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Romanticism & Gender & Melancholy

1. Romanticism & Gender & Mellor

In influential publications, from Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters (1988), through the pioneer anthology, Romanticism and Feminism (1988), and on into the briskpolemics of Romanticism & Gender (1993), the field-changer (co-edited with Richard Matlak), British Literature, 1780–1830 (1996), the history-shifting Mothers of the Nation: Women’s Political Writing, 1780–1830 (2002), and a mother-lode of articles, further editions, plenary lectures, and collegial conference talks, Anne K. Mellor has been remapping the zone marked “Romantic,” showing the difference that gender makes, to the canon and the canonicals. My essay in honor of her work tests a blue/sprint for this difference in the field of “melancholy.” Despite a mirror in the first three letters, this mood does not spell the warmth and good humor of a Mellor, though its issues have been her devotions.

2. Romanticism & Melancholy: The Spirit of the Age

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

This memorably brilliant volley is the opening paragraph of Dickens’s Tale of Two Cities (1859), set in 1775, before everything exploded in France at the dawn of the literature we have come to call “Romantic,” hallmarked by unities and fragments, identity formation and identity crisis, hopeful


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revolution, despondency and dispossession. "Melancholy" is the big tent for this oscillation—and durably forever "like the present."

In the Romantic era, melancholy haunts idealism as its shade of disillusion. Here's Wordsworth writing about one of Dickens's two cities in 1804. Although he tells Coleridge that he regards himself (and his poetry) as composed by "two natures . . . joy the one, / The other melancholy," the horror of Paris in the civil war that succeeded the revolutionary hopes of 1789 gives all to melancholy, its force still felt deeply years on:

Most melancholy at that time, O Friend!
Were my day thoughts, my dreams were miserable;
Through months, through years, long after the last beat
Of those atrocities (I speak bare truth,
As if to thee alone in private talk)
I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep,
Such ghastly visions had I of despair . . .

Resonating from bare to scarely to despair, this poetry sounds a prelude to Freud's iconic essay, more than a century on, on melancholy. Freud proposed that whereas "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself." But such refinement eluded the Romantic generation, eluded even its icon of the "egotistical sublime," Wordsworth. More than any personal, self-hollowing loss, his nightmare is an arrest of historical consciousness, a "melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown" (2:448–49), as vast and as heartfelt for the poet writing in 1804 as it was for the hope-dashed young man of 1792.

By 1804, even everyday Lakeland could fall to a sensation of this waste: the "miner, melancholy man, / That works by taper-light, while all the hills / Are shining with the glory of the day" (8:508–10). Wordsworth could hear melancholy anywhere. Touring the Highlands, he listens to a Lass at a distance, "Reaping and singing by herself . . . / . . . a melancholy strain": her "plaintive numbers" evoke "old, unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long ago," or "Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain, / That has been, and may be again!" While the exact theme remains unknown, the poet


4. Keats coined the phrase "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" in a letter of October 1818; see Wolfson, ed. John Keats (New York: Pearson, 2006), 214. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from this edition, cited as K.

fully absorbs the melancholy affect: "The music in my heart I bore, / Long after it was heard no more"—the music translated to the muse of the music that is The Solitary Reaper." In Wordsworth's lingering imagination, a melancholy song paces the rhythm of her solitary work, from which he takes a compatible poetic harvest. On the horizon of my essay is what "melancholy" may speak beyond a solitary song—namely, that historical consciousness and, for modern women, a "familiar matter of today" (to call upon the language of another surmise for the Highland Lass's theme but of matter that eludes Wordsworth's guesses) in a chorus of women's social alienation and restlessness.

But first, back to Wordsworth. Worrying in his thirties about the high vocation of "Poet," he recounts a melancholy fit and fall in Resolution and Independence.7 On a splendid morning, after a roaring in the wind all night and a rain that came heavily and fell in floods, he's out in the world enjoying a reprieve from "all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy" (21). But this being Wordsworth, it's not long before feeling "as happy as a Boy" (18) turns to his musing on another boy, "Chatterton, the marvellous Boy, / The sleepless Soul that perish'd in its pride" (43–44), and then on Burns, whose ill health aged him beyond his mid-thirty years. And so, the melancholy myth for all boys-to-poets: "We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof come in the end despondency and madness" (48–49). Yes, a Leech-gatherer pops up "by peculiar grace" (50) to utter faith and cheerful endurance; but if wading bare-legged into ponds to attract a waning supply of blood-suckers, and being old, poor, and homeless to boot, constitute an oracle of "human strength, and strong admonishment" (119), can melancholy be far behind? "In my mind's eye," the poet murmurs, "I seem'd to see him pace / About the weary moors continually, / Wandering about alone and silently" (136–38), and the eye can't close. Its deep reflection is Hamlet's vision: "methinks I see my father . . . in my mind's eye" (Hamlet 1.2.184–85)—a paternal ghost that makes the one a Melancholy Dane and drives the other to "Resolution and Independence" (Wordsworth's rebranding of the 1802 working-title "The Leech-gatherer").

6. Lines 3–6, 18–24, 31–32, in Poems, in Two Volumes (London: Longman, 1807). The actual inspiration was already written: a "beautiful passage" in Thomas Wilkinson's journal of a Highland tour (Dorothy Wordsworth, 7 November and 14 December 1805; The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Early Years, 1787–1805, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester Shaver [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967], 639, 652). "Passed a female who was reaping alone: she sung in Erse as she bended over her sickle; the sweetest human voice I ever heard: her strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious long after they were heard no more" is the passage in Tours to the British Mountains (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1824), 12.

7. Lines from the poem are cited from Poems, in Two Volumes.
3. What Keats Owed to Melancholy. What *Ode on Melancholy* Collects

As a sensation, melancholy is wrought with sorrow, loss, or pain. As a word of alliterative is in trochaic dimeter, *melancholy* seems genetically destined for double duty: *melano* (black); and (though not philologically accurate) *mel* (sweet), in alliance with *melody*. Keats took this in as he underscored the verses in *Paradise Lost* on Satan’s rally of the vanquished in “Hell’s concave” (1:535–69), writing in his margin:

The light and shade—the sort of black brightness—the ebon diamonding ... the sorrow, the pain, the sad-sweet Melody—the P[h]alanges of Spirits so depressed as to be ‘uplifted beyond hope’—the short mitigation of Misery the thousand Melancholies and Magnificences of this Page.8

In this key of splendor recalled amidst the doom of loss, Keats remembered the base line of Wordsworth’s great *Ode*, on mortality and immortality, a mingling of recognition and longing that Keats writes out this way on May 31, 1819:

Nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass and glory in the flower

“I once thought this a Melancholist’s dream—” Keats could say, with belated correction (K 256). Wordsworth first published his *Ode* (the title later elaborated into *Intimations of Immortality*) in the 1807 *Poems* that housed *Resolution and Independence*. It mattered mightily to him that the elegiac couplet isolated in Keats’s quotation was for him a subordinate syntax—“Though nothing can bring back ...”—pointed to a determination against melancholy: “We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind” (*Ode* 179–89). Even so, *will . . . not* sounds that hard Wordsworthian discipline of “philosophic mind” (189) over and against the achingly gorgeous evocation of what is so utterly gone. (Not for nothing did another William, William Inge, title a teleplay *Glory in the Flower* and a later screenplay *Splendor in the Grass.*) Keats elevates the epitaphic sigh to primary syntax, which he allows to oscillate between an ironic regard of the genre of “Melancholist’s dream” (oh those melancholics—it’s always “Nothing”!), and a rueful review (“I once thought”) with new respect.

Keats was drafting *Ode on Melancholy* at the time, its every fullness poised for dissolution, and inseparable from this knowledge. In three stanzas arrayed on the classical ode-pattern of thesis (strophe), antithesis (antistrophe)

and condensation (stand), the Ode issues a mock–didactic treatise on how to rebrand transience, the Melancholist’s lament, as a poetic resource, intensity. Keats begins in medias res, on four stressed syllables, three rhymed:

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf’s-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss’d
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow’s mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

(1–10)

For all the large cautions, the tone is tricky. In the “contrariety of pathological splendours” William Empson hears a confident “parody” that voices “by contradiction... the wise advice of uncles,” while Helen Vendler audits a poet “subversively attracted by what he reproves.”9 Keats serves both with his menu of lush antithetical compounds, rehearsing the admonitions in melodies of seductive allure. Even that downy owl, rejected mascot for “sorrow’s miseries,” sounds again in the caution-cue drowsily (Keats hit this adverb after trying out heavily then sleepily10) for the sake of a flow into drown.

With a mournful Psyche disciplined into wakeful soul,11 the suffixes of ful chime out a thesis on opposite recognitions as inextricable and, at extremes, simultaneous. Don’t melt, thaw, and resolve the elements, Keats’s odist exhorts,

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;


10. K 360, citing autograph ms. in the Taylor Collection, Princeton University Library.

11. This only lightly personified “Psyche” hints at an aesthetic “psychology.” Although this word is not in the 8th edition of Dr. Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language (1799), the OED marks two strands of relevant definition: a science of the soul (1654–); then a science of cognition, nicely summed by David Hartley’s Observations on Man (1749): “Psychology, or the Theory of the human Mind” (1.3.354).
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Empire her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

This odist will have none of the pathology of “melancholy fits” indexed in Robert Burton’s sublime treatise, The Anatomy of Melancholy, the very phrase appearing therein dozens of times. Keats’s odist makes poetic capital out of fit, an archaic term for a unit of poetry or a strain of music: the mood fits into the poetry as the poetry fits out the mood. In this one-sentence stanza of luxurious cascades, Keats even hangs fall at a line-end, to give it pause before the scenery drops from weeping, to heaven-sent nurture, to funeral shroud. The advice is arrested around its images. The morning rose cannot forbid its undertone of mourning, nor keep rose from ghosting the fall of melancholy that might re-call for use the rosary refused in stanza 1. The rainbow of a salt-sand wave is a sheen no sooner seen than gone. The adjective globed is Keatsian: this for a world in a peony, the flower famed, of old, for medicinal powers, but here a wealth in transience. The diet for these dyings is not mourning, however, but the exhortation to “glut” and “feed.”

