moment that can befall our committed reading at any point – a sense of opening that is only ever indirectly connected to the labor we have invested in the poem, that dissipates as soon as we read on, that attaches to Minute Particulars that revert to opacity when we next encounter them. Reading *Jerusalem* brings us into strenuous, sustained engagement with the "world of Albion," but almost never in a way that is productive of clarity, legibility, the sure recognition of falsehood and truth. Here, bodies nest within their own bosoms, enter the veins and sinews of other bodies, and exist "within" and "without" their own Members; the Divine Family can't keep its relationships or stories straight; and human forms – nations, cities, words, books, biological organisms – appear "like" other human forms, but not in any lasting or stable way (the way of allegory, analogy, myth), for all are incommensurable, irreducible one to the other. If the poem has a stake in breaking open the dynamics of shame that keep Albion closed to us, the openings it affords are rare and precarious and come out of a reading experience bound in the very dynamics they puncture – an experience marked by rhythms of exhaustion, frustration and withdrawal, of renewed exegetical efforts of containment, of inordinate attachment to and strange impulses of defensiveness on behalf of this Giant Body that is always "too much."

But in this way, *Jerusalem* transports the reader whose friendship endures toward a New Jerusalem: a collective body whose relations are those of dissimilitude and unnatural consanguinity, the intimate, strenuous, and inescapable congress of incommensurable forms. For example, of Human Giants – the planet, the country, the city, individual human beings, the natural landscape, *Jerusalem* itself – and Minutely Particular bodies that move within and through them as unruly Members. Within *Jerusalem*'s courts, we are unpredictably surprised into radical ways of encountering and imagining bodies in and as social space, and afforded glimpses of an expansively imagined enthusiastic

humanism that holds that “Cities are Men!” and even “Tree, Metal, Earth & Stone: all / Human Forms identified.” *Jerusalem*, the Emanation of the Giant Albion, would call Albion back from death by drawing its readers into the ways of impossible friendship: and so it tests us, answers our labors with rebuffs, remains closed to us in portions, perversely risks becoming an absolute isolate, and gets on our nerves and under our skin.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 21 “Poetry and Illustration: ‘Amicable strife’”; chapter 24 “Romanticism, Gnosticism, and Neoplatonism”; chapter 25 “Milton and the Romantics”

NOTES

- 1 Textual references here and below are to Blake 1991 by plate and line(s).
- 2 In a fine essay on Derrida and Blake that concludes with a reading of the theoretical dimensions of *Jerusalem* seen through a Derridean lens, Green is more cautious than I about identifying Albion with the nation-state (2007: 165–6). My excuse for a certain reductiveness here is my different focus on the friendship between the artist and Albion, a secondary formation to the politics of friendship as Derrida describes it.
- 3 Paley’s introduction to *Jerusalem* provides the missing lines and describes the restoration process (Blake 1991: 10–11). Connolly provides a thoughtful summary of critical speculation about Blake’s damage to the plate and writes suggestively of the ways the plate challenges and also solicits the “friendship” of the reader (2002: 10–15). See also Steven Vine for an argument that the plate addresses a public “to come” (2002).
- 4 Examples of critics who produce compelling versions of this construction of Blake, although with some significant disagreements, are Eaves (1992), and more recently Makdisi (see esp. Makdisi 1998: 154–72).
- 5 See Limon for a description of the volatility and familial character of shame in an argument that links these dynamics to the character of one’s relation to the state (2007: 550–3); his arguments are in turn indebted to the work of Sedgwick, including her introduction, with Adam Frank, to the work of Tomkins (Tomkins 1995: 1–28), and to Tomkins himself. My analysis is indebted to all these writers.
- 6 See Tompkins 1995: 163–5. Sturrock’s suggestive short essay (2007) concerns the way the idea of England engages ideologies of gender and especially of female chastity during Blake’s period.
- 7 In this context see Matthews’s exploration of the ways in which Blake’s use of the figure of Albion both challenges and reinforces conventional nationalistic discourse of his time (Matthews 1998). Keach makes a more strongly critical argument about Blake’s use of the figure of Albion as evidence of a failure to imagine a collective politics, although he is primarily interested in the earlier prophecies (2004: see esp. 134–5). Schierenbach observes another sort of split in recent Blake criticism between assessments of the early work, which tend to favor Marxist and historicist approaches, and of the later work, which tend to see it as less politically engaged and more caught up with “myth.” Schierenbach himself argues for the social and political concerns of *Jerusalem*, but ultimately sees the poem’s focus on the Divine Body as reinforcing a mystified idea of unity. I would argue that the poem invites us to reimagine the body in such radical ways (as

possessing plural "bosoms," as comprised of "members" that resent their organization into a defended, genitally organized form, as ideally polymorphous, as existing at times "within," at

times "without," other bodily forms and members, and so on) that the "unity" it represents must also be radically reimagined (Schierenbach 2007).

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The World without Us: Romanticism, Environmentalism, and Imagining Nature

Bridget Keegan

Maybe the world, without us, is the real poem

Mary Oliver, "From the Book of Time"

In the final, wrenching stanza of his best known poem, "I Am," John Clare writes:

I long for scenes, where man hath never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God;
And sleep as I in childhood, sweetly slept,
Untroubling, and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below – above the vaulted sky.
(ll. 13–18)¹

While some have interpreted the poem to be an expression of Clare's wish for death, permanent escape from the emotional suffering he experienced while confined to the asylum, these lines might also represent another powerful poetic fantasy, one shared by other Romantic poets but uttered most movingly by Clare, for access to a world without us, a pristine natural world devoid of human contamination and thus more purely divine. Clare wishes to exist there, as he does in all the landscapes he loved and wrote about, "untroubling, and untroubled," able to witness a nature liberated from the destructiveness of human interventions, whether agricultural or aesthetic.

Such a vision has a powerful appeal for modern green readers. Unsurprisingly, Clare's popularity has increased in tandem with the popularity of ecocritical approaches to literature over the last twenty years. In late 2008, of the 358 items listed with Clare as their subject in the *MLA International Bibliography*, 142 were written in the past ten

years and 107 in the decade prior to that. Of those published since 1998, approximately 45 discuss Clare's representation of the natural world (with an equally large number devoted to the copyright controversy, the other recent major concern).² This inventory does not include Bate's 2003 biography, which has a strong ecocritical agenda, Iain Sinclair's psychogeographical memoir based upon Clare's "Journey out of Essex," *Edge of the Orison* (2006), or Paul Chirico's *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (2007), which also discusses Clare's nature writing.

Romantic-period writing in general is often characterized by an increased interest in the natural world, thus making the period popular for critics with environmentalist agendas. The broad aim of this essay, then, is to discuss how Clare's poetry is exemplary of Romantic writing and thinking about nature. At the same time, however, Clare goes further than any of his peers to write and think in innovative and original ways about the relationship of the human and natural worlds, in particular by trying to think these two terms without placing them in conceptual opposition.

In one of the most ambitious and insightful ecocritical readings of Clare's work to date, Simon Kövesi argues that Clare achieves Keats's ideal of the "cameleon Poet" more perfectly than any other poet of the period. Rejecting "the Wordsworthian, or egotistical sublime," Clare, rather than Keats, is able to get his own identity out of the way in particular in his writings about nature. Like Keats's "cameleon": "He is continually in for – and filling some other body" (Kovesi 2004: 77). Simply put, Clare attempts to place the emphasis on the natural object being perceived, rather than on the subject doing the perceiving. In some cases, he does so by granting subjectivity to the natural object (as in poems such as "Lament of Swordy Well" where the landscape speaks for itself). At other times he does so by describing a scene without the overt inscription of an observing "I" whose viewpoint and interests impose an ordering perspective (as can be seen in many of his celebrated bird nest poems). When Clare includes a speaking subject in his descriptive poetry, critics such as James McKusick and John Goodridge have noted that the phrase that Clare most often uses to introduce a scene is "I love," suggesting that he envisions an intersubjective relationship with nature. In all his nature poems, Clare foregrounds nonhuman creatures or phenomena, rather than the poetic perceiver who organizes, orders or reacts to such representations. Although such a perceiving presence is implicit, its implicitness is noteworthy. Psychoanalytic and biographical critics see the erasure of the subjectivity of the perceiver as a symptom of Clare's lifelong struggle with mental illness. For others, such as Bate and McKusick, this feature illustrates Clare's anticipation of the values of deep ecology. By his rejection of the egotistical sublime (and sometimes of ego entirely), and by his refusal to turn all of the rest of creation into a mirror for his mind, Clare has become more central in current ecocritical assessments of Romanticism. In an age that witnessed an array of poetic experimentation and a wide variety of innovative explorations of the question of the appropriate relationship between the human and the natural, Clare goes furthest in trying to discover how to escape the destructive opposition between human and nature. He tries to imagine if not a world entirely without us, at least a world where humans tread more carefully, where the opposition between us and our environment is less destructive.

Clare was not the only poet of the period who experimented with rethinking the human/nature duality. For many other Romantic writers the strategy is to turn to a transcendence that reasserts the dominance of the human mind or poetic imagination above the brute matter it works upon. Percy Shelley's *Mont Blanc* is the textbook example, just as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the best critique of that technique. Mary Shelley, like Clare, was interested in imagining a world without us in a more sustained way in her late novel, *The Last Man*. It too has earned renewed popularity through ecocritical readings such as that included in McKusick's *Green Writing*.

Unlike his contemporaries, Clare rethinks the dualism he inherits not by "losing himself" in nature as a means to reassert an egotistical imagination, as Wordsworth famously does in "Tintern Abbey." He does not engage in what Timothy Morton labels "ecomimesis" (2007: 8 and *passim*), which strives to erase the distinction between human subject and natural object. Instead Clare aspires to write what Mary Oliver (a modern writer with an enormous debt to Clare) calls "the real poem." His poetry gives nature a primacy and an immediacy that has often led to his writing being dismissed as "just" descriptive (or in Harold Bloom's infamously dismissive phrase, a "Wordsworthian shadow" (quoted in Storey 1973: 429)). However, contemporary environmental criticism now enables us to see such descriptiveness as more than mere "poetry about nature," but as approaching what Bate calls "ecopoetry" – "not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experience of it" (2000: 42). This experience is less about the effect on the human experiencing nature. Rather the emphasis is on the encounter itself, the moment of experience as the interaction between human and nature, which is not the same as a oneness or a transcendence of the difference. Rather it attempts to capture in language a sustained and sensuous recognition and inhabitation of that difference.

Clare understood that, technically speaking, writing about "the world without us" – nature devoid of the human presence or trace – is impossible. Writing requires a human subject, present in some way as witness, even without the uttering of the first-person pronoun, and thus undermining the conceit of human absence from the scene. Yet Clare's attempt to imagine a way outside and around the dichotomy and separation of the human from the natural is one of his most important legacies. From his earliest work to his compositions of 1841, Clare experimented with techniques and topics to write himself (and in some cases, everyone else) out of the picture – or at least out of the center of the picture.

In what follows, I examine three of Clare's strategies to imagine a world without us. First, I revisit a topic that I have written about previously – namely, Clare's fascination with wetlands – the bogs, swamps and fens that were disappearing along with the commons and open landscapes around his native Helpston due to the agricultural enclosure that his poetry so eloquently protests (Keegan 2008). These ecosystems, as much water as earth, are inhospitable to the human presence without drainage and other forms of radical intervention. In Clare's poetry, the undrained areas are refuges for wild nature, havens where birds such as the snipe can exist unmolested, even by the poet's interest.

Second, Clare uses the concept of time as well as geographical place to consider nature without (or with less of) us. His poems about eternity attempt to think outside of time to imagine another way beyond the human/nature opposition. In his poems about eternity Clare introduces a third term – that of the divine – into his exploration of the human/nature dyad, complicating the question beyond a simple opposition. Several of these poems witness Clare exploring the possibility of a language or writing in nature. These poems thus imagine whether or how nature might speak for itself, without any human intervention.

Building from an examination of how the spiritual dimension informs Clare's attempts to think nature in and for itself, the final section of this essay examines a neglected strand of Clare's poetic output, his versifications of scripture, produced largely during the tumultuous year 1841. Clare transposes numerous Bible passages (many of which were already in verse form; Clare rewords these, putting them into new rhymes and meters). *Which* passages he chose to versify is significant. These choices suggest an environmental emphasis that critics have heretofore neglected. Indeed, these poems are often written off as evidence of Clare's madness. But they should not be dismissed summarily, and I will examine whether they can be read in the context of Clare's other writing about the natural world. The passages Clare chooses to transpose offer insights into his environmental commitments. In these, as in all of his efforts to imagine a world not just without him but without any humans, Clare experiments with a variety of literary forms to reconceive our ethical obligations to the world that is still with us.

I

*Yer flat swampy vallies unbolsome may be
Still refuse of nature wi out her adorning(s)
Yere as dear as this heart in my bosom to me*

John Clare, "Song ('Swamps of wild rush beds')," ll. 22–4

Clare's writing about wetlandscapes comprises a powerful thread in his writings against enclosure. As Keith Lindley has surveyed in his study *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution*, the East Anglian Fens had been a site for violent, class-based dispute since the seventeenth century, when, with royal backing, the Duke of Bedford introduced his scheme for wholesale drainage of the area to increase the amount of arable acreage. Clare's protests do not involve smashing the draining tools and equipment. Rather, his poetry aims to smash the preconceived notions of wetland environments as unhealthy and dangerous. As I have described elsewhere, Clare writes in opposition to an inherited literary tradition – going back to *Beowulf* – that figured fens as places of insalubrious miasma, breeding grounds of disease (Keegan 2008). Grendel and his hateful mother were creatures of the swamps. Bunyan and Milton in the seventeenth century and Dyer in the eighteenth century represented the fens as physically and morally

dangerous places, the source of fen ague for humans and hoof rot for sheep. The only human inhabitants of these areas had a reputation for savagery, documented as early as the sixteenth century, when William Camden wrote of them in *Britannia*: “fen-men, a sort of people (much like the place) of brutish uncivilized tempers, envious of all others . . . and usually walking aloft on a pair of stilts” (quoted in Ayto and Crofton 2005: 419). Even these intrepid souls required prosthetics to exist in this environment. They were popularly known as “fen slodgers” or more positively as “fen tigers” (“alluding to their crafty ferocity” (Ayto and Crofton 2005: 419), witnessed in how they fought the incursions of the gentleman drainers). Lindley notes that the struggle over the fens during the English revolution was an example of what today might be called “environmental classism,” setting the aristocratic landowners, seeking maximum productivity from the rich soil of the fens, against the indigenous fen-dwellers who eked out a living by hunting waterfowl or fishing. While Clare does not explicitly invoke this history, his poetry about wetlands is an important strand in his elegiac writing about the fate of nature after enclosure.

The first instances of Clare’s descriptions of wetlands in his poetry are not as sites of protests but as landscapes associated with love, specifically with courting his wife, perhaps because they offered privacy not found in more typically pastoral romantic spots. In a “Song” from *Poems Descriptive* (1820) beginning “Ye swampy falls of pasture ground,” Clare transforms a swampy scene into the space of amorous encounter with Patty. In *The Village Minstrel* (1821), in another “Song (‘Swamps of wild rush beds’),” he asserts that the wetlandscape is “loved as an Eden by me” (l. 16). Clare writes in stark contrast to the numerous authors before him who saw wetlands as geographical abominations.

