

*ROMANTICISM*  
and the  
*RISE of the MASS*  
*PUBLIC*

ANDREW FRANTA



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## ROMANTICISM AND THE RISE OF THE MASS PUBLIC

Dramatic changes in the reading public and literary market in early nineteenth-century England not only altered the relationship between poet and reader but prompted new conceptions of the poetic text, literary reception, and authorship. With the decline of patronage, the rise of the novel and the periodical press, and the emergence of the mass reading public, poets could no longer assume the existence of an audience for poetry. Andrew Franta examines how the reconfigurations of the literary market and the publishing context transformed the ways poets conceived of their audience and the forms of poetry itself. Through readings of Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Hemans, and Tennyson, and with close attention to key literary, political, and legal debates, Franta proposes a new reading of Romanticism and its contribution to modern conceptions of politics and publicity.

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ANDREW FRANTA



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*In memory of Maggie Rose Franta*





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## *Introduction: The regime of publicity*

This book examines the ways in which the advent of the mass public made the issue of reception central to Romantic poetry and poetics. It argues that the transformation of the relationship between poet and reader in early nineteenth-century England precipitated a fundamental shift in conceptions of the poetic text, literary reception, and authorship. Commentators have long recognized that with the decline of patronage, the rise of the novel and the periodical press, and the emergence of the mass reading public, poets could no longer simply assume the existence of an audience for poetry.<sup>1</sup> But the reconfiguration of the reading public and the literary market did not just alter poets' perceptions of the audience for poetry (as many recent critics have suggested). It also, and more crucially, changed their ways of thinking about poetry and the very forms their poems came to take. In contrast to some of the period's most famous characterizations of poetry – from Wordsworth's definition of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” to Shelley's image of the poet as “a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds” – texts as different as Keats's early sonnets, Byron's *Don Juan*, and Shelley's poetry from *Queen Mab* to *Prometheus Unbound* demonstrate that in early nineteenth-century England the conditions under which poems were received had come to be an element internal to the production of poetry.

“The regime of publicity” is a phrase drawn from Jeremy Bentham's *An Essay on Political Tactics*. Composed for the newly established Estates-General in France and printed in 1791 (but not published until 1816), Bentham's *Essay* undertakes a theoretical analysis of parliamentary procedure and articulates an ideal of perfect transparency in the operations and deliberations of political assemblies. As “the fittest law for securing the public confidence, and causing it constantly to advance towards the end of its institution,” he offers “*publicity*” (a term Bentham

himself introduces into the English language).<sup>2</sup> Rather than an established principle, publicity is a law in embryo: as Bentham puts it, “the régime of publicity – very imperfect as yet, and newly tolerated, – without being established by law, has not had time to produce all the good effects to which it will give birth” (311). This linking of publicity to “good effects” in the political realm is an issue to which I will return.<sup>3</sup> What is most striking in this context, however, is Bentham’s attempt to describe the emergence of a new way of thinking about the public. His crucial insight is to conceive of the public as a mode of opinion-making, and mass society less as an arena for the passive consumption of ideas than a kind of feedback loop which has a potentially transformative effect on the ideas it receives. Rather than naming a realm of action or reflection, “publicity” transforms “public” into a set of practices or mode of action; the term itself underscores the sense in which it is understood as a process rather than a space.<sup>4</sup> In these various senses, “the regime of publicity” captures a key aspect of the particular way of thinking about the public that this study argues is characteristic of Romantic poetics.

The regime of publicity thus not only indicates a way of thinking about the public and the condition of publicness, but it also announces the advent of an era. Addressing a political assembly on the verge of meeting for the first time in 1775 years, Bentham at once argues that publicity must be the ruling principle of their deliberations and suggests that it is already well on its way to becoming the defining feature of modern society. His theoretical account not only defends its rationale for advocating publicity (under such headings as “Reasons for Publicity” and “Examination of Objections to Publicity”) and recommends practical measures for its establishment (the “Means of Publicity” include the publication of the assembly’s transactions and “[t]he employment of short-hand writers for the speeches”); it also alludes to “the state of things in England relative to publicity.” His discussion of English publicity, moreover, not only takes account of parliamentary rules but also of “actual practice” (315), which includes particular customs, such as public audiences at the House of Commons and the unauthorized publication of “the contents of debates and the names of voters,” that are in fact violations of those rules. Bentham makes it clear that this “contrary practice” is more than a set of exceptional instances. In fact, he claims, “whatever improvement has taken place in England has been accomplished through a continual violation of its laws.” This astonishing situation is the result of the “greater

ascendancy” of “public opinion” (316) – the result, in other words, of the political pressure which was beginning to be exerted by the mass public. The tendency of Bentham’s assessment of the state of things in England is to acknowledge that, rather than a theoretical proposition, the regime of publicity is, for better or worse, a historical reality and a work in progress.

Bentham might seem an unlikely starting point for a study that focuses on poetry. He claimed, after all, that “[p]rejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry.”<sup>5</sup> But Bentham serves as an instructive place to begin precisely because he describes a crucial shift in the conceptualization of the public – the real effects of which he cannot yet comprehend. He argues for the political significance of this “very imperfect . . . and newly tolerated” regime of publicity and imagines its contribution to the reformist project in which he had been engaged since his attack on Blackstone in the *Fragment on Government*.<sup>6</sup> In conceiving of publicity as practice and process, and the regime of publicity as a feedback loop, however, Bentham’s analysis suggests that publicity’s effects are less predictable and more expansive than his political argument admits. Understood in this way, the regime of publicity encompasses a range of social and historical transformations which attended the emergence of the mass public, including such large-scale changes as the development of the concept of public opinion, the new prominence of the periodical reviews, the cementing of political opposition, and the theorization of the law of libel. I will argue that the shift Bentham describes has important implications in the literary realm as well, chief among them the reconceptualization of the very nature of textuality. Indeed, it is the project of this book to examine in detail the profound literary effects of the conception of publicity Bentham first articulated. For Bentham, publicity’s significance was purely political, but, describing this transformed idea of the public as it was coming into being, he was not in a position to recognize the full range of its repercussions for political discourse and for modern culture more broadly.

In the chapters that follow, the regime of publicity will also come to signify the range of ways in which these diverse cultural developments mediate between poets and their readers in the Romantic period. The license I take with Bentham’s phrase thus reflects my contention that poets from Wordsworth to Tennyson take up the issue of publicity in terms that reflect the new demands the mass public makes not only of politics but of poetry. Thinking about the reading public brings into

focus the issue of poetry's relation to the means by which it is produced and distributed, as well as the media in which it is published and reviewed. If the absence of an immediate, predetermined readership forces poets to pay close attention to how poems reach their readers, it also prompts them to explore other attempts – in literature, politics, and the law – to conceptualize the mass public and thus affords them distinctive ways of thinking about the new cultural significance of mediation itself. Reception is central to poetic practice in the Romantic period because it is through reflection on the idea of the reading public that poets seek to come to grips with the implications of an emergent mass society – both in general and for poetry in particular.

The claim that reception plays a central role in Romantic poetics contradicts some of our most enduring critical beliefs about Romantic poetry.<sup>7</sup> The expressivist view of poetry reflected in the passages from Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* cited at the outset, for example, has long been understood by critics as an explicit statement about Romantic poetry's indifference to its audience. Over fifty years ago, M. H. Abrams took this view to be axiomatic when he observed in *The Mirror and the Lamp* that "[t]here is, in fact, something singularly fatal to the audience in the romantic point of view."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Abrams understood this Romantic hostility toward the audience as the product of the social transformation to which I have alluded. It was with "the disappearance of a homogeneous and discriminating reading public," Abrams argued, that we began to see the rise of "a criticism which on principle diminished the importance of the audience as a determinant of poetic value" (25–6). The reorientation in literary theory that for Abrams marked the beginning of modern aesthetic theory and artistic practice – the "radical shift to the artist in the alignment of aesthetic thinking" (3) – thus coincides with the growing sense in the early nineteenth century that the expansion of the reading public was eroding the traditional social and educational prerequisites for the production and consumption of literature.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one need not look far for evidence of the hostility toward the new mass public that Abrams described. From Wordsworth's attack on the lurid attractions of the literature of sensation in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and invidious distinction between the "People" and the "Public" in the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" of 1815 to Coleridge's condemnation of "the devotees of the circulating libraries" in the *Biographia Literaria* and comments on "that luxuriant misgrowth of our activity: a Reading Public!" in *The Statesman's Manual*, a distrust of the

new classes of readers (especially novel-readers) would appear to underwrite the Romantic conception of the audience from the outset.<sup>10</sup>

Despite dramatic changes in Romantic scholarship since *The Mirror and the Lamp*, in important ways Abrams's account of Romantic aesthetics has continued to determine our understanding of the Romantic relationship with the audience. The line of Romantic new historicism that begins with Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, for example, rejects in the strongest possible terms Abrams's account of Romanticism.<sup>11</sup> But this rejection does not so much do away with the theory of Romantic expressivism as invert Abrams's judgments of value. When McGann asserts that "Abrams offers a program of Romanticism rather than a critical representation of its character," his argument is not that Abrams has misrepresented the writers he studies but uncritically accepted their own self-representations.<sup>12</sup> The revaluation McGann urges entails a form of critique which would reveal these self-representations as false consciousness: what Abrams calls transcendence McGann labels ideology. But McGann's understanding of the aesthetic aims of such poems as Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and "Immortality Ode" does not differ substantially from Abrams's; what differs is his evaluation of the cultural and historical significance of Wordsworth's aims. McGann asserts "that the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (1). We need not discount the power of this assessment in order to recognize that the critique of Romanticism's "erasures and displacements" (85), which maintains that silences, oversights, and aversions are as crucial to understanding a poem as what it says, is a critical method which still takes *self-expression* as its object of analysis.<sup>13</sup>

The same is true of much important recent scholarship on Romanticism's relation to the reading public. Influential work on the formation of historical publics in the early nineteenth century has emphasized the consolidation of audiences along lines established by class affiliation, political interest, and gender.<sup>14</sup> This attention to the reading audience has paved the way for studies that have examined the formative influence on Romantic poetry of the anxiety produced by the rise of the mass reading public.<sup>15</sup> But in regarding poets' preoccupations with the public in the early nineteenth century as a reflection of the effort to compete for readers or identify audiences for poetry, these approaches have left the equation of Romanticism and expressivist aesthetics virtually untouched. Whether the uncertainty

produced by the mass reading public is thought to prompt a turn away from the audience or an anxious attempt to reconstitute an ideal audience, the writer is imagined to be engaged in a struggle to control the terms of reception. The notion of reception at work in such studies casts the reader's relation to the writer in terms of an ability and a disposition to identify with the views or opinions reflected in the text. This tendency is especially clear in accounts of Romanticism's politics, but it extends to aesthetics and poetics as well. From this standpoint, the desire to reach an audience becomes a desire to establish, maintain, and expand the domain of the author's intention, for the connection between author and reader is understood as necessarily a sympathetic bond – even, indeed perhaps especially, in those instances when the writer finds no sympathetic audience.

Of course, this way of conceiving of the writer's relation to the reader has a central place in Romantic poetry and poetics as well as Romantic criticism. One need only call to mind, for example, Wordsworth's turn to his "dearest Friend" and sister at the end of "Tintern Abbey." Dorothy serves as a kind of surrogate for the reader, and together they become the poet's second self, in whom he can "catch / The language of my former heart, and read / My former pleasures" (117–19). Thus, when Wordsworth urges Dorothy, in "solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief," to "remember me, / And these my exhortations!" (144, 146–47), he imagines that his poem not only records his own "healing thoughts" but will bring solace to its readers (145). That this sympathetic imperative remains in force even when the poet laments the absence of an audience is evident, for example, in the prefatory stanza to Shelley's *Epipsychidion*:

My Song, I fear that thou wilt find but few  
 Who fitly shall conceive thy reasoning,  
 Of such hard matter dost thou entertain;  
 Whence, if by misadventure, chance should bring  
 Thee to base company (as chance may do),  
 Quite unaware of what thou dost contain,  
 I prithee, comfort thy sweet self again,  
 My last delight! tell them that they are dull,  
 And bid them own that thou art beautiful.<sup>16</sup>

These lines, translated from Dante, offer an arch version of the theory of sympathetic identification Shelley articulates in "On Love" and *A Defence of Poetry*. In addressing his poem, Shelley also offers an indirect address, and a challenge, to his reader. His "fear" that his "Song" will



find “but few” who will comprehend it thus expresses all the more powerfully his desire for a sympathetic audience.

My argument, then, is not that we must simply dispose of Abrams’s identification of Romanticism with an expressive theory of poetry. Rather, it is that this understanding of poetry as self-expression, as well as the host of influential critical narratives recounting Romanticism’s turn inward and away from the audience that have continued to shape our understanding of the period’s literature, has obscured the emergence of an equally important conception of poetry as a process which includes the poem’s reception, dissemination, and transmission.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, what is most striking about the prefatory stanza to *Epipsychidion* is not that Shelley despairs of finding a sympathetic readership but that he reimagines the poet’s relation to the audience by redescribing the nature of the *text’s* relation to the reader. When he addresses the poem as his child, Shelley does not only draw on Dante; he evokes the humanist topos of book as child and, in particular, recalls Spenser’s “To His Booke” from *The Shepheardes Calendar* and Chaucer’s “Go, litel bok, go, lityl myn tragedye” from *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>18</sup> In echoing this traditional appeal to the audience, however, Shelley transforms it into an indirect and somewhat sarcastic challenge to the reader – and an allegory about how poems make their way in the world. His address to his personified “Song” predicts its failure to find fit readers; its rebuke to those who will react to the poem with incomprehension and hostility reiterates and amplifies the pathos of the Advertisement to *Epipsychidion*, which, like *Alastor* and *Adonais*, establishes the solitary and idealistic character of the poet by announcing his death. But the stanza also imagines the poem’s self-sufficiency, its ability to withstand or outlast “misadventure” and “base company.” If the process of finding a sympathetic audience is made difficult by its “hard matter” and is subject to “chance,” the role the poem plays in its own transmission has as much to do with its obduracy (“tell them that they are dull, / And bid them own . . .”) as the persuasive power of its beauty (“. . . that thou art beautiful”).<sup>19</sup> Chapter 4 suggests that Shelley’s *The Mask of Anarchy* arrives at a similar conception of the poetic text’s ability to endure – or, as I put it there, to lie in wait until the proper audience comes into being – and argues that this form of textual self-sufficiency serves political ends. In *Epipsychidion*, Shelley’s aims are more strictly aesthetic, but in each instance what might look like a retreat from the audience in fact

constitutes a radical attempt to revise the poet's relation to his readers by reflecting on how poems reach readers.

Even as he imagines that his poems must outlast indifferent, uncomprehending, or even hostile readers, Shelley focuses his attention on what happens after a poem leaves its author's hands. It is the premise of the prefatory stanza to *Epipsychidion*, after all, that the poem will leave Shelley behind – and that it will then have to find its own readers, for better or for worse. The mass reading audience highlights the unpredictability of the poet's readership, figured here in the Miltonic aspiration to “fit audience find, though few,” rather than a mere loss of control; in this sense, it emphasizes the difficulty of reaching an audience by holding out the promise of the poem's capacity to find readers the poet cannot imagine or predict.<sup>20</sup> For Shelley, the unpredictability of response engendered by the mass audience is refigured as the poem's potential to exceed its author's expectations. In such works as the “Ode to the West Wind,” *Prometheus Unbound*, and the *Defence*, Shelley pushes this idea even further by elaborating a poetics of reception that emphasizes the importance of the effects that poems have on their readers, even at the expense of their authors' intentions.

In emphasizing the crucial contribution of such thinking about the audience to Romantic conceptions of literature, I do not mean to suggest that writers before the Romantics were unconcerned with the effects of their works on their readers. Such effects have, of course, been part of the writer's concern as long as rhetoric in general has. My contention is that the emerging mass public gives this age-old issue a new shape and a new force. That said, however, this study departs very sharply from empirical studies of the history of reading and of authorship. William St. Clair's recent *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, for instance, examines “the explosion of reading” through exhaustive and detailed quantitative and economic analysis of publishing history, the publishing industry, and institutions, such as the circulating library, which shaped reading practices in the Romantic period.<sup>21</sup> St. Clair's work provides valuable context for the subjects I take up – and, perhaps more importantly, suggests a growing interest in the material conditions under which Romantic literature was produced. But such empirically oriented studies ask fundamentally different questions from those posed here. Whereas St. Clair argues that writers' impressions of the market for literature as well as received critical understandings of literary production in the period often fail to

reflect the real state of the literary market, I am interested in the effects of precisely these mistaken impressions. St. Clair suggests, for example, that the assumption “that verse was the preferred reading of the age, and that at the end of the romantic period, there was a shift in public taste in which the reading of ‘poetry’ gave way to the less demanding reading of novels” is largely mistaken and, in the case of Byron’s assertion that Southey’s hostile review in the *Quarterly* boosted the sales of Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam*, argues that “[q]uantification destroys a good story” because “the record shows that Shelley’s sales remained miniscule.”<sup>22</sup> By contrast, I argue that paying close attention to the ideas about the public that shaped these stories can help us to a better understanding of Romantic poets’ conceptions of their own writing, the reading public, the literary marketplace, and literature in general. That poetry’s preeminence in the Romantic period, and the novel’s rise to prominence after it, simplifies a more complicated transition in the hierarchy of genres, for example, does not change the fact that many Romantic writers, and especially poets, felt this way. If statistics often show up our sense of lived reality, we nonetheless persist in making important decisions and assessments which defy statistical explanations. It is a central claim of this book that the impact of the mass public on Romantic poetry has to do with just this kind of gap between accurate, quantitative assessment and the perceptions that influence the writing of poetry (among many other endeavors, to be sure). In other words, that the sales of *The Revolt of Islam* were in fact unaffected by Southey’s review does not nullify Byron’s understanding of the relationship between poetry and the reviews – an understanding that helped to shape his own poetry. I argue that such views and convictions, whether they can be substantiated by publishing history, had a profound influence on Romantic writing, and this book strives to analyze their effects.

I have already indicated that one of the central consequences of the transformation of the relationship of writer to reader in the period is a changed conception of the poetic text. A crucial distinction between what we have come to regard as first- and second-generation Romantic writing lies in a shift from defining the text as the expression of its author’s views to understanding the text in terms of its effects on its readers. In different ways, Byron, Keats, and Shelley are each deeply concerned with effects – of their poems on their readers and of the reading public on their poems – and I argue that their anxiety has its source in the changing conditions of publicity that Bentham identifies and examines. This poetic examination of effects first emerges, however,

not in the poetry of the second-generation writers themselves, but in Wordsworth's prose. Wordsworth's famous claim in the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" of 1815 that "every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed" has been understood by critics as an explicit defense of the poet's authority over his readers.<sup>23</sup> Implicit in this claim is a grudging acknowledgment of the poet's dependence on readers (which is the source of Wordsworth's worry about creating taste and being enjoyed). For Wordsworth, the mass public is a problem which must be solved or circumvented. For the second-generation Romantics – and, I suggest in chapter 6, key early Victorians – this anxiety about the mass public is at once more explicit and more productive. From Byron to Tennyson, intense attention to the idea of public response leads to an interrogation of how distribution, circulation, and transmission inform poetic practice. The attention these poets pay to the different facets of poetry's reception derives from their sense that modern systems of publicity amplify both the scope and the nature of the ramifications that public expression in general, and poetry in particular, can be imagined to have in a mass society. The chapters to follow trace poets' responses to the regime of publicity as they emerge in the early nineteenth century and develop in relation to such disparate technologies of publicity as public opinion, the periodical reviews, political partisanship, and the law of libel.

Chapter 1 sets the parameters for the study as a whole by examining the development of public opinion – a crucial moment in Jürgen Habermas's account of the public sphere, which has received surprisingly little critical attention. I argue that even as a positive conception of public opinion was taking shape over the second half of the eighteenth century, so too was a profound anxiety that public opinion was necessarily subject to manipulation. Edmund Burke's critique of the London corresponding societies' public support of the newly formed French National Assembly in the *Reflections* and Byron's attacks on the new schools of poetry nearly thirty years later in *Don Juan* address this threat in radically different contexts. At issue in each case, however, is the authority by which a self-elected coterie – whether of radicals or poets – can claim to represent the English public at large. The threat to which both Burke and Byron respond is that any opinion, simply by virtue of appearing and circulating in print, might come to look representative.

In arguing that Burke's and Byron's assessments of public opinion take the same form, the first chapter traces the trajectory of the book's

historical argument, which examines poetic responses to new forms of modern publicity from the French Revolution to Waterloo and its aftermath in England. The three chapters that follow present case studies which demonstrate how the development of Romantic poetics transforms the mass public from an obstacle into an opportunity for reimagining the nature of the poet's authority and the function of poetry itself.

I have already suggested that Wordsworth provides the most powerful articulation of the poet's problem with the audience – and that he points the way for subsequent poets. Chapter 2 traces Wordsworth's shifting attitude toward the audience from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface," arguing that his anxiety about how his poems would be received prompts a shift from an expressive theory of poetry to the conviction that the poet must create "the taste by which he is to be enjoyed." Wordsworth thus moves between two competing understandings of the poet's relation to the audience: one asserts the poet's authority over – and autonomy from – the reader; the other acknowledges poetry's dependence on the audience.

Chapter 3 argues that Keats's engagement with the increasingly powerful periodical reviews transforms Wordsworth's opposition into a kind of dialectic in which the poet's dependence actually becomes a source of poetic authority. Unlike many of his contemporaries (as well as his recent critics), Keats does not oppose poetry and reviewing but rather asserts and capitalizes on their similarity. In a series of early sonnets that describe responses to works of art – among them, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," and "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again" – Keats looks to the reviews as a model for how he might create an audience for his poetry by creating occasions for the expression of opinion. In this way, Keats's "review poems" stress the central role played by reception in the constitution of the work of art.

The way that the reviews prompt Keats to think about his poems in terms of audience feedback brings to light what is more difficult to see in Shelley: that poetry's contribution to politics has to do with its form – how it addresses the audience – rather than its content. Chapter 4 argues that attempts to explain Shelley's understanding of poetry's role in effecting political change miss the point of his commitment to political poetry. For Shelley, poetry's political utility has less to do with its ability to intervene in contemporary politics than its capacity to redefine the form that political action takes. Shelley's politics depends upon his conception of poetic transcendence, but this poetic ideal is

paradoxically grounded in the material transmission of the text. In *The Mask of Anarchy*, *A Defence of Poetry*, and the “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley predicates poetry’s success, and political value, on its ability to withstand the antagonism or neglect of the contemporary audience and live on to address future readers.

Chapter 5 steps back from the preceding chapters’ sequence of case studies to suggest that the Romantic period’s changing conception of the text and of authorship is not merely a literary phenomenon. Indeed, Shelley’s insistence on the consequentiality of texts is just one instance of what might be termed a cultural revolution in theories of textual interpretation. While a range of writers saw the growing scope of the press’s influence as a salutary sign of democratization, it also prompted a record number of prosecutions for libel in postwar England. Because the law of criminal libel defined politically dangerous expression in terms of a text’s potential for inciting a breach of peace, libel trials focused on a publication’s consequences, whether intended or unintended, rather than the intentions of its author or publisher. That the same theory of textuality supported ideologically opposite ends underscores the sense in which legal and literary history were shaped not in opposition to one another but in reaction to the emergence of mass society. Moreover, in their shared emphasis on effects, the law of libel and late Romantic poetics refute familiar genealogies of modern authorship. Against the image of the author as creator and owner reflected in the history of copyright, the notion of textual effects – which maintains that effects on readers (real or imagined) take precedence over authorial intention – gives rise to a conception of authorship in which authors finally give way to readers.

By way of conclusion, chapter 6 suggests that the perceived opposition between poet and audience, which served Byron, Keats, and Shelley as a means of examining and enlarging poetry’s public role, for Tennyson and Hemans becomes a topic for poetry. Much as the nightingale of Shelley’s *Defence* emblemizes Romantic expressivism, Mill’s dictum “that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*” epitomizes the Victorian identification of poetry with the privacy of lyric expression.<sup>24</sup> In Tennyson’s and Hemans’s “poetry of sensation,” I argue that the association of poetry with privacy does not express an ideological commitment but in fact constitutes a position in an ongoing debate about the function of poetry and the nature of the poet’s relation to the audience. Tennyson’s allegories of the work of art’s failure to withstand exposure to the world and Hemans’s lyric narratives of

withdrawal into the domestic sphere articulate a conception of poetic privacy that seeks to solve the poet's audience problem by insisting on "the right of private judgment."<sup>25</sup>

To speak of a shift from author to reader and from intention to effect is necessarily to call to mind the two predominant tendencies in Romantic scholarship of the last several decades. (It also suggests the implicit role of reception in each of these attempts to revise our critical understanding of Romanticism.) The first of these approaches, of course, is the strain of deconstructive criticism that twenty-five years ago was virtually synonymous with Romanticism. On this view, discrepancies of interpretation are presented as evidence for an anti-intentionalist account of literary meaning which puts the text at odds with itself and emphasizes the multiplication and dissemination of meanings at the expense of textual self-identity.<sup>26</sup> The second and more recent tendency is broadly historicist and, in addition to the form of ideology critique initiated by McGann, has involved the attempt to understand Romantic writing by looking at actual readers and specific audiences. In such work, the assertion that texts come to have multiple meanings is offered not in the service of an argument about textuality, but rather as evidence of the existence of multiple audiences defined in terms of social class, political interest, or gender.<sup>27</sup>

While indebted to both deconstructive and historicist lines of argument, my project departs from them in that it primarily attempts to examine the emergence of a particular set of theoretical claims about textuality and authorship at a specific historical moment – and, in the readings that constitute the following chapters, to explore the impact of these developments on poetic form. It differs from deconstructive approaches because it offers no account of the literary as such; it diverges from much recent historicist work in that its primary concern is not the responses of actual readers or the constitution of specific audiences but the *idea* of the audience reflected in Romantic poetry and poetics. If some readers might find it to be insufficiently theoretical and others insufficiently historical, the book's method, which is to tack back and forth between formal and historical analysis, is designed to address an important convergence between theoretical and historicist accounts of Romanticism. That my central claim about the Romantic turn from intentions to effects reflects a similar turn in Romantic criticism signals the sense in which Romanticism might be imagined as a kind of precursor to twentieth-century developments in literary theory and history. (It also indicates that the conditions that helped to shape

Romantic writing are in many ways still with us today. It is striking, for example, how claims about, and analysis of, the current communications revolution replicate the early nineteenth-century reaction to the emergence of the mass reading public.)<sup>28</sup> The deconstructive version of this claim – which sees Romanticism as not only the primary subject matter for the kind of rhetorical reading it advocates, but its point of origin – is familiar enough. In the shift from author to reader and intention to effect, we might also trace the lineaments of “the death of the author.”<sup>29</sup> Implicit throughout this book is the claim that such twentieth-century concerns about the irrelevance of authorial intention to textual interpretation have their origins in late Romantic poetics. Another way to put this point would be to say that deconstruction was in essence always already a form of historicism. Its identification with Romanticism is in fact more than incidental because its repertoire of rhetorical readings constitutes a powerful description of the effects of a set of historical developments masquerading as a methodology.

These developments included not only the growth of the reading public and the advent of new technologies for disseminating and circulating books, but also an explosion in the public circulation of opinions about books, exemplified by the unprecedented prominence of the periodical reviews. Whether they emphasize poetry’s transcendence of or determination by the social, historical, and political contexts of its production, critics have been united in seeing a mutual antagonism between Romantic poetry and the media in which it was published and reviewed. A more profound effect of the relationship between poetry and the media, however, is not that it set poets in opposition to the literary marketplace, but prompted them to assimilate questions about these new technologies for the production and distribution of literature to poetry itself. The reorganization of the literary market did not simply redefine the reading public on the model of class, politics, or gender but made the idea of the audience into a formal problem for poets. The picture that emerges from this study is of a period which saw not only the origin of our modern conception of the public as a collection of interest groups competing for representation, but also the idea of literature’s importance for creating groups that cannot readily be identified in terms of shared interests or identities. Instead, through the formation of classes of readers united only in relation to the text itself, literature becomes a crucial technology for imagining how groups emerge and are defined.



The idea that poems are objects that make their own way in the world, finding their own readers and creating their own audiences, gives us a radically different understanding of the development of poetic autonomy. Abrams claimed that the Romantic poem is “an object-in-itself, a self-contained universe of discourse, of which we cannot demand that it be true to nature, but only, that it be true to itself” (272); de Man observed that “[p]oetic language seems to originate in the desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object, and its growth and development are determined by this inclination.”<sup>30</sup> I argue that we should understand the poem’s fidelity to itself and desire to become an object not with reference to the ontology of the text but in relation to Romantic poetry’s aspiration to achieve the kind of durability that will allow it to reach its readers. Rather than withdrawal, displacement, or an attempted reconciliation of subject and object, the autonomy of the poetic text reflects the poetic attempt to account for the text’s reception.<sup>31</sup> From this standpoint, the power of Keats’s Grecian urn lies not just in its ability to “tease us out of thought” but its capacity to do so repeatedly and to do the same to others who are remote from it and from us in terms of time and place.<sup>32</sup> The kind of transcendence Shelley envisions when he claims that “poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions” is thus paradoxically itself the product of the accidental impressions made by the poem (533). From this vantage point, the self-regarding quality of Romantic poetry – and of the poet “who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds” – is a formal acknowledgement of the necessity of transmission.

The poets considered here understood these issues of reception and transmission to be the central challenge that the mass public posed for poetry. If my selection of authors and texts is largely canonical, it reflects the book’s focus on reception. In important ways, the attitudes and stances toward the public fashioned by Wordsworth, Shelley, and Tennyson affected the very terms in which their works were received – and not only by their first readers, but more importantly by subsequent generations of readers and critics. It is one of this book’s contentions that a distinguishing feature of the Romantic tradition is its combination of authority with respect to the tradition and anxiety with respect to the audience. Even Keats and Byron, who appear most at odds among the Romantic poets in terms of cultural privilege and popular success, arrive at similar conceptions of how their poems are influenced by the effects that they might have on an audience which is

imagined to be inscrutable. On the one hand, the canonical aspirations of these poets reflect a moment in the historical development of literary autonomy. On the other hand, their attempts to define poetry against the novel, popular verse, and the periodical reviews, yet in terms of its reception, dissemination, and transmission, make poetry into a mode of cultural mediation at odds with the commercialization of the publishing industry. In understanding poetry as a form of cultural critique, however, I am less concerned with the way that poets thematize social crisis or political revolution than the sense in which elite poetry's peculiar cultural position – its centrality to high culture and apparent marginality to mass culture – itself comes to possess a kind of analytical power. For the poets considered here, the particular conditions of poetry's appearance to the world make it a vehicle for examining the literary and political implications of an emergent mass society.<sup>33</sup>

This revisionary account of the poet's relation to the audience thus entails a significantly revised understanding of the political significance of Romantic poetry. In arguing, for example, that Shelley finally equates authorial intention with the text's effects on its readers – a view reflected in the *Defence's* concluding claim that poetic inspiration is a manifestation not of the poet's spirit but of “the spirit of the age” and that poets are “the influence which is moved not, but moves” (535) – I demonstrate that this understanding of the text derives from an attempt to imagine poetry's contribution to politics. It is in the effort to address a political situation that appears to have reached an impasse (with an absolute opposition not just between Whigs and Tories, but between the political establishment and radical movements for reform) that Shelley turns to poetry for its capacity to reach a future audience unbounded by the terms of present political opposition. It is in this sense, I argue in chapter 4, that “[p]oets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (535). But if this theory of textual effects emerges out of an attempt to put poetry in the service of progressive, or even radical, politics, this does not mean that this conception of the text is in itself radical or even progressive. Indeed, as chapter 5 argues, the same understanding of texts and their possible political effects serves as the foundation for the libel prosecutions of Regency England, which sought to silence radical political expression and to punish radical publishers and writers for the transgressive potential of their works.

Critics as different as Abrams and McGann have influentially formulated the relation between poetry and politics as a battle between

political beliefs and have thereby heightened our awareness of poetry's efforts to respond to political events. On this expressivist account, poetry is political when it is concerned with the representation of political views. I have already suggested, however, that discourse about poetic practice in the Romantic period becomes political insofar as it forms a part of a larger debate about how views become public. The advent of the mass public radically alters the period's understanding of representation – both literary and political – by revising its conception of publicity. In claiming that attending to the issue of representation calls into question the customary account of literature's political function, I follow the example of James Chandler's *England in 1819*. Chandler argues that Romantic historicism entails a self-consciousness about representation which extends to notions of political representation. This historical consciousness is reflected, for example, in the sense in which the phrase “the spirit of the age” captures both the Romantic effort to describe the historical character of the age and Romanticism's skepticism about such historical characterizations. Chandler points out that, in the collection of essays that takes the phrase as its title, William Hazlitt offers not one “spirit of the age,” but a multiplicity of contradictory spirits. For Chandler, the tension between the promise held out by Hazlitt's title – to provide a unified representation of the age's inspiration – and Hazlitt's refusal to arrive at anything like a definitive portrait points to the way that literary representation in the Romantic period frustrates a straightforward political reading. One might say that Romantic historicism's attention to the concept of representation relativizes politics by insisting that the “politics of representation” necessarily involves not only the idea of a politics conducted by means of representation but the awareness that representation itself carries political implications.<sup>34</sup>

Chandler's account raises questions about how literary representation inflects political content in Romantic period writing. This approach has a number of important consequences for our reading of Romanticism; among the most powerful is the implicit claim that Romantic politics takes the form of critique rather than statement. Embedded in this claim, however, is the idea that publicity is secondary to politics. Indeed, accustomed as we are to thinking that the issue of publicity is subordinate to its subject matter, the notion that the formation and assessment of political views takes precedence over questions about how they are made public goes without saying. By contrast, it is the argument of this study that for major writers of the Romantic period, the issue of publicity is in fact prior to that of politics.

As Bentham contends, the emergence of the mass public transforms the nature of political practice; the regime of publicity designates both this changed political world and the attempt to theorize the shape that politics might take in an emergent mass society. For the writers I consider, how views become public and the forms in which they circulate are often more significant than the views themselves. As I will argue in chapter 1, for example, Burke's critique of the activities of the London corresponding societies in the *Reflections* locates the threat posed by the English supporters of the French Revolution not so much in the opinions they express as their status as self-elected spokesmen for the public. Burke's contention that in publishing their views the corresponding societies claim to speak not only for their members but for "the whole English nation" betrays a persistent anxiety about the mass public's effect on the practice of political representation.<sup>35</sup>

This book argues that this anxiety about who speaks for whom – reflected in the state's policing of public speech and in Hazlitt's concern that the reviewer had become "the invisible link, that connects literature with the police" – was not merely a hindrance to poets.<sup>36</sup> Instead, the ungovernability of response inspired the hope that poetry might achieve effects beyond what poets could envision – that a poem might, in Shelley's words, be "the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight" (528). In the pages that follow, I argue that this aspiration occasioned a radical rethinking of what it meant to be a poet and what poetry was for.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Public opinion from Burke to Byron*

The full title of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* may be unfamiliar even to those who are most familiar with the text to which it is attached. The title page of the 1790 edition reads: *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event. In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Paris*. It is the second clause of Burke's title that concerns me here. For if the bulk of this bulky text is devoted to the author's reflections on "the important transactions" taking place on the continent, Burke begins the *Reflections* by contemplating matters that lie closer to home, namely, the activities of a number of London societies, in particular the Society for Constitutional Information and the Revolution Society, whose public support of the revolution in France Burke sees as a threat to his own good name.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, however, the activities of these London corresponding societies come to exemplify for Burke the threatening possibility that at the end of the eighteenth century England was fast becoming a society ruled by publicity.

Nearly thirty years later, in the course of a critique of what he calls "the triumphs of the new Schools," Byron offers an assessment of the new conditions of literary publicity that bears a striking resemblance to Burke's critique of the corresponding societies.<sup>2</sup> Byron's evaluation of the new schools of poetry contributes to a literary debate, but he illustrates his objection to the Lake School with an anecdote drawn from a different form of public controversy: "A paper of the Connoisseur says that 'It is observed by the French that a Cat, a Priest, and an old woman are sufficient to constitute a religious sect in England.' – The same number of animals – with some difference in kind will suffice for a poetical One" (107–8). If Byron leaves it up to the reader to imagine the aberrant beliefs that unite this bizarre religious sect, he makes it clear that the Lake School is defined by its aberrant *poetics* – in particular its willful rejection of Pope, "the Christianity of English

Poetry” (106). But the real danger of the Lake School, like that of the sects (or, I will argue, the corresponding societies), lies not in the content of the beliefs its members profess. Instead, it derives from the sense in which “in England” the views of “a Cat, a Priest, and an old woman” – or, on Byron’s literary analogy, “Sir George Beaumont instead of the Priest, . . . Mr. Wordsworth for the old Woman,” and Southey (as a dog rather than a cat) (108) – can come to look like a fair portrayal of public opinion.

In identifying the Lake School as a kind of sect, Byron is objecting to the sense in which the views held by the smallest factions can come to look representative. In this sense, I will argue, Byron’s evaluation of the schools recalls and extends Burke’s criticisms of the corresponding societies in the *Reflections*. The contexts of their critiques might appear to be far removed from one another, but both Burke and Byron respond to public opinion’s caustic effects on the integrity of individual judgment. Burke’s position has been understood as little more than a conservative reaction to the kind of free exchange of ideas reflected in the activities of the corresponding societies. From a similar standpoint, Byron’s contributions to the literary debates of Regency England can be seen as reactionary responses to literary innovations like those associated with the Lake and Cockney Schools. In this chapter, however, I argue that far from fighting rearguard actions against political and literary change, Burke and Byron identify some of the most vexing issues raised by modern publicity. The force of Burke’s claim, and the force of its connection to Byron’s, is to suggest that between 1790 and 1820 the very conditions that enabled the public exchange of views radically altered what it meant to speak in public or to publish. What the corresponding societies and the new schools of poetry have in common is that each exploits the changed conditions of publicity brought about by the emergence of the mass public. Burke’s and Byron’s objections thus call attention to the possibility that the views of the new publics that make up the mass are subject to a new kind of manipulation: the danger posed by the corresponding societies and the new schools is not that they might win the public over, but that they might, simply by virtue of the workings of publicity, *appear* to have done so.

For Burke and for Byron the emerging mass public was not inhabited by the anonymous, disembodied denizens of the bourgeois public sphere familiar to readers of Jürgen Habermas. Instead, their arguments suggest that the new public sphere fostered corporate subjects whose ability to appear in public (enabled by their appearance in

print) accorded them a representative status in excess of the actual composition of the groups they in fact represented. However one understands the activities of the members of the corresponding societies and the new schools, Burke and Byron argue, the public pronouncements of these groups do not reflect public opinion. In each case, they suggest, the threat is that what was coming to be known as “public opinion” might merely represent the opinions held by those most adept at making their opinions public, rather than the aggregate of the people’s opinions.

Burke’s relation to Romanticism has long been understood in terms of the influence of his politics on writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge or the impact of his representations of the Revolution on those produced by subsequent writers.<sup>3</sup> That Byron’s critique of the new schools of poetry recalls Burke’s critique of the corresponding societies, however, suggests that Burke’s significance for Romantic writing might extend beyond his political views and what Paine called his “horrid paintings” of revolutionary violence.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I will argue that Burke’s analysis of the changed conditions of public expression effected by the rise of the mass public inaugurates an important and little-examined line of Romantic writing and thought. The importance of this way of thinking about the public has to do with its attention to the formal, rather than substantive, dimension of the mass public. Its focus is publicity (a set of conditions – or condition of possibility – for public action and expression) rather than publics (the specific groups that make up the mass). Thus the link between Burke and Byron investigated in this chapter is at once structural (in response to threats posed by public opinion, Burke and Byron offer parallel critiques) and historical. It is historical, I will suggest, in that Burke’s analysis of the political scene in 1790 lays the groundwork for Byron’s assessment of the literary scene in 1820; it does so by identifying the public as a powerful new fiction – and a powerful new realm for fiction-making. From this perspective, it is striking that Byron’s altogether familiar complaints about the politicization of literature are preceded by what amounts, in Burke’s *Reflections*, to a critique of the literarization of politics – the sense in which English support of the French revolution might be attributed to “literary caballers, and intriguing philosophers; . . . political theologians, and theological politicians, both at home and abroad” (93). For Burke, the “literary” names a realm characterized by cabals and intrigues; it marks a kind of cultural chiasmus that links politics and theology (as well as literature and

philosophy). By 1820, Byron, among many others, will take for granted the proximity of literature and politics. One reason for this close relationship is the degree to which the kind of publicity work examined in this chapter had come to be associated with the literary realm.

In a larger sense, Burke's critique of the corresponding societies and Byron's critique of the new schools, like Wordsworth's engagement with the reading public, Keats's with the reviews, and Shelley's with radical politics (to look ahead to the topics addressed in the next three chapters), depend upon the perception that the mass public was in the process of transforming the conditions of publicity – that publicity had become a powerful technology with yet-to-be-determined effects. I start with Burke and Byron because their accounts of public opinion demonstrate that the effects of publicity were not simply reducible to the existence of an expanded reading audience with greater access to information. Their assessments of the regime of publicity help to define the stakes of the transformation this book seeks to analyze, and their shared sense that the advent of mass publicity heralded the coming of a world in which opinion might be disconnected from any legitimating authority suggests the momentousness of this cultural shift for both politics and literature. In linking Burke and Byron, moreover, this chapter at once traces the book's historical trajectory, from the English response to the French Revolution to the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, and departs from strict chronological sequence in order to situate the literary-historical developments examined in the chapters to follow in a broader historical and political context.

#### CERTAIN SOCIETIES IN LONDON

If the full title of the *Reflections* has an unfamiliar ring, to highlight the attention Burke pays to “the proceedings in certain societies in London” points to the centrality of questions about the circulation of opinions in public, and especially in print, to the revolution debate in England. On the one hand, of course, the importance of the public expression of opinion emphasizes the fact that in England the revolution was a paper war: despite English fears of invasion, the French Revolution was at the outset a Continental affair. At home in England, the contest between the revolution's supporters and detractors was waged in print; its intensity has often been measured by reference to sales figures for Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* or to the number of radical



periodicals launched in the 1790s.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, however, what is crucial about the English reaction to the revolution is that it not only registered attitudes toward the events in France, but also raised questions about the legitimacy and authority of political claims made in public. The revolution debate was at once a contest between political opinions and a conflict over the right to express political opinions in public. In framing his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* with a critique of the public statements issued by the corresponding societies, Burke invites himself into the fray by calling into question the very grounds upon which such a debate might be conducted.

Burke's attack on the corresponding societies makes it clear that he disagrees with the views they hold. But disagreement alone is not the basis of his critique. Rather than focusing on the opinions the societies express, Burke objects to what he regards as their fraudulent mode of expression. The corresponding societies offer their opinions to the public as the resolutions of deliberative bodies, Burke argues, and in so doing they hide behind – and derive authority from – the anonymous publication of their views. Were the publications of the corresponding societies clearly identified as the views held by groups of individuals with no particular public standing, Burke suggests, they would not be worthy of notice. Without any clear attribution, however, the corresponding societies' public pronouncements effectively take on the authority of public opinion itself – a form of misrepresentation with the power to persuade at least one “very young gentleman at Paris” that Burke himself might be numbered among the revolution's English supporters (84). It is finally to the *means* by which this misrepresentation is effected, rather than the specific danger it might be imagined to pose, that Burke most strenuously objects.

The *Reflections* begin with Burke's explanation of the threat to his reputation that he discerns in the activities of the Society for Constitutional Information and the Revolution Society. He is quick to disabuse the “very young gentleman at Paris” to whom the *Reflections* are addressed of the idea that he “might possibly be reckoned among the approvers of certain proceedings in France, from the solemn public seal of sanction they have received from two clubs of gentlemen in London” (85). On this point, he will not be misunderstood:

Before I proceed to answer the more material particulars in your letter, I shall beg leave to give you such information as I have been able to obtain of the two clubs which have thought proper, as bodies, to interfere in the concerns of

France; first assuring you, that I am not, and that I have never been, a member of either of those societies. (86)

On first sight, Burke's explicit disavowal looks out of place: he has not been accused, after all, of belonging to either of these London societies; he was merely assumed to share their opinion of the recent events in France. It would appear to be a simple matter to make public his views on the events in France – a task easily accomplished by a pamphlet or a published speech rather than a lengthy manifesto. That Burke's objection seems to be so far in excess of its object suggests that he views the issue as more than a simple misunderstanding. It is, instead, a question of misrepresentation. Burke objects not only to the views of the corresponding societies but, more specifically, to their claim to speak for all Englishmen and thus to speak for him.

Burke's portrayal of these two societies predictably emphasizes their marginality. Of the Revolution Society he remarks, "Until very lately I do not recollect to have heard of this club. I am quite sure that it never occupied a moment of my thoughts; nor, I believe, those of any person out of their own set" (87). Nevertheless, Burke's description of the Society for Constitutional Information provides an accurate account of the essential function of the corresponding societies:

The institution of this society appears to be of a charitable, and so far of a laudable, nature: it was intended for the circulation, at the expence of the members, of many books, which few others would be at the expence of buying; and which might lie on the hands of the booksellers, to the great loss of an useful body of men. Whether the books so charitably circulated, were ever as charitably read, is more than I know. (86)

The correspondence Burke describes included the circulation not only of books but also of letters between like-minded groups across the country; it was designed to form a network for the transmission of ideas which would lead to parliamentary reform and greater political representation for the working men who formed the membership of these groups.<sup>6</sup> The description of the formation of the London Corresponding Society in opening pages of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* lays out the ways in which the corresponding societies served to organize and radicalize the various and far-flung reform movements of late eighteenth-century Britain. According to Thompson, "[t]he L.C.S. was a junction-point of this sort," and he points out that "there are features, even in the brief description of its first meetings, which indicate that a new kind of organization had come into being." Among these features, perhaps the most important

are “the function of the meeting, both as social occasion and as a center for political activity,” and, most crucial of all, “the determination to propagate opinions and to organize the converted, embodied in the leading rule: ‘That the number of our Members be unlimited.’”<sup>7</sup>

Writing two years in advance of the formation of the L.C.S., Burke suggests that the problem with the corresponding societies derives from the manner in which they propagate their opinions. He objects to the Revolution Society’s correspondence with the French National Assembly, for example, on the grounds that the club assumes a degree of authority that it does not rightfully possess. In its support of the French National Assembly’s actions, the Revolution Society seems to offer something more than the good wishes of a discreet group of British subjects. As Burke puts it:

To me, who am but a plain man, the proceeding looks a little too refined, and too ingenious; it has too much the air of political stratagem, adopted for the sake of giving, under a high-sounding name, an importance to the public declarations of this club, which, when the matter came to be closely inspected, they did not altogether so well deserve. It is a policy that has very much the complexion of a fraud.

Burke’s close inspection of this strategy focuses on the fact that, rather than “send forth . . . a piece of argument,” the Revolution Society puts before the public “only a vote and resolution.” And, unlike an argument, which “would be neither the more nor the less convincing on account of the party it came from,” “a vote and resolution” “stands solely on authority; and in this case it is the mere authority of individuals, few of whom appear” (89).

For Burke, the Revolution Society’s illegitimate assumption of authority is predicated on its anonymity. By standing behind the name of their society and posing as a deliberative body, the members of the Revolution Society transform “the mere authority of individuals” into a form of public authority. Burke proposes a straightforward remedy to this problem:

Their signatures ought, in my opinion, to have been annexed to their instrument. The world would then have the means of knowing how many they are; who they are; and of what value their opinions may be, from their personal abilities, from their knowledge, their experience, or their lead and authority in this state. (89)

The implication here is clear enough: were the identities of its members known, the pronouncements of the Revolution Society would be seen for what little they are worth. It is important to notice, however,

that even as he questions the Revolution Society's authority Burke does not challenge the right of any individual member of the Society to express an opinion on the events in France. "Whatever I may have reason to suspect concerning private management," he explains, "I shall speak of nothing as of a certainty, but what is public" (88). Thus Burke's call for signatures has as much to do with determining the *extent* of the group represented by the Revolution Society ("The world would then have the means of knowing how many they are") as judging "of what value their opinions may be." He objects, in other words, to the tendency to misrepresentation inherent in the determined ambition of the London Corresponding Society "[t]hat the number of our Members be unlimited."

In focusing on public proceedings rather than "private management," Burke puts aside the questions about motivation and accountability that would come to characterize the revolution debate in England. Despite the obvious animosity he feels for such supporters of the revolution as Richard Price, for example, the case Burke makes against the corresponding societies in the *Reflections* differs markedly from the cases the state would make against the radicals Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, and John Thelwall in the treason trials of 1794. There has been a tendency for commentators on the revolution debate to posit a continuity between the rhetorical excesses of the *Reflections* and political and juridical attempts to put down political dissent in the 1790s. That Burke focuses his attention on the Revolution Society's public pronouncements rather than its "private management," however, points to a very different conception of the relationship between political discourse and political action than that which underwrites the state's attempt to police political speech. As John Barrell has demonstrated, the treason trials were inevitably concerned with the state of mind of the accused.<sup>8</sup> The threat Burke perceives in the Revolution Society, however, has more to do with the manner in which it makes its opinions public than the views its members hold.

In explaining why he "should be sorry to be thought, directly or indirectly, concerned in their proceedings," for example, Burke is careful to make a place for the cultivation of private opinion on matters of public concern:

I certainly take my full share, along with the rest of the world, in my individual and private capacity, in speculating on what has been done, or is doing, on the public stage; in any place ancient or modern; in the republic of Rome,

or the republic of Paris: but having no general apostolical mission, being a citizen of a particular state, and being bound up in a considerable degree, by its public will, I should think it, at least improper and irregular, for me to open a formal public correspondence with the actual government of a foreign nation, without the express authority of the government under which I live.

Burke's complaint here is clear enough: he objects to what looks like an attempt by private citizens to conduct the nation's foreign policy. But if a charge of treason lies not too far below the surface of this passage, Burke pointedly stops short of making it. He does so because his primary concern is to address the form of indirection by which he might be thought to be associated with the proceedings of the corresponding societies: "I should be still more unwilling to enter into that correspondence, under any thing like an equivocal description, which to many, unacquainted with our usages, might make the address, in which I joined, appear as the act of persons in some sort of corporate capacity, acknowledged by the laws of this kingdom, and authorized to speak the sense of some part of it." For Burke, the Revolution Society's public pronouncements are illegitimate not because of what they express, but because the society's "sort of corporate capacity" exploits "the ambiguity and uncertainty of unauthorized general descriptions, and . . . the deceit that may be practiced under them" (88). By presenting its opinions to a foreign government as though they represented the conclusions of a deliberative body of indeterminate scope, he argues, the Revolution Society contrives to assume a representative function that cannot help but mislead.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE BURKE PROBLEM AND PUBLIC OPINION

Despite Burke's claim not to contest any individual's right to "speculat[e] on what has been done, or is doing, on the public stage," his critique of the corresponding societies' public standing would appear to constitute a fundamental challenge to public debate. Since its publication, the *Reflections* have been understood by many to mark a radical shift in Burke's politics. As James Chandler has observed, "Virtually every radical writer of this time saw Burke's position on France as a change of political colors, and at the same time realized that Burke's reputation made him one of the worst English enemies the French Revolution could have made."<sup>10</sup> Any inquiry into the *Reflections* must recall the "Burke problem" that has defined Burke studies for

more than twenty-five years.<sup>11</sup> The crux of the problem has been Burke's transformation from the liberal defender of the American colonies to the conservative reactionary of the *Reflections*. "There are two Burkes," Isaac Kramnick argues, and his assessment of the problem recapitulates the responses of many of Burke's contemporaries to the *Reflections*.<sup>12</sup> This reaction is perhaps best expressed a generation later by Hazlitt, who returned to the Burke problem again and again throughout his writing life. "Mr. Burke, the opponent of the American war, and Mr. Burke, the opponent of the French Revolution," Hazlitt writes, "are not the same person, but opposite persons – not opposite persons only, but deadly enemies."<sup>13</sup>

Burke's critique of the corresponding societies does not, however, simply return us to the Burke problem. Read as an attack on the principles of public debate, it intensifies the problem by suggesting that the *Reflections* repudiate Burke's earlier work as a theorist of public opinion. Burke's argument with the corresponding societies, in other words, seems to refute the notion that public opinion plays any legitimate role in politics. While the historical development of the concept of public opinion has received surprisingly little scholarly attention, it holds a crucial place in Habermas's account of the public sphere.<sup>14</sup> As Habermas puts it, "The self-interpretation of the function of the bourgeois public sphere crystallizes in the idea of 'public opinion.'"<sup>15</sup> For Habermas, Burke plays a crucial role in the conceptualization of public opinion. It is with Burke's arguments in favor of conciliation with the American colonies, Habermas argues, that the idea of public opinion is finally purged of the pejorative sense previously attached to opinion: "The opinion of the public that put its reason to use was no longer just opinion; it did not arise from mere inclination but from private reflection upon public affairs and from their public discussion" (94).

In this context, the argument of the *Reflections* calls attention to features of Habermas's account that have come under repeated attack. Since the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas has been criticized, most influentially in Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's *Public Sphere and Experience*, for failing adequately to address the principles of exclusion that helped to define the public sphere from the outset.<sup>16</sup> Among Habermas's recent critics, Geoff Eley has made the revisionist argument for "the existence of *competing* publics not just later in the nineteenth century, when Habermas sees a fragmentation of the classical liberal model of *Öffentlichkeit*, but at every

stage in the history of the public sphere and, indeed, from the very beginning."<sup>17</sup> While Eley concedes that Habermas's real concern is not political history but political theory ("Habermas is less interested in the realized political dimension of the public sphere . . . than in abstracting a strong ideal against which later forms of the public sphere can be set" [292]), he nevertheless argues for the relevance of competing publics to any account of the public sphere:

The classic model was already being subverted at the point of its formation, as the actions of subordinate classes threatened to redefine the meaning and extent of the "citizenry." And who is to say that the discourse of the London Corresponding Society was any less rational than that of, say, the Birmingham Lunar Society (let alone the Birmingham Bean Club)? (306)

One answer to Eley's question, of course, is Edmund Burke. Burke's critique of the corresponding societies exemplifies precisely the kind of discrimination that Eley is calling into question. In questioning such discriminations, Eley aims to revise Habermas's "classic model" by emphasizing the sense in which for Burke, and others like him, the legitimacy of public opinion depended upon its conformity to their own views.