The odist takes this aesthetic to erotic extravagance (in his dreams!), feeding on a spectacle of female anger, the aesthete in love with the phonics of feed deep, deep . . . peerless (her peerless eyes are nonpareil, but no window to her soul). Stuart Sperry had to halt his critical analysis for a parenthesis: “(Viewed in purely human terms, the situation is the perfect one for a poet having his face slapped).” The hazard is more than a slap in Keats’s plan. The severest reversal impedes in stanza 3, and it’s related to the gender-spectacle that had Sperry wincing. The opening phrase, “She dwells with Beauty,” puns the mistress of Stanza 2 into transience too, and then, in a crucial pivot, turns this She to an alliance with sovran Melancholy:

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,

Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:

14. Princeton’s manuscript has “Mistress” in stanza 2, kin to capital-M Melancholy.
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

(21–30)

The Melancholy-connoisseur of she-anger is set up for a death of luxury.
I think that Keats left eyes/peonies such a weak rhyme at the end of stanza 2
in order to save eyes for this strong chime with die at the start of 3. Beauty
must die, the present participles spelling the rapid transience of life in
time: Joy bidding adieu; Pleasure aching nigh, tuming to poison in the pitch
of sweetness. In an argument pointed by rhyme-echoes, the ruby grape of
Proserpine returns to resound as Joy’s grape bursting against a palate fine, the
boon of Melancholy’s sovran shrine, where the connoisseur becomes a tro-
phy, and no special trophy either, just one “among” many “hung”—the
bottom line, faintly toning “trophies sung,” the verbal embodiment of ode
to melancholy’s strophes in the soul-making.15

Absent from this Ode has been its speaker’s marker, “I.” It is trumped by
an expressively modal Ay, schemed to rhyme with die. The phrasing of
“none save him” is a rich double supplement. Keats first tried “none but
him” (keying the willing burst);16 the revision is better for punning the
sense of except into beyond saving. Ode on Melancholy is ultimately a mortality
ode—a genre shadowed by its housing in the same volume as Keats’s last
romance, Lamia, where a young man’s fatal enchantment by a lady who
vanishes (perhaps was never gettable) takes a cue from The Anatomy of Mel-
ancholy. Keats was reading this treatise both with a poet’s and a medical stu-
dent’s attention, and postscripted a citation as the epitaph to Lamia.17

4. Melancholy Men, Melancholy Women

In 1831, Tennyson’s friend Hallam named the “spirit of modern poetry” as
“melancholy,” and measured this as a “return of the mind upon itself,” in
recoil from the “community of interest” busy with the “prevalence of so-
cial activity” and “the palpable interests of ordinary life” (620).18 The next

15. This nice audit is Garrett Stewart’s, in the Cambridge Companion to John Keats, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
year Tennyson published his extravagant melancholy romance, *The Lotos-Eaters*, expanding and revising an episode in the *Odyssey*. The allure of the "mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters" (stanza 3) is no simple historical nostalgia; it is a displacement that enables a modern man to write world-weary verse. Soon the ancient seamen are singing, in chorus, of how sweet it would be "To lend our hearts and spirits wholly / To the influence of mild-minded melancholy" (Choric Song, stanza 5), a poetry that may well intoxicate its readers, too. No wonder that the choral ode of refusals—"we will no further roam"; "we will not wander more"—has troubled some professional critics, who, sensing its proximate pressure, slap it down: "infantile voluptuousness," says one; "melancholy in the state of decadence," says another. But Tennyson’s lutos-eating is a complex confection, layered with painted skepticism about the sermonizing that life is hard, suffering inevitable, toil virtuous, death the only ease. Ulysses’ crewmen are no languorous decadents, and surely no infants. They are battered veterans of a long war, whose long, long voyage home feels like another endless war, with home lost in the haze of history. This alienation, not lutos-eating, is the deepest melancholy, and its voicing is plural and public:

Dear is the memory of our wedded lives,
And dear the last embraces of our wives
And their warm tears: but all hath suffer’d change;
For surely now our household hearths are cold:
Our sons inherit us: our looks are strange:
And we should come like ghosts to trouble joy.

(Choric Song, stanza 6)

Dear is, not dear was. But the now holds no recovery: warm tears have fallen to cold hearths, joy not even bidding adieu, but lost to these exiles.

What of the women at home? The rest of my essay is about their melancholy, a language that some want to valorize as she–epistemology ("women’s ways of knowing," says one critic), but which is better audited, I think, in the registers of social logic and communication. One of the

E. Moxon, August 1831: 616–28. Although Hallam (and Tennyson) may anticipate Julia Kristeva’s *Soleil Noir: Dépression et mélancholie* (1987), my interest is in the social resistance Hallam saw Tennyson articulating, a temper against the times.


first communicators for the Romantic era was Charlotte Smith, whose se-
rial productions of Elegiac Sonnets across the 1780s and 90s seduced legions
of men who felt her pain, and felt connected, through her poetry, to other
men of feeling. “SONNET XXXII. TO MELANCHOLY. / WRITTEN ON THE
BANKS OF THE ARUN. OCTOBER, 1785” opens these channels by working a
literary inventory for personal expression:

WHEN latest Autumn spreads her evening veil,
   And the grey mists from these dim waves arise,
I love to listen to the hollow sighs,
Thro’ the half-leafless wood that breathes the gale.
For at such hours the shadowy phantom, pale,
   Oft seems to fleet before the poet’s eyes;
Strange sounds are heard, and mournful melodies,
As of night-wanderers, who their woes bewail.
Here, by his native stream, at such an hour,
Pity’s own Otway, I methinks could meet,
   And hear his deep sighs swell the sdden’d wind!
Oh melancholy!—such thy magic power,
   That to the soul these dreams are often sweet,
And soothe the pensive visionary mind!

By the fifth edition, “melancholy” gets upgraded with a capital M,23 a gen-
eral spirit abroad. No isolated, diseased, or hysterical female sensibility, it is
“the poet’s” perception. Veils, grey mists, dim waves, breathing autumnal
woods, and native spirits: these are Graveyard-Poetry schoolings, only inci-
dentally gendered. When Smith’s sonnet-poet invites us “Here, by his
native stream, at such an hour” to “hear” Otway’s “deep sighs swell the
sadden’d wind,” it matters that the origin of the sighs are Pity’s, there to be
audited by an Otway or by a Smith. The flow from “Strange sounds are
heard” to the scene Here marks out a liberal poetic tradition: “And hear his
depth sighs.” The shadowy auditorium of Melancholy (here and hear), Smith
proposes, is not gender-gated; it is open admission to the “pensive vision-
ary mind”—and so, a way for a woman to be credentialed as a poet.

Wordsworth heard the call of Elegiac Sonnets (1784) as a fourteen-year-
old schoolboy, and subscribed as a Cambridge undergraduate to the fifth
edition (1789), an era he recalls in The Prelude in a soft but knowing parody
of Smith-forged language:

A melancholy from humours of the blood
In part, and partly taken up, that lov'd
A pensive sky, sad days, and piping winds,
The twilight more than dawn, Autumn than Spring,
A treasured and luxurious gloom . . .

(6:192–96)

The "sweet" habit that liked "To feed a Poet's tender melancholy / And fond conceit of sadness" (6:375–78), Wordsworth freely admits, is life and food for future years, a Poet's training table.

Smith's Elegiac Sonnets succeeded not just through this Poet-franchise but also from a validation by experience—with such effect that a reviewer for The Gentleman's Magazine could "hope that the misfortunes she so often hints at, are all imaginary"; if these were "real," it would be with a "diminished pleasure" that one could purse "her very tender and exquisite effusions."24 Yet Smith insisted on "real," and real in a woman's fortunes. Her melancholy was not "imaginary"; it was the voice of an intelligent, cultured woman, forced early into marriage to a spendthrift sot, who financially ruined and serially impregnated her, and left her to write ceaselessly, to sustain herself and her many children.25 In a preface to the sixth edition (1792), she recounts a conversation with a friend who hoped she might write "in a more cheerful style." She replied, "Alas! . . . can the effect cease, while the cause remains?" When "I first struck the chords of the melancholy lyre" (she takes pains to say) it was "unaffected sorrows drew them forth . . . And I have unfortunately no reason yet, though nine years have since elapsed, to change my tone."26 All italics are hers. Melancholy is the authentic voice, and effect, of social causes and grievances.

Absent legal remedy or political remediation, melancholy was the available channel for female communication—even better if men overheard. Writing an essay in 1810 titled "The Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing," Anna Barbauld asked, "Why is it that women . . . are apt to give a melancholy tinge to their compositions?"27 She answered by turning the question to a rhetorical harangue:

Is it that they suffer more, and have fewer resources against melancholy? Is it that men, mixing at large in society, have a brisker flow of

ideas, and, seeing a greater variety of characters, introduce more of the business and pleasures of life into their productions? ... Is it that women nurse those feelings in secrecy and silence, and diversify the expression of them with endless shades of sentiment. ...? (42)

There are several iterations of the question, all marking a circular sociology: women write with a melancholy tinge because they are melancholy, and they are melancholy because in “society” they are “women.”

At this intersection, in this circulation, is Felicia Hemans, at once the celebrated poetess of hearth and home and “The Queen of Melancholy” (so she was dubbed in numerous Victorian anthologies). In publications from 1812 into the 1830s, Hemans’s genius was her bending the cultural ideal of “feminine” into dark contradictions. Nineteenth-century monitors wanted to read her melancholy tinge as peculiar to her, or at least containable as a “feminine” hallmark that could be transvalued into patient suffering, a pattern female heroism. Yet Hemans’s friend Henry Chorley, even as he allowed that the poetry was “often deeply melancholy” in its devotion to “the farewells and regrets of life,” could read the cultural grain of “finer natures broken in pieces by contact with a mercenary and scornful world.” In 1825 Hemans heard another friend’s plea that she temper her habitual “choice of melancholy subjects,” her “dwelling on what was painful and depressing,” by “giving more consolatory views of the ways of Providence, thus infusing comfort and cheer into the bosoms of her readers, in a spirit of Christian philosophy.” At such requests, Charlotte Smith could only sigh in exasperation. Hemans obliged with Our Daily Paths, getting off a few game stanzas about the beauty abiding even in the dark paths. But it’s the dark passages that keep pulling her back in: “we carry our sick hearts abroad amidst the joyous things.” A reader may sense this burden in her severe pruning of some lines from Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey (133–35) for her epigraph:

Nought shall prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
Is full of blessings

29. Poems (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1873), 370n. The exhorter was Dugald Stewart, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University.
30. Our Daily Paths, line 15. The poem was first published in The Monthly Magazine (ns 4; October 1827); I quote here and subsequently from my edition, Felicia Hemans (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), a publication for which Anne Mellor’s support was instrumental.
Wordworth’s verse, just before what Hemans has (re)worded, is a fuller census:

that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e’er prevail against us or disturb . . .”