The wetlands always remained a place Clare associated with love, but with a more general love of nature, a love threatened by the destructions of enclosure. As such the wetland poems are politically as well as stylistically significant. In “The Mores” Clare disrupts the conventions of loco-descriptive poetry in two distinct ways. First, he forgoes the point of view offered by an elevated prospect, from which he can look down and survey the landscape. Traditional landscape poetry gives primacy to the human viewpoint, typically situated at the top of a hill or other lofty spot, which organizes the description through picturesque points of interest and of traces of human history on the land. While a historical perspective is invoked, as John Barrell has observed, in this poem, “the eye moving to the horizon is engaged by nothing.” Such an “empty prospect” would have been unbearable to writers like James Thomson (Barrell 1972: 144). Yet for Clare, this emptiness is not meaningless. It signifies freedom, an escape from limits. Clare nostalgically envisions this site as having been free from humans:

Far spread the moorey ground a level scene
 Bespread with rush and one eternal green
 That never felt the rage of blundering plough
 Though centurys wreathed spring blossoms on its brow
 (ll. 1–4)

The moors were beautiful and did not need a human eye to appreciate them. Clare's poem suggests that their beauty would not be obvious to most observers, in particular those intent on draining or enclosing the space. Barrell demonstrates how the poem celebrates several kinds of freedoms in the unboundedness of its description: "On the one hand ... the moors are free because open; on the other they are free because limitless ... when the moors are thought of as open, they are emblematic of the freedom of the villagers before enclosure; when they are thought of as boundless, they express the possibility of the movement *towards* freedom" (1972: 144). The freedom is not just a freedom for the poet, but also a freedom for nature from human destruction:

Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene
Nor fence of ownership crept in between
...
One mighty flat undwarfed by bush and tree
Spread its faint shadow of immensity
And lost itself which seemed to eke its bounds
In the blue mist the orisons edge surrounds
(ll. 7–8, 11–14)

The landscape is difficult to describe because it eludes the conventions of descriptive visuality organized by the dominance of the human eye. Because it resists visual consumption, one might say that it is not a landscape at all, as it is not an environment shaped and contained by the abstractions and idioms inherited from the visual arts. Human points of reference are missing or at least decentered in the scene, and Clare, as the poet/spectator is not elevated above what he describes. He is in the scene looking toward a horizon with nothing in between himself and the unbroken line of earth and sky.

As the remainder of the poem documents, however, this unusual unbounded, unframed space is ruined by enclosure. The freedom from aesthetic conventions of a dominating visuality is mirrored in the loss of political and economic freedoms for Clare's fellow villagers: "Inclosure came and trampled on the grave / Of labours rights and left the poor a slave" (ll. 19–20). The environmental classism of the seventeenth century is repeated again nearer to Clare's home. Wild and domesticated animals are deprived of their freedoms. The cows are denied "the wild pasture as their common right" (l. 26).

In place of "Moors loosing from the sight far smooth and blea ... / / Fence now meets fence in owners little bounds" (ll. 37, 47). The fencing, marking human claims to possession and domination of nature, are not the only interventions. Other indications of claims of ownership, such as "no trespassing" signs, mar the moors:

Each little tyrant with his little sign
Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine
On paths to freedom and to childhood dear
A board sticks up to notice "no road here"

And on the tree with ivy overhung
 The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung
 As tho the very birds should learn to know
 When they go there they must no further go
 (ll. 67–74)

While Clare here describes a specific kind of writing on the landscape as especially devastating to flora and fauna, behind this lurks an awareness that all writing, poetic writing included, signals distance and mediation, marking our separation from the natural world and putting us into opposition with our environment.

II

Tee-rew Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew
Chewrit chewrit ...

John Clare, "The Progress of Rhyme" (ll. 249–50)

Clare sometimes aimed to approximate nature's sounds and silences in his writing. He turns repeatedly to the aural rather than the visual to evoke the world without us and to provide a contrast to the possessive writing *on* nature that he elsewhere describes in "The Mores." To imagine one could write the nonhuman sounds and signals of the world without us is an impossible project – a mad project – since only humans write and, at least according to some poststructuralist theorists, writing is a key indication of our alienation and separation from nature. However, with writing that aimed nonetheless to capture the immediacy of sound in nature, Clare experiments with how to work around this difficulty. He also seeks "writing" in nature and of nature, patterns and symbols that enable him to approximate a poetry that is nature's not humanity's. In his fen poems, he chooses an uninhabitable location and describes it in a way that challenges the conventions of poetic language and perspective. In his poems on eternity, he reconceptualizes time instead of space.

Most of Clare's enclosure elegies are nostalgic, invoking an irretrievably lost past that Clare associates with childhood. Such yearning for childhood and a more innocent, childlike relationship to nature is axiomatic for Romanticism. For Clare, in many poems, to escape the damage we have done to nature, we can only imaginatively revert to a time "before" – not only before enclosure, but more anciently, before humans at all, hearkening back to Eden before the fall. In addition, Clare experiments with imagining less destructive way for humans to be in nature by looking toward a distant future or a time outside of time that, along with this edenic past, is captured through his use of the word "eternity."

Perhaps the most well-known use of the word "eternity" in Clare's poetry comes near the conclusion of his late sonnet "I Am," the counterpart to the three-stanza "I Am." In this poem, Clare takes what is for him an unusual position, presenting

earth as a prison and imagining himself as “a soul unshackled – like eternity / Spurning earth’s vain and soul debasing thrall” (ll. 12–13). The idea of eternity presented here is that of a human outside of, above and beyond the natural environment, a picture that contrasts strikingly with his predominant tendency, even in the other “I Am” poem, to privilege a nature isolated from humanity. This poem is thus atypical of how Clare conceptualizes eternity, and expresses a yearning for transcendence more typical of high Romantic discourse (which may explain why this poem is anthologized more often than many others that are more representative of Clare’s voice).

In most of his poetry, when the concept of eternity appears, nature alone – not humanity – bears the ability to exist outside of and beyond time. In a sonnet from *The Rural Muse* entitled “Earth’s Eternity” the poet begins by challenging conventional Christian notions of eternity: “Man earths poor shadow talks of earths decay / But hath it nothing of eternal kin” (Clare 1998; ll. 1–2). The answer for Clare is decidedly yes, and the remainder of the poem illustrates how Earth has a stronger claim to transcending time than humanity.

Clare also uses images from nature to symbolize his concept of eternity in the poem “A Shadow of Life Death & Eternity.” The poem’s concluding stanza describes Eternity as

The vaulted void of purple skye
That every were extends
That stretches from the dazzled eye
In space that never ends
(Clare 1996; ll. 17–20)

The same boundless, limitless horizon that characterizes Clare’s wetlandscapes carries over to his description of eternity. Such a vision ultimately eludes human perception, just as temporally bound humans cannot ultimately grasp or experience eternity, only the “intimations” of it, as another poet suggested.

The better-known “Song’s Eternity” is one of the earlier poems in which Clare demonstrates his range in formal experimentation. A seemingly simple piece, the interweaving of the repeated lines makes the structure more complex than that of a typical song. The first line asks “What is songs eternity” and then paradoxically invites the reader to “Come and see” (l. 2), even though the emphasis of the song is primarily aural. Songs are “Praises sung and praises said” (l. 5) – but songs produced by the human voice, “They die” (l. 10). Song’s eternity is beyond the human voice, just as in other poems it is beyond human sight as well. The “Melodys of earth and sky” (l. 13) are the ones that “Thrive, thrive” (l. 18). Clare not only wants to write himself out of the picture, but he also wants to write his writing out of the equation as well. His aim is a poetry that approximates the oral and aural, for as he asserts in poem after poem, writing is not a guarantee of permanence. More often, writing is associated with destructiveness that undoes both pristine nature and even writing itself, whereas ephemeral natural sounds transcend the ravages of time.

The more material containers of human achievement, buildings and books, “Years will lay them with the dead” (l. 27). They are “Trifles unto nothing wed” (l. 30). What endures is the music of the honey bee and the blue cap that was “Sung to adam and to eve” (l. 35), which survived the flood and was heard on “Noahs ark” (l. 38). The “tootle tee,” the song of the bird and bee that Clare uses as a refrain – a simple even silly sound – is “Natures universal tongue” (l. 53). To the human ear the “poetry” that will endure after we are gone risks sounding like nonsense. These sounds are outside of and prior to human language, though Clare can imitate them, as he does elsewhere in “The Progress of Rhyme.” This is the music, the poetry of the world without us which Clare approximates onomatopoeically.

The more formally conventional, “The Eternity of Nature” is a quintessentially Romantic poem in its celebration of the sublimity and beauty of the commonplace, such as the simple daisy that Clare describes in the opening lines. This humble flower “strikes its little root / Into the lap of time” (ll. 4–5). The poem details how it will thrive long after we are gone, just as it has going back to a time, in the garden of Eden, when we were first here. Unlike Clare’s poetry, thousands of years from now, the daisy will still delight the child who discovers it, just as it did in the thousands of years prior. The flower delights Clare now, and he imagines it might have delighted Eve in the garden. The child delights in it but he plucks it. Even the innocent child seems instinctively destructive of nature – his admiration leading him to destroy what he admires. Perhaps this is a symptom of our common fallen condition, our inheritance from Adam and Eve (who also plucked what she should not have). Our human condition may prevent us from a nonharmful coexistence with our natural environment.

Despite what may be our innate tendency to destructiveness, these simple flowers, daisies and cowslips, persist. While the plants are admired by humans, their beauty also exists separate from and beyond human appreciation. It does not require human observation to exist. The very fact of their being unnoticed and neglected, of being apart from humans and from human touch – even if it is appreciative – is their power. Nature without us, nature ignored by us, is nature that survives.

The poem’s concluding lines turn to a curious meditation on the persistence of the number five in nature. Clare was unlikely to have been familiar with any of the lore of numerology, whether Pythagorean or Judeo-Christian. Yet he would certainly have recognized that the number five is critical to English poetry, forming the foundation of the pentameter line. Here and in the poem “The Yellowhammer’s Nest,” which is another meditation on the recurrence of the number five in nature, Clare seeks patterns and thus a kind of writing in nature, a writing that is observable but ultimately inscrutable to humans.

The repeated presence of five in nature is presented as a mystery that the poem does not solve and which Clare does not need to unlock.

Tis natures wonder and her makers will
Who bade earth be and order owns him still

As that superior power who keeps the key
 Of wisdom power and might through all eternity
 (ll. 99–102)

God writes in and through Nature, and with these lines Clare invokes the conventional trope of nature as one of two of God's books (the other being the Bible). In his versifications of scripture (discussed below) Clare continues to explore the divine inefability and inscrutability of the natural world.

Clare's last major poem devoted to the concept of eternity, "Invite to Eternity," dates from the asylum years. It looks toward the end of time rather than the beginnings with Adam and Eve in Genesis and is addressed not to nature directly but to a "sweet maid" (l. 1) whom Clare asks to come with him "Through the valley depths of shade" (l. 3). He invites her not to a conventional secluded pastoral glen, but to "Where sun forgets the day" (l. 6). The true darkness of this place is described in more alarming detail in the second stanza:

Where stones will turn to flooding streams
 Where plains will rise like ocean waves
 Where life will fade like visioned dreams
 And mountains darken into caves.
 (ll. 9–12)

Eternity is a landscape of apocalypse, rather than romance, a place of "sad non-identity" (l. 14) and dissolution of the poetic subject. One of Clare's most despairing poems, "An Invite to Eternity" describes a place that is ultimately not human, and more profoundly and irrevocably inhospitable to humans than the wetlands Clare otherwise celebrates. Eternity – where nature abides – is also a world without us. Eternity – that same eternity joyously sung by the bumble bee and the blue cap, is also where the poet and his beloved "live in death and [are] the same / Without this life, or home, or name" (ll. 19–20). Such a "land of shadows" may or may not be death: "The present mixed with reasons gone / The past, and present all as one" (ll. 27–8). Eternity is ultimately beyond human reason and thus representation, a place which Clare tries to inhabit in his poetry. The futility and persistence of such efforts may have contributed to the emotional struggles that led him to the High Beach Asylum in 1837.

III

His search is after every thing thats green

John Clare, Versification of Job 39

In 1841, his last year at High Beach, and later, his last year at home, Clare produced a series of versifications of scripture, simultaneously penning his own versions of

Childe Harold and *Don Juan*. While scholars such as Anne Barton (1996), Philip Martin (1995) and Simon Kövesi (2000) have studied the Byronic poetry, celebrating Clare's satirical vision and relying upon it to explore the complex relationship between the two authors and questions of poetic identity and originality, the biblical poetry remains something of an anomaly – even an embarrassment – to Clare scholars. Such a religious turn, after all, must be a sign of his madness. Sarah Houghton-Walker's superb recent monograph, *John Clare's Religion* (2009), does much to redress this critical oversight. Houghton-Walker thoroughly inventories the many ways in which religion informs Clare's oeuvre, and demonstrates that Clare made a practice of turning scripture into verse throughout his long career. Such a practice should, moreover, not be seen as unusual, as versifying scripture was a common practice among poets of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Finally, read ecocritically, these poems may seem less aberrant within the range of Clare's other topics, as I hope to demonstrate.

Tim Chilcott's edition, *John Clare: The Living Year 1841* (Clare 1999), offers a fascinating perspective on Clare's creative life during a year that began at High Beach, which he escaped in July to return briefly to his cottage in Northborough, only to be sent, at the end of December, to the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum where he would spend the remaining twenty-three years of his life. Chilcott's text provides the Byronic poems on the verso side and the biblical poems on the recto, matching the chronological sequence of the poetry's composition. While we must read this work with the knowledge of Clare's precarious mental and emotional condition, it is certain that these poems are not the work of a madman, but of a gifted writer, vertiginously making "imaginative leaps from cosmos to cowslip" (Chilcott 1999: xv).

Versification of scripture was an important poetic practice, particularly for poets of the laboring classes, as I have written about elsewhere (Keegan 2005). Clare's decision to turn to biblical passages for inspiration was neither entirely anomalous nor an indication that he had lost his mind. Laboring-class poets from Stephen Duck forward found in this subgenre an opportunity to write in a sublime style that might otherwise have been regarded as "off limits" for self-educated artists. Their efforts could be couched in piety, thereby defusing any accusations of attempting to rise above their station through choosing an elevated subject. Although Clare wrote a century after Duck, he faced many of the same prejudices. Given Clare's voracious reading habits, we can assume that he was well aware of how his poetic precursors, both refined and rustic, had reworked the biblical originals, and he was already an avid reader of the Bible itself. Claiming Clare's religious poetry has "never been fully appreciated" (Clare 2003: xix), the editors of the magisterial Oxford editions are unequivocal in their appraisal of the importance and relevance of Clare's biblical poetry.

Like many laboring-class poets, Clare found ample inspiration in the Book of Job and the Psalms. But he also looked to more obscure books, such as that of the minor prophet Habakkuk. The passages Clare transforms are primarily from the

Hebrew Bible, which is not unusual, as Hebrew poetry was favored by eighteenth-century writers. Robinson et al. note that

Clare was also powerfully moved by the Hebrew poetry of the Bible, the most important book he ever read. Not only . . . did the ancient Hebrew, with its omission of vowels in its written form possibly provide him with a code in which he wrote letters, prose, and poems in his asylum period and cause him to advise his children to study Hebrew, but it also provided many of the images and the rhythms of his own verse and prose. (Clare 2003: xix–xx).