This reappraisal of Habermas has done much to call attention to the exclusions and restrictions which shaped the bourgeois public sphere. From this perspective, Burke's objections to the corresponding societies are all too easy to place. But in repeatedly demonstrating that history serves to disprove the emancipatory and democratic pretensions of Habermas's account, his critics have paid too little attention to the historical development of the concept of public opinion. Burke's place in this history is complicated; if it is a mistake to identify him as the champion of public opinion, it is also misleading to argue that his criticisms of the corresponding societies amount to a repudiation of public opinion in general. As John Brewer has pointed out, parliamentary Whigs such as Burke "might pay lip-service to the notion that power emanated from the people and might use popular discontent for its own purposes, but [they] expected that the public would be willing to be led by the nose."<sup>18</sup> Even in casting doubt upon the purity of Whig appeals to public opinion, however, Brewer emphasizes the difficulty of distinguishing principle from political expediency in Burke's comments on the public. Brewer argues that attempts by established political groups to defend their political authority and determine the role of party in the face of "[a]n amorphous, incipient, popular political culture" "produced a highly ambivalent attitude

towards the public, especially among whig opposition politicians.” Party apologists like Burke “wanted *limited* popular support, based on their (rather narrow) conception of the significant political issues, and mediated by their leadership. At the same time, they feared any independent political initiative, or any attempt to raise issues outside the parameters of parliamentary debate.”<sup>19</sup>

What is instructive about Brewer’s account is that the ambivalence he describes is not simply reducible to hypocrisy or inconsistency. He demonstrates instead that parliamentary Whigs, and Burke in particular, were engaged in an ongoing effort to define their relationship to the public.<sup>20</sup> It is this conception of politics that prompts Habermas to regard Burke as the key theorist of public opinion. In making this claim, Habermas cites Burke’s argument, in *A Letter to the Sheriffs of the City of Bristol on the Affairs of America* (1777), “that no . . . given part of legislative rights can be exercised without regard to the general opinion of those who are to be governed. That general opinion is the vehicle and organ of legislative omnipotence. Without this it may be a theory to entertain in the mind, but it is nothing in the direction of affairs.”<sup>21</sup> Burke goes on to explain that while Parliamentary power does not depend upon popular support, it is nevertheless nothing without it: “The completeness of the legislative authority of Parliament *over this kingdom* is not questioned; and yet many things indubitably included in the abstract idea of that power, and which carry no absolute injustice in themselves, yet being contrary to the opinions and feelings of the people, can as little be exercised as if Parliament in that case had been possessed of no right at all” (106). Here “general opinion” amounts to an expression of the will to be governed. Burke argues, moreover, that if government owes its “legislative omnipotence” to the “general opinion,” the public owes its liberty to the recognition that the general opinion applies equally to every citizen. This is why Burke concludes, in the *Reflections*, that “being a citizen of a particular state, and being bound up in a considerable degree, by its public will, . . . to open a formal public correspondence with the actual government of a foreign nation” is “at least improper and irregular,” if not treasonous (88).

In another letter to his electors in Bristol written in 1777, Burke describes the individual citizen’s relationship to the public will in greater detail:

In a free country every man thinks he has a concern in all public matters; that he has a right to form and a right to deliver an opinion upon them. They sift, examine, and discuss them. They are curious, eager, attentive, and jealous;



and by making such matters the daily subjects of their thoughts and discoveries, vast numbers contract a very tolerable knowledge of them, and some a very considerable one.

For Burke, this “real public wisdom and sagacity” constitutes “the difference between freemen and those who are not free,” and the portrait he offers of the formation of public opinion is a description of traditional English society. Thus, while he exhorts the Bristol electors to put their reason to use (“Your whole importance, therefore, depends upon a constant, discreet use of your own reason; otherwise you and your country sink to nothing”), he asks that they do only that which they are already capable of doing – that which they, as Englishmen, are already in a position to do.<sup>22</sup> If they fail to put their reason to use, they fail “from want of spirit, and not from want of ability” (119). Moreover, the language Burke uses to describe such a failure strikingly foreshadows the rhetoric of the *Reflections*:

If upon any particular occasion you should be roused, you will not know what to do. Your fire will be a fire in straw, fitter to waste and consume yourselves than to warm or enliven anything else. You will be only a giddy mob, upon whom no sort of reliance is to be had. You may disturb your country, but you never can reform your government. (119–20)

While the tenor of the *Reflections* leaves little room for doubt, the distinction between “disturb[ing] your country” and “reform[ing] your government” drawn in this passage already makes it clear that Burke refuses to recognize public disturbances as a legitimate part of the process of reform.

In the *Reflections*, Burke gives the impression that he has little use for “private reflection upon public affairs and . . . their public discussion.”<sup>23</sup> But surveying his earlier reflections on public opinion reinforces the idea that what is truly at stake in his criticisms of the corresponding societies is their misrepresentation of their own interests as public opinion. This is to say that Burke’s critique of the publicity work of the corresponding societies does not contradict his prior acknowledgment of the importance of public opinion to the affairs of government. Rather, his critique *depends upon* the idea “[t]hat general opinion is the vehicle and organ of legislative omnipotence,” and his criticisms of the corresponding societies’ fraudulent misrepresentations of public opinion mark his acknowledgement of the importance of public opinion. This commitment marks a curious convergence between Burke’s view of public opinion and Bentham’s discussion of the regime of publicity in the *Essay on Political Tactics* (1791).<sup>24</sup> Among

the “Reasons for Publicity,” Bentham argues that “[i]n the same proportion as it is desirable for the governed to know the conduct of their governors, it is also important for the governors to know the real wishes of the governed.” For this reason, publicizing the operations of government assures that in forming their “real wishes,” the governed will act from knowledge rather than from ignorance and prejudice. As Bentham puts it, “The public is placed in a situation to form an enlightened opinion, and the course of that opinion is easily marked.” For Bentham, the publicity of government, the transparency of its “mode of proceeding” and its “practice,” provides a model for the formation of public opinion. The result is that “the general feeling will be raised to a higher tone,” instilling “[a] habit of reasoning and discussion” in “all classes of society.” The example set by what Bentham calls “the greater model” is infectious: “The order which reigns in the discussion of a political assembly, will form by imitation the national spirit.”<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, there are significant differences between Burke’s and Bentham’s attitudes toward the public. For Burke, the “constant, discreet use of . . . reason” is a traditional feature of the English national character. For Bentham, conversely, it is a “habit of reasoning and discussion” that must be brought into being, and the best political tactic is to write into law the publicity that promotes it. Bentham marvels at the “degree of moderation” with which London crowds often act when “well-known orators” appear “amid the effervescence of a tumult,” giving them “the same attention as if they had been in parliament.” As we have already seen, however, he also acknowledges the distance that still separates crowd from Parliament:

Still, however, the régime of publicity – very imperfect as yet, and newly tolerated, – without being established by law, has not had time to produce all the good effects to which it will give birth. Hence have arisen riots, for which there was no other cause than the precipitation with which the government acted, without taking the precaution to enlighten the people. (311)

The public disturbances that Bentham characterizes as growing pains, Burke condemns as a want of spirit that threatens to turn the English people into “a swinish multitude” (173). Both recognize the newfound importance of public opinion in English society and politics, but while Bentham recommends publicity as “the fittest law” for “securing the public confidence” and for achieving the ends of government, Burke identifies the proceedings of the corresponding societies as political tactics designed not to enlighten the public but to exploit this “very

imperfect” and “newly tolerated” regime of publicity. Bentham’s commitment is to the regime of publicity as such; he imagines that the system will give rise to reasoned behavior. For Burke, the mechanisms of publicity are nothing in themselves; they are to be valued only to the degree that they serve and reflect individual judgment. In demonstrating that “the ambiguity and uncertainty of unauthorized general descriptions” can come to substitute for the “public will,” the proceedings of the London societies do not invalidate public opinion; they impersonate it. While both Burke and Bentham endorse the importance of public opinion, in the *Reflections* Burke asks how one knows that the voice that one hears is that of the public.

Burke’s concern about the danger posed by the public pronouncements of the corresponding societies suggests that, even as a positive conception of public opinion was taking shape at the end of the eighteenth century, so too was the anxiety that public opinion was necessarily subject to manipulation. According to Habermas, the wholesale manufacture of public opinion was the product of the growth of commodity culture in the latter part of the nineteenth century, which he describes as the transition “from a culture-debating to a culture-consuming public”: “When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode” (159, 161). For Habermas, the decline of the public sphere is linked to the emergence of mass culture. For Burke, writing at the moment that many commentators have identified as the birth of the mass public, the corresponding societies’ ability to pass off their sectarian views as public opinion itself suggests that the regime of publicity could be employed to manipulate the very notion of representation – not by transforming debate into consumption but by bypassing debate altogether. The threat Burke perceives is that any opinion, simply by virtue of being publicly represented as the view held by a group, might come to look representative.

In the end, Burke’s critique of the corresponding societies does not undo his commitment to public opinion. Instead, it insists that the basis of public opinion must be individual judgment. It is crucial, therefore, that we distinguish Burke’s account of the making of general opinion from his description of the opinion-making activities of the London corresponding societies, for it is in the difference between these two

species of public judgment that he locates the real threat posed to England by the revolutionary situation. The scenario Burke describes in his letters to his electors in Bristol – in which reasoned reflection and the debate of free individuals constitutes the general opinion – exemplifies Habermas’s conception of the public sphere. Even though the letter in which he exhorts his electors to “a constant, discreet use of . . . reason” is addressed to the members of a Bristol society called the Bell Club, Burke’s appeal is not made to a group, but to individuals. By representing the members of the Bell Club to themselves as individuals, Burke makes them representative of “freemen” everywhere. In this way, they come to stand for the importance of individual judgment. And it is for this reason that the fate of the country is in their hands (“. . . otherwise you and your country sink to nothing”). No one, Burke implies, not even a representative in Parliament, stands between Englishmen and their government.

This account of the logic of representative government contrasts sharply with Burke’s later assessment of the activities of the corresponding societies. Unlike the Bristol electors, whose use of reason is “constant” and “discreet,” the Society for Constitutional Information and the Revolution Society are in the business of making their private opinions appear to be sanctioned by the larger public of which they form only a small part. By appearing in public not as disembodied individuals but corporate bodies, the corresponding societies achieve a kind of anonymity that absorbs opponents and bystanders into their ranks simply by virtue of the societies’ indeterminate scope. Because they offer no arguments to be refuted, no signatures to be authenticated, their “vote and resolution” “stands solely” on an authority that cannot be checked. In this way, the corresponding societies capitalize on the liberty of which their individual members, as Englishmen, are assured in order to arrogate to themselves, “as bodies,” a degree of authority in excess of “the mere authority of individuals.” In this “corporate capacity,” Burke sees a threat: “liberty, when men act in bodies, is *power*.” And power must be checked: “Considerate people, before they declare themselves, will observe the use which is made of *power*; and particularly of so trying a thing as *new power in new persons*” (91).

From the standpoint of Burke’s critics, such statements exemplify the Burke problem. From the standpoint of Habermas’s critics, to examine the terms in which Burke questions the rationality of the Society for Constitutional Information’s discourse or to look at the difference between Burke’s characterizations of the Bristol Bell Club in 1777 and

the Revolution Society in 1790 contributes to the ongoing revision of the Habermasian model. In contrast to each of these schools of thought, what I have been arguing is that Burke's analysis of the problem of publicity helps us to recognize the fundamental continuity of his views. As far as his attitude toward the public is concerned, there is no Burke problem. Instead, we might understand Burke's critique of the corresponding societies as an attempt to reverse – or at least check – the unintended consequences of his own theorization of public opinion in the 1770s.

Burke's account of publicity also identifies an issue that, even as theorists of the public sphere have made talking about alternative- and counter-publics routine, has largely escaped critical attention.<sup>26</sup> While Burke's critique of the corresponding societies points to the existence of what look like competing publics ("new power in new persons"), its more powerful effect is to underscore the importance of claims made on behalf of the public *as a whole*. For Burke, what is threatening about the corresponding societies is not that they constitute a counter-public, but that, in publishing their opinions on public issues, they claim the authority of public opinion itself. The problem they pose has less to do with issues of access or exclusion than the sense in which mass publicity made it possible to circumvent the legitimating protocols of the public sphere and impersonate public opinion. While banding together into groups might seem merely to make people more visible – as the force of individual opinion is underwritten and magnified by other people – what Burke suggests is that it can in fact serve as a kind of hiding, in which the views of a group come to be seen as the views of the larger group that is the public. When Burke insists that the members of the corresponding societies attach their signatures to their publications, he is recognizing that it is the anonymity of such groups – the sense in which the corresponding societies exist *only* as groups rather than collections of individuals – that enables their implicit claim to represent public opinion in the first place.

#### BYRON AND THE TRIUMPHS OF THE SCHOOLS

In an unpublished 1820 essay entitled "Some Observations upon an Article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*," Lord Byron defends himself against "a personal attack upon the imputed author" of *Don Juan* (89). Dedicated to Isaac D'Israeli, father of the future Prime Minister and author of *The Calamities and Quarrels of Authors*, Byron's essay, which he

describes as an “additional Quarrel and Calamity . . . inscribed by one of the Number,” begins with the following reflection on professional authorship:

“The Life of a writer” – has been said, by Pope I believe – to be “*a warfare upon earth*” as far as my own experience has gone I have nothing to say against this proposition – and like the rest having once plunged into this state of hostility – must, however, reluctantly, carry it on.—An article has appeared in a periodical work – entitled “Remarks on Don Juan” which has been so full of this spirit on the part of the writer – as to require some observations on mine. (88)

That Byron authorizes his reply to the *Blackwood's* critic with a quotation from Pope reflects a literary affiliation that not only shapes his essay but also informs the poem he is concerned to defend and is continuing to write. For his answer to the first public critic of *Don Juan* leads him into the ongoing debate over Pope's place in the canon of English poetry and an assessment of what he terms “the present deplorable state of English Poetry” (104). Like Burke's *Reflections*, Byron's “Observations” begin with an issue of personal misrepresentation and turns to a larger public controversy. And, again like Burke, Byron's defense of *Don Juan* ultimately focuses on the peculiar form of judgment that underwrites public opinion. I will argue that *Don Juan* itself embodies Byron's critique of the regime of publicity – and that it does so by thematizing the demands it makes on the reader's judgment. I turn to “Some Observations,” then, as a kind of poetics of *Don Juan*.<sup>27</sup>

At the outset, however, it is important to examine the terms in which Byron conducts his defense. As his reference to “the imputed author” of *Don Juan* suggests, Byron's first line of argument is to wonder “by what right – the Writer assumes this work which is anonymous to be my production.” His response is to “neither deny nor admit it to be [his]” and thus offer his observations under the pretence that he is merely answering a reviewer who has invoked his name in connection with the poem (89). While Byron recognizes that this personal attack calls for a justification of the circumstances surrounding his separation from his wife and daughter and his exile in Italy, he “feel[s] the degradation of being compelled to make it”:

I am not less sensible of the Egotism of all this – but Alas! who have made me thus egotistical in my own defence? – if not they who have by perversely persisting in referring fiction to truth – and tracing poetry to life – and regarding characters of imagination as creatures of existence – have made me personally responsible for almost every poetical delineation which my Fancy and a particular bias of thought may have tended to produce. (92)

Byron turns the accusation of perversity back against his accuser, insisting that the charge that *Don Juan* is “an elaborate satire on the character and manners of his wife” is not the poem’s truth but the reviewer’s fiction. While he attempts to justify himself by insisting that “my *figures* are not portraits,” he must admit that in the end it is a charge he cannot refute: “I acquiesce – because no man can *justify* himself until he knows of what he is accused” (93, 94).

In the absence of “any specific charge in a tangible shape,” Byron has been “accused of every monstrous vice by public rumour, – and private rancour” (94, 95). “Has not ‘the general voice of his Countrymen’ long ago pronounced upon the subject – sentence without trial – and condemnation without a charge?” he asks the *Blackwood’s* critic. “Have I not been exiled by Ostracism, except that the shells which proscribed me were anonymous?” (94). The result of this persistent confusion of fact and fiction, poetry and life, in other words, is his condemnation by another intangible shape: “public opinion.” His exile itself is an effect of a judgment outside the law:

The Man who is exiled by a faction has the consolation of thinking that he is a Martyr, he is upheld by hope and by the dignity of his cause real or imaginary, – he who withdraws from the pressure of debt may indulge in the thought that time and prudence will retrieve his circumstances – he who is condemned by the law has a term to his banishment – or a dream of it’s abbreviation – or it may be the knowledge or the belief of some injustice of the law or of it’s administration in his own particular; – but he who is outlawed by general opinion without the intervention of hostile politics, – illegal judgement, – or embarrassed circumstances, – whether he be innocent or guilty must undergo all the bitterness of Exile without hope – without pride – without alleviation.

This case was mine. – Upon what grounds the Public founded their opinion – I am not aware – but it was general – and it was decisive. – Of me or of mine – they knew little except that I had written what is called poetry – was a nobleman – had married, become a father – and been involved with my wife and her relatives, – no one knew why, because the persons complaining refused to *state* their grievance. (94–5)

At first sight, Byron’s allusion to the groundlessness of his ostracism suggests that public opinion is simply mistaken. How, he asks, is one to explain the public outcry against him, let alone answer it, when the grounds upon which the public has formed its opinion are unknown? As Byron observes, “I can hardly conceive that the common & every day occurrence of a separation between man and wife could in itself produce so great a ferment” (96). And if the separation itself is not the

object of the public's disdain, then public opinion would appear to have turned against him without reason, "unless the atrocities of public rumour, and the mysterious silence of the Lady's legal advisers may be deemed such" (94). On this account, Byron's banishment is an effect without a cause.

But what is most striking about Byron's complaint about his outcast state is his realization that while groundlessness would compromise the opinion of an individual, it constitutes the particular – and peculiar – strength of public opinion. Byron recognizes that the real force of the judgment against him has to do with the anonymity of public opinion – the sense in which it cannot be answered because no one actually has it and has to justify it.<sup>28</sup> While the press is "active and scurrilous," public opinion exists chiefly as a threat, and its manifestations are reported rather than observed: Byron hears about the "outcry" against him from "the few friends who gathered round [him]"; he is "advised not to go to the theaters lest [he] should be hissed, – nor to [his] duty in parliament lest [he] should be insulted by the way"; and his "most intimate friend" later tells him that he "was under the apprehension of violence" on the day of his departure from England. If the reviewers willfully treat fiction as fact, the public cannot be found guilty of the same offense, because public opinion makes itself felt and produces effects without quite achieving the status of a cause. As Byron explains his departure, "I felt that, If what was whispered and muttered and murmured was true – I was unfit for England, – if false – England was unfit for me" (95). His self-exile constitutes an acknowledgement that, in the realm of public opinion, the difference between truth and falsehood has ceased to matter.

In this sense, the problem posed by public opinion is not merely that it is mistaken, but that it is in fact indifferent to the grounds on which it is founded. If the public confuses fact and fiction, in other words, it cannot be understood to do so willfully, because, while public opinion may be the expression of the general will, the public's will is itself a fiction (on the order of Byron's own "*figures*"). The irony of Byron's situation is that it is precisely because public opinion is baseless that he is denied redress. It is therefore Byron's fate to suffer consequences in the literary public sphere of the threat that Burke had discerned in the political public sphere. Despite the obvious differences between these two moments, Byron and Burke are united in seeing publicity as a mechanism that hides as much as it reveals. Both the radical agitation in support of the revolution in France and the gossip of Regency



England exemplify the sense in which public opinion is, at best, subject to manipulation or, at worst, necessarily disposed to misrepresentation. If Burke felt obliged to deny that he held opinions that might be mistakenly attributed to him, Byron's dilemma is more outrageous: he is forced to defend himself not against the content of the charges being leveled against him, but rather against the very fact of the imputation itself. In each case, the threat is the result of a form of public judgment that is "general" and "decisive" precisely *because* it is groundless (94).

Yet while Burke and Byron each respond to the transformation of publicity that attends the emergence of the mass public, their responses to the problem do not take the same form. Burke's concern that his French correspondent has been misled into believing that he endorses the public statements of the corresponding societies admits the possibility of correcting the problem by exposing the misrepresentation of public opinion as a Jacobin plot; the threat the corresponding societies pose would be alleviated if only their signatures were "annexed to their instrument." By contrast, Byron knows that no letter to the reviews will clear his name and realizes that in the face of the public circulation of opinion public demands for accountability are little more than nostalgic fantasies. Indeed, in describing the separation from England and his family, he dismisses the idea that his exile is the result of such a plot:

I retired from the country perceiving that I was the object of general obloquy; I did not indeed imagine Like Jean Jacques Rousseau that all mankind was in a conspiracy against me – though I had perhaps as good grounds for such a chimera as ever he had, – but I perceived that I had to a great extent become personally obnoxious in England – perhaps through my own fault – but the fact was indisputable. (96)

Unlike Rousseau, who imagined that he saw enemies all around him, Byron chose exile as a response to the indisputability of public opinion itself.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, we might understand the distinction between Burke and Byron as the difference between blaming a faction and blaming factionalism. For Burke, the problem of publicity is embodied in the agency of the corresponding societies; for Byron, it can be located only in the abstraction of public opinion.

To this point, I have addressed only the part of the "Observations" that deals most directly with the attack on Byron's reputation. In fact, most of Byron's essay is dedicated to another, apparently unrelated, topic – "the present State of English Poetry" (104) – and the remainder of this chapter will examine the connection between these two issues. On

the face of it, in turning to the question of the state of English poetry Byron is only following the *Blackwood's* reviewer: "I have now arrived at a passage describing me as having vented my 'spleen against the lofty minded and virtuous men' men 'whose virtues few indeed can equal' – meaning I humbly presume the notorious triumvirate known by the name of 'Lake Poets' in their aggregate capacity, and by those of Southey – Wordsworth – and Coleridge when taken singly" (99). But as Byron's argument against the schools develops, it becomes clear that the real occasion for his reflections on what he calls "the Age of the Decline of English Poetry" is the debate that has come down to us as "the Pope controversy." He argues that "[t]he great cause of the present deplorable state of English Poetry is to be attributed – to that absurd and systematic depreciation of Pope, in which for the last few years there has been a [kind] of Epidemical concurrence. – Men of the most opposite opinions have united upon this topic" (104).

James Chandler has called this debate "arguably the canonical canon controversy in English literary history." He explains that, "in its narrowest sense, 'the Pope controversy' refers to the seven years war of words that was touched off in 1819 by some remarks of Thomas Campbell in defense of Pope"; he suggests the debate's scope when he points out that "before hostilities subsided in 1826, Grub Street was littered with some two-dozen pamphlets, articles, and reviews pertaining to Pope and his place in the poetic canon."<sup>30</sup> Chandler aligns Pope's enemies with "the rise of English nationalism," and Byron's position comes to look like "a kind of twisted elegy for the passing of those fixed laws that guided Pope" (222). While Chandler is right to claim that, in what was ostensibly a debate over "the invariable principles of poetry," the stakes were in fact much larger, the idea that in taking Pope's side Byron is simply digging in his heels is a mistake. Instead, Byron's stake in the debate has to do with the difference between the form of literary authority that Pope represents and that which is epitomized for Byron in the poetic judgments being rendered by representatives of the new schools.

Rather than articulating poetic principles, Byron's contribution to the Pope controversy focuses on the internecine feuds between contemporary English poets. He is less concerned to refute the "absurd and systematic depreciation of Pope" than to point out how the schools have turned poets from poetry to opinion-making. Like Burke, Byron obviously disagrees with his opponents in this debate. But, again like Burke, Byron's contribution to the debate leaves such substantive issues

aside and instead concentrates on the circumstances – which is to say the conditions of publicity – that have made such a controversy possible in the first place. He enters into the exchange not in order to weigh the merits of the argument against Pope or to make his own case in Pope's defense, but to call attention to the peculiar way in which the case against Pope has been prosecuted not by argument but, to echo Burke, by something like "a vote and resolution."

Thus, while Byron allows Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge their low opinions of Pope "when taken singly," he objects to the appearance of critical consensus that has grown up around their school:

These three personages Southey – Wordsworth, and Coleridge had all of them a very natural antipathy to Pope, and I respect them for it – as the only original feeling or principle – which they have contrived to preserve. – But they have been joined in it by those who have joined them in nothing else, – By the Edinburgh Reviewers, by the whole heterogenous Mass of living English Poets. . . .

But the Edinburgh Reviewers, and the Lakers – and Hunt and his school, and every body else with their School, and even Moore – without a School – and dilettanti lecturers at Institutions – and elderly Gentlemen who translate and imitate, – and young ladies who listen and repeat – Baronets who draw indifferent frontispieces for bad poets, and noblemen who let them dine with them – in the Country, the small body of the wits and the great body of the Blues – have latterly united in a depreciation of which their fathers would have been as much ashamed as their Children will be. (106–7)

Against the Lakers' ability to enlist what looks like support for their critical opinions from diverse and seemingly unrelated sources ("Men of the most opposite opinions have united upon this topic") Byron poses their inability to find readers for their poetry: "The greater part of the poets mentioned however have been able to gather together a few followers" (107). For Byron, the truly astonishing thing about Wordsworth is not that he has failed, by his own admission, to find an audience for his poetry, but that he has found an audience for his opinions on poetry despite the fact that he "is not quite so much read by his contemporaries as might be desirable" (108).<sup>31</sup> In effect, Wordsworth appears to have assembled a constituency for his views on poetry – a group that, Byron suggests, agrees on nothing else – which outstrips his readership. And, on this tenuous basis, Wordsworth claims a kind of legislative authority for what is essentially private opinion.

Of course, Byron intends this comic catalogue of Pope's detractors as pretenders to literary sophistication to stand in stark contrast to his

own ability to command a popular audience. But rather than use his own popularity to cudgel Wordsworth for his inability to sell poems, he attributes the discrepancy between Wordsworth's lack of popularity and his influence to the medium by which modern poetry is disseminated: "The very existence of a poet previous to the invention of printing depended upon his present popularity – and how often has it impaired his future fame? Hardly – ever; history informs us that the best have come down to us." Byron's argument is perhaps not as circular as it appears on first sight. If it seems that history is incapable of telling us anything but that the best poets have survived, Byron goes on to explain that, "The reason is evident, the most popular found the greatest number of transcribers for their M.S.S. and that the taste of their contemporaries was corrupt can hardly be avouched by the moderns, the mightiest of whom have but barely approached them." Homer provides a case in point: "Homer's Glory depended upon his present popularity; – he recited, and without the strongest impression of the moment, who would have gotten the Iliad by heart, and given it to tradition?" (108). More crucial than Byron's capsule history of literature, then, is his more general point, which is that print culture – and, more specifically, the convergence of print culture and the mass reading audience – has transformed the mode of transmission responsible for the shape of the canon of English poetry. That poets who are comparatively very little read – and the apposite poles here are Byron and the Lakers – can so profoundly affect contemporary poetic discourse suggests that, with the advent of mass culture, canonicity may no longer depend upon a text's or an author's ability to continue to attract an audience.<sup>32</sup> In one sense, the "invention of printing" and the expansion of the reading public put a premium on popularity; in another sense, Byron suggests, they have displaced it altogether.

For Byron, it is the dubious achievement of the schools to have recognized the waning of popularity as a criterion for judging poetic excellence and to have developed a strategy that makes it possible for Wordsworth's influence to extend far beyond his readership. Byron argues that while Wordsworth, "the Edinburgh Reviewers, and the Lakers – and Hunt and his school, and every body else with their School" cannot be imagined to be responsible for the turn against Pope, they all reap rewards from the widespread public disparagement of Pope's poetry. What is at stake here is not Wordsworth's actual influence; according to Byron, "he may have a sect, but he will never

have a public, and his ‘*audience*’ will always be ‘*few*’ without being ‘*fit*’” (109). Instead, the problem is that Wordsworth’s position at the head of the Lake School affords his views a public standing unwarranted by his poetic success (or, more precisely, the lack thereof). In the [next chapter](#), I will suggest that critics have paid insufficient attention to Wordsworth’s assertion in the “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” that “[t]he love, the admiration, the indifference, the slight, the aversion, and even the contempt, with which these Poems have been received . . . are all proofs that for the present time I have not laboured in vain.”<sup>33</sup> By contrast, Byron’s analysis of the paradoxical basis of the Wordsworth’s public standing acknowledges the full import of the reconfiguration of the grounds of poetic authority intimated in Wordsworth’s Essay.

It is in these terms that the views represented by the schools can come to look representative. Here Byron’s critique of the logic of the schools – wherein smaller and smaller groups come to define public opinion – resembles Burke’s criticism of Richard Price in the *Reflections*. Burke’s occasion was Price’s *Discourse on the Love of our Country*, a sermon commemorating the Glorious Revolution delivered in London’s Old Jewry on November 4, 1789. Responding to Price’s suggestion that dissenters set up their own congregations in accordance with their beliefs, Burke holds the spirit of dissent up for ridicule by arguing that its logical conclusion would be a sect of one:

If the noble *Seekers* should find nothing to satisfy their pious fancies in the old staple of the national church, or in all the rich variety to be found in the well-assorted warehouses of the dissenting congregations, Dr Price advises them to improve upon non-conformity; and to set up, each of them, a separate meeting-house upon his own particular principles. It is somewhat remarkable that this reverend divine should be so earnest for setting up new churches, and so perfectly indifferent concerning the doctrine which may be taught in them. His zeal is of a curious character. It is not for the propagation of his own opinions, but of any opinions. It is not for the diffusion of truth, but the spreading of contradiction. (95)

The dissent with which Byron is concerned, as we have seen, is the contemporary reaction against “the Christianity of English Poetry – the Poetry of Pope” (106). For him, the rejection of Pope is “[t]he great cause of the present deplorable state of English Poetry,” of which Wordsworth, “essentially a bad writer” (109), is the exemplar. As an example of the effects of this transformation of publicity, he offers John Keats, “a tadpole of the lakes, a young disciple of the six or seven new

Schools” (116). A passage from Keats’s “Sleep and Poetry” serves as a proof-text for his argument:

But ye were dead  
 To things ye knew not of, – were closely wed  
 To musty laws lined out with wretched rule  
 And compass vile; so that ye taught a School  
 Of dolts to SMOOTH, *inlay*, and *clip*, and *fit*,  
 Till, like the certain wands of Jacob’s wit,  
*Their verses tallied. – Easy was the task:*  
 A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask  
 Of Poesy. – Ill-fated impious race  
 That blasphemed the bright Lyrist to his face,  
 And did not know it, no, they went about  
 Holding a poor, *decrepid*, Standard out  
 Marked with most flimsy mottos, and in large  
 The name of *one* Boileau! (113–14)<sup>34</sup>

The tenor of Byron’s objection to this passage is captured in his footnote to the line, “so that ye taught a School,” on which he remarks, “It was at least a *Grammar* ‘School’” (114). This note, like the quotation from “Sleep and Poetry,” Byron claims, was “intended for some of my old Classical friends who have still enough of Cambridge about them – to think themselves honoured by having had John Dryden as a predecessor in their College – and to recollect that their earliest English poetical pleasures were drawn from the ‘little Nightingale’ of Twickenham” (113). The problem with Keats’s lines, and with the new schools in general, lies exactly in the difference between a grammar school (or a school like Cambridge) and schools (like the Cockney School) that produce writers like Keats.<sup>35</sup> The “wretched rule / And compass vile” ridiculed in “Sleep and Poetry” (and parodied in Keats’s rhymed couplets) is the very “Standard” that Byron believes to be “the Christianity of English Poetry.” Keats’s lines purport to reject not only the rule of Pope but the very notion of a “Standard” for poetry. What Byron sees in them, however, is not heresy or heterodoxy, but the assertion of a new orthodoxy. For Byron’s real objection to Keats, “a young person learning to write poetry, & beginning by teaching the art” (113), is not that he departs from Pope, but that “Sleep and Poetry” (which Byron calls “an ominous title”) represents an attempt to invent a “new ‘Essay on Criticism’” (117). In following “Hunt and his school,” Keats has subscribed to a poetic doctrine that produces not poems, but statements of doctrine. Hunt’s “zeal,” in other words, is of

the same “curious character” as Richard Price’s, and its logical conclusion is the solipsism of a school of one.

#### DIGESTING DON JUAN

It is the doctrinaire attitude of the schools that Byron has in mind at the end of the first canto of *Don Juan*:

If ever I should condescend to prose,  
 I'll write poetical commandments, which  
 Shall supersede beyond all doubt all those  
 That went before; in these I shall enrich  
 My text with many things that no one knows,  
 And carry precept to the highest pitch:  
 I'll call the work 'Longinus o'er a Bottle,  
 Or, Every Poet his *own* Aristotle'. (1:204)<sup>36</sup>

The prescriptions that follow in fact reflect the views Byron expresses in the prose “Observations” he condescended to write two years later: “Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope; / Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey . . .” (1:205). Commenting on these lines, Chandler concludes that, in the end, “in *Don Juan* Byron can only parody the laws by which Pope swears.” Of Byron’s proposed poetics, “Every Poet his *own* Aristotle,” Chandler writes, “The joke is easy to get but hard to interpret, especially in view of how the degradation of Pope by the leveling ‘poetical populace of the present day’ is tied to their obsessive jockeying for fame and recognition”; he suggests that “it was this suspicion about an unseemly ambition beneath the surface of their populist rhetoric that led Byron, the most radical Whig among the Romantics, to denounce Wordsworth and his colleagues as too democratic in their poetics” (221). What I have been arguing is that interpreting Byron’s joke *depends* upon precisely the complicating factors that Chandler identifies. Amid what he calls “the trashy Jingle of the crowd of ‘Schools’ and upstarts,”<sup>37</sup> Byron despairs of returning Pope to his proper place or reforming contemporary poetic practice because he recognizes that his pronouncements do not contribute to a real public debate, but only work to publicize his position. His objection to the “depreciation of Pope” is an objection to the degeneration of debate into opinion-making. If it seems that Byron can do no more than parody Pope’s laws or that his objections to Wordsworth and the schools are antidemocratic, this misapprehension

is a consequence of the parody of democratic representation that is the true object of Byron's satire.

If I've given the impression that Pope's connection to the controversy that bears his name is only incidental, for Byron at least he represents what has been lost. In the *Dunciad Variorum*, Pope describes satire's efficacy in terms of its ability to punish offenders whose "obscurity renders them more dangerous, as less thought of: Law can pronounce judgment only on open Facts, Morality alone can pass censure on Intentions of mischief; so that for secret calumny or the arrow flying in the dark, there is no publick punishment left, but what a good writer inflicts."<sup>38</sup> The difference between Pope's satire and Byron's is that for Pope "obscurity" is dangerous, while for Byron the real danger is precisely the kind of publicity that the writer, good or bad, "inflicts." That is to say, publicity is dangerous because it entails its own brand of obscurity. In Pope's day, the satirist's power resided in his capacity to bring dark designs into the light of day; in Byron's, it looks as though the satirist can only despair, because those he would punish are hiding in plain sight.<sup>39</sup>

But the point of drawing attention to Byron's critique of the corrosive effects of publicity is not to suggest that his answer to the problem is nostalgia. Instead, his response is to be read in lines like the ones that prepare for Juan's return to England at the beginning of canto 11:

When Bishop Berkeley said 'there was no matter,'  
 And proved it – 'twas no matter what he said:  
 They say his system 'tis in vain to batter,  
 Too subtle for the airiest human head;  
 And yet who can believe it! I would shatter  
 Gladly all matters, down to stone or lead,  
 Or adamant, to find the World a spirit,  
 And wear my head, denying that I wear it.

What a sublime discovery 'twas to make the  
 Universe universal Egotism!  
 That all's ideal – *all ourselves*: I'll stake the  
 World (be it what you will) that *that's* no Schism.  
 Oh, Doubt! – if thou be'st Doubt, for which some take thee,  
 But which I doubt extremely – thou sole prism  
 Of the Truth's rays, spoil not my draught of spirit!  
 Heaven's brandy, – though our brain can hardly bear it.

For ever and anon comes Indigestion,  
 (Not the most 'dainty Ariel') and perplexes



Our soarings with another sort of question:  
 And that which after all my spirit vexes,  
 Is, that I find no spot where man can rest eye on,  
 Without confusion of the sorts and sexes,  
 Of being, stars, and this unriddled wonder,  
 The World, which at the worst's a glorious blunder—. (11:1–3)

In these lines, Byron makes Berkeley's "universal Egotism" the apotheosis of "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime."<sup>40</sup> For Byron, Berkeley's idealism also stands in for the logic of the schools. While the doctrinal pronouncements of the Lake School and the Cockney School don't quite make the philosophical argument "all's ideal," Byron insists in both poetry and prose that they do epitomize the radical subjectivism of the claim, "*all ourselves*."

While I have just claimed that Byron's critique of Berkeley does not represent a nostalgic return to an Augustan (or Habermasian) ideal of communicative rationality, Samuel Johnson's memorable response to Berkeley nevertheless affords an illuminating point of comparison. When Boswell observes, "that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. . . . Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, 'I refute it *thus*.'"<sup>41</sup> Here Johnson refutes "Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry" by forcefully pointing to the existence of objects outside the self.<sup>42</sup> Byron's materialist argument takes a different form. Having considered the claims of philosophical idealism, the narrator of *Don Juan* decides to "leave off metaphysical / Discussion, which is neither here nor there: / If I agree that what is, is; then this I call / Being quite perspicuous and extremely fair" (11:5). This common-sense conclusion, which takes the world as given, points toward a recognition of the way in which objects outside the self organize our experience. Thus, the coming of "Indigestion" itself refutes the claim "That all's ideal – *all ourselves*" by emphasizing the obstinate tendency of things to be inassimilable to our selves.

Moreover, the "sort of question" raised by "Indigestion" is typical of *Don Juan*, insofar as its appearance at the end of the first line of the stanza immediately prompts the reader to ask, "What word rhymes with 'Indigestion'?" The answer, the "question" that "perplexes / Our soarings" and finally prompts the poet to "leave off metaphysical / Discussion," resolves the rhyme without assuaging the poet's – or the reader's – bewilderment. And in this sense, it doesn't bring us down to earth or dispel our doubt so much as simply remind us there is "no spot where man can rest

eye on, / Without confusion of the sorts and sexes, / Of being, stars, and this unriddled wonder, / The World, which at the worst's a glorious blunder – ." Here the inassimilability of the world, the impossibility of arriving at a perspective from which confusion disappears, is encompassed in the "glorious blunder" that rhymes "Indigestion" and "question."

Of course, *Don Juan* is filled with rhymes more "glorious" than this one, and to draw attention to them is, in one sense, simply to recall the poem's improvisational quality. "You ask me for the plan of Donny Johnny – ," Byron famously wrote to John Murray after the appearance of the first two cantos of the poem in 1819, "I *have* no plan – I *had* no plan – but I had or have materials."<sup>43</sup> In drawing attention to the poet's "materials," however, both the refractory materiality of *Don Juan*'s rhymes and Byron's letter to Murray emphasize the sense in which *Don Juan* is itself an object which defies easy assimilation. Set in opposition to the orthodoxies of the schools, Byron's text acts as a provocation. In scandalizing reviewers and readers, it enters the public realm populated by "the Lakers – and Hunt and his school, and every body else with their School," while conceiving for itself a different relation to the public. Against the schools' claims to represent the public, Byron imagines that *Don Juan* is a poem that will create its own readership without the assistance of a program or plan. That it shocked friends and enemies alike is thus a testament to the way that it provokes the reader's judgment.

This is to say that from the outset the poem predicts – even courts – responses like that of the *Blackwood's* reviewer. Near the beginning of canto 4, Byron reflects on such responses when his narrator defends himself against those who "have accused me of a strange design / Against the creed and morals of the land":

I don't pretend that I quite understand  
My own meaning when I would be *very* fine;  
But the fact is that I have nothing plann'd. . . . (4:5)

The claim that he has "nothing plann'd," of course, recalls Byron's letter to Murray (which may well have been its source). His assertion that the "strange design" of which he has been accused is not his poem's, but his critics' – "Who have imputed such designs as show / Not what they saw, but what they wish'd to see" (4:7) – similarly recasts his reply to the *Blackwood's* critic. It is easy enough to understand passages like this one as moments in which the reaction to *Don Juan* is registered in the poem: Byron is responding to his critics. But in concluding this chapter, I want to suggest that the poem's thematization

of response is more significant than this account might recognize. For in responding to its critics and provoking its readers, *Don Juan* offers an account of reading as physical response – and thus constitutes a radically materialist argument against Lake School idealism. In this sense, *Don Juan* is an antidoctrinal poem not simply because it is immoral, but because it refuses any governing rule or principle, save that of a response which it figures as physical reaction.

Peter Manning has described the narrator of *Don Juan* as “a victim of indigestion and metaphysical doubt.”<sup>44</sup> This observation points to a number of memorable episodes in the poem and, in linking stomach distress and philosophical skepticism, calls attention to moments like the beginning of canto 11. But in light of the account of the poem to which I have pointed, it also suggests that, despite Byron’s rejection of a plan for *Don Juan*, indigestion serves a programmatic function in the poem. (One purpose of this program is reflected in Hazlitt’s observation in “The Fight” that “[a]n indigestion is an excellent commonplace for two people that never met before.”)<sup>45</sup> Stomach distress does not make its first appearance when Juan arrives in England. It also plays an important role at the beginning of canto 2, for example, as he says goodbye to Spain and to Donna Julia:

‘Farewell, my Spain! a long farewell!’ he cried,  
 ‘Perhaps I may revisit thee no more,  
 But die, as many an exiled heart hath died,  
 Of its own thirst to see again thy shore:  
 Farewell, where Guadalquivir’s waters glide!  
 Farewell, my mother! and, since all is o’er,  
 Farewell, too dearest Julia!’ – (here he drew  
 Her letter out again, and read it through).

‘And oh! if e’er I should forget, I swear –  
 But that’s impossible, and cannot be –  
 Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air,  
 Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea,  
 Than I resign thy image, Oh! my fair!  
 Or think of any thing excepting thee;  
 A mind diseased no remedy can physic – ’  
 (Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew sea-sick.)

‘Sooner shall heaven kiss earth’ – (here he fell sicker)  
 ‘Oh, Julia! what is every other woe? –  
 (For God’s sake let me have a glass of liquor,  
 Pedro, Battista, help me down below).

Julia, my love! – (you rascal, Pedro, quicker) –  
 Oh Julia! – (this curst vessel pitches so) –  
 Beloved Julia, hear me still beseeching!  
 (Here he grew inarticulate with reaching.) (2:18–20)

Juan's reflections on the life and the love he is leaving behind are hardly metaphysical. If we need to be persuaded of this point, in canto 1 Byron has already deflated Juan's metaphysical pretensions by attributing the profound musings prompted by the budding romance with Donna Julia – "He thought about himself, and the whole earth, / Of man the wonderful, and of the stars, / And how the deuce they ever could have birth . . ." (1:92) – to another bodily process: "If *you* think 'twas philosophy that this did, / I can't help thinking puberty assisted" (1:93). But the interruption of Juan's profession of love for Julia by "nausea, or a pain / About the lower region of the bowels" nevertheless foreshadows the "question" that will arrest the poet's reflections on philosophical skepticism in canto 11 (2:23). Neither the poet's metaphysics nor Juan's love can resist their stomachs.

In bidding adieu to Spain and to Julia, Juan's "reaching" puts the lie to his fidelity – if only because he can't vomit and profess devotion at the same time. In addition to this joke, however, Byron's description of the scene also aligns the physical process that interrupts Juan's farewells with the act of reading. Juan's sea-sickness is a parenthetical affair – the humor of the scene derives in part from the way the series of parenthetical phrases which depict the quick progression of Juan's illness overcome the text they're interrupting – and its parenthetical status formally links it to his reading of Julia's letter (which also takes place parenthetically): "– (here he drew / Her letter out again, and read it through)." The effect is to suggest that it is the reading of the letter, as much as the rolling of the ship, that upsets Juan's stomach. Whether we accept this account of the source of Juan's sickness, juxtaposing Juan's nausea and Julia's letter in this way stresses the poem's presentation of reading as a physical process (or a process with physical consequences) and understands texts as something more than mere carriers of meaning. That is to say, Juan's physical response – to the sea, to Julia's letter – serves to align reading with a species of reaction which is understood to be prior to judgment (whether metaphysical or aesthetic).

Julia's is a love letter, but as it makes its way through the text its importance will come to have more to do with its material existence than

the sentiments it expresses. In canto 1, the text of the letter is given in full and is followed by a stanza which describes its physical appearance:

This note was written upon gilt-edged paper  
 With a neat crow-quill, rather hard, but new;  
 Her small white fingers scarce could reach the taper,  
 But trembled as magnetic needles do,  
 And yet she did not let one tear escape her;  
 The seal a sunflower; *'Elle vous suit partout'*,  
 The motto, cut upon a white cornelian;  
 The wax was superfine, its hue vermilion. (1:198).

Byron puts before us not only the text of the letter but also the materials out of which it is composed (perhaps to provide us with concrete evidence that Julia *can* write; we've already been told, after all, that "not a line had Julia ever penn'd" [1:66]). This attention to the materiality of the letter introduces the first canto's self-reflexive conclusion. For the letter prompts the poet's punning reflection on the story he is telling; the beginning of the next stanza, "This was Don Juan's earliest scrape . . ." (1:199), must for the attentive reader recall the scraping of Donna Julia's "neat crow-quill, rather hard, but new" on the "gilt-edged paper." This association leads in turn to a comment on the audience for Julia's letter, Juan's adventures, and the poem itself:

This was Don Juan's earliest scrape; but whether  
 I shall proceed with his adventures is  
 Dependent on the public altogether;  
 We'll see, however, what they say to this,  
 Their favor in an author's cap's a feather,  
 And no great mischief's done by their caprice;  
 And if their approbation we experience,  
 Perhaps they'll have some more about a year hence. (1:199)

From Julia's pen scraping the page, to Juan's scrapes, the quill has now become a feather in the author's cap – a symbol of the public's favor. Byron's attention to Julia's materials, and their associative connection to the fortunes he imagines for *Don Juan*, points to his claim about his own: "I *have* no plan – I *had* no plan – but I had or have materials." This association also foreshadows the fate of Julia's letter, which in canto 2 will find its way onto the long-boat with Juan and the other survivors of the wreck of the *Trinidad* and there will play a crucial role in the episode upon which Byron stakes the success or failure of the first two cantos of *Don Juan* (and therefore, according to the account

of his intentions given at the end of canto 1, the continuation of the poem as a whole).

The description of canto 2's grisly lottery returns to the matter of materials:

At length the lots were torn up, and prepared,  
But of materials that much shock the Muse –  
Having no paper, for the want of better,  
They took by force from Juan Julia's letter. (2:74)

The reappearance of Julia's letter comes as a surprise; it also completes the letter's circuit through the text. In noting that the lots are made of "materials that much shock the Muse –," Byron offers a proleptic acknowledgment of the reading public's outraged response to the eating of Juan's tutor, Pedrillo. The shipwreck episode as a whole makes a comedy out of an act of cannibalism; it also serves as a kind of forecast of the reaction that it will provoke from reviewers and readers. Andrew Cooper has commented that, "with regard to the shipwreck episode, what is most striking about first readers' reaction is not their horror, but specifically their mortification, as though they felt Byron had personally duped them somehow."<sup>46</sup> The *Blackwood's* reviewer remarks that "the best and the worst part of the whole is without doubt the description of the shipwreck," and he claims that, "[a]s a piece of terrible painting, it is as much superior as can be to every description of the kind – not even excepting that in the *Aeneid* – that ever was created." It is all the more mortifying, then, that

even here the demon of his depravity does not desert him. We dare not stain our pages with quoting any specimens of the disgusting merriment with which he has interspersed his picture of human suffering. He paints it well, only to shew that he scorns it the more effectually; and of all the fearful sounds which ring in the ears of the dying, the most horrible is the demoniacal laugh which this un pitying brother exults over the contemplation of their despair. Will our readers believe that the most innocent of all his odious sarcasms is contained in these two lines?

'They grieved for those that perished in the cutter,  
And also for the biscuit, casks, and butter.' [Canto 2. 61]<sup>47</sup>

This same combination of grudging admiration and unmitigated disgust is registered in Keats's reaction to the scene. According to Severn, "Keats threw down the book & exclaimed, 'this gives me the most horrid idea of human nature, that a man like Byron should have exhausted all the pleasures of the world so completely that there was

nothing left for him but to laugh & gloat over the most solemn & heart-rending since [i.e., scenes] of human misery this storm is one of the most diabolical attempts ever made on our sympathies, and I have no doubt it will fascenate thousands into extreem obduracy of heart. . . .”<sup>48</sup>

Of *Don Juan*’s first readers, Manning has written:

*Don Juan* baffled contemporaries and incurred accusations of cynicism because its first readers did not realize that Byron had transferred the locus of meaning from within the poem outside to them. Pope draws his audience into a compact of solidarity against the fools he presents – the Dunces, the Timons, the Sir Balaams. In Byron, however, the object of satire is not a fictive, representative character, but the false assumptions in the individual reader that his reactions to the poem bring to the surface.<sup>49</sup>

This is an excellent account of how, as Manning puts it, “Byron compels the reader to participate in the cleansing of error.”<sup>50</sup> And the allusion to Pope is apt. I would revise Manning’s assessment, however, by suggesting that the object of Byron’s satire in *Don Juan* is, in fact, “a fictive, representative character.” This character differs from Pope’s Dunces, Timons, and Sir Balaams, but the “false assumptions” the poem wants to expose and the “error” Byron would cleanse have their source not in the individual reader but rather in the “fictive, representative character” that is the public. Byron’s critique of the metaphysics of the schools maintains that individual readers share these false assumptions and participate in error not in their individual judgments but to the extent that they constitute the public and are the bearers of public opinion. Byron’s aim in correcting his readers is to reacquaint them with themselves as individuals: to engage them in acts of reading and compel not adherence to a set of opinions or poetic doctrine but to individual judgment itself.

In the end, of course, Pedrillo’s end is also the end of those who eat him:

in fact,  
The consequence was awful in the extreme;  
For they, who were most ravenous in the act,  
Went raging mad – Lord! how they did blaspheme!  
And foam and roll, with strange convulsions rack’d,  
Drinking salt-water like a mountain-stream,  
Tearing and grinning, howling, screeching, swearing,  
And, with hyena laughter, died despairing.

Their numbers were much thinn’d by this infliction,  
And all the rest were thin enough, heaven knows;

And some of them had lost their recollection,  
 Happier than they who still perceived their woes;  
 But others ponder'd on a new dissection,  
 As if not warn'd sufficiently by those  
 Who had already perish'd, suffering madly,  
 For having used their appetites so sadly. (2:79–80)

As Byron depicts it, the suffering of the shipwreck's doomed survivors resembles nothing other than the reactions of the poem's reviewers and readers: Byron's poem drives its audience "raging mad"; its blasphemy prompts reviewers to "foam and roll"; their "[t]earing and grinning, howling, screeching, swearing" mimics that of the cannibals on the long-boat. Reading, in short, produces "strange convulsions" which leave the *Blackwood's* reviewer unable to separate praise and blame in a poem whose best and worst parts are one and the same. Just as those who partake of Pedrillo find him to be difficult to digest (or disagreeable once digested), many of the poem's readers will find it to be similarly inassimilable. (And as the *Blackwood's* reviewer complains, the poem is also indigestible in that it cannot be easily digested in a review: the poem's immorality frustrates the reviewers' attempts to summarize its plot or even offer extracts.)<sup>51</sup> Having claimed that *Don Juan's* continuation "is / Dependent on the public altogether" (1:199) and proceeded to offer an episode which seems to be designed not just to try the reader's patience but to provoke readers to toss the book away, Byron imagines that the compulsion that incites some of the cannibals to renew their efforts even in the face of their horrible effects is an "infliction" that will also affect readers of the poem. Some at least will persist in consuming a text they cannot digest. Like the shipwreck's survivors, they will find themselves "[d]rinking salt-water like a mountain-stream" – or reading *Don Juan* as though it were a poem of the Lake School. That it is not is proved by their tortured responses.<sup>52</sup>



## CHAPTER 2

### *Wordsworth's audience problem*

Wordsworth serves as an important point of reference throughout this study. As I indicated in the introduction, this position reflects Wordsworth's exemplary status for an influential line of Romantic criticism. From the perspective of much criticism of the Romantics, in fact, it is not too much to say that "Wordsworth" and "Romanticism" are interchangeable.<sup>1</sup> More crucial than the role Wordsworth plays in the criticism of Romanticism, however, is what he came to represent to the poets who followed him and responded to his example.<sup>2</sup> It is, after all, in the responses of Wordsworth's near contemporaries that we find the basis for twentieth-century reassessments of Wordsworth's poetry and politics.<sup>3</sup> And, among the second-generation poets, the image of Wordsworth as apostate or egotist is widespread: Shelley makes the first charge in his sonnet "To Wordsworth"; Keats writes to Richard Woodhouse of "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime";<sup>4</sup> and, as chapter 1 made clear, Byron's correspondence, prose, and poetry are littered with examples of each of these accusations (not to mention the more damning complaint that Wordsworth is simply dull).<sup>5</sup>

Alongside these derogatory assessments, however, Wordsworth also stood for a particularly powerful form of sympathetic relationship between author and reader. I have already characterized this side of Wordsworth in terms of the relation to the reader established in "Tintern Abbey." In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes his own initial response to Wordsworth's poetry in terms which "the poet hath himself well described in his lines 'on re-visiting the Wye'" and goes on to represent poetic genius itself in such a way as to recall Wordsworth's "exhortations": "And therefore it is the prime merit of genius and its most unequivocal mode of manifestation, so to represent familiar objects as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them and that freshness of sensation which is the constant

accompaniment of mental, no less than of bodily, convalescence.”<sup>6</sup> In this “kindred feeling,” Coleridge depicts a form of identification between poet and reader, the creation of which is at once Wordsworth’s greatest accomplishment and the standard against which his work would be measured (by Coleridge, among others).