Hemans suppresses the full litany of Wordworth’s daily paths, to cut to “cheerful faith.” Yet a reader as subtly tuned as she to everything that contends with faith knows that Wordworth’s lines give what is denied a weight of words that in poetic force may well disturb and prevail against the counter-weight of determined argument. “I have really studied these poems, and they have been the daily food of my mind,” she tells her friend Maria Jane Jewsbury; this too is a daily path. “Then, what power Wordsworth condenses into single lines,” she exclaims. Several years on, she expresses gratitude to the poet himself “for the fresh green places of refuge” his poetry “has offered me in many an hour.” But instead of listing the green places, she explicates the antithetical context:

... in many an hour when
------------------------ “The fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart”

No surprise that the Wordsworth-words she effaces return to haunt the lines of Our Daily Paths as it labors toward consolation, the cause clearly competing with the cure:

... in our daily paths lie cares, that ofttimes bind us fast,
While from their narrow round we see the golden day fleet past.

(23–24)

Yet should this be?—Too much, too soon, despondingly we yield!
A better lesson we are taught by the lilies of the field!
A sweeter by the birds of heaven—which tell us, in their flight,
Of One that through the desert air for ever guides them right.

31. Lines, written a few miles above Tintern Abbey (1798), in Poems, in Two Volumes, 2:79; lines 129–33.
32. Letter to Maria Jane Jewsbury, 1826; in Felicia Hemans, ed. Wolfson, 492; “Tintern Abbey” was her “favourite,” Hemans told Chorley (24 June 1830; Felicia Hemans, 505).
Shall not this knowledge calm our hearts, and bid vain
conflicts cease?
Ay, when they commune with themselves in holy hours of peace;
And feel that by the lights and clouds through which our
pathway lies,
By the beauty and the grief alike, we are training for the skies!

(29–36)

“Shall not this knowledge” conveys coercion, the “lesson” and the “train-
ing” feeling more rote than endorsed, with salvation in “the skies” the re-
 remotest of romances—a pathway in death out of the daily paths prescribed
for women in time and history.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s voice of melancholy, worldly and politically ag-
grieved, speaks out loud and bold in A Vindication of the Rights of Men, her
rebuttal to Edmund Burke’s pain at the arrest of the royal family at Ver-
sailles in 1790: do “the pangs you felt for insulted nobility . . . deserve to be
compared with the long-drawn sigh of melancholy reflection, when misery
and vice . . . haunt our steps, and swim on to the top of every cheering
prospect?” she protests.34 Soon in prospect is a reflection more categorical
than even the general “our” of 1790:

After considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with
anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indigna-
tion have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to
confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man
and man, or that the civilization, which has hitherto taken place in the
world, has been very partial.

So she opens A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792).35 By “partial,” she
means “considering females rather as women than human creatures . . .
when improvable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which
raises men above the brute creation” (2–3). She’s heard the murmur “that
it is masculine for a woman to be melancholy” (66)—thus Addison began a
frequently anthologized Spectator essay, “Men and Women,” in no compli-
ment. “Women in their nature are much more gay and joyous than men”
and so must “keep a watch on the particular bias which nature has fixed.”36

35. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 2nd ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1792). 1; subsequent
quotations are from this edition. A genre of female melancholy, the “political elegy,” Anne
Mellor notes, often housed a “social critique” of the conditions of a woman’s life (“Anguish
no cessation knows,” 456–57). See also Lauren Berlant on the female complaint as a witness
to injury, its discourse hovering between oppositional sexual politics and sentimental expres-
36. Number 128 (July 27, 1711), in an edition contemporaneous with A Vindication of the
To Wollstonecraft, such gender-partition (insinuating the abnormality of uncooperative women) betrays, with no care to theorize, the cause: women are censured for melancholy deviation from their assigned nature. Wollstonecraft’s “melancholy . . . indignation” is a political protest, tuned to the “melancholy truth” that women have no “civil existence in the state” (1:339–40).37

This melancholy is the severe spirit of the age for the wrongs of woman, and a language to which women resorted, again and again, to articulate and share civil grievances, often with a heroic Hamlet badge. Romantic Hamlets were legion, and not always male: Radcliffe’s oppressed heroine Emily St. Aubert and Wollstonecraft’s Vindicator put in a purchase. Hamlet-melancholy was liberal autobiography, an intertext for all. In the 1820s and early 1830s, Jewsbury (who praised Wollstonecraft in decades when it was still not possible to speak her name in polite society) spoke this melancholy as the strains of professional authorship were taking a toll on her, the satisfactions tangled up with aggravations. She discussed this with Wordsworth (who admired her talent), then with Hemans. Both women were coming to wonder, with “sober sadness,” Hamlet-sighed, “how, unless a necessity be laid upon her, any woman of acute sensibility, and refined imagination can brook the fever & strife of authorship.”38

Their contemporary L.E.L. (celebrity poet Letitia Elizabeth Landon) brooked the fever with determination. In a “Memoir of L.E.L.,” her friend and housemate Emma Roberts commented that “the trials . . . of writing against time, often under the infliction of indisposition or mental anxiety,” so depressed Landon’s spirits as to render a view of “the realities of life, somewhat of a melancholy character.”39 But this was “occasional,” and Landon more typically persisted “with cheerfulness” (13). Even so, the trials (fueled by gossip) were unrelenting. In 1838, she took the cure of marriage, leaving with her husband for Cape Coast Africa, in a last adventure, soon sealed with her sudden, mysterious death—“a melancholy catas-

37. Mary Jacobus reads in women’s “melancholic subjectivity” a “science of herself” with political bearing, “a contestatory position from which to vindicate the rights of woman” by dislodging the routine gendering of Reason as male and sensibility as female (“The Science of Herself: Scenes of Female Enlightenment,” Romanticism, History and the Possibilities of Genre, eds. Tilottama Rajan and Julia Wright [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 258, 267).


trophe” (so one report went) for her and her adoring public, in the line of all her melancholy heroines.40

In 1832 Jewsbury also capitulated to what Wollstonecraft called that “melancholy truth” for women: the necessity of marriage. She was exhausted by the profession of author: “the world is too strong for me,” she told Dora Wordsworth (the poet’s daughter) in March 1831; “literary life poisons my moral being, at once by its blandishments & cares ‘Me this unchartered freedom tires.’”41 She’s using William Wordsworth’s poetry first to ally with his melancholy (“The World is too much with us”) then to summon his antidote-minded Ode to Duty about the perils of too much freedom.42 She had given the discipline her best shot in a semi-autobiographical novella, The History of an Enthusiast (1830). Its template was Staël’s Corinne (international best-seller since 1807), the anatomy of a female artist, heartbroken by a lover who wants a traditional wife.

Yet Jewsbury’s tale refuses to pathologize her poet-heroine’s world-weary melancholy, or to give it a death sentence. Staël makes Corinne’s last poem a death-song; Jewsbury has her heroine fill the last pages of The History with a satire on the whole anatomy. Here’s a brief sample:

And I would rather lose what I love here,

Be it man, woman, flower, or recollection,

By swift translation to another sphere,

Than have it in the shape of retrospection;

I hate all ghosts, but most, and without measure,

The apparition of departed pleasure.

. . .

“Is not this shocking?” cries some flaxen Werter,

Warm from a bath of tears o’er tomes of folly;

Be still,—what is exchange of hearts but barter,

As full of cheating and of melancholy . . . 43

This poet has the melancholy lores gleefully in hand, from Hamlet to Goe-the and his legions, to Smith’s clutch of Werter-voiced elegiac sonnets, to Corinne, to Shelley’s perpetual elegies on transience, to Keats’s range of modes from satiric to high aesthetic.

And not the least, Lord Byron, who theatricalized melancholy with


41. Dove Cottage archives, Grasmere, England: WLMS/A. See also Dennis Low, Literary Protégées, 173.

42. Both poems are in Poems, in Two Volumes.

grand success, launched by the world-unloving Childe Harold (1812). Swooning to Canto 3 of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* in 1816, Scott declared that “the proper language” for describing Byron’s alluring aspect was “melancholy.” 44 Five years on, “John Bull” (mask of J. G. Lockhart, Scott’s son-in-law) spoofed the pose in an open *Letter to the Right Hon. Lord Byron*: “you thought it would be a fine, interesting thing for a handsome young Lord to depict himself as a dark-souled, melancholy, morbid being, and you have done so, it must be admitted, with exceeding cleverness.” He mimicked the national crush: “the amazing misery of the black-haired, high-browed, blue-eyed, bare-throated, Lord Byron. How melancholy you look in the prints! Oh! yes, this is the true cast of face.” 45 But Bull was belated; Byron was already spoofing the melancholy industry in *Don Juan*:

I pass my evenings in long galleries solely,
And that’s the reason I’m so melancholy.