There are also three passages from the New Testament, all of which are apocalyptic. The majority of the passages explore different dimensions of the role that nature plays in the ever-shifting relationship between the human and divine.

The first major paraphrase of 1841 is David's Lament, from 2 Samuel 1–17. Here nature performs the function of pathetic fallacy and only in a minor way. Likewise the next text, the much longer Song of Deborah, from Judges 5:6–31, a favorite among laboring-class authors, also invokes natural forces fighting on the side of justice, serving as God's weapons against his enemies. The third poem in the sequence, Clare's version of Psalm 104, more fully makes nature its focus, praising God for his wisdom and goodness in creating the world as he has, marveling at the scope and scale of creation:

Thou hast made in thy wisdom both forest & flower
The earth it is full of thy riches & good
So is this great ocean & fathomless flood
Where small & great beasts of a wonderfull size
In numberless numbers our fancies surprise

(ll. 10–14)³

Clare is predictably drawn to the psalmist's praises for God's inventiveness, his poetry in making creatures that delight "fancy." Just as Clare found poetry in less "poetical" animals such as badgers, here he celebrates how the sea monster Leviathan "plays" in the depths of God's ocean. Leviathan will appear again in the paraphrase of Job. Clarence Glacken notes the historical significance of this psalm in Western conceptions of natural order: "The life, beauty, activity, order, and reasonableness in nature are described without mysteries, joyously – even triumphantly. God is separate from nature, but he may be understood in part from it" (Glacken 1967: 157). Psalm 104 provides an important basis for the "argument from design" expounded by such seventeenth-century thinkers as John Ray.

What is significant about this psalm, and which is elaborated upon in Job, is that in the worldview celebrated here, humans are "one species among all the others . . . Neither in terms of form nor contents of this song are they singled out" (Tucker 1997: 16). Clare appears to be drawn to those rare scriptures where nature is elevated and human importance diminished, although as Gene Tucker warns, these passages are not

nature poetry. The vision is theocentric; and *creation* not *nature* is praised, and nature then only as an extension of the creator.

Clare makes a unique choice in the text for his next paraphrase, the Prayer of Habakkuk. Here nature serves as the instrument and the sign of God's power and wrath. Divine anger continues to grow until the scenario becomes increasingly apocalyptic, as mountains "trembled & fled" (l. 30) and "Worlds of water broke loose & in thunder passed bye" (l. 31). Likewise, those who are obedient to God are protected. Here Clare finds scriptural precursors for the catastrophic vision found in many of the more secular poems written around the same time, like the late "Songs" and the two "I Am" poems. When read together, these versifications (as well as the one of Lamentations of Jeremiah 3) are stylistically and tonally similar.

Clare's next paraphrase, from Numbers 23 and 24, concerns the prophecy of Balaam. One might imagine that Clare would devote himself to the famous story of Balaam's ass (Numbers 22), given his sympathy for animals and his numerous writings protesting their mistreatment. His poem, however, transforms the story subsequent to the speaking donkey. These two chapters focus on the tension between the king Balak and the prophet Balaam. Balak is intent to have Balaam curse the Israelites. However, Balaam sees that God blesses them and refuses to comply with Balak's demands. These two passages rely heavily on animal imagery, but are otherwise not concerned with the role of nature, except with the association of the favored Israelites with the wilderness:

& when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord well
To bless them – he sought not enchantment or spell
But he turned to the wilderness loved in his youth
Where nature & God live in silence & truth

(ll. 1–4)

The Israelites' blessedness is connected to their close association with wilderness, which is anomalous in Old Testament representations of nature. Clare had obviously studied his Bible for those passages that aligned with his own sympathies.

During the late summer and fall, after Clare had returned home following his harrowing "Journey out of Essex," he turned again to converting Bible passages into his own poetry including his lengthy adaptation of the final chapters of the Book of Job, chapters 38–41. Given Clare's sufferings it would seem obvious why he, as so many other sufferers before him, would be drawn to this exploration of the problem of pain and the motive of a divinity who could allow it into creation. However, these chapters also offer "[t]he most forceful and compelling critique of the idea that humanity is the pinnacle of the natural order" (Tucker 1997: 13).

In these chapters, God finally speaks to Job who has been at a loss to understand why he has been so afflicted. God frames his answer in terms of his absolute sovereignty, as Creator, over all of created nature and challenges Job's ability to comprehend the enormity of such a role – as well as the enormity of nature itself. In chapter 38, He challenges Job, "Where wast thou mortal when I formed & laid / Foundations of the

earth and sea ..." (ll. 7–8), and also asks him, "Hast thou perceived the breadth of earth or space / If thou knowest all or part thereof – declare" (ll. 35–6). By asking Job whether his relation to nature is like God's, God underscores humanity's impotence to control nature:

The influences of the Pleiades canst thou bind
Or loosen Orion's belt – canst thou bring forth
Nazzaroth in his season or yet guide
Arcturus and his sons – man knowst thou
The ordinances of heaven – canst thou set
The dominion thereof in earth – let silence speak
(ll. 64–9)

The answer to all of the divinity's questions about whether or not Job fully understands nature is a resounding NO. Writing of the ecological significance of Job 38, theologian Dale Patrick argues:

The first discourse envisages a created order independent of humans. One can see this in its celebration of the "wildness" of nature – forces not only outside of human control, but without value to humans. Nothing in this address speaks of the good of creation for humans. Nor does it conform to the human moral order. This is a world that is good in a non-moral sense, each being existing for itself and participating in a community of being. Such a world has intrinsic worth apart from any human valuation. (Patrick 2001: 111)

The world that Clare versifies in Job is a world without us, a world that is, moreover, divinely indifferent to us.

Job 39 focuses on humanity's relationship to the animals, who are just as indifferent to human control as the weather or the stars described in chapter 38. In Clare's hands, this long litany of human irrelevance becomes a powerful description of the animals' beauty and magnificence:

Hast thou given the horse his strength or cloathed
His neck with thunder – canst thou make him fear
& flee like a grasshopper – the glory
Of his nostrils is fierce and terrible
He paweth the ground in strength rejoicing
& goeth onward to meet the battle
(ll. 34–9)

As Tucker observes about chapter 39, "it explicitly challenges the human instinct to control, especially to domesticate. Humanity does not understand all things, nor manage them, but God does" (Tucker 1997: 15).

It is not only lions, horses, and goats that God cares for and in whose creation God relishes, but also the less charismatic megafauna, including Behemoth, who forms the

subject of most of Clare's versification of chapter 40. Behemoth is a creature of the swamps, and thus one might assume of particular interest to Clare:

Coverts of shady trees do make his lair
 In the reed forests of the untrodden fens
 The shady trees doth cover him with shadow
 & willow brooks encompass him with shade
 (ll. 38–41)

Much like the snipe or other wetland creatures that Clare wrote about, Behemoth is reclusive, living apart from and indifferent to humanity. His beauty does not require human approval. He has God's.

Chapter 41 turns to Behemoth's counterpart from the sea, Leviathan, who symbolizes even more powerfully nature's independence and refusal to submit to human dominion or control. As Terence Frethem writes about Behemoth and Leviathan,

That they are created by God ... strongly suggests that however strange and atypical they might be they are good creatures, not evil. They are part of the diverse and wonderful world that God has created. At the same time, these creatures are revealing of the kind of good creation wherein humans can be hurt and suffer, not least because they are certainly beyond human control. (Frethem 2005: 235)

Clare transposes a portion of this passage on Leviathan as follows:

Will he to thee a supplication make
 Or speak soft words to make a friend of thee
 Will he with thee make covenant – or thou
 Make him for aye thy servant or thy slave
 ...
 Shall thy companions banquet on his flesh
 Or part him among merchants for rich gain
 Or canst thou fill his skin with barbed hooks
 ...
 Thy hopes of him behold are all in vain
 (ll. 5–8, 10–12, 17)

Leviathan demonstrates God's power and the alterity of nature, an alterity to which Clare is the most powerful poetic witness in the period. God created the Leviathan who is not at the service of humanity. God glories in the monstrosity of his creation, a creation that concerns God only. In Clare's hands, this passage offers some of the most gorgeous description of the power of nature in and for itself. Clare was apparently so taken with this magnificent chapter that he wrote a second version of it, the "Peterborough Rhyming Version." Modern environmentalist Bill McKibben, who uses these last chapters of Job as the foundation for a meditation on modern environmental hubris and destructiveness, has commented on the poetry of this passage, praising: "the biologically

accurate, earthy, juicy, crusty, *wild*, untamed poetry of God's great speech" (1994: 54). McKibben goes on to call these verses "the first great piece of modern nature writing" (1994: 57), as Clare had already noticed.

Interspersed in the manuscript of the versifications of Job are versifications of chapters 21 and 22 of the Book of Revelation, as well as of Matthew 31 (on the Last Judgement) and the third chapter of Jeremiah, discussed above. In these selections, Clare envisions not a world without us, *per se*, but the divine recreation of the world that fell because of us. John Clare assumes the voice of John of Patmos and imagines the New Jerusalem, which replaces "the first earth . . . fled with its deeds unforgiven" (l. 3). While nature as we know it seems at first absent from the city of God, Clare continues in his transposition of Revelations 22 to describe the "River of the Water of Life." Rivers and riparian scenes were another landscape predominant in Clare's pre-Asylum verse, as I have elsewhere written (Keegan 2003). On this riverside, the Tree of Life grows, thus Nature persists in the New Jerusalem. The tree grows "Twelve manner of fruit . . . so fertile is the sod" (ll. 7–8). Much like the Eden Clare continuously celebrates in his earlier nature poetry (and which has been thematically surveyed by Janet Todd), before and after us, nature thrives.

In his versification of Psalm 19, which follows chronologically the composition of the apocalyptic passages, Clare returns to the theme found in his poems on eternity, that of the language of nature which is also the voice of the divine:

The heaven his wonderous works declare
The firmament his power
His handyworks are written there
Through every day & hour

Day unto day in language speaks
Night into night will shine
In knowledge – & all language reads
& hears that voice divine

Their lines & words through all the earth
Hath all the world oer run

(ll. 1–10).

Clare here describes the language of God, which he had represented and imitated in earlier texts. God's delight in his creation – in nature and nature alone – is also expressed in the opening lines of one of the last psalms, Psalm 97, that Clare transposes.

The earth reigneth now earth is green in his smiles
Let gladness extend through her hundreds of isles

(ll. 1–2).

Despite the celebratory tone here, these late psalms and scriptures have a predominantly lamentatory quality which allows them to be read from a psychological perspective as providing insight into Clare's emotional despair. But an equally important

meditation on nature runs through these works, one that is consonant with Clare's earlier poetry.

Throughout his career, Clare extolled the beauty of nature and gave witness to how humans could enjoy it as well as condemning the ways they could destroy it. He was courageous enough to understand that nature's beauty and purpose might ultimately have nothing whatsoever to do with us, and that the world without us was the true poem, the poem Clare again and again aspired to write.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 5 "Ballad Collection and Lyric Collectives"; chapter 9 "The Romantic Georgic and the Work of Writing"; chapter 11 "Ear and Eye: Counteracting Senses in Loco-descriptive Poetry"

NOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations will be taken from Eric Robinson and David Powell's Oxford Authors edition of Clare (Clare 1984).
- 2 The John Clare Page – www.johnclare.info (accessed May 2010) – maintained by Simon Kövesi, provides the most thorough overview and bibliography for the copyright controversy.
- 3 All quotations from Clare's 1841 versifications of scripture are taken from Tim Chilcott's edition (Clare 1999).

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Ethical Supernaturalism: The Romanticism of Wordsworth, Heaney, and Lacan

Guinn Batten

“Feeling into Words” is Seamus Heaney’s most celebrated and controversial essay (Heaney 1980). An excavation of bogs as sites of savagery, memory, and poetry for Wordsworth, it is also, more generally, an exploration of the erotics of political violence and the ethics of affect. Heaney, a Nobel laureate and a celebrated reader and anthologist of Wordsworth, brings into uncomfortable focus the disturbances that are provoked rather than diminished when we seek to separate “passion” and “reason,” to find through words distance from distress during political crisis. That oxymoron the “Romantic Enlightenment” perhaps unsurprisingly even today spurs Irish poets and Romantic scholars to seek (this, too, is an oxymoron) to “know” the “feelings” – the moods, passions, melancholia, and anger, to use the terms of the most recent contemporary Romantic scholarship – of a Romantic poetry that surely the reader cannot help but also experience *through* feeling. The conjunction of a “hope” that “can never die” with both violence and with disappointment was experienced by Wordsworth and Heaney at sites of sacrificial murder (including, but not limited to, standing stones and bogs) as well as in Nature’s most sublime settings (Wordsworth 1979: 1805 *Prelude* vi. 540). These primitive, memorial sites are for Wordsworth as for Heaney coterminous with the primal vicissitudes of personal memory, or with something worse. Jacques Lacan, by offering a penetrating critique of the violence of the Romantic Enlightenment (studying Wordsworth, Kant, and Sade), helps us see what Heaney can teach the Romantics scholar about Wordsworth and “feelings” (Lacan 1992).

It may seem unnecessary to remind ourselves that the Romantic Enlightenment has haunted the politics and, through crisis, the poetry of Ireland after Yeats – including that of Patrick Kavanagh, John Montague, Thomas Kinsella, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, and Ciaran Carson. This has been particularly recognized since the Troubles gained international attention in the early 1970s. It likewise seems to go without saying that Seamus Heaney could learn from no better model than Wordsworth

how to write as a first-person witness of political crisis poems that cumulatively compose what M. H. Abrams would call a Romantic “crisis autobiography” (1971: 73–140). In that genre violence, through arduous self-scrutiny, can be purged from reason, can through self-awareness lead to the literally higher ground of humane compassion, whether it is (as for Wordsworth) a retrospect from Snowdon or, as in Heaney’s case, the point of view that merges with the suffering of the victim raised from bog burial.

There is undeniable truth in Abrams’s linkage in 1971 – as insurgency and state violence escalated in Northern Ireland but also, thanks to the Vietnam war, on American campuses – of public crisis and poetic autobiography. But there is a less obvious, and more important, lesson Heaney learns from such different poems as “The Thorn” and *The Prelude* (each written by Wordsworth while England, engaged in its own foreign and colonial wars, encouraged bigotry and even mob violence to quell dissent). The site of violence, whether it is a street in Derry or Paris or Birmingham (England) or Birmingham (Alabama), whether it is a mythic sacrifice at Stonehenge or the 1798 battle at Ballinamuck, persists long after the event as what Wordsworth called in Book 11 of the 1805 *Prelude* a “spot” of “time” (xi. 257). Such spots make visible the workings of hope, threat, and power, and they do so by seeming to lay hold of a secret of the subject who was early “fostered alike by beauty and by fear” (i. 306). Yet the spot of time not only hurts, it heals:

There are in our existence spots of time
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
...
our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired –
A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
That penetrates, enables us to mount
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
(xi. 257–9, 263–7)

Two centuries after Wordsworth wrote *The Prelude*, in large part in response to his disappointment with French republicanism, in Heaney’s poems such spots continue to haunt his readers precisely because they bear witness to a source in the self structured by the deepest “wish” of the armchair republican: that “Reason” will prevail over violence, beyond as well as within the self, and through the practice of peace will persuade power to be just. This wish is “Romantic,” its source common to every troubled idealist, insurgent or apostate, pamphleteer or philosopher or poet, in 1968 or 2010 as in 1798, because – for reasons that, as I will elaborate, are by no means sentimental – it believes in what Lacan calls the myth of the pastoral (1992: 88–9). Central to that myth is not only a good father (even if he is also all too human in his capacity to disappoint) but more importantly an idealized, all-powerful “mother,” who, as Lacan insists, can only be mythic: “she” (like Wordsworth’s spot of time) recedes as soon as she appears in the adult mind. She both is, and is not, one’s “real” mother because she is (in Lacan’s term) “Real” (1992: 70). To use Wordsworth’s own phrase in the spots of

time passages, this mythic mother is a “hiding place” of “power,” or what Lacan calls, as did Freud, *das Ding*, and as such “she” is the vexed link between idealism and violence, and violence and beauty, in Wordsworth and Heaney. This is so, however outrageous may seem the yoking of the names “Lacan” and “Heaney,” or “Lacan” and “Wordsworth,” for readers of Lacan who link him only with poststructuralist language theory and with gentle theories of the maternal “imaginary” and “the mirror stage” that fail to represent the complexities of his engagement with, more broadly, the “affect” of “Reason” that sustains hope even as it ensures its defeat.