It is this conception of poet and reader united by a shared point of view, moreover, which made Wordsworth’s turn away from his early political principles all the more devastating to the readers who shared them. Wordsworth’s apostasy, in other words, was understood not merely as an abrogation of a perceived duty but of fellow-feeling itself. When Shelley laments the departure of the “Poet of Nature” in his sonnet “To Wordsworth,” for example, he mourns not only Wordsworth’s desertion of his earlier beliefs but also the loss of “common woes” felt by poet and reader alike:

Poet of Nature, thou hast wept to know  
 That things depart which never may return:  
 Childhood and youth, friendship and love’s first glow,  
 Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.  
 These common woes I feel. One loss is mine  
 Which thou too feel’st, yet I alone deplore.  
 Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine  
 On some frail bark in winter’s midnight roar:  
 Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood  
 Above the blind and battling multitude:  
 In honoured poverty thy voice did weave  
 Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,—  
 Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,  
 Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.<sup>7</sup>

The “frail bark” of the sonnet looks forward to the “spirit’s bark” of the final stanza of *Adonais*; but where the *Adonais* poet takes his direction from “[t]he soul of Adonais” which “like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are” (494–95), the speaker of the sonnet has been abandoned by the “lone star” which had been his guide “in winter’s midnight roar” (7–8). The loss is not merely a loss like the one described in the opening lines of the sonnet. Rather, it is a loss of direction, of orientation, or, even more generally, of the kind of reciprocity that made such “common woes” possible in the first place. Shelley suggests that what has been lost is not merely a relationship, but a form of relationship. More than a merely personal matter, then,

Wordsworth's desertion dramatizes the dilemma faced by the poets who came after him. The form of relationship that Shelley laments as lost is the one-to-one encounter between poet and reader Wordsworth describes in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. For Shelley, this loss was announced by the publication of *The Excursion*; in a diary entry which describes their reading of the poem in September 1814, Mary Shelley wrote of Wordsworth, "He is a slave."<sup>8</sup>

More than the disapprobation of two disappointed readers, however, this reaction to *The Excursion* reflects a problem with the audience against which Wordsworth had struggled from the outset of his career as a poet.<sup>9</sup> This chapter traces the development of Wordsworth's response to his "audience-problem" from the Advertisement and Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" of 1815.<sup>10</sup> I argue that the Preface's poetics of feeling is an attempt to solve the problem posed by the mass reading public and that Wordsworth's failure to arrive at an adequate solution motivates his effort in the "Essay, Supplementary" to put the problem behind him once and for all. Wordsworth's anxiety about how his poems would be, and were being, received prompts a departure from the expressive theory of poetry his work has been thought to exemplify. In the Essay, Wordsworth arrives at an account of the relationship between poet and reader which, even as it strives to evoke an ideal reader, acknowledges the limitations of such a theory. The chapter develops a reading of the central claim of the Essay, "that every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed."<sup>11</sup> Wordsworth's assertion is one of the best-known and most often cited of the Romantics' critical statements, but for all its familiarity critics have failed to attend to the complexity of the claim. Either approvingly or disapprovingly, commentators have tended to assume that Wordsworth is simply making an argument about the poet's dominion over his readers – that in addition to writing poetry the poetic genius must control the terms of its reception.<sup>12</sup> On this reading, the creation of taste is a process of replication, in which Wordsworth creates readers in his own image. The poet's authority is secured by imagining that its scope includes not just the poem, but also the reader.<sup>13</sup>

But Wordsworth's point is double-edged. As Shelley among others came to understand, the interest and importance of the idea of creating taste has to do with a paradox which is implicit in Wordsworth's assertion. For in arguing that the poet's job entails not only the creation of poems but the creation of taste, Wordsworth at once asserts

control over his readers and acknowledges his dependence on them. That is, in making the creation of taste part of the business of the poet, Wordsworth is turning away from the expressivism inherent in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*' suggestion that poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."<sup>14</sup> Against this understanding of poetry as expression (as well as the Preface's attempt to imagine an audience that is responsive to the poet's feelings), the "Essay, Supplementary" makes it clear that the poem is part of a circuit that includes both poet and reader. Even Wordsworth's attempt to assert control over his audience underscores his recognition that the transmission of poetry from author to reader cannot be neglected or simply assumed. In describing "a radical change . . . in ideas of art, of the artist, and of their place in society" which took place in the Romantic period, Raymond Williams remarked, "Under patronage, the writer had at least a direct relationship with an immediate circle of readers, from whom, whether prudentially or willingly, as mark or as matter of respect, he was accustomed to accept and at times to act on criticism"; along similar lines, Bertrand Harris Bronson claimed that, for poets from Milton to Pope, the author's social world and his audience were still "roughly commensurate."<sup>15</sup> Wordsworth cannot assume that his poetry will be received as he intends because the rise of the mass reading public means that the kind of "direct relationship" and commensurability described by Williams and Bronson has been lost.

The discrepancy between poetic achievement and popular success is, of course, the main lesson of the capsule history of English poetry which occupies the center of the "Essay, Supplementary." In this "hasty retrospect of the poetical literature of this Country for the greater part of the last two centuries," Wordsworth rewrites literary history in order to transform the neglect of his poetry into proof of his genius (67). He notes that "[a] dramatic Author, if he write for the stage, must adapt himself to the taste of the audience, or they will not endure him" and claims, on the basis of "the fact that Lord Bacon, in his multifarious writings, nowhere either quotes or alludes to him" and Dryden's observation that "in his time two of the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher were acted for one of Shakespeare's," "that Shakespeare stooped to accommodate himself to the People, is sufficiently apparent" (67-8). As for Milton, he points to the neglect of the early poems, "to that degree, that Pope in his youth could borrow from them without risk of its being known" and argues that Johnson's *Life* mistakenly asserts the initial popularity of *Paradise Lost* (70). Wordsworth suggests that the first

readers of the poem were Milton's "numerous friends" and "also those who wished to possess the Poem as a religious work," and, in answer to Johnson's claim that *Paradise Lost* did not find more readers because there were not more readers of poetry to be found, he points to the numerous contemporary editions of Cowley, Flatman, Waller, and one Norris of Bemerton (70). Wordsworth contends that "if Milton's work were not more read, it was not because readers did not exist at the time"; instead, he argues, "There were readers in multitudes; but their money went for other purposes, as their admiration was fixed elsewhere" (71). With Thomson's *Seasons*, Wordsworth admits that "[t]his case appears to bear strongly against us," but immediately adds that "we must distinguish between wonder and legitimate admiration" and, on the basis of this distinction, attributes Thomson's popularity to the novelty of his "image[s] of external nature" (73).

In his appraisal of Thomson, Wordsworth's obstinacy – which is to say his desire to find neglect even in the face of spectacular popular success – is on full display, and the tendentiousness of his history (along with its aggressively defensive tone and the fact that Wordsworth's argument takes the form of a classic logical fallacy) have made it all but impossible to see the Essay as anything but a case of special pleading.<sup>16</sup> But the very defensiveness and illogic that have blinded critics to the counterargument I want to identify here – which grudgingly recognizes the audience's integral role not only in poetry's popular success, but in its conception and composition – are in no small measure the result of Wordsworth's own struggle to deny the implications of that counterargument. Wordsworth struggles because, despite the Essay's effort to define and expand the domain of poetic genius by extending it to include the poet's command over his readers, he cannot ignore that the relationship he describes entails contingencies of response which escape the poet's control. Even as he mounts an argument designed to rule popularity out of court as a marker of poetic value, the attention he devotes to the issue of reception is telling in itself. From this standpoint, the concluding pages of the "Essay, Supplementary" are of particular importance for the way that they revise Wordsworth's earlier claims about the relationship of poet to reader. Broadly, the importance of the Essay has to do with its move away from the expressivism of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which emphasizes the expression of powerful feelings and attempts to establish a reciprocity between writer and reader, toward a new recognition of the centrality of the *effects* that poems have on their readers.

Wordsworth's shifting attitude toward the audience for poetry also calls attention to the sense in which the shift from authorial expression to poems' effects on readers marks a changed conception of the role of feeling in the reception of poetry. It serves as a reminder that any inquiry into Romantic poetics must begin with the simple observation that feeling repeatedly emerges as a criterion of judgment for poetry in the critical writings of the Romantics. But the very omnipresence of feeling in Romantic poetic discourse has made it difficult to assess the very different kinds of work that affect can do. What Wordsworth's critical prose suggests is that the *significance* of feeling as a criterion of judgment is bound up with a split or dual conception of the reader's affective response: on the one hand, readers' responses are frequently depicted as proof of poetry's power; on the other hand, they are often – and I will argue increasingly – understood as an unpredictable and perhaps even dangerous check on, or denial of, the poet's own authority. From this standpoint, the interest of Wordsworth's changing attitude toward his readers is that it reflects a shift from a conception of feeling as a marker of emotions shared by author and audience to a broader and, in Wordsworth's case, even ill-defined notion of feeling as a placeholder for any effect a text might be imagined to have on its readers.

My aim in examining the transition from the Preface to the "Essay, Supplementary," then, might be regarded as an effort to trace some of the ways in which, in Romantic poetic theory, feeling comes to serve as a kind of empty counter, shifting registers between an empiricist understanding of the emotions and a quasi-utilitarian understanding of effects. I am less interested, however, in identifying potential philosophical contexts for this shift than examining its impact on conceptions of poetic reception. In the Preface, feelings are conceived in terms of content; they reflect a sympathetic relation between poet and reader. In the Essay, Wordsworth recasts emotions as effects of reading, and in so doing he effectively empties feeling out and redefines it in formal terms. The result, I will argue, is that Wordsworth must confront the reader in a new way and acknowledge that the project of creating taste entails that the poet "call forth and . . . communicate *power*" (82). What began, and has traditionally been read, as an assertion of the poet's authority over the reader becomes, in the end, an exploration of reception which offers a radically different conception of the relationship between poet and reader – one which admits the possibility that posterity's claim on the poet might finally outweigh the poet's claim on posterity. In this way, Wordsworth's anxiety about the

audience is the consequence of a zero-sum game in which the power communicated to readers is granted at the poet's expense.

#### A MAN SPEAKING TO MEN

In the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth famously asks, "What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself?" The answer he provides – "He is a man speaking to men" – aspires to portray the relationship between poet and reader as an encounter between equals.<sup>17</sup> Even as he identifies the poet and reader by insisting on the common humanity that unites them, however, the series of qualifications that immediately follows the image of the poet as "a man speaking to men" troubles this assertion of equality: the poet is "endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, . . . has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind"; he is "a man . . . who rejoices more than other men," is "affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present," and "has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels" (255–56). By the end of this long list of ways in which the poet is more than other men (even if, as Wordsworth maintains, he is superior only in degree rather than in kind [261]), it is difficult to see the basis for the equality Wordsworth had claimed at the outset.

The real grounding for Wordsworth's claim of equality emerges not in his enumeration of the poet's attributes, but in his account of the poet's obligation to the reader: "It is supposed, that by the act of writing in verse an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association, that he not only apprizes the Reader that certain classes of ideas and expressions will be found in his book, but that others will be carefully excluded" (243). While Wordsworth claims that he will not attempt "to determine the exact import of the promise which by the act of writing in verse an Author in the present day makes to his Reader," his admission that "it will appear to many persons that I have not fulfilled the terms of an engagement thus voluntarily contracted" points to the central importance of readers' expectations to the project of the *Lyrical Ballads* (243–44). In advance of the Preface, the Advertisement to the 1798 edition had already raised the issue of the book's potential readers – and had initiated the assault on "that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision" continued in the Preface and

the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface." In introducing the anonymous volume, the Advertisement presents the poems collected in *Lyrical Ballads* "as experiments . . . written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure." What follows, however, suggests that they are experimental in another sense as well. "Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers," Wordsworth writes, "if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title" (7). It is in this context that Wordsworth urges his reader to resist "that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own preestablished codes of decision," and in this sense, the Advertisement suggests, the *Lyrical Ballads* might be considered as an experiment designed to test not only the canons of poetic diction but the audience for poetry as well. If, as Wordsworth claims, "[r]eaders of superior judgment may disapprove of the style in which many of these pieces are executed" and find "that wishing to avoid the prevalent fault of the day, the author has sometimes descended too low," he also suggests that truly superior readers, those "more conversant . . . with our elder writers," will have "fewer complaints of this kind" (7-8).

In the Preface, Wordsworth refines the nature of the contract between author and reader by purifying it of any prior literary training or knowledge: "The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a Man" (257-58). This disinterested stance works as much by subtracting the reader's distinguishing characteristics as by positing a universal human nature. On this account, the reader who judges "by his own feelings genuinely," "not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a Man," will judge rightly because in him human nature is not only uncorrupted but altogether uninflected. One aim of this process of subtraction is the establishment of a relationship between poet and reader on the model of a face-to-face encounter. It is a one-to-one correspondence that operates at a level more fundamental than either the poet's attributes or those of the reader: pleasure is the response that proves the reader's receptiveness to



poetry defined as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (246 and 266). Thus the “one restriction” under which the poet writes is not really a restriction at all. Instead, the poet’s responsibility to provide pleasure represents a reprieve from the litany of poetic requirements that Wordsworth eschews elsewhere in the Preface (such as personification, poetic diction, rhyme, and even meter itself). Poetry need not hew to these rules, Wordsworth argues, so long as it gives pleasure. To this end, the poet’s “one restriction” is mirrored by the “one request” Wordsworth makes of the reader of *Lyrical Ballads*, “which is, that in judging these Poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others” (270). By acting as a check against “the judgment of others,” feeling thus stands for the truth of individual judgment. The face-to-face encounter Wordsworth envisions depends upon a conception of feeling as a form of judgment capable of uniting poet and reader because, unlike taste, it is not subject to the accidents of culture.

It has been tempting to critics of the Preface to understand Wordsworth’s comments on his readers as a kind of originary fiction – the reader of the *Lyrical Ballads* is not merely “a human Being” but a natural man – and thereby to debunk the Preface’s democratic pretensions. The [last chapter](#) argued that this tendency played an important role in Byron’s critique of the Lake School; it is also reflected in Coleridge’s criticism of the Preface’s theory of poetic diction in the *Biographia*. It has been noted (and lamented) that this way of thinking about readers led Wordsworth to surround himself with an immediate audience made up of intimates. David Perkins has described this audience as “family and friends plus a few enthusiasts in the reading public.”<sup>18</sup> In a letter of 1803, Coleridge offered a less charitable assessment: “I saw him . . . living wholly among devotees – having every minutest thing, almost his very Eating & Drinking, done for him by his Sister, or his Wife – & I trembled, lest a film should rise, and thicken on his moral Eye.”<sup>19</sup> Coleridge’s concern for Wordsworth’s “moral Eye,” of course, had much to do with his sense that he was being excluded from the domestic circle of “devotees” he describes. But personal animosity aside, his observation gets at the sense in which Wordsworth’s stance toward his readers makes the narrowing of the audience to the poet’s immediate family seem inevitable – as though Wordsworth’s demands on his readers and his desire for complete identification mean that in the end he can only address those whose attachments to him precede and outweigh their responses to his poems.

What such accounts of the Preface miss, however, is how closely Wordsworth's attempts to define poetry and the poet are bound up with his effort to situate himself in relation to his audience. From this standpoint, the questions Wordsworth asks – "What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself?" – are striking not only for the answer they elicit but also for the very fact that Wordsworth links them as he does. The Advertisement demonstrates that the audience had been a matter of anxiety for Wordsworth since the first appearance of the *Lyrical Ballads*. In taking up the subject of the *Lyrical Ballads* in chapter 4 of the *Biographia*, Coleridge isolates the problem of the volume's reception and identifies "the critical remarks . . . prefixed and annexed to the 'Lyrical Ballads' . . . as the true origin of the unexampled opposition which Mr. Wordsworth's writings have been since doomed to encounter" (71). In his analysis of this antagonistic response to Wordsworth's "peculiar opinions" (69), Coleridge offers a paradox, in which "the poems, admitted by *all* as excellent, joined with those which had pleased the far *greater* number," rather than compensating for the small number of poems which gave offense, in fact "gave wind and fuel to the animosity against both the poems and the poet" (71). Wordsworth's genius, it seems, does not excuse his faults but exacerbates them. Coleridge explains this apparent contradiction in psychological terms:

In all perplexity, there is a portion of fear, which predisposes the mind to anger. Not able to deny that the author possessed both genius and a powerful intellect, they felt *very positive*, but were not *quite certain*, that he might not be in the right, and they themselves in the wrong; an unquiet state of mind, which seeks alleviation by quarrelling with the occasion of it, and by wondering at the perverseness of the man, who had written a long and argumentative essay to persuade them, that

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;

in other words, that they had been all their lives admiring without judgment, and were now about to censure without reason. (71–2)

Coleridge elaborates this conundrum – which echoes the Advertisement's stated intention "to temper the rashness of decision, and to suggest that if poetry be a subject on which much time has not been bestowed, the judgment may be erroneous, and that in many cases it will necessarily be so" (8) – in a long footnote on Irish bulls. He argues that while a bull "consists in the bringing together two incompatible thoughts, with the *sensation*, but without the *sense*, of their connection" (Coleridge's example is "*I was a fine child, but they changed me*") (72), Wordsworth's critical opinions produce in his readers "the direct

contrary state," namely, "a distinct sense of the connection between two conceptions, without the *sensation* of such connection which is supplied by habit" (73). Here Coleridge turns to the *form* of the bull to describe the structure of Wordsworth's reader's confusion, but he reverses the relationship between feeling and reason that defines the bull. The contortions of his analogy thus capture the "unquiet state of mind" that Wordsworth produces in his reader: "The man *feels*, as if he were standing on his head, though he cannot but *see*, that he is truly standing on his feet. This, as a painful sensation, will of course have a tendency to associate itself with the person who occasions it; even as persons, who have been by painful means restored from derangement, are known to feel an involuntary dislike towards their physician" (73).<sup>20</sup>

Coleridge's examination of the hostile reaction to the *Lyrical Ballads* reflects a contradiction noted by many of the Preface's most astute readers: it is an attempt to persuade that repeatedly imagines a reader who is already persuaded. Peter Murphy has described the rhetorical paradox of the Preface in precisely these terms: "Wordsworth both wants to convince his readers of certain things and also wants for them to find that they already agree with him, because he is simply right. The Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* is a long struggle between these two versions of his project."<sup>21</sup> This struggle begins with Wordsworth's account of his reluctance to write a preface in the first place. Asked by friends "to prefix a systematic defence of the theory, upon which the poems were written," Wordsworth initially "was unwilling to undertake the task, because I knew that . . . the Reader would look coldly upon my arguments, since I might be suspected of having been principally influenced by the selfish and foolish hope of *reasoning* him into an approbation of these particular Poems" (242-43). Having declined to provide a systematic defense, Wordsworth nevertheless undertakes a preface, because the very nature of the poems seems to require it: "I am sensible, that there would be some impropriety in abruptly obtruding upon the Public, without a few words of introduction, Poems so materially different from those, upon which general approbation is at present bestowed" (243). This shifting account of the genesis of the Preface captures the double bind that governs it from the outset. On the one hand, the Preface itself will go on to suggest, a preface can have no bearing on the poems' success or failure in achieving the aim the poet sets out for them: the poems will either give immediate pleasure or they won't. On the other hand, while a preface cannot reason a reader into approbation, Wordsworth acknowledges that it might prepare

readers for poems that fail to “gratify certain known habits of association.” In this sense, Wordsworth’s account of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and in particular his claim that the collection represents something altogether new, is at odds with the very principle that defines its novelty.

Charles Altieri has argued that in the Preface Wordsworth addresses the perennial problem of speakers whose aim is the persuasion of an audience: to what degree are claims for the new – for originality, for genius – in fact simply a restaging of commonly held positions, opinions, and beliefs? As Altieri puts it, “Every rhetor who dreams of changing the values of his audience must also rely sufficiently on those values to win the hearts of those shaped by them. How new then are the orator’s visions? Perhaps they are little more than self-congratulatory versions of that old system.”<sup>22</sup> For Altieri, this problem stems from the Preface’s rhetoric of eloquence, its “effort to provide a passionate rendering about the effects of passion, which then makes sense only if one provisionally adopts the projected state of mind” (372). It is for this reason that Altieri understands the Preface as a performance: it is not an argument to be accepted or rejected, but “a mutual process of amplification” in which Wordsworth works to enlarge his readers’ understanding through their sympathetic identification with the passions he describes (373). From this standpoint, the problem Wordsworth faces in the Preface is that “[t]he high tradition of eloquence has become the worst enemy of genuine passion, siphoning it off into artifice, leaving the majority of people with no alternative to debased popular media and requiring the poet, perhaps for the first time, to stage himself as an experimental artist.” Therefore, Altieri argues in words that echo the Advertisement, Wordsworth’s real task is to find “a language which can resist the culture’s preestablished codes of decision to restore a sense of the pleasure and the awe which will accompany a full rendering of the passions” (377).

Altieri’s account points to the way in which the rhetorical problem posed by the Preface redoubles the critical problem posed by the poems themselves. In other words, Wordsworth’s audience problem recapitulates the longstanding critical debate over the originality of the *Lyrical Ballads*. At least since the publication in 1954 of Robert Mayo’s seminal essay, “The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*,” critics have questioned the originality of the poems in the collection – or cast doubt on Wordsworth’s aggressive claims on behalf of the novelty of his project.<sup>23</sup> Does the resemblance of the *Lyrical Ballads* to popular magazine verse of its moment devalue the poems’ achievement? Does

it invalidate Wordsworth's claims in the Preface? Such questions suggest that both the reader of the Preface and the literary historian face a version of the dilemma confronted by Altieri's rhetor. How new is the new? Or, more to the point, how new can the new afford to be?

From the critical perspective I have been describing, such questions about the originality of the *Lyrical Ballads* are more interesting than the answers they have prompted. These questions are significant, that is, because they reproduce Wordsworth's own vexed attempt to articulate a functional relationship with his readers. Wordsworth's anxiety about this relationship – and about how his poems would be, and were being, received – is on full display in the note added to “The Thorn” in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and a letter he wrote to John Wilson in 1802. In both cases, Wordsworth goes to extraordinary lengths to elucidate his intentions. In the note to “The Thorn,” Wordsworth offers an elaborate account of the character of the poem's speaker. In the letter to Wilson, he attempts to reason his reader (a schoolboy of seventeen who would later be known to readers of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* as “Christopher North”) into approbation of “The Idiot Boy” by answering Wilson's charge “that nothing is a fit subject for poetry which does not please” with a question:

Does not please whom? . . . or what? I answer, human nature, as it has been [and eve]r will be. But where are we to find the best measure of this? I answer, [from with]in; by stripping our own hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves to[ward me]n who have [led] the simplest lives most according to nature men who [ha]ve never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, false criti[ci]sms, effeminate habits of thinking and feeling, or who, having known these [t]hings, have outgrown them.<sup>24</sup>

In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's argument for his poems' novelty dramatizes the difficulty of his authorial situation; in response to the predicament he faces, he imagines readers who are devoid of distinguishing features and works to refashion judgment on the model of feeling. Both the disinterested stance he recommends (which asks readers to set aside their interests in order to recognize the purer interest of his poetry) and the effort to convince readers to rely on their own judgments (to undo the damage done by “men who speak of what they do not understand; who talk of Poetry . . . as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for Rope-dancing, or Frontiniac or Sherry” [257]) stand just as surely as acknowledgments of the obstacles in the way of creating taste.

## THE POLITICS OF READING

In the “Essay, Supplementary,” in the course of developing his claim that “every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed,” Wordsworth returns to these obstacles. While he doesn’t quite give up on his prior account of poetic disinterestedness, he seems to admit that he had underestimated the barriers in the way of true and unbiased response:

And where lies the real difficulty of creating the taste by which a truly original poet is to be relished? Is it in breaking the bonds of custom, in overcoming the prejudices of false refinement, and displacing the aversions of inexperience? Or, if he labour for an object which here and elsewhere I have proposed to myself, does it consist in divesting the reader of the pride that induces him to dwell upon those points wherein men differ from each other, to the exclusion of those in which all men are alike, or the same; and in making him ashamed of the vanity that renders him insensible of the appropriate excellence which civil arrangements, less unjust than might appear, and Nature illimitable in her bounty, have conferred on men who may stand below him in the scale of society? Finally, does it lie in establishing that dominion over the spirits of readers by which they are to be humbled and humanised, in order that they may be purified and exalted? (80)

In part, of course, this litany of impediments to creating taste reflects the critical and popular failures that followed the success of the *Lyrical Ballads*. *Lyrical Ballads* had gone through four editions in eight years; *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807) and *The Excursion* (1814) met with a largely indifferent public response and increasingly hostile reviews, including Jeffrey’s infamous attacks on Wordsworth and the Lake School in the *Edinburgh Review*. Whatever the immediate cause for Wordsworth’s reflection on “the real difficulty of creating . . . taste,” in imagining that readers must “be humbled and humanised, in order that they may be purified and exalted,” he suggests that it is difficult to imagine readers apart from the professions – and the prejudices – that define them. His response to this problem in the Essay is to distinguish between groups of readers: first between classes of readers distinguished by their experience as readers of poetry and finally between “that small though loud portion of the community, ever governed by factitious influence, which, under the name of the PUBLIC, passes itself, upon the unthinking, for the PEOPLE” and “the People, philosophically characterized,” to whom the poet’s “devout respect, his reverence, is due” (84). In this final distinction, Wordsworth turns away from the actually existing audience for poetry and stakes his

success as a poet on a posterity that his poetry will have to help to bring into existence.

This way of thinking about the "Essay, Supplementary" is a familiar one, and it has had much to do with the understanding of Wordsworth's poetic (and political) retrenchment shared by many of his contemporaries and much twentieth-century criticism.<sup>25</sup> The transition from the Preface to the Essay, on this account, is a move from the imagination of an idealized audience – or at least an ideal reader – to the idea that the true poet is necessarily set in opposition to the reading audience. Out of this opposition, moreover, a different form of idealization emerges – one that is oriented toward the future, which is imagined in distinctly self-serving terms. Jon Klancher provides an excellent account of the historical situation Wordsworth is addressing when he claims that the "high hyperbole" of the Essay's closing passage "confronts the real structural impasse of the early-nineteenth-century British cultural sphere. The high Humanist effort to bridge social and cultural difference in a powerful act of cultural transmission . . . founders against the deepening division of the social audiences themselves."<sup>26</sup> From this standpoint, we are in a position to see Wordsworth's defensiveness and his hostility toward the reading public as a reflection of the difficulty of establishing a common bond of feeling in the absence of the face-to-face encounters of a traditional society. The idea of feelings shared by poet and reader underwrites the project of the *Lyrical Ballads*; the "Essay, Supplementary" responds to the perceived absence of any such common bond in contemporary culture.

Against this understanding of Wordsworth's situation, I have suggested that the Essay also contains a different line of argument – one that is at odds with its final paragraph's distinction between the "People" and the "Public." Before likening the "original Genius of a high order" to "Hannibal among the Alps," Wordsworth offers a radically different view of the meaning of the public response to poetry:

A sketch of my own notion of the constitution of Fame has been given; and, as far as concerns myself, I have cause to be satisfied. The love, the admiration, the indifference, the slight, the aversion, and even the contempt, with which these Poems have been received, knowing, as I do, the source within my own mind, from which they have proceeded, and the labour and pains, which, when labour and pains appeared needful, have been bestowed upon them, must all, if I think consistently, be received as pledges and tokens, bearing the same general impression, though widely different in value; – they are all proofs that for the present time I have not laboured in vain; and afford

assurances, more or less authentic, that the products of my industry will endure. (80)

In light of his subsequent denunciation of “the senseless iteration of the word, *popular*, applied to new works in poetry” (83), it is perhaps difficult to believe that Wordsworth is in fact “satisfied.” But his determination in this passage to take both praise and criticism “as pledges and tokens” that he has “not laboured in vain” nevertheless points to a conception of the poet’s relation to the audience that amounts to something more than opposition or idealization. The response Wordsworth describes also suggests a conception of feeling which departs from the ideal of reciprocity between poet and reader.<sup>27</sup> In this catalogue of responses, Wordsworth is working to take seriously a whole range of emotions and judgments (and the two are always shading into one another) as possible responses to his poetry, and he is doing so in order to argue that getting a response – any response – is what counts in the long run.

What Wordsworth recognizes in this passage is that making taste is a process which will require time – hence the distinction between the enduring “People” and the transitory “Public” – and therefore puts a premium on poetry’s endurance. It is in this light, I would suggest, that we might understand Wordsworth’s increasingly strong tendency to think about his poetry in architectural terms. The project of *The Recluse* is the most obvious and most dramatic example of this propensity.<sup>28</sup> But we might also call to mind the three “Essays upon Epitaphs” as well as the meticulous ordering of the poems in the 1815 edition.<sup>29</sup> In *The Prelude*, we find both the ambition to “leave / Some monument behind me which pure hearts / Should reverence” and a more general inclination toward monumentalization (6:67–9).<sup>30</sup> And the “Essay, Supplementary”’s account of the fortunes of “the poetical literature of this Country for the greater part of the last two centuries” makes durability itself – imagined as the capacity to endure and outlast neglect or mistaken judgments – the hallmark of poetic achievement (67).

The idea that the best poetry endures by no means originates with Wordsworth. But his effort in the Essay to divorce the idea of poetry’s endurance from popularity by replacing it with a broader notion of response (one that comprises “love, . . . admiration, . . . indifference, . . . slight, . . . aversion, and even . . . contempt”) represents an important shift in the conceptualization of literary reception. Thus it is not simply the case, as Klancher among others has claimed, that Wordsworth’s



critique of the contemporary reading public amounts to an attempt to replace debased readers with readers who have been “purified and exalted.” “Out of his prefaces, supplements, and letters,” Klancher argues, “emerged a whole vocabulary with which literary history and the sociology of culture came to distinguish the transmission of cultural works: their ‘reception’ by some readers, their ‘consumption’ by many others, and the abyss between serious and mass culture that has only recently begun to be critically explored.”<sup>31</sup> What this argument fails to recognize is the degree to which Wordsworth’s engagement with the problem of the audience itself constitutes a critical exploration of the emerging mass public. Alongside the idea of “the People, philosophically characterised” (84), Wordsworth also acknowledges both the unpredictability of readers’ responses and the constitutive contribution of reception to the production of poetry.

I’m not suggesting that Wordsworth prefigures reader-response theory in this passage. He is not arguing that the “pledges and tokens” he draws from the reception of his poems constitute their meaning. Instead, he seems to understand responses to his work on an analogy with empiricist philosophy: “bearing the same general impression, though widely different in value,” readers’ responses are the highly contingent *effects* of his poetry. From the standpoint Wordsworth assumes in this passage, the significance of these “pledges and tokens” derives not from their *content* (the “widely different” “value[s]” inherent in praise or blame) but from their *form* (figured rather literally here as the “general impression” on a coin). Coleridge offers a version of this image in the *Biographia*, when, in reflecting on his plan for a series of lectures on “the characteristic merits and defects of English poetry in its different aeras” (53), he notes that he decided against lecturing on modern poetry, “that I might furnish no possible pretext for the unthinking to misconstrue, or the malignant to misapply my words, and having stamp’d their own meaning on them, to pass them as current coin in the marts of garrulity or detraction” (54).

Coleridge would defend himself against misunderstanding or misuse of his words; he nevertheless acknowledges that he owes a substantial portion of his “reputation and publicity” to critics who have kept his name before a public incapable of “distinctly remembering whether it was introduced for an eulogy or for censure” (48–9). This contradiction – Coleridge’s self-defense strives to set the record straight, but admits that there would be no record at all were it not for the “unthinking” critics he criticizes – suggests the difficulty of thinking

about reception strictly in terms of the impression an author makes. Wordsworth's worry about the waywardness of the audience and "the clamour of that small though loud portion of the community, ever governed by factitious influence," that constitutes the public, is that taste, while linked metaphorically to "a *passive* sense of the human body," refers in reality "to things which are in their essence *not* passive, – to intellectual *acts* and *operations*" (81). This lesson is nothing new. It is there to be read, for example, in the well-known address to the reader that appears two-thirds of the way into "Simon Lee":

My gentle reader, I perceive  
How patiently you've waited,  
And I'm afraid that you expect  
Some tale will be related.

O reader! had you in your mind  
Such stores as silent thought can bring,  
O gentle reader! you would find  
A tale in every thing.  
What more I have to say is short,  
I hope you'll kindly take it;  
It is no tale; but should you think,  
Perhaps a tale you'll make it. (69–80)

These lines at once solicit the reader's activity and come close to provoking the reader's anger (by way of their less than subtle suggestion that the reader is perhaps incapable of the kind of active engagement the poem recommends and their speaker's feigned gentility and anxiety).<sup>32</sup> Appealing to the reader in this way is clearly a part of the public relations program announced by the Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*. What I have been arguing is that, by the time he writes the "Essay, Supplementary," Wordsworth has come to realize that the double-edged nature of such an appeal to the audience is more perilous than even the proximity of invocation and insult in "Simon Lee" would suggest. In the terms Wordsworth offers in the Essay, the danger inherent in a conception of the author's relation to the public that includes criticism as well as acclaim is that "to create taste is to call forth and bestow power, of which knowledge is the effect; and *there* lies the true difficulty" (82).

The difficulty Wordsworth has in mind here is, explicitly, that of provoking an active response in the reader. Indeed, he has already offered a gloss on the idea of making taste along these lines: "If every great poet with whose writings men are familiar, in the highest exercise of his genius, before he can be thoroughly enjoyed, has to call forth and

to communicate *power*, this service, in a still greater degree, falls upon an original writer, at his first appearance in the world" (82). This way of redescribing the business of the poet, however, in particular Wordsworth's recourse to the language of power, suggests that the problem posed by this "true difficulty" is that conceiving of taste as active rather than passive might jeopardize the poet's project. The communication of power is risky business.<sup>33</sup> For, as Wordsworth's account of genius suggests, the process the poet would set in motion courts the unforeseen:

Of genius, in the fine arts, the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility, for the delight, honor, and benefit of human nature. Genius is the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe: or, if that be not allowed, it is the application of powers to objects on which they had not before been exercised, or the employment of them in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown. What is all this but an advance, or a conquest, made by the soul of the poet? Is it to be supposed that the reader can make progress of this kind, like an Indian prince or general – stretched on his palanquin, and borne by his slaves? No; he is invigorated and inspirited by his leader, in order that he may exert himself; for he cannot proceed in quiescence, he cannot be carried like a dead weight. Therefore to create taste is to call forth and bestow power, of which knowledge is the effect; and *there* lies the true difficulty. (82)

If the picture Wordsworth paints in this passage – of the reader as "an Indian prince or general – stretched on his palanquin, and borne by his slaves" – looks like a bizarre political allegory, its point is obvious enough. Even though Wordsworth's purpose is to produce this image in order immediately to reject it, making the reader into an oriental despot does not merely emphasize his "quiescence." It also transforms the poet, for a moment, into the reader's slave. This is the threat Wordsworth discerns in the reading public and the literary market.

But the scene is more than an object lesson in the perils of creating taste. The crux of Wordsworth's orientalist tableau is the way that it serves to link passivity and mastery – but only in order to reject them both. In calling for the reader to "exert himself," Wordsworth refuses the metaphor by which taste is equated with "a *passive* sense of the human body" and thus corrects "that inversion in the order of things whereby a passive faculty is made paramount among the faculties conversant with the fine arts" (81). While, for Wordsworth, it is clear that the reader cannot be the poet's master (as the metaphor of the literary marketplace demands), the relationship cannot simply be

reversed: if the reader cannot enslave the poet, neither can the poet enslave the reader. In order to be properly “invigorated and inspired,” the reader must find in the poet not a master but “his leader,” and the relationship between leader and follower depends upon the active exercise of judgment rather than mere obedience.

In rejecting the image of the reader as “dead weight,” then, Wordsworth suggests that the *true* “true difficulty” inherent in the creation of taste is that the power the poet would “call forth and bestow” cannot be so easily delimited. In other words, to claim that “to create taste is to call forth and bestow power” is to admit the possibility that the production of “effects hitherto unknown” might refer not only to the creation of the taste by which genius will be appreciated but to effects unforeseen by the poet himself – not just “love” and “admiration,” but also “indifference, . . . slight, aversion, and even . . . contempt.” What this undercurrent in the “Essay, Supplementary” implies is that conferring power on the reading public (as opposed to individual readers or an idealized audience) must also mean investing readers with a form of authority that might compromise that of the poet. That the poet must lead, in other words, does not mean that readers will follow.<sup>34</sup> And, as Wordsworth well knows, the power he confers on the reader, as well as the “knowledge” which is its effect, is less a quantum of energy than a durable capacity. As a result, the poet who works to create the taste by which he will be enjoyed might discover, after the fact and in opposition to his intentions, that he has created the taste by which he is ignored, neglected, or abhorred.

In the context of the passage’s analysis of power relations, the political allegory of Wordsworth’s orientalist fantasy assumes a more complicated shape. The reader’s unceremonious removal from his perch as “an Indian prince or general – stretched on his palanquin, and borne by his slaves” might seem at first to represent little more than a fanciful example of “establishing that dominion over the spirits of readers by which they are to be humbled and humanised, in order that they may be purified and exalted” (80–1). But Wordsworth does not merely reject oriental despotism. Instead, in insisting that the reader “exert himself,” Wordsworth replaces despotic passivity with a kind of republican civic virtue which depends upon the reader’s “intellectual *acts* and *operations*” (81). The allegory is political, that is, not because it happens to feature an oriental despot but because it articulates a politics of reading. It does not advance a political program; instead, it construes reading in opposition to mastery (figured by

the "Indian prince or general"). And in conceiving of reading in this way, Wordsworth points to a conception of politics as a formal process capable of producing "effects hitherto unknown."

Wordsworth's allegory thus offers another illustration of the regime of publicity. His rejection of "the Public" in favor of an image of "the People" strives to preserve the poet's authority in the face of the emergence of a public world which makes it increasingly difficult to imagine the face-to-face encounter between poet and reader as anything more than an impossible ideal. In his letter to John Wilson, Wordsworth held out hope that the kind of poetry he was writing might find sympathetic readers, arguing that "[t]his complex state of society does not . . . prevent the characters of individuals from receiving a strong bias not merely from the impressions of general nature, but also from local objects and images."<sup>35</sup> In the end, however, Wordsworth's audience problem was that, with "the disappearance of a homogenous and discriminating reading public," the connection he desired between the production of "effects hitherto unknown" and "an advance, or a conquest, made by the soul of the poet" was finally a matter of chance.<sup>36</sup> In the *Biographia*, Coleridge offers a dreary history of the progressive devaluation of books from "religious oracles" to "venerable preceptors," "instructive friends," "entertaining companions," and finally "culprits to hold up their hands at the bar of every self-elected, yet not the less peremptory, judge" (57). He claims that "[t]he same gradual retrograde movement may be traced, in the relation which authors themselves have assumed toward their readers" (58):

Poets and philosophers, rendered diffident by their very number, addressed themselves to 'learned readers;' then, aimed to conciliate the graces of 'the candid reader;' till, the critic still rising as the author sunk, the amateurs of literature collectively were erected into a municipality of judges, and addressed as THE TOWN! And now finally, all men being supposed able to read, and all readers able to judge, the multitudinous PUBLIC, shaped into personal unity by the magic of abstraction, sits nominal despot on the throne of criticism. (59)

Coleridge's "retrograde movement" might also be understood as progress; call it the democratization of taste. Whichever label we choose, Coleridge describes the situation against which Wordsworth struggled. It was also, the following chapter will suggest, the context in which Keats arrived at a new understanding of the place of poetry in an age which saw critics rising and authors sinking.

### CHAPTER 3

#### *Keats and the review aesthetic*

In the original preface to *Endymion*, Keats offers the following comment on the reception of his 1817 *Poems*:

About a twelvemonth since, I published a little book of verses; it was read by some dozen of my friends, who lik'd it; and some dozen whom I was unacquainted with, who did not. Now when a dozen human beings, are at words with another dozen, it becomes a matter of anxiety to side with one's friends; – more especially when excited thereto by a great love of Poetry.<sup>1</sup>

In taking up the question of the public response to a volume of poetry, this passage might be set alongside Wordsworth's reflections on the reception of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. In the Preface to the second edition of 1800, Wordsworth describes his expectations upon the poems' first publication:

I had formed no very inaccurate estimate of the probable effect of those Poems: I flattered myself that they who should be pleased with them would read them with more than common pleasure: and on the other hand I was well aware that by those who should dislike them they would be read with more than common dislike. The result has differed from my expectations only, that I have pleased a greater number, than I ventured to hope I should please.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Wordsworth's supreme self-assurance, what is striking about Keats's preface is how quickly this ironic stance toward the failure of his first volume of poems gives way to the pleadings and excuses he proceeds to offer for his second: "I fought under disadvantages," he writes of the composition of *Endymion*. "Before I began I had no inward feel of being able to finish; and as I proceeded my steps were all uncertain. So this Poem must rather be consider'd as an endeavour than a thing accomplish'd; a poor prologue to what, if I live, I humbly hope to do" (739).

Keats's inconsistency did not sit well with his friend, John Hamilton Reynolds, or his publisher, John Taylor. Reynolds's letter responding

to the proposed preface is now lost, but the substance of his reaction is clear from Keats's reply: "Since you all agree that the thing is bad, it must be so –," the letter begins.<sup>3</sup> But while Keats yields at once to his friend's and his publisher's verdict, he disputes the grounds on which they offer it. To Reynolds and Taylor, it seems, the draft betrayed too much of Leigh Hunt's influence, a charge Keats immediately rejects. "I am not aware that there is anything like Hunt in it," he writes; ". . . if there is any fault in the preface it is not affectation: but an undersong of disrespect to the Public" (1:266, 267). The problem with the preface, in other words, is precisely the opposite of the kind of "affectation" suggested by Hunt's name:

I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the public – or to any thing in existence, – but the eternal Being, the principle of Beauty, – and the Memory of great Men – When I am writing for myself for the mere sake of the Moment's enjoyment, perhaps nature has its course with me – but a Preface is written to the Public; a thing I cannot help looking upon as an Enemy, and which I cannot address without feelings of Hostility. (1:266–67)

As Keats puts it a little further on, "I never wrote one single Line of poetry with the least Shadow of public thought" (1:267).

In the introduction, I observed that the idea of poetry unshadowed by public thought has long held an important place in the critical commentary on Romantic poetry. And it is not surprising that a poet like Keats, famously lacking the economic and educational resources of Wordsworth, Byron, or Shelley, should feel a certain anxiety about the reading public. The anxious tone of Keats's preface, alternating as it does between beseeching and berating the reader, is clearly prompted by the commercial failure of his first volume. The revised version he published, more consistent and more consistently apologetic, just as clearly reflects his recognition, at Reynolds's and Taylor's urging, that to answer indifference with indignation was not the way to sell books. But the significance of Keats's preface finally has less to do with the way it registers his ambivalent relation to the reading audience than its characterization of the public reception of a book of poetry in the early nineteenth century. For in his depiction of the factionalism of the literary marketplace, Keats portrays not his own ambivalence but that of the reading public itself. And while Keats's letters and prefaces offer ample evidence of his anxiety about writing "to the Public," I will argue that his poetry constitutes a sustained attempt to position himself with respect to the emerging mass audience. Keats's early poems in

particular offer a point of departure from which the aesthetic represents not an escape from the kind of disputes that characterize the literary market and the reading audience but a site that reflects and reviews the conflicts of the market and the public.

This chapter argues that Keats's conflict with the reviews can help us to revise our sense of the emergence of the mass reading public because, in his early poetry, Keats comes to see the reviews as not merely a medium through which he might fashion an audience but also the means by which he might understand his relation to his readers. The last chapter argued that, even as Wordsworth attempted to assert his control over his readers, the project of creating taste required him to acknowledge the power that readers possess. In this chapter, I will suggest that Keats's engagement with the audience takes up where Wordsworth's left off and that, as was the case for Coleridge, Keats comes to understand his relationship with the mass public through the figure of the reviewer. The most influential recent criticism on the historical publics for Romantic writing has emphasized the role of the periodical press in the formation of audiences on the basis of preexisting class affiliations and political interests. From our vantage point today, this account has an immediate plausibility: accustomed as we are to thinking about the public as a collection of special interest groups, we both acknowledge the struggle for market share to be an inescapable feature of periodical journalism and perceive market research to be an obligatory concern of the publishing industry. This common-sense understanding at once recognizes that modern audiences are not so much given as made and assumes that it is one function of the mass media to carve audiences of like-minded individuals out of the crowd.<sup>4</sup> But if critics have been interested in what the periodical reviews can tell us about the class politics of the nineteenth-century reading audience, Keats sees in the reviews a model for a poetic practice grounded in the unpredictability of reception. For Keats, that is, the unprecedented prominence of reviewing did not simply heighten his concern about gaining acceptance for his poetry, but created the opportunity to take up the question of what it means for a literary work to be judged and to be perceived as standing up under the process of judgment.

#### KEATS'S LIFE OF ALLEGORY

Over the last twenty-five years, critics have renewed the debate over the relationship between the poet and the reading public by insisting



on the social dimensions of the poetic text.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a critic like Jerome McGann turns to the question of audience reception as a response both to formalist criticism's focus on the text and to biographical criticism's emphasis on the interconnection of the poet's life and work. For McGann, the biographical approach does not obscure the meaning of the poetry by including too much, as the formalist critic contends, but rather by including too little. If "[f]ormally oriented critics have been wary of the approach" because it "imports 'extrinsic' materials into the analysis," "biographical analysis falters because it maintains the poem, and the poetic analysis, in the artificially restricted geography of the individual person."<sup>6</sup> In his brief on "the historical method in literary criticism," which takes Keats as its test case, McGann argues that "we need not doubt the relevance of 'extrinsic' methods and materials; rather, what the critic must weigh are the problems of how best and most fully to elucidate the poem's (presumed) networks of social relations" (18). McGann's procedure is built on the distinction between the poem's "point of origin" and "point of reception" (23), a distinction that divides the essentially private act of writing verse from the presumed publicity of a poetic text's circulation. From this point of view, a poem's meaning does not reside in the poetic text or the poet's biography, but in the critical history of its reception – what McGann calls a "dialectical" or "processive life" that "dates from the first reviews or responses it receives" (24) – and the critic must look to the transmission of poetry from author to audience for a record of "the poem's complete, social particularity" (22). For McGann, publication history is more than an attempt to establish an authoritative text. Instead, it represents the attempt "to define the social relationship between author and audience which the poem has called into being" (23).<sup>7</sup>

For McGann, publication and circulation comprise the social life of the poetic text. Marjorie Levinson's account of Keats's reception provides an alternative explanation of how poems embody social relations. Her examination of the "social, sexual and stylistic critique" of the early reviews of *Endymion* undoes McGann's distinction between private individual and social act by considering both under the heading of social class: "To those early readers, 'Keats' was the allegory of a man belonging to a certain class, and aspiring, as that entire class was felt to do, to another: a man with particular but typical ambitions and with particular but typical ways of realizing them."<sup>8</sup> The epithet "particular but typical" describes a practice of writing that refuses the distinction between the individual and the social, the private and the

public. Writing verse is a social act because the writer, as “a man belonging to a certain class,” is inscribed in a network of social relations, and the private individual is replaced by the “particular but typical” man.

For Levinson, the meaning of Keats’s “life of allegory” is to be read in the responses of his first readers; the early reviews offer a perspective “so sharply opposed to mainstream modern commentary as to imply a determinate insight on the part of Keats’s contemporaries and a determined oversight on the part of his admirers” (3). This “insight,” Levinson claims, “lies in the realm of social production, not aesthetics, metaphysics, or humanistic psychology” (5), and her contention that to read Keats “badly” – as Cockney, adolescent, or sexual deviant – is to read him well, constitutes a strategy designed to avoid such class-determined “oversight” (37). The mutual hostility of Keats and the reviewers suggests that the poetry is the product of neither an opposition between the poet and society nor the contradictory desires of an individual psyche, but of class conflict. The poet as hero gives way to the poet as class hero.

If Keats’s life is representative of a class rather than an autonomous individual, it is a “life of allegory” because, like individuals or texts, in an account like Levinson’s, classes too have psyches.<sup>9</sup> In Keats’s poetry, Levinson argues, “the critics read the signature” not of an aspiring poet, but “of a certain kind of life, itself the sign of a new social phenomenon,” and their outrage is the reaction of the literary establishment to “the self-fashioning gestures of the petty bourgeoisie” (4). For Levinson, this conflict with the reviewers – considered as an example of “social production” – demonstrates how subject formation recapitulates class formation. From this standpoint, the contrast between the “insight” of the contemporary reviewers and the “oversight” of the modern critics looks less like the difference between critique and appreciation than an inevitable instance of class conflict. Despite her assertion that “[a] world of difference separates this hermeneutic from the ‘poignantly allegorical life’” (5), Levinson’s approach differs from biographical or formalist criticism not by rejecting the conflict between individual and society but by doubling it. As a member of the middle class, Keats both aspires to be more than he is and is always recognized for what he is because his aspirations give him away.

McGann, too, despite his emphasis on publication history as the most concrete context of the poem’s reception, grounds the poem’s “dialectical” or “processive life” in what turns out to be a peculiar

double-bind of individual and class. In his exemplary reading of “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” for example, McGann’s analysis of the historical meaning of Keats’s poem turns on the identification of the social and political meanings of literary periodicals like the *Indicator*, in which “La Belle Dame” first appeared, and the *Examiner* or *Liberal*. McGann argues that Keats’s consciousness of the *Indicator*’s audience is reflected in the pseudonym under which the poem appeared: in signing his name “Caviare,” an allusion to Hamlet’s “’twas caviare to the general,” Keats plays to the audience of Hunt’s magazine, which was, McGann points out, “established . . . as an alternative to the more traditional periodicals of the day.” In this way, “Keats shows his reader that he, as a poet, stands at a slightly critical distance from his subject,” and “[t]he *Hamlet* allusion shows us that Keats means to share a mildly insolent attitude toward the literary establishment with his readers in *The Indicator*” (35).

But McGann is ultimately less concerned with reconstructing Keats’s intentions than establishing the poem’s “networks of social relations.” It is with the poem’s “point of reception” in mind that he asserts that “[e]veryone would agree that these facts illuminate how the poem would have been originally received, and understood, by the readers of *The Indicator*” (35). In this form, McGann’s claim is unobjectionable; after all, it is hard to imagine that the fact that “La Belle Dame” appeared in *The Indicator* had *no* effect on its first readers. But McGann’s stronger claim is not simply that the context of the poem’s original publication “illuminates” how it was received, but rather that “the poem’s appearance in *The Indicator* – the event of it and the physique of it alike – was of a determinate character” (41). For McGann, when the facts surrounding the poem’s appearance assume “a determinate character,” publication history ceases to be merely a context which helps the critic to explain the poem’s reception. Instead, the facts that comprise the poem’s publication history come to constitute its reception.

It is in this light that McGann’s emphasis on the poem’s multiple texts should be considered. Because, as in his discussion of the ideological implications of the scholarly suppression of the antiestablishment *Indicator* text of “La Belle Dame” in favor of the more “literary” Brown/1848 text, McGann’s identification of multiple texts inevitably amounts to an identification of different audiences. And where such textual variants do not exist, a poem’s multiple contexts of response – its divergent audiences – effectively produce them. One result of seeing the two texts of “La Belle Dame” not as versions of one poem but two

different poems is, as Frances Ferguson puts it, to “personalize” literature, “so that it can be seen as different whenever the particular combination of writer, text, and reader changes.”<sup>10</sup> The solipsism of McGann’s account of reception – which maintains that different readers do not just arrive at different interpretations but in effect read different poems – arises from a conception of reading as a process of self-recognition. In the case of “La Belle Dame,” according to McGann, “Keats’s audience was meant to recognize, and to respond to, the poem’s self-conscious and slightly critical treatment of its romance subject” (41). The poem’s meaning, in other words, is the product of an act of identification: the audience’s “response” is to sympathize with Keats’s “self-conscious and slightly critical attitude.” In this way, reading describes the process of matching up an author’s views with those the reader already holds.