(5:58)

I bet Jewsbury enjoyed Byron’s pun-anagram *lemacholy*, a lover’s affliction. 46

In Jewsbury’s wit, *melancholy* matters most (as often for Byron) as a ready rhyme for a *folly*. She may be registering Shakespeare’s capacity to inhabit both a Hamlet and a Jacques, or its update in one spasm of Keats’s bitter love-lorn Endymion, “stupified with my own empty folly, / And blushing for the freaks of melancholy” (*Endymion* 1:962–63). The godfather of the rhyme is of course Burton, in a dozen refrains in a poem at the front of *Anatomy*, “The Authors Abstract of Melancholy.” Each stanza of mood-swing sighs an octave in tetrameter couples, the last one a refrain-rhyme with *melancholy* that measures the relays of joy and grief in comparisons that go this way:

44. [Walter Scott], review of Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, *Canto iii & c. Quarterly Review* xvi (October 1816): 177.
46. *Don Juan*, Cantos iii–v (London: John Murray, 1821); Byron’s self-satire in a letter to Thomas Moore, October 6, 1821 (Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, 2 vols. [London: John Murray, 1830], 2:544). In a letter of November 1811 (not in Moore) Byron uses *lemacholy* for several lover-frustrations, including Miss Milbanke’s recent rejection of his first proposal of marriage (Leslie Marchand, *Byron’s Letters and Journals* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973–1982], 2:124). F. A. Marshall notes that “lemacholy used to be a common slang word” (NQ, 6th Series ix [April 5, 1884]: 271)—e.g. “Our Social Chair,” *Hutchings Illustrated California Magazine* 4, no. 7 (January 1860): “If you are melancholy, laugh to drive the blues away” or laugh at “a poetical young man” as he tells his “own lemacholy story” (330).
All my joyes to this are folly,  
Naught so sweet as melancholy.

All my griefes to this are jolly,  
Naught so sad as melancholy.

All my joyes besides are folly,  
None so sweet as melancholy.

All my griefes to this are folly,  
None so soure as melancholy.

All other joyes to this are folly,  
None so sweet as melancholy.

All my griefes to this are jolly,  
None so damn'd as Melancholy.

All my joyes to this are folly,  
Naught so sweet as melancholy.

All my griefes to this are jolly,  
Naught so fierce as Melancholy.

All my joyes to this are folly,  
Naught so sweet as melancholy.

All my griefes to this are jolly,  
Naught so fierce as melancholy.

All my joyes to this are folly,  
Naught so devine as melancholy.

And so on—each base-line of melancholy a repetition that accumulates, with mounting parody, the theme at hand, hurling to the death-wish that is the crisis and release:

My paine, past cure, another Hell,  
I may not in this torment dwell,  
Now desperate I hate my life,  
Lend me a halter or a knife.  
All my griefes to this are jolly,  
Naught so damn'd as melancholy.

Jewsbury's playful rhymings are a conscious refrain from this legacy.  
Her rogue refusal provoked some Victorian monitors, all too eager to supply a discipline of melancholy. *The History of an Enthusiast* (scolded Mrs. Ellis in her obituary on Jewsbury for *The Christian Keepsake*, edited by
her husband) gives a "most melancholy picture of the ceaseless conflict, the insatiable thirst for what is unattainable, and the final wretchedness necessarily attendant upon the ungoverned ambition of superior intellect, when associated with the weakness, natural dependence and susceptibility of woman." But what's natural? This is the question Jewsbury tested in her writing and in her self-accounting, telling a friend:

In the best of everything I have done, you will find one leading idea—Death: ... in all you would find the sober hue, which, to my mind's eye, blends equally with the golden glow of sunset and the bright green of spring—and is seen equally in the 'temple of delight' as in the tomb of decay and separation. I am melancholy by nature, cheerful on principle.48

In a melancholy nature, the "feminine" charge to be cheerful is an alien principle. The male poetic voices Jewsbury involves, without ascription because they seem natural to her voice, are the Prince of Melancholy, Hamlet ("my mind's eye"), Wordsworth's kind and not yet resolute poet (Resolution and Independence), and the aesthetic principle that has Keats putting Melancholy in the "temple of delight."

Jewsbury rendered this CV just before she left England, in the spirit of her Enthusiast, as a "second Mary Wollstonecraft,"49 but historically as Mrs. William Kew Fletcher, serviceable wife of a brusque career chaplain, posted to India in the employ of the East India Company. A few months into her new chapter, Jewsbury was dead from cholera, not from melancholy—cheerful on principle, perhaps, but not denying its exertion against authentic melancholy: melancholy not by self-indulgence but by self-esteem. With a cheerful marriage and in a better time, our un-melancholy Anne Mellor (her name nicely errata-shifted to Mellow in an anthology of 199050) cheers us on.

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49. The History, 170.
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*Hutchings Illustrated California Magazine* 4, no. 7 (January 1860): 330.


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Reflections on Textual and Documentary Media in a Romantic and Post-Romantic Horizon

Jerome McGann

When I began my graduate work at Yale in 1963, Romantic Studies were in a state of intense renewal that everyone in the program was aware of.1 Though our register was merely academic, we all felt the force of Wordsworth’s “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.” The Visionary Company (1961), recently published, was a kind of sacred text, and over the next three years we passed around for discussion among ourselves a handful of essays by M. H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, Paul De Man, and Geoffrey Hartman that would soon become defining works for Romantic and Post-Romantic studies. In 1970 Bloom gathered a core set of these materials into the canonical collection Romanticism and Consciousness, interlacing his own and other advanced work with essays by distinguished academic precursors of the previous generation. It proved to be such a commanding book that the rest, as we say, is history, even if only academic history.

Here I will ask you to rethink that academic history, which settled in the 1970s and 1980s into a particular and somewhat distorted appreciation of our past 200+ years of poetry. Fortunately, other histories were coming into play at the same time. Especially important was the growth of a movement in poetic practice as diverse as that academic movement would prove to be. It was a global movement, but in America its first names were Beat Poetry, The San Francisco Renaissance, The New American Poetry, Ethnopoetics, the New York School, and finally Language Poetry. This loose poetical enterprise, like the tighter academic one, moved to recon-

1. I want to thank Richard Sha for provoking me to write this essay, which I did for presentation at the 2014 NASSR conference in Washington, DC. He asked me if I would address the topic of how I registered the impact of Organizations and Institutions on scholarship and on Romantic studies in particular.
sider the grounds of poetic expression. But whereas the academy’s approach was conceptual and philosophical—it would eventually consolidate as the Theory Movement—the poets’ thinking was being shaped by their direct experience with material culture. Crucial to understand is that the poets constellated outside the academy around self-publishing and small presses often founded and run, at every level of the work required, by poets themselves. That institutional fact not only inflected the work with clear social and political goals, it involved the poets in direct personal contact with the materials, means, and modes of production of their own work. The stylistic exponent of this productive orientation was an interest in the acoustic and visual resources of language. The message was in the media.

I will add one more prefatory comment before explaining my view of a “distorted appreciation of our past 200+ years of poetry.” Though strictly personal, it is pertinent here because it helps to locate my relation to all these events. In 1966 I would leave Yale for an appointment at the University of Chicago, where my life would be even more profoundly overthrown between 1966 and 1970 than it had been in my previous years in New Haven. That overthrow would put me in an awkward, often conflicted relation to what I had been learning as a scholar at Yale. Between 1969 and 1979 I would publish six books. Three were academic studies of Byron and Swinburne published by the University of Chicago Press. At the same time, I began what would be a twenty-two-year project to edit the complete poetical works of Lord Byron, eventually completed (in 1992) in seven volumes. Swinburne, Byron, and scholarly editing were not high on the agenda of the Theory Movement, though two decades later the situation would be a little different, and four decades later—now—very different indeed.

The other three books were books of verse published by three small presses, all now defunct. Two were imprints set up by myself, my sister, and some friends, the other was a small press founded by the writer and artist Virgil Burnett, with whom I was to have a lifelong relation. Let me say that I do not consider myself a poet, though I have written a half dozen books of verse printed by small presses. Writing poetry for me has always been an exercise in trying to understand poetry. I am a pedant, not a poet, but I do take my pedantry seriously, though I hope not too seriously. As for those three early books of verse, they were all written under the influence of J. H. Prymne, who would become a legendary figure in the late twentieth-century British Poetry Revival—the UK movement that complemented what was happening in the US and elsewhere.

In 1962 Prymne took up a fellowship at Gonville and Caius College and published, quite successfully, Force of Circumstance and other poems with the distinguished British firm Routledge and Kegan Paul, noted for its interest.
in scholarship and poetry. When I was writing my dissertation in London in 1965–66 I bought a copy and read it with enough interest to make me want to read more of his work. Then in 1968 appeared Prynne’s *Kitchen Poems*, the first of six poetry books he would have printed in the next three years. These works had for me the force of a secular revelation, not least because they were deliberately embracing non–traditional, small press, and self-publishing venues. Prynne—who had already established a scholarly reputation at Cambridge—was issuing a declaration of independence of great significance. I would only begin to understand the import of what he was involved with a few years later when I started to read young American writers like Silliman, Bernstein, Howe, and Hejinian.

With that past as prologue, then, let me take up my argument.

1

It is a commonplace—indeed, a truth universally acknowledged—that the Romantic Movement in England was preoccupied with problems of language and poetic expression. Wordsworth’s “Preface” is the standard point of departure for assessing the issues. It is indeed a key document, like that other Lakeist manifesto the *Biographia Literaria*, where Coleridge trenchantly glosses his friend’s “Preface.” But the problems of language that interested Wordsworth and Coleridge were being engaged in a much more extensive context much earlier, not least in the 1780s when Sir William Jones and Robert Burns made their spectacular cultural appearances, and the short–lived but influential Della Cruscan Movement began its work. And then there was William Blake, though few were aware of him at the time. Not until the proto–Modernist poetics of Rossetti, Swinburne, and the early Yeats would Blake’s significance—historical as well as aesthetic—be clearly recognized.

I cite Jones, Burns, the Della Cruscan, and Blake to draw attention to some important fault lines that run through the poetry of the Romantic Period. Wordsworth’s revolutionary approach to poetic language stands apart, often far apart, from these poets, though Burns at times seems close. But Burns’s commitment to Scottish dialect and Scots song inflects his verse in a fundamentally different way. The same is true of Jones, who was working through the 1780s at the periphery of the British Empire, in India, and with the tools of philological scholarship. When Jones transmitted, into English Pindaric odes, the Sanskrit hymns to Hindu gods, he set up a consequential line of poetic expression. It was very different from Wordsworth’s, though not always so different from Coleridge’s.2 It had much in

2. See Omar F. Miranda, “Yet Another Probable Source for ‘Kubla Khan’: Sir William Jones’s ‘Hymn to Srya and Scholarly Orientalism,’” paper delivered at the 2013 MLA (truncated version available online: http://nyurrg.org/2013/04/10/yet-another-
common with the style being cultivated by the English Della Cruscans, as the "Irregular" poems of Ann Batten Cristall show. Because of his visionary materialism, the antithesis of Blake is even more stark, as we shall see.