I

“Feeling into Words,” published in 1974 as the Troubles escalated in the two years that followed Bloody Sunday, opens with an intention to explore Wordsworth’s “hiding places” and concludes with Heaney’s own fascination with spots where time is preserved, including places where ritual sacrifice is offered to the Irish and female “territorial numen,” Sovereignty (Heaney 1980: 57). Surprisingly, Heaney does not mention here (or elsewhere in his writing, as far as I can determine, including in a conversation with the poet at his home in December 2008) the episode of druid sacrifice on Salisbury Plain in *The Prelude*. This episode, which anticipates the climax to follow on Snowdon in Wales, revisits the Stonehenge described in the early poem *Salisbury Plain*. Drafted in 1793, that poem was renamed as “Guilt and Sorrow” when it was published in 1842 (Wordsworth 1940). In this vision poem of Celtic Britain, the bodies of sacrificial victims emerge at England’s best-known prehistoric site. When he resituates that vision in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth (now speaking in first person) recalls his terror before “vestiges of ancient times,” the “bone” of warriors “long mouldered” ascending to “barbaric majesty” (xii. 318–26). The “sacrificial altar” is “fed with living men” whose single “voice” “pervades the monumental hillocks” (ll. 331–3).

That word, “voice,” is Heaney’s central topic in “Feeling into Words.” There are few surprises in what Heaney has to say about voice and poetic (and personal) development in the essay: “voice” is what separates the successful, because “authentic,” poet from the imitative epebe. Yet in the three decades that followed “Feeling into Words,” Heaney increasingly has not come to concern himself exclusively, as we might expect, with the individuality or authenticity of “voice” as it might emerge (let us say during a politically engaged poet’s on-the-ground experience of the French Terror or the Irish Troubles) as a vocation to speak out on behalf of civilians who suffer during war. Indeed, in “The Redress of Poetry” he explicitly repudiates those who would limit the poet’s role in a time of war to this duty (Heaney 1995). Beyond this obvious lesson which once claimed his attention, Heaney – thankfully – increasingly came to hear (and to imitate) in the poetry of Wordsworth what Mladen Dolar, in *A Voice and Nothing More*, defines in his astute reading of Lacan and Kant as an ethical, still small voice which he calls an “opening” (Dolar 2006: 95). An ethical voice, as it turns from the excess of emotion aroused by the ethical imperative to do the right thing, articulates a position

Pondering Wordsworth's "loss of visionary gleam in his great 'Ode'" Heaney concludes that "it was only when the gleam had fled that Wordsworth opened up all the gorgeous stops" in the "deliberately orchestral" Immortality Ode (O'Driscoll 1998: 304). In an earlier work, "The Makings of a Music," Heaney cites Book 1 of *The Prelude* (ll. 280–1) that describes the act of walking, of "cadence," as a "tempering" of "Our human waywardness" (Heaney 1980: 69). An ethics of "feeling," if we extend what Heaney suggests in his interview with O'Driscoll, must acknowledge that voice and violence provoke one another, and that the opening of "gorgeous" "stops" must also cherish, and preserve, what is "stopped." "Temperament" is immortality hearing at the heart's deep core, through what Heaney calls the Ode's "orchestral plenitude," mortality. That lesson bears comparison with what Lacan teaches, in his own close reading of the preamble to the Immortality Ode, in Seminar VII.

Lacan's 1959–60 Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, was delivered a decade before he would criticize the "childishness" of university students who engaged in protests in Paris, and this seminar on ethics, violence, and beauty anticipates that later criticism. Lacan opens with a close reading of Wordsworth's phrase "the child is father of the man" (Lacan 1992: 24), which Wordsworth's readers know is the epigraph of the Immortality Ode: "The Child is Father of the Man; / And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by Natural Piety" (Wordsworth 1947). Our age childishly demands of art, Lacan complains, as of the psychoanalyst material and immediate solutions to the actual, and historical, conditions of human evil. What Lacan tells us that we get from art, as from analysis, however, is in fact what Heaney would call "clearance": an "emptying" that nevertheless preserves a "spot" – beyond but also within ourselves – *as* "empty" and, as a consequence, renders it resonant. "The emptiness at the center of the real," Lacan observes, "is called the Thing," and that, he continues, is what art, music, and poetry encircle, cherish, preserve and keep open (1992: 121). The spot, site of a historical violence psychic and/or public, makes us suffer because, Lacan argues, it is (as in the Immortality Ode) the locus of an immortal "wish." Because of suffering we demand that a poet speak from the place of the *oppressed* as if for, and from the place of, the *repressed*, speak from the primal place of "feeling," the unfulfillable site of opened (as Heaney, too, would describe it) ground as from an open wound. Yet that spot does not simply represent the wound of trauma: just as important, it arrests, making visible as *guilt*, the inextinguishable *wish* of the child that suffers there. While philosophy, psychoanalysis, and poetry – and each of these domains receives Lacan's close scrutiny in this seminar – might wish, since the Romantic Enlightenment, to claim, with the ambition of the precocious child who takes center stage in the first books of *The Prelude* and in the spots of time, a higher ground from which to see and speak the truth, none in fact may speak *except* on behalf of, or literally in the place of, not "the truth" but rather *a* "wish." That wish persists *as* "violent" precisely because it is neither "realistic" nor *realizable* but rather (in Lacan's lexicon) "Real" (Lacan 1992: 68, 70). If ethics can be universal, that is so, Lacan argues, only because "it is universal that this particularity is found in every human being" (1992: 24).

This particularity we might, following Heaney's lead in the interview with O'Driscoll, call the *unconscious* that is the "temperament" that underlies every act of judgment, including the ethical judgment. That truth of the child's wish is "preserved," for Lacan as it is in Heaney's suggestive bogs and Wordsworth's spots of time, in "the depths of the subject in an irreducible form" (Lacan 1992: 24). From those depths, Heaney claims in "Feeling into Words" (contrary to his insistence on an "authentic" voice), emerge words that present what he calls a "two-faced approach" to truth (1980: 54). "Truth" speaks not in a single and unified voice, the voice we would expect Heaney to celebrate as at once personal, ethical, and political in this essay, but rather through "a ramification of roots and associations" in words themselves that look "forward to a clarification of sense and meaning" (1980: 52). But "clarification" isn't finally the ethical means, or the end, that Heaney seeks in "Clearances," where silence, and not the last word, "ramifies" "forever." Heaney's ethics, contrary to his reputation, are not to be found in a poetry that digs up, and thereby exposes, its source, however urgent the "secret," as Heaney calls it in "Feeling into Words," "asking for release" in the boggy ground or, as he adds, "in the thorn" (1980: 52).

Because the opened ground, in Lacan's ethics as in Heaney's, should not, and indeed cannot, be purged fully – for that wish to eliminate exacerbates, rather than relieves, a ruthless aggression – the poet and the reader may with respect, as Wordsworth writes, return to that spot "nourished and invisibly repaired" (1805 *Prelude* xi. 264). "The hiding-places of my power" (xi. 334), as Wordsworth writes in introducing the final spots of time passage, demand that he give "as far as words can give, / A substance and a life to what I feel" (ll. 340–1). In such giving *to*, rather than *through* feeling, he may in turn "repair" *to*, and be repaired *by*, "the workings of my spirit" (ll. 335–40; 383–8). Those "workings," Lacan would tell us, are synonymous with the very place of *das Ding*, where words are "bound each to each" by the force-field of that spot's power.

Regardless of these likenesses to be found in Heaney's "Clearances" and Lacan's ethics of *das Ding*, the earlier and more polemical "Feeling into Words" could not be further from Lacan's insistence that the "mother" may be "wished" to be *das Ding* but that in fact she is not. Heaney, however, proposes that poetic truth is, purely and simply, the expression of the repressed, and the repressed is at once "woman," "sexuality," and "Nature." Indeed he uses as one example of this silenced secret a well-known Romantic image: the genius of the spring who elicits but resists poetic genius, the feminine *undine* of sodden ground whose drains or pipes the masculine poet forcibly enters and clears. Sites where "Woman" enters into "voice," Heaney concludes, "arise out of the almost unnameable energies" in the self, as they themselves arise in the "language and landscape" (1980: 52). Lacan would, in fact, agree on this point. Yet contrary to Heaney he would argue that neither the release of these energies in sexual fulfillment (as in the *undine* example) nor the clarification of what is meant by a "sense," or feeling, through interpretation (in Heaney's words, "a *clarification* of sense and meaning") is in itself the ethical function of art. The sense that "feels" is neither oppositional to, nor complementary to, nor better nor worse than the sense that claims to know better. The less clear-cut (so to speak) ethics offered by Lacan is closer to the later

Heaney whose clearances ramify, and the Heaney who knows (as we will see) that Wordsworth's truth has thorns. Heaney in this essay also offers a quite different, and no less Romantic, example of the ramified voice: the complex, resistant roots of Wordsworth's thorn tree, an image that vexes the alleged stability, and authority, of masculine voice as it confronts "woman" and "Nature." The violence of language that authors but also disturbs the speaking self (as in "The Thorn") begins, for Lacan, in that self's judgment – driven by the child's Wordsworthian wish for days filled with wonder – of reality and pleasure (Lacan 1992: 39–42; 47; 72–5). Does the wish coincide with "reality," or does it only hallucinate pleasure, seeking to make it real simply by wishing for it? The wish leads to judgment through internal energies that are competing, or, to use Heaney's own term in the essay, "two-faced," testing a pressure from without, or "reality," according to a pressure, that is, a wish for a *repetition* of, "pleasure" from within (Lacan 1992: 39–42; 47; 72–5). One's temper, moods, or feelings, *die Stimmungen*, are for Lacan never to be trusted as single-minded, as identical to, or knowing *of*, themselves (Lacan 1992: 26). That distrust leads Lacan, as it did Freud, to explore the law of feelings as the dialectical principles of reality and pleasure, fields whose oppositional pressures structure vortically the drives as a whirlpool around the absent/present *Ding* that both call *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* (Lacan 1992: 60–2; 100–11; 118; 137–8). The pleasure-seeking, reality-testing self, in short, encircles the void of *unpleasure* that, like Heaney's *undine* in the boggy field, or Wordsworth's insistent "spot," demands release but at the same time demands preservation. The source that fosters beauty, as the so-often circumambient Wordsworth knew, through the discipline of fear as well as the forgiveness of love, that void, around and out of which the child constructs "Nature" as "mother," lies at the heart of the child's wish. In that void Lacan situates, as does Wordsworth in the Immortality Ode, the *guilt* (*our* guilt) of "the Thing" that is surprised (or, rather, that the judgmental "reality testing" function of reason *seeks* to "surprise") in its joy, something that "Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised" (l. 148).

From that vortical forcefield that is precisely, in its unknowability, the felt reality of one's identity, the sensual certainty that one is (to use a Romantic construction) unique and individual in one's self, Lacan arrives at an ethics of representation, indeed an ethical aesthetic. That ethics represents, acknowledges, but does not seek union with the Thing that the wish encircles, the Thing that one cannot abjure because it is literally that *by* which one *abides*. The Thing breathes life into, and makes personal, the structure of language, but it also haunts the wish that would, in preserving pleasure, mortify its source, the Thing, and therefore the self, insofar as, paradoxically, the self wishes to *be* the Thing, not simply to *have* it, so that it may become, thereby, "immortal" (Lacan 1992: 70). That, Lacan tells us, is an apt description not of eternal life but of the living dead, or "drive," which is, he insists, another word for the categorical imperative produced by the Romantic Enlightenment, "the great revolutionary crisis of morality" (1992: 70).

For Lacan that child's wish, prelude to the drive, structures Enlightenment reason as it does Romantic imagination. Each – the child, Enlightenment reason, Romantic

imagination – is driven by what it cannot have, and by what it wants at once to vanquish and to preserve. In the political and philosophical campaigns for liberation that were, and are, inspired by the Romantic Enlightenment, an ethical poetry, Lacan teaches, must refuse either a natural piety that ostensibly would release gradually and guardedly the pressure of violent feeling in the erroneous belief that it can be put to good use, or a natural religion that ostensibly would release ecstatically, and absolutely, the pressing truth of our animality that festers when repressed. Nature *herself* must be liberated, Lacan insists, from the demand that she liberate humankind; she must be freed from a human, visionary gleam that acts on “feeling” as though feeling were the innocent victim of reason. For the source of violence is not in a Nature that deprives. Rather it is in the unnatural place *in* Nature, *das Ding*, created by the *Wunsch*. Any political dream founded on the fantasy of a lost “Good” is the fantasy, not the prior truth or possible realization, of maternal, and natural, plenitude. While this may seem a platitude of poststructuralism that repudiates its prior “ism” (“Romanticism”), and hence not a realization derived *from* a truth made available by a Romantic (and a late Romantic) poet, in fact my strong claim is, as I extend Lacan’s reading of the Ode’s epigraph, on behalf of the latter.

In that inevitably unrealizable fantasy governing what Wordsworth calls “those first affections” grows, as he instructs us, the suspicion and resentment of a feminized “Nature” accused of withholding her secrets, her treasure, and her pleasure. That suspicion and aggression is what recoils, in Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode, as the “guilty Thing surprised” locked in a “nature” suspected of harboring “what was so fugitive:” “O joy! that in our embers / Is something that doth live, / That nature yet remembers / What was so fugitive!” (ll. 130–4). Astonishingly, rather than hate this fugitive, Wordsworth’s speaker in fact “raises” a “song of thanks and praise” for

those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realized,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprized:
(ll. 142–8)

These are, Wordsworth elaborates, “our first affections,” and they lead not to voice but to “the eternal *Silence*” of “truths that wake, / To perish never” (ll. 156–7). A poetry that would suspend, rather than sustain, that fantasy would constitute what Anne-Lise François has called, from the perspective of ecological theory, the “open secret” of a nature poetry that frees Nature by leaving, indeed by preserving, such secrets unmolested, and unexploited (François 2008). Freed from the pressure of the poet’s very wish to speak not only for but *from* or *within* her “truth,” the pressure that Wordsworth so often calls “impressive,” Nature may be released from the terror she is alleged to

harbor, as the Thing, or void, in whose image she has been made, from the mode by which she is believed to “impress.”