For McGann as for Levinson, the significance of the periodicals, as sites of both publication and reviewing, lies chiefly in their legibility as statements about whether poetry is or is not the property of a particular class. Just as the *Blackwood’s* and *Quarterly’s* attacks on *Endymion* mark Keats’s exclusion from the literary establishment, the *Indicator’s* publication of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” classes him with Hunt and the opposition. This kind of partisan identification – which, for Levinson, constitutes the “insight” of the contemporary reviewers – is precisely the knowledge “illuminated” by McGann’s “historical method.” “Only by reading such poetry,” McGann writes of Keats’s early poems, “in a sharply specified historical frame of reference are we able to see, at this date, the aesthetic domain which Cockney verse attempted to conquer . . .” (28). And the insight of class identification applies not only to the Cockney style, but Romantic aesthetics as a whole:

The Romantic programme developed along two distinct strategic lines. On the one hand, poetry was employed as a weapon to be used in the context of an explicit, and accepted, audience which the poet aimed to persuade, reinforce, or attack. Though Blake consciously adopted this strategy, only his work between 1790 and 1795 shows consistently effective results. Shelley and Byron use this strategy throughout their careers with repeated success. The other strategy, which dominates the work of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, received its most important formulation in Wordsworth’s “Essay Supplementary” (1815) where he said that poets would now have to create their own audiences. Here Romanticism developed its patterns of “internalization,” as they have been so memorably called, because it was unwilling to make contracts with the audiences available to it. Keats, who is especially typical of this Romantic line, showed how poets could establish “a world

elsewhere.” In that alternative geography, personal and social tensions could be viewed with greater honesty and intellectual rigor. (57)

This programmatic statement points to McGann’s subsequent work – in particular to *The Romantic Ideology*, which argues that the “honesty” and “rigor” achieved by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats must be understood as a powerful, and therefore all the more pernicious, form of false consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

In dividing “the Romantic programme” into “two distinct strategic lines,” McGann conceives of literary history less as a record of the past than as a field of choices open to both the poet and the critic. Thus the meaning of poems like “To Autumn” and “Tintern Abbey” comes to include questions that Keats and Wordsworth left unasked as well as unanswered. While Levinson maintains that the insight of class critique is that it defines Keats’s position in the social field, she too conceives of styles in terms of strategies – styles not, as McGann would have it, of rhetorical self-presentation, but of subject-formation. In either case, being a Romantic poet is imagined to be synonymous with occupying a particular position with respect to a range of social and political issues. In this way, reading poetry amounts to a kind of position-taking as well – a practice exemplified in the reviews and reflected in Keats’s original preface to *Endymion*. But, while Keats’s comment on the audience for his 1817 *Poems* – “a dozen human beings . . . at words with another dozen” – is further evidence of the factionalism McGann and Levinson describe, his preface suggests a radically different understanding of the place of the poetic text in the culture of the reviews.

Near the end of the preface, Keats registers the following protest:

It has been too much the fashion of late to consider men biggotted and addicted to every word that may chance to escape their lips: now I here declare that I have not any particular affection for any particular phrase, word or letter in the whole affair. I have written to please myself and in hopes to please others, and for a love of fame; if I neither please myself, nor others nor get fame, of what consequence is Phraseology? (739)

Like his ironic distance from the failure of his 1817 *Poems*, this declaration of indifference to the fate of *Endymion* could be read as a defensive and disingenuous attempt to avoid the kind of hostile reviews that the poem would in fact receive – an attempt, as Keats puts it, to “escape the bickerings that all Works, not exactly in chime, bring upon their begetters” (739). From this point of view, Keats’s desire not to be identified with his work – his denial of “any particular affection for any

particular phrase, word or letter in the whole affair” – represents precisely an effort to “establish a world elsewhere” that McGann describes. Rather than engage the audience available to him, Keats would absolve himself of the responsibilities of authorship.

But to read Keats’s comments in this way mistakes the force of his claim. Despite his misgivings about the literary warfare waged in the pages of the reviews, Keats recognizes that “there must be conversation of some sort and to object shows a Man’s consequence” (739). Moreover, if he denies his attachment to “any particular phrase, word or letter” in *Endymion*, he does not deny his ambition to “get fame” or his willingness to take credit for any pleasure his poem should happen to provide. While his statements might seem to alternate between a commitment to self-promotion and the claim that all writing is simply a form of gaming, what is important here is Keats’s sense that responses to his work will allow him to reevaluate it.<sup>12</sup> Rather than an instance of literary functionalism or ideological bad faith, Keats’s account of poetic work is notable for its emphasis on reception’s role in the writing of poetry. From this perspective, his apparent lack of faith in *Endymion* does not represent the inward turn that critics have understood, for better or worse, to be characteristic of Romantic aesthetics. Instead of a statement about the irrelevance of the audience “as a determinant of poetry and poetic value,” Keats’s emphasis on the consequentiality of poetry – on its ability to please or to “get fame” – in fact insists on the audience’s defining role for poetry.<sup>13</sup> The importance of the wait-and-see attitude of Keats’s preface is not that it somehow gets him off the hook for what he’s written. Instead, in subordinating the “particular affection” of the author to the audience’s pleasure, Keats expresses a commitment to the importance of reception not simply as the justification or disqualification of the work of art but as fundamentally constitutive of it. This is not to say that Keats locates the “meaning” of the poem in the various responses of different readers, but to suggest that he comes to recognize that the act of reception recasts objects in significant, unpredictable ways. For Keats, the audience does not merely approve or disapprove. It tells him what he has done.

#### POETRY, REVIEWING, RECOMMENDATION

Keats’s brief but heated exchange with Reynolds and Taylor over the preface to *Endymion* turns on the question of his connection to Leigh Hunt. If his reaction to their reservations about the preface seems

excessive, it is easier to understand given that the composition and especially the revision of Keats's second volume of verse marked the beginning of his protracted attempt to distance himself from Hunt and his circle.<sup>14</sup> That Keats links a denial of Hunt's influence to the problem of writing "to the Public," however, is more than a matter of biographical circumstance because Keats's negotiations with the reading public – or more precisely, his effort to create an audience for his poetry – are bound from the outset both to Hunt and to his "new school of poetry." From this standpoint, Keats's preface must be read not merely as an address to the potential audience for *Endymion* but also as a response to the very public association of Keats's name and poetry with Hunt and the Cockney School.

In commenting on the published preface to *Endymion*, critics have tended to see Keats's reflections on the unhealthy "space of life between" boyhood and manhood in terms of the growth of the poet's mind.<sup>15</sup> That the preface itself invites such attention, even as it works to redirect it, is clear from the outset. "Knowing within myself the manner in which this Poem has been produced," Keats begins, "it is not without a feeling of regret that I make it public."

What manner I mean, will be quite clear to the reader, who must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished. The first two books, and indeed the two last, I feel sensible are not of such completion as to warrant their passing the press; nor should they if I thought a year's castigation would do them any good; – it will not: the foundations are too sandy. It is just that this youngster should die away: a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plotting, and fitting myself for verses fit to live. (102)

Despite the preface's conspicuously "self-hindering labours," the tendency to read it almost exclusively in terms of developmental psychology or, more recently, the relationship between social and poetic minority has obscured the fact that Keats's self-analysis does not originate with him. In fact, the "youngster" of Keats's preface was first introduced to the public by Hunt, in an article entitled "Young Poets" which appeared in the December 1, 1816 edition of the *Examiner*.

As Donald Reiman has pointed out, Hunt's article is "scarcely a review in the strict sense."<sup>16</sup> Instead, it is essentially a publicity piece for his "new school of poetry." Indeed, while the first and second of the "three young writers who appear . . . to promise a considerable

addition of strength to the new school," Shelley and John Hamilton Reynolds, had in fact published volumes of poetry, Keats had not. As Hunt explains:

The last of these young aspirants whom we have met with, and who promise to help the new school to revive Nature . . . is, we believe, the youngest of them all, and just of age. His name is John Keats. He has not yet published any thing except in a newspaper; but a set of his manuscripts was handed us the other day, and fairly surprised us with the truth of their ambition, and ardent grappling with Nature. (1:426)

There are two matters of fact to address here. First, as Hunt points out, Keats was not a minor. But, as was the case with the preface to *Endymion*, the issue of Keats's age was never really a question about minority, strictly defined, and in broaching the topic, Hunt, like Keats, opens the poet to the potentially more damaging charge of immaturity. Second, Hunt was in fact well-acquainted with Keats by December of 1816; they first met as early as October and by the end of the year knew each other well.

Given Hunt's reputation, his reasons for keeping his new friendship with Keats out of view are obvious enough. So too, however, is the fact that his supposedly disinterested pose convinced no one: the reviews of *Endymion* reproduce exactly the kind of partisanship that Keats describes in his preface. *Endymion* was reviewed six times in the months immediately following its publication, and of the three positive notices it received, two were written by Keats's friends. If his friends hailed his genius, those he "was unacquainted with" most emphatically "did not." Other than a largely positive review in the *Literary Journal*, the anonymous reviewers savaged the poem: the review in the *British Critic* was indexed "*Endymion*, a monstrosly droll poem, analysis of"; the *Blackwood's* reviewer took advantage of Keats's second publication to include him, as promised, in its infamous series on "The Cockney School of Poetry"; and the *Quarterly Review* published an article so dismissive that it prompted responses from a number of Keats's friends and supporters.<sup>17</sup> "Reviewers have sometimes been accused of not reading the works which they affected to criticize," the *Quarterly* review begins. "On the present occasion we shall anticipate the author's complaint, and honestly confess that we have not read his work" (110). With the admission that he has in fact tried to read the poem, however, the reviewer transforms his mock confession into a condemnation: "We should extremely lament this want of energy, or whatever it may



be on our parts, were it not for one consolation – namely, that we are no better acquainted with the meaning of the book through which we have so painfully toiled, than we are with that of the three which we have not looked into” (110–11).

Recent critics have focused their attention on Lockhart’s attack on the Cockney School in *Blackwood’s* as an exemplary instance of class warfare. By contrast, the published responses to the reviews of *Endymion* suggest that Keats’s friends and admirers were less concerned by the ridicule of *Blackwood’s* than the condescension of Croker’s review in the *Quarterly*. A letter to the editor of the *Morning Chronicle* signed “J. S.” (presumably written by John Scott, the editor of the *London Magazine* who would be killed in a duel fought over his criticisms of *Blackwood’s*) puts the issue this way: “Although I am aware that literary squabbles are of too unfeeling a nature for your Journal, yet there are occasions when acts of malice and gross injustice towards an author may be properly brought before the public through such a medium.”<sup>18</sup> The writer professes to “know nothing” of John Keats, but “from his Preface” he understands that he is “very young – no doubt a heinous sin” and, worse still, “that he has incurred the additional guilt of an acquaintance with Mr Leigh Hunt,” with whom “the Editor of *The Quarterly Review* [has] long been at war” (115). Against the indictment of the reviews and “the literary gossip of the day,” he offers the poem itself: “From a perusal of the criticism, I was led to the work itself. I would, Sir, that your limits would permit a few extracts from this poem. I dare appeal to the taste and judgment of your readers, that beauties of the highest order may be found in almost every page.” While the writer admits “that there are also many, very many passages indicating haste and carelessness,” and even goes so far as to “assert that a real friend of the author would have dissuaded him from immediate publication,” he maintains that the opinion of the reviewer should not supplant “the taste and judgment” of the reading public (116). His appeal to the *Morning Chronicle’s* readers urges the public to judge the poem for itself by calling attention to the personal feuds and political intrigues that influence the pronouncements of reviews like the *Quarterly*. On this view, the *Quarterly’s* review of *Endymion* represents little more than an obstacle between author and audience, poet and public; the remedy is impartial criticism that recognizes both faults and “beauties.”

In setting “the criticism” against “the work itself,” “J. S.” locates his objection to the *Quarterly’s* treatment of Keats within a larger debate over the place of the reviews in literary culture. Perhaps the

best-known statement of the argument against the reviews, Hazlitt's *Letter to William Gifford, Esq.* (1819), makes its case against the editor of the *Quarterly* by literalizing the analogy between the literary and political establishments. "You are the *Government Critic*," Hazlitt writes accusingly, "a character nicely differing from that of a government spy – the invisible link, that connects literature with the police."<sup>19</sup> As the organ of the former, Gifford and the *Quarterly* become the "oracle" of the latter: "The silent listener in select circles, and menial tool of noble families, you have become the oracle of Church and State. The purveyor to the prejudices or passions of a private patron succeeds, by no other title, to regulate the public taste" (9:15–16). Gifford's license to speak for the establishment, in literature as in politics, derives from his willingness to subordinate impartial judgment to partisan opinion:

You dictate your opinions to a party, because not one of your opinions is formed upon an honest conviction of the truth or justice of the case, but by collusion with the prejudices, caprice, interest or vanity of your employers. The mob of well-dressed readers who consult the *Quarterly Review*, know there *is no offence in it*. They put their faith in it because they are aware that it is "false and hollow, but will please the ear;" that it will tell them nothing but what they would wish to believe. (9:14)

Hazlitt's picture of reviewing recalls McGann and Levinson's picture of reception. In both cases, reading takes the form of self-identification and literary works are not so much judged as they are measured against what the audience "would wish to believe." For Hazlitt, however, this model of reading and reception is not a lesson of literary history but the work of the "Government Critic" against whom he writes.

In October of 1820, with Keats's third volume of poetry soon to appear, Shelley drafted his own letter to Gifford. While it lacks the vitriol of the *Letter to William Gifford*, Shelley's letter elucidates the terms of Hazlitt's analogy between the critic and the police. Like "J.S.," Shelley is "willing to confess that the *Endymion* is a poem considerably defective, & that perhaps it deserved as much censure as the pages of your review record against it."<sup>20</sup> But, while he is "aware that the first duty of the Reviewer is towards the public," he is finally concerned less with what can be said about the poem, pro or con, than why the *Quarterly* would choose to say anything about it in the first place. His criticism has to do not with a difference of taste but with the protocols of reviewing: "Why it should have been reviewed at all, excepting for

the purpose of bringing its excellencies into notice I cannot conceive, for it was very little read, & there was no danger that it should become a model to the age of that false taste with which I confess that it is replenished." The kind of review of which Shelley can conceive, he implies, is one that would resemble his letter – that is to say, a review that acknowledges the poet's "false taste" and the poem's faults but points out its "excellencies" as well, a few of which Shelley endeavors to bring to the attention of the *Quarterly's* editor, if only by pointing them out: "Look at Book 2. line 833 &c.," he writes, "& Book 3. line 113 to 120 – read down that page & then again from line 193 – I could cite many other passages to convince you that it deserved milder usage" (124). At the same time, however, Shelley makes it clear that he is not recommending that the task of the reviewer be reduced to cataloging beauties. Were *Endymion* a popular poem – were there, in fact, any "danger that it should become a model to the age of . . . false taste" – it would undoubtedly deserve the *Quarterly's* disdain. The reviewer's derision would be warranted, that is, were it not for the fact that the poem "was very little read." In light of that fact, however, Shelley implies that Croker fails to fulfill "the first duty of the Reviewer" – not because he failed to finish reading *Endymion*, but because recommending that an unread poem remain unread cannot be said to serve "the public."

Shelley's letter suggests that there are at least two ways to construe the harm done to Keats by the *Quarterly*. On the one hand, because a poem published but unread remains effectively in the realm of the private, Croker's attack on the author of *Endymion* resembles a kind of personal libel. On the other hand, in its effort to make sure that *Endymion* will remain unread, the *Quarterly* does not damage Keats's public reputation so much as deny him the chance to have one. In this sense, Shelley understands the review less as a personal affront than an attempt to undermine the poem's publication – not libel, but censorship. Taken together, however, libel and censorship describe the same offense viewed from different perspectives: what looks like libel from the point of view of the private individual is censorship from that of the published author. Shelley objects not just to the harm done Keats as a person, but the harm done him in the person of a poet. His trick in *Adonais* is to conflate Keats the poet with Keats the person: by censoring the poet, the *Quarterly* reviewer kills the man.

But to read Shelley's objection to the *Quarterly's* review of *Endymion* as just another instance of the antagonism between poetry and the

reviews would miss the point of his letter to Gifford. “J. S.” appeals to the readers of the *Morning Chronicle* because “there are occasions when acts of malice and gross injustice to an author may be properly brought before the public through such a medium”; Hazlitt addresses his letter to Gifford not to Gifford personally but to the public; both seek to defend the author’s right to be heard by enlisting the reading audience against the reviews. Shelley’s insistence that *Endymion* “was very little read” points to a more fundamental problem. His concern is not that the reviews have interfered with the public reception of Keats’s work, because, in Keats’s case, there is no public with which to interfere. Against the antagonism between reviewer and poet, Shelley poses the more pressing antagonism between poet and audience.

Shelley’s emphasis on *Endymion*’s unpopularity makes the mere fact of a poem’s publication come to look almost inconsequential. Popularity, not publication, he suggests, is the index of a poem’s publicity; publication alone is nothing more than a precondition for publicity – a necessary, but insufficient, condition for the poet’s public recognition. In asking why *Endymion* “should have been reviewed at all” given its limited readership, Shelley at once acknowledges the reviewer’s duty to correct the public taste and alludes to the role of the reviews in bringing the poet before the public. If the reviews have the power to censor, Shelley reasons, they must also have the power to promote, and, because publication alone cannot ensure the poem’s publicity, the reviewer assumes the roles of both critic and publicist. That Shelley addresses his letter to Gifford to the editor himself – unlike Hazlitt, who directs his plea for disinterested criticism to the public – itself acknowledges the poet’s dependence on the reviewer.

The suggestion that poets depend upon the reviews recalls Wordsworth’s equivocal recognition of the poet’s dependence upon readers. In Keats’s case, it also brings us back to the question of Hunt and his circle. If the objections of Keats’s defenders to the *Quarterly*’s partisan politics suggest that Keats’s affiliation with Hunt was perhaps more damaging to his reputation as a poet than were the shortcomings of his poetry, Shelley’s letter to Gifford points out that Keats’s recognition as a poet was, in an important sense, the product of Hunt’s promotion and the reviewers’ attacks. Writing and publishing poetry were not enough to make Keats a poet; being identified as a member of a school was.<sup>21</sup> For Shelley, publication alone cannot assure public recognition, because popularity as he imagines it is measured not only in terms of sales but also in terms of influence – it has to do with a poem’s ability to

“become a model to the age.” To this way of thinking, it is significant that Hunt’s “Young Poets” notice claims for the new school precisely this kind of influence. Hunt offers his young poets to the public less as individual authors than as members of a school or, as in his reference to “a new school of poetry that has been rising of late” (1:425), part of a movement. While he cites a passage from Reynolds’s “The Naiad” and quotes Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” in full, his method differs from “J. S.’”s appeal to the readers of the *Morning Chronicle*, Hazlitt’s polemic against partisan reviewing, and Shelley’s attempt to point out *Endymion*’s “excellencies,” in that he offers these extracts not as examples of each poet’s work but evidence of the new school’s status as “a model to the age.” Hunt’s young poets are at once authors and members of the audience for the kind of poetry they write – both poets and admirers of *his* poetry – and the promise he sees in them derives from the conviction that they will be influential because they have been influenced. To maintain, as Hunt does, that these young poets are members of a new school is to claim for them an audience as easily identifiable as the members of Hunt’s circle, or, by extension, the *Examiner*’s list of subscribers.

Hunt’s “packaging” of Keats and the new school marks the poet as belonging to one group – a particular class of poets – in order to “sell” him to another group – a particular class of readers. But if Hunt’s classifications are designed to create an identification between two classes – to claim that the two are, from a certain perspective, one – the *Quarterly*’s review of *Endymion* and the *Blackwood’s* series on the Cockney School identify classes of poets and readers in order to underscore the difference between them. Despite the fact that Hunt and the reviews work to opposing ends, in each case the periodical acts as a medium between author and audience by offering an author’s work to an audience that is given in advance. Seen in this light, Keats’s hostility toward the audience – “I never wrote one single Line of poetry with the least Shadow of public thought” – looks less like a repudiation of the reading public than a response to the factionalism of the reviews and the schools. Keats’s desire to be a poet required not only that he publish poetry, but that he appear in the reviews. His letters testify to the unpleasantness of suffering the reviewers’ attacks; his falling out with Hunt and the way he carefully kept his distance from Shelley suggest the unpleasantness of being defended. From a certain point of view, then, being attacked and being defended finally amount to the same thing for Keats, because both friends and enemies identify him as

the kind of poet who writes verse for a coterie. In distancing himself from Hunt, Keats seeks not just to set himself apart from the Cockney style, but also to appeal to readers across party lines, to the world outside Leigh Hunt's drawing room or the subscription list of the *Examiner*.

Of course, Keats's readership in his lifetime did not extend much beyond these confines. But the point I am arguing finally has less to do with the actual audience Keats reached than the difference between the conception of literary reception that informs his poetry and what McGann calls "the aesthetic domain Cockney verse attempted to conquer." While both McGann and Levinson acknowledge the determining role of publication and reviewing for the poet, in regarding publication and the reviews as something like the court of last appeal for critical interpretation they credit the literary periodicals and reviews with absolute efficiency. Thus McGann moves easily between Hunt's design for the *Examiner* and the audience for "La Belle Dame sans Merci," as though Hunt held perfect sway over the opinions and dispositions of his subscribers. And in the *Blackwood's* attacks on the Cockney School, Levinson reads the predicament not just of a poet but of a social class. For McGann and Levinson, as well as the critics who have developed the kind of historicism they advocate, publication and reviewing function as a kind of shorthand for the claim that audience reception determines a poem's meaning.

The identification of audiences with social classes that underwrites this understanding of reception similarly informs Jon Klancher's study of the formation of reading audiences in the early nineteenth century. Klancher describes periodical journalism as "a paradigm of audience-making" and takes the reviews as the point of departure for his examination of "the vital but by no means simple relation between an act of reading and a location with[in] a collective realm, an audience (social, ideological, historical)."<sup>22</sup> While he objects to the tendency to confine "the question of reading to either the narrow textuality of 'reception' criticism or an equally enclosed empirical sociology of literature" (3), Klancher's analysis depends no less than McGann's or Levinson's upon the classification of empirical audiences for particular texts. Indeed, Klancher suggests, periodicals are of interest to the literary historian precisely insofar as they point to particular audiences: "Always supremely conscious of the audiences their writers imagine, assert, or entice, periodicals provide perhaps the clearest framework for distinguishing the emerging publics of the nineteenth century" (4).

Klancher turns to the periodicals to study reception because engineering reception – matching up writers and readers – is the business of the reviews. On this view, reception is framed as an epistemological problem – as though writers were trying to figure out what readers were thinking in order to determine what they were prepared to accept and how they might be moved. Moreover, in emphasizing the role played by the reviews in “the historical forming of taste as well as readers’ interpretive modes” (ix), these accounts serve to confirm Hazlitt’s contention that the periodical reviewer had appropriated an office traditionally assigned to the poet. In the “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface,” as we have seen, Wordsworth claimed that a “review . . . of the fortunes and fate of poetical Works” would demonstrate “that every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.”<sup>23</sup> What commentators from Hazlitt to these recent historians of literary reception suggest is that poets would have to do so in competition with the reviews.

While negative reviews clearly had their effect on Keats’s career, the original preface to *Endymion* demonstrates that his anxiety about reviewing anticipated the reviewers’ attacks. If Keats was wounded by the reaction to *Endymion*, he was not surprised: he wrote under the pressure of the reviews from the outset. As he understood it, reviewing was not so much an obstacle to his poetry’s success as it was a crucial condition of its existence: “What the Reviewers can put a hindrance to must be – a nothing – or mediocre which is worse” (2:220). Despite complaints about the reviews “getting more and more powerful” and the suggestion that his success would have to wait until “Reviews have had their day” (2:65, 15), which echo Coleridge’s ominous history of “the critic still rising as the author sunk,” Keats recognized from the first that the world his poems would have to inhabit was the one made by the reviews.<sup>24</sup>

The tendency to see his poetry as an attempt to escape the kind of debate it engendered has obscured the striking way in which, in a series of early poems in particular, Keats does not oppose poetry and reviewing but rather asserts, and capitalizes on, their similarity. Poems like “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” and “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again” are best understood as review poems. In these sonnets, Keats addresses the problem of “writing poems, & hanging them up to be flyblown on the Reviewshambles” by insisting on the poet’s proximity to the reviewer (2:70). In presenting poems in the name of opinion and

making judgments on works of art the subject for poetry, Keats takes reviewing as a model for how poets might work.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that Keats's review poems are nothing more than an attempt to reassert the poet's preeminence in the face of the threat the reviews were thought to pose. Instead, in the reviews' rise to prominence, Keats recognizes a new function for poetry. In the review poems, he works to adapt poetry to its new assignment. Rather than join those who, like Hazlitt, railed against the illegitimacy of the reviews, Keats assumed their legitimacy – both in the sense of acknowledging it and borrowing on it – as the solution to his own legitimation crisis. What was instructive about the reviews for Keats was not the control they seemed to exercise over the reading public, but how the brute fact of their wide circulation and the currency of reviewers' judgments in literary circles emphasized the importance of expressing opinions. Moreover, the reviews made it clear that opinion was not interesting as a thing in itself. Reviews are, after all, necessarily reviews of something. Their interest for Keats has to do with the sense in which they foreground the task of writing about objects external to themselves. From this standpoint, the novelty of the review poems lies in the fact that as much as each seeks to capture an experience of a work of art, as a group they attest to the conviction that to describe such an experience is to recommend the object that occasioned it. And if the power of the reviews derives in part from their timeliness in surveying the new works appearing before the public every day, Keats's review poems strive for a similar effect without depending upon the novelty of the objects they call to the reader's attention. Rather than remark on new objects, these poems testify to the power of familiar works of art. In the face of the persistent novelty of the reviews, a poem like "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again" emphasizes poetry's capacity to create the occasion for seeing something again as if for the first time. While the reviews mediate between the author and the audience, Keats's review poems make poetry into a medium between the audience and other poems.

In the following pages, I will turn to the review poems. I should first make it clear, though, that the originality I am claiming for Keats involves the way in which his solution to the problem of writing poetry under the scrutiny of the reviews led him to think about reception as an act in itself rather than the activity that defines an audience. From the point of view of much recent work on the nineteenth-century reading audience and the mass public, such a distinction between reception



and audience is unthinkable. From Keats's point of view, however, the striking thing about the reviews was not how they brought discrete audiences into focus but that they demonstrated that reception itself had become the object of the reading public's interest. For Keats, the fact that reviewers' descriptions and evaluations of literary works could be imagined to have supplanted the works themselves in the public eye did not announce the decline of literature. Instead, it revealed poetry's recommending function. From the standpoint of the reading public (and those who would study its historical manifestations), the reviews are useful for producing communities of agreement in which writers and readers can be matched up on the basis of the opinions and beliefs they are presumed to share. From Keats's standpoint as a poet, they are useful primarily for emphasizing the importance of expressing opinions about objects which preexist any such agreement. For Keats, to write poems that express opinions about familiar works of art, or point to a bird or a season or the sea, is to advance the claim that poetry is now in the business of recommending that the reader look at things she has seen before, not in order to determine where she stands or which side she is on, but to invoke her judgment.<sup>25</sup>

#### THE AESTHETIC DOMAIN OF THE EARLY SONNETS

The frequency with which Keats's early poems make reference to other poems and works of art has provided the starting point for almost every discussion of his early poetry. What I have been arguing is that this tendency to write poems "on" other works of art is not simply a reflection of Keats's influences or aspirations as a poet but instead a recognition of the importance that the contemporary practice of reviewing had accorded to the expression of opinion. Against accounts that understand the self-conscious literariness of Keats's poetry solely in terms of his ongoing attempt to position himself with respect to the poetic tradition, the similarity of a number of the early sonnets to reviews suggests that what is at stake in Keats's references to other poems is not a claim of affiliation but a conception of the tradition as a medium between the poet and the audience.<sup>26</sup> In the review poems, Keats imagines that poetry does not simply create the taste by which it is to be appreciated but fashions an artistic tradition for itself.

For Keats, making reference to other texts and works of art becomes a way of responding to the felt precariousness of poetry. Unlike those of his contemporaries who perceived reviewing as a threat to literature's

autonomy, Keats recognized that the reviews had radically altered what it meant to become a professional poet. What he comes to understand in the review poems is that if the reviewer claims authority for his literary opinions, he does not do so by displacing the authors and works on which he passes judgment. Against the idea that poetry must be defended against the attacks of the reviews, the novel, and other popular forms and attempts to organize poets in order to better protect their interests such as Hunt's promotion of his new school, Keats asserts poetry's similarity to reviewing on the basis of their shared commitment to producing testimony about texts.

I have suggested that in breaking with Hunt and his circle Keats rejects both coterie poetry and the relationship to the audience that it entails. Before turning to the poems that best exemplify the alternative Keats envisions, I want to begin with a poem that is a representative production of the Cockney School. The sonnet "On *The Story of Rimini*" has not received anything like the kind of critical attention devoted to the series of early sonnets I have identified as review poems – which are both better known and generally acknowledged to be better poems. But it offers an instructive example of the kind of poem that in fact conforms to "the aesthetic domain which Cockney verse attempted to conquer."

Who loves to peer up at the morning sun,  
 With half-shut eyes and comfortable cheek,  
 Let him with this sweet tale full often seek  
 For meadows where the little rivers run.  
 Who loves to linger with that brightest one  
 Of heaven, Hesperus – let him lowly speak  
 These numbers to the night and starlight meek,  
 Or moon, if that her hunting be begun.  
 He who knows these delights, and, too, is prone  
 To moralize upon a smile or tear,  
 Will find at once a region of his own,  
 A bower for his spirit, and will steer  
 To alleys where the fir-tree drops its cone,  
 Where robins hop, and fallen leaves are sere. (95)

It perhaps comes as no surprise that critics have had little to say about this poem. An expression of Keats's admiration for Hunt's latest poetic effort, written during their period of greatest intimacy, the poem would appear to be little more than a straightforward tribute to Hunt. In fact, the terms in which Keats praises Hunt's poem largely correspond with

those of another sonnet of praise written at about the same time. In “Written on a Blank Space at the End of Chaucer’s Tale of *The Floure and the Lefe*,” Keats describes the kind of “region” or “bower” to which he alludes in “On *The Story of Rimini*”:

This pleasant tale is like a little copse:  
 The honied lines do freshly interlace,  
 To keep the reader in so sweet a place,  
 So that he here and there full hearted stops;  
 And oftentimes he feels the dewy drops  
 Come cool and suddenly against his face,  
 And by the wandering melody may trace  
 Which way the tender-legged linnet hops. (1–8)

In contrast to the rather matter-of-fact assertion that Hunt’s reader “will find at once a region of his own” which concludes the sonnet on *Rimini*, this poem ends with a celebration of the “mighty power” of “this gentle story”:

I, that do ever feel athirst for glory,  
 Could at this moment be content to lie  
 Meekly upon the grass, as those whose sobbings  
 Were heard of none beside the mournful robbins. (11–14)

The power of Chaucer’s story is twofold: like the “mournful robbins” that appear in the final line of Keats’s sonnet, *The Floure and the Lefe* simultaneously solicits and sympathizes with the reader’s response. This pleasant tale is like a little copse, these lines suggest, in that it seems to have been made for the reader.

Measured against this power to effect an exact fit between reader and poem, the audience response Keats imagines in “On *The Story of Rimini*” looks calculated. The sonnet is structured by a series of stipulations about Hunt’s ideal reader: “Who loves to peer . . .” (1); “Who loves to lingert . . .” (5); “He who knows these delights . . .” (9). Rather than advancing claims about *The Story of Rimini*’s effect on the reader or offering his own response to the poem as evidence of its power, Keats addresses the sonnet to a reader whose tastes already match the attributes of Hunt’s poem. By transforming the qualities that should recommend the poem to the reader into a set of qualifications which the reader must possess in order to take pleasure in Hunt’s poem, the sonnet presents itself as a guarantee: readers who can identify themselves in “On *The Story of Rimini*” “[w]ill find” what they already know and love in *The Story of Rimini*.<sup>27</sup>

If Keats would seem to work too hard – or, conversely, not hard enough – to secure the reader’s pleasure in “On *The Story of Rimini*,” the response to Hunt’s poem can help to clarify the sonnet’s peculiar stance toward the reader. The first edition of *Rimini* appeared in February 1816. In June of that year, a hostile review of the poem appeared in the *Quarterly Review*. The review, on which Croker and Gifford collaborated, was not as dismissive as the *Quarterly*’s subsequent critique of *Endymion*. What it lacked in condescension, however, it made up for in contempt. The review begins with a slap – the anonymous reviewer pretends never to have heard of the infamous Hunt – and ends with an indictment of Hunt’s dedication to Byron which set the terms for the *Blackwood*’s assaults on the “King of the Cockneys” that began shortly after the publication of the second edition of *Rimini* in 1817:

Mr. Hunt prefixes to his work a dedication to Lord Byron, in which he assumes a high tone, and talks big of his ‘*fellow-dignity*’ and independence: what fellow-dignity may mean, we know not; perhaps the *dignity* of a *fellow*; but this we will say, that Mr. Hunt is not more unlucky in his pompous pretension to versification and good language, than he is in that which he makes, in this dedication, to *proper spirit*, as he calls it, and *fellow-dignity*; for we never, in so few lines, saw so many clear marks of the vulgar impatience of a low man, conscious and ashamed of his wretched vanity, and labouring, with coarse flippancy, to scramble over the bounds of birth and education, and fidget himself into the *stout-heartedness* of being familiar with a LORD.<sup>28</sup>

From this standpoint, Keats’s testimonial – written in March 1817, as Hunt prepared the second edition of his poem for the press – represents an answer to the reviewers. Rather than merely offering a dissenting view in response to the reviewers’ criticisms of Hunt’s poem, Keats counters the *Quarterly*’s authority by invoking the authority of Hunt’s readership. The sonnet is thus an assertion of Hunt’s right to expression – a right the *Quarterly* has attempted to revoke. In a stronger sense, however, it represents a claim for the existence of an audience for *Rimini*. Like the *Quarterly*’s review, Keats’s sonnet is designed to mediate between the poet and his audience – an audience of which Keats is a member. Moreover, this rhetoric of identification links poet and reviewer, for in writing a poem that speaks to others like himself, Keats conforms to Hazlitt’s description of the reviewer who tells his readers “nothing but what they would wish to believe.”

“On *The Story of Rimini*” follows the reviews in offering an opinion underwritten by the identification of an audience. The most interesting of the review poems – and those that have received the most critical

attention – are less concerned with the authority of the reviewer’s judgment than the authority of the objects under consideration. This insistence upon the importance of the object of judgment emerges most forcefully in “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” which was written within weeks of Keats’s sonnet on Hunt’s poem:

My spirit is too weak – mortality  
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,  
And each imagined pinnacle and steep  
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die  
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.  
Yet ’tis a gentle luxury to weep  
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep  
Fresh for the opening of the morning’s eye.  
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain  
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;  
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,  
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude  
Wasting of old time – with a billowy main –  
A sun – a shadow of a magnitude. (93)

Recently, critics have been concerned to show how “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” intervenes in the contemporary debate over the fragments from the Parthenon frieze.<sup>29</sup> The marbles had been controversial since their acquisition in Greece and removal to England by Lord Elgin. By 1815, the question of whether they should be purchased for the nation and put on public display had made them the subject of an intense public debate which would continue to occupy the pages of the periodical press long after Parliament approved their purchase from Elgin in October 1816 and the marbles were moved into the British Museum.<sup>30</sup> Critics of the marbles called into question their authenticity and their artistic merit – with, as Ian Jack points out, “the two being usually considered different aspects of the same question” – as well as the political and moral propriety of the claims by which Lord Elgin and Parliament transformed Greek antiquities first into personal property and finally into English national treasures.<sup>31</sup> Conversely, the marbles’ proponents saw in them the “union of nature with ideal beauty” and argued that their acquisition and display would revive the fine arts in England.<sup>32</sup> As Benjamin Robert Haydon, one of the marbles’ most ardent advocates, remarked in a diary entry in 1816, “This year the Elgin Marbles were bought, and produced an Aera in public feeling.”<sup>33</sup>

In the context of the debate over the marbles, the most striking thing about Keats's sonnet is the way that it subordinates "public feeling" to private feeling. "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" does not merely stress the speaker's response to the fragments; it represents this response in such a way as to insist that it has more to do with perception than taste. The poet does not express his approbation but testifies to the felt effect of the marbles' power: seeing the marbles produces not pleasure, but "a most dizzy pain" (11). Rather than stressing the ideal beauty of the fragments, the speaker's testimony links "Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time – with a billowy main – / A sun – a shadow of a magnitude" (12–14), in broken syntax which at once approximates the broken forms of the marbles and, in bringing the sonnet to a halt, dramatizes the weakness confessed at the outset. And instead of illustrating the renewal of the arts promised by the marbles' champions, in the companion sonnet, "To Haydon," Keats registers their authority by representing his inability to "speak / Definitively on these mighty things" (1–2).

Of course, it's difficult to see Keats's profession of weakness and his apology to Haydon as anything more than posturing. His response to the marbles, after all, furnishes the subject for two poems (both of which would be published simultaneously in the *Champion* and the *Examiner* shortly after their composition and then reprinted the following year in Haydon's *Annals of the Fine Arts*).<sup>34</sup> From a slightly different standpoint, however, the Elgin Marbles sonnet's emphasis upon the viewer's perception and Keats's claim that seeing the marbles has rendered him unable to "speak / Definitively" both work to distinguish the marbles themselves from the opinions about them that are already in circulation. Rather than attempting to revise the terms of the debate, the poems' emphasis on response stands as a reminder that both positive and negative assessments of the marbles necessarily refer to the objects themselves. If "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" does not attempt to describe the fragments or to define their value, in describing their effect on the speaker as an experience that defies communication, it attests to the difference between seeing the Elgin Marbles and having views about them. In the context of the debate that surrounds them, Keats suggests that what finally recommends the marbles most is that they must be seen to be believed.

If a poem like "On *The Story of Rimini*" looks to the reviews in order to assert that the poet, like the reviewer, is in the business of making opinion, the Elgin Marbles sonnet emphasizes the importance of

objects for the expression of opinions. On first sight, this shift in emphasis might look inconsequential: it's hard to see how pointing out that opinions are necessarily opinions of something constitutes any kind of claim at all. In the context of contemporary reactions to the reviews, however, the force of Keats's claim is easier to discern. As Hazlitt's *Letter to William Gifford* suggests, at the center of the controversy over reviewing is the anxiety that judgments of taste lay claim to no evidence outside themselves. Works of art, Hazlitt argues, are merely the reviewer's pretext for expressing views that preexist their purported objects. Moreover, because the objective nature of the work of art offers no proof of its quality – to say that a poem has fourteen iambic pentameter lines identifies it as a sonnet, but says nothing about whether it's a good poem – the testimony given to support aesthetic opinions would seem inevitably to amount to a kind of self-evidence. Despite the fact that the patronage of the public and the publishing industry would seem to acknowledge the legitimacy of the reviews, reviewing comes to look as though it has more to do with reviewers' preconceived opinions than the works to which they respond. Because what is at stake in a controversy such as the debate over the Elgin Marbles is which description best represents the object in question, there appears to be no immutable object against which conflicting opinions can be judged. The object, as it were, disappears in the face of competing accounts of it.

This is why, while Hazlitt accuses Gifford of substituting partisan opinion for critical judgment – “not one of your opinions is formed upon an honest conviction of the truth or justice of the case, but by collusion with the prejudices, caprice, interest, or vanity of your employers” (9:14) – his critique finally has less to do with Gifford's political views than his ability to pass them off as judgments on works of art. The problem with this form of politics by other means, Hazlitt argues, is that it ends up leaving the object behind:

It is the old story – *that I think what I please, and say what I think*. This accounts, Sir, for the difference between you and me in so many respects. I think only of the argument I am defending; you are only thinking whether you write grammar. My opinions are founded on reasons which I try to give; yours are governed by motives which you keep to yourself. It has been my business all my life to get at the truth as well as I could, merely to satisfy my own mind: it has been yours to suppress the evidence of your senses and the dictates of your understanding, if you ever found them at variance with your convenience or the caprices of others. (9:31)

Hazlitt contends that Gifford's reviews merely reflect his prior commitments. To Gifford's charge "that it is impossible to remember what I write after reading it," Hazlitt responds, "One remembers to have read what you write – *before!*" (9:31).

From this point of view, the threat Hazlitt perceives in the reviews cannot be that they "regulate the public taste." After all, according to Hazlitt, Gifford doesn't change his readers' minds so much as tell them what's already on them. Instead, the success of the reviews suggests that the reading public has come to prefer reviewing to literature. The reviews threaten literature's autonomy not simply because they circulate bad or biased opinions about literature, but because the very extent of their circulation suggests that literature is in the process of being replaced by opinion. Or, Hazlitt argues in "Why the Arts Are Not Progressive":

The diffusion of taste is not the same thing as the improvement of taste; but it is only the former of these objects that is promoted by public institutions and other artificial means. The number of candidates for fame, and of pretenders to criticism, is thus increased beyond all proportion, while the quantity of genius and feeling remains the same; with this difference, that the man of genius is lost in the crowd of competitors, who would never have become such but from encouragement and example; and that the opinion of those few persons whom nature intended for judges, is drowned in the noisy suffrages of shallow smatterers in taste. (4:163-4)

The result of such "artificial means" as the rise of reviewing is that the partnership between "the man of true genius" and those with "a natural taste" gives way to the "factitious patronage" of "pretenders to taste" and "pretenders to criticism" (4:163).

Hazlitt sees this proliferation of opinion as a threat to literature. It is out of this very dilemma that Keats creates a new function for poetry. The striking thing about the review poems is their insistence not only that the provocation of responses is central to literature's mode of operation but that, far from constituting a threat, the production of different responses testifies to the integrity of the literary object. Rather than endangering literature's autonomy, for Keats the poetic text's inability to determine the conditions of its reception or impose standards by which it will be judged becomes an argument for a conception of poetry as a reminder of the inadequacy of objects to explain themselves or provide evidence of their own value.



In “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again,” for example, the Shakespearean text is valued precisely in terms of its ability to solicit new responses:

O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute!  
 Fair plumed syren, queen of far-away!  
 Leave melodizing on this wintry day,  
 Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute.  
 Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute  
 Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay  
 Must I burn through; once more humbly assay  
 The bitter-sweet of this Shakspearean fruit.  
 Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,  
 Begetters of our deep eternal theme!  
 When through the old oak forest I am gone,  
 Let me not wander in a barren dream:  
 But, when I am consumed in the fire,  
 Give me new phoenix wings to fly at my desire. (225)

The sonnet points to a familiar contest between romance and tragedy, fantasy and reality, but its speaker's preference for the Shakespearean text has to do with the difference between predictable, reproducible responses and responses that cannot be predicted. As in the sonnets on *The Floure and the Lefe* and *The Story of Rimini*, romance here stands for genre as such, imagined as a kind of delivery-system for familiar pleasures. From this standpoint, the sonnet bids farewell to the kind of predictability that characterizes both romance and Hunt's “far-away” coterie poetry. While Keats praises Chaucer's and Hunt's romances for meeting the reader's expectations, the motivation for sitting down to read *King Lear* once again is that it promises an outcome the reader cannot foresee.

In letters written the year before the sonnet, Keats twice comments on how rereading Shakespeare inevitably yields new insights. He instructs Reynolds to “say a Word or two on some passage in Shakespeare that may come rather new to you; which must be continually happening, notwithstanding that we read the same play forty times” (1:133). And, again to Reynolds, he remarks on his most recent reading of the sonnets: “One of the three books I have with me is Shakespear's Poems: I neer found so many beauties in the sonnets – they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally – in the intensity of working out conceits – ” (1:188). Keats presents this variability of

response as an argument for reading Shakespeare and, by extension, poetry in general.<sup>35</sup> But it is crucial that in emphasizing the sense in which “some passage in Shakespeare . . . may come rather new to you,” Keats links this variability to the invariability of the poetic text. As the observation that the sonnets “seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally” suggests, Keats’s remarks on Shakespeare single out neither what the author has put into the text nor what the reader makes of it. Instead, as in the Elgin Marbles sonnet, the beauties Keats finds in the sonnets exemplify the sense in which his reaction is a response to an object that is external to the self and its thoughts.

On the one hand, Keats’s assertion that his responses are perceptions about objects contradicts Hazlitt’s contention that the expression of opinion results in the disappearance of the object. On the other hand, it only reinforces the sense that there is no standard by which such responses can be judged. While the review poems insist upon the importance of objects for the expression of opinion, they make no claim to the kind of objectivity Hazlitt seems to desire. Instead, they point to the sense in which every judgment entails at least a minimal recognition of the existence of the object under consideration, even when that recognition occasions the expression of views that fail to take the object into account. Rather than regarding the necessarily subjective nature of response as a threat to literature’s objective existence, the review poems put a new kind of emphasis on the relationship between subject and object. In “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” for example, Keats represents his own personal experience in the objective language of exploration and scientific discovery:

Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold,  
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
 Round many western islands have I been  
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
 That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;  
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
 When a new planet swims into his ken;  
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
 He star’d at the Pacific – and all his men  
 Look’d at each other with a wild surmise –  
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien. (64)

Critics have regarded this poem as a description of an intensely personal experience. I want to suggest that it is autobiographical primarily because it stakes out a new role for poetry. On a strictly autobiographical reading, the sonnet announces Keats's discovery of his calling as a poet: his first encounter with the "one wide expanse . . . / That deep-brow'd Homer ruled" in Chapman's translation figures his own accession as a poet staking claim to, if not exactly claiming mastery of, that poetic domain. From this perspective, the sonnet at once celebrates that experience and inaugurates Keats's poetic career – a view perhaps best captured in Leigh Hunt's recollection of his own response to the poem: "[it] completely announced the new poet taking possession."<sup>36</sup>

But to read "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" as a figure for, or an allegory of, its place in Keats's career tends to produce some confusion about the experience it describes. Critics agree that the poem represents an aesthetic response. But they disagree about what its speaker is responding to: is the feeling the poem expresses a response to the poet's first authentic experience of Homer's text? Is it a response to Chapman's translation? Or, if the poem is an allegory of the poet's discovery of his poetic vocation, is it in some sense a response to itself? Rather than a confusion on the part of the critics, this multiplication of responses in fact recapitulates the process whereby a poem that describes the poet's possession by a text is transformed into a poem about "the new poet taking possession." In other words, the slippage of the sonnet's point of reference – from Homer to Chapman to Keats – is less a matter for critical debate than the effect the poem is after. For it is the shifting object of Keats's response that transforms the poem's ostensible occasion – "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" – into an occasion to reflect on the poetic process – or, in this paradigmatic case, to begin a poetic career.<sup>37</sup> Rather than a problem of interpretation, the ambiguity that makes it difficult to distinguish between objects inside and outside the self identifies the poem as a statement of poetic ambition.

Stuart Sperry has remarked on the connection between the transfer of agency figured in a number of Keats's early sonnets and the account of aesthetic experience that originates with Longinus and reemerges in numerous eighteenth-century commentaries on aesthetics.<sup>38</sup> The feeling Keats describes in the Chapman's Homer sonnet, that is, reproduces the sense of shock and wonder that the sublime text inspires in the reader. Moreover, this connection helps explain how Keats turns

a description of his response to Chapman's translation into a claim that identifies him with the tradition represented by Homer's name: in describing this feeling, Keats not only delineates the experience of the Longinian sublime, but capitalizes on its most notable effect. Just as Longinus describes how the auditor who is initially overwhelmed by a sublime orator is subsequently "uplifted by a sense of proud possession" and "filled with a joyful pride, as if [he] had [himself] produced the very thing [he] heard," in the movement from hearing "Chapman speak out loud and bold" to the similes of the sestet ("Then felt I . . ."), Keats's sonnet figures a transfer of agency from speaker to hearer, from author to reader.<sup>39</sup>

But this reading, in which Chapman's translation stands between Keats and Homer in a way that makes translation itself the sign of Keats's distance from the tradition he seeks to enter, finally loses sight of the sonnet's conspicuous foregrounding of Chapman's name and thus misses the point of Keats's insistence that the text to which he is responding is a translation. In "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," in other words, translation comes to look like the representation of, rather than an obstacle to, the sublimity of the Homeric text. It is striking, for example, that in describing his response Keats seems to be unconcerned to distinguish between translation and original. And, in fact, commentators since Amy Lowell have pointed out that Keats first read Homer not in Chapman's translation but in Pope's.<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting, too, that the line Keats most admired in the translation – "The sea had soaked his heart through" – was original not to Homer but to Chapman. These facts suggest that Keats does not so much reproduce Longinus's account of aesthetic experience as extend it, for his ability to recognize in Chapman's translation what he did not recognize in Pope's and to single out in Chapman a line found neither in Pope's translation nor in Homer's original points to a conception of translation that literalizes the transfer of agency glimpsed in the feeling of the sublime.

To this way of thinking, Keats responds not to Homer's poem, but to Chapman's. He praises Chapman's translation, then, not because it provides a better approximation of Homer's text than does Pope's (a judgment that, as recent critics have insisted, Keats was in no position to make). Instead, his interest in translation has to do with the way in which Chapman's response to Homer's text stresses the central importance of reception in the constitution of the work of art. Indeed, this conception of translation as response draws a connection between

the work of translation and the act of reading that allows Keats to add his own name to the line that links Chapman's name to Homer's, so that we can speak, however awkwardly, of Keats's "Chapman's Homer." As much as each link depends upon its precursor, the work of art is valued not simply in itself but as the object of these subsequent judgments. On this view, the significance of reception is not that it singles out particular features in the text for approbation: Keats's sonnet makes no reference to the particular merits of Chapman's translation or those of Homer's qualities that it brings into view. Instead, it describes his response and offers the aesthetic judgment itself as a work of art.

If the significance of Chapman's translation for Keats is that it serves to emphasize the reader's role in the production of the work of art, the necessary connection between translation and original constitutes the review poems' most striking illustration of the importance of the original object. The phrase "Chapman's Homer" points to a conception of translation that is neither ideally transparent nor problematically opaque. Instead, the connection of one name to another – Chapman to Homer, Keats to Chapman's Homer – stresses the mutual implication of original and translation, author and reader, in the constitution of the art object. The possessive that links the translator to the author of the original points not only to the kind of possession described by Longinus (and later, with reference to Keats's sonnet, by Hunt), but also to the relationship to the object figured in the translator's commitment to the original text. For Keats, it is precisely the imposition of a line inspired by, but not translated from, the original that constitutes Chapman's fidelity to Homer. From this standpoint, the task of the translator has as much to do with writing in Homer's name as it does with faithfully reproducing his words.<sup>41</sup>

Rather than a move toward subjectivism, in which the text is nothing more than what he makes of it, in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" Keats's response emerges in relation to the responses of others:

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold. . . . (5–8)

These lines suggest that what Keats comes to understand by way of Chapman's translation is not so much the message of Homer's poem as

the meaning of what he has “been told” about Homer. This sense that his experience of Chapman’s Homer leads him to an understanding of others’ judgments is reinforced in the version of the poem that Hunt published in his “Young Poets” article, where the seventh line reads: “Yet could I never judge what men could mean.”

Keats emended this line before the publication of his 1817 *Poems*, explaining to Charles Cowden Clarke that it was “bald and too simply wondering.”<sup>42</sup> If this revision serves to emphasize the experience of reading Homer rather than a newfound understanding of his reputation, it does not erase the sense that the importance of Chapman’s translation is not that it makes it possible for Keats to read Homer (he has read Pope’s), but offers a recommendation as to why one might want to read Homer in the first place. What Keats discovers in Chapman is the means by which he can experience for himself something that he has “Oft . . . been told” about a work that he has read before. If Keats comes around to an understanding of “what men could mean,” the sonnet represents this understanding as a result of his own experience of the object in question rather than his affiliations with other readers. In standing between Keats and Homer, Chapman’s translation stands for the difference between being told about poetry and reading it for oneself.

The rise of reviewing raised the possibility that literature was being replaced by criticism, but Keats did not see this situation as a threat. Instead, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” suggests that in the new importance accorded to the expression of opinion Keats recognized a new opportunity for poetry. The remarkable thing about his description of his discovery of Homer is that it depends upon the recommendation provided by Chapman’s translation. In the context of review culture, the sonnet’s claim that Homer now stands in need of Chapman – and its further suggestion that Chapman’s Homer stands in need of Keats’s sonnet – is not merely a claim upon the authority of the poetic tradition, but a response to the perception that the poetic tradition alone can no longer guarantee poetry’s continued viability. Keats’s recognition of the poet’s new role in effecting the transmission of a tradition that can no longer be imagined to be continuous is what it means for him to become a professional poet.

In this sense, the review poems constitute a professionalizing gesture of a different sort than has been previously recognized. With the rise of the mass reading public, Keats makes it part of the poet’s job to extend the possibility of recognizing poetic value to new readers. While the

coterie poetry of Hunt and his circle and the partisan politics of the reviews suggest that being a poet means submitting to a poetics of party affiliation, Keats's review poems respond to the apparent inescapability of choosing sides by making it look as though it's possible simply to choose poetry. Rather than pursuing alliances with actual persons, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" makes poetry a medium between the audience and other poems and thus works to enlist allies whose poetic credentials are not subject to review. In acknowledging the process of judgment that defines review culture, Keats asserts that to attack him means attacking Chapman, and to attack Chapman means attacking Homer. If the free expression of differing views is the rationale that underwrites the practice of reviewing (or, as Hazlitt argues, allows the reviewer to conceal his true motivation), Keats's review poems account for what it means to be the subject of debate.

I make this point not to suggest that in the review poems Keats mounts a defense of the aesthetic. On the contrary, the premise that informs these poems is that aesthetic experience cannot be defended. For Keats, however, this indefensibility does not invalidate aesthetic experience; instead, it requires that we understand it differently. (One might say that this changed understanding itself constitutes a defense of the aesthetic.) In the review poems, which point the reader to the possible sources of the pleasures they describe, Keats highlights the sense in which aesthetic response counts as experience even though it cannot be reliably shared. In transforming poetry into a technology for recommending pleasure (in particular the kind of pleasure that poetry can provide), Keats articulates a conception of the poet's relation to the audience that opposes the idea that under the reviews all pleasure is ideological. Rather than a form of assent or dissent, in other words, the review poems stress the sense in which reception represents the process by which the reader or viewer comes to recognize the object presented for her judgment as a work of art.

In these poems, in which responses to works of art assume the shape of sonnets, the sonnet form itself becomes an emblem for the role the act of reception plays in the constitution of the art object: the very conventionality of the form emerges as a claim about the fitness of the response. In the review poems, the sonnet signifies aesthetic experience by representing subjective responses in a form that cannot be conceived of as personal property and thus registers the public dimension of private experience. Rather than presenting a judgment as a referendum on which the reader must cast a vote, the review poems stress

the sense in which descriptions and evaluations point to objects per se. Thus, in “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again,” and “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” descriptions of responses to works of art take the form of recommendations. And, imagined as a statement of a reader’s judgment and an appeal to the judgment of other readers, the poetic text takes on a new role and a new form. Instead of expressing the poet’s own experience or serving as a code that enables mutual recognition among the members of a coterie, Keats’s poem attempts to imagine both the objects that occasioned it and the potentially infinite series of responses that it will occasion.