The Appendix here gives a series of passages from those poets that will help me talk about the differentials that run through "the past 200+ years of poetry." The excerpt from Wordsworth will serve as a point of reference to set up the discussion because it differs so sharply from Burns, Blake, Jones, and Cristall. I'll begin by considering the differential of Burns, then turn to examine both Wordsworth and Blake more closely, and finish by turning to Jones and Cristall and "the rhetoric of Romanticism" they illustrate.³

Scots dialect in Burns represents something far more vulgar and profane than the simple diction that Wordsworth deploys to illustrate the ethical ideal he connects to "low and rustic life" in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*. The central point of Wordsworth's polemic was to argue that the language of country people reflects a fundamental moral ethos that had been lost in the fleshpots of London. Wordsworth wants a language that is, as we might say, simple and sincere. Not so Burns. What he admires in his country people—what his poetry represents—is not their pristine, uninstructed morals, but their vitalities, which as often as not get expressed in coarse, obscene, and cheeky registers. Wordsworth would never have permitted himself the sexual wordplay so essential to Burns's poetry, wonderfully illustrated in the passage from "Hallowe'en" (see Appendix). Tranquil recollection has little to do with Burns, who has pledged his allegiance to the spontaneities of his Halloween revelers. His ethos is nicely laid down in the famous chorus from "Love and Liberty. A Cantata" (often called "The Jolly Beggars"):⁴

A fig for those by law protected!
Liberty's a glorious feast!
Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest!

Burns's poetry comes to us as an overflow of powerful singing. The optimal interpretation of the Cantata, his masterwork, would thus not be a

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prose exegesis but an actual performance: minimally a recitation but more adequately, a full theatrical presentation.5

Unlike Wordsworth, Burns works a ballad tradition that has not so sophisticated its connection to popular song that its musical ground has lost effective presence. Consequently, his verse always strikes us, even when we are only reading it silently, as spectacular, performative, theatrical. Indeed, the miscegenated poems in the Kilmarnock volume are hard to read silently. They beg to be recited since the feeding source of their power comes as the play of the signifiers, not as the ideas of the signifieds.6 Wordsworth could be, and was in fact, often moved by the kind of music on which Burns’s work drew so deeply, as we know best from poems like “The Solitary Reaper.” But as he tells us in that very poem, he would not seek to reprise the music, he would move to internalize it: “The music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more.”

If we ponder that poem and that line, we see their pertinence for Wordsworth’s program to revitalize poetry and, through that, general culture. This program—“Romanticism as interiorization”—would come to dominate Romantic and Post-Romantic studies throughout the late twentieth century. Burns is important exactly for the swerve his poetry makes from the authority of that program. It is not that such a program, as Francis Jeffrey sneered, “would never do.” Rather, it is that “one good [poetic] custom should [not] corrupt the world” of poetry at large. I invoke a resonant line in Tennyson here because he is in certain respects such a clear inheritor of Wordsworthian ideas and stylistic habits. But his relation to the verse protocols that come from poets like Jones and Cristall set him decisively apart from Wordsworth, as Tennyson’s great earlier explicer, his friend Arthur Henry Hallam, showed. Tennyson began his career by writing poems like “The Lady of Shalott.” That signature work reprises “The Solitary Reaper,” but only in order to question its argument and example. Tennyson’s solitary lady turns what was once Romantic to Victorian.

The case of Burns reminds us how often Romantic poetry sought to preserve close relations with many different musical resources. But in this he is merely exemplary, as is apparent if we briefly consider Byron. The Hebrew Melodies are almost the least of the matter. He was fascinated by

5. A performance of the Cantata was mounted in Edwardsville, Illinois in 2002 by a group of interested local people with amateur skills. The event was hosted at a local pub, “The Stagger Inn.” Plans for an annual event did not materialize.


7. This is De Man’s general characterization of the theory of Romanticism we now associate with the Yale School. See his Aesthetic Ideology (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 190n4.
the popular songs and music of Greece, Italy, France, Scotland, and England. He produced numerous translations and imitations of nearly every kind of sung poetry, from vulgar street songs to primitive epic. Indeed, the latter he experienced, like Burns, at first hand, when he listened to "The Singers of Tales" in Levantine coffee houses in 1810–11. Byron's historical eminence thus stems from sources that produced aesthetic innovations every bit as decisive as Wordsworth's, however much those resources largely ran to rhetorical rather than meditative registers.

But that difference is exactly the point. At least as much Romantic poetry feeds upon what Donald Davie once called "Articulate Energy" as it does upon interiorization, and Shelley was one of Davie's key exemplars. When poetry brings song and music to its fore, its material physique and rhetorical address command our attention. Consider for a moment that recitation was one of the governing approaches to poetic interpretation in the nineteenth century. We have all but completely lost an appreciation of why it was so and what it might mean for our own interpretative designs. Critical reflection on that neglected history might also pressure us to rethink the invidious distinction, still prevalent, between "heard" and "overheard" verse, between public rhetoric and private feeling. That might well be an unexamined idea not worth holding on to.

The greatness of Burns and the importance of Thomas Moore, a major poet of the time, cannot be understood without recovering an appreciation of the full range of the resources of language. These supervene what twentieth-century scholars, in flight from philology and material culture, were taught to call "the text." Far too well taught. As one of the greatest practitioners of that word and idea—Paul De Man—might and should have told us, the insights they brought to cultural studies during the twentieth century also brought a correspondent blindness, severely attenuating our theoretical and practical scholarship. To understand what is happening in the imaginative work of a Burns or a Blake, the concept of textuality as it metastasized through the twentieth century will not take one very far.

Before turning to Blake I must pause to consider briefly how far such a conceptual approach to poetry can take one. Because De Man is such a rigorous philosophical interpreter, his commentaries clarify not just his interpretive strengths and limitations—he is a disarmingly modest critic, despite his intimidating reputation—but the sources of both. Take the late essay “Autobiography as De-facement” (1979), for instance, where he worries the relation between an autobiographical text and the actual life to which it refers.12 In a familiar DeManian move he examines one of his favorite English subjects, Wordsworth, through Wordsworth’s Essays Upon Epitaphs. His principal goal in the essay is to test the strength of Wordsworth’s “claim” that his poetry is “a discourse of restoration” (73–74). In an argument as elegant and as thorough as any he ever marshaled, De Man shows how an exemplary Wordsworthian textual constellation “deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores.” In general, we “understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding” (81).

No one does this kind of critical inquiry better than De Man. But its success depends upon understanding language as a discourse of understanding, or rather, of “understanding” in a very special sense. This sense will be “privative,” De Man says, “To the extent that language is figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia)” (80). That is exactly the extent of the language that De Man undertakes to examine. At the outset of his essay he observes that “whatever the writer does is in fact governed . . . by the resources of his medium” (69). By “medium” he means—as he always does in his commentaries—textuality as a figural discourse. Literary media for him are never bibliographical or acoustic, never sensible and material. As he puts it lucidly later in the essay, textuality is “a consistent system of thought, of metaphors, and of diction . . . a system of mediations” (74).

But the “extent” of language’s resources is much larger than its textual mediations, as the example of Burns indicates. And we may be surprised to see that the Essays Upon Epitaphs explicitly direct us to that larger linguistic world. It lies beyond the texts that De Man recuperates. It is the world Wordsworth locates in the rural cemeteries he loved to visit. Consider the following passage:

In an obscure corner of a country church-yard I once espied, half overgrown with hemlock and nettles, a very small stone laid upon the ground, bearing nothing more than the name of the deceased with the date of birth and death, importing that it was an infant which had

been born one day and died the following. I know not how far the Reader may be in sympathy with me; but more awful thoughts of rights conferred, of hopes awakened, of remembrances stealing away or vanishing, were imparted to my mind by that inscription there before my eyes than by any other that it has ever been my lot to meet with upon a tomb-stone.\textsuperscript{13}

In terms of genre, the gravestone’s minimal text conforms to an informative discourse. Here is tropic language at a zero degree, and how overwhelmingly appropriate in the circumstances! This is the spot that reveals for us why we are so moved by Wordsworth’s violet by a mossy stone—is that in fact a gravestone?—and by the girl in “We Are Seven.” The scripts we encounter in the \textit{Essays Upon Epitaphs} gain their eloquence not simply by their stone medium, but also by the context that alone makes such eloquence possible. Wordsworth once more:

\begin{quote}
A village church-yard, lying as it does in the lap of Nature, may indeed be most favourably contrasted with that of a town of crowded population; and sepulture therein combines many of the best tendencies which belong to the mode practised by the Ancients, with others peculiar to itself. The sensations of pious cheerfulness, which attend the celebration of the sabbath-day in rural places, are profitably chastised by the sight of the graves of kindred and friends, gathered together in that general home towards which the thoughtful yet happy spectators themselves are journeying. Hence a parish-church, in the stillness of the country, is a visible centre of a community of the living and the dead; a point to which are habitually referred the nearest concerns of both.
\end{quote}

Whereas De Man speaks of “the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions” (71), Wordsworth’s gravem inscriptions point to the social structure that underlies all tropologies. Language has important ethical functions beyond the ethical demands of epistemology, and it has at its disposal—or I should say, \textit{we} have—more extensive mediations than are perhaps dreamt of in tropological philosophy. I say “we” because the first person plural is Wordsworth’s subject in these \textit{Essays}, a subject who cannot thrive in “interiorization.” That is surely the whole point of \textit{The Excursion}, as it is even more clearly the point of his greatly neglected masterpiece \textit{The White Doe of Rylestone}. Indeed, were we to orient our reading of Wordsworth from \textit{Lyrical Ballads} rather than from \textit{The Prelude}, from

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Prose Works of William Wordsworth . . .} ed., Alexander B. Grosart, 3 Vols. (London: Moxon, 1876). The \textit{Essays Upon Epitaphs} are printed in volume 2; this excerpt on pages 72–73, the following excerpt on pages 33–34.
Wordsworth’s “Preface” rather than from Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, we would see him very differently.\textsuperscript{14}

In the *Essays Upon Epitaphs* Wordsworth asks us to see a world in the grain of stones. I recall Blake here because the subject of poetry and musical form, which is foregrounded in Burns, represents only one aspect of a much larger set of fundamental issues. Even more than Wordsworth, Blake forces us to consider another sensory dimension of poetic expressiveness. Ezra Pound famously observed that all poetic expression draws upon melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia. When a textual vantage privileges logopoeia, as it necessarily does, the other dimensions tend to slip to the edge of attention, or even go entirely unnoticed. So the melopoeia of Burns is simply not addressed in the line of interpretation that deals in texts.\textsuperscript{15} Burns has no presence in *Romanticism and Consciousness* or *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. Similarly, “phanopoeia” shrinks to a linguistic trope: “The Romantic Image,” so-called.\textsuperscript{16} But think how little that tropic view of image has to do with the visible language of Blake, to name only one of many poets for whom visible forms are expressively crucial: not just, say, Edward Lear, Rossetti, and Wilde, but Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Stephen Crane, and a host of twentieth-century poets whose work, as Yeats knew, “has all but completely shaped itself in the printing press.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} John F. Danby’s *The Simple Wordsworth. Studies in the Poems 1797–1807* (London: Routledge, 1960) is so oriented. It is worth noting that Pryme, Davie, and Danby were all published by Routledge.