II

In writing of Salisbury Plain Wordsworth notes what he calls the “impressive” effect of “the monuments and traces of antiquity scattered in abundance over that region,” a statement that appears in his preface to the 1842 revision, “Guilt and Sorrow” (Wordsworth 1944: 95). Glimpsing traces of the past in its hiding places led Wordsworth to a historian’s impulse “unavoidably to compare what we know or guess of those in remote times with certain aspects of modern society, and with calamities, principally those consequent upon war, to which, more than other classes of men, the poor are subject” (1944: 95). He had encountered in 1793 these antiquities, and calamities, in a severe summer storm after returning from a “long residence in revolutionary France” to an England “which was then preparing for . . . the commencement of war” (1944: 94), a crisis that he feared “would be of long continuance, and productive of distress and misery beyond all possible calculation.”

Heaney in “Feeling into Words” hears just such “impressive” distress and misery in a different poem by Wordsworth, also set in a tempestuous landscape: the enchanted tree and the quaking moss of “The Thorn.” That impressive object is rooted in an English village that seems, in its preoccupation with an allegedly infanticidal mother, remote from the calamities of war. A “permanently impressive object” is the phrase used by Wordsworth, notes Heaney, to describe to Isabella Fenwick the thorn that inspired the eponymous poem (Heaney 1980: 50). Through a “wind-tossed” “field of force” Nature “grant[s] the thorn tree its epiphany, awakening in Wordsworth that engendering heightened state” which, Heaney reminds us, he describes at the beginning of *The Prelude* as “A tempest, a redundant energy / Vexing its own creation” (Heaney 1980: 51, 50; 1850 *Prelude* i. 46–7). While Heaney cites here *The Prelude*, Book 1, we might have expected him instead to recur to a more “Thorn”-like vexation: the spot of time in which a woman who carries on her head a pitcher – bearing (one supposes) a source of life or even life itself – finds her passage imperiled, “her garments vexed and tossed” by *tempest*. A “Woman in a scarlet cloak” in “The Thorn” (is she perhaps an English Kathleen ni Houlihan?) haunts the site of presumed infanticide “in rain, in *tempest*, and in snow” (ll. 63, 79). In that site is rooted an “aged Thorn” beside a “hill of moss” (ll. 6, 36) – on a “jutting crag” where the speaker sought, in “mist and rain, and storm and rain,” natural shelter (ll. 182, 177).

Heaney argues that Wordsworth in “The Thorn” encounters his *own* “superstition,” the way in which authentic “feeling” finds its way into an authentic “voice;” yet on the face of it, the poem is a perverse choice (Heaney 1980: 50). The poem’s loquacious, credulous speaker summoned Wordsworth’s own loquacious, not fully persuasive, defense of the poem: that he was led to write “The Thorn” “to exhibit some of the general *laws* by which superstition acts upon the mind” (Wordsworth 1984: 593).

“Poetry is passion,” Wordsworth continues, but it also “is the history or science of feelings” (Wordsworth 1984: 594). Yet Heaney insists – rightly – that Wordsworth’s own, *true* passion speaks here, and speaks *as* “superstition,” through this terrified witness who is judging, or questioning, the truth of what he has seen, and heard, through the senses even as he renders it in his refrain, in his repetition of the cloaked and threatening woman’s words: “I have *heard* her cry, / ‘O misery! O misery!’” (ll. 240–1, emphasis added). Judgment, the basis for discerning what is real, here summons its own basis in disturbance.

The initial “apprehension of the tree” through which, Heaney claims, Wordsworth “instinctively realized” his true feelings in order to put them into words (Heaney 1980: 50) is repeated, often using the same words, in two other poems where Wordsworth memorably encounters guilt. In *The Prelude*’s second spot of time the speaker’s “desire” is “corrected” on a “crag” that is the site of a “whistling hawthorn,” “the one blasted tree” singled out in the midst of “wind and sleety rain” (1805 *Prelude* xi, 434, 436; 349–59; 376–8). In the Immortality Ode “there is a Tree, of many, one” that leads, as if inevitably, from its impressive presence to a startled and “guilty Thing” to, at last, the stretch of time that brings “philosophic mind” (ll. 148, 187). Does Wordsworth mean by such philosophy simply “disenchantment?” In “The Thorn,” Heaney argues, we witness, in fact *enchantment*, a “survival” in Wordsworth of a “magical way of responding to the natural world, of reading phenomena as signs, occurrences requiring divination,” as a result of which, “the thorn in its new, wind-tossed aspect had become a field of force” (Heaney 1980: 51). Heaney, a decade later in “Clearances,” however, has recognized that the Romantic poet may free himself of that force-field, releasing his mortal mother from her entrapment there, for Heaney shapes the imperative of a surviving wish, or demand, for immortality into words that refuse its intractability. “We all knew one thing by being there,” Heaney writes of his mother’s deathbed, “The space we stood around had been emptied / Into us to keep, it penetrated / Clearances that suddenly stood open. / High cries were felled and a pure change happened” (Heaney 1998: vii. 11–14). But is that site of clearance merely another way of persisting in the wish rather than releasing the child from its spell? Is it just another recourse to natural piety, a wish to immortalize, and therefore to occupy, the place of the Thing as though it were the natural mother, the natural tree? If so, then Heaney will have indeed confirmed “poetic selfhood” as persistence in the child’s belief that he may reclaim, through *temperance*, masculine authority on higher ground. This would indeed be (to cite the opening poem of “Clearances”) a wish to “co-opt” the “obliterated echo” (Heaney 1998: l. 5).

An obvious psychoanalytic reading (but one that is not Lacanian) would conclude that Wordsworth in the Immortality Ode, and Heaney in “Clearances,” each liberates his first affections from the ambitions of an immature, unrealistic, and oedipal eroticism, turning his back on a “druidical worship” (through the live entombment of a victim in the heart of an oak, for example) of a maternal “Nature” in which, as Wordsworth writes “beauty ... / Hath terror in it” (1805 *Prelude* xii. 225–6). The mature poet enters into a mortal relationship with “woman” through the immortal

life – facilitated by sublimation – that is “art.” The moment on Snowdon at the end of *The Prelude* and the Immortality Ode, both of which were composed during (and completed after) Wordsworth’s decision to marry Mary Hutchinson, constitute, as most critics have observed, in some sense a shared epithalamium. Heaney, in fact, is particularly astute in situating his tribute to Wordsworth, the “Glanmore Sonnets,” in a place, remote from the violence of the Troubles, where he imagines, like Wordsworth, that he is in some sense coming home. Yet the same “sensings, mountings from the hiding places, / Words entering almost the sense of touch” that inspire new beginnings in these sonnets (Heaney 1998: ii. 1–2) also arrive in a place of “strange loneliness” where the speaker is in danger of confusing one couple – Marie and Seamus – with another, “Dorothy and William” (iii. 11).

Suspecting that marriage haunts the sororal, and the natural, in Wordsworth’s poems does not, of course, require that the critic endorse Freud. M. H. Abrams reads as an “apocalyptic marriage” the climax of the Romantic crisis-autobiography, in which is subsumed a maternal or sororal and material Nature (or “other”) into an aggrandized and masculine “self”: the “two” become “one” in poetic subjectivity (Abrams 1971: 143–6). Alan Liu in *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* contends that Wordsworth’s ideology of the imagination, in league with what he characterizes as a bourgeois domesticity that reaches its pastoral climax in marital “romantic” joy, originates in the violence of political injustice based on class difference (Liu 1989: 236–51). “Feeling” in Wordsworth’s poetry is a symptom of what Wordsworth cannot recognize as a political origin for a private experience (Liu 1989: 299). That Romanticism emerges from crises of the Enlightenment provoked by the rise of capitalism would find some support in Lacan, more fully in Seminar XVII but also, and significantly, in Seminar VII. Lacan acknowledges that, like the Enlightenment, psychoanalysis might seem to be a “search for a natural ethics,” one that would hasten a resolution to “some difficulty that is external in origin, that is the order of a misrecognition or indeed of a misunderstanding” (1992: 88). Psychoanalysis or poetry would offer, in this delusion, an idealized individuation as a “solution to [civilization’s] discontents” and as an ideal for a society that seeks to tolerate, and thereby promote peace among, all forms of difference (1992: 88). The “pastoral,” the ideal and end of a “natural ethics,” has been since the crisis of ethics engendered by the Enlightenment “masked,” Lacan continues, not only by the “vague archetypes of myth” but also by “the more severe and more pedantic form of the infallibility of the proletarian consciousness.” Nevertheless, he argues, “it’s the same old idea of the pastoral,” a wish for what Lacan calls a state of “improved nature or natural amelioration” (1992: 89).

What makes natural piety impossible is the “malice” and “melancholia” of the Thing in its role as “Sovereignty” (Lacan 1992: 70). While it is merely coincidence of translation that this is also the name for the Irish “territorial numen” that Heaney invokes in “Feeling into Words” (Heaney 1980: 57), nevertheless the parallels are striking. “Sovereignty” is the apparition that manifests itself, in particular, after the violent eviction of a sovereign who, in Burke’s antirepublican terms, “roots” a people, like a sturdy oak. In self-governance, Lacan argues, sovereignty returns as the vindictive ghost that

haunts the Reason that has usurped that cleared space. Lacan, continuing his reading of the preamble to the Immortality Ode, describes the “breathtaking” but also “shattering” legacy of Wordsworth and English Romanticism, “bursting forth at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the industrial revolution, in the country that was most advanced in experiencing its effects” (1992: 24). “English romanticism has its own special features,” Lacan continues, “which include the value given to childhood memories, to the whole world of childhood, to the ideals and wishes of the child” (1992: 24). This radically distinguishes the poetry of English Romanticism, Lacan argues, from the generation of European poets to which he will devote the central part of the seminar: the troubadours of the courtly love tradition. While courtly love managed the violence of the “wish” that sustains the Thing by setting “woman” apart as an object of fear, devotion, and impossibility, Romanticism, releasing desire from its bounds, introduces into the mind itself that violence redounding from the Thing as the secret spring of thought.

Reason, for Wordsworth as for Kant, is, Lacan insists, precisely the illimitable dimension of the Romantic sublime in a mind that turns against *itself* as against a “permanently impressive object.” Like the thorn tree Heaney points to in Wordsworth’s letter to Fenwick, the source of thought, driven by the child’s wish, demands – through “feelings” – attention but (as Heaney likewise follows Wordsworth in acknowledging) while it can seek, in words, to be represented, it cannot through them be explained (Heaney 1980: 50). In what Lacan calls the “great revolutionary crisis of morality, namely, the systematic questioning of principles ... at the level of the [Kantian] imperative,” he locates the origins of the guilt that is, as Wordsworth understood, the ghost and goad of the Thing (Lacan 1992: 70). The philosopher who uses reasoning self-knowledge to defend against the wish of the child finds, as Wordsworth does in crossing the Alps in Book 6 of *The Prelude*, that that wish returns as Kant’s dynamical sublime, the underside of self-sovereignty. Likewise this “revolutionary crisis” in thought is, Lacan insists, a crisis in *erotic* “feeling,” whether it is the anxiety Wordsworth recalls when he encounters prostitutes in the streets of London in Book 7 of *The Prelude*, or more generally in the book as he experiences the problem of “difference” as “sexual” in the marketplace that levels distinctions. “Feeling” in such cases becomes “utility.” “*That* is the culminating point for both Kant and Sade with relation to the Thing,” Lacan concludes (1992: 70). This unknowable object that is the source of the child’s wish manifests itself, when thought is interrogated, as the “duty” not simply to obey “Reason” but to *enjoy* obedience. “It is there,” Lacan concludes, alluding both to Kant and to the Marquis de Sade, “that morality becomes, on the one hand a pure and simple application of the universal maxim and, on the other, a pure and simple object” (1992: 70).

In an age when sovereigns are overthrown on behalf of universal rights and unfettered reason, the child will indeed father the man who believes every man is a sovereign in his own mind, but whose encounter with the violence spawned where he pursues happiness requires him, at some point, to encounter two impossible alternatives. One would be to free the child (this would be the Heaney of “Feeling into Words”), the

other to teach him self-governance (Heaney as he might be misread as arguing in “The Government of the Tongue”). Both alternatives, equally destined to fail, are in fact what Lacan calls the violent ethics of *immortality*, espoused by Kant and by Sade, and questioned (as I have shown) by Wordsworth, that drives freedom, even as it seeks to discipline that drive. For Lacan there can be no judgment that delivers peace from violence without separation from the very *source* of judgment in the wish of a child that commands the faculty of reason. Likewise must judgment free itself from the teleology of self-completion, a legacy sustained by the critical heritage of Wordsworth and Kant, and by the political appropriation of Bentham and Macaulay to shape colonial policy: the notion that an adult, and perhaps an entire culture, may have a “juvenile mentality” that it is the task of ethics to adjudicate and, through violence if necessary, educate, or eradicate. But separation from the wish, while it is the solution, is made difficult by “Reason.”

Heaney concludes “Feeling into Words” with the false separation of an erotics (or “feeling”) that mystifies, suffers from, and transgresses the patriarchal law, and a patriarchal metaphysics (or “law”) that, suspicious of feeling but not of reason, would clear in order to colonize the mind, uprooting its superstitious thorn and moss, demystifying its dolmens and draining its bogs, and with that clearance banish from “words” their enchantment to false ideologies that ostensibly lead to conflict between, because they exploit the bodily vulnerability of, otherwise decent human beings. Wordsworth, however, by the end of *The Prelude*, has acknowledged the impossibility of such disenchantment, and calls his own effort to follow the second, metaphysical path an attempt to develop the “function” of the mind, “reason,” that is “rather proud to be / The enemy of falsehood, than the friend / Of truth – to sit in judgment than to feel” (xi. 134–6). “Reason” is merely, Wordsworth discovers, the spell of “syllogistic words” (xi. 82), leading him “Zealously ... to cut off my heart / From all the sources of her former strength” (xi. 77–8). “Thus strangely did I war against myself,” he writes, “A bigot to a new idolatry” (xi. 74–5). The philosopher, Wordsworth concludes, is just another “wizard,” one whose druid “wand” would “unsoul” (xi. 81) the “mysteries of passion” (xi. 84). Under that spell, in the period of 1793 and 1794, Wordsworth recalls that “an emptiness / Fell on the historian’s page, and even on that / Of poets, pregnant with more absolute truth” (xi. 90–2). He concludes, “their empire passed away” (xi. 95).

That empire revives as the “aesthetic,” Alan Liu argues, for Wordsworth on Snowdon. What scared him on Salisbury Plain, the wizardry and the antiquities of a “Celtic” druidism, Wordsworth now appropriates, accommodating a politics of sacrificial violence, based on the “mystification” of natural religion, to a poetics of peaceful priestcraft, of supernatural transcendence. Wordsworth stakes on Snowdon a “druidical” claim, Liu concludes, through the “aesthetic” to “immortality” (Liu 1989: 196). In the early 1790s, engaged with the mortal realities of political struggle, Wordsworth still believed that violence could be a “natural” and therefore “necessary” stage in a people’s, and indeed in a *civilization’s*, liberation. By 1805, however, Wordsworth defines patriotism as an aesthetic act.