## CHAPTER 4

### *Shelley and the politics of political poetry*

Criticism of Shelley has long revolved around questions about the relationship between his poetry and his politics. One strand of Shelley's reception history reflects a poet whose ideas inspired generations of political activists. Shelley's early poem *Queen Mab*, for example, served as a kind of bible for British radicals. For numerous commentators, however, Shelley's political thought has been something of an embarrassment, evidence of the kind of arrested development that prompted T. S. Eliot to observe that "the ideas of Shelley seem to me always to be ideas of adolescence."<sup>1</sup> Eliot's judgment stands in a long line of complaints about the immaturity and incoherence of Shelley's thought and reflects an ongoing effort to save Shelley the brilliant lyric poet from Shelley the thinker. If recent critics have attempted to provide better explanations of the relevance of Shelley's politics to his poetry, they have done so largely in the context of the perceived opposition between them. Even those critics who have insisted on the coherence and importance of Shelley's political thinking have had to contend with Shelley's own movement away from the unequivocal radicalism of *Queen Mab* to the rarified abstraction of *Prometheus Unbound*.

Commenting on the renewed interest in Shelley's radicalism, William Keach has argued that Shelley's cultivation of distance from any practical politics is in fact the most distinctive and most enduring feature of his political imagination. "Radical Shelley," Keach concludes, "keeps his distance from the assumptions and instincts of those he continues to inspire." For Keach, this distance is the product of Shelley's idealism – of his belief "that existence was essentially a construct of the perceiving mind, and thus a function of the mind's own resources and limitations." It is in these terms that he approaches Shelley's politics: "What sense of political power and historical change will you have if you believe, with Shelley, that 'Nothing exists but as it is perceived'? How do you come to terms politically with a writer

whose great maxim for overcoming oppression is ‘to hope, till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates’?”<sup>2</sup>

The questions Keach poses point to the difficulty of arriving at a positive political program from the starting point of Shelley’s philosophical and poetic convictions. On the one hand, the apparent opposition between poetry and politics could be understood as a question about how to square Shelley’s idealism, as Earl Wasserman described it over thirty years ago, with recent accounts of his participation in the radical political culture of his day.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it might return us to Eliot’s objection or to the problem that critics from Matthew Arnold to F.R. Leavis found in Shelley – the problem of belief that C. S. Lewis sought to answer and Frederick Pottle attempted to explain away.<sup>4</sup> That the positions staked out by mid-twentieth-century critics have been refined in recent years rather than replaced suggests that Shelley criticism has reached an impasse.<sup>5</sup> However critics frame the opposition between poetry and politics, they have continued to ask: why did a writer committed to many of the tenets of radical political reform choose poetry as his vehicle? In short, if your aim is to change the world, why choose a form of expression with a severely limited and, in many ways, radically inappropriate audience?

In this chapter, I suggest that to put the question in this way – to ask how Shelley’s beliefs are manifested in his poems – is to miss the point of his continued investment in poetry. Shelley’s critics have tended to reinforce, even in their attempts to reconcile, the distance between poetic form and political content. I argue that the interest of Shelley’s politics has less to do with the content of his beliefs than the formal constitution of his poetics.<sup>6</sup> For Shelley, poetry ultimately represents neither a way to intervene in political conflicts nor a means by which to transcend them. Instead, in the face of a contemporary political scene defined by opposition and faction, he imagines that poetry recommends itself for political analysis by virtue of its peculiar conditions of appearance to the world. As Shelley sees it, poetry is a process defined as much by its transmission from one generation to the next as the immediate circumstances that govern its production and reception. This long-term view of the process of writing, which extends the time frame of poetry to include not only its composition and its reception by an immediate audience but also its relation to future readers and audiences, claims for poetic form itself the privilege of a future perspective on the present.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, if poetry’s longevity – the sense in which poems outlive both their authors and their first readers – might

initially look like a way of conveying political messages to future readers (for whom they would be obsolete), it is better understood as a way of imaginatively occupying a future unbounded by the terms of present conflicts.

Making sense of Shelley's political commitment to poetic form does not, I will claim, require us to transform this commitment into a political program. This chapter is not an attempt to derive a coherent "politics" from Shelley's poetry. (Indeed perhaps the central problem with Shelley's conception of politics is that it extends the realm of political action to include contingencies that cannot be imagined to fall within the control of individual agents.) Rather than making an effort to reconcile Shelley's poetry and politics, I want to account for the crucial importance of Shelley's political thought to his poetic theory and to explain the continuity between them. In order to understand this relationship, we must recognize that central to Shelley's poetics is the effort to reconceptualize the relation between actions and their effects in a way that gives priority to effects. Shelley's investment in poetry as a form of political action has to do with his recognition that an action's consequences can come to redefine the action itself. From this point of view, political actions are best understood retrospectively, in terms of their effects. Poetry thus serves politics less by thematizing political change than by affording a privileged perspective on that change. In Shelley's eyes, that is, poems not only become the objects of future readings but vehicles that enable future readings of present conflicts.

At first sight, Shelley's turn to the future might seem to announce a departure from the turn to the past described in the [last chapter](#). There I argued that, in addition to discovering in the culture of reviewing a new model for poetic practice, Keats's review aesthetic worked to align his poetry with the tradition, in that the review poems at once developed poetry's recommending function and identified poems with the works of art that they took as their subjects. Keats's odes might be understood to extend this idea of recommendation: where the review poems recommend other works of art, the odes come to serve as recommendations of aesthetic experience itself. In this regard, we could read the odes' interest in obsolete beliefs – the unworshipped goddess of the "Ode to Psyche," the transhistorical song of the "Ode to a Nightingale," the ritual depicted in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," or even the attenuated allegories of the "Ode on Melancholy" and "To Autumn" – as attempts to represent the impersonality of aesthetic

experience by emptying out beliefs and opinions. In each of these instances, Keats describes an experience which also constitutes a claim that aesthetic experience is more than a judgment of taste determined by ideologies of class or politics. From this perspective, Keats's engagement with the past and Shelley's with the future are not at odds. Rather, they reflect a shared desire, not to escape the present, but to imagine experiences or judgments undetermined by present conditions.

The first two sections of this chapter trace the ways in which Shelley's interest in poetry's political instrumentality leads him increasingly to conceive of poems in terms of their future readers. This changed conception of the audience for poetry and politics emerges in response to a specific set of historical circumstances, and I read Shelley's response to the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, *The Mask of Anarchy*, as a poem composed for such a future audience. The second half of the chapter argues that Shelley's interest in effects leads to a poetics that makes reception and transmission central to poetic composition. From this perspective, Shelley's poetry and poetics can be understood as part of a historical transformation in the conception of the poetic text that involves not only other Romantic poets but also larger structural changes in how we continue to think about the public conditions of literary reception and transmission. This transformation, moreover, is a crucial moment in the history of literary theory, for the eclipse of authorial intention as the primary focus of literary interpretation in twentieth-century criticism finds its origin in the emphasis on reception and transmission to be found, among other places to be sure, in Shelley's late poetics.

#### POETRY AND POLITICAL INDIRECTION

Living in Lynmouth in 1812, having just returned to England after the brief Irish sojourn that saw his most active foray into radical politics, Shelley hit upon a novel method of distributing political propaganda. He and his circle released bottles, homemade boats, and hot air balloons that bore broadside copies of his *Declaration of Rights* and "The Devil's Walk." This practice, which forms the subject of the early sonnets "On launching some Bottles filled with Knowledge into the Bristol Channel" and "To a Balloon laden with Knowledge,"<sup>8</sup> is in one respect an indication of Shelley's continued interest in natural philosophy. In another, however, it is a somewhat fanciful manifestation of the commitment to the dissemination of radical literature that

soon earned Shelley's Irish servant, Dan Healy, a six-month sentence in the Barnstaple jail "for posting unlicensed and seditious papers."<sup>9</sup>

A year later, writing to his publisher as he prepares *Queen Mab* for the press, Shelley gives the following instructions: "I expect no success. Let only 250 Copies be printed. A small neat Quarto, on fine paper & so as to catch the aristocrats: They will not read it, but their sons & daughters may."<sup>10</sup> At first sight Shelley's concern about fine paper looks like an aggressively materialist, or perhaps simply literal-minded, version of the kind of ethical and aesthetic purpose for poetry he later describes in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*: "to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence."<sup>11</sup> But "fine paper" and "highly refined imagination[s]" are not simply interchangeable. What is most striking about Shelley's superficial or even frivolous interest in *Queen Mab*'s appearance is how issues that seem external to the production of poetry, namely the poetic text's material production, became for him crucial ways of thinking about poetry's transmission – how poetry reaches its audience. Thus the theoretical importance of Shelley's reference to the sons and daughters of aristocrats has little to do with the actual audience he hoped his poem might reach. Rather, it illustrates a more general concern with the conditions of poetic transmission – one that I will argue became increasingly central to Shelley's poetics. Shelley's request that his poem be printed on fine paper is more than a way of identifying or preselecting an audience for his poetry. It also suggests that poetry is a mode of address which is, in an important sense, indirect or even misdirected. *Queen Mab* should be printed on fine paper not simply to live up to the expectations of its immediate audience – Shelley does not expect, after all, that the people who buy the poem will read it – but to ensure that the poem will find an audience in the future.

These two early moments in Shelley's career illustrate a persistent concern with the indirect routes by which texts can reach their readers. In the first of these cases, the threat posed by messages in bottles or by the broadsides posted in public for which Dan Healy was arrested and jailed has as much to do with their evasion of the normal channels of transmission as the messages they bear. In the second case, Shelley similarly imagines that *Queen Mab*'s political effectiveness depends not so much upon the poem's capacity to persuade its readers of the truth of its propositions as its ability to end up in the right hands by first passing through the wrong hands. Moreover, Shelley's instructions to

his publisher suggest that the work done by bottles, boats, and balloons in the dissemination of political messages is, in the case of *Queen Mab*, to be performed by the poetic text itself. Shelley's desire to have his poem printed on fine paper transforms poetry into a Trojan horse which conveys radical politics into the ancestral houses of the aristocracy. In other words, if poetry cannot transcend class boundaries, it can transcend generational barriers; printing a poem on fine paper represents a way of selling a poem to one generation in order to address the next. And Shelley's interest in poetry is, in an important sense, an interest in this kind of indirect address.

Although the reasons that Shelley would resort to such indirect means – boats, bottles, balloons, and not least Dan Healy – to circulate seditious materials are clear, it is perhaps more difficult to discern the political utility of a poem that he imagined might have to wait a generation for an audience. On the one hand, Shelley's low expectations for the success of *Queen Mab* reflect the perceived distance between the poet and the reading public in the early nineteenth century documented in the preceding chapters. On the other hand, it makes sense to understand Shelley's remarks about *Queen Mab*'s audience in terms of the political repression that prompted him first to cut out the title page of the privately published edition (which bore his own name to protect his publisher from prosecution for libel) and then to withdraw the book from circulation altogether.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Shelley must have had state censorship in mind when he wrote of *Queen Mab* that “a Poem is safe, the iron-souled Attorney general would scarcely dare to attack ‘genus irritabile vatum’” (1:324). Critics have read the form of the poem itself as either an attempt to circumvent such repression or, through the inclusion of Shelley's infamous (and infamously long) notes to the poem, a means by which to address different audiences simultaneously.<sup>13</sup> Marilyn Butler, for example, describes *Queen Mab* as “a book that works for several family members at once – a story, a serious textbook, even an anthology of materialist thinking.”<sup>14</sup>

It would be a mistake not to recognize that *Queen Mab* is a poem with multiple purposes and multiple audiences. But in Shelley's seemingly offhand deferral of *Queen Mab*'s audience into the future, we can also see the beginning of a line of his political thought that must be understood as something more than an attempt to evade prosecution for libel or a hope that the poem will find an audience of sympathetic readers who share the poet's own background.<sup>15</sup> In appealing to “sons & daughters,” Shelley is also acknowledging the widespread perception

that the rhetoric of political opposition had exhausted the possibility of persuasion, a situation succinctly captured in William Hazlitt's observation that "*those that are not with us, are against us*, is a maxim that always holds true."<sup>16</sup>

The idea that political discourse was governed by partisan rhetoric rather than direct engagement with the issues at hand was a familiar complaint about the party system from the moment of its inception.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, this complaint helped to shape the radical movements that grew out of the English response to the French Revolution, which were put down by state repression before the turn of the century and then resurrected in the post-Waterloo resurgence of protest for reform. As Kevin Gilmartin has argued, "Early nineteenth-century radicalism can be defined as a protest against the dominance of two political parties."<sup>18</sup> But by the second decade of the nineteenth century, the objection that had once been leveled at Whigs and Tories was being applied to the radicals themselves. When, in an 1810 essay in the *Edinburgh Review* entitled "The State of Parties," for example, Francis Jeffrey describes Britain as a nation "breaking rapidly into two furious and irreconcilable parties," he is referring not to Whigs and Tories but to the established parties and the radical opposition.<sup>19</sup> For Jeffrey, "The dangers, and the corruptions, and the prodigies of the times, have very nearly put an end to all neutrality and moderation in politics; and the great body of the nation appears to be divided into two violent and most pernicious factions; the courtiers, who are almost for arbitrary power, and the democrats, who are almost for revolution and republicanism."<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey laments the falling away of the middle ground formerly inhabited by "the old constitutional Whigs of England,"<sup>21</sup> but what Gilmartin's analysis of radical opposition demonstrates is that "the whig and tory agreement that a radical position was unacceptable" at once worked to "reinforce the radical view that the two parties were in fact identical" and to redraw old party lines so that the opposition that once existed between Whigs and Tories now existed between the two parties and the radicals (13).

Against Edmund Burke's influential account of the utility of organized political opposition ("which," as Gilmartin points out, "allowed two competing but equally legitimate claims upon state power" [12]) and Jeffrey's nostalgia for a middle road, in the early nineteenth century radicals and the political establishment did not merely differ in their views. Instead, each side denied the other's very legitimacy. Thus oppositional politics came to look like a zero-sum game: political

conflict might produce winners and losers, but it would permit no compromise. It is in this context – of party and faction – that Shelley’s skepticism about *Queen Mab*’s audience comes to look like a political strategy. If, in matters of politics, there is no preaching but to the converted, Shelley’s poetic appeal is addressed to an audience untouched by the effects of party or faction. On this view, poetry’s political utility has to do with the sense in which it answers the paradoxical demand that political action stand outside the conditions that govern contemporary politics.

This strategy helps to explain Shelley’s curiously divided attitude toward didactic poetry. Despite his assertion that “a poem very didactic is I think very stupid,” it would be difficult to argue that *Queen Mab*, even without its “long philosophical, & Anti Christian” notes, is not in fact a “very didactic” poem (1:350, 361). In imagining from the first that “a Poem is safe,” however, Shelley makes it clear that this poem was never intended to address a hostile audience. Indeed, he writes to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, “Like all egotists I shall console myself with what I may call if I please the suffrages of the chosen few who can think & feel, or those friends whose personal partialities may blind them to all defects” (1:352–3). Far from attempting to persuade, *Queen Mab* is intended for “the chosen few” who are already sympathetic to Shelley’s views or who will find the views they already hold reflected there. The problem with didacticism, in other words, is that Shelley finds it hard to imagine that a didactic poem might change anyone’s mind.

If Shelley’s relegation of *Queen Mab* to “the suffrages of the chosen few” speaks to the difficulty of imagining poetry as a pedagogic instrument, his desire to seed the libraries of the aristocracy with his radical poem points to a different conception of poetry’s political utility. For the hope that he holds for *Queen Mab* – “They will not read it, but their sons & daughters may” – does not simply reflect his expectation that the poem will find its audience in the future. It also imagines that poetry serves politics not merely by registering an opinion about present conditions and factions but by trying to imagine a change in the formation of beliefs themselves. Unlike Wordsworth, however, whose claim that poets must make the taste by which they will be appreciated extends the poet’s responsibility to include readers’ responses to his work, Shelley comes to understand the instrumentality of poetry precisely in terms of the contingencies of reception, transmission, and dissemination that Wordsworth strives to subdue. In responding to a



contemporary situation that seems to rule out the possibility of transformative political action, Shelley asserts that political change, like poetic success, is contingent on future conditions which lie outside the control of individual agents. In turning to the future as an alternative to present conflicts, Shelley's politics could be understood to foreshadow recent poststructuralist theories of political action.<sup>22</sup> But the interest of Shelley's use of indirection is not only that it seeks to address present conflicts by transferring political agency to a *future* polity but also, and perhaps more importantly, that it understands the agency of readers (consistently figured as a yet-unformed future audience) in terms of their ability to confer poetic authority *retrospectively*.

#### PROPHECY IN REVERSE

In light of the relentless abstraction of a poem like *Prometheus Unbound*, to claim that Shelley's political imagination involves a utopian vision of some future state of affairs would be unsurprising. But rather than reinforce the canonical distinction between esoteric and exoteric poems, I want to suggest that Shelley's attempt to imagine an alternative to the urgency of present conflicts in fact undoes the division between poems of the mythic mode and poems that condescend to topical reference.<sup>23</sup> For even a poem as explicitly occasional as *The Mask of Anarchy, Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester*, which Shelley himself denominated "of the exoteric species" (2:152), derives much of its considerable power from its peculiar distance from the events that occasioned it.

In *The Mask of Anarchy*, Shelley recalls and extends his early conception of the poetic text as propaganda device by imagining that a poem's meaning does not strictly depend upon the interpretation of an immediate audience. Instead, poetry's peculiar power is that it lies in wait, as it were, until the materialization of its proper audience. This deferral of poetry's readership not only reflects the expectation that the poem will find its audience in the future but constitutes an effort to conscript the future for political purposes. In one sense, this is a teleological move, in which the sense of necessity projects a world of rights that will be honored in the future.<sup>24</sup> In a different sense, it amounts to a rather general way of cursing the present by making the future loom over it as a disapproving presence.<sup>25</sup> Whether we stress the utopianism of Shelley's position or understand it as a form of critique,

however, his political project depends upon taking a long view of the poetic process.

From this perspective, the most remarkable thing about Shelley's attempt to intervene in a pressing political struggle – “to publish a little volume of *popular songs* wholly political, & destined to awaken & direct the imagination of the reformers” (2:191) – is how, in *The Mask of Anarchy*, he shifts attention from the conflict between existing political views to questions about how to view the event itself. Shelley recognized at the outset that “Peterloo,” the name radicals gave to the slaughter of the reform-minded protesters who gathered at St. Peter's Field in Manchester on August 16, 1819, would be the occasion for controversy. Debates both in Parliament and in the radical press were concerned with the question of how best to respond to the event. While political reformers quarreled about what course of action to take – armed rebellion or continued nonviolent mass demonstration – the debate in Parliament moved quickly from whether or not the administration should investigate the events in Manchester to how best to contain the radical response. That debate culminated in the passage of the repressive Six Acts in December 1819.<sup>26</sup> Shelley's response differs, however, in that he is less concerned with what should be done than what *has* been done. In a letter to his publisher Charles Ollier, he comments on the massacre: “The same day that your letter came, came the news of the Manchester work, & the torrent of my indignation has not yet done boiling in my veins. I wait anxiously [to] hear how the Country will express its sense of this bloody murderous oppression of its destroyers” (2:513). Shelley's anxiety about “how the Country will express its sense of” the event itself suggests that the true burden of *The Mask of Anarchy* is not to make a case for a particular course of action; it is instead to recognize that Peterloo is an event that will have a history. In other words, the poem's fundamental political significance is not its contribution to the contemporary debate but its prediction of the future significance of its occasion. For Shelley, the idea that a poet should take on the project of writing contemporary history derives from the conviction that poetry has a special purchase on the future.

Of course, to suggest that *The Mask of Anarchy* represents a kind of history writing would make little sense to those critics who have seen the poem as Shelley's contribution to the radical response to Peterloo.<sup>27</sup> But what such accounts fail to acknowledge is that Shelley's

distance from the events in Manchester is not simply a geographical accident but an explicit feature of the poem:

As I lay asleep in Italy  
There came a voice from over the Sea,  
And with great power it forth led me  
To walk in the visions of Poesy. (1-4)

On the one hand, this “voice from over the Sea” refers to the letter Shelley received from Thomas Love Peacock on September 5 and the news reports, especially the extensive coverage in the *Times* and the *Examiner*, from which he gathered information about the event. On the other, it initiates the dream vision that constitutes *The Mask*. As Susan Wolfson has argued, this framing vision at once acts as the enabling condition for the political allegory that follows and emphasizes Shelley’s distance from the political situation to which he responds. In her reading, the poem’s radical message – “the fantastic allegorical parade of abuses . . . that serves Shelley as a language of political critique; the seemingly effortless victory over Anarchy by Hope; and the advent of an epipsychic oratory, an address to the ‘Men of England’ that Shelley can represent only fantastically” – is undercut by its “unclosed frame.” Moreover, Wolfson argues, that the speaker of the frame disappears from the poem points out that his very return “would expose the oration as an unreal event – a wish and a dream, a fantasy wrought by the visions of Poesy – at the very moment that Shelley wants to insist on its political potency.” In fact, Wolfson ultimately contends, the force of Shelley’s frame poet is such that, even without his return, he comes to stand as “a figure of self-imposed alienation from the world he would influence and of the estrangement of writing from its social events.”<sup>28</sup>

In emphasizing how Shelley’s physical, psychological, and political distance from Peterloo is reflected in the formal features of *The Mask*, Wolfson’s reading offers a helpful corrective to accounts that too quickly assimilate the poem to the tradition of radical opposition. Many critics have noted that Shelley’s poem was not published until after the passage of the Reform Bill in 1832. Wolfson suggests that, given the likelihood of prosecution for libel, Shelley could not have expected its immediate publication. Shelley’s indifference to publication is suggested by the very fact that he offered the poem to Leigh Hunt, whom he knew to be wary about prosecution (Hunt had been jailed for libeling the Prince of Wales in 1812), rather than any number of radical publishers. For Wolfson, “the fact is that between

the production of the poem and its popular reading is a gap,” and “this gap is not just an unlucky product of state repression, but is in some ways courted by the poem itself as it converts politics to aesthetic spectacle and finally leaves its spectacle as a figment in the mind of the sleeping poet” (206). Her point is that Shelley’s alienation is not merely a historical accident, but a product of his engagement with contemporary events.

But the peculiarity of the picture of Shelley that emerges from this account is not that he is simply cut off from the audience he wishes to address, nor that he is simply indifferent to the idea of reaching an audience. Instead, Shelley seems to be committed to a mode of address that *necessarily* distances him from an audience. When Shelley later sent another of his political songs to Hunt, he wrote, “I do not expect you to publish it, but you may show it to whom you please” (2:167). *The Mask*, which invites libel charges and thereby insures that it will go unpublished, seems to be a poem designed to avoid even that limited circulation. The strangeness of Shelley’s stance, in other words, is that he recognizes what might be considered a liability for poetry – its limited popular appeal – and he insists upon emphasizing this liability as poetry’s particular strength.

Another way to put this point would be to say that where critics have maintained that Shelley’s poetry is too evanescent to withstand the demands of politics, Shelley insists politics is ephemeral while poetry lasts. This way of reversing the relationship between poetry and politics, fiction and reality, is dramatized in the allegorical figures that populate the opening dream vision of *The Mask*. The “ghastly masquerade” of “Destructions” that forms the poem’s first part follows the Jacobean masque in beginning with an anti-masque, but departs from it by presenting allegorical figures that in effect are turned inside out. The masks these figures wear do not so much conceal their identities as give them away:

I met Murder on the way –  
 He had a mask like Castlereagh –  
 Very smooth he looked, yet grim;  
 Seven bloodhounds followed him:

All were fat; and well they might  
 Be in admirable plight,  
 For one by one, and two by two,  
 He tossed them human hearts to chew  
 Which from his wide cloak he drew. (5–13)

The sense that these masks do not disguise but rather reveal is reinforced in the lines that introduce Fraud (“Next came Fraud, and he had on, / Like Eldon, an ermined gown” [14–15]) and Hypocrisy (“Clothed with the Bible, as with light, / And the shadows of the night, / Like Sidmouth, next, Hypocrisy / On a crocodile rode by” [22–25]). The true identity of each of these “allegorical” figures is transparent: Murder is Viscount Castlereagh, the foreign secretary; Fraud is Lord Eldon, the lord chancellor; Hypocrisy is Viscount Sidmouth, the home secretary.<sup>29</sup> If the point of creating a personified abstraction like Murder is normally to give a general idea a concrete embodiment, in each of these cases Shelley seems not so much to be personifying abstractions (“I met Murder on the way –”) as abstracting persons (“He had a mask like Castlereagh –”).

Transforming Castlereagh, Eldon, and Sidmouth into masks suggests that personal identity itself is nothing more than a mask worn by abstract vice. According to Thomas Edwards, the first critic to comment on the strangeness of Shelley’s personifications, “the effect of the ‘mask’ as Shelley represents it is to question just the distinction between self and role that ordinary masquerade depends on,” which in turn “suggests that in public life there is no value to distinguishing the man from the function he performs or the effect he has.” Edwards argues that the ultimate problem with Shelley’s critique is that it must finally admit its own impotence:

Shelley, in short, seems on the verge of acknowledging a radical disillusionment with politics, a despair about there being any possibility of healthful life in an organized society of men. Peterloo is not the result of good men behaving badly on the basis of principles that are honest but mistaken; more dreadfully, it may not even be the result of *bad* men behaving badly, just as you’d expect them to. Rather the event is so paralysing to the mind as to make the question of motive or moral judgment unaskable. Politics is not a series of calculated impersonations but a series of commitments to roles and styles that penetrate behind the “mask” to destroy any lingering human identity whatever.<sup>30</sup>

Edwards is right, I think, to emphasize how Shelley’s personifications elide the distinction between personal identity and political function – so that, as Edwards puts it, “Castlereagh *is* Murder, however much he might want to insist on his personal decency and human dignity, or the tragic difficulty of his job” (163). But the strangely self-defeating quality of Shelley’s allegory – the sense in which it seems not so much

to demand interpretation as to interpret itself by providing the true identity of each figure in the text – need not be taken as a sign of political despair. Instead, the claim that Castlereagh *is* Murder, the way that Shelley presents the Foreign Secretary as at once something more and something less than a historical personage, imagines that a time will come when Castlereagh's name will signify *only* "Murder." If, in other words, the impossibility of distinguishing between the man and the mask offers no hope of transforming present conditions, it nevertheless envisions a future in which Shelley's identification of Castlereagh as Murder will stand in the text, while his historical identity will be consigned to a footnote.

The claim that Shelley's allegorical figures are, in some sense, self-interpreting suggests an affinity between the interpretive strategy exemplified by *The Mask* and the method of rhetorical reading advanced, to cite perhaps the most prominent example, in Paul de Man's analysis of Rousseau's *Confessions*. There the iterability of the signifier, the very materiality of the name "Marion," overmatches the instability of the signified so as to make the name indistinguishable from "any other name, any other word, any other sound or noise."<sup>31</sup> In *The Mask*, Shelley imagines that where "Castlereagh" once referred to a person, it will come to refer to an abstract idea. Along similar lines, the poem's parodic dialogue between Anarchy and his minions might be understood to thematize the inherent instability of reference. Responding to the "mark" on Anarchy's "brow" (35) – "I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!" (36) – the "hired Murderers . . . sing / 'Thou art God, and Law, and King'" (60–61), the lawyers and priests whisper, "'Thou art Law and God'" (69), and, finally, "all [cry] with one accord; / 'Thou art King, and God, and Lord'" (70–71). This perversion of the trinity, echoed by the Murderers' demand to "'Give us glory, and blood, and gold'" (65), reflects a situation in which political dogma, inflected by the vagaries of transmission and psychology, precludes the possibility of real exchange. In this way, it adheres to a model of communication which resembles nothing so much as a child's game of telephone, in which the hired Murderers first jumble the order of the terms which appear on Anarchy's brow, the lawyers and priests – recalling only the terms that apply to them – drop "King" from the litany, and, in the end, one word is substituted for another, as "Law" becomes "Lord," justice gives way to power, and language waxes into noise.

This final step, from language to noise, is not one that Shelley takes. In *The Mask*, the disfiguration of language is meaningful, and its

meaning, on this occasion, is political. But to suggest that Shelley offers the instability of reference as a way around the impasse of contemporary political conditions is to begin to see that politics for Shelley comes to include not only actual events, like Peterloo, but also textual events, like *The Mask of Anarchy*. In each case, Shelley imagines that the event's significance is composed not only of the thing itself but of responses to it. Thus, part of the point of seeing Peterloo as an event that will have a history or of thinking about *The Mask* as a poem written for a future audience is to recognize that the meaning of either event is not determined solely in the moment but rather emerges after the fact. If critics have emphasized the political message of *The Mask* and debated whether it should be read as an argument for passive resistance or a call for active rebellion, what they have failed to see is that the poem does not chart a course of action for the future but provides an account of Peterloo itself. In other words, Shelley provides an account from the perspective of the immediate future that positions itself in a poetic (rather than journalistic) tradition and thus imagines for itself a future readership.

The "maniac maid," for example, whose action seems to hold the key to interpreting the action the poem describes, is at best an ambiguous figure. Even before she acts, her name is put in doubt: "her name was Hope, she said: / But she looked more like Despair" (87–8). When she does act – "she lay down in the street, / Right before the horses' feet, / Expecting, with a patient eye, / Murder, Fraud and Anarchy" (98–101) – it is not clear that the rout of Anarchy and his followers, which follows her action, follows as its result.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, if the action of the maid seems to hold the key to interpreting the action the poem describes, it is worth noting that she is in fact an image transplanted from contemporary newspaper reports on the events in Manchester: a woman caught between the protesters and the yeomanry is one of several stock images that circulate in such reports. In this sense, Shelley's foregrounding of the maid has less to do with the action she performs than the sense in which she comes to stand as a self-conscious figure of interpretation. Her appearance at the center of the poem does not highlight her agency so much as call attention to the fact that she, like the massacre itself, is a figure to be read.

Once we recognize that Shelley's poem describes Peterloo itself, questions about the political program *The Mask* recommends give way to a rather more pedestrian set of identifications. The "words of joy and fear" that seem to arise from the "indignant Earth / Which gave the sons of England birth" are the words spoken by the "voice from

over the Sea” that animates the poet’s dream-vision (138, 139–40, 2). They can in turn be identified with the newspaper reports on the massacre that made their way to Shelley in Italy. Thus stanzas routinely read as a radical call to action or merely wishful thinking come instead to refer to the events in Manchester:

“Let a great Assembly be  
Of the fearless and the free  
On some spot of English ground  
Where the plains stretch wide around.

.....

“Ye who suffer woes untold,  
Or to feel, or to behold  
Your lost country bought and sold  
With a price of blood and gold –

“Let a vast assembly be,  
And with great solemnity  
Declare with measured words that ye  
Are, as God has made ye, free –

“Be your strong and simple words  
Keen to wound as sharpened swords,  
And wide as targes let them be  
With their shade to cover ye.” (262–65, 291–302)

Thus the series of injunctions that follow – “Let the tyrants pour around” (303), “Let the charged artillery drive” (307), “Let the fixed bayonet / Gleam with sharp desire to wet / Its bright point in English blood” (311–13), “Let the horsemen’s scimitars / Wheel and flash” (315–16) – looks less like political prophecy than Shelley’s attempt to express his own sense of “this bloody murderous oppression.”

On this reading, the poem concludes by presenting itself as evidence of the conclusion it draws:

“And that slaughter to the Nation  
Shall steam up like inspiration,  
Eloquent, oracular;  
A volcano heard afar.

“And these words shall then become  
Like oppression’s thundered doom  
Ringing through each heart and brain,



Heard again – again – again –

“Rise like lions after slumber  
 In unvanquishable number –  
 Shake your chains to earth like dew  
 Which in sleep had fallen on you –  
 Ye are many – they are few.” (360–372)

Not only do these lines offer proof of the outcome they predict – for Shelley, Peterloo is “A volcano heard afar” – they also create a textual mechanism for bringing about the reception they describe. For in ending the poem by repeating the second stanza of the address to the Men of England, Shelley creates a kind of feedback loop: the poem does not end, but is instead “Heard again – again – again –.”

This repetition and the promise of a reception that extends into the future distinguish Shelley’s poetic account from the news reports that were his source. If Shelley would identify his poem with the “voice from over the Sea” that comes to him in the form of the *Examiner* or the *Times*, he also imagines that the form that voice takes in *The Mask* will ensure its continued circulation in a way that the periodical press cannot. Thus, far from attempting, as Wolfson argues, “to release the fantasy oration into a potentially wider circulation, implying that a political action has emerged from visionary poetry” (208), the circulation Shelley engineers in *The Mask* is itself finally a *textual* effect. Its aim is not so much to incite action or to speak on behalf of the “Men of England” as to create a holding pattern capable of preserving the poem’s address for an audience that is in a position to recognize the account it provides. From this perspective, *The Mask* comes to look like a prophecy in reverse.<sup>33</sup> Rather than predict the future for the present, it imagines a future that will see the present for what it was.

#### A POETICS OF RECEPTION

Taking a long view of the poetic process, which constitutes the contribution that poetry makes to politics, is also an integral part of Shelley’s defense of poetry. The extension of the time frame of poetry to include its reception by future audiences – Shelley’s answer to the intractability of political opposition – carries important implications for our reading of poems that appear to address political questions at only the highest level of abstraction if at all. In this section and the next, I turn to moments in *Adonais*, *A Defence of Poetry*, and the “Ode to the West Wind” which demonstrate how figures that we have come to understand

as paradigmatically transcendent in fact derive the formal privilege that Shelley claims for poetry – his sense that poets are “the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present” (535) – from the material conditions of poetic production and transmission.

Taking a long view of poetry means conceiving of poetic form as much in terms of the poem’s durability as its organic unity. From this perspective, Shelley’s description of *Adonais* as “a highly wrought *piece of art*” and “perhaps the least imperfect of my compositions” should be understood in the context of the poem’s assertion that Keats was killed by the reviewers (2:294, 299). In his comments on *Adonais*, Shelley sets poetic form itself – the formal integrity of his elegy – against the corrosive, even fatal, power that he accords to criticism. In describing *Adonais* as a “*piece of art*,” he emphasizes the poem’s embeddedness in the elegiac tradition it invokes and thus conceives of the poem as an object that, in its artful invocation and embodiment of that tradition, defies the kind of criticism that killed *Adonais*.<sup>34</sup> *Adonais*’s “murderer” (Keats’s critic) will be, worse than Castlereagh, a “noteless blot on a remembered name” because poetry will live after criticism has died (317, 327). Accordingly, the stanza in which Shelley’s elegy makes the transition from lamentation (“I weep for *Adonais* – he is dead!” [1]) to celebration (“Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep – / He hath awakened from the dream of life – ” [343–44]) turns on this distinction:

Nor let us weep that our delight is fled  
 Far from these carrion kites that scream below;  
 He wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead;  
 Thou canst not soar where he is sitting now. –  
 Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow  
 Back to the burning fountain whence it came,  
 A portion of the Eternal, which must glow  
 Through time and change, unquenchably the same,  
 Whilst thy cold embers choke the sordid hearth of shame. (334–42)

Here Shelley associates poetry with spirit and criticism with matter (“Dust” and “cold embers”), but he does so in order to contrast the durability of spirit with the ephemerality of matter. Just as the refrain that concludes *The Mask of Anarchy* is imagined to preserve the poem for a future audience, Shelley’s assessment of his own poetic craftsmanship (an opinion echoed in Wordsworth’s judgment that Shelley was “one of the best *artists* of us all: I mean in workmanship of style”) identifies his poem as itself a claim on the kind of afterlife that its subject has achieved and to which its speaker aspires.<sup>35</sup>

The afterlife *Adonais* imagines requires a death, but this passing does not represent a turn away from the reader. Instead, even in lines that have been understood to announce the speaker's suicide, the very act of leave-taking is rendered in terms that thematize not just the end of bodily existence but also the dissemination of the poetic text:

The breath whose might I have invoked in song  
Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,  
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng  
Whose sails were never to the tempest given;  
The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!  
I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar:  
Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,  
The soul of Adonais, like a star,  
Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are. (487–95)

In the idiom of the poem, the “spirit's bark” is now the poet's body and now the poem. It is, in other words, at once the vehicle of the soul – the material body whose passing liberates the spirit – and the vehicle of poetry itself – the material text that outlasts not just the moment of inspiration but also the moment of its own composition.

James Chandler has recently argued that this kind of textual self-reference in Shelley's poetry is a crucial instance of a larger transformation of historical consciousness in the Romantic period. In the analysis of the sonnet “England in 1819” that frames his study, for example, Chandler suggests that the lines on which that poem turns – the claim that the catalogue of ills enumerated in the poem's first twelve lines “Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day” (13–14) – might call to mind not just burial plots but also “printed type, graven words, even graven images, that open up into the day's illuminations.”<sup>36</sup> He goes on to argue that these lines provide “a way to test the limits of the poem's performative self-consciousness about historical representation – of its apparent commitment to the notion of changing history *by* interpreting it” (31).<sup>37</sup> In this poem and others, particularly the “Ode to the West Wind,” Chandler discovers a Shelley who is not after transcendence but is instead engaged in a reflection on the material conditions that govern both poetic production and the possibility of historical change. As he puts it, Shelley's “hope for his own time depends on the possibility of the exchange of views in public forms, on the technologies that allow writing to be circulated in wider and wider readerships, and on

the capacity of particular individuals to reach and shape public opinion" (511). In Chandler's view Shelley's achievement is that, in "the historicity of the lyric form," he "had glimpsed that profound lesson later articulated by Marx at mid-century" (529, 554). The "lesson" Chandler has in mind here is Marx's claim, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past."<sup>38</sup> For Chandler, then, the "lesson" of a poem like "England in 1819" or the "Ode to the West Wind" is that "the English people must collectively recognize the phantasmal character of their own historical situation, and in recognizing it, must change it" (554).<sup>39</sup>

Chandler's account of Romantic literary culture makes a powerful case for reading even Shelley's most esoteric verse as, in effect, "an experiment on the temper of the public mind."<sup>40</sup> But Shelley's estimation of poetry's contribution to historical change is ultimately less straightforward than Chandler's account suggests. In conceiving of poetry's political utility in terms of its formal identification with a futurity that it cannot predict rather than in terms of the lessons it imparts, Shelley imagines poetry not as an instrument designed to bring its readers around to a different understanding of their historical situation, but as itself a transmission "from the past." In this way, Shelley reimagines poetry's greatest impediment – the sense in which a poem's success depends on circumstances that lie outside the poet's control – as its greatest strength. From this standpoint, poetry is less "an experiment on the temper of the public mind," a kind of political litmus test, than an experiment on the temper of some future public's mind. While a poem's future success might depend upon the historical transformations that attend its transmission to future readers, its relation to those changes need not be strictly causal. For Shelley, to imagine that poetry serves a political purpose is not to imagine that poetry is, in the last instance, political.

Paradoxically, the political claim Shelley makes for his poetry is that its success will be predicated on a political transformation it cannot effect. Thus rather than calling for immediate action in response to Peterloo, *The Mask of Anarchy* addresses a future audience which will see the massacre for what it was. In this sense, the form of instrumentality worked out in Shelley's poetry does not conceive of poetry as a tool for effecting change so much as an instrument for registering future

change. While a poem like *The Mask* clearly represents an intervention in a contemporary political debate, its larger significance has to do with the sense in which the conception of politics it articulates is not exhausted by an account of the political views it expresses. The political insight of Shelley's poetics stems from the conviction that the present terms in which politics is understood cannot determine the future horizon of politics.

This is the view I take Shelley to be proposing at those moments in *A Defence of Poetry* that describe poetry's power in terms of the attenuation of authorial agency:

Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results: but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet. (531)

To claim, as Shelley does here, that "poetry is not like reasoning" or that "when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline" is, on the one hand, to measure poetry against poetic inspiration and to find it wanting. On the other hand, however, it is to insist that only in this diminished state has "the most glorious poetry . . . ever been communicated to the world." The poet's loss is the world's gain because, even in describing composition as a falling away from inspiration, Shelley acknowledges that it is only as "a feeble shadow" that poetry can ever be made known to the world. If poetry necessarily escapes the poet's will, in other words, this discrepancy between poetic inspiration and its concrete realization becomes the basis for poetry's existence and endurance in the world.

Throughout the *Defence*, in fact, it is poetic transmission and not any particular definition of poetry that best explains poetry's "effects upon society" (516). And, curiously enough, Shelley raises the possibility that the poets he credits with the creation of "forms of opinion and action never before conceived" produced these effects not because but in spite of the views they held (523). Thus it is crucial, for Shelley, that "the

most decisive proof of the supremacy of Milton's genius" is his "bold neglect of a direct moral purpose" (527). It is this sense of "bold neglect" that unites Shelley's central examples, Milton and Dante:

The poetry of Dante may be considered as the bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and the antient world. The distorted notions of invisible things which Dante and his rival Milton have idealized, are merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised. It is a difficult question to determine how far they were conscious of the distinction which must have subsisted in their minds between their own creeds and that of the people. Dante at least appears to wish to mark the full extent of it by placing Rhiphaeus, whom Virgil calls *justissimus unus*, in Paradise, and observing a most heretical caprice in his distribution of rewards and punishments. And Milton's poem contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support. (526)

If Shelley seems uncertain about whether Dante or Milton intended the heresies he finds in their poetry, his uncertainty has less to do with the difficulty of the question than with his indifference to it. While the claim that "[n]othing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*," that "[i]t is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil," would seem to make it clear that Milton covertly intended this result, this is not a claim that Shelley expends much energy defending (526). When he returns to it later in the same paragraph, he introduces a parenthetical qualification that pushes the question of intention aside: "Milton has so far violated the popular creed (if this shall be judged to be a violation) as to have alleged no superiority of moral virtue to his God over his Devil" (527). In raising the issue of judgment, Shelley seems to be as concerned with what readers make of Milton's violation of the popular creed as with Milton's reasons for doing so. His point about Milton's "bold neglect of a direct moral purpose," then, serves not just to emphasize what Milton intended but also to insist upon the fact and the effect of this neglect. The point, in other words, is not to determine whether these effects were intended or unintended but rather to establish them as the mark of what Shelley calls "high poetry" (528).

In claiming that Shelley is indifferent to Milton's actual intentions, I do not mean to suggest that the *Defence* does not in fact raise questions about the beliefs Milton held or the way those beliefs are manifested in *Paradise Lost*. Among Shelley's claims is the clear suggestion that both

Milton and Dante were secret heretics, that “the distorted notion of invisible things which Dante and his rival Milton have idealized, are merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised” (526). What I want to emphasize, however, is the overdetermined nature of Shelley’s assessments of Milton and Dante: on the one hand, he argues that both poets were closet heretics; on the other hand, he suggests that, whatever they intended, the masking and indirect expression of their views has made it possible to read their works as expressions of diametrically opposed beliefs. Shelley’s judgment is overdetermined because either one of these positions would be a sufficient warrant for his argument. The presence of both positions in the *Defence* leads to the strangeness of Shelley’s claim that the “strange and natural antithesis” by which Milton’s “philosophical refutation” of Christian doctrine “has been its chief popular support” and the capriciousness of his claim that Dante exhibited the “most heretical caprice in his distribution of rewards and punishments.” In effect, Shelley buttresses his argument about Milton’s and Dante’s heretical intentions with a second line of argument which dispenses with the determination of authorial intention, replacing it with an assessment of the effects that poems have after they have left their authors’ hands.

In his defense of literary formalism, Steven Knapp makes the theoretical implications of this second line of argument clear when he offers Shelley’s remarks on Milton as an example of “the claim that Milton, when he wrote *Paradise Lost*, actually did something other than what he intended to do.”<sup>41</sup> For Knapp, the disparity between intention and content exemplified in what he terms the “Romantic Argument” reflects a conception of literary composition as “a peculiarly self-transcending action” (5), which provides “one of the main intuitions underlying the various forms of literary formalism, old and new” (6). Knapp’s interest, however, is not in offering an account of the argument of the *Defence*. In fact, he notes that “the context of Shelley’s statement indicates . . . that he thought of Milton as having secretly intended this result,” and he claims that “only in the twentieth century – above all, in the work of William Empson – does one encounter unambiguous statements of the view that what Empson calls ‘the logic of the story’ undermines Milton’s defense of God despite his intentions to the contrary” (8). While Knapp is clearly right to reject Shelley’s comments on Milton as a strong version of the Romantic Argument – a version that “advances the *logical*, or perhaps *metaphysical*, claim” that

the world Milton intended was not the one he realized in *Paradise Lost* (8) – the *Defence* nevertheless holds an important place in the development of the view he describes. What I have been arguing is that the process whereby authorial intention and poetic inspiration are increasingly imagined in terms of reception stands behind the tendency in the twentieth century to imagine that “the meaning of the work goes beyond what its author intended” (5). Moreover, the peculiar ambiguity of Shelley’s statement of this view – the sense in which indirection masks the author’s true intentions in such a way as to allow divergent interpretations of his central convictions – attests to the historical pressures that helped to shape it.

From this standpoint, that Shelley presents himself as the proper judge of Milton and Dante is as crucial a feature of his argument as the claims he makes about their poetry. In offering himself as the heir and interpreter of a Christian poet like Dante, Shelley makes an implicit argument about the relationship between poetic inspiration and poetic reception:

His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor. All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great Poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight. (528)

It comes as no surprise that, for the author of *The Necessity of Atheism*, Dante’s poetry might be “the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight.” But for Shelley this relationship works both ways. That is to say, as much as the appearance of the Trojan Riphæus in the *Paradiso*’s Circle of the Just marks Dante’s distance from the system of beliefs to which he ostensibly ascribes, Shelley’s appearance among Dante’s readers exemplifies the sense in which the mark of poetic achievement is the inevitability of reaching an audience the poet not only could not have foreseen but would not have endorsed. Shelley, as the future reader whom Dante could not foresee but in fact conceives, stands as the proof of his poetry.



TRANSMISSION AS TRANSCENDENCE

In the "Ode to the West Wind," composed in Dante's terza rima stanza, Shelley's future reader stands at the margin of the poem's closing appeal to the West Wind:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:  
What if my leaves are falling like its own!  
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,  
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? (57-70)

Here again, Shelley works to identify the aspiration of his verse with its reception by future readers. What the poet asks of the West Wind is effected by the reader whose "incantation of this verse" stands as proof of the transmission of his words.<sup>42</sup> Thus the power that lies outside the poem, the "Wild Spirit" it invokes (13), is imagined to reside in the poem's readers themselves, among whom the scattering of the poet's "dead thoughts," like the wind's scattering of "withered leaves," "quicken[s] a new birth."

The leaves themselves finally stand as the poem's most powerful image of the identification of poetic power and poetic reception. From the outset, they figure not only the fallen leaves driven by the West Wind or the leaves of the poem itself, fallen from the poet's hand as he falls away from inspiration; "Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red" (4), they also figure the people of the world, "Pestilence-stricken multitudes" (5). In likening his words to leaves, Shelley imagines a transfer of agency on the order of the one he describes in the *Defence*. Just as Shelley's reception proves the power of Dante's verse, so the power of the "Ode" will be confirmed by its "incantation" by future

readers. In this way those who respond to the poem's repeated apostrophe – "O hear!" – come to embody not only the poet's words but also the inspiration he seeks, the "Ashes and sparks" that point ahead to the description of Dante's "very words" in the *Defence*.

In other words, if the "Ode" is a myth, it is a myth of transmission rather than transcendence. This is to say that Shelley's commitment to poetry has as much to do with his recognition of the possibilities inherent in the materiality of the poetic text as his idealism. In emphasizing poetic transmission, even to the extent of identifying poetry's power with its reception, Shelley acknowledges a dependence on the technology of writing that had troubled philosophy all the way back to Plato's *Phaedrus*. But unlike Plato, who criticizes writing for its tendency to "roll about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it," for Shelley it is precisely writing's promiscuity that recommends it.<sup>43</sup> The kind of self-referentiality implied by "the incantation of this verse" has less to do with the reader's possession by the poetic text than the sense in which the reader, by breathing through the text, takes possession of it.

## CHAPTER 5

### *The art of printing and the law of libel*

In an 1817 review of Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*, Leigh Hunt observed that "although the art of printing is not new, yet the Press in any great and true sense of the word is a modern engine in the comparison, and the changeful times of society have never yet been accompanied with so mighty a one. *Books* did what was done before; they have now a million times the range and power."<sup>1</sup>

This unprecedented "range and power" is echoed in Hazlitt's claim in his *Life of Napoleon* that "the French Revolution might be described as the remote but inevitable result of the invention of the art of printing."<sup>2</sup> On first sight, these early nineteenth-century assertions about printing's modernity must appear anachronistic. After all, neither printing nor its widespread dissemination were new in the nineteenth century – as Hunt himself notes.<sup>3</sup> On closer inspection, however, Hunt's and Hazlitt's claims have less to do with technological innovation than the effects of the emergence of the mass reading public. Their point, in other words, is that while print technology was by no means new, it took the appearance of new classes of readers to realize print's full potential.

For Hunt and Hazlitt, the new scope of the press's influence was a salutary sign of democratization. As Hazlitt contends, when "the world (that dread jury) are impanelled, and called to look on and be umpires in the scene, so that nothing is done by connivance or in a corner, then reason mounts the judgment-seat in lieu of passion or interest, and opinion becomes law, instead of arbitrary will."<sup>4</sup> But democratic reformers were not alone in claiming for literature a new kind of power.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the understanding of the text that underwrites the radical literary politics of such writers as Hunt and Hazlitt also informed the libel prosecutions of Regency England, which endeavored to punish publishers (and, by extension, writers) for the possible negative effects of the texts they published. For Hunt and Hazlitt,

among others, the power of the press was thought to depend upon the radical extension of textual power made possible by the expansion of the reading public. The law of libel expressed a similar commitment to understanding texts in terms of their effects, but its aim was to limit the dissemination of radical views to the mass audience. That the same notion of textuality came to support opposite ends underscores the sense in which the expansion of the reading audience served to recast political conflicts as literary controversies.

For both the reformers and their opponents, texts come to be understood in terms of their (often unpredictable and remote) effects. The conception of the power of the printed text to which Hunt and Hazlitt allude recapitulates the attitudes toward the new mass audience that the preceding chapters have explored; the opportunities for poetic practice realized by Byron, Keats, and Shelley, but also the obstacles with which Wordsworth contends, attest to the growing conviction that, for better or worse, the transformation of the reading public had changed the conditions of literary production. But Hunt's and Hazlitt's reflections on the art of printing, and their emphasis on the emancipatory potential inherent in the meeting of print culture and the mass public, do not simply mark their devotion to the liberal side of the question. They also suggest that the law of libel should not be set in simple opposition to literary production in Regency England. Rather than a clear antagonism between state-sponsored censorship and perfect freedom of expression, the relationship between libel and literary practice suggests that the legal and literary interest in textual effects represents something more than a change in the legal status of literary work. This chapter argues that the transition from an expressive theory of authorship to a new emphasis on texts' effects on readers is mirrored by the turn from treason trials to libel prosecutions in the state's ongoing effort to police political expression and that the law of libel itself articulates a theory of authorship which prefigures the death of the author. It does so, moreover, in a way that complicates recent attempts to historicize modern authorship.

Thinking about the history of libel law points to some of the larger implications of the Romantic period's changing conceptions of the text and of authorship. This legal history at once affords a different perspective from which to reconsider this book's central arguments and discloses the effects of the rise of the mass public on another cultural field. The history of libel is closely related to the literary-historical

developments I have been tracking, that is, not merely because authors in the period were concerned with the threat of prosecution (although many were) but because legal and literary history were both shaped in reaction to an emergent mass society. The contemporary discourse about libel tells its own story about the way that authors were being eclipsed by readers – and this story illuminates Shelley’s confrontation with the limits of authorial intention in *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley’s version of Aeschylus’s lost drama is formed by his conviction that the power of the Prometheus myth “would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language.”<sup>6</sup> This chapter argues that to solve this dilemma Shelley turns to the logic of libel law. In making Prometheus’s alienation from his words the measure of their full power, Shelley again identifies poetry’s power with its effects on readers, but he does so by taking libel’s view of the text and the author as a pattern for poetry. In *A Defence of Poetry*, to which I return at the end of the chapter, this theory of textual effects becomes the basis for a new form of poetic authority.

#### ROMANTIC AUTHORSHIP AND THE LAW

In his 1817 collection *Sibylline Leaves*, Coleridge included “Fire, Famine, and Slaughter: A War Eclogue,” a poem first published anonymously in the *Morning Post* in 1798. The poem, a thinly veiled attack on the Pitt administration’s war policy cast in the form of a dialogue between three figures who recall *Macbeth*’s “weird sisters,”<sup>7</sup> was preceded by an elaborate “Apologetic Preface,” which, in a marginal note to a manuscript copy of the volume presented to his son Derwent, Coleridge described as “my happiest effort in prose composition.” He explains his decision to republish the poem by noting that it “had been attributed at different times to different other persons; and what I had dared beget, I thought it neither manly nor honourable not to dare father.”<sup>8</sup> The argument of the “Preface” also makes it clear, however, that “fathering” this poem of his radical youth involves Coleridge in an uncomfortable negotiation: in laying claim to “Fire, Famine, and Slaughter,” he feels compelled to produce a rationale that will absolve him of the politically incendiary sentiments it expresses.