\textsuperscript{16} See Frank Kermode’s *Romantic Image* (1957) and then De Man’s “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,” collected in *Romanticism and Consciousness* (1970) and reprinted in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*.

Given that context, now let’s consider Blake. In his prose account of the dream from which “Kubla Khan” was ostensibly drawn, Coleridge said that “all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions.”18 The remark could be a description of Blake’s visionary poetry. But whereas Coleridge meant to emphasize the complete clarity of an unpremeditated communication, Blake’s Illuminated Books—dictated from Eternity, as he averred—appear very different. Every plate presents us with language that is difficult to process as text. Texts are mind-meditations, as De Man makes very clear, whereas Blake’s works are sensory meditations, primarily visual, though the acoustic features of his work should not be neglected.19 Plate 5 from The [First] Book of Urizen, for example, presents a comical revelation of Urizenic textuality that Blake glosses with a true visionary scripture: his own “living creations [etched] in the flames of eternal fury.”20

De Man parsed “The Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image” in his celebrated essay of 1960.21 The exegesis has only minimal relevance for Blake’s Romantic images because Blake’s medium of expression is material, not textual. The intentional structure of Blake’s images—at once so arresting and so obdurate—is exposed with special clarity on plate 4 of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (see the plate link in the Appendix). The linguistic inscriptions here are permeated by figural forms that speak, so to say, another language. They are not tropes; they are iconic forms that appeal to the mortal eye, one of the “chief inlets of Soul” mentioned on the plate. The images at the foot of the plate not only command us to read non-linguistically, they set a base for registering the plate’s visible language in relation to human forms. They work to draw attention to the pervasive if less foregrounded nonlinguistic scripts. But because the linguistic scripts are themselves delivered as incised forms, the other forms—the miniature figurations—draw our attention. The figures laid in after the word “Energies” and after the crucial phrase “the chief inlets of Soul in this age” are particularly notable since their living and human forms are clearly defined. In this they rhyme with the human images at the foot of the plate.

But they also rhyme with the very different images that surround the

18. From the prose account of how the poem came to be written, prefixed by Coleridge to the verse in the first edition (1816).
20. All the plates cited here are from The William Blake Archive: www.blakearchive.org, accessed 20 May 2014.
21. First published in French in the Revue internationale de Philosophie, De Man translated and then republished it in Bloom’s collection Romanticism and Consciousness.
plate's heading. Barely sketched forms, those heading figures are drawn with the same kind of sinuous lines that populate the plate and occasionally coagulate into more or less determinate images of living things. These images thus carry the argument—a visual argument—that all the incised forms are bringing glimpses of a vast and living world. That argument is driven home with particular force by the string of vertical figures that stand above the last line of the plate. These figurations suggest at once both attenuated living forms as well as the strange letterings of an unknown language. Observe how strategically they are placed. Traditional page design here marks them with the form of a sentence. Though unintelligible linguistically, Blake’s medium frees that strange sentence to an expressive life. The chosen medium carries an intentional structure that is not primarily textual. Those scripts represent a communication from the Eternity of the Soul’s life, to whose existence they now testify.

3

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a satire, is rare among Blake’s imaginative works, and unique among his Illuminated Books in the way it advances conceptual arguments. In his other Illuminated Books, Blake is a prophetic voice, the visionary mouthpiece of “the Eternals.” In the *Marriage* that voice is often ironical and even personal, breaking into outrageous comedy, as on plates 14–15 and 17–20. Still, the work is fundamentally prophetic even in its most comical moments, and as such its discourse is revelatory and apocalyptic, not philosophical. Although plate 4 gives us a glimpse of the language of Eternity, its signification—its “meaning”—is simply that Eternity exists. Had years brought him a philosophic mind, as they did Keats, Blake might have glossed the revelation thus: “That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” But Blake doesn’t do that. The plate needs no gloss because its medium and its message are undivided. The plate is declaring primitive rather than privative truth.

But he did gloss his convictions elsewhere and those glosses will be as astonishing to educated or even enlightened minds as his imaginative creations. Recall his conversations with Henry Crabb Robinson in 1825. When Robinson suggested to Blake that his religious views argued that there was “no use in discipline or education, no difference bet[ween] Good & evil,” Blake shot back: “There is no use in education [my emphasis]. I hold it wrong. It is the great sin. It is eating of the tree of the Knowledge of good & evil.”

That particular comment—so central to Blake’s world-view—is rarely cited by Blake readers or even Blake scholars when considering his intellectual positions. Like certain inconvenient passages in the Bible, it is left to gather dust and gain obscurity. This happens because we—scholars in particular—are all partisans of the knowledge and education that Blake thought useless and even sinful.

And that he disapproved of secular education is the least of the matter. “I do not believe that the world is round,” he told Robinson, “I believe it is quite flat” (7). Though a professed Christian, he thought Jesus made mistakes. According to Blake, on at least one occasion—in the Garden of Gethsemane—Jesus, the god-man, lost his moral bearings altogether. Blake also told Robinson that he saw and spoke with various dead people, including Socrates and Jesus, and that his works were dictated to him by visioned beings who lived in Eternity. These visions, recorded in and as his illuminated works, were to him exactly as real as the material world of James Wyatt (or Blake’s studio), the social world of Jane Austen (or Blake’s London), and the natural world of William Wordsworth (or Blake’s Felpham).

I say “exactly” because that is what Blake says, as in his 1799 letter to Trusler: “I know that this World is a World of Imagination & Vision I see Every thing I paint In This World, but Every body does not see alike.”

For Blake, the philosophic mind is as visioned as his own. The difference is that philosophic visions for him are deadly, not vital. When enlightened imaginations envision the sun as a globe of fire, Blake agrees this is indeed an imaginative vision, but in ultimate terms, pitifully limited. Blake sees the sun as a heavenly host singing the glories of human existence. And there are great differences in religious visions as well:

God Appears & God is Light  
To those poor Souls who dwell in night,  
But does a Human Form Display  
To those who Dwell in Realms of day.

("Auguries of Innocence," 129–32)


24. See his celebrated conclusion to “A Vision of the Last Judgement” (Erdman, 565–66): “I assert for My self that I do not behold the Outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action it is as the Dirt upon my feet No part of Me. What it will be Questioned When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea O no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight I look thro it & not with it.”
This habit of thought and experience in Blake is often called "unmediated vision." The phrase derives from Geoffrey Hartman's early study of a particular group of poets that interested him. Applied to Blake, however, the term seems to me seriously misleading because it suggests the very opposite of what Blake was attempting. In proposing that term, Hartman argued that Wordsworth and various later poets were trying to create conceptual systems that would not be mediated by inherited categorical frameworks, whether religious, scientific, or even philosophical. The dramatic action of such pogeries would not be categorically controlled, they would be organized by the immediate personal experience of the poets. The poems would therefore represent recordings of those experiences. They would be psychomachias. And "Nature" is a convenient territory in which those psychic dramas play themselves out because Nature's existence—"rocks and stones and trees" for example—does not have to be philosophically justified. Generations of scholars have understandably taken "Nature" to be one of the regulative norms of a Romantic ethos. "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her" states exactly why. But Blake's explicit view was that Nature was not only "a ratio of the perishing Vegetable Memory" (Milton, plate 26/28), Nature always finally betrayed the hearts that loved her. Blake's Nature is another name for the Whore of Babylon. Consequently, for Blake and poets working to exploit the full material resources of expressive language, "immediated" rather than "unmediated" would be a more accurate term.

If "rocks and stones and trees" are parsed in textual rather than in Blake's existential terms, they open themselves to questions of their meaning, including the meaning of their existence. Their signification in this perspective lies in what they may be imagined to signify, not in that they signify. In this perspective, the Romantic pursuit of Unmediated Vision turns itself over to the Rhetoric of Romanticism, the process of self-conscious reflection that some Romantic poets initiate and that so many Post-Romantic scholars replicate. That Romantic poetry exhibits this kind of action is certain, but equally certain is that other actions are at least as pervasive.

Blake famously declared—or rather, his character Los declared—"I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason and

25. See Hartman's The Unmediated Vision. An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954). Because of the importance of Blake's work to Harold Bloom's grasp of Blake's apocalypticism, the term came to be regularly applied to Blake in subsequent academic criticism.
26. See also The Ghost of Abel: "Nature has no outline: / but Imagination has, Nature has no tune, but Imagination has! / Nature has no Supernatural & dissolves. Imagination is Eternity."
Compare, my business is to Create” (Jerusalem, plate 10). Crucially, Los's “System” is nothing conceptual, it is a set of existential forms—arbitrary Saussurian signifiers—that appear to spring from nowhere: “Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the burdened air.” Like the word that names him, this visionary being did not exist prior to his inscription. When we track such Blakean apparitions through the Illuminated Books we realize they comprise an infinite and bounded set in a very particular sense: forms are created and even named, but immediately those creations run into transformations and new names emerge.