We should recall, however, that it is precisely in Book 12 when Wordsworth declares that he will write on behalf of those who suffer in the “walks of homely life” that the druid vision interrupts his politically correct intention (xii. 265). While it may be true that Wordsworth’s poetry moves toward political quietism, and indeed apostasy, that should not lead us to assume in advance that his poetry moves to a position of ethical retreat from the inimitable questions it has raised in approaching the vexed links of violence, the pursuit of universal truth, nature worship, and *das Ding*. When, as Wordsworth writes in the “spots of time” passage, “feeling comes in aid / Of feeling,” there is indeed a “power” that is “left behind” by the memories that are held in the spots of time (xi. 324–5). That power is released, he suggests, not through finding in these spots of time an intimation of immortality, for that is the power by which he is held captive. Rather Wordsworth has been spurred by that promised power literally to return to those sites in Nature with “two dear ones” – his sister Dorothy and his wife Mary – so that life may resume beyond the moment frozen in time (xi. 315–19). What may lead to political inertia, rationalized by a bourgeois ideology of domestic romance, may in fact be an ethics of freedom from immortality.

III

Two years before Heaney published his self-consciously Wordsworthian “Glanmore Sonnets” in *Field Work*, poems in which he acknowledges retreating from the violence in Belfast to rusticate in Wicklow with his wife Marie and their children, Heaney in 1977 was already delineating, in sharp contrast to his 1974 essay “Feeling into Words,” a civilizing and meditative Wordsworth in “The Sense of Place.” No longer celebrating Wordsworth’s experience of violent *impression* as the release of *oppression*, in “The Sense of Place” Heaney now locates Wordsworth in an Irish mode of landscape poetry, “a whole genre of writing called *dinnseanchas*,” or “poems and tales which relate the original meanings of place names” (Heaney 1980: 131). Wordsworth enjoys a “feeling, assenting, equable *marriage* between the geographical country and the country of the mind,” Heaney writes, a union which allows the English poet, as it did the Irish *filidh* dispossessed of the land of their ancestors, to retain, in what Heaney calls “our *sensing* of place,” a filial tie that is also suggestively oedipal. Oedipal but not, finally sexual or violent: Heaney now insists that Wordsworth’s stone omphalos may be found in the sheepfold built by a rural laborer in “Michael.” These stones that encircle loss are pointedly described as “*not* inanimate stone” (i.e., one surmises, a dolmen such as Stonehenge) but rather an “active nature, humanized and humanizing” (Heaney 1980: 145). It could be so because Wordsworth’s “eye,” Heaney insists, was not “regulated by laws of aesthetics, by the disciplines of physical geography” but rather were guided by what Heaney calls “the primary laws of our *nature*, the *laws of feeling*” (1980: 145).

Wouldn’t those laws, a reader of Lacan’s seventh seminar would ask, lead the poet into the violence by which the immortal wish, hidden but preserved, tests reality

against pleasure? While the Wordsworth that Heaney, in 1974, calls attention to in "The Thorn" figures "Nature" as a murderous mother, in this later essay a father, "Michael," is the basis for Heaney's strong claim that "Wordsworth was perhaps the first man to articulate the nurture that becomes available to the feelings through dwelling in one dear perpetual place" (Heaney 1980: 145). Using the language of the *Prelude's* Boy of Winander episode, Heaney writes that Wordsworth intuits how "the surface of the earth can be accepted into and be a steadying influence upon the quiet depths of the mind" (1980: 145). But this suggests, as Patricia Coughlan and Moynagh Sullivan have so keenly argued regarding Heaney, that Heaney's Wordsworth, like the Heaney as "nature lover" that they critique, usurps the position of "woman," the maternal breast of Winander, to put himself as benevolent patriarch (or even as a male breast) in the place of the moist bog queen. Indeed, the patriarchs do return in *The Prelude* and, like the slime-kings of Heaney's "Death of a Naturalist," they do so with a vengeance.

Yet this time, on Salisbury Plain, they do not prevail. Wordsworth in *The Prelude* does slowly wean himself from the habit of "reason," from the eye's judgment. Yet he does not, on Salisbury Plain, put in reason's place "feeling." This allows the poet, belatedly, to develop *temperament* through something less than strong sensation, what Wordsworth calls "habits of devoutest sympathy" (1805 *Prelude* xi. 396). Such habits alone, however, cannot forestall the final workings of druid magic on the Plain of Sarum in Book 12. As Wordsworth now approaches the conclusion of *The Prelude*, his ambition mounts, leading to the wish "that a work of mine, / Proceeding from the depth of untaught things, / Enduring and creative, might become / A power like one of Nature's" (xii. 309–12). Yet he halts, remembering the feeling, or "mood" when he was, to use his term, "raised" "on the plain of Sarum" (xii. 315). What happens on this "pastoral down" is not empowerment but, on the face of it, humiliation, guilt, and terror. Transposed from *Salisbury Plain*, "Guilt and Sorrow," and the spot of time, in the 1805 *Prelude* the monumental writing, gibbet, and moss are put, it seems, in the service of a vision of the "covert" science, and bloodlust, of druid Nature worship (xi. 345). Yet the music that "guides" the ghostly druids now "cheers" the "waste" "with stillness and a pleasant sound" (xi. 352–3). This important passage should lead us to recall that, in the Immortality Ode, the poet's encounter with the fugitive and "guilty Thing surprised" in fact "raises" in the poet "a *song* of thanks and praise" (l. 141). Standing imaginatively, in *The Prelude*, on the plain of Sarum, with such vision of glory – "This for the past, and things that may be viewed, / Or fancied, in the obscurities of time" (xii. 354–5) – Wordsworth now concludes his recollection of a terrifying spectacle, one that he once associated with the "calamities" of war, with the observation that "yet the mind is to herself / Witness and *judge*" (xii. 367–8). To account for this conversion of fear into faith, he will offer next a "sight / Of a new world" vouchsafed to him on Snowdon (xii. 370–1). There he will locate, he claims, an "ennobling interchange / Of action from within and from without" (xii. 378; emphasis added). How is this not a usurpation, a "co-opting" of an "obliterated" Nature by the mind that "witnesses" and "judges"?

As Wordsworth mounts this highest point in Celtic Wales, “bent / Earthward, as if in opposition set / Against an *enemy*,” he is as eager as the boy in the spots of time to master Nature, and himself (xiii. 29–30). Yet Nature demonstrates on Snowdon that she has herself mastered the art of circumlocution. No genius of the springs, Nature on Snowdon is herself a creative genius, for, as Wordsworth writes, she “exerts upon the outward face of things” her domination as she “moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines / Or by abrupt and unhabitual influence / Doth make one object so *impress* itself” (xiii. 78–83). The mists, rather than the tempests, of the preceding spots of time are now the material means by which she gives form to, or represents, her capacity to inflict violent death. Nature uses these materials that might have lured the poet to his death instead to “lodge” the poet, ambitious to surmount Nature in a vision of “totality,” within her own “imagination of the whole.” Nature, as herself a creative being, is, literally, a hole, a clearance, or, in Wordsworth’s terms, a “chasm, a fracture in the vapour” where the poet might have plummeted (xiii. 45–65). In this “perfect image of a mighty mind,” where Nature herself “feeds upon infinity,” the poet recognizes how this “unhabitual influence” has so often shaped his temperament (xiii. 69–70; 81). Nature “Doth make one object so *impress* itself,” Wordsworth writes, “Upon all others, and pervades them so, / That even the grossest minds must see and hear / And cannot choose but *feel*” (xiii. 81–4; emphasis added). From this encounter, the poet concludes “Hence sovereignty within and peace at will, / Emotion which best foresight need not fear / ... / Hence truth in moral judgements; and delight / That fails not, in the external universe” (xiii. 114–19). The “consciousness” of this gift from Nature’s mind is in itself the *temperament* of poetic minds: “the consciousness / Of whom they are, habitually infused / Through every image, and through every thought, / And all *impressions*” (xiii. 108–11; emphasis added). Through the habit that knows but does not further the *Wunsch*, through this poetic voice tempered by crisis, Wordsworth puts his voice in the service of an art which encircles, admires, and remains separate from the “one voice” of Nature’s “universal spectacle.”

If, as Heaney writes in “The Harvest Bow,” “*The end of art is peace*,” we might note the Wordsworthian, encircled form within which the passage of “the spirit of the corn” in this poem has “burnished” the snare of art. No cold pastoral, it is “still warm”:

The end of art is peace
 Could be the motto of this frail device
 That I have pinned up on our deal dresser –
 Like a drawn snare
 Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn
 Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.
 (Heaney 1998; ll. 25–30)

What slips from the “drawn snare,” from the wish of that motto, is a Nature that will not be taken in violence, but also a Nature who no longer takes us in.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 28 “‘Strange utterance’: The (Un)Natural Language of the Sublime in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*”; chapter 34 “The Persistence of Romanticism”

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The Persistence of Romanticism

Willard Spiegelman

When William Butler Yeats looked back in old age to the ardors of his youth, he claimed:

We were the last Romantics – chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people ...
(“Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931,” Yeats 1956: 240)

And a few years later, in “The Municipal Gallery Revisited,” the poet recalled the commitment he shared with John Millington Synge and Lady Augusta Gregory. They “thought / All that we did, all that we said or sang / Must come from contact with the soil” (Yeats 1956: 318). From the revolution set rolling by the principles of Wordsworth’s 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, through the Rhymers’ Club and the Irish Independence movement of the late nineteenth century, to Yeats the old symbolist surveying his past and contemplating a continent about to succumb to a Second World War, Romanticism has held artists in its grip. It is no exaggeration to say that poetry in English, wherever it has been written, is still under the sway of the canonical six – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats – and that the past 200 years represent the endurance and continuities of Romanticism. What “Romanticism” meant, or means, changes, of course. For Yeats, it had a distinctly conservative cast to it, compounded equally of populism, although not democracy, and “tradition,” whether folksy or arcane. For other poets, other overtones persist. Romanticism has offered a unique and altering blend of tradition and rebellion, a multifaceted legacy that two centuries of poets have been free to modify at will.

I am concerned in the following pages with this persistence on the American scene, especially in the poetry of the post-1945 period, and with our poets’ indebtedness to

Romantic poetry through acts of imitation, quotation, and reference. Such homage would have been less likely a hundred years ago. In his *Literary Essays* Ezra Pound called most English verse between 1890 and 1910 “a doughy mess of third-hand Keats, Wordsworth, heaven knows what, fourth-hand Elizabethan sonority blunted, half melted, lumpy” (cited Ruoff 1990: 117) and he turned away in order to forge new paths. No wonder that under the banners of Imagism and Modernism, of William Carlos Williams’s mantra “no ideas but in things,” the poets of the first half of the twentieth century seemed – or tried – to turn their backs on most of the preceding one. But with Modernism on the wane, Yeats dead, Eliot a grand old eagle whose poetic wings stopped spreading after *Four Quartets* (1943), Frost’s major work completed, but the late flowering of Pound, Wallace Stevens, Williams and Marianne Moore still to come, the new generation after the war began the inevitable move away from Modernism and – whether deliberately or unconsciously – started to revive or reabsorb many of the poetic programs, goals, forms, and techniques of the British Romantics.

It would be easy to account for such intergenerational rivalry and homage through Harold Bloom’s theories of anxious influence, based on an Oedipal model of internecine jealousy, sons killing fathers, the younger set clearing a space for itself by absorbing and simultaneously turning and spurning its predecessors. Such theorizing has as much going against it as for it, especially because feminist critics and other readers of women’s poetry have taken legitimate umbrage at the strict masculine focus of an Oedipal mode, and also – and more to my point – because the distance conferred by time and space (in the form of national boundaries) can blunt rather than sharpen the paralyzing power of precursors. So I shall pass Bloom unalarmed and hew instead to a theory of “un-anxious” influence, first proposed by James Rieger (1975) and invoked more recently by Christopher Ricks (2002). Because of their temporal and spatial remove, American poets of the late twentieth century found ways to revive their English forefathers without compromising their own integrity or originality. (See also Hollander 1981.)

In part, this imaginative revival modifies the classic American declaration of aesthetic independence memorably articulated by Emerson in “The American Scholar” (1837). Emerson asks for a release from the “courtly muses of Europe,” and for the nurturing of a uniquely American language and art:

I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds ... The near explains the far. (Emerson 1950: 61)

Dismissing the antique and future worlds, the pastoral and the utopian, is not an easy task, but embracing the common and exploring the mundane are, in part, Wordsworthian injunctions. Emerson rejects “the romantic,” the exotic, but in welcoming the “near,” he equally defends another species of Romanticism.

It is a small step from Emerson to Stevens, who adjusts Romantic notions of sublimity to an American landscape, transforms Keats’s Grecian Urn to a humble

jug, and rewrites an Ode as an Anecdote, moving from the British Museum to a hill in Tennessee:

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.
(“Anecdote of the Jar,” Stevens 1965: 76)

Stevens’s echo of Keats rings loud. See, also, “Terra Incognita,” an ekphrastic lyric by the young American poet Christopher Bakken, which makes its own allusions to Keats (Bakken 2001: 3). Writing on the topic of sublimity and the purification of poetic language, Wordsworth’s obsessions in his prime, Geoffrey Hartman has said that Stevens was “a sublime improviser . . . purging Europe from America but enjoying and exploiting the thought that it can’t be done” (1999: 153). Indeed, it never could. Pound’s injunction to “make it new” can be neither understood nor obeyed without the acknowledgment that “it” preexists any effort to renovate, resume, and to make a *new* beginning. And, for my purposes, *it* is nothing less than the principles of British Romanticism.

Many recent critics in addition to Hartman have sought to make connections between these two distinct periods (1789–1824, and 1946–the present). Some of them focus more on ideas and philosophy than on poetic form and style. Charles Altieri, for example, works from a sense of Wordsworth’s general, not specific, influence: “Frustrated by the indulgent lyricism of what might be called the scenic mode in contemporary poetry [certain poets] devote themselves to the Wordsworthian project of testing the power of personal eloquence to mediate between the margins of cultural life, where transforming insights take place, and the social theater, where such values must be applied” (Altieri 1990: 184–5). “Cultural” here seems synonymous with “artistic,” but Altieri’s primary interest lies in what he calls the social theater.

Angus Fletcher has recently proposed a “new theory” for American poetry, which starts from a distinction between vertical and horizontal axes. For Fletcher (2004), the major Romantics epitomize the Western, specifically Christian, pattern of understanding the world and reproducing it through art. They distinguish between “high” and “low,” between surface and depth (or height), and between ease of access and opacity of meaning. Because the natural world, the *liber naturae*, grants access to God’s existence and power, we can view it both in itself and as a symbol, image, or trope, of something greater. Wordsworth beautifully dramatizes such formulations in his two apocalyptic accounts of mountain climbing, in *The Prelude*, books 6 (the Alps and Simplon Pass) and 14 (the ascent of Mount Snowdon). Human aspiration always seems to point toward heaven; we move from low to high in hope of transcendence, revelation, and access to the divine.

Fletcher’s alternative tradition takes its origin in the distinctly unsymbolic, indeed barely figurative naturalistic poetry of John Clare, who has only recently entered the pantheon of major Romantic figures. This new tradition, with political and ecological ramifications, moves forward through Whitman to John Ashbery, both of whom, like

Clare, use a horizontal rather than a vertical view of the world, scanning the horizon with an eye that takes all in, not along an axis of higher-and-lower, but along an axis of undifferentiated sameness. It is, we might say, the American Romanticism. But Fletcher's theory derives equally from Wordsworth, although from a different part than the visionary, apocalypse-fearing-and-seeking poet whom Hartman so forcefully analyzed in *Wordsworth's Poetry* (1964), a poet in the line of European visionaries seeking an unmediated vision, but always realizing that mediation must come. Symbolic poems or objective ones: all paths lead back to the Romantics.