Coleridge begins his self-defense by recounting Walter Scott’s recitation of the anonymous poem at an 1803 dinner party whose guests included “more men of celebrity in science or polite literature than are

commonly found collected round the same table” (1097). Reminded by another guest of the poem “which he had recited that morning,”

[Scott] was rather surprised that none of us should have noticed or heard of the poem, as it had been, at the time, a good deal talked of in Scotland. It may be easily supposed that my feelings were at this moment not of the most comfortable kind. Of all present, one only [Sir H. Davy] knew, or suspected me to be the author. . . . It appeared the general wish to hear the lines. As my friend chose to remain silent, I chose to follow his example, and Mr. [Scott] recited the poem. This he could do with the better grace, being known to have ever been not only a firm and active Anti-Jacobin and Anti-Gallican, but likewise a zealous admirer of Mr. Pitt, both as a good man and a great statesman. As a poet exclusively, he had been amused with the Eclogue; as a poet he recited it; and in a spirit which made it evident that he would have read and repeated it with the same pleasure had his own name been attached to the imaginary object or agent. (1097–98)

The recitation prompts Coleridge’s host, William Sotheby, to remark on the “malignity of heart which could alone have prompted sentiments so atrocious.” Coleridge acknowledges the poem’s “moral deformity,” but before revealing himself as the author of “the imaginary object,” he offers an elaborate argument against understanding it as a serious attempt to render a political judgment – or, indeed, as a serious statement at all. He first asks the assembled party “whether the mood of the mind and the general state of sensations in which the poet produces such vivid and fantastic images, is likely to co-exist, or is even compatible with, that gloomy and deliberate ferocity which a serious wish to realize them would pre-suppose?” (1098). He calls attention to the contradiction between poetic figuration and the “madness” of “[a] rooted hatred,” which “eddies round its favourite object, and exercises as it were a perpetual tautology of mind in thoughts and words which admit of no adequate substitutes.” Unlike the “rapid flow of those outrageous and wildly combined execrations, which too often with our lower classes serve for escape-valves to carry off the excess of their passions, as so much superfluous steam,” he claims, “deliberate malignity” expresses itself “with that sort of calmness of tone which is to the ear what the paleness of anger is to the eye” (1099).

To prove his point, Coleridge turns, unsurprisingly, to Shakespeare:

What language Shakespeare considered characteristic of malignant disposition we can see in the speech of the good-natured Gratiano, who spoke ‘an infinite deal of nothing more than any man in all Venice;’

–Too wild, too rude and bold of voice!

the skipping spirit, whose thoughts and words reciprocally ran away with each other;

–O be thou damn'd, inexorable dog!  
And for thy life let justice be accused!

and the wild fancies that follow, contrasted with Shylock's tranquil 'I stand here for Law'. (1099–1100)

Coleridge's argument is that the poet, like the common man blowing off steam or Shakespeare's Gratiano, speaks "an infinite deal of nothing." Having established it, he transforms it from a general claim about human nature into a more specific claim about authorship:

Or, to take a case more analogous to the present subject, should we hold it either fair or charitable to believe it to have been Dante's serious wish that all the persons mentioned by him (many recently departed, and some even alive at the time,) should actually suffer the fantastic and horrible punishments to which he has sentenced them in his Hell and Purgatory? Or what shall we say of the passages in which Bishop Jeremy Taylor anticipates the state of those who, vicious themselves, have been the cause of vice and misery to their fellow-creatures? (1100)

Of course, these questions are rhetorical: it is neither "fair" nor "charitable" to imagine that either Dante or Taylor, given the chance, would actually inflict the tortures he describes. In claiming that, like Dante and Taylor, he never intended the harms he imagined, Coleridge does more than simply disavow the politics of "Fire, Famine, and, Slaughter." Rather than arguing that the poem is not merely political – and that we must look beyond the views it expresses to find its real value as poetry – he maintains that it is not political at all.

If the drama of the scene Coleridge describes is that the author of the poem sits unrecognized at the table as its merits and his morals are debated – that he has become merely a part of the audience for the poem – the interest of his defense is that it works so hard to undermine the problem that taking responsibility for the poem might pose. Rather than defending himself for republishing the poem or excusing his younger self for writing it, Coleridge constructs a theory of authorship wherein authors cannot be held responsible for the opinions their works express. In fact, the anecdote that frames the "Preface" illustrates this argument in advance: that Scott recites the poem with such pleasure, "being known to have ever been not only a firm and active Anti-Jacobin and Anti-Gallican, but likewise a zealous admirer of Mr. Pitt," demonstrates that he does so "[a]s a poet exclusively"; "that he would have read and repeated it with the same pleasure" had he

been its author proves that the poem is an aesthetic, and not political, performance (1098). From this perspective, Coleridge's apology is as much a defense of Scott's approbation of the poem as of his own authorship of it. While the poem requires an explanation, because it "was not calculated to excite passion in any mind, or to make any impression except on poetic readers" (1101), it demands no recantation. Finally, then, Coleridge's is a self-consuming apology which justifies the poem by denying the need for justification.<sup>9</sup>

The "Apologetic Preface" is obviously self-serving, and we might be tempted to regard the theory of authorship it articulates, wherein the poet writes as a poet and "a poet exclusively," as equally suspect. Yet David Saunders and Ian Hunter have suggested that it is precisely the refusal to countenance such a split conception of the author's historical and aesthetic personalities that undermines recent literary-historical accounts of authorship. They contend that historicist studies of authorship – Ian Watt's account of Daniel Defoe in *The Rise of the Novel* serves as "a well-known case in point" – assume "the familiar form of a dialectic between the movement of history and the growth of consciousness" and that "[l]iterary studies of censorship . . . almost invariably identify the writer's legal and aesthetic personalities."<sup>10</sup> As a result, Saunders and Hunter argue, historicist accounts of the author inevitably culminate in the identification of this subject with "a figure – that of the expressive author – to which all earlier forms of authorship were pointing, whether they knew it or not" (480–81).

For Saunders and Hunter, the persistence of the expressive author is nowhere more apparent than in the work of Foucault, which stands behind recent literary-historical analyses of authorship, and whose account of the "author-function" they see as legitimating "quite divergent arguments." They note that Foucault's "romantic leanings towards the transgressing of constraints" (486n9) tend to work against his definition of the "author-function" as a "certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction."<sup>11</sup> They suggest that influential accounts of authorship by Martha Woodmansee and Mark Rose, despite their claims that modern authorship was shaped by the development of copyright law and the expansion of the literary market, have in fact served to reinforce the conception of the author as genius that they set out to historicize.<sup>12</sup> "The trouble with this sort of account," Saunders and Hunter argue, "is that it explains too much



and in the end accounts for too little”—a misprision which results from a mistaken “case for the historical equivalence of the writer’s aesthetic and legal personalities” (492, 491). As a corrective, they emphasize that in England criminal liability has historically been attached “not to the activity of *writing* but to that of *publication*” and that English criminal law understood texts through “a legal calculation of what we can term the socioethical effects of the work’s dissemination,” or what they go on to call “a sociolegal calculation of the effects of publication” (487, 491).<sup>13</sup> Saunders and Hunter urge that we follow Foucault, then, not in his “romantic” conception of the author as “the figure of the transgressive subject” but in “his treatment of the author as a historical positivity” (485, 486n9).<sup>14</sup> For Saunders and Hunter, “[i]t is not discourse but print that is transgressive,” and thus “it is not discourse but print that allows the writer to take on the ethical attributes of an author who speaks for all men for all time” (507).

Saunders and Hunter’s ostensible subject is early modern authorship, but as the idea of “an author who speaks for all men for all time” and numerous passing references suggest, the real target of their critique is “the romantic conception of authorship,” which they identify as the blind behind which early modern authorship has been obscured from view.<sup>15</sup> While they assume that the failure of literary historians to recognize the impact of print technology is a legacy of Romanticism, I want to suggest that the approach they recommend as an alternative to the birth of the author is in fact itself a better account of Romantic authorship than is the historical fiction that serves as the object of their critique.<sup>16</sup> Saunders and Hunter imagine that the relationship between author and publisher (or, for that matter, between author and audience) is a one-way street — that the legal status of texts had no effect on authors or on conceptions of authorship. The result, despite their claims to the contrary, is the hypostatization of the writer as Romantic genius or expressive author.<sup>17</sup> If literary history’s failure adequately to historicize authorship has been the result of its conflation of the writer’s legal and aesthetic personalities, the failure of Saunders and Hunter’s approach is that it imagines that the two might be cleanly separated. The preceding chapters have questioned the expressive theory of authorship by emphasizing the numerous ways in which reception became a central concern for Romantic writers. While the point of this chapter is to examine the status of Romantic authorship within the context of the rise of the law of libel, libel is not simply one more context for understanding Romantic writing. Instead, libel law and the

libel prosecutions of the early nineteenth century exemplify a conception of authorship which is fundamental to understanding both the pressure that the changed conditions of literary production and reception exerted on Romantic writers and how their sense of poetic authority was beginning to change.

#### THE LITERARY THEORY OF THE LAW OF LIBEL

In claiming a connection between Romantic authorship and libel, I do not mean to imply that the English law of libel was an invention of the early nineteenth century. Instead, the “rise” to which I refer reflects both the increased numbers of prosecutions for criminal libel in the years following Waterloo and the intensification of public interest in libel trials. Between 1760 and 1790, there were approximately seventy prosecutions for criminal libel in England. In 1795, following the Terror in France, the anti-Jacobin furor in England, and the declaration of war between the two countries, the Attorney-General Sir John Scott claimed “that there had been more prosecutions for libel during the last two years than there had been for twenty years before.”<sup>18</sup> The convictions of Leigh and John Hunt for libeling the Prince Regent in *The Examiner* in 1812, not to mention the salon Leigh Hunt conducted in his prison cell in Southwark, established prosecution for libel as a real threat for many subsequent writers. In 1817 alone there were at least twenty-six prosecutions for seditious and blasphemous libel, among them the celebrated trials of the radical publisher William Hone. In the wake of Peterloo, the years 1819, 1820, and 1821 saw over 120 prosecutions for criminal libel.<sup>19</sup>

The new prominence of politically motivated libel prosecutions represented a radical shift in the state’s legal strategy for policing political expression. In the 1790s, the primary legal instrument for controlling radical political activity had been dramatized in a series of highly publicized treason trials. As John Barrell has argued, the 1794 acquittals of Thomas Hardy, John Thelwall, and John Horne Tooke on charges of high treason in London “have generally been regarded as both the greatest triumph of the revolutionary or reform movement in Britain in the 1790s, and as the point at which that movement went into decline, under the pressure of new laws defining seditious and treasonable practices, and of the need of the accused, during the trials, to insist that their aims were limited and entirely constitutional.”<sup>20</sup> By 1819, the radical movement had reemerged, and so too had the government’s

attempts to control it. The most celebrated political prosecutions of this second wave of reformist and revolutionary activity, however, were not for treason, but rather for criminal libel. If the key public figures of 1790s radicalism were alleged conspirators, the new public representatives of the radical movement were publishers and printers. In part, this change reflects the reconfiguration of radical culture that followed the repressive measures taken by the government in the late 1790s. But the move from treason to libel, and from radical conspirators to radical publishers, in fact marks a far larger transformation in the understanding of public expression. Moreover, the state's recourse to the law of libel enables us to see that the Romantic aspiration to "speak for all men for all time" does not merely express a desire to transgress or transcend contemporary standards. It also reflects a historical moment in which meaning, and especially the meaning of printed texts, was increasingly coming to be identified with effects rather than intentions.

This shift from intention to effect has been a recurrent concern of the preceding chapters. In the legal realm, the change is reflected in the different domains that treason and libel sought to control. Critics such as Barrell have taken the treason trials of 1794 to be exemplary not simply because they represent the pinnacle of 1790s radicalism, but also because the common-law crime of high treason, around which these trials revolved, raises a familiar set of literary-theoretical issues. Written into statute law during the reign of Edward III – in order, as Blackstone explains in the *Commentaries*, to distinguish real offenses from the "constructive treasons" created by "tyrannical princes" – the charge of high treason was to be brought "[w]hen a man doth compass or imagine the death of our lord the king, of our lady the queen, or their eldest son and heir."<sup>21</sup> Blackstone points out that, in the eyes of the law, "compassing" and "imagining" are "synonymous terms" (78), and he goes on to identify precisely the feature of the statute that would prove to be the central issue in the trials of 1794:

But, as this compassing or imagining is an act of the mind, it cannot possibly fall under any judicial cognizance, unless it be demonstrated by some open, or *overt*, act. And yet the tyrant Dionysius is recorded to have executed a subject, barely for dreaming that he had killed him; which was held for sufficient proof, that he had thought thereof in his waking hours. Such is not the temper of the English law. (79)

Blackstone's comments emphasize that treason was understood to involve precisely a treasonous *intention*. A treasonous act served

the purposes of the prosecution only insofar as it offered evidence of the accused's mental state: treason was, by definition, "an act of the mind." As Thomas Erskine claimed in his successful defense of Hardy, high treason was a "complete . . . anomaly" in English law, in that the crime was "wholly seated in unconsummated intention." In short, Erskine argued, "a man cannot be indicted for killing the king."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in a note to his 1809 edition of Blackstone's *Commentaries*, Edward Christian makes this distinction absurdly clear by offering the trial of Charles I's executioner as an example: "In the case of the regicides, the indictment charged, that they did traiterously compass and imagine the death of the king. And the taking off his head was laid, among others, as an overt act of compassing. And the person who was supposed to have given the stroke was convicted on the same indictment." As Christian explains, "the compassing is considered as the treason, the overt acts as the means made use of to effectuate the intentions of the heart" (79n1).<sup>23</sup> In the case of high treason, then, intentions were not simply identified with actions, but came to replace them altogether.

The difficulties inherent in making the defendant's intentions the ultimate object of a criminal trial, evident in the treason trials themselves, were brilliantly summarized by Edmund Burke in his 1794 *Report from the Committee of the House of Commons*:

The connexion of intention and the circumstances is plainly of such a nature, as more to depend on the sagacity of the observer, than on the excellence of any rule. The pains taken by the civilians on that subject have not been very fruitful; and the English law writers have, perhaps, as wisely, in a manner abandoned the pursuit. In truth, it seems a wild attempt to lay down any rule for the proof of intention by circumstantial evidence; all the acts of the party; all things that explain or throw light on these acts; all the acts of others relative to the affair, that come to his knowledge, and may influence him; his friendships and enmities, his promises, his threats, the truths of his discourses, the falsehood of his apologies, pretences, and explanations; his looks, his speech; his silence where he was called to speak; every thing which tends to establish the connexion between all these particulars; – every circumstance, precedent, concomitant and subsequent, become parts of circumstantial evidence.<sup>24</sup>

Burke's *Report* was concerned not with the trials of Hardy, Thelwall, and Tooke, but with the impeachment hearings of Warren Hastings, which were entering their sixth year. Moreover, his object was not to call into question the efficacy of circumstantial evidence, but to argue

for some latitude in assembling such evidence against Hastings. But in making a case for the free admission of circumstantial evidence in Hastings's case – in order to satisfy what Alexander Welsh has called “the demands of a fully managed narrative replete with incident, characters, and things, with speech and silence, and the connection of all the circumstances over time” – Burke also discloses the terms in which Erskine sought to refute charges that he argued amounted to “constructive” treason.<sup>25</sup>

It is along precisely these lines that literary critics have understood the significance of the treason trials. Barrell, for example, has argued that the trials were “the occasion of a dramatised and staged conflict between the various discourses in which politics was debated in that decade, a conflict in which the stake was ownership of the institution of Law itself.”<sup>26</sup> Thomas Pfau has suggested that the defense's ability successfully “to expose the prosecution's self-confirming, ‘constructive,’ and distinctly narrative modes of inferential legal argument” raises the question of whether all disciplinary knowledge is similarly constructive, conspiratorial, and paranoid.<sup>27</sup> Pfau sees the treason trials as opening up “the larger problem of ‘disciplinarity’ in the humanities and social sciences today,” which prompts him to ask a series of questions that repeat the core concerns of McGann's *Romantic Ideology* in a methodologically finer tone:

To what extent do the currently dominant models of historicist scholarship, materialist analysis, and rhetorical (tropological) reading open up more authentic and historically “durable” vistas on the antagonistic, socio-political and aesthetic scene of Romanticism? Or is, alternatively, the disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical rigor and reflexivity characteristic of such approaches but another, distant echo of Romanticism's ideological dispensation? Do our scholarly and critical engagements of Romanticism constitute an authentic “over-coming” or but another repetition of Romanticism? Are our knowledges of Romanticism objective and abiding or pragmatic and transferential representations of that “past”? (31)

Pfau answers these questions by claiming that it is “the formal and rhetorical organization of narratives, rather than their professed content, which emerges as the symptomatic material on which pivots our analytic relationship to Romanticism.” This answer leads him to the assertion that “[t]he formal-rhetorical structure of these accounts is their historical content, which is to say, it is the *mode of appearance* of the consciousnesses produced by historical change” (32). The virtue of Pfau's account, I think, is its insistence on the identity of formal

structure and historical content; its shortcoming is that he understands this connection to be fundamentally narrative and rhetorical. Because his analysis regards consciousness as the preeminent category of Romantic knowledge, he cannot help but conclude with another diagnosis of the Romantic ideology. My aim here is not to liberate Romanticism from this malady, but to recognize the way in which the Romantic recognition of the importance of the *text's* mode of appearance represents an engagement with reality that does not amount to an attempt, as Pfau would have it, "to *defend* us against the traumatic recognition of an irreducibly contingent future" (60).

The terms in which recent critics have understood the treason trials go a long way toward explaining the quantity of critical attention devoted to the 1794 trials in particular and to 1790s radicalism in general.<sup>28</sup> The trials, focusing as they did on the methods by which intentions can (or cannot) be reconstructed from the traces they leave, afford critics the opportunity, as Barrell puts it, to examine how the "mobility of language was exploited in a specific historical situation and with very specific historical effects."<sup>29</sup> The most immediate historical effect of the state's failure to convict Hardy, Thelwall, and Tooke, however, was the passage of a series of acts effectively outlawing radical organization. These acts, beginning with Eldon's "Two Acts" in 1795 and concluding with the Corresponding Societies Act in 1799, worked to suppress radical organization by suspending habeas corpus, outlawing unadvertised public meetings, taxing previously untaxed publications, requiring that the printer's name and address appear on the title page of all publications, and finally outlawing any organization which required an oath. The result was to drive the radical movement so far underground as to be all but invisible.<sup>30</sup> If the failure of the prosecution in the 1794 trials was in large measure a result of the failure of the law of high treason to identify words as acts – if, in other words, the problem with proving that a man had in fact imagined the death of the king had to do with the difficulty of establishing a clear link between imagination and intention – the measures taken following the treason trials sought to close this loophole by focusing on words that need not be constructively linked to intentions, that were not evidence of intentions, but were in fact acts in and of themselves.<sup>31</sup>

The threat posed by the new "print politics" inaugurated after the end of the war by such radical writers as T.J. Wooler, Robert Carlile, and William Cobbett required a radically different remedy. Whereas

the law of treason took as its object the intentions of the accused, the danger posed by the dissemination of radical or reformist views in print had less to do with the machinations of a small, closed group of conspirators than the potential for mass unrest represented by the circulation of radical publications.<sup>32</sup> It was this threat, at once less immediate and more difficult to locate, that the series of prosecutions for criminal libel that began in 1817 sought to answer. The law of libel's power was derived, ironically, from the very event that had confirmed the liberty of the English press: the expiration of the Licensing Act in 1695. According to William Wickwar, whose *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press* remains the best history of press prosecutions in early nineteenth-century England, the Licensing Act's "almost accidental" expiration in effect extended "a right or liberty to publish *without* a license what formerly could be published only *with* one."<sup>33</sup> The limited nature of this right is captured in Blackstone's observation that "[t]he liberty of the press is, indeed, essential to the nature of a free state; but this consists in laying no *previous* restraints upon publication, and not in freedom from censure for criminal matters when published." "Every freeman has undoubted right to lay what sentiments he pleases before the public," Blackstone continues, "to forbid this, is to destroy the freedom of the press: but if he publishes what is improper, mischievous, or illegal, he must take the consequence of his own temerity. . . . Thus the will of individuals is still left free; the abuse only of that free will is the object of legal punishment" (151–52). Blackstone's opinion was recapitulated fifty years later by Henry Addington, Lord Sidmouth, the Tory Home Secretary whose office was responsible for the prosecution of criminal libel. Sidmouth's account tellingly elaborates on the precise nature of the "criminal matters" to which Blackstone refers: "It was the great character of a Free Press that its productions were not interfered with before publication; but that, when the publication took place, if it should be considered injurious to morals, to religion, or to the good order of society, it then became liable to prosecution."<sup>34</sup> As Blackstone explains and Sidmouth emphasizes, while the liberty of the press was "essential to the nature of a Free State," the most dramatic effect of the expiration of the Licensing Act was a shift in the timing of censorship. The law of criminal libel, in other words, was at the center of what Jeremy Bentham called "the prosecuting system" of postpublication censorship.<sup>35</sup>

The utility of the law of libel in policing political publications lay in its flexibility. By statute, criminal libel applied to "[t]he *publication* of

anything with a *malicious intention* of causing a *breach of the peace*.”<sup>36</sup> In contrast to the relative specificity of treason (“compassing or imagining the death of the king”), the law of libel was, according to Francis Holt, a conservative jurist whose influential treatise *The Law of Libel* was published in 1812, “necessarily” vague, precisely because it was “left as uncircumscribed as . . . the natural possibility of the injury.” “In plain words,” Holt claims, “it is limited as sedition is limited, as blasphemy is limited, as gross immorality is limited; not in this or that shape, not in these or those words, but in every shape, and in every term, in which it can offend God or man.”<sup>37</sup> In addition to the “uncircumscribed” nature of the offense, criminal libel applied equally to the act of publication and the act of circulation, broadly conceived. According to Blackstone, “The communication of a libel to any one person is a publication in the eye of the law: and therefore the sending an abusive private letter to a man is as much a libel as if it were openly printed, for it equally tends to a breach of the peace” (150). Thus, as Wickwar points out, “to let what one had written come into the hands of another person, even without any publicity, was an act of publication.”<sup>38</sup> In contrast to our contemporary conception of the public sphere as an expansive realm defined by the circulation and exchange of ideas and texts, the law of libel effectively defined as public the passing of a written text from one individual to another.<sup>39</sup>

Even more crucially, just as “publication” came to have a technical meaning at variance with common usage, in the law of libel “malicious intention” had nothing to do with a bad motive. In the understanding of the courts, “malicious intention” did not refer to the state of mind of the party responsible for the libel. Instead, the phrase referred to the “foreseeable tendency” of the publication in question. Thus, “a reckless indifference to the possible ill consequences of a publication was construed into an evil intention,” and the fact of publication itself was often held to be sufficient evidence of “reckless indifference.”<sup>40</sup> And, given that criminal libel was defined as the “tendency” of a publication to cause a breach of the peace, truth was no defense against the charge. In fact, in criminal cases, the truth of the libel was an *aggravating* rather than mitigating factor.<sup>41</sup> Holt puts the point this way: “Now it evidently makes no difference in the mischief of a libel . . . whether the subject alleged be true or false. . . . This doctrine is so firmly settled, and so essentially necessary to the maintenance of the king’s peace, and the good order of society, that no court of justice has at any time allowed it to be drawn into debate.” Like the words “the instigation of



the devil” in an indictment for murder, Holt argues, “the word *false* is part of the formal description of the crime” of libel and, as “one of those popular adjuncts which, in simpler times of the law, crept from common discourse into the language of pleading,” “is merely surplusage” (280–81).

Moreover, while “a tendency to cause a breach of the peace” was, as Wickwar puts it, “the essence of a criminal libel,” juries were required to look no further than the libelous publication itself for proof that the peace had been disturbed, because “[a] criminal libel was in itself a transgression of the established standard of public behavior.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, while Saunders and Hunter are right to emphasize the technological rather than aesthetic power of writing – what they call “the unprecedented moral power of print technology” – they are wrong to imagine that “a sociolegal calculation of the effects of publication” can be separated from “the hermeneutic interpretation of texts” (490–91). The constructive nature of the law of libel *requires* an act of interpretation, even if that interpretation involves only the assertion of a causal relationship between the offending text and a foreseeable breach of the peace.

All of these factors combined to make libel an effective tool for policing political expression in print, and prosecutions for libel predictably mirrored political crises at home and abroad. The sharp rise in the number of libel prosecutions following the end of the hostilities with France indicates that while treason was a wartime offense, libel quickly became its peacetime equivalent. On first sight, the danger posed by libelous publications would appear to be less acute than that posed by treasonous acts. But, as the state’s policing of libel makes clear, libel’s real threat is its potential diffusion. If Holt’s definition of libel suggests that the scope of the law’s purview was almost limitless, libel prosecutions in fact rarely focused on what we would recognize today as works of literature. Instead, their impact was most strongly felt among the ranks of radical publishers like William Hone (who were also frequently writers themselves).<sup>43</sup> Moreover, as Wickwar’s study of press prosecutions make clear, the effectiveness of a prosecution for libel rarely depended on securing a conviction; it was more often the case that an indictment for libel was enough to put radical publishers operating on very narrow financial margins out of business altogether.

The government turned to libel prosecutions to keep pace with the changing configuration of the radical movement, but, in an important sense, libel’s effectiveness as a tool for controlling political dissent had

as much to do with the climate created by well-publicized prosecutions as the outcomes of the cases themselves. This change in tactics also suggests that the threat posed to the state by a few individuals in 1794, by 1819 was understood to be distributed throughout a group large enough to be called a mob, a crowd, or even simply the public.<sup>44</sup> In the 1790s, sedition was face-to-face and conspiratorial; by 1819, it had come to be dangerously anonymous and above all public. Correspondingly, whereas the law of high treason was concerned with the intentions of a few, the law of libel was concerned with the potential effects on the many. The policing of political radicalism had once focused on minds. It now focused on the practically unlimited potential of print and the harm that words might do.

#### RECALLING WORDS IN *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*

*Prometheus Unbound* begins with a question about the power of words and the possibility of their retraction. The action that animates act 1 – and thus, most commentators have agreed, the central dramatic action represented in the play – is the recall of the Promethean curse.<sup>45</sup> In the opening speech that at once lays the Aeschylean groundwork for Shelley's lyrical drama and announces its Shelleyan departure, Prometheus declares:

I speak in grief,  
Not exultation, for I hate no more  
As then, ere misery made me wise. – The Curse  
Once breathed on thee I would recall. (56–59)<sup>46</sup>

That Prometheus's desire to recall "The Curse / Once breathed on" Jupiter works on two registers – that it is at once a desire to *retract* the curse and a desire simply to *recollect* it – is made clear at the outset, for Prometheus himself cannot remember the words he uttered, as though "misery" has "made" him not just "wise," but in some sense made him other to the self who breathed the curse. Or, as Prometheus puts it in asking the Mountains, Springs, Air, and Whirlwinds to remind him of his words,

If then my words had power  
– Though I am changed so that aught evil wish  
Is dead within, although no memory be  
Of what is hate – let them not lose it now!  
What was that curse? for ye all heard me speak. (69–73)

The responses to Prometheus's request that emanate from the Mountains, Springs, Air, Whirlwinds, and finally his mother, Earth, seem at first to indicate that his words have indeed lost their power. Rather than return his words to him, the four Voices and Earth can do no more than rehearse the *effect* of his words by describing the misery that followed Prometheus's curse. Moreover, Prometheus himself cannot understand their words – he hears “a sound of voices – not the voice / Which I gave forth” (112–13) – and thus must repeat his question:

Why scorns the spirit which informs ye, now  
To commune with me? me alone, who checked –  
As one who checks a fiend-drawn charioteer –  
The falsehood and the force of Him who reigns  
Supreme, and with the groans of pining slaves  
Fills your dim glens and liquid wildernesses?  
Why answer ye not, still? brethren!

THE EARTH

They dare not.

PROMETHEUS

Who dares? for I would hear that curse again. . . .  
Ha, what an awful whisper rises up!  
'Tis scarce like sound, it tingles through the frame  
As lightning tingles, hovering ere it strike.–  
Speak, Spirit! from thine inorganic voice  
I only know that thou art moving near  
And love. How cursed I him? (124–37)

As Earth explains it, the problem (and thus the reason that the answering Voices seem to Prometheus first “sounds” and then “scarce like sound”) is twofold: first, Prometheus is “immortal, and this tongue is known / Only to those who die . . .” (150–51); and second, while “the inarticulate people of the dead / Preserve” the curse as “a treasured spell” (183–84), they “meditate / In secret joy and hope those dreadful words / But dare not speak them” (184–86).

Thus, far from being lost or forgotten, Prometheus's words in fact enjoy a kind of independent existence:

For know, there are two worlds of life and death:  
One that which thou beholdest, but the other  
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit  
The shadows of all forms that think and live  
Till death unite them, and they part no more;

Dreams and the light imaginings of men  
 And all that faith creates, or love desires,  
 Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.  
 There thou art, and dost hang, a writhing shade  
 'Mid whirlwind-peopled mountains; all the Gods  
 Are there, and all the Powers of nameless worlds,  
 Vast, sceptred Phantoms; heroes, men, and beasts;  
 And Demogorgon, a tremendous Gloom;  
 And he, the Supreme Tyrant, on his throne  
 Of burning Gold. Son, one of these shall utter  
 The curse which all remember. (195–210)

From this standpoint, the problem Prometheus faces in recalling the curse is not that his words have lost their power; rather, they are too powerful. They must be returned to him by one of these ghosts (“Ask and they must reply” [215], Earth tells him) because the words themselves continually threaten to outstrip the intentions that motivated them. In this sense, then, the problem posed in the first act of Shelley’s lyrical drama is that in the world Prometheus has made his curse cannot simply be repeated because its power resides not in the intention that produced it but in the words themselves. To repeat the curse is to run the risk of sharing Prometheus’s fate.

Accordingly, when presented by Earth with a choice among those who can repeat his words (“Call at will / Thine own ghost, or the ghost of Jupiter, / Hades or Typhon, or what mightier Gods / From all-prolific Evil, since thy ruin / Have sprung . . .” [210–14]), Prometheus elects to call upon the power he has cursed and recalls the shade of Jupiter himself:

Mother, let not aught  
 Of that which may be evil, pass again  
 My lips, or those of aught resembling me.—  
 Phantasm of Jupiter, arise, appear! (218–21)

Critics have remarked on the irony of putting Prometheus’s curse in Jupiter’s mouth, but what is perhaps most striking about Jupiter’s Phantasm is that he too must be shielded from Prometheus’s words. For the shade is twice-estranged: not Jupiter, but his ghost, the Phantasm, speaks in a voice that is not his own. Recalled by Prometheus, he asks, “What unaccustomed sounds / Are hovering on my lips, unlike the voice / With which our pallid race hold ghastly talk / In darkness?” (242–45). As Prometheus explains, “no thought inform[s] thine empty voice” (249). When the ghost repeats the curse, the words

are not so much spoken by him as *through* him: “A spirit seizes me, and speaks within: / It tears me as fire tears a thunder-cloud” (254–55). Moreover, despite the fetishization of the Phantasm’s voice, his speech emerges, as it were, less as speech than as text, as Prometheus’s response suggests:

I see the curse on gestures proud and cold,  
And looks of firm defiance, and calm hate,  
And such despair as mocks itself with smiles,  
Written as on a scroll. . . . (258–61)

Thus returned to him as text, Prometheus still fails to recall his curse. He turns instead to Earth for attribution: “Were these my words, O Parent?” he asks; to which Earth responds, “They were thine” (302). Prometheus’s response suggests that it is finally the curse itself that effects his repentance: “It doth repent me: words are quick and vain; / Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine. / I wish no living thing to suffer pain” (303–5).

What I have been characterizing as the problem that sets *Prometheus Unbound* in motion, most commentators on the play have not regarded as a problem at all. Rather than understanding Prometheus’s inability to remember and difficulty recognizing his curse as a dilemma in itself, critics have instead debated the specific nature of the moral reformation implied by his recantation. As Susan Hawk Brisman helpfully puts it, while critics have disagreed as to the moment at which Prometheus truly recalls his curse, “[s]uch disagreement in locating the recantation is perhaps nominal, for the textual place of insight depends on what an individual reader may understand by ‘recantation’; say, the will to recall the curse, the Titan’s judgment on the repeated words, or the full repeal of ‘Large codes of fraud and woe’ through regenerate speech.”<sup>47</sup> In one sense, the disagreement Brisman describes necessarily depends upon a prior agreement among readers that Prometheus has in fact recanted. In a different sense, however, this “trouble in locating the recantation” is far from “nominal,” because the questions it prompts – does recantation mean “the will to recall the curse, the Titan’s judgment on the repeated words, or the full repeal of ‘Large codes of fraud and woe’ through regenerate speech”? – turn not only on the differences between individual readers’ understandings of recantation but on the central formal problem posed by the play.<sup>48</sup>

The best statement of this problem, I think, is still to be found in Earl Wasserman's reading of the poem, which characterizes the project of *Prometheus Unbound* as the representation of revolutionary change and finds its true solution in Shelley's "mythic mode." Wasserman's account, which identifies Prometheus as the representation not of man, but of "the One Mind," hinges on Shelley's reconstitution of his mythical inheritance by way of a process of recollection and correction that differs crucially from mere allusion. In part, this difference has to do with the sense in which "the myths that appear in Shelley's poetry, however traditional, are to be understood as having no inherited contexts at all."<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the use of myth in *The Rape of the Lock*, for example, where "the established structures of the myths upon which Pope draws operate allusively in the poem, and the reader, when called upon, must bring them to bear so that they may perform upon the text their acts of supplying, amplifying, and complicating significances," Wasserman argues that Shelley's use of myth is deliberately "ambiguous . . . and demands of the reader an equally ambiguous frame of mind" (273, 272). Shelley, that is, does not allude to other works, but instead makes use of the structures that he – "and," Wasserman adds, "the critic" – find in them. According to Wasserman, interpretations of previous works are "formally present and yet otherwise inoperative" in Shelley's poetry (274). This "assimilation of myths as archetypal orderings" in turn requires "paradoxical informed ignorance . . . for the most complete reading" (275). For Wasserman, it is crucial that Shelley makes use of myths without allusively recalling their contexts (or, for that matter, their contents) because the kind of transformation that *Prometheus Unbound* imagines requires more than simple repetition or even radical revision. Just as in the *Defence* the "promoters of utility . . . make space, and give time" "by applying the eternal, universal poem to a particular time and place" (209n), to revise is to do no more than to set the same old story in a new context.<sup>50</sup>

On this account, the problem Prometheus faces in act 1 recapitulates the problem Shelley faced in writing *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley begins the Preface to the poem by observing that, "The Greek tragic writers, in selecting as their subject any portion of their national history or mythology, employed in their treatment of it a certain arbitrary discretion." He claims the same "licence" for himself (206). Just as the Greek dramatists "by no means conceived themselves bound to adhere to the common interpretation or to imitate in story as in title their

rivals and predecessors,” Shelley does not conceive himself bound to adhere to the account of the reconciliation of Prometheus and Jupiter given in Aeschylus’s lost play. He describes the difficulty the story poses – the problem, that is, which his version of the story seeks to redress – precisely in terms of the central importance of Prometheus’s recall of his curse: “The moral interest of the fable which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus, would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language, and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary” (206). For both Prometheus and Shelley, the point at issue is how past actions – words or myths – might be recalled without simply being repeated. Shelley’s dilemma (how will he retell this story without merely attempting “to restore the lost drama of Aeschylus”?) is recast as Prometheus’s dilemma (how will he retract the curse without renewing it?). At stake in each case is a conflict between freedom of expression and external constraint.

In a slightly different sense, however, a sense that I have been arguing is importantly related to the development of Shelley’s poetics and Romantic poetics more generally, the dramatic situation that sets *Prometheus Unbound* in motion is less metaphysical than circumstantial. Prometheus’s situation at the outset of the drama not only recapitulates Wasserman’s account of Shelley’s engagement with the mythic tradition but also reflects and recasts the infamous domestic drama played out in the court of Chancery the year before Shelley started writing *Prometheus Unbound*. Following the suicide of his estranged wife, Harriet, late in 1816, Shelley spent the early part of 1817 in court in an attempt to win custody of his two children, Charles and Ianthe, over the claims of Harriet’s family, the Westbrooks. According to Richard Holmes, the Westbrooks “assembled a powerful case for custody of the children.” In addition to providing for the financial security of the children “irrespective of the outcome of the case,” they “drew up a dossier of letters which Shelley had sent to Harriet during the time of their separation” which “reflected badly on the irregularity of his conduct and compounded Shelley’s complete failure to visit the children” and also collected “several of Shelley’s ideological writings – notably *Queen Mab* – which showed his political and religious views at their most heretical.”<sup>51</sup>

Shelley focused on the last aspect of the case against him.<sup>52</sup> In a letter to Byron written a week before the case began at Chancery, he struck a pose of Promethean defiance:

The sister has instituted a Chancery process against me, the intended effect of which is to deprive me of my unfortunate children, now more than ever dear to me; of my inheritance, and to throw me into prison, and expose me in the pillory, on the ground of being a REVOLUTIONIST, and an *Atheist*. . . . So I am here, dragged before the tribunals of tyranny and superstition, to answer with my children, my property, my liberty, and my fame, for having exposed their frauds, and scorned the insolence of their power. Yet I will not fail; though I have been given to understand that I could purchase victory by recantation. Indeed, I have too much pride in the selection of their victim.<sup>53</sup>

Here Shelley displays the command of the case that would result in the judgment against him handed down by Lord Chancellor Eldon on March 17, 1817. As Holmes points out, “There was no real sense in which he could have ‘purchased victory by recantation’: the essence of the Westbrook case lay not in what he had done as a writer but in what he had omitted to do as a father” (357). But if Shelley’s understanding of the case against him misses the point of the proceedings at Chancery, his concern that a criminal prosecution might follow was not entirely without foundation.<sup>54</sup> Even before the Chancery case, Shelley had been wary enough about *Queen Mab* to see to it that the 250 copies of the poem printed by Thomas Hookham were not disseminated to the public. Instead, he personally distributed seventy copies of the poem, taking care to cut away the title page displaying his name and address (which, contravening the Act of 1799, appeared in place of the publisher’s). These measures prompted Newman Ivey White to remark that Shelley handled the poem “with the caution of a professional dynamiter.”<sup>55</sup>

What is most striking about Shelley’s defiant refusal to retract *Queen Mab* is that it invokes a residual conception of authorship (defined in terms of authorial intention) at the very moment that an emergent form of authorship (defined in terms of the text’s effects) was taking hold. Also in early 1817, Robert Southey, then the poet laureate, had gone to court to halt the pirate publication of his play *Wat Tyler*, which, like Coleridge’s “Fire, Famine, and Slaughter,” was a product of his Jacobin youth. Southey’s request to suppress publication was denied; Eldon ruled against him as he ruled against Shelley. Despite his sympathy for Southey’s predicament, Eldon was obliged to follow a previous ruling, in which he had maintained that “a person cannot recover in damages for a work which is in its nature calculated to do injury to the public.”<sup>56</sup> In addition to denying Southey’s property right in his work, the ruling makes it clear that, in the eyes of the law, the



recantation Shelley refused was a fantasy. Shelley imagined that, like Aeschlyus's Prometheus, he could unsay his high language, when in fact his words were no longer his to retract. The impossibility of the recantation he imagined, like Southey's failed attempt to suppress *Wat Tyler* and Coleridge's self-consuming apology for "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter," underscores this rupture in the Romantic conception of authorship.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley responds to this revolution by reimagining authorship on the model of the logic of libel. Rather than defending the author's freedom of expression against state censorship, Shelley follows the law of libel in maintaining that the power of words lies not in the intentions that produced them but in their effects. If libel seeks to police a work's potentially dangerous effects by making those who are responsible for its publication accountable for its "malicious tendency," the recall of the Promethean curse insists that while Prometheus can change his mind, he cannot undo what he has done.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the sense of responsibility for effects the play imagines is so strong that it comes to include the possibility of *undoing* the damage that words have done – a possibility dramatized in Prometheus's dialogue with Mercury in the middle of act 1. Here it becomes clear that the opposition between Prometheus and Jupiter is also a contest between radically different understandings of past, present, and future: Prometheus would recall his curse, while Mercury (as Jupiter's emissary) asks that Prometheus undo it by preventing its negative consequences for Jupiter. Prometheus's refusal – "I would not quit / This bleak ravine, these unrepentant pains" (426–27) – marks his continued commitment to his words, even after he has resolved to recall them. In insisting upon Prometheus's responsibility not simply for his words but also for their effects, Shelley extends the claim of authorship beyond the individual author's immediate control. While libel has been construed as a threat to free expression and thus an indirect form of censorship, for Shelley it also stands as a reminder, and perhaps a promise, of the potential impact of the printed text.

From this standpoint, to claim that Shelley refigures authorship on the model of libel is perhaps a mistake. Instead, we might say that the notion of authorial agency that emerges in *Prometheus Unbound* responds to the same forces – the transformed conceptions of reception, transmission, and dissemination which have been the recurrent concerns of this study – that made the law of libel such a powerful means of policing political expression. The account of authorship presupposed

by Shelley's stance – in which authors are held responsible for, and credited with, effects they did not in fact intend – reflects the contradiction that the shift from understanding texts in terms of their authors' intentions to understanding them in terms of their effects created for poetic practice. *Prometheus Unbound* does not resolve this contradiction. Indeed, part of the power of Wasserman's account of the "especially ambiguous relation between the traditional form of a legend or myth and the poet's use of it" and the "paradoxical informed ignorance" that such ambiguity requires of the reader is that this double ambiguity of conception and reception highlights the sense in which Shelley tries to have it both ways (272, 275). On the one hand, like Prometheus, he claims responsibility for his words. On the other hand, the transformation Shelley imagines in *Prometheus Unbound* is, in an important sense, left to the reader to realize. While this claim has been made before, the point I want to emphasize is that in yielding control to the reader in this way, and at this moment, Shelley embraces the kind of contingent effects that the law of libel sought to control.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, he makes such effects the basis of his late poetics.

#### DEAD LETTER AND ELECTRIC LIFE

In its broad outlines, Shelley's claim that the responses that a text elicits are not simply incidental but rather integral to its conception returns us to the claim with which Wordsworth concluded the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface." Reflecting on his own argument, Wordsworth had asked, "Is it the result of the whole, that, in the opinion of the Writer, the judgment of the People is not to be respected?" He went on to answer in the negative:

The thought is most injurious; and, could the charge be brought against him, he would repel it with indignation. The People have already been justified, and their eulogium pronounced by implication, when it was said, above – that of *good* poetry, the *individual*, as well as the species, *survives*. And how does it survive but through the People? What preserves it but their intellect and their wisdom?<sup>59</sup>

In justifying the People and making them responsible for poetry's endurance, Wordsworth would seem to be in agreement with Shelley's sense of the reader's crucial role in realizing the poetic text. Indeed, in chapter 2, I argued that the "Essay, Supplementary" contains an undercurrent which points forward to a stance toward the reader much like the one Shelley develops. The resemblance between Shelley's and

Wordsworth's positions ends here. For Wordsworth's overt argument in the Essay, in particular its concluding distinction between "the People" and "the Public," would do away with the unpredictability that Shelley courts. The control Wordsworth imagines, not just for himself but for all poets at all times, makes it clear that the responses that assure that "the *individual*, as well as the species, survives from age to age" are effects the author has not only foreseen, but intended to produce (83).

Shelley's departure from Wordsworth emerges most pointedly in the final paragraph of *A Defence of Poetry*. In drawing his essay to a close, Shelley reverses the vectors of influence implicit in Wordsworth's philosophical characterization of the People, in whom individual poets survive by creating a taste for their poetry. Shelley performs this reversal, it would seem, with Wordsworth in particular in mind:

In spite of the low-thoughted envy which would undervalue contemporary merit, our own will be a memorable age in intellectual achievements, and we live among such philosophers and poets as surpass beyond comparison any who have appeared since the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty. The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. At such periods there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting men and nature. The persons in whom this power resides, may often, as far as regards many portions of their nature, have little apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which they are the ministers. But even whilst they deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve, the Power which is seated upon the throne of their own soul. It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled by the electric life which burns within their words. (535)

Whether this passage is in fact working to characterize Wordsworth as one of those "persons" who disavow their true callings or merely serves up a caricature of the Wordsworthian poet, it represents a dramatic departure from the attitude Shelley had displayed toward Wordsworth in the sonnet he addressed to him in 1816.<sup>60</sup> "To Wordsworth" lamented the elder poet's desertion of the younger by presenting Wordsworth's apostasy as the end of his existence: "In honoured poverty thy voice did weave / Songs consecrate to truth and liberty, - / Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve, / Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be" (11-14). By contrast, the *Defence* suggests that, far from ceasing to be, Wordsworth has instead continued to live a life that he would rather "deny and abjure." His person might "have little

apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which [he is] the [minister]" (recall that, after reading *The Excursion* with Percy in September of 1814, Mary Shelley wrote of Wordsworth, "He is a slave"), but he is nevertheless "compelled to serve."<sup>61</sup> As in Shelley's discussions of Dante and Milton, reception trumps intention. It is the continued life of such poets and philosophers – "the electric life which burns within their words" – that is the basis for Shelley's *Defence*.

To return briefly to the legal realm, the conception of authorship entailed by Wordsworth's argument in the "Essay, Supplementary" is also reflected – even, we might say, cemented – by his contributions to the debate which led to the passage of the Copyright Act of 1842. Wordsworth had long resented the Copyright Act of 1814, which limited the author's financial interest in his works to twenty-eight years or, if the author outlived this term, to the end of the author's life. In 1837, Thomas Noon Talfourd introduced a bill in the House of Commons which would have extended copyright to sixty years after the author's death; Wordsworth responded with a furious letter-writing campaign in support of Talfourd's bill.<sup>62</sup> Commenting on these efforts, Susan Eilenberg has remarked that "Wordsworth's interest in the matter verged on the excessive. He seems to have invested the problem with a significance for which practical considerations cannot altogether account." She goes on to suggest that "[t]o hear his appeals at their most grandiloquent, one would have had no idea that the problem was the assignment of profits; his rhetoric, so wildly in excess of its apparent object, suggests a desperation more nearly eschatological than financial. For Wordsworth, the solution of legal and financial problems stood for the solution of poetic and even metaphysical ones."<sup>63</sup>

In a practical sense, Wordsworth's interest in copyright reform had to do with protecting the legacy he would leave to his heirs; his decision to delay publication of *The Prelude* until after his death was, at least in part, intended to extend his family's property interest in his poetry.<sup>64</sup> It was also, however, the logical outcome of his conception of authorship. Thus Wordsworth's response to a petition against Talfourd's bill in an 1838 letter to the editor of the *Kendall Mercury* echoes key claims of the "Essay, Supplementary":

The objections against the proposed bill rest upon the presumption that it would tend to check the circulation of literature, and by so doing would prove injurious to the public. Strong reasons have been given above for believing that these fears are groundless, and that such extension of copyright would cause the reprinting of many good works, which otherwise, to give back the

petitioners their own words, would nearly remain a “dead letter.” But what we want in these times, and are likely to want still more, is not the circulation of books, but of good books, and above all, the production of works, the authors of which look beyond the passing day, and are desirous of pleasing and instructing future generations. (312)

Wordsworth’s argument is entirely in line with the accounts of modern authorship offered by Woodmansee and Rose.<sup>65</sup> His anxiety – the sense in which “what we want” is not merely what is desired but what is lacking “in these times” – is in keeping with the accounts of his attitude toward the reading public surveyed in chapter 2. In the context of the argument of this chapter, however, what is most striking about Wordsworth’s efforts on behalf of extending copyright is how, once again, the intersection of legal and literary history serves to crystallize “poetic and even metaphysical” problems.<sup>66</sup> In the passage above, it does so by setting the author’s property right in his work against “the circulation of literature” and thus the best interests of “the public” (although Wordsworth denies that extending copyright would necessarily have these effects). More importantly, however, even in defending the author’s right, Wordsworth acknowledges the feedback effect which links “the production of works” and “future generations.” His difference from Shelley (it is a difference that divides him from Byron and Keats as well) is that he imagines his relation to these future generations in terms of both pleasure and instruction. In looking to the future, that is, he desires more than mere circulation; he is “desirous of” a continued existence that is not just formal but based on the content of his works – the “good” he has inscribed in them, and not just “the electric life which burns within” them.

From this standpoint, we are in a better position to assess what the history of libel tells us about legal – and literary – conceptions of authorship. In its emphasis on effects and principled rejection of questions about intention, the law of libel arrives at an understanding of the text at odds with genealogies of modern authorship that focus on the development of copyright and the author’s property right in the text. If Wordsworth’s involvement in the copyright debate is a dramatic instance of an author’s attempting to extend his control over his work, Shelley’s appropriation of the logic of libel in *Prometheus Unbound* and the *Defence* would seem to reflect an author in the process of ceding control. In a slightly different sense, however, Shelley articulates a new form of poetic authority – one which takes into account the kinds of effects that poems can be imagined to have after they have left their

authors' hands. In *Prometheus Unbound*, this extension of the claim of authorship materializes in the chains that bind Prometheus not simply to the words he has spoken, but to the effects that those words have produced in the world. In the *Defence*, the idea that authorship entails something more than what an author intends emerges in Shelley's claim that *Paradise Lost* "contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support" (526). Unlike Blake, whose suggestion that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it" points to the triumph of unconscious over conscious intentions,<sup>67</sup> in the *Defence*, Shelley consistently subordinates intention, conscious or unconscious, to what he calls "the laws of epic truth . . . that principle by which a series of actions of the external universe and of intelligent and ethical beings is calculated to excite the sympathy of succeeding generations of mankind" (527).

In the [previous chapter](#), I argued that Shelley's assertion of Milton's "bold neglect of a direct moral purpose" reflects his determination to grant no greater authority over texts and their meanings to authors than to readers (527). I return to this claim now not to argue that Shelley's extension of authorship to include the effects that texts have on their readers finally constitutes a coherent theoretical account either of the ontology of the poetic text or of authorial agency. Instead, I want to suggest that the theoretical incoherence of Shelley's account itself represents an attempt to solve the historical problem posed by the emergence of the mass reading public. For, in extending authorial agency by alleging no superiority of interpretive authority to the poet over the audience, Shelley presents the poetic text as its own prime mover, "the influence which is moved not, but moves" (535). It is difficult not to label such a claim metaphysical. But we might instead understand it, on the one hand, as a view of the text shared by law of libel and, on the other, to quote Hazlitt, as "the remote but inevitable result of the invention of the art of printing."

## CHAPTER 6

### *The right of private judgment*

“How do you mean – the right Mr. Tennyson?”

“The great Mr. Tennyson, miss. I don’t know if you are familiar with the work of the great Mr. Tennyson? He wrote ‘The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck.’”

P. G. Wodehouse, *The Luck of the Bodkins* (1935)

The preceding chapters have been concerned to show how such diverse cultural institutions as public opinion, the periodical reviews, political opposition, and the law of libel mediate between poets and their readers in early nineteenth-century England. I have argued that, in various ways, Romantic poetry and poetics were shaped by their engagement with the mass public, and that the regime of publicity at once put new pressure on poets (by alerting them to the changed nature of the audience for poetry) and offered them new models for addressing readers and conceptualizing the public. As a kind of coda to the argument developed to this point, I now turn to the 1820s (in many ways, a lost decade for literary history) to examine two important attempts to relate poetry to the public as the Romantic period comes to an end and the Victorian period begins. This chapter argues that reviewers’ hostile reactions to Alfred Tennyson’s early poetry and the rise and fall of Felicia Hemans’s critical reputation each represent a version of what I have described as feedback effects – in which the circumstances of poetry’s reception become a crucial condition of poetic composition. Unlike Keats and Shelley, however, who sought readers they could not readily identify, in Tennyson and Hemans the thematization of the artist’s alienation from the world demonstrates how critical reflection on poetry’s cultural marginality itself became a market niche for poetry.

Recent work on the transformation of the literary market in the early nineteenth century has demonstrated how crucial developments in the book trade, in publishing technology, and in the transmission of texts refashioned the market for poetry in the 1820s. Such critics as

Peter Manning, Herbert Tucker, and Lee Erickson have examined the burgeoning gift-book and annual album business, tracked poetry's declining sales against the novel's rising market-share, and emphasized the roles played by the periodical press and publishing monopolies in the consolidation of audiences along lines of class interest.<sup>1</sup> In documenting the increasingly private, domestic, and class-bound spaces of the poetry of the 1820s, such accounts have both deepened our understanding of the nineteenth century's increasingly strong identification of poetry with the privacy and intimacy of the lyric and recapitulated Arthur Henry Hallam's 1831 judgment "that modern poetry, in proportion to its depth and truth, is likely to have little immediate authority over public opinion."<sup>2</sup> In 1833, John Stuart Mill famously put the point this way:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or uttering forth of feeling. But if we may be excused the seeming affectation of the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener.<sup>3</sup>

I have claimed that Romanticism's perceived turn inward and away from the audience has obscured the numerous ways in which Romantic poetry sought to address, and to comprehend, the new mass public. In the pages that follow, I will suggest that the poetry of Hallam and Mill's moment was engaged in a similar attempt to engage its audience – and that the identification of poetry with private feeling was not the sign of the poet's withdrawal from the larger world, but instead an effort to stake out a position in a larger public debate about poetry and its audience.

To this end, this chapter takes up two sets of poems which have been considered almost exclusively in terms of their attention to private feeling, first exploring the contemporary reception of Tennyson's first two volumes of poetry, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) and *Poems* (1832), and then examining how Hemans's later poetry, especially *Records of Woman* (1828) and *The Forest Sanctuary* (1825; 1829), address her status as England's preeminent woman poet. It was Tennyson's early lyrics that Hallam and Mill had in mind when they identified poetry and private feeling; Hemans, in her own time and ours, has been regarded as the exemplary domestic poet. In contrast to these assessments, I will argue that the significance of "the poetry of sensation" is not exhausted by its focus on feeling. Instead, from the standpoint of this study, what



is striking about Tennyson and Hemans is that each responds to contemporary arguments about poetry – debates about its proper aims and subject matter – by making the debate itself the subject for poetry. In Tennyson and Hemans, the divorce of poetry from opinion which for Hallam constitutes the poetry of sensation's particular strength repeatedly takes the form of a competition between the private and the public; the social and political world Hallam claimed to be absent from poetry is in fact crucially present. Tennyson allegorizes the work of art's failure to withstand exposure to the world, while Hemans stages a poetic withdrawal into the domestic sphere. But in writing poems that depict hostile responses to works of art and episodes of public and private worlds in conflict, both poets attest to a growing sense that poetry's cultural function depends upon the perceived opposition between the poet and the public. By examining Tennyson's early lyrics alongside Hemans's late poetry, I argue that rather than the expression of an ideological commitment, the identification of poetry with privacy appeals to readers by refiguring the mass audience as a coterie.