The pivotal event in Blake’s Milton—the descent of Oolon into the vales of Beulah (plates 19–31)—is illuminating. The plates record a bewildering series of verbal and visual transformations, a kind of n-dimensional mutating figuration created to represent what the work itself calls “go[ing] to eternal death.” Many are conceptual forms we recognize as they fleet past us, for they are drawn from various histories, literatures, the bible, even works of science and philosophy. They are presented as at once allusive and illusive because, like all mortal creation, they are, in Blake’s view, born precisely for “Eternal Death.” Beside and twined with them, however, are a host of unheard of figurations: Udan Adan, Palamabron, Golgonooza, Enitharmon, Luvah, Oolon, Tharmas, and on and on, in saecula saeculorum. These “unnamed forms”—unnamed because they are their own names—come to define the invented character of all the figurations, not least that seemingly determining one, “Eternity.” If we want to locate the primitive categorical determinants that organize Blake’s whirliging worlds, there are just three: existence, the existential condition of death, and that “Valley of Decision,” the intention to “enter into” both. 27

Speaking in this way I am already disfiguring Blake’s work with conceptual markers. So let’s stop that and just look at plate 31 (see the Appendix for the link). This is what Vincent De Luca years ago called Blake’s “wall of words.” 28 The phrase recovers the resistance that Blake’s art raises against conceptual translation. The plate primarily declares itself a material set of figurations. Look at it carefully. The surface is not so richly populated with figural forms as the Marriage plate we looked at before. But note what the few figures that are there are doing at the right margin. The wall of words is inscribed on a surface that seems laid down on another surface. Here some of the figures are mere marks, others have suggestive shapes, and at least one—the second of the definitely shaped forms—seems to be lifting the

27. See Jerusalem, plate 64 for Blake’s appropriation of King David’s double victory over the Philistines in the Valley of Rephaim (2 Samuel: 5 and 23).
edge of the inscribed surface from a surface now being exposed below it. This action occurs on all the plates of Milton that are not strictly image plates. Agents of revelation, these figures expose the plate as a kind of palimpsest. One thinks of the "infernal method" of printing described in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: "melting apparent surfaces away and displaying the infinite, which was hid." The image plates presumably represent what lies below the apparent surfaces.

But of course, as Blake knows, we have all eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, so he knows we will push through his apocalyptic walls in quest of some meaning beyond. That impulse is exactly figured at the plate's edges. Indeed, the plate's very difficulty—the intention of its image—draws us to make such moves. When we do make them—elementally, when we seek a readable transcription that will support interpretive readings like the one I am laying out here—we discover a startling contradiction. Though it reads like a sentimental poetic celebration, the text calls itself a "lamentation."

This is the story being told: when Ololon decides to "go to eternal death," she (a difficult term, since Ololon is a river in Eden, among other things) . . . she, so it is said (among other things that are also being said) . . . she descends into the vale of Beulah and, in that move, raises cries of weeping and lamentation. Ololon does this, apparently, because the residents of Beulah fear her arrival. No one expects Ololon, no one wants her. The birds are happy, the flowers are happy. Or so it is said. But the same voice—who is it?—tells us that the birds and flowers are actually raising a chorus of lamentations, for "Men are sick with Love":

The Jonquil, the mild Lilly opes her heavens! Every Tree
And Flower & Herb soon fill the air with an innumerable Dance
Yet in order sweet & lovely, Men are sick with Love!
Such is a Vision of the lamentation of Beulah over Ololon

Conceived as text, which is also to say, conceived as work available to philosophic reflection, the intentional structure of romantic images will inevitably develop the incongruities Blake is dramatizing here. But that is not the intentional structure of Blake's romantic images. These passages are tour de force catalogues of natural phenomena conceived in a rhetoric of sensibility, one of the elementary rhetorics of Romantic expression. But as incised, the image's intentional structure is not reflexive and self-conscious, it is immediate and declarative. Meanings are not forbidden—indeed, they inevitably appear—but they (inevitably) come as the dependent extrusions of an act of elementary vision, the primal experience that grounds all reflection. In Biographia Literaria Coleridge called it the condition of Primary Imagination, the prerogative of God, assigning Secondary Imagination—the Rhetoric of Romanticism—to human beings. Because Blake's God is human,
acts of Primary Imagination comprise the intentional structure of his work. Immediated rather than unmediated vision.

So what is Blake’s argument for those who would strip away those apparent surfaces in a quest for Blake’s meaning? It is that they will not discover meaning, they will discover more images, more spectacular than ever: “the infinite, which was hid.”

4

The Illuminated Books execute that intention most forcefully, but Blake achieved it in his textual works as well. The fact is pertinent because of the immediated work of so many poets who work only with traditional textual resources. 29 Consider Blake’s “Aeguries of Innocence,” for example. The text of this work has vexed the scholastic conscience from the beginning of its public life, which is to say from the time it was brought to D. G. Rossetti’s attention. The poem’s series of pithy declarations unfold in such a random way that scholars have regularly tried to impose what they hope will be more significant rearrangements—that is to say, to reorganize the only authoritative text we have, Blake’s fair copy. 30 But why not read in the same letter that the author writ? We might see how the randomness makes possible each couplet’s radical particularity. It also allows the sequence to congeal into little random groups that then reinforce the sense of randomness, as if the work lacked any beginning, middle, or end. And that the couplets are not heroic but four-stress hudiabrasics is equally decisive, for they have little space, and apparently no intention, to explain themselves or wait for explanations:

A Riddle or the Crickets Cry
Is to Doubt a fit Reply
The Emmets Inch & Eagles Mile
Make Lame Philosophy to smile
He who Doubts from what he sees
Will neer Believe do what you Please
If the Sun & Moon should Doubt
Theyd immediately Go out

29. The importance of “Visible Language” has of course been a major focus of both linguistics and poetics in the past fifty years, as the founding in 1966 of the journal Visible Language illustrates.

30. Nearly every scholar attempting to edit Blake has tried to put the couplets into what they each judge a more coherent order, despite the fact that the text we have from Blake’s hand is a neat fair copy, reflecting his clear intention. Rossetti was the first to make this move in his edition of a selection of Blake’s works that he made for Alexander Gilchrist’s The Life of William Blake, “Pictor Ignotus” (London: Phaeton Press, 1880), 2:107–11.
“A riddle or the Crickets cry”: that unexplained collocation of a certain kind of text, a certain kind of creature, and a particular kind of sound is an act of Primary Imagination. When it joins itself with “Is to Doubt a fit reply,” the syntactic ambiguity turns the couplet into an instance of itself, an unnamed form. It is an existential riddle that has no “fit” equivalent other than itself, any more than does a cricket or a cricket’s cry.

Art and poetry would “truly” be in Touchstone’s “parlous state” if they were capable only of the privative resource we learned to call Secondary Imagination. But song and iconic images are not the only agents with the power of immediated expression. Typography, bibliographic codes, syntax, prosody: all are available to acts of Primary Imagination, as one can see by taking a more philological view of the history of nineteenth-century poetry.31 A brief look at the typographic design of Sir William Jones and Ann Batten Cristall is illuminating. Both Jones and Cristall mark their verse as Pindaric ode, which for Jones is the signifier licensing the celebration of divine names that comes at the center of his “Hymn to Narayana”: Narayana, Venamely, Peitamber, Checra, Kytabh, etc. The names are legion: daemonic and generative, not demonic and privative. Crucially, the poem draws a perfect equation between the “unknown, all-knowing Word” of the Genesis myth and the rhetoric of the poem itself, which is entirely imperative or declarative, even when the syntax is interrogative:

With restless pain for ages he inquir’d
   What were his pow’rs, by whom, and why conferr’d:
With doubts perplex’d, with keen impatience fir’d
   He rose, and rising heard
   Th’ unknown all-knowing Word,
   “Brehma! no more in vain research persist:
   My veil thou canst not move—Go; bid all worlds exist.”32

The referent of “he” is all the proper names that spill out of the poem, and the command by which “He rose” cannot be tracked to any source or authority beyond the running energy of the syntax. The poem is channeling its own enthusiastic action:

What first impell’d thee to exert thy might?
   Goodness unlimited. What glorious light
   Thy pow’r directed? Wisdom without bound.

What prov’d it first? Oh! guide my fancy right;
   Oh! raise from cumbrous ground
   My soul in rapture drown’d,
   That fearless it may soar on wings of fire;
   For Thou, who only knowst, Thou only canst inspire.

It’s striking that after the conceptual responses to the first two theological questions, the third question—we would call it an epistemological question—turns to prayer. Even more striking is the structure of the prayer. Who issues the prayer, we may wonder? There is no way of answering such a question because the poem is an impersonal hymn. But even were we to wonder, that wonder becomes part of the poem’s well being, like the questions it raises. And then, we might ask, to whom is the prayer directed? Again the question is expressive because it is unanswerable. It is “Thou,” we see, but “Thou” turns to an unnamed form exactly because it has an infinite number of possible names—a bounded Infinite, of course, as in Blake.

Cristall’s pindaric ode is very different, influenced as it obviously is by the high artifice of Della Cruscana poetry. Where Jones operates in the register of a religious sublime, Cristall’s verse could not be more dainty. Paradoxically, among the passages we began with, the colloquial Burns is closest to Cristall in point of verse style. Both cultivate a sympathetically comical representation of very ordinary life. The Cristall passage I want to consider (see Appendix) is excerpted from the initial section of a three-part poem whose subject is, as in Burns’s “Halloween,” the quotidian love sports of young people. But Cristall’s comic scene is a well-to-do country garden. Instead of the “low and rustic” diction that Burns and Wordsworth solicit, Cristall cultivates a hyper version of a posh and privileged world. Like Pope, she knows exactly how not to break a butterfly upon a wheel, and why.

The triviality of the scene and events is essential to the poem’s brilliance. The core action is beyond conventional and slight: GERTRUDE is enamoured of a youth named URBAN who, careless of her delicate feelings, spends the day in light play and games. Despondent, GERTRUDE (note: not “Gertrude,” nor “Urban,” etc.) flees to solitude. Then comes an afternoon shower—the scene in the passage I’ve quoted—and the company runs for cover. The showers end, the sky clears, and when the “sportive feet” resume their games, GERTRUDE watches URBAN lead away the “glowing ROSAMUNDE.” Finding herself finally the object of the company’s “wounding satires” of “wicked looks, and jests, and jeers,”

GERTRUDE breaks through her "tears" to recover herself by taking the measure of the company's "thoughtlessness."