I want to take a far from exhaustive look at a mere handful of poets who absorbed and extended the practices of the British Romantics. They took the principles that Wordsworth bequeathed to Emerson; they imitated a new kind of poem perfected by Wordsworth and Coleridge; they wove the rich stylistic experiments of Keats into their poems. Their practices touch on issues of poetic identity, poetic diction, experiments with poetic forms, epistemological questions, and acts of homage both explicit and implicit to precursors. Many of these practices speak on behalf of elective affinities.

The essential democratic heft of *Lyrical Ballads*, especially its Preface, and many of Wordsworth's stated purposes throughout *The Prelude*, have given poetry of the past two centuries two kinds of radical justification, one in terms of "subject" (in the twin sense of "topic" and "person"), the other in terms of language, "the real language of men," which Wordsworth claimed in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800/2) as the new *koine* for his experiments in ordinary diction. Hartman, grounded in Romantic poetry, traces a line of what he calls "an older, undying tradition of Romance: oneiric, visionary, vernacular, sporadically supernatural" (1999: xiv–xvi) that extends through our present moment. I am less interested in the "supernatural" side that Hartman identifies as one pole of Romanticism: the gothic, the mysterious, everything that we mean by the supernatural (which Emerson rejected). The other, of course, is the commonplace, the low, the banal, the prosaic. In my remarks below, I shall stick with the natural rather than the supernatural. Although I mention other poets, my focus below will be on five poets born between 1911 and 1929, who came of poetic age after 1946: Elizabeth Bishop, Amy Clampitt, Howard Nemerov, A. R. Ammons, and Adrienne Rich, all of whom I have written about in other contexts (Spiegelman 1989 and 2005). In many ways they have little in common except their inheritance of some of Romanticism's artistic benefactions. Had I chosen other poets, I might have discussed the way Byron's aristocratic nonchalance, filtered through W. H. Auden, affected the poetry of James Merrill or the flamboyant performances of some of the so-called "Confessional" poets. Or Blake's anger and visionary zeal and its effects on Allen Ginsberg. Or how the "oneiric," and "supernatural" strands of Romanticism interwove themselves into some later versions of Gothicism and surrealism.

Postwar American poetry can legitimately be said to have begun with Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) and Robert Lowell (1917–1977), whose first volumes were published in 1946 and 1947. It would be no exaggeration to trace many of the major strands of American poetry of the period back to this pair of admiring friends. Lowell apprenticed

himself to the entire range of the Western literary canon. His career was the latest example of the tradition going back to Virgil, and the one that Bloom's theories describe: a young poet decides to vie with the greats and sets himself the task of doing so. Bishop positioned herself differently. One early influence came through Marianne Moore, her first poetic mentor and an enabling "mother," a Modernist from the immediately preceding generation. But the other influence was British all the way – from Hopkins and Herbert, her favorite poets, through Wordsworth. In an early letter to Lowell, Bishop identified herself with characteristic modesty and irony as "a minor female Wordsworth" (1994: 222). By this she meant, quite simply, that at least one strand of her poems derived from the tradition of what M. H. Abrams defined as the "greater Romantic lyric" (1965: 527)

Bishop learned many things from Wordsworth. More important than her fondness for simple speech was her adaptation, during her thirty-year career, of the Wordsworthian poem of encounter, or the epistemological lyric in which a speaker (easily identified with the poet herself, as are Wordsworth's and Coleridge's with them in "Tintern Abbey," "This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison," and "Frost at Midnight") observes a scene, sometimes one with another human being; grapples with questions of knowledge; and seeks for, or is struck by, revelations that she may not have imagined before. If the fanciful, surreal, indeed fey side of Bishop's poetic temperament comes out in poems like "Cirque d'Hiver," "From the Country to the City," "The Man-Moth," and "12 O'Clock News," the steadier Wordsworthian side, compounded of observation and questioning, is central to such nature lyrics as "At the Fishhouses," "Cape Breton," "The Bight," "The End of March," and "Santarém." In all of these, looking becomes the occasion for knowledge; an encounter with a person in a landscape, or just with a scene itself, leads to self-understanding.

Wordsworth, who claimed always "to look steadily at my subject" (1984: 600) set the standard for objective interactions with the natural surround. Bishop – who read and admired the prose of Darwin, Ruskin, and Hopkins – those followers in the Wordsworthian tradition – would have appreciated Hopkins's remark in his journal that "what you look at hard seems to look hard at you" (1959: 204). Acts of looking become acts of self-analysis, and a glance at external nature invariably calls into question the issue of selfhood.

Bishop's contemporary A. R. Ammons (1926–2001) was, like Howard Nemerov, a poet-walker in the tradition that goes from Wordsworth and Coleridge through Wallace Stevens, who composed poems in his head each day as he walked from home to insurance office in downtown Hartford, and back again. "Corsons Inlet," one of Ammons's most anthologized and representative lyrics, might be called a "Tintern Abbey" for the twentieth century. In "Reflective," one of his short poems, Ammons brings alive Hopkins's observation about looking. The lyric epitomizes, indeed miniaturizes, one of Romanticism's major legacies to American nature writers, especially those like Ammons with a scientific eye:

I found a
weed
that had a

mirror in it
 and that
 mirror

 looked in at
 a mirror
 in

 me that
 had a
 weed in it
 (1977: 53)

For Bishop and Ammons, as well as Nemerov (and even earlier poets like Robert Penn Warren), acts of looking confer dignity upon the looker as well as represent objective details about the objects, landscapes, or terrain described.

In “The Sanctuary” Nemerov (1920–1991) looks carefully at dark trout in a pond, while his “mind goes on transposing and revising / The elements of its long allegory / In which the anagogue is always death” (1977: 114). Self and world become a twinned pair, as they do in Ammons’s little poem. I think of Shelley’s comparable adventure. When viewing a sublime landscape (“Mont Blanc”) Shelley begins

To muse on my own separate fantasy,
 My own, my human mind, which passively
 Now renders and receives fast influencings,
 Holding an unremitting interchange
 With the clear universe of things around.
 (2002: 98)

Nemerov’s indebtedness to Shelley is clear, even though it involves neither quotation nor allusion. Clearer is Nemerov’s allusion, I am sure, to the end of Wordsworth’s *Intimations Ode* (“the Clouds that gather round the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o’er man’s mortality”; Wordsworth 1984: 302) at the end of his own nature lyric “The Blue Swallows.” Having seen, considered, and finally addressed the birds, the poet concludes that what is important is not the making of poems but, instead “finding again the world ... where loveliness / Adorns intelligible things / Because the mind’s eye lit the sun” (Nemerov 1977: 398). Wordsworth’s “ennobling interchange / Of action from without and from within” (Wordsworth 1979: 457; xiv. 375–6) has had a long history.

Where Wordsworth “gazed and gazed” in “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” on his daffodils, Bishop (in “Over Two Thousand Illustrations and a Complete Concordance”) thinks back to her travels as she fingers the pages of a heavy Bible, and wishes, at the end, to have “looked and looked our infant sight away” (1979: 59). Anthony Hecht’s speaker in “The Venetian Vespers” recalls, wistfully, “I look and look, / As though I could be saved simply by looking” (1980: 65). Such accuracy and intensity of close

looking represents one major strand of American poetry. Even what has become by now the conventional ekphrastic poem – a looker addressing, describing, or otherwise responding to a work of visual art – has its Romantic origins in Wordsworth’s “Elegiac Stanzas,” Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and Shelley’s “Ozymandias” and “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci.”

Looking, regardless of the object, demands attention, and such focus has become for secular American poets, as for their British precursors, a kind of religious agon or quest. Whether or not they can be saved by looking, they engage themselves in the process. Looking inward and looking outward – as in Ammons, Nemerov, and Bishop – become one gesture. But looking at the social, political, and historical surround has engaged as much of the energies of our post-Romantic poets as have their personal quests. Of the postwar generation, perhaps Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) and Adrienne Rich (1929–) most forcefully speak the prophetic rage that exploded in social and political protest, first during the Civil Rights movement, then the antiwar controversies attending the Vietnam conflict, and finally the movement for women’s rights followed by the post-Stonewall consciousness-raising of gay or queer citizens. Both poets can trace part of their poetic fervor and their poetic and political anger to a source in William Blake.

Both poets, but especially Rich, also adhered to the humanistic, Wordsworthian-Keatsian side of Romanticism. This affiliation has everything to do with Romantic ideas of the poetic character and the poet’s role. “To do something very common, in my own way”: thus ends Rich’s 1970 “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” (Rich 1984: 137). The title’s nod to Donne’s poem of the same name suggests the eternal bookishness of Rich, a star student before she was an activist. But the line itself points us toward a source not in the Renaissance but in the nineteenth century. In *The Prelude*, the autobiography he withheld from publication during his lifetime, calling it in a letter to his patron Sir George Beaumont “a thing unprecedented in literary history that a man should talk so much about himself” (Wordsworth and Wordsworth 1967: 586), Wordsworth attempts a self-justification through a question about exemplification: “What one is / Why may not millions be?” (1979: 443; xiii. 88–9). This is a thoroughly modern, that is to say, Romantic question. Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton would never have asked it. If a poet is to write about himself, then he must ask himself why, and to what end. On the one hand there is the answer of poetic exceptionalism, which now finds a home in American university creative writing courses that ask of students that they “discover their own unique voices.” On the other hand, there is the sense that a poet is a man speaking to men, that exceptionalism is balanced by likeness, similarity, and – to cite a Wordsworthian word – “commonalty.” Where Shelley spoke of the poet as a legislator, acknowledged or not, and Wordsworth and Coleridge, in poems as different as *The Prelude* and “Kubla Khan” return to the ancient Greek image of the poet as a vatic seer, foresightful and dangerous in equal measure, Rich tries to measure individual uniqueness against ordinariness and human resemblances. “Something very common” but “in my own way”: thus the challenge to all contemporary poets in the aftermath of the Romantic revolution.

Questions of identity involve more than mere vocational ones. Rich strikes an interesting post-Romantic balance in her early “Necessities of Life” (1962), the title poem of her fourth volume (1966). In this case it is not Wordsworth but the Keats of “negative capability” and the “chameleon poet” who offers a historical handle to the subject. In his famous letter to Richard Woodhouse (October 27, 1818), Keats distinguishes between the Wordsworthian “or egotistical sublime,” “which is a thing per se and stands alone,” and the genuine “poetical Character” which “has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character ... A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence ... the poet has ... no identity” (Keats 2009: 294–5). The poet feels himself pressed upon by everyone else around him. Thus he dissolves, allowing other people, or the famous sparrow who picks about the gravel by his window, to enter into him. Whitman, the supreme American egoist, has a greatness that contains multitudes and, it might be said, is undone by them. Where is the self, what Whitman calls “the real me?” It is a Romantic question as well as an existential one. Far from being an artistic movement that encourages, indeed demands, an exclusive attention to matters of selfhood, Romanticism often encourages dissolution.

Rich contemplates what makes a self. She moves from certainty, solidity, through a period of confusion, to a pioneering move outward. It is as though she is doing a riff on Keats’s description of the “mansion of many apartments,” which traces a growth into maturity: from the “infant or thoughtless chamber,” through the chamber of maiden-thought, and then to the dark passages which he hopes to be able to explore in his maturity (Keats 2009: 245). Rich’s metaphor is not architectural but, to start with, painterly:

Piece by piece I seem
to re-enter the world: I first began

a small, fixed dot, still see
That old myself, a dark-blue thumbtack

pushed into the scene,
A hard little head protruding

from the pointillist’s buzz and bloom.
After a time the dot

begins to ooze. Certain heats
melt it.

(Rich 1984: 55)

Moving from the past to the present, she begins to “blur” into burning colors, and gets taken over by other lives – Jonah, Wittgenstein, Mary Wollstonecraft, Louis Jovet – a whole range of representatives from her cultural inheritance. From this point, “wolfed almost to shreds” (that is, without a real self of her own), she “learned to make myself // unappetizing,” and “let nothing use me.” She vacillates between thinking of the self

as a hard, simple thing, able to assert itself, and considering it a force to be entered. Where does the true self lie? How does one make her self? At the end of the poem, it turns out that the poet represents her new identity in two ways. The first is metaphorical: "I'll // dare inhabit the world / trenchant in motion as an eel, solid // as a cabbage-head." Something exotic, animal, and phallic, is posed beside something domestic, vegetable and female. And the second way of presenting the self comes through an act of assertion that includes otherness. Rich is committing herself to a community of women, both explicitly as an audience and then, tacitly, as their spokesperson:

I have invitations:
a curl of mist steams upward

from a field, visible as my breath,
houses along a road stand waiting

like old women knitting, breathless
to tell their tales.

(Rich 1984: 56)

Rich is lighting out for the territories here, and her sense of life's "necessities" derives at least in part from the missionary zeal of her Romantic forebears.

The "self," that staple of the modern period, is both very large and very small. In his lovely poem "Gravelly Run," Ammons alludes to Wordsworth's "rocks and stones and trees" with which his Lucy has been "rolled round in earth's diurnal course" (Wordsworth 1984: 147):

I don't know somehow it seems sufficient
to see and hear whatever coming and going is,
losing the self to the victory
 of stones and trees,
of bending sandpit lakes, crescent
round groves of dwarf pine:

(Ammons 1977: 11–12)

Once dead, Lucy ("A slumber did my spirit seal") can neither hear nor see. She has been subsumed. Ammons recognizes the mere sufficiency of seeing and hearing. A living walker in the woods, he gives himself up, and even – at last – refuses philosophizing as useless in a world where inanimate nature could not care less about human presence, or a "god in the holly," or Hegel. The poet is a mere "surrendered self among / unwelcoming forms" and therefore addresses himself at the end as if he were a different person, one for whom movement alone will offer a help. He's like Rich heading off: "stranger, / hoist your burdens, get on down the road" (Ammons 1977: 12). Finding God's fingerprints in nature, or thinking of an animistic universe as Coleridge does when he asks "And what if all of animated Nature / Be but various harps diversely

framed?" ("The Eolian Harp"; Coleridge 2004: 18–19) is one legacy of Romanticism. Even when our recent poets express skepticism about such harmonious integration, they are thinking with envy, nostalgia and lingering gestures of belief, back to their Romantic precursors.

Later in her poetic life, Rich actually seems to have adopted the model of the Romantic nature lyric because the facts of her real life involved a move, for a time, from city to country. A change of location involved a change of poetic tactics. Her own Wordsworthian nature lyrics include "Transcendental Etude" and "Culture and Anarchy" (Rich 1984: 264, 275), both of which echo "Tintern Abbey." "From an Old House in America" (1984: 212) is Rich's version of Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage*, a poem that moves from contemplating a place to considering its former, now deceased inhabitants, and then broadens to take in larger historical questions.

Romanticism has no monopoly on political engagement, natural observation, or questions of poetic identity, but we might say that it is responsible for a specifically modern concern, what Matthew Arnold in the 1853 Preface to his *Poems* identified as the distasteful subject of contemporary poetry, "the dialogue of the mind with itself," or acts of self-consciousness. Whether regarded as vacant navel-gazing or abstruse philosophical meditations, the poem of mental dialogue has taken hold because the past few generations of American poets have adopted autobiography, that staple of lyric poetry from the Renaissance on, with a vengeance. Altieri says – without assigning blame or causality – that contemporary poetry is "intensely personal without being highly dramatic" (1990: 196). Another way of describing this condition is Hartman's assessment of the modern lyric, "which attempts the impossible: a monument to spontaneity, a poem that coincides with the act and passion of its utterance. It tries to overcome the secondary or elegiac aspect of language by making language coterminous with life." "Spontaneity," of course, deliberately alludes to Wordsworth's definition of a poem as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (1984: 598), and especially in the age of poetry "workshops," poets have been trying to measure their authenticity and immediacy against the revision, sculpting, and "recollecting" (another Wordsworthian word) that go into the actual construction of a poem. The problem, as Deborah Forbes sees it, lies in the issue of sincerity, or what she calls "sincerity-effects" (Forbes 2004: 4). A poem must seem to be the spontaneous utterance of a unique person, addressing us honestly.