My interest in examining the turn from Romantic to Victorian is not to contest the critical genealogy of this transition that traces the transformation of a Romantic anxiety about the audience into the Victorian privatization of poetry. Instead, I want to examine how later poets take up and refashion the Romantic engagement with the mass public that has been the subject of this book. The privatization of poetry, rather than picking up on Romanticism's supposed turn inward, continues to make the problem of audience central to poetic production. The public reactions to Tennyson and Hemans suggest that one way to understand what happened to poetry in the 1820s is in terms of a heightened consciousness about its situatedness. Thus I begin with Tennyson, whose battles with the reviewers clarify the conflict between an emerging poetics of privacy and the literary public, and then move back to Hemans, whose public stance is an important model for Tennyson's and yet is also complicated by the identification of her poetry and her gender. While Tennyson's early poetry and Hallam's defense would solve the poet's audience problem by appealing to the mass audience as a coterie, Hemans must approach this problem from the opposite direction, and her late poems strive to move beyond the confines of "Female Poetry" by setting the women they depict in the context of "the great theater of the world."<sup>4</sup> Responses to Hemans's work, from the reactions of contemporary reviewers to the recent renewal of critical interest, raise the issue of

canon formation, and I take the opportunity they afford to think about reception in this larger context.

In broader terms, my argument is that we might better understand the particular form of poetic ambition inscribed in Tennyson's early poems and Hemans's most successful, and most popular, works in terms of their self-conscious engagements with the available paradigms for situating new poetic work that are reflected in the praise and the blame elicited by the poems themselves. Far from marking a turn away from the audience (or even hostile or dismissive reviewers), this form of self-consciousness simultaneously displays a consciousness not only of self but of the poet's public situation. It finds the poet engaged in a monologue of a different sort than the one Mill describes, and its drama differs substantially from that made familiar by the monologues Tennyson and Browning would soon begin to write.

#### TENNYSON AND THE UNCEREMONIOUS WORLD

"One of the saddest misfortunes that can befall a young poet, is to be the Pet of a Coterie; and the very saddest of all, if in Cockneydom. Such has been the unlucky lot of Alfred Tennyson." So wrote John Wilson, known to the readers of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* as "Christopher North," of Tennyson's first volume of poetry, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. He goes on to attribute Tennyson's "unlucky lot" to a more widespread phenomenon:

The besetting sin of all periodical criticism, and now-a-days there is no other, is boundless extravagance of praise; but none splash it on like the trowelmen who have been bedaubing Mr. Tennyson. There is something wrong, however, with the compost. It won't stick; unseemly cracks deform the surface; it falls off piece by piece ere it has dried in the sun, or it hardens into blotches; and the worshippers have but discoloured and disfigured their Idol. The worst of it is, that they have made the Bespattered not only feel, but look ridiculous; he seems as absurd as an Image in a tea-garden; and, bedizened with faded and fantastic garlands, the public cough on being told he is a Poet, for he has much more the appearance of a Post.

According to Wilson, one review in *The Englishman's Magazine* sealed Tennyson's fate. "The superhuman – nay, supernatural – pomposity of that one paper," Wilson argues, "incapacitated the whole work for living one day longer in the unceremonious world":

The Essay "on the genius of Alfred Tennyson" awoke a general guffaw, and it expired in convulsions. Yet the Essay was exceedingly well-written – as well as

if it had been “on the Genius of Sir Isaac Newton.” Therein lay the mistake. Sir Isaac discovered the law of gravitation; Alfred had but written some pretty verses, and mankind were not prepared to set him among the stars. But that he has genius is proved by his being at this moment alive; for had he not, he must have breathed his last under that critique.<sup>5</sup>

One way to approach Wilson’s sly invective would be to turn immediately to the sense in which its juxtaposition of Tennyson and Newton establishes the terms of the “two-Tennyson” theory as it was formulated by Tennyson’s twentieth-century detractors and defenders, and much as it still comes down to us today.<sup>6</sup> I will return to the “two-Tennyson” question, but the first thing to notice about Wilson’s review is its suggestion that the early reviewers’ derision focused primarily on the claims made on Tennyson’s behalf – a point made explicit by Wilson’s image of Tennyson as “the Bepattered” “bedaub[ed]” with “compost.” That Tennyson “seems . . . absurd,” in other words, is less a reflection of his poetry than what “the public” has been told about it. The *Blackwood’s* reviewers who savaged Tennyson’s first volumes (Wilson was soon joined by John Croker), as well as the *New Monthly Magazine* reviewer (probably Bulwer) who described the *Poems* of 1832 as “of the best Cockney classic; and Keatesian to the marrow,” were responding as much to Hallam’s 1831 essay, “On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson,” as to Tennyson’s poetry itself.<sup>7</sup> From this standpoint, Tennyson’s early poetry is notable chiefly as an occasion for critical controversy.

Hallam’s essay identifies Tennyson with the poets of the Cockney School, which, he argues, “contained more genuine inspiration, and adhered more speedily to that portion of truth which it embraced, than any *form* of art that has existed in this country since the days of Milton” (849). Hallam classifies Shelley and Keats, though “of opposite genius,” as “poets of sensation rather than reflection,” and, in this way, distinguishes them from Wordsworth (849, 850). The key distinction here is between thought and feeling. Hallam acknowledges that “there is undoubtedly no reason, why [the poet] may not find beauty in those moods of emotion, which arise from the combinations of reflective thought.” “But,” he continues, “though possible, it is hardly probable,” because the reflective poet “will be apt to mistake the pleasure he has in knowing a thing to be true, for the pleasure he would have in knowing it to be beautiful, and so will pile his thoughts in a rhetorical battery, that they may convince, instead of letting them flow in the natural course of contemplation, that they may enrapture” (849).

On first sight, Hallam's distinction between conviction and rapture would appear simply to recapitulate his distinction between reflection and sensation: where the poet of reflection seeks to convince, the poet of sensation seeks to enrapture. On this reading, the problem with Wordsworth is "that much has been said by him which is good as philosophy, powerful as rhetoric, but false as poetry" (849). But the distinction Hallam draws is not merely a judgment of taste or an assessment of poetic styles. For in his attempt to describe "Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry," he also advances a historical account of the present state of poetry. The history Hallam traces in brief is essentially that of the dissociation of sensibility: "Those different powers of poetic disposition, the energies of Sensitive, of Reflective, of Passionate Emotion, which in former times were intermingled, and derived from mutual support an extensive empire over the feelings of men, were now restrained within separate spheres of agency."<sup>8</sup> And "[t]hose different powers" are not just "restrained." They are in fact set in competition with one another: "there arose a violent and unusual action in the several component functions, each for itself, all striving to reproduce the regular power which the whole had once enjoyed" (852). Thus Hallam's distinction does not merely name a preference. Rather, it describes nothing less than the fallen condition of the modern sensibility.

From the perspective of his historical argument, Hallam's opposition of reflection and sensation has less to do with the assertion that convincing readers is not the appropriate end of poetry than the sense that rapture is now a more powerful mode of persuasion than argument. It is with reference to "this change in the relative position of artists with respect to the rest of the community" – the sense that, given the fractured nature of modern life, the artist cannot hope to speak to or for "the community" as a whole – that Hallam concludes "that modern poetry, in proportion to its depth and truth is likely to have little immediate authority over public opinion." Instead, he argues, "Admirers it will have; sects consequently it will form; and these strong under-currents will in time sensibly affect the principal stream" (852). Hallam's account of the creation of taste departs from Wordsworth's image of the "original Genius of a high order" as "Hannibal among the Alps," replacing it with a picture of a larger public divided into little groups.<sup>9</sup> He presents this analysis of the present state of the audience for poetry, moreover, as ironic proof of Wordsworth's assertion, "in his celebrated Preface to the 'Lyrical Ballads,'" "that immediate or rapid

popularity was not the test of poetry” (848).<sup>10</sup> The irony Hallam finds lies in the sense in which the “truth” of Wordsworth’s “doctrine” prevailed not only against “the exasperation of that hydra, the Reading Public, whose vanity was hurt, and the blustering of its keepers [“those farmers of public favour, the established critics”], whose delusion was exposed, but even against the false glosses and narrow apprehensions of the Wordsworthians themselves” (849, 848). According to Hallam, the lesson Wordsworth inadvertently teaches is about “the madness of all who loosen some great principle, long buried under a snow-heap of custom and superstition, to imagine that they can restrain its operation, or circumscribe it by their purposes” (849).

For Hallam, the real lesson to draw from Wordsworth’s example is that “the right of private judgment was stronger than the will of Luther; and even the genius of Wordsworth cannot expand itself to the full periphery of poetic art.” This reference to Luther might appear to be a nonsequitur, but Hallam’s yoking together of Luther and Wordsworth in fact illustrates a crucial aspect of his argument. The connection becomes clear when Hallam describes the “sectarian” nature of Wordsworth’s poetry of reflection: “Perhaps this very distortion of the truth did more in this peculiar juncture of our literary affairs to enlarge and liberalize the genius of our age, than could have been effected by a less sectarian temper” (849). In this way, Hallam’s reading of Wordsworth recalls Shelley’s readings of Dante and Milton (and, as the [last chapter](#) suggested, of Wordsworth as well). In each case, the effects (of a poem or a doctrine) are at odds with, and in fact supersede, the intentions that produced them. Hallam’s observation that even “the Wordsworthians themselves” turned against Wordsworth – and that this turn paradoxically proves Wordsworth’s assertion “that immediate or rapid popularity was not the test of poetry” – is a concise articulation of the second line of argument that, I argued in [chapter 2](#), runs through Wordsworth’s “*Essay, Supplementary*.” Thus the deeper irony of Hallam’s account of Wordsworth is that a “sectarian temper” such as Wordsworth’s, while perhaps necessary at “this peculiar juncture,” produces not conformity but dissent (even among its adherents). Conversely, the nonsectarian poetry of sensation, while “likely to have little immediate authority over public opinion,” will paradoxically not only attract “[a]dmirers” but will also “form” “sects” (852). Learning Wordsworth’s lesson, it would appear, allows the poets of sensation to achieve what he could not, and they do so not by creating taste but by yielding to the right of private judgment.

It is in this sense, then, that sensation surpasses reflection (and philosophy and rhetoric) as a form of persuasion. What finally recommends poets of sensation such as Keats and Shelley is that rather than attempting to argue their readers into an apprehension of the value of their poetry, they engage readers at a level that has less to do with judgment than perception. As a kind of “under-current,” their influence is not understood, but felt. Indeed, this is Tennyson’s primary connection to the “Poets of Sensation”: “There is a strange earnestness in his worship of beauty, which throws a charm over his impassioned song, more easily felt than described, and not to be escaped by those who have once felt it” (853). Hallam calls attention to the difficulty that this “strange earnestness” poses for the critic when, after quoting “Recollections of the Arabian Nights” in its entirety, he remarks: “Criticism will sound but poorly after this; yet we cannot give silent votes” (855). His observation, however, intimates that the challenge to articulation that the poetry of sensation poses for the critic is a problem that need not trouble the reader. Keats, Shelley, and Tennyson are poets of sensation not only because they take feeling as their subject, but also because rejecting their poetry’s charms is akin to rejecting the evidence of the senses.

Or nearly so. The problem with Keats and Shelley, it turns out, is that while they have shown the way, they have not disburdened their poetry of distractions that, for the modern sensibility, are in danger of becoming disrecommendations. It is precisely in avoiding these distractions that Tennyson proves himself to be superior to his precursors. Keats, for example, is marked by “blemishes of diction and hasty capriccios of fancy” which Tennyson avoids; and over both Keats and Shelley, Tennyson has the “advantage” “that he comes before the public unconnected with any political party or peculiar system of opinions.” In thus distinguishing Tennyson first from Wordsworth and then from Keats and Shelley, Hallam imagines that the particular power of Tennyson’s poetry derives from the purity with which it displays “the character of its parent mind” – a mind stripped clean of linguistic idiosyncrasies, political programs, and peculiar opinions. In short, Tennyson’s poetry is presented as the bare record of a way of feeling and thinking that sets the poet apart from any discernible form of group interest yet nevertheless reflects not an individual consciousness but rather “the spirit of the age” (853). It is this combination of individuality and representative commonality that constitutes Tennyson’s strongest claim on his readers.

In offering Tennyson to the public in this way, Hallam mounts an argument against the “sectarian temper” in order to exalt poetry – and a poet – so refined as to bring sects (or, one might say, coteries) into being without the aid of politics or “peculiar . . . opinions.”<sup>11</sup> His judgment thus coincides with, or more precisely prefigures, the strategy by which early twentieth-century critics sought to rehabilitate Tennyson’s flagging reputation. The idea, as Robert W. Hill, Jr., has put it, “that there is a central division in the poet between the public moral voice speaking out on national issues to the largest audience ever and the private lyric voice which acknowledges doubt and despair” was broached by A. C. Bradley in 1914 and elaborated by Harold Nicolson in 1923.<sup>12</sup> Nicolson provided what remains the sharpest formulation of the stakes of the “two-Tennyson” theory: “For had his lot fallen among other circumstances, or in a less cloying age; had that unfortunate element of caution been absent from his character; had some whim of fate let loose the vast reserves of emotion that were in him, and had he realized that what he *felt* was infinitely more important than what he *thought*, we might well have had a greater Francis Thompson, or maybe – for who can tell? – an earlier Swinburne.”<sup>13</sup> If for us there is more than a little of the bathetic in Nicolson’s musings – some of us might still find reason to value Swinburne over Tennyson, but how many of us long for “a greater Francis Thompson”? – Tennyson remains for many critics a problematic figure, and largely for reasons that Nicolson identified over eighty years ago. “He was intended to be a subjective poet,” Nicolson argued, “and was forced by circumstances into fifty years of unnatural objectivity. He chose the easier and more prosperous course: he became Laureate of his age; he subordinated the lyric to the instructional. And his poetry thereby has lost one half of its potential value.”<sup>14</sup>

Early reviewers like Wilson did not reject Tennyson’s ideas so much as bristle at the assertion that the absence of ideas was itself Tennyson’s great idea. The problem early on, in other words, was not that the critics failed to see that Tennyson was a poet of feeling. Rather, they saw all too well that he was, and they objected to what they regarded as excessive claims made on that basis. What is interesting about the conflict between Tennyson’s early critics and his early twentieth-century defenders is not that it reflects obvious differences in taste between nineteenth-century reviewers and twentieth-century academics, nor that it shows how the “two-Tennyson” theory gets the poet wrong. Instead, the real interest of the conflict emerges when we

consider the ways in which Tennyson's early poems themselves work to stage it, over and over again. In the paired poems "The Poet" and "The Poet's Mind," for example, Tennyson contrasts the power of the poet's words – in "The Poet," they are the instrument with which Wisdom "shook the world" (56) – with the "Dark-browed sophist's" power to "blight" them (8, 18).<sup>15</sup> Tennyson's "Poet" is himself defined by opposition – he is "Dowered with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn, / The love of love" (3–4) – and the two poems present the opposition between thought and feeling in terms that seem to predict the impending battle between poet and critic.

Even poems which do not frame this opposition so explicitly are, in a sense, still governed by it. Thus, in "Mariana," the conflict is internalized, and the absence of the blighting antagonist from the scene dramatizes thought's corrosive effect on feeling. We need not make Mariana a poet to recognize that her isolation is poetic.<sup>16</sup> In alternating between static, but fraught, descriptions of Mariana's surroundings and the unchanging dirge which ends each of the first six stanzas – "She only said, 'My life is dreary, / He cometh not,' she said; / She said, 'I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!'" – the poem paints a picture of a mind in exile from the object of its obsession and, perhaps, from itself. The final stanza intensifies this feeling of isolation by first shifting Mariana's lament to the present and then extending her abandonment into an indefinite future:

Then, said she, 'I am very dreary,  
He will not come,' she said;  
She wept, 'I am aweary, aweary,  
Oh God, I wish that I were dead!' (81–84)

Any reading of "Mariana" must attend to the effects produced by the minimal differences introduced in these last lines. If we read Mariana's isolation as a commentary on the condition of the poet, these lines serve to emphasize the poet's alienation by transforming circumstance ("My life is dreary") into identity ("I am very dreary").

From the outset, the *Poems* of 1832 reinforce the conception of the poet, and of the poet's relation to the critic, inaugurated by *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. The 1832 volume opens by addressing "Christopher North" directly, in verses that would seem to obviate the need for criticism:

You did late review my lays,  
Crusty Christopher;



You did mingle blame and praise,  
 Rusty Christopher.  
 When I learnt from whom it came,  
 I forgave you all the blame,  
 Musty Christopher;  
 I could *not* forgive the praise,  
 Fusty Christopher. (501–2)

Hallam understandably urged Tennyson not to publish these lines. In his 1835 review of Tennyson's first two volumes in the *London Review*, Mill remarked that "the verses to Christopher North . . . express, in rather a commonplace way, the author's resentment against a critique, which merited no resentment from him, but rather (all things considered) a directly contrary feeling."<sup>17</sup> While the poem testifies to Tennyson's strong reaction to Wilson's review, the impression it gives of the poet's understanding of his relation to the reviewers is misleading in its lack of nuance. For in making the opposition between feeling and thought a part of his poetic project, Tennyson came to depend upon the image of the killing critic. Whatever position the early poems take – from the celebration of art and the artist's transcendence in "The Hesperides" to the portrait of the failure of art for art's sake in "The Palace of Art" – they depend upon a dialectic between art and what Wilson called "the unceremonious world."

Tennyson offers the most dramatic instance of this opposition, and of the dialectic on which it depends, in the final stanza of the 1832 text of "The Lady of Shalott":

They crossed themselves, their stars they blest,  
 Knight, minstrel, abbot, squire and guest.  
 There lay a parchment on her breast,  
 That puzzled more than all the rest,  
 The wellfed wits at Camelot.  
*'The web was woven curiously*  
*The charm is broken utterly,*  
*Draw near and fear not – this is I,*  
*The Lady of Shalott.'* (163–71)

The poem as a whole invites an allegorical reading, and such a reading is necessarily governed by the Lady's death.<sup>18</sup> In this final stanza, Tennyson stages precisely the kind of conflict – between art and reality, feeling and thinking, private and public – that Hallam claimed Tennyson's poetry had left behind. The Lady's death allegorizes the fortunes of the work of art in a world which not only does not understand,

but spells the end of art. Its enigmatic meaning is represented finally not only by the verses inscribed on the “parchment on her breast” but also by the scene itself: the “wellfed wits” puzzling over the meaning of the parchment. The scene provides an apt emblem for Tennyson’s allegory of the contest between artist and society, since it does not merely dramatize the work of art’s failure to withstand exposure to the world, but also makes the scene of this conflict into the object of poetic representation. In so doing, the poet does not present a program or take sides in the debate but offers up the conflict itself as an object of judgment and as a poem.<sup>19</sup>

Tennyson revised this final stanza in the 1842 version of the poem. Rather than the Lady’s suicide note, we are presented with the reaction of the object of her love:

Who is this? and what is here?  
 And in the lighted palace near  
 Died the sound of royal cheer;  
 And they crossed themselves for fear,  
 All the knights at Camelot:  
 But Lancelot mused a little space;  
 He said, ‘She has a lovely face;  
 God in his mercy lend her grace,  
 The Lady of Shalott.’ (163–71)

Herbert Tucker describes Lancelot’s entirely inadequate response as “a parody of reciprocation” and characterizes the poem’s ending as “a travesty of communication that ranks among Tennyson’s closest approaches, anywhere, to unmitigated irony.”<sup>20</sup> These remarks suggest that rather than mitigating the conflict of the original concluding stanza, the revised ending of “The Lady of Shalott” in fact highlights the line that the poem draws in the sand. On one side, we are presented with the Lady’s remains – the end of art – and, on the other, with an uncomprehending audience which not only fails to appreciate what lies before it, but is held responsible for her death. Lancelot’s “dismissive courtliness” mirrors not just killing incomprehension but also the critic’s ability to damn the poet with faint praise.<sup>21</sup> The crowd’s incapacity to appreciate what has been lost, or even to identify the Lady (“Who is this? and what is here?”), is pitted against the individual reader’s sympathetic bond with the Lady, the poem, and thus the poet. It is against this public background that Tennyson asserts his claim for the significance of “silent votes”: while they receive no

hearing at the end of the Lady's funeral journey to Camelot, he stakes his early poetry on their ability to "affect the principal stream."

#### HEMANS AND THE GREAT THEATER OF THE WORLD

In an essay which takes Felicia Hemans as a test case for assessing the reception of women poets of the Romantic period, Paula Feldman has suggested that "there seems not to have been a deliberate conspiracy to exclude from the canon women of the Romantic era or to silence them." She reminds us that "[t]he establishment of a literary reputation and its maintenance require active championing and an ongoing effort to keep that reputation alive and prospering" and that "[i]t is easy to forget that" Shakespeare and Donne "once fell into disfavor and had to have their reputations resuscitated." What would have become of Shelley, she asks, "had Mary Shelley not painstakingly edited his works and rehabilitated his public image through her notes to his poems?" How would he have made his way through the nineteenth century "without the enthusiasm of the Chartists and later the pre-Raphaelites and the Shelley Society?" "And," finally, "after having been eclipsed in the twentieth century, would that reputation have been revived without the efforts of such scholars as Newman Ivey White, with his monumental 1940 biography?"<sup>22</sup>

To the examples Feldman offers, we might add Milton to the list that includes Shakespeare and Donne, and Blake to the one that Feldman begins with Shelley. The story of canon formation for any period is, after all, long and complicated. As for Romanticism, it was not so long ago that Blake did not figure as a major poet. Even the critical consensus that recognizes Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats as major writers was the result of a twentieth-century, and really mid-twentieth-century, effort of critical rehabilitation. What is remarkable about T. S. Eliot's 1933 Norton Lecture on Shelley and Keats, from this point of view, is not the criticism he levels against them: as we have seen, Shelley's ideas are for Eliot famously "ideas of adolescence," and Keats, despite the fact that Eliot thinks him "a great poet," turns out to be a kind of idiot savant of poetry, whose genius can be compared to Shakespeare's in kind but not degree (although Eliot does suggest that the "egotism" that marks Keats's work might have been "redeemed" had he lived).<sup>23</sup> After all, Eliot's judgments merely rehearse the arguments of his undergraduate teacher at Harvard, Irving Babbitt, whose *New Humanism* found little use for

Romanticism from Rousseau forward.<sup>24</sup> What is remarkable about Eliot's comments on Shelley and Keats, however, is that he felt the need to make them at all. With the important exceptions of I. A. Richards's and the New Critics' allegiance to Coleridge's theory of organic form and critical interest in selected poems from the Romantic corpus, in the first half of the twentieth century Romantic poetry was more a subject for sporadic scholarly inquiry than an object of sustained critical attention.

For Feldman, the remarkable thing about the critical reception of Hemans in the twentieth century is not that she was neglected, but how far, and how quickly, she fell. Feldman remarks on Hemans's popularity throughout the nineteenth century – in her lifetime, she was widely reviewed in such journals as the *Quarterly Review*, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *New Monthly Magazine*, *Blackwood's*, the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, the *Critical Review*, and the *European Magazine*; set to music, her verses became popular songs; her poetry was reproduced in numerous anthologies and gift albums – and points out that it translated into something like canonical status in the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Until 1914, for example, Hemans held a place in the Oxford Editions of Standard Authors series.<sup>26</sup> From Feldman we learn that Hemans's neglect is distinctly a twentieth-century phenomenon and that it is closely linked to the eclipse in the early part of the century of Romantic poetry in general. Moreover, and this is not a part of Feldman's argument, but is nevertheless a further lesson that we might draw from it, it may well be that Hemans's popularity made her a less suitable object of the mid-century Romantic recovery. The same argument could be made for Charlotte Smith – whose *Elegiac Sonnets* went through nine editions in her lifetime – and we might even speculate, on the basis of a similar forgetting of Walter Scott's poetry and Byron's frequent status as the odd-man-out of accounts of Romantic poetry, that popularity has worked as a disqualifying factor for canonization as a Romantic poet.<sup>27</sup> This is just as the Wordsworth of the "Essay, Supplementary" would have wanted it. And the point might be extended even further, for it helps to explain why the extensive effort to recover women writers in the 1970s never made the recovery of poetry by women of the Romantic period one of its objectives. We don't have a *Literature of Their Own* or *Madwoman in the Attic* for poets, that is to say, at least in part because the canon of Romantic poetry was still a relatively shaky thing, and the critical consensus represented by the work of M. H. Abrams – who,

more than any other critic perhaps, worked to overturn the New Critical condescension to Romantic poetry – was only beginning to be challenged by deconstructive critics.<sup>28</sup>

This is not to say that scholars working on such poets as Hemans and Smith have failed to examine the ways in which women's poetry of the Romantic period constitutes a separate tradition or a form of resistance to patriarchal society and the literary canon. Such approaches have raised crucial questions about the relationship between women's poetry of the Romantic period and the work that, for many years, has been understood to define British Romanticism. But rather than simply ratifying the kind of claim for novelty that Wordsworth makes about his own early poetry in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* by suggesting that poetry such as that produced by Smith and Hemans was the norm against which the male Romantics distinguished themselves, critics like Marlon Ross and Susan Wolfson have instead shown how even, and perhaps especially, in rejecting women's poetry and women readers, the male Romantic poets in fact defined themselves in relation to their female contemporaries.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, writing about the relationship between sentimentality and experience in the *Elegiac Sonnets*, Adela Pinch has argued that Smith's poetry makes it especially difficult to take at face value the claim that "women's literary writings . . . [are] fundamentally or exclusively about women's experience."<sup>30</sup>

Pinch does not argue that the melancholy expressed in Smith's sonnets is somehow unrelated to the unremitting hardships and sorrows that plagued her life. Instead, she suggests that sentimentality, in Smith's poetry and in general, is in an important sense a *literary* phenomenon. In examining Smith's use of literary conventions and extensive quotation from other poets, Pinch argues that Smith's art is bound up with her ability to problematize the relationship between affective and literary realms that appear to be nearly synonymous. On Pinch's reading, Smith "reminds us that the sentimental involves the sense of a disproportion between an occasion for feeling and the way in which that feeling is expressed" (69). Smith's "'personalization' of her conventionalized expressions of woe" draws uncomfortable attention to the role that convention plays in the formation of personal experience itself and, Pinch argues, suggests "that 'feeling,' surprisingly, renders it impossible rather than natural to try to reconcile writing and experience" (69, 70).

In the pages that remain, I want to suggest that Hemans's poetry, like Smith's, can be read as a critical reflection on the very values to which it seems to be uncritically devoted. Hemans, that is, is engaged in a project much like the one Pinch sees in Smith – and, as I've already suggested, the mode in which Hemans works is closely related to the one on which a young Alfred Tennyson would capitalize. For Pinch, Smith's poems emerge out of, and reflect upon, a set of epistemological problems with emotion that also occupied such writers as Hume, Wordsworth, Radcliffe, and Austen. What I want to suggest is that the way that Hemans problematizes the representation of emotion – and devotion – in her poems, which is an aspect of her poetry upon which a number of recent critics have commented, cannot be understood solely in terms of either the domestic turmoil of the poet's own life (very real though it was) or the kind of nascent feminism recent critics have found in her.<sup>31</sup> Instead, it is my claim that Hemans identifies and exploits the terms of the contemporary critical debate about the proper objects of poetic representation.

I have characterized this debate in terms of Hallam's reading of Tennyson. A glance at the table of contents of Tennyson's 1832 *Poems* suggests that Tennyson learned much from Hemans. Many of the best-known poems in that collection, as well as in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, explore topics that might have been drawn directly from Hemans. Indeed, with the addition of a few more poems like "Mariana" and "The Lady of Shalott," Tennyson might have taken *Records of Woman* as the title for his second volume. If Hallam's claim that Tennyson's poems are purified of politics and opinion tells only half the story, the same can be said of Hemans. By 1828, Hemans was known primarily as the preeminent poet of the "domestic affections" (the phrase itself was the title of one of her early collections). She had been praised by no less influential a critic than Francis Jeffrey as "the most touching and accomplished writer of occasional verses that our literature has yet to boast of." The *Quarterly Review* remarked on her "delicacy of feeling" and described her as the perfect "English lady"; a review in the *Edinburgh Monthly* added that "she never ceases to be strictly *feminine* in the whole current of her thought and feeling."<sup>32</sup> But when Jeffrey claims that "the poetry of Mrs. Hemans [is] a fine exemplification of Female Poetry," he has already undermined his praise of Hemans, as the first sentence of his review makes clear: "Women, we fear, cannot do every thing; nor even every thing they attempt" (549). "They cannot," he continues, "represent naturally the fierce and sullen

passions of men – nor their coarser vices – nor even scenes of actual business or contention – and the mixed motives, and strong and faulty characters, by which affairs of moment are usually conducted on the great theater of the world” (549). The “proper and natural business” of the woman writer, Jeffrey patiently explains, “is the practical regulation of private life, in all its bearings, affections, and concerns . . .” (550).

Of course, Jeffrey’s argument is a familiar one, foreshadowing Coventry Patmore’s “angel in the house.” Many critics, among them Mary Poovey, Nancy Armstrong, and G.J. Barker-Benfield, have enumerated the ways in which women were imagined to be the guardians and guarantors of private values and morals.<sup>33</sup> It is in these terms that Hemans earned the praise not only of Jeffrey but of a host of nineteenth-century commentators. In reading Hemans in this way, however, these early readers overlooked striking moments that recur throughout Hemans’s late poetry. An astonishing number of the poems that make up *Records of Woman*, for example, in particular such well-known poems as “Arabella Stuart” and “Properzia Rossi” and the suggestively titled “Gertrude, or Fidelity till Death” and “Constanza,” represent steadfast women watching their worlds crash down around them. In his review of *Records of Woman*, Jeffrey had described poetry’s “very essence” in terms of “the fine perception and vivid expression of that subtle and mysterious analogy which exists between the physical and the moral world” (552). He develops this definition in a way that echoes Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:<sup>34</sup>

[Poetry] has substantially two functions, and operates in two directions. In the *first* place, it strikes vividly out, and flashes at once on our minds, the conception of an inward feeling or emotion, which it might otherwise have been difficult to convey, by the presentment of some bodily form or quality, which is instantly felt to be its true representative, and enables us to fix and comprehend it with a force and clearness not otherwise attainable; and, in the *second* place, it vivifies dead and inanimate matter with the attributes of living and sentient mind, and fills the whole visible universe around us with objects of interest and sympathy, by tinging them with the hues of life, and associating them with our own passions and affections. (552)

Jeffrey’s emphasis on the externalization and concretization of “an inward feeling or emotion” anticipates those recent appreciations of Hemans that value her depiction of women’s experience. It also foreshadows Hallam’s analysis of Tennyson’s poetry of sensation. But in *Records of Woman*, such introspection is framed – quite literally, in fact, as many of the poems are prefaced by headnotes which

contextualize the verses that follow – in terms of the larger world with which the individual must contend.<sup>35</sup> These gestures frame the catastrophic moments to which I have alluded; they do so by demanding a critical attitude which departs from Jeffrey’s standard of sympathetic appreciation.

Perhaps the most striking of these moments appears in Hemans’s most famous poem, “Casabianca” (published one year after *Records of Woman* in the second edition of *The Forest Sanctuary*). The poem recounts the story of the son to the Admiral of the French ship, *The Orient*, who, dying with his father in the Battle of the Nile, became, through Hemans’s poem, a symbol of filial duty. Yet alongside this paternalistic and patriotic reading (which, despite the fact that the boy and his father are French, was the standard reading of the poem in Hemans’s lifetime and beyond), the climactic stanzas of the poem sit uneasily at best:

There came a burst of thunder-sound  
 The boy – oh! where was he?  
 Ask of the winds that far around  
 With fragments strew’d the sea!

With mast, and helm, and pennon fair,  
 That well had borne their part  
 But the noblest thing which perished there  
 Was that young faithful heart! (33–40)

Not simply killed by the blast that also takes his father’s life, but vaporized by it (the boy’s “fragments” mingle “With mast, and helm, and pennon fair”), the figure of young Casabianca stands as a rather grotesque example of the way that Hemans played both sides against the middle. The boy’s devotion may be pure, but Hemans’s poem – and especially the way its final stanzas equate the pieces of the boy, and, in particular, pieces of his heart, with the pieces of the ship – suggests that perhaps, in this instance, devotion was *too* pure. Hemans’s attention not just to the boy’s tragic end but to the fate of the “fragments” that once composed his body, pushes his status as a symbol of devotion to a ridiculous extreme. In this sense, the naïveté of the poem’s closing question – “The boy – oh! where was he?” – reveals a strangely violent side of the domestic affections. Here Hemans pits family against nation in a way that must call into question their compatibility. Tricia Lootens has read “Casabianca” along similar lines, noting that the poem “never fully defuses the horror of the



history it evokes” and arguing that “setting the tactically unnecessary death of a child at the heart of Britain’s victory in the Battle of the Nile, the poem suggests the powerful, unstable fusion of domestic and military values that helped render Hemans’s poetry influential.”<sup>36</sup> If on the face of it Hemans sticks to “the practical regulation of private life, in all its bearings, affections, and concerns,” it is hard not to see that the poem as a whole raises just the issues – about “the mixed motives, and strong and faulty characters, by which affairs of moment are usually conducted on the great theater of the world” – which Jeffrey, among others, thought women were unfit to address.

The first poem of *Records of Woman*, “Arabella Stuart,” takes this conflict as its subject. As Hemans’s headnote explains, Arabella Stuart was “allied by birth to Elizabeth, as well as James I. This affinity to the throne proved the misfortune of her life, as the jealousies which it constantly excited in her royal relatives, who were anxious to prevent her marrying, shut her out from the enjoyment of domestic happiness which her heart appears to have so fervently desired” (331). “The Lady Arabella”’s relationship with Edward Seymour prompted her imprisonment by Elizabeth; their secret marriage led to their imprisonment by James. In the poem, Arabella addresses her absent husband while both are in prison, but before their escape and failed reunion. (Arabella was recaptured and died in the Tower of London, while Seymour remained at large and ultimately reclaimed his inheritance and his title after the Restoration.) The poem is set “during the time of her first imprisonment, whilst her mind was buoyed up by the consciousness of Seymour’s affection, and the cherished hope of eventual deliverance.” Hemans offers the poem “as some record of her fate, and the imagined fluctuation of her thoughts and feelings,” but the trajectory it traces is less “fluctuation” than decline (332). Hemans’s rendering of the story foreshadows Arabella’s madness (in her note, she quotes from the version of the story included in Isaac D’Israeli’s *Curiosities of Literature*) by tracing the progressive failure of her faith in Seymour. The shared burden (“And thou too art in bonds! – yet droop thou not, / Oh, my belov’d!” [45–6]) which fuels Arabella’s resolve (“. . . I will not sink!” [115]) gives way to doubt (“My friend, my friend! where art thou?” [125]), which she expresses in terms that echo Christ’s lament on the cross (“Dost thou forget me, Seymour?” [160]).

This doubt leads Arabella to “[sin] in her despair” (214); she imagines Seymour straying from her (184–199) and envisions her own

death (200, 224–27). In the end, however, she recovers her senses and turns once again to her beloved:

Now, with fainting frame,  
 With soul just lingering on the flight begun,  
 To bind for thee its last dim thoughts in one,  
 I bless thee! Peace be on thy noble head,  
 Years of bright fame, when I am with the dead!  
 I bid this prayer survive me, and retain  
 Its might, again to bless thee, and again! (233–39)

These lines are addressed to Seymour, but it is hard not to hear them also as Hemans addressing her poem. Even as she gives voice to her suffering, Arabella's lament turns back on itself by reflecting her creator's desire for poetic permanence. It is almost as though the "fainting frame" to which the first half-line of the passage refers points not only to Arabella's body, but to the distance between Hemans's headnote and the expressive extremity at which the poem has arrived. In this sense, the distance between the historical Arabella and the poem's depiction of her subjectivity is part of Hemans's point in "Arabella Stuart." Moreover, in reading Arabella's plea as Hemans's as well, we are confronted with a moment in which the poet confronts herself. My point is not to suggest that Hemans has misgivings about presenting her speaker's pain for the pleasure of her readers – and for her own reward. Rather, the ease with which Arabella's words might be spoken by the poet herself reflects Hemans's awareness of the difficulties posed by her position as England's preeminent woman poet.

Susan Wolfson has argued that Hemans's popularity and critical reputation in her own day depended upon her readers' ability to overlook precisely those aspects of her poetry that recent critics have brought to our attention.<sup>37</sup> Rather than the poetess of the domestic affections par excellence, that is, we have only just begun to recognize Hemans the social critic. What I have been arguing is that the interest of Hemans's poetry for us now depends not only upon seeing what her first readers missed. Instead, we should be attentive to the ways in which Hemans herself understood the critical terrain her poetry sought to engage. If, as Jeffrey's review suggests, Hemans's stature as the exemplar of "female genius" was in one sense an obstacle to what she might achieve (551), in another sense it afforded opportunities on which she was able to capitalize. She did so, as Tennyson would, by transforming critical reflection on her situation as a poet into poetry. If

this appears to be a different form of self-reflection than that of the poet Shelley described as “a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds,” whose “auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why,” this book has argued that they are in fact intimately related.<sup>38</sup>

## Notes

### INTRODUCTION: THE REGIME OF PUBLICITY

- 1 The standard work on the mass reading public remains Richard D. Altick's *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957). For another seminal early study of the emergence of the mass public, see Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1958; New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), esp. the chapter entitled “The Romantic Artist,” 30–48. On the reorganization of the book trade in the late eighteenth century, see J. H. Plumb, “The Commercialization of Leisure in Eighteenth-century England,” in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), esp. 265–73. On the relationships between authors, patrons, and publishers, see A. S. Collins, *The Profession of Letters: A Study of the Relation of Author to Patron, Publisher, and Public, 1780–1832* (London: Routledge, 1928), and Alvin Kernan, *Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). And on the market for poetry in the early nineteenth century, see Tim Chilcott, *A Publisher and His Circle: The Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats's Publisher* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), esp. 199–209, and Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 19–69.
- 2 Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1843), 310. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text. The first English instance of “publicity” cited in the *OED* is from 1791, but its source, a translation of a French treatise on bleaching and dyeing by Claude-Louis Berthollet, is less pertinent to the term's meaning than is Bentham's *Essay*. (The *OED* does cite an example from Bentham, but it is drawn from his 1832 *Draught of A Code*.)
- 3 Publicity's political effects, especially as they are conceptualized in public opinion, are the subject of chapter 1.
- 4 This distinction marks a crucial difference between Bentham's account of the regime of publicity and Jürgen Habermas's conception of the public sphere

- (see *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence [1962; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989]). I consider Habermas's account of the public sphere, and responses to it, at some length in chapter 1.
- 5 Jeremy Bentham, "The Rationale of Reward," in *Works*, 253.
  - 6 Bentham's "comment on the *Commentaries*" was published anonymously in 1776 (see *A Fragment on Government*, ed. Ross Harrison [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988]).
  - 7 And about the history of criticism since Romanticism. In the course of a historical overview of the reader's role in literary criticism, Jane Tompkins presents an especially lucid statement of this view: "As the conditions of life – economic, social, political – come more and more to resemble those of the present day, conceptions of literature take on a more and more familiar outline. The development of literary theory from the pre-Romantics onward leads in a straight line to literary formalism, effecting a total reversal of the assumptions that had been in force since the Renaissance. This remarkable shift – so profound, yet gradual and continuous at close range – registers itself most tellingly in the changing definition of literary response, which, ever at the center of critical attention, comes paradoxically but inevitably to be redefined out of existence" ("The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980], 214). The shift to literary formalism that Tompkins describes here is a topic taken up below – and in greater detail in chapter 4.
  - 8 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 25. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
  - 9 In remarking on the disintegration of the reading public, Abrams's brief account of the audience for Romantic poetry concurs with Habermas's larger narrative of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere.
  - 10 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols., in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 7 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1:48–9, and *The Statesman's Manual*, in *Political Tracts of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley*, ed. R. J. White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 7.
  - 11 This line includes such important studies as Marjorie Levinson's *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), David Simpson's *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York: Methuen, 1987), and Alan Liu's *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989). In chapter 2, I will suggest that it is no accident that these books all focus on Wordsworth. Where these critics take Wordsworth to be representative of Romanticism, I argue that Wordsworth is the point of departure for a radical shift in Romantic poetry and poetics.

- 12 Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 32. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 13 A version of this line of analysis has been advanced by Sarah M. Zimmerman, who argues that the “massive critical and rhetorical endeavor” undertaken by Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), “English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age” (1963), “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric” (1965), and *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) “has retained a hold on the critical imagination, which is operative even when Abrams’ influence is not explicitly recognized, since his claims have been so thoroughly absorbed” (*Romanticism, Lyricism, and History* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999], xi, x). There is much to credit in this account, in particular Zimmerman’s shrewd observation that “influential Romantic new historical critiques have, in effect, reinforced this paradigm by elaborating the ideological implications of a desire for transcendence without interrogating the preeminence of that desire in characterizing the period’s lyric impulses” (x). For Zimmerman, however, the critical legacy that originates with Abrams and continues with his critics consists primarily in the definition of the Romantic lyric as private and transcendent, and her response is to emphasize “the subtle indirection of the mode’s capacity for social engagement” (xi). The problem with such an approach, as I see it, is that even as it insists upon the public dimension of lyric poetry, it remains firmly committed to the expressivist account, so that poems continue to be judged by what they say.
- 14 The most important, and most influential, study of the stratification of the audience in terms of class and politics is Jon P. Klancher’s *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987). For excellent studies of the gender politics of the audience for Romantic poetry, see Margaret Homans, “Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats,” *Studies in Romanticism* 29:3 (1990): 341–70, and Sonia Hofkosh, *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 15 See, for example, Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Both of these studies take up themes which are closely related to my own, and each offers an account of Romantic poets’ struggles with the changing literary public which illuminates the conditions of poetic production and reception examined here. But Bennett’s and Newlyn’s assessments of the significance and meaning of the poet’s relation to the audience differ sharply from mine, and it would be useful to make these differences clear here at the outset. Bennett argues that anxiety about the reading public engenders an interest in posthumous reception and produces a “Romantic culture of posterity” which prompts poets to imagine “a form of textual continuation of

personal identity” (13) (hence his study’s thematics of “living on,” “life-after-death,” and “haunting”). For Bennett, “the fiction of posterity” offers “compensation” for the fragmentation of the reading audience (44), and his sense that poets come to “figure reception in terms of an ideal audience – masculine, generalised, and anonymous – deferred to an unspecified future” reflects the conception of audience and reception against which this study argues (5). Newlyn’s subject differs from mine in her focus on first-generation poets – the case studies which undergird her analysis are of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Barbauld – and her concern throughout is with the anxieties which attended the transformation of the reading public and the literary marketplace (in particular, the rise of anonymous periodical criticism). As this introduction suggests, this anxiety is the starting-point for my study, but my argument involves the transformation of poetic theory and practice to which the anxiety so skillfully described by Newlyn and Bennett gave rise. The central claim of this book is that recognizing and analyzing this shift fundamentally alters our understanding of the literary-historical trajectory and development of Romantic writing – and that it does so, in part, by alerting us to how these changes in poetic theory and practice reflect a larger cultural and historical shift whose effects extend to the realms of politics and the law as well as conceptions of authorship and the literary text.

- 16 *Epipsychidion*, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), 393. Subsequent references to Shelley’s poetry and prose are to this edition and are cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
- 17 In addition to Abrams and McGann, see, for example, the essays collected in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970).
- 18 *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 416; *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 584.
- 19 In the lines from Dante which Shelley translates and adapts, by contrast, beauty is offered as compensation for incomprehension:

My song, I do believe there will be few  
 Who toil to understand my reasoning;  
 But if thou pass, perchance, to those who bring  
 No skill to give thee the attention due,  
 Then pray I, dear last-born, let them rejoice  
 To find at least a music in my voice.

(*Il Convito: The Banquet of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Elizabeth Price Sayer, [New York: G. Routledge and Sons, 1887])

- 20 *Paradise Lost*, in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957), 346.

- 21 William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. 235–67. “The explosion of reading” is the title of chapter 6.
- 22 St. Clair, *The Reading Nation*, 175, 189.
- 23 “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface,” in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 80.
- 24 John Stuart Mill, “What Is Poetry?” in *Mill’s Essays on Literature and Society*, ed. J. B. Schneewind (New York: Collier, 1965), 109.
- 25 This phrase is drawn from Arthur Henry Hallam’s review of Tennyson’s first volume of poetry (“On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson,” in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange, 2nd ed. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968], 849).
- 26 Here one could cite a host of deconstructive readings of Romanticism which followed the example of Paul de Man. Rather than address these deconstructive accounts in detail here, I examine the basis for their fundamental claims in chapter 4.
- 27 This kind of attention to the audience for poetry is particularly evident in critical work on Keats, which I address in chapter 3. It also underwrites many accounts of the politics of Romantic poetry. For one recent example, see Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- 28 For an instance which at once participates in and comments on this convergence, see Darin Barney, *Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- 29 See Roland Barthes’s 1968 essay, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–48.
- 30 Paul de Man, “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 7.
- 31 On subject and object in Romantic poetry, in addition to de Man’s essay, see, for example, Earl Wasserman, “The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge,” *Studies in Romanticism* 4 (1964): 17–34, and William K. Wimsatt, “The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery,” in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Bloom, 77–88.
- 32 “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in *The Poems of Johns Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 373.
- 33 In making a case for the continued critical power of Romanticism, Paul Hamilton has recently claimed “that romantic period writing is often simultaneously a position paper on its own kind of significance” (*Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 1). While my method differs from Hamilton’s more explicitly philosophical approach, I am similarly concerned with the critical power and political significance of Romantic reflexivity.



- 34 James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. 155–202. Citing Hanna Pitkin, Chandler notes that “it is difficult to discuss . . . ‘the concept of representation’ without repeated reference to political representation in modern history and theory” (159) (see Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967], esp. 244–52). For a discussion of the politics of representation in the 1840s, see Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Revolution of English Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 187–218.
- 35 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O’Brien (1790; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 89.
- 36 *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–34), 9:13.

#### 1 PUBLIC OPINION FROM BURKE TO BYRON

- 1 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O’Brien (1790; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 84. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 2 George Gordon, Lord Byron, “Some Observations Upon an Article in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*,” in *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 117. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 3 For Burke’s influence on Wordsworth, see James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth’s Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). For the claim that Burke’s “dominant representation” of the Revolution “both constrained and enabled subsequent radical narratives about France (including those of the Romantic poets),” see Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 13. On the relationship between Burke’s aesthetics and the Revolution, in addition to Furniss, see Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 57–87; W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 116–49; and James K. Chandler, “Poetical Liberties: Burke’s France and the ‘Adequate Representation’ of the English,” in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf, vol. 3 (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), 45–58.
- 4 Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1791; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 50.
- 5 In 1809, Paine estimated that *Rights of Man* had sold one and a half million copies. A more conservative estimate is offered by Richard D. Altick, who places the number at one hundred thousand. (For Paine’s estimate, see Marilyn Butler, ed., *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution*

- Controversy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 109; for Altick's, see *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], 70.) For discussions of the rise of popular interest in reading and of the expansion of the radical press during the 1790s, see Altick, 67–77, and Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 18–46.
- 6 For an excellent account of the formative importance of “circulation” for modern publics, see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 90–114. In “My First Acquaintance With Poets” (1823), William Hazlitt describes one of the forms of circulation on which the corresponding societies were modeled, remarking that his father “was in the habit of exchanging visits . . . according to the custom of Dissenting Ministers in each other's neighborhood. A line of communication is thus established, by which the flame of civil and religious liberty is kept alive, and nourishes its smouldering fire unquenchable, like the fires in the Agamemnon of Aeschylus, placed at different stations, that waited ten long years to announce with their blazing pyramids the destruction of Troy” (*The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. [London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–34], 17:107). For a later representation of circulation (with vastly different ideological implications), see Thomas De Quincey's essay, “The English Mail-Coach, or the Glory of Motion” (1849), in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. 201–8.
- 7 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; New York: Vintage, 1966), 21. For an excellent brief discussion of the L.C.S., see John Barrell, “Divided We Grow,” *London Review of Books* (5 June 2003): 8–11.
- 8 John Barrell, *The Birth of Pandora and the Division of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 119–43, and *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 9 It is for accepting such an “equivocal description” as an authoritative representation of the opinion of the English public that Burke rebukes the French revolutionaries: “you have thrown open the folding-doors of your presence chamber, and have ushered into your National Assembly, with as much ceremony and parade, and with as great a bustle of applause, as if you had been visited by the whole representative majesty of the whole English nation” (89).
- 10 Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature*, 19.
- 11 On the “Burke problem,” see Isaac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 3–11, and C. B. Macpherson, *Burke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 1–7. For recent reassessments of the Burke's relation to Romanticism, see Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, 3–8, and Kevin Gilmartin,

“Burke, Popular Opinion, and the Problem of a Counter-Revolutionary Public Sphere,” in *Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. John Whale (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 94–114.

12 Kramnick, *Rage of Edmund Burke*, 4.

13 *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 7:226.

14 For an assessment of the history of public opinion that attempts to “account for the thinness of material on the subject,” see J. A. W. Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1983), 260–315. Gunn argues that “[h]istorians have long been deeply suspicious of the notion of public opinion, seeing it as the last refuge of the politician without vision, of the scholar without any better explanation,” but notes that this suspicion has not prevented historians from agreeing “that the latter part of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century saw changes in western Europe and elsewhere that signaled the arrival of public opinion as a significant force” (260). His analysis is grounded in the Humean observation that, “admitting the limited explanatory power of the concept of ‘public opinion,’ one is left with the widespread expectation that, in a certain sort of society, public opinion will in fact be significant” (261). Rather than addressing the historiographical problem to which Gunn points, recent reassessments of public opinion have tended either to respond to Habermas’s account of the public sphere or examine the role played by public opinion in specific controversies in French or English political history. For responses to Habermas, see the essays collected in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). For exemplary studies in the French and English contexts, see Mona Ozouf, “‘Public Opinion’ at the End of the Old Regime,” in *The Rise and Fall of the French Revolution*, ed. T. C. W. Blanning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 90–110, and Dror Wahrman, “Public Opinion, Violence and the Limits of Constitutional Reform,” in *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England’s Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. James Vernon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 83–122.

15 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (1962; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 89. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text. In an encyclopedia article on the public sphere, Habermas provides an even more explicit formulation of the role played by public opinion: “By ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (“The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article [1964],” trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique* 3 [1974]: 49).

16 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi,

Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff, foreword by Miriam Hansen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). This criticism has come despite Habermas's attempt, in his preface, to preempt it with the following "reservation pertaining to the subject matter itself": "Our investigation is limited to the structure and function of the *liberal* model of the bourgeois public sphere, to its emergence and transformation. Thus it refers to those features of a historical constellation that attained dominance and leaves aside the *plebeian* public sphere as a variant that in a sense was suppressed in the historical process." The example Habermas proceeds to offer at once illustrates the central importance of literacy in his account of the public sphere and displays the attitude toward the question of the "plebeian public sphere" to which his critics object: "In the stage of the French Revolution associated with Robespierre, for just one moment, a public sphere stripped of its literary garb began to function – its subject was no longer the 'educated strata' but the uneducated 'people.' Yet even this plebeian public sphere, whose continued but submerged existence manifested itself in the Chartist Movement and especially the anarchist tradition of the workers' movement on the continent, remains oriented toward the intentions of the bourgeois public sphere" (xviii).

- 17 Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Calhoun, 306. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 18 John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 17. For another important account of the development of Whig political thought, see J. G. A. Pocock, "The Varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform: A History of Ideology and Discourse," in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 215–310.
- 19 Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*, 17.
- 20 The development of the concept of virtual representation was one attempt to manage this relationship; Burke's defense of the two-party system was another. On virtual representation, in addition to Brewer, see J. R. Pole, *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic* (London: Macmillan, 1960), 442–57; John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 31–33; and John Phillip Reid, *The Concept of Representation in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 50–62. Of Burke's defense of party in *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770), Brewer remarks, "what is so important about Burke's argument is that, unlike previous apologias for opposition, he defends an opposition to *preserve*, not to *destroy* party" (71). Conceiving of political opposition "as an enduring feature of politics" serves to legitimate the political function of public opinion, as parties claim to represent the national interest (72).

In this way, even as Burke seeks to limit the groups entitled to perform this kind of virtuous political action by branding both Tories and such popular political movements as the Wilkites as factions, his account of party articulates a general rationale for the legitimate political action of groups.

- 21 Edmund Burke, *Burke's Politics: Selected Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke on Reform, Revolution, and War*, eds. Ross J. S. Hoffiman and Paul Levack (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 106. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 22 Burke thus acknowledges the importance of public opinion by offering an account of tradition which accommodates it (by making reasoned reflection on public issues an immemorial trait of the English). Mark Canuel makes a similar argument about Burke's views on religious toleration: "The point toward which Burke continually drew . . . was not that the business of government was toleration, but that Britain's national church was the Anglican church, and that the Anglican church happened to be a tolerant one. Tolerance, in other words, was merely the outcome of a fortunate historical accident" (*Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790–1830* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 18–19). Burke's views on public opinion represent another such "historical accident." Taken together, these instances suggest that, were we to attend to the capaciousness of tradition as Burke defines it, we might well arrive at a different understanding of Burke's traditionalism. For the representative statement on Burke and tradition, see J. G. A. Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A Problem in the History of Ideas," in *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (1971; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 202–32.
- 23 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 94.
- 24 Curious not only because it finds Burke and Bentham in fundamental agreement about the significance of public opinion, but because, as I noted in the introduction, Bentham's essay was intended as a set of instructions for the newly formed Estates-General. His subtitle, like Burke's, is instructive: *An Essay on Political Tactics; or, inquiries concerning the discipline and mode of proceeding proper to be observed in political assemblies; principally applied to the practice of the British Parliament, and to the constitution and situation of the National Assembly of France*. For a brief discussion of the *Essay*, see Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism*, trans. Mary Morris, preface by A. D. Lindsay (1928; London: Faber & Faber, 1949), 166–67.
- 25 Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1843), 311. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 26 See, for instance, Bruce Robbins's claim that "theorists have sought to pluralize and multiply the concept" of the public sphere, so that "we now speak routinely of *alternative* public spheres and *counterpublics*" ("Introduction: The Public Sphere as Phantom," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993], xvii).