"No more fair reason's sacred light despise;
Thy heart may blessings find
That dwell not in the eyes,
But in the virtues of the feeling mind."

One does not want to fracture the poem's delicate mechanisms, lest we break them on a wheel of interpretation. Enough to say that the poem operates by playing its wit off the "wicked wit" it comes to expose. It sets "sportive feet" dancing to "frolic measures" in order to reset imagination as the proper master of its represented world, bringing measure for measure, game for game.

Look again at the passage. The poem's dominant image—GERTRUDE's tears of sensibility—rain down upon what cannot be considered a natural world. This is not a Gertrude's world, it is a GERTRUDE's, a crystalline and extravagant recreation of the land and the "mansion" of GERTRUDE's "feeling mind" and its (un)Natural Order, its natural and visible language. GERTRUDE is not a person, that "mansion" is not a place, the rain is not rain, the "clods" of "moist earth" that muck up her feet are all pure unrealities: on one hand figures of Gertrude's initial misperception of objective Truth, on the other an index of the power of the primary imagination. For just as "music's power deludes her from her cares," the reader too is uplifted from a trivial world.

How amazing that this "idle and extravagant story in verse" (Wordsworth) should be able to resurrect "the One Life within us and abroad" (Coleridge). But that is exactly what poetry does.

Coda

When Yeats said that Modern poetry was born in the printing press, he exposed the social nexus at work in any communicative exchange. So do the careers of Jeremy Prynne, Susan Howe, and Charles Bernstein, among many others we all could name. This Press, Tuumba, Roof Books, Poetical Histories, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E: like Kelmscott, Cuala, Three Mountains, Contact, or Black Sun, these imprints tell us that the poetic act of making, poiesis, involves far more than textual figuration and rhetorical form. In the names of those publishing venues, the ancient distinction between techne and poiesis will be called to critical reflection. Or as Prynne's

work shows, called to practical acts of critical reflection as his work turned to private presses and self-publication. They were acts at once of poetry, of theory, and of material mediations.

Like Poe and Mallarmé, such work foregrounds the intentional character of poetry. *Verbum caro factum est.* Poetry is something that is deliberately made, visible and oral language and related expressive media being its (so to say) fleshly part. As Mallarmé remarked to Degas: "You don't write verse with ideas, Degas. You use words." But that also means one does not make poetry with texts, but with media. One recalls Keats: the poet and the dreamer are distinct. Though Keats did not say so, conscious intention is the mark of that distinction. It also becomes a mark of distinction when poets deliberately move to control their expressive media.

Poets and their readers are also distinct, but differently so. They are more like what Blake called "Contraries," without which, as he said, there can be "no progression." The relation is especially strong in the case of vocational readers like ourselves. Poets occupy a condition of production, scholars, of reception, but they share a codependence of doing and making. Poetry's fundamental intention is to hunt up its respondents: in Wordsworth's idiom, to create the taste by which the poetry is to be enjoyed. However interiorized, the intentional structure of Romantic poetry waits upon its summoned audience, which is expected to demonstrate reciprocal intentions.

In my experience, nothing puts a scholar in a more sympathetic and codependent relation to his subject than a serious investment in the means, materials, and modes of poetic production. I am not speaking of a theoretical investment, or I should perhaps rather say, I am speaking of a theoretical investment of a special kind—one shaped by the minute particulars of practical acts. To write poetry is to play a game that must be lost, as all poets know and as many have said. And if you do not imagine yourself "a poet," all the more reason to play the game from time to time and be chastened in that instructive event. Becoming involved with poetry's quotidian public media is even more trying and instructional.

Nor is it possible, if you write, not to be involved. That is a great lesson to be learned from that greatest of dropouts, Emily Dickinson, who had a lifelong relation of resistance to public media and its institutions. Few


36. Perhaps the most memorable are Dante's (Paradiso, 13:76–78), Pope's (An Essay on Criticism, 253–54), and Laura Riding Jackson's (The Telling [New York: Harper and Row, 1972]). Abandoning what she judged to be the self-deceptions of poets about poetry, Riding Jackson would speak instead of "the common risks of language, where failure stalks in every word" (66–67). The remark fairly repeats what Dante and Pope wrote earlier.
poets' work expose as clearly how "the auction of the mind" works because few spent as much time thinking critically about the publishing industry and its forms of expression. Dickinson's critical reflections on the politics of contemporary poetry, including her technical exposure of its materials, means, and modes of operation, are written all over her manuscripts, and even in the little handful of poems that did get printed.

That is to look from the production side of the poetic exchange. The reception side awaits the illumination of an equivalent transtextual commitment. For readers who write about poetry—scholars—are also subject to "the common risks of language, where failure stalks in every word." The traditional literary article and monograph are dangerous instruments, partly because they aspire to the impossible condition of truth, and partly because they so readily lend themselves to self-expression rather than self-attention. The institutional venues of scholarly communication are supposed to monitor the work: peer-reviewing. And they often do. But as we all know, those mechanisms also function uncritically, issuing conventional imperatives and seals of approval instead of critical reflection.

The poetry imprints I mentioned earlier were efforts by poets to escape such authorities. At the present unusual moment, we see analogous moves by scholars who seek new forms of address in digital and online resources. One of the great virtues of these new media comes from the invitation they offer scholars to reflect on our own expressive resources, both traditional and digital. The recent explosion of Book Studies and History of the Book shows how eagerly scholars have responded to that invitation. So does the emergence of Digital Humanities.

Thinking of these new materials, means, and modes of literary reception we might think: Ah, Let a thousand flowers bloom! But their chief importance for the scholar may not lie in the methodological opportunities they seem to offer to scholastic enterprise, important as those are. On the contrary, their chief value may lie in the difficulties they throw up when you try to use them for acts of literary analysis and interpretation. For the literary scholar, digital instruments are powerful, seductive, and deeply intransigent... and important exactly for those reasons, as I can testify from the evidence of my own years spent trying to master them for my very old-fashioned work.

It's difficult to build a scholarly edition, even when the materials, means, and modes of production are familiar. My twenty-two years of working on the edition of Byron reflect a common work experience. It is also an experience that can bring startling interpretive revelations since the scholarly edition is the Turing Machine of traditional discourse fields. It is even more difficult—if also more energizing—to design and build such a work with the new materials, means, and modes of production that are becom-
ing available. That was the eighteen-year long experimental project of *The Rossetti Archive*, which I began in 1992 and left off in 2010. Though a rich scholarly resource of primary materials, it was a project that couldn't be completed, as the Byron edition could be.37 The primary materials of that edition were and are Byron's works but for *The Rossetti Archive* they were the conceptual designs, back end as well as front end, of the *Archive* itself. Yet both were important for me because both put me in a close practical relation to the most fundamental requisite of both scholarship and art. William Morris called it "resistance in the materials."38

To execute good criticism and scholarship you have to solicit the difficulties of your subject. It isn't what you think you recognize and understand that takes the measure of your judgment and the work. In fact, it's everything else. So skilled interpreters should probably be looking for opportunities for serious scholarly editing. And vice versa. Scholars in the twenty-first century will be consumed in the remediation of our cultural heritage and integrating it with contemporary poetical work. That means re-editing and it also means re-interpreting. Not for nothing did the ancients call our work *philologia perennis*.

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Appendix


Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
   And let the young Lambs bound
   As to the tabor's sound!
We in thought will join your throng,
   Ye that pipe and ye that play,
   Ye that through your hearts to-day
   Feel the gladness of the May!
What though the radiance which was once so bright
   Be now for ever taken from my sight,
   Though nothing can bring back the hour
   Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
   We will grieve not, rather find
   Strength in what remains behind;

In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

**Robert Burns, “Halloween,” st. 5–6:**

The lasses staw frae ‘mang them a’,
To pou their stalks o’ corn:
But Rab slips out, and jinks about,
Behint the muckle thorn:
He grippet Nelly hard an’ fast;
Loud skirl’d a’ the lasses;
But her tap-pickle maist was lost,
When kuitin’ in the false-house
Wis’ him that night.

The auld guidwife’s weel-hoordit nits,
Are round and round divided,
And monie lads’ an’ lasses, fates
Are there that night decided:
Some kindle coothie, side by side,
And burn thegither trimly;
Some start awa, wi’ saucy pride,
An’ jump out owre the chimlie
Fu’ high that night.

**William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, plate 4, Copy 1**

http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.i.illbk.04&java=no

**Blake, Milton, plate 31, Copy A:**

http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=milton.a.illbk.31&java=no

**Sir William Jones, “Hymn to Narayena,” 109–26:**

Blue crystal vault, and elemental fires,
That in th’ ethereal fluid blaze and breathe;
Thou, tossing main, whose snaky branches wreathe
This pensile orb with intertwined gyres;  
Mountains, whose radiant spires  
Presumptuous rear their summits to the skies,  
And blend their em'rald hue with sapphire light;  
Smooth meads and lawns, that glow with varying dyes  
Of dew-bespangled leaves and blossoms bright,  
Hence! vanish from my sight:  
Delusive Pictures! unsubstantial shows!  
My soul absorb'd One only Being knows,  
Of all perceptions One abundant source,  
Whence ev'ry object ev'ry moment flows:  
Suns hence derive their force,  
Hence planets learn their course;  
But suns and fading words I view no more:  
God only I perceive; God only I adore.

Ann Batten Cristall, "Evening. Gertrude":

The skies disgorg'd, their last large drops refrain,  
The cloudy hemisphere's no more perturb'd;  
The leafy boughs, that had receiv'd the rain,  
With gusts of wind disturb'd,  
Shake wild their scattering drops o'er glade and plain;  
They fall on GERTRUDE'S breast, and her white  
garments stain.  
Sighing, she threw her mantle o'er her head,  
And through the brakes towards her mansion sped;  
Unheedingly her vestments drew along,  
Sweeping the tears that to the branches hung:  
And as she pass'd  
O'er the soak'd road, from off the shining grass,  
In clods around her feet the moist earth clung.

Bibliography


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