Such utterances speak to the notion of selfhood – and the issue continues the more specific concerns about a poet's identity that I have mentioned above. In a more general way, poets have been asking whether they indeed have a "self" that precedes the very articulations they give us on the page, or whether those articulations create a person rather than reflect one. Who is speaking the poem, and to whom? This question has concerned all theorists of lyric from Wordsworth and Shelley through John Stuart Mill down to the present. Forbes quotes Robert Lowell's demur concerning the poetry of his student Anne Sexton: "Many of her most embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if someone had put them in quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author" (Forbes 2004: 108–9).

Confession – understood in its religious and legal, as well as psychoanalytic senses – has been a staple of our poetry for two hundred years, but in many poems, like those of Sexton or, more spectacularly of Sylvia Plath, an audience must be careful not to assume that there is a one-for-one correspondence between the life of someone speaking from the page and the life of the writer. A poet can reflect his character through the other characters who fill his pages. The multiple versions of the self, real, fictive, observed, and created, that appear in James Merrill’s epic *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982) represent one of the strongest legacies of Romantic conceptions of selfhood, whether of the poet or of the characters filling his or her pages. The dashing allure of such flamboyant poets as Plath and Sexton in our time, or of Byron in his, should not obscure the real way in which poets invent and manipulate the facts of their lives.

The more general legacy of Romanticism – with its interest in the creation or reflection of poetic “selfhood”; its commitment to acts of speculation and looking; and its veering between fidelity to uniqueness and to commonality – is bolstered by specific, less categorizable, acts of homage, allusion, echo, and quotation. Lisa Steinman borrows from Wai Chee Dimock the term “resonance” (from stochastic physics) referring to how “a weak signal is boosted by background noise and becomes newly and complexly audible,” and applies it to “the way in which words in a text yield different meanings or signals across time” (Steinman 2006: 101). Getting down to the level of words – the nuts and bolts of poetic materials – is also what John Hollander does in *The Figure of Echo* (1981), a vade mecum of poetic allusion.

Such allusiveness and quotation will account for my concluding points. Both Christopher Ricks (2004) and Richard Marggraf Turley (2006) have discussed Keats’s “truth” and “beauty” in the songs of Bob Dylan, thus suggesting not only the specific acts of quotation that one artist may perform but also the more general filtering down into a popular medium of earlier works. A good quotation or echo makes us reimagine the original. It doesn’t merely use it.

But not always. The surest sign of the permeating or trickle-down effects of literary influence may not add anything to our sense of prior texts. The 1921 Al Jolson hit song “April Showers” (words by B. G. De Sylva, music by Louis Silver) includes, I am sure, both specific and more generic allusions to both Keats (“Ode on Melancholy”) and Wordsworth (“I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”) although the song gains no extra “resonance” in meaning or effect if one hears the echoes:

Though April showers
May come your way,
They bring the flowers
That bloom in May,

So when it’s raining,
Have no regrets,
Because it isn’t raining rain, you know,
It’s raining violets,

And when you see clouds
 Upon a hill
 You soon will see crowds
 Of daffodils ...

Such resonance alerts us to the advantages and the dangers of listening for the echoes. De Sylva was certainly uninterested in wanting his audience to be aware of his debt to Romantic precursors. But what about Wallace Stevens? Lisa Steinman says that “The Idea of Order at Key West” is Stevens’s debt to Wordsworth, especially to “The Solitary Reaper,” and that we gain an understanding of both poems, and poets, by hearing the resonance of the earlier in the later (Steinman 2006: 107–9). This connection is not like T. S. Eliot’s idea of a canon retrospectively reconfigured, nor are the relationships like those among Wordsworth’s chain of poets, “each with each / Connected in a mighty scheme of truth” (Wordsworth 1979: 453; xiii. 301–2). It works to perform more modest acts of integration.

Allusion and revision constitute a major part of our best poets’ imaginative transcriptions. Often, as with Steven and Wordsworth, our understanding of the later poem depends on, and is enhanced by, our knowledge of the prior one. This would be true, as well, in the case of Bishop’s “The Unbeliever,” which Steinman takes as a mockery of Shelley’s “The Cloud,” and of “The Monument,” a rewriting of “Kubla Khan” (and I would add of “Ozymandias” as well). But what happens when Bishop refers to her “Sandpiper” (“finical, awkward ... obsessed”) as “a student of Blake” (Bishop 1994: 131)? It makes all the difference to hear the opening of “Auguries of Innocence”: “To see a world in a grain of sand” (Blake 2008: 403). Bishop’s bird, like a scientist at a microscope (“no detail too small” for his observation), is “focussed ... preoccupied.” Like Blake, like Bishop herself, he is looking for something, although the poet, looking at him, cannot tell what.

A richer, more playful allusion occurs in “Crusoe in England,” the late poem that purports to come from the mouth of the fictional outcast upon his return home. He finds himself equally alienated on his native island. The poem resonates with a prevailing theme in Bishop’s poetry: the search for home amid a context of existential aloneness, a feeling that home – “*wherever that may be?*” as she wonders at the end of the title poem in *Questions of Travel* (Bishop 1979: 94) – is an allusive construct, always out of sight. Crusoe is really Bishop-in-disguise. He is a persona in the long array of poetic “speakers” populating poems of the past two centuries who have more than coincidental resemblance to their makers (think of J. Alfred Prufrock). One detail would tip off even a reader unfamiliar with Bishop’s characteristic themes, methods, tropes, or her life. In the middle of the monologue, Crusoe thinks that had he had more knowledge, about anything, he’d have been able to spend his time better in his exile:

Why didn’t I know enough of something?
 Greek drama or astronomy? The books
 I’d read were full of blanks;
 the poems – well, I tried

reciting to my iris-beds,
“They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss...” The bliss of what?
One of the first things that I did
when I got back was to look it up.
(Bishop 1979: 164)

Crusoe could not have remembered Wordsworth, not just because he’s a fictional character but also, and more significantly, because, whether real or invented, he antedates Wordsworth by a century. Only a post-Romantic speaker could know about the bliss of solitude or exactly which flowers – daffodils, not irises – might inspire a poetic revelation.

Allusion and quotation can turn poems into hybrids, responses to original models. One poem inspires another, and fertilization occurs by many means. These chains of allusiveness constitute forms of respect. The longest and most interesting explicit homage paid by a contemporary to a Romantic precursor is Amy Clampitt’s “Voyages: A Homage to John Keats,” from *What the Light Was Like* (1985), her second book. In any survey of postwar poetry Clampitt would figure as a unique figure for many reasons. She was the oldest “young” poet in America, publishing her first volume, *The Kingfisher*, in 1983, when she was sixty-three years old. Her public “career” lasted for a single decade until her death in 1994. More important, she did not attach herself to any school, either a university program or a kind or label of poetic production. She seems to have sprung, Athena-like and sui generis, from the head of some transnational, trans-temporal Zeus. Many readers – during her lifetime as well as now – have found her work overripe, too indebted to sources in nineteenth-century classics, too intellectual, too baroque in its syntax, too reliant on scientific nomenclature, in other words too much a legacy of “high culture” and its artifacts. Clampitt was, indeed, a bookworm. The richness of her poetry – in terms of its diction and syntactic arrangements – can be traced at least in part to her love of Keats, his life as well as his work. She once said, in conversation, that only a person who knew in her bones what it is like to be cold could fully appreciate “The Eve of Saint Agnes.” Clampitt, who grew up on an Iowa farm during the Depression, knew whereof she spoke. She was also (whether consciously or not) echoing Keats’s observation that nothing is real until it is experienced; that the life of the body prepares and influences the life of the mind.

In “Crusoe in England” Bishop measured her life through the voice and story of another, even if fictive, person. “Voyages” pays homage to Keats by retelling his story. It also gives us a sense of Clampitt’s creative life through her use of reportage, quotation and allusion, and imitation. The twenty-two page medley teaches us how learned poems operate. A full knowledge of Keats’s life and work is, on the one hand, useful for appreciating and understanding the eight individual poems. But, on the other hand, we may ask: is it necessary? To what extent do they succeed on their own terms, for a reader with only the slightest recollection of Keats? Recognizing the allusions increases pleasure and understanding but is not required.

Clampitt has so fully internalized Keats that we may count her poems as more than homage and imitation, but also as a self-contained artifact. We get to know Clampitt as well as Keats. When we see in the first poem ("Margate") not only brief quotations from Keats's letters but also such touchstone words as "alien corn" and "casement," gentle allusions to "Ode to a Nightingale" and "The Eve of Saint Agnes," we begin to feel the way Clampitt has made Keats part of her own art. Echoes such as these (or, in the following poem, "the oozing of the ciderpress, the harvest done" (see "To Autumn"), "untrodden region" (see "Ode to Psyche"): the list goes on through the entire sequence), as well as quoted phrases and whole lines, serve as more than mere grace notes to the ongoing melody. One writer's words, picked up and recirculated by a later poet, gain a second life and resonate backwards and forwards.

Enticed by Keats's life, Clampitt was even more strongly seduced by his style. Keats evolved (as W. J. Bate long ago proved (1945)) during his short career from his early, weakly phrased and metered imitations of Leigh Hunt and Spenser through the Miltonic exercises of both versions of *Hyperion*, to the lush Spenserian stanzas of "The Eve of Saint Agnes," and the brittle jocular and tragicomic Dryden-inflected couplets of "Lamia," with the great odes standing as a summa of all that he could do with language (as Helen Vendler has capaciously explained (1983)). A late bloomer, Clampitt hit on her own style early and stuck with it for the duration of her short career. It is a style that owes a great deal to Keats: specifically to his rich descriptions; his doubled epithets (e.g., "cool-rooted," "fragrant-eyed," "silver-white," "calm-breathing," "soft-handed," "eye-dawn" in the first stanza of the "Ode to Psyche"); his adaptations in the odes and "Hyperion" of snaking Miltonic syntax; his experiments with stanza forms; and the more general sense of luxury that everywhere vies in his poems with a feeling for something "more naked and Grecian."

The play of monosyllabic words against large, mouth-filling Latinate diction does for Clampitt what it did for Keats. Consider stanza 6 of the "Ode to a Nightingale," which ends with the stunning, indeed numbing, revelation that were Keats to be granted his wish for an easeful death, the bird would continue to sing but he would not be able to hear the song, because he will have become "a sod." The line finishes with a thud. Monosyllables can create an eerie melody, as in the advice given in line 20 of the "Ode on Melancholy" to the troubled lover: "And feed deep, deep, upon her peerless eyes." More generally, especially in his mature works, Keats uses monosyllables at line ends for stronger closure and stronger rhyme. Of the thirty-three lines in "To Autumn," for example, only line 1 ends with a polysyllabic word ("Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness"). Keats begins with a large generalization and then proceeds to itemize its constituents.

Clampitt writes without rhyme and, for the most part, with irregular metrical arrangements. She seems to have learned from Keats (although most good poets will work with some variation on this principle) how to alternate long words and short ones, long sentences (of which her work contains a very large number) with shorter ones, or with clipped phrases. This is poetic rhythm, not meter in a conventional sense

but the rhythm of a developed unit. Here is an example, chosen from among many possible articulations, the first stanza of “Winchester: The Autumn Equinox”:

Salubrious air, free of the low fogs that were
 (he wrote) like steam from cabbage water;
 past scrubbed stoops and ram’s-head-knocked
 doors, a daily walk through the beautiful cathedral yard
 down to the river: how beautiful
 the season was – ay, better than
 the chilly green of spring, the warmed hue
 of grainfields’ harsh stubs turned pictorial
 with equinoctial bloom, the tincture of
 the actual, the mellow aftermath of fever:
 purgatorial winnowings, the harvest over.

(Clampitt 1997: 158)

This stanza, the first of five, has eleven lines, like “To Autumn.” It is one sentence long. Actually, not even a sentence but an extended sentence fragment, like the first stanza of Keats’s ode. Through imitation, Clampitt is paying homage. She quotes from Keats’s letter from Winchester, and she uses or adapts words from his poem (in both cases, without quotation marks): “ay,” “spring,” “warmed hue,” “stubs,” “bloom,” “mellow.” The polysyllabic “salubrious” precedes thirteen monosyllabic words. As in much of Keats, adjectives appear extravagantly.

Although they lack a metrical base, the poems provoke interesting questions about their stanzaic forms. Why has Clampitt written as she has? Artists make choices. Keats was always playing with stanzas: trying to find new ways of using and updating the sonnet; coming upon a ten-line form for most of his odes, some containing lines of differing lengths, others entirely regular; giving “To Autumn” an eleventh line, after the rhymed couplet, as a way to signal abundance and overflow. Clampitt performs similar experiments. “Margate” has five seven-line stanzas; “Teignmouth” ten quatrains and “Voyages” twelve; “The Elgin Marbles,” the longest poem, is written in paragraphs of irregular blank verse; “Chichester” has stanzas of 17, 20, 26, 22, and 16 lines – a deliberately enlarging and diminishing pattern; “He Dreams of Being Warm” has stanzas of varying lengths, all of which end with a very short line, reminiscent of the five-syllable close of a Sapphic stanza; “The Isle of Wight” has four ten-line stanzas and one eleven-line one.

Such enumeration indicates, at the very least, Clampitt’s experiments with form, and a careful reader could go further to explain the local effects of her stylistic decisions. “Winchester” next moves from Keats’s anxieties about his brother and sister-in-law in Kentucky, through his inability to finish his “Hyperion,” to his fragmentary last poetic efforts. It ends with a trailing off from its regular stanzas into a five-line coda that portends slowness, failure, and death. Here are the last line of the fifth stanza and then the coda:

His peace made with the diminishments of autumn,
 he now declared the second epic of the sun-
 god’s fall abandoned.

Hampstead: Fever
and passion. A comedy. A sonnet. In letters,
now and then a cry of protest. The rest
is posthumous.

(Clampitt 1997: 159)

In a poem of many long sentences, the end comes simply – as though Clampitt were doing her imitation of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” with its truncated fourth line “And no birds sing.” The only transitive verb is “declared,” signaling an act of will. It balances “His peace made” and “abandoned,” which indicate finality.

Then three lines of phrases. A final, simple sentence, with its muted echo of *Hamlet* (“The rest is silence”) suggesting not only Keats’s early death but also, and more important for the legacy of Romanticism, the posthumous life that any great writer continues to live in the tradition he hands on to his descendants. Yeats referred to “the book of the people.” Like all great poets, Amy Clampitt was a person of the book, of many books. One of her sacred texts was the poems of Keats. She was his latest, but will certainly not be his last descendant, as surely as she will not be the “last” Romantic.

SEE ALSO

Chapter 1 “Mournful Ditties and Merry Measures: Feeling and Form in the Romantic Short Lyric and Song”; chapter 7 “‘Stirring shades’: The Romantic Ode and Its Afterlives”; chapter 33 “Ethical Supernaturalism: The Romanticism of Wordsworth, Heaney, and Lacan.”

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