There has been much important work on the competing publics of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England over the last twenty years. In addition to the studies by Klancher and Eley cited above, see, for example, Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); John Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Michael Scrivener, ed., *Poetry and Reform: Periodical Verse from the English Democratic Press, 1792–1824* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992); Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790–1822* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); the essays collected in *Romanticism, Radicalism, and the Press*, ed. Stephen C. Behrendt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997); Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); and Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

- 27 For a similar claim about the relationship between Pope's *Peri Bathous* and *The Dunciad*, see Ronald Paulson, *Breaking and Remaking: Aesthetic Practice in England, 1700–1820* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 80–81.
- 28 In an article on free indirect style in Austen's *Emma*, Casey Finch and Peter Bowen make a related point about the groundlessness and decisiveness of gossip: "Ultimately, the irresistible force of public opinion expresses itself by anonymity, by an authority that is everywhere apparent but whose source is nowhere to be found" ("'The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury': Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in *Emma*," *Representations* 31 [1990]: 15). Byron's dilemma suggests that, even when the source of gossip is known, its force remains difficult to resist.
- 29 According to Jerome Christensen, Byron's answer to the kind of structural paranoia represented by public opinion is a strategic psychosis that acts as an ethical standard: "Psychosis is the last refuge against irony. *Juan* fails to renounce for the same reason it fails to oppose – because there is no position on which to take a stand independent of the phenomenon it would satirize. . . . If it is psychotic to insist on giving ethical prescriptions without any ground except that of the landspeech in which the prescriptions are made, it is also democratic. Anyone can be psychotic. Anyone can speak out" (*Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993], 352–53). Christensen argues that this strategy, on display in *Don Juan*, constitutes Byron's rejection of "Byronism," which denotes both the "literary system" that "programmatically translates poetic deeds into reflexively complicated, serially elaborated images of the poet available

for imitation and consumption” and “Byronic irony,” which posits “a humanistic poet who is the master strategist of his poem, who thematizes contingency and pays lip service to the ‘god circumstance,’ but who, ironically, occupies a standing place of transcendental freedom outside the ‘array’ from which he, designing agent, can artfully dispose accident, contingency, and circumstance to the greater glory of Byron, ‘properly so-called’” (215). My reading of Byron, and of *Don Juan* in particular, owes much to Christensen’s. I depart from it in arguing that Byron’s turn against “Byronism” (the publishing industry, the literary world, and commercial society itself) takes shape through a thoroughgoing critique of public opinion and the logic of the schools.

- 30 James Chandler, “The Pope Controversy: Romantic Poetics and the English Canon,” in *Canons*, ed. Robert von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 197, 198. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 31 Byron’s remark is a pointed reference to Wordsworth’s “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface.”
- 32 Addressing the formation of the canon of English poetry in the eighteenth century, Jonathan Kramnick argues that around mid-century “the literary canon took on its modern constitution” as critics worked “to stabilize or at the very least to comprehend a cultural crisis of broad and significant scope: the long-term transformation of the reading public and the print market.” On this reading, the English canon becomes modern when it joins together the “antithetical models” that preceded it: “reception secures value, but only over time. The antiquity of the national literature, in other words, depends on the constancy of its rereading” (“The Making of the English Canon,” *PMLA* 112:5 [1997]: 1099). The point I am making is that the situation Byron describes, in which poets who are themselves unread can be taken as arbiters of what the public should read, itself constitutes a “cultural crisis” engendered by the emergence of the mass reading public.
- 33 “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface,” in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 80.
- 34 The emphases are Byron’s. The accuracy of the quotation suggests that he had a copy of Keats’s 1817 *Poems* before him as he wrote “Some Observations.”
- 35 The use of the word “school” to denote a group of poets (which begins with Francis Jeffrey’s campaign against Wordsworth and the Lake School in the *Edinburgh Review*) seems to draw on and move between several senses of the word. It is obviously modeled on the definition of school as “[t]he body of persons that are or have been taught by a particular master (in philosophy, science, art, etc.; hence, in a wider sense, a body or succession of persons who in some department of speculation or practice are disciples of the same master, or who are united by a general similarity of principles

and methods” (*OED*, s.v. “school”). In addition, it touches on the senses of the word which denote “those whose training was obtained in the same locality” (the Lake District or Cockneydom rather than Rome, Venice, or Tuscany) or “designate an anonymous work produced in the school of a particular artist” (as in Byron’s insidious treatment of Keats’s status as an unknown). But it also points forward to the figurative sense of “school” as “[a] set of persons, who agree in certain opinions, points of behaviour or the like” (despite the *OED*’s citation of Walter Scott’s *Chronicles of the Canongate* [1827] as the first instance of this usage). Finally, Byron in particular might have in mind a definition found in J. H. Vaux’s *Flash Dictionary* (1812): “a party of persons met together for the purpose of gambling” (the *OED* also provides “[a] company of thieves or beggars working together”). This meaning of “school” nicely captures Byron’s sense of Hunt and his followers as literary gamblers (an attitude which, I will suggest in chapter 3, reflects Keats’s own sense of his authorial position). On Byron’s knowledge of the slang (“flash”) of Regency England, see Gary Dyer, “Thieves, Boxers, Sodomites, Poets: Being Flash to Byron’s *Don Juan*,” *PMLA* 116:3 (2001): 562–78.

- 36 George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in Byron, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 429. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text by canto and stanza.
- 37 This phrase appears in Byron’s one published contribution to the Pope controversy, his 1821 *Letter to \*\*\*\* \* [John Murray], on the Reverend W. L. Bowles’ Strictures on the Life and Writings of Pope* (in *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, 149).
- 38 Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 320.
- 39 Christensen suggests that “[o]ne difference between Pope and Byron as satirists is that Pope is always partisan: given his principles, it is possible to state what, in theory at least, would satisfy him. Byron is not partisan: there is no change in policy or personalities that would satisfy him” (*Lord Byron’s Strength*, 408n17).
- 40 *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. Edward Hyder Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 1:387.
- 41 James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 333.
- 42 Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 333.
- 43 Byron, ed. McGann, 1009. My sense of the importance of circumstance in *Don Juan* follows Jerome McGann’s account of its centrality to the poem’s conception (*Don Juan in Context* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976], 1–10). More recently, Jane Stabler has explored “the contingencies of readerly participation in the historical matrices of literary composition” and made a convincing case for Byron’s interest in his readers (*Byron, Poetics, and History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 10).



- 44 Peter Manning, *Byron and His Fictions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), 179.
- 45 *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 7:76.
- 46 Andrew Cooper, *Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 146.
- 47 “Remarks on Don Juan,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 5:29 (August 1819): 512–18. Rpt. in Byron, *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, 364–65. Cooper quotes from the *Blackwood’s* review, but it is striking that in addition to being quoted out of sequence, the sentences he cites – “the insulting deceit which has been practiced upon us . . . Every high thought that was ever kindled in our hearts by the muse of Byron . . . every remembered moment of admiration and enthusiasm is up in arms against us” – are also taken out of context. The passage Cooper quotes is not commenting on the shipwreck episode at all; it describes how knowledge of “the main incidents in the private life of Lord Byron” intensifies the reader’s disgusted reaction to *Don Juan*. Cooper, it would seem, is guilty of the same confusion of fact and fiction of which Byron accused the *Blackwood’s* reviewer.
- 48 Qtd. in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 163.
- 49 Manning, *Byron and His Fictions*, 260.
- 50 Manning, *Byron and His Fictions*, 261.
- 51 Christensen likens *Don Juan’s* early reviewers to the cannibals on the longboat: both “digest what degrades them into demons.” He also remarks that the reviewers “found it difficult to quote from the poem, not merely because there are so many outrageous passages but because even the rare ‘beauties’ bleed into something ugly” (*Lord Byron’s Strength*, 236, 231). The *Blackwood’s* reviewer introduces the passages he does quote by noting that “we are the more willing to quote a few of the passages which can be read without a blush, because the comparative rarity of such passages will, in all probability, operate to the complete exclusion of the work itself, from the libraries of the greater part of our readers” (Byron, *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, 364).
- 52 Byron dramatizes this discrepancy in the description of the rain that provides a brief respite for the crew of the long-boat. The passage as a whole clearly alludes to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Moreover, the lines that describe the beginning of the storm – “And the same night there fell a shower of rain, / For which their mouths gaped, like the cracks of earth / When dried to summer dust” (2:84) – parodically recall the climactic passage of the first book of *The Excursion*: “Oh Sir! the good die first, / And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust / Burn to the socket” (*The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, vol. 5 [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949], 25).

## 2 WORDSWORTH'S AUDIENCE PROBLEM

- 1 Jerome McGann, for example, makes a version of this claim in *The Romantic Ideology*: “The patterns I shall be marking out are widespread in the works of the period. I shall concentrate on Wordsworth, however, because his works – like his position in the Romantic Movement – are normative and, in every sense, exemplary” (*The Romantic Ideology* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983], 82). For a powerful argument about the critical tendency to “[subsume] Romanticism under Wordsworth,” see Robert J. Griffin, *Wordsworth's Pope: A Study in Literary Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.
- 2 Of course, Wordsworth's place in critical accounts of Romanticism and his status as a representative figure for later poets are connected phenomena: Wordsworth's influence on subsequent writers over the course of the nineteenth century is itself partly responsible for his centrality to twentieth-century criticism. This connection also points to a recurrent concern of this and subsequent chapters: namely, the recursive relationship between modern critical and theoretical appraisals of Romanticism and issues central to Romantic poetry and poetics. This chapter, for example, will argue that the longstanding critical debate over the originality of the *Lyrical Ballads* repeats, at a higher level of abstraction, the problems inherent in Wordsworth's conception of making taste (which, I claim, is the central concern of his critical prose).
- 3 To McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* and the other studies cited in the introduction – Marjorie Levinson's *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), David Simpson's *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York: Methuen, 1987), and Alan Liu's *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) – one might add an early example, F. W. Bateson's *Wordsworth: A Re-Interpretation* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1956).
- 4 *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. Edward Hyder Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 1:387.
- 5 Dullness is also the leading principle of Shelley's parody of Wordsworth in *Peter Bell the Third*.
- 6 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2 vols., in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 7, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1:79, 81. Subsequent references are to vol. 1 and are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 7 *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), 92. Subsequent references to Shelley's poetry are cited parenthetically by line number in the text.
- 8 Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1:25.

- 9 Jonathan Arac has offered an acute description of the situation with which Wordsworth contends: “Once poetic authority was lost, once the previously existing social demand for poetry had been transformed, once the writer was no longer producing on direct demand by patrons, or even subscribers, but was isolated in the marketplace producing for unknown readers whose taste could not be predicted but might with luck be formed, once, in other words, a certain condition of alienation prevailed, then the possibility of literary autonomy also came into existence. The process of internalization by which Wordsworth not only defended but also formed a new literary human nature – the human nature that makes psychoanalysis possible – cannot be understood apart from such externalities” (*Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1987], 49). Like Arac, I am concerned with a transformation which might be described as the formation of “a new literary human nature.” I depart from his account, and from the numerous other accounts of the “process of internalization” so often identified with Wordsworth, however, in that the account I offer in this chapter and develop throughout this book focuses on poetic attempts to harness the contingencies implicit in the “externalities” to which Arac alludes. Thus the efforts to reconceive poetic authority (by Byron, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, and Hemans) addressed in the [previous chapter](#) and those to follow are characterized by processes not of internalization but of indirection, mediation, and what might be understood as externalization.
- 10 I take the phrase “audience-problem” from Jerome McGann’s remarks on Byron’s critique of Wordsworth in *Don Juan* (*Don Juan in Context* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976], 78).
- 11 “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface,” in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 80. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 12 For a representative reading of the Essay along these lines, see Charles Rzepka, *The Self as Mind: Vision and Identity in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 63–4.
- 13 Oscar Wilde makes a version of this claim in “The Decay of Lying” when he remarks that Wordsworth “found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there” (*The Soul of Man Under Socialism and Selected Critical Prose*, ed. Linda Dowling [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001], 173). It should be noted, though, that the kind of circularity Wilde identifies in Wordsworth, whether or not we like the sermons Wordsworth has hidden, is a more straightforward project than is the “Essay, Supplementary”’s attempt to remake the reader in the image of the poet. It is one thing to plant sermons in stones, another to plant a version of oneself in another person.

- 14 I call this definition a “suggestion” because, as I will argue shortly, in the Preface Wordsworth is already conflicted about the issue of the audience for poetry.
- 15 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1958; New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 32; Bertrand Harris Bronson, “Strange Relations: The Author and His Audience,” in *Facets of Enlightenment: Studies of English Literature and Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 302–3.
- 16 Wordsworth’s argument – all great poets are neglected in their own lifetimes; I am neglected; therefore, I am a great poet – commits the fallacy of the undistributed middle. In pointing out this fallacy, W.J.B. Owen remarks that “[a]s a defence of Wordsworth’s poetry, the argument is passable rhetoric but poor logic” (*Wordsworth as Critic* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969], 188–89).
- 17 William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: The Text of the 1798 Edition with the Additional 1800 Poems and the Prefaces*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (1963; London: Routledge, 1991), 255. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 18 David Perkins, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 159. More recently, Judith W. Page has linked Wordsworth’s “desire not only to be read but to be read in a certain way” both to his cultivation of a “wider audience” and to his dependence “on the moral and emotional support of a very small audience: Dorothy Wordsworth, Coleridge, and then Mary Wordsworth and Sara Hutchinson; later he will rely on Dorothy Wordsworth and Isabella Fenwick. The ‘man speaking to men’ depends on the sympathetic reading of (mostly) women” (*Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], 51).
- 19 *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), 2:1013; qtd. in Perkins, 172.
- 20 Moreover, while Coleridge’s assessment of Wordsworth’s readers’ paradoxical obsession with the faults of his poetic theory and neglect of the real merit they find in the poems themselves seems to fall in line with his determination, expressed at the beginning of chapter 2 of the *Biographia*, “to analyze, and bring forward into distinct consciousness, that complex feeling, with which readers in general take part against the author, in favor of the critic” (30), Coleridge’s own analysis of the reaction to the *Lyrical Ballads* participates in the very problem he is trying to diagnose. In fact, early responses to the volume were overwhelmingly positive, and in characterizing the public reception of the work as overwhelmingly hostile, Coleridge himself takes the critic’s part against the author. Despite his repeated pleas to critics to focus on “the *beauties* of an original work” rather than its “*defects*,” Coleridge’s defense arrives at Wordsworth’s beauties by way of an assessment of the critical fixation on his defects (62). Coleridge does much the same in addressing the public response to his own works. As

the editors of the Princeton edition of the *Biographia* note, “There are over ninety extant articles and reviews from 1798 to the end of 1814 that discuss or mention C[oleridge] in specific detail. . . . Of them at least sixty-three are favorable, often eulogistic; another ten or twelve strike a middle note; and in the remainder the adverse criticism is for the most part less abusive than C[oleridge] implies” (50n1).

- 21 Peter T. Murphy, *Poetry as an Occupation and as an Art in Britain, 1760–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 185. Lucy Newlyn generalizes this observation when she claims that “[t]he problem Wordsworth encounters in his dealings with readers is described in Schleiermacher’s *Hermeneutics* as the precondition for all acts of understanding: ‘One must already know a man in order to understand what he says, and yet one first becomes acquainted with him by what he says’” (“How Wordsworth Keeps His Audience Fit,” in *Placing and Displacing Romanticism*, ed. Peter J. Kitson [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001], 66). While Newlyn’s discussion of this problem, in this article as well as the book whose argument it recapitulates (*Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000]), is insightful, Murphy’s formulation of the paradox as a rhetorical problem is I think more useful because it emphasizes Wordsworth’s ongoing struggle with the issue – rather than understanding it, as Newlyn does, in terms of the primarily psychological implications of a hermeneutic inevitability.
- 22 Charles Altieri, “Wordsworth’s Poetics of Eloquence: A Challenge to Contemporary Theory,” in *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, ed. Kenneth R. Johnston, et al. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 404n5. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 23 Robert Mayo, “The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*,” *PMLA* 69 (1954): 486–522. This “controversy” has taken numerous forms: Mayo read the *Lyrical Ballads* in relation to contemporary magazine verse; Mary Jacobus has analyzed the poems in the context of the ballad revival (*Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads (1798)* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976]); and more recently, critics have fruitfully examined Wordsworth’s (and Coleridge’s) simultaneous critique and appropriation of the conventions of the gothic (see, for example, Karen Swann, “Public Transport: Adventuring on Wordsworth’s Salisbury Plain,” *ELH* 55:4 [1988]: 533–53, and Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000]).
- 24 “Letter to John Wilson,” in *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 621–22.
- 25 Murphy remarks that “even though recent writing on Wordsworth has taken some notice of his interest in his readers, we still remember the ‘fit audience’ of 1815 better than the anxiously solicitous Wordsworth of the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*” (*Poetry as an Occupation and as an Art*, 182–83).
- 26 Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 150.

- 27 In commenting on Wordsworth's critique of religious readers of poetry, Mark Canuel arrives at a conclusion consonant with my reading of the Essay's second line of argument: ". . . Wordsworth's emphasis on shared taste is actually an emphasis on poetry as a way of sharing in the absence of more comprehensive agreement; the only way to create shared taste is to abandon the quest for shared beliefs. . . . Wordsworth thus lowers the importance of sectarian belief in the very process of raising the issue of sectarianism, for he eventually claims to observe virtually all ways of reading his poetry – 'the love, the admiration, the indifference, the slight, the aversion, and even the contempt' – as 'proofs that I have not laboured in vain.' The sense of common experience and shared taste that comes from reading his poetry derives simply from its having been read" (*Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790–1830* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 197). Canuel attributes this conception of poetry as the vehicle for a kind of minimal formal consensus to Wordsworth himself; it is the argument of this book that the implications of the account toward which Wordsworth gestures in the Essay are developed by subsequent poets from Byron to Tennyson.
- 28 In the Preface to *The Excursion*, Wordsworth famously compares the "long and laborious Work," of which *The Excursion* comprises "only a portion," to "a gothic church." On this "allusion," *The Prelude* is an "ante-chapel" to the main structure, and "his minor Pieces, which have been long before the Public, when they shall be properly arranged" become "the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in those edifices" (*Prose Works*, 5–6). On the structure of *The Recluse* and the more general applicability of Wordsworth's architectural "allusion" to "his minor pieces," see Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
- 29 See Frances Ferguson, *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 35–95, 155–72.
- 30 *The Prelude*, in *William Wordsworth*, ed. Gill, 452. Subsequent references to Wordsworth's poetry are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text. On monumentalization in *The Prelude*, see J. Douglas Kneale, *Monumental Writing: Aspects of Rhetoric in Wordsworth's Poetry* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), and Bruce Haley, *Living Forms: Romantics and the Monumental Figure* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 129–45.
- 31 Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences*, 135.
- 32 Paul Sheats has remarked of this passage that "[t]he cool scrutiny of 'I perceive' is sharpened by the fact that the reader has by no means waited 'patiently' for the tale he expects. It also exposes the reader's blindness to the 'tale' already told by Simon's ankles, a tale that concerns him more than he knows" (*The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry, 1785–98* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973], 191). Thomas Pfau's reading of the poem elaborates on Sheats's observation in a way that

bears on the present argument: “At the very least, the narrator’s intervention intensifies the reader’s self-consciousness by hinting at a disparity between the poem’s authorial ‘design’ and the reader’s lesser interpretive resources. For to disclose, without any warning, that ‘I perceive / How patiently you’ve waited’ is to reveal that the entire preceding description – quite apart from its intricate historical references – was meant to generate a hermeneutic plot between the author/narrator and the projected reading audience as much as it was to ‘relate’ a tale” (*Wordsworth’s Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Romantic Cultural Production* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997], 214). While Wordsworth’s positioning of the reader in “Simon Lee” is perhaps too transparent to qualify as a “plot” (it is this transparency, I would suggest, that constitutes the poem’s programmatic exemplarity – for both the reader of *Lyrical Ballads* and the critic), Pfau’s reading usefully foregrounds the poem’s self-consciousness about plotting and tale-telling and draws attention to the reader’s consciousness of the poet’s mode of address.

- 33 Owen comments perceptively on Wordsworth’s “peculiar” use of the word “power” as “an attribute of mind.” His analysis of the three unqualified uses of the word in the Essay is worth quoting in full: “In the two certain cases, *power* is a quality which the poet ‘calls forth’ from the reader, and which he also ‘communicates’ to, or ‘bestows’ on, the reader. In the third case, *power* is a faculty of the reader’s mind which he ‘exerts.’ Thus power in these passages is an attribute of the mind – the poet’s mind, perhaps, and certainly the reader’s, and it is also . . . an attribute of other things; but it is not an attribute of the artefact, which is rather the means by which power is communicated. By the process which Wordsworth calls elsewhere ‘action from within and from without,’ the reader, it would appear, achieves that quality of power and, perhaps, the same state of power as that which obtains in the mind of the poet. Power is thus, it seems, at once objective and subjective: the power of the poet is perceived by the reader, but in the act of perception the power of the reader is also felt by himself” (*Wordsworth as Critic*, 196).
- 34 In his 1831 review of Tennyson’s first volume of poetry, Arthur Hallam argues that Wordsworth’s “sectarian temper” ironically produces followers who turn against their leader, while Tennyson’s poetry of sensation, which “is likely to have little immediate authority over public opinion,” will nevertheless be responsible for the formation of sects (“On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson,” in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange, 2nd ed. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968], 849, 852). I take up Hallam’s argument in detail in chapter 6.
- 35 Wordsworth, “Letter to John Wilson,” 621.
- 36 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 25.

## 3 KEATS AND THE REVIEW AESTHETIC

- 1 *The Poems of Johns Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 739. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 2 William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: The Text of the 1798 Edition with the Additional 1800 Poems and the Prefaces*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (1963; London: Routledge, 1991), 241–42.
- 3 *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. Edward Hyder Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 1:266. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 4 See Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950), 64.
- 5 I focus on the work of Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson because they both foreground Keats's relationship with the reviews. More importantly, their arguments about this relationship have had a formative influence on historicist approaches to Romanticism more generally. For more recent critical efforts to describe Keats's cultural situation, see Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), and Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 6 Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 48–9. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 7 In the first published version of McGann's essay, he wrote that, "Writing verse is not, by itself, a social act. Only when the poem enters social circulation . . . does a work begin its poetic life" ("Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism," *Modern Language Notes* 94:5 [1979]: 993). He revises this claim in *The Beauty of Inflections*: "Although writing verse is itself a social act, only when the poem enters circulation . . . does it begin its poetic career" (23). While the revised version of this claim negates the radical distinction between the poem's private and public existences that McGann originally proposed, it is my argument that the earlier formulation in fact more accurately reflects the larger implications of McGann's argument.
- 8 Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 5. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 9 Kim Wheatley argues that by thus "allegoriz[ing] Keats as the representative of an 'entire class,'" critics like Levinson "repeat the rhetorical moves of the early-nineteenth-century reviewers. In reifying the middle class, they personify it as a consciousness capable of making choices" ("The *Blackwood's* Attacks on Leigh Hunt," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47:1 [1992]: 4).
- 10 Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 151.



- 11 See Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). It is striking that McGann's account of Keats as "especially typical" resonates with both Levinson's "particular but typical" and M. H. Abrams's explanation of the limited attention he pays to Keats in *Natural Supernaturalism*: "Keats . . . figures mainly insofar as he represented in some of his poems a central Romantic subject: the growth and discipline of the poet's mind, conceived as a theodicy of the individual life (what Keats called 'a system of Salvation') which begins and ends in our experience in this world" (*Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* [New York: Norton, 1971], 13). Each of these formulations is a version of the "life of allegory."
- 12 Keats's interest in reception thus cannot easily be assimilated to the kind of uncertainty about audience that Jean-François Lyotard has identified as a salutary component of "modernity": "I believe that it is important that there be no addressee. Where you cast bottles to the water, you don't know to whom they are going, and that is all to the good. That must be a part of modernity, I think" (Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985], 9). A version of this conception of the modern relation to the audience is taken up in chapter 4's discussion of Shelley's conception of political poetry.
- 13 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 26.
- 14 See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 195. For an argument against this view, which strives to place Keats's entire career within the context of the Cockney School, see Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*, esp. 82–122.
- 15 For examples of this approach to Keats, which emphasizes the social dimensions of his poetic "vulgarity," see Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), and John Bayley, *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976). For a more recent study which follows in this line, see Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 16 *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, Part C, ed. Donald H. Reiman, 2 vols. (New York: Garland, 1972), 1:425. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 17 *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. G. M. Matthews (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 91. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 18 *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Matthews, 115.
- 19 *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–34), 9:13. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 20 *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Matthews, 124.

- 21 Cox makes the same point about Keats's relationship with Hunt: "It is not too much to say that Keats became a poet through a series of distant and then close encounters with Hunt" (*Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*, 86).
- 22 Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 4, 11. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 23 *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, eds. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 80.
- 24 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2 vols., in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 7, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1:59.
- 25 As this brief inventory suggests, while I have singled out a series of Keats's early sonnets for attention here by grouping them under the heading of "review poems," I do so because they provide particularly striking examples of concerns present elsewhere in Keats's poetry – especially, I think, in the odes.
- 26 See, for example, Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- 27 The calculation of "On *The Story of Rimini*" resembles "the double strategy of invitation and exclusion" that Stanley Fish has identified in Ben Jonson's poetry. Fish describes how, in many of Jonson's poems, "the reader is first invited to enter the poem, and then met, even as he lifts his foot above the threshold, with a rehearsal of the qualifications for entry, qualifications which reverse the usual relationship between the poet and a judging audience" ("Authors-Readers: Jonson's Community of the Same," *Representations* 7 [1984]: 28).
- 28 *The Romantics Reviewed*, ed. Reiman, 1:756.
- 29 See, for example, Grant F. Scott, "Beautiful Ruins: The Elgin Marbles Sonnet in Its Historical and Generic Contexts," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 39 (1990): 123–50; Theresa Kelley, "Keats, Ekphrasis, and History," in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 212–37; and Noah Heringman, "Stones so wonderous Cheap," *Studies in Romanticism* 37:1 (1998): 43–63.
- 30 See Ian Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 31–36, and William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).
- 31 Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, 33.
- 32 Benjamin Robert Haydon, "On the Judgment of Connoisseurs" (1816), in *The Autobiography and Memoirs of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. Tom Taylor, 2 vols. (London: Peter Davies, 1926), 1:235.
- 33 *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. W. B. Pope, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960–63), 2:76.
- 34 This point is not so obvious to Scott and Kelley, both of whom ridicule Haydon for failing to see that Keats's sonnets on the marbles are expressions of despair rather than inspiration. For a corrective to this kind

- of psychological reading, see William Crisman, “A Dramatic Voice in Keats’s Elgin Marbles Sonnet,” *Studies in Romanticism* 26:1 (1987): 49–58.
- 35 See, for example, Keats’s letter of February 19, 1818 on the composition of *Endymion*: “I have an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner – let him on any certain day read a certain page of full Poesy or distilled Prose and let him wander in it, and muse upon it, and reflect from it, and bring him home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it – untill it becomes very stale – but when will it be so? Never – ” (1:231). This account of Keats’s motivation for writing suggests that a reading of *Endymion* might recognize the very incoherence that has frustrated readers and critics as an element of the poem’s design.
- 36 Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* (London, 1828), 248.
- 37 See Lawrence Lipking’s *The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) which begins its consideration of poetic beginnings with a reading of “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (3–11).
- 38 Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (1973; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 74. As Sperry notes, Abrams also discusses Keats in the context of the Longinian sublime (see *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 132–38).
- 39 “Longinus,” *On the Sublime*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe, in *Aristotle, The Poetics*; “Longinus,” *On the Sublime*; *Demetrius, On Style*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 139.
- 40 Amy Lowell, *John Keats*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), 2:176.
- 41 The relationship between faithful reproduction and the kind of fidelity that Keats discovers in Chapman’s translation is a central concern of Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator.” Also relevant here is the connection that Benjamin draws, by way of German Romanticism, between translation and criticism, “another, if a lesser, factor in the continued life of literary works” (*Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken Books, 1969], 76). For Benjamin, this affinity serves to distinguish both translation and criticism from poetry. For Keats, however, the convergence of translation and criticism (or reviewing) in the Chapman’s Homer sonnet underscores the sense in which the review poems emphasize poetry’s critical function.
- 42 Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (London, 1878), 130.

#### 4 SHELLEY AND THE POLITICS OF POLITICAL POETRY

- 1 T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 80.
- 2 William Keach, “Radical Shelley?” *Raritan* 5:2 (1985): 129, 121, 121.
- 3 Earl Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

- 4 See F. R. Leavis, “Shelley” (1949), C. S. Lewis, “Shelley, Dryden, and Mr. Eliot” (1939), and Frederick A. Pottle, “The Case of Shelley” (1952), all of which are collected in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 345–65, 324–44, 366–83.
- 5 In his recent account of this problem in Shelley criticism, Hugh Roberts casts the conflict in terms of the opposition between Shelley’s (politically dubious) idealism and his (politically engaged) skepticism and addresses this impasse by attempting to identify what he calls “a heretofore unrecognized ‘third way’ that allows Shelley to accept aspects of both the Romantic-idealist and Enlightenment-skeptical approaches while correcting the political incoherences that plague them both” (*Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997], 4). I will argue that such attempts at reconciliation miss the fact that Shelley’s radicalism has less to do with his political program than the sense in which his poetics works to recast the meaning of politics.
- 6 Throughout this chapter, I use the words “form” and “formal” in a general sense to denote opposition to content rather than any of their several more specific senses (whether generic or theoretical). I will address Shelley’s place in the history of literary formalism later in the chapter, but I use these terms in this general sense in order to reflect Shelley’s similarly abstract conception of poetic form.
- 7 Andrew Bennett offers a suggestive account of some of the factors that prompt Shelley to look to the future in this way but understands “his concern with audience and posterity” as a turn away from politics (*Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 159). “On the one hand,” Bennett argues, “Shelley’s desire to change the world, to effect reform if not revolution through his poetry and prose, makes his work utilitarian, polemical and direct. On the other hand, and increasingly as time goes by and Shelley finds his work neglected, abused, censored and censured, he relies increasingly on a minority readership and on the political and aesthetic after-effects of his writing” (158). Thus for Bennett, the Romantic “culture of posterity” serves as a form of compensation for the absence of an immediate audience (44). My disagreement with this view will become clear in the pages to follow. For a concise version of this argument, see Andrew Bennett, “Shelley in Posterity,” in *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 215–23; for the theoretical (and, in particular, psychoanalytic) basis of this reading of posterity, see Andrew Bennett, “On Posterity,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 12:1 (1999): 131–44.
- 8 *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, corrected by G. M. Matthews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 877.

- 9 Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1974; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975), 187. For a more detailed account of Shelley's propaganda methods, see Holmes, 148–62.
- 10 *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 1:361. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 11 *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), 209. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 12 *Queen Mab's* wide circulation in the nineteenth century, especially among radical workers, was made possible by a series of pirate publications which began in 1817. In a study of William Benbow's republication of Mary Shelley's 1824 edition of Shelley's *Posthumous Poems*, Neil Fraistat examines the politics of Shelley's material reception and transmission ("Illegitimate Shelley: Radical Piracy and the Textual Edition as Cultural Performance," *PMLA* 109:3 [1994]: 409–23).
- 13 See Kyle Grimes, "Queen Mab, the Law of Libel, and the Forms of Shelley's Politics," *Journal of English and German Philology* 94:5 (1995): 1–18.
- 14 Marilyn Butler, "Shelley and the Empire in the East," in *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, ed. Bennett and Curran, 162.
- 15 Shelley himself was the radical child of an aristocratic Whig family and was therefore among the "sons & daughters" to whom he refers in his letter to *Queen Mab's* publisher.
- 16 *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–34), 7:255–56.
- 17 Steven Zwicker describes the transition from a "Jacobean ideal of unitary politics" through "the political pluralism of the Restoration" to the systematic party divisions of the late eighteenth century ("Lines of Authority: Politics and Literary Culture in the Restoration," in *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987], 230–31). On the development of the two-party system in the eighteenth century, see John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
- 18 Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early-Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 19 Francis Jeffrey, "The State of Parties," *Edinburgh Review* 15 (1810): 505. Jeffrey's essay is cited by Gilmartin, to whom I am also indebted for the Hazlitt reference above. More generally, my brief account of the rhetorical situation faced by the radical movement after Waterloo follows Gilmartin's analysis of the rhetoric of radical opposition (esp. 11–64).
- 20 Jeffrey, "The State of Parties," 505. Coleridge's analysis of wartime political opposition, in his essay "On the Errors of Party Spirit: Or

Extremes Meet” (published in *The Friend*), runs along similar lines. In addition to criticizing the polarization of political parties, Coleridge argues that “it was, indeed, evident to all thinking men, that both parties were playing the same game with different counters” (*The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols., in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 4 [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969], 1:216). For an incisive recent analysis of the philosophy and practice of political opposition in the Western liberal tradition, see Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*, trans. Allan Cameron (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

21 Jeffrey, “The State of Parties,” 506.

22 See, for example, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London: Verso, 1985), and Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). Several critics have noted a more general affinity between Shelley’s poetics and deconstruction (see, for example, Jerrold Hogle, *Shelley’s Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988], and Tilottama Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990]). As the argument of this chapter will make clear, I am somewhat sympathetic to this view. The problem with a proto-deconstructive Shelley, however, is twofold. First, for Shelley indeterminacy is less a linguistic phenomenon than a function of the historical contingencies of reading. Second, in arguing that Shelley’s poetry and poetics exemplify literary and linguistic indeterminacy, these accounts fail to attend to the specific uses to which Shelley attempts to put such contingencies. Rather than accept a Shelley who foreshadows deconstruction, it might be more profitable and more accurate to understand deconstruction as the critical reflection of an important episode in the history of reception in which Shelley and Romanticism play a central role. Rather than a universal feature of literature – and language itself – the text’s capacity to bear meanings not intended by its author is a historical development and a function of the increasingly important role of reception in the conceptualization of literature which is one of Romanticism’s legacies.

23 See Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 342–62.

24 This is the case in *Queen Mab*, where Shelley’s use of the concept of necessity reflects Godwin’s influence. Shelley’s later conception of a future-oriented poetics, however, departs from Godwin’s understanding of literature’s political and ethical utility. For a cogent discussion that distinguishes between Godwin’s emphasis on the transmission of content and Shelley’s on the transmission of poetic inspiration, see

P. M. S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 218–20.

- 25 It does so, for example, in Shelley's dedication of *Peter Bell the Third* to Thomas Moore, where he chides Moore for his popularity as the author of such satires as *The Fudge Family in Paris*: "Your works indeed, dear Tom, Sell better; but mine are far superior. The public is no judge; posterity sets all to rights" (340). He goes on to describe a future "when St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey shall stand, shapeless and nameless ruins in the midst of an unpeopled marsh" and imagines that "some transatlantic commentator will be weighing in the scales of some new and now unimagined system of criticism, the respective merits of the Bells and the Fudges, and of their historians" (341). In *A Philosophical View of Reform*, in the course of calling for petitions supporting reform from contemporary poets and philosophers, Shelley makes a different version of this argument: "These appeals of solemn and emphatic argument from those who have already a predestined existence among posterity, would appal the enemies of mankind by their echoes from every corner of the world in which the majestic literature of England is cultivated; it would be like a voice from beyond the dead of those who will live in the memories of men, when they must be forgotten; it would be Eternity warning Time" (*Political Tracts of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley*, ed. R. J. White [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953], 259). Commenting on this passage, Bennett claims that "Shelley is attempting to endow living writers with the authority of writing from posterity. These writers, he suggests, are already speaking from beyond their own lives" (*Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*, 169). In this way, Bennett argues, Shelley's interest in posterity "involves an attempt to fold or collapse the future into the present" (170). While I agree to a point with this assessment, it seems to me that Shelley's strategy is significantly more complicated and far-reaching than Bennett allows. In addition to appealing to posterity as a means of accruing authority in the present, Shelley's long view of poetry also constitutes an attempt to account for and capitalize on the very contingencies of reception and transmission that collapsing the future into the present would necessarily deny. In claiming that the role played by retrospection in literary reception might have a bearing on political change, Shelley is in fact insisting on the *distance* that separates the future from the present, even as he appeals to the future in order to ground the writer's authority in the present.
- 26 See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; New York: Vintage, 1966), 746–48.
- 27 See, for example, Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, 532–39; Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980); Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator*, 204–10; Michael Henry Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 198–210; Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley*

- and *His Audiences* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 196–204; Steven Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 240–60; and Anne Janowitz, “‘A Voice from across the Sea’: Communitarianism at the Limits of Romanticism,” in *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialist Criticism*, ed. Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 83–100.
- 28 Susan J. Wolfson, “‘Romantic Ideology’ and the Values of Aesthetic Form,” in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 206, 217 n. 51, 208, 207. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text. A revised version of this essay appears in Wolfson’s *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). I cite the earlier essay, however, which Wolfson describes as “a polemic” (*Formal Charges*, viii), because it more effectively distinguishes her position from other critiques of Shelley’s political poetry.
- 29 Castlereagh and Sidmouth were widely held responsible for the repression of postwar unrest and agitation for reform; Eldon had ruled against Shelley in the 1817 Chancery case in which Shelley sought custody of his children from his first marriage.
- 30 Thomas R. Edwards, *Imagination and Power: A Study of Poetry on Public Themes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 163, 164. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 31 Paul de Man, “Excuses (Confessions),” in *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 288. See also de Man’s reading of *The Triumph of Life* (“Shelley Disfigured,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1984], 93–124).
- 32 On the ambiguity of this scene, see William Keach, “Shelley and the Revolutionary Left,” in *Evaluating Shelley*, ed. Timothy Clark and Jerrold E. Hogle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 85–6. For a reading that emphasizes the maid’s political agency, see Janowitz, “A Voice from across the Sea,” 96.
- 33 Morton Paley argues that “the program of *The Mask of Anarchy* might be described as a secular rewriting of the book of revelation” (“Apocapolitics: Allusion and Structure in Shelley’s *The Mask of Anarchy*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 54:2 [1991]: 92). While Paley justly emphasizes the poem’s prophetic ambition, Shelley’s redefinition of the prophet’s role suggests that his interest in futurity has less to do with biblical prophecy than the inevitability of retrospective accounts like the one he offers in *The Mask*.
- 34 On *Adonais* and the elegiac tradition, see Stuart Curran, “*Adonais* in Context,” in *Shelley Revalued: Essays from the Gregynog Conference*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Totowa: Barnes & Noble, 1983), 165–82.
- 35 Qtd. in Markman L. Peacock, Jr., *The Critical Opinions of William Wordsworth* (New York: Octagon, 1969), 340.



- 36 James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 31. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 37 For a complementary reading of this turn, see Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 55. Wolfson offers an incisive account of divergent interpretations of this sonnet's crucial lines (*Formal Charges*, 204–5).
- 38 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852; New York: International Publishers, 1977), 15.
- 39 For another account of the relationship between Shelley's poetics and politics that emphasizes their "proto-Marxian character," see Robert Kaufman, "Legislators of the Post-Everything World: Shelley's *Defence* of Adorno," *ELH* 63:3 (1996): 722.
- 40 This phrase, quoted by Chandler (483 n. 1), is drawn from the preface to Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*. Shelley describes that poem as "an experiment on the temper of the public mind, as to how far a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives, among the enlightened and refined, the tempests which have shaken the age in which we live" (*The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Hutchinson, 32).
- 41 Steven Knapp, *Literary Interest: The Limits of Anti-Formalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 42 Chandler notes the "strong sense in which the West Wind's inspiration has been interchangeable with the readerly audience from the start" (553), and Rajan describes a similar turn to the reader in her reading of the *Defence* (*The Supplement of Reading*, 293–96). It is my claim that the identification of the poet's inspiration with the poem's future readers is the central task of the "Ode" and the distinguishing feature of Shelley's late poetics.
- 43 Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 275e.

##### 5 THE ART OF PRINTING AND THE LAW OF LIBEL

- 1 *Shelley: The Critical Heritage*, ed. James E. Barcus (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 114.
- 2 *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–34), 13:39.
- 3 Hazlitt's claim about the art of printing has less to do with the history of the press than a larger argument about the Reformation and its consequences and the legacy of radical dissent.
- 4 *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 13:39. Hazlitt's projection of a future which will reflect upon a past which is his present recalls the temporality of the politics Shelley envisions in *The Mask of Anarchy*. It also calls to mind

Shelley's Dedication to *Peter Bell the Third* (see chapter 4) and the pictures of a disapproving posterity Byron offers in both "Some Observations" (see chapter 1) and, here, in the *Letter to John Murray*: "Of Pope I have expressed my opinion elsewhere – as also of the effect which the present attempts at Poetry have had upon our literature. – If any great national or natural Convulsion could or should overwhelm your Country in such sort as to sweep Great Britain from the kingdoms of the earth – and leave only that – after all the most living of human things, – a *dead language*, to be studied and read and imitated by the wise of future and far generations – upon foreign shores, – if your literature should become the learning of Mankind, divested of party cabals – temporary fashions – and national pride and prejudice – an Englishman anxious that the Posterity of Strangers should know that there had been such a thing as a British Epic and Tragedy – might wish for the preservation of Shakespeare and Milton – but the surviving World would snatch Pope from the Wreck – and let the rest sink with the People" (*The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991], 150).

- 5 In discussing Hazlitt's conviction that reading was "an act that empowered the individual and promoted the progress of society as a whole," Lucy Newlyn remarks that "[a]mong Hazlitt's less liberal contemporaries, however, the same symbolic association between literacy, print culture, and revolution led to very different conclusions" (*Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 5).
- 6 *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Friarstat, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), 206. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 7 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Stephen Orgel (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 8.
- 8 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 1097n1, 1102. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 9 John Barrell remarks that "the real burden of the 'Apologetic Preface' is that Coleridge has nothing to apologize for" (*Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 650).
- 10 David Saunders and Ian Hunter, "Lessons from the 'Literatory': How to Historicise Authorship," *Critical Inquiry* 17:3 (1991): 480, 485. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 11 Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" trans. Josué V. Harari, in *Textual Strategies: Perspective in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 159. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 12 See Martha Woodmansee, "The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the 'Author,'" *Eighteenth-Century*

*Studies* 17:4 (1984): 425–48, and *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and Mark Rose, “The Author as Proprietor: *Donaldson v. Becket* and the Genealogy of Modern Authorship,” *Representations* 23 (1988): 51–85, and *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). For other work on authorship, see the essays collected in *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature*, ed. Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). For a wide-ranging assessment of the development of modern authorship that touches on these issues, see Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (1991; Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), esp. 3–30 and 132–72. Finally, for an excellent brief account of the state of recent work on the history of authorship, see Meredith L. McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 45–49.

- 13 For a challenge to Saunders and Hunter’s claim, see Jody Greene, *The Trouble With Ownership: Literary Property and Authorial Liability in England, 1660–1730* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). Greene claims that authors were always the real target of the law’s attempts to police published works, and that the 1710 Act of Anne, and the development of copyright more generally, aimed to address “the greatest single problem that had faced would-be controllers of the English press for more than fifty years: the difficulty of finding and holding liable the authors of printed works, rather than their more easily located printers and distributors” (5). Greene’s argument makes it clear that authors were not simply deluded when they worried about the possibility of facing legal sanctions for controversial works. In addition, it helpfully distinguishes between divergent approaches to the history of authorship: “The ability to make such a counterintuitive argument depends upon drawing a distinction between a set of material historical events – who actually produced written works? Who faced indictments, prosecutions, and punishments as a result of those works? – and another kind of history, a history of the discourse surrounding responsibility for printed works, which tells a rather different tale both about attribution and about accountability” (8). In this chapter, I argue in similar fashion that the discourse surrounding the law of libel tells a different story than does the “set of material historical events” that constitutes the history of the libel prosecutions of Regency England.
- 14 For an influential account of the author as “transgressive subject,” see Peter Sallaby and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
- 15 The phrase is from an article by James D. A. Boyle, who argues that “[t]he romantic conception of authorship gives the author more than mere interpretive control over the work,” by going “so far as to recognize

- the author's 'moral rights' to control a work" ("The Search for an Author: Shakespeare and the Framers," *American University Law Review* 37:3 [1988]: 629). It is quoted by Saunders and Hunter to illustrate "the great lesson of the author's right system," namely that "this right was constructed when the instruments of juridification available within a particular legal system were used to address a historically specific problem of legal regulation" and that "the resulting delineation and distribution of rights could have been otherwise" (500).
- 16 In calling Saunders and Hunter's account of the Romantic conception of the author a historical fiction, I have in mind the curious convergence in their argument of a series of formulations that are recognizably "Romantic" – of which "an author who speaks for all men for all time" is one – with a historical line of argument which offers an analysis of early-modern English print culture as a corrective to late nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts of authorship without so much as a glance at the intervening period.
- 17 For an early and incisive critique of this conception of Romantic authorship, see Raymond Williams, "The Romantic Artist," in *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1958; New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 32–48. For recent accounts of the development of modern authorship from a variety of perspectives, see Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Thomas Pfau, *Wordsworth's Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Romantic Cultural Production* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*, and Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700–1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
- 18 Qtd. in William H. Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press, 1819–1832* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928), 17.
- 19 For these figures, see Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*, 17, and Donald Thomas, *A Long Time Burning: The History of Literary Censorship in England* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 154–55. For accounts of the libel trials of 1817, and Hone's three trials in particular, see Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790–1822* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 96–154, and Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 22–39.
- 20 John Barrell, *The Birth of Pandora and the Division of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 119. For a similar appraisal of the treason trials' significance, see Thomas, 139. Barrell has developed his account of the treason trials into a monumental analysis of the history of law and politics in the 1790s in *Imagining the King's Death*.
- 21 William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, with notes and additions by Edward Christian, 15th ed., vol. 4 (London, 1809), 75, 76. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

- 22 T. B. Howell and Thomas Jones Howell, eds., *A Complete Collection of State Trials*, 30 vols. (London, 1816–22), 24:896.
- 23 Barrell cites Erskine's account of the law of treason (*The Birth of Pandora*, 123; *Imagining the King's Death*, 33) and, on the subject of the law's anomalousness, points out that "[a]t the trial of the regicides, as post-Restoration commentators on the law of treason never tired of pointing out, the man who cut off Charles's head was accused only of compassing and imagining his death, and his actual delivery of the fatal stroke was judicially cognizable only insofar as it was an act which manifested his prior intention to do what he did" (*Imagining the King's Death*, 33–4).
- 24 *The Works and Correspondence of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, 8 vols. (London, 1852), 8:95. Qtd. in Alexander Welsh, *Strong Representations: Narrative and Circumstantial Evidence in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 39.
- 25 Welsh, *Strong Representations*, 39.
- 26 Barrell, *The Birth of Pandora*, 119.
- 27 Thomas Pfau, "Paranoia Historicized: Legal Fantasy, Social Change, and Satiric Meta-Commentary in the 1794 Treason Trials," in *Romanticism, Radicalism, and the Press*, ed. Stephen C. Behrendt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 31. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 28 For other recent accounts of literature and politics in the 1790s (in addition to the studies cited in chapter 1), see Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Andrew McCann, *Cultural Politics in the 1790s: Literature, Radicalism and the Public Sphere* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).
- 29 Barrell, *The Birth of Pandora*, 120.
- 30 Indeed, in reading such studies as David Worrall's *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance, and Surveillance, 1790–1820* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), one often gets the sense that between 1799 and 1815 the radical movement was comprised entirely of a handful of radical organizers and the Home Office spies assigned to watch them.
- 31 On words as acts, see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (1962; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). On the performativity of Jacobin rhetoric in particular, see Jerome Christensen, "Once an Apostate Always an Apostate," *Studies in Romanticism* 21:3 (1983): 461–64.
- 32 For an excellent account of the way in which libel trials "raised a number of specialized issues that moved to the center of radical argument during periods of prosecution," see Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 114–57. My account of libel law is indebted to Gilmartin's analysis of the congruence between the claims of the radical press and the logic of libel.

- 33 Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*, 15. For useful discussions of the history of libel, see William Holdsworth, *A History of English Law*, 2nd ed., 16 vols. (1925; London: Methuen, 1966), 8:333–78 and 10:672–96, and J.H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, 2nd ed. (London: Butterworths, 1979), 364–74.
- 34 Qtd. in Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*, 15.
- 35 Qtd. in Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*, 18.
- 36 Qtd. in Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*, 19.
- 37 Francis Ludlow Holt, *The Law of Libel* (London, 1812), 280–81. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 38 Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*, 19.
- 39 From this standpoint, Saunders and Hunter's insistence that criminal liability applied "not to the activity of *writing* but to that of *publication*" overlooks the fact that the law of libel effectively expanded the definition of publication in such a way as radically to broaden the scope of possible prosecutions (487).
- 40 Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*, 20.
- 41 Thomas Moore makes this point in his verse satire, *A Case of Libel* (1828): "For oh, it was nuts to the Father of Lies, / As this wily friend is named in the Bible, / To find it settled, by laws so wise, / That the greater the truth, the worse the libel" (qtd. in Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*, 24n). By contrast, in civil cases of personal defamation, a statement's truth was a viable defense against the charge of libel.
- 42 Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*, 20.
- 43 See Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, 114–57.
- 44 On the relation between crowds, mobs, and readers in this context, see Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), esp. "The Reading Monster," 49–68, and John Plotz, *The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
- 45 For representative statements of this view, see Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 92; Milton Wilson, *Shelley's Later Poetry* (1957; New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 42; and Daniel Hughes, "Prometheus Made Capable Poet in Act One of *Prometheus Unbound*," *Studies in Romanticism* 17 (1978): 3.
- 46 References to *Prometheus Unbound* are to the first act and are cited parenthetically by line number.
- 47 Susan Hawk Brisman, "'Unsayings His High Language': The Problem of Voice in *Prometheus Unbound*," *Studies in Romanticism* 16:1 (1977): 51–2.
- 48 For an excellent account of the problem of locating the action in *Prometheus Unbound*, see Carol Jacobs, *Uncontainable Romanticism: Shelley, Brontë, Kleist* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 19–57. "Quite understandably," Jacobs comments, "almost all of Shelley's readers insist on the teleological structure of the drama, though many

have been struck by the difficulties of locating the action” (204n3). She goes on to pose a question to which my analysis is indebted: “What does it mean to have a figure who represents the origin of the spoken word and though yet forgets his own most critical declamation – whose strange amnesia extends, moreover, to a loss of sense of self and of his own authority?” (23). Jacobs also usefully extends her analysis to the numerous ways in which subsequent acts of the drama echo its initial “disparities between the effect of language and authorial intent” (25). My reading of the poem departs from Jacobs, however, in that her interest is focused on the epistemological consequences of these disparities: “The opening scenes of *Prometheus Unbound* enacts the crisis of knowing one’s own voice, of coming to terms with one’s self, and places this dilemma in the broader matrix of a rupture in our conventional temporal and linguistic structures” (36). It is my argument that, in the context of the broader historical matrix Shelley engages in the poem, the dilemma Jacobs identifies is in fact a strikingly precise reflection of the “conventional temporal and linguistic structures” that characterize the law of libel.

- 49 Earl Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 306, 257, 273. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 50 Wasserman’s account of Shelley’s mythic mode thus differs sharply from Jerrold Hogle’s deconstructive account of Shelley’s “process,” in which the radical instability of language itself becomes the basis for revolution (see *Shelley’s Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988]).
- 51 Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1974; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975), 356–57. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 52 As Holmes puts it, “It was characteristic of Shelley that he failed to see the social and legal force of the first two aspects of the case, and concentrated entirely on the third” (357).
- 53 *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 1:530.
- 54 For Shelley’s persistent fear of prosecution, see Holmes, 369. For an interpretation of Shelley’s Chancery case which contests Holmes’s conclusions, see Michael Kohler, “Shelley in Chancery: The Reimagination of the Paternalist State in *The Cenci*,” *Studies in Romanticism* 37:4 (1998): 552–54.
- 55 Newman Ivey White, “Shelley and the Active Radicals of the Early Nineteenth Century,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 29 (1930): 250. Qtd. in Kyle Grimes, “*Queen Mab*, the Law of Libel, and the Forms of Shelley’s Politics,” *Journal of English and German Philology* 94:5 (1995): 3.
- 56 Eldon’s ruling is quoted in *The Life and Correspondence of the Late Robert Southey*, ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey, 6 vols. (London, 1849–50),

- 4:251n. For accounts of the *Wat Tyler* case, see Paul M. Zall, “Lord Elgin’s Censorship,” *PMLA* 68 (1953): 436–53, and William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 316–25.
- 57 Jacobs makes a version of this claim: “He wishes, of course, not only to remember his words, but also to revoke them. Yet their recitation not only prompts no genuine recall in the sense of recollection; it fails to bring about the desired nullification. Prometheus, it seems, is as little able to empty his words of their power as he is to guarantee their fullness” (*Uncontainable Romanticism*, 24–5).
- 58 See, for example, Marlon Ross, “Shelley’s Wayward Dream-Poem: The Apprehending Reader in *Prometheus Unbound*,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 36 (1987): 110–33, and Grimes, “*Queen Mab*, the Law of Libel, and the Forms of Shelley’s Politics.”
- 59 *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 84. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 60 It also departs from Shelley’s characterization of Wordsworth in *Peter Bell the Third*. Written in 1819, Shelley’s satire mocks the changeability that he mourned in “To Wordsworth.” In the prefatory dedication to Thomas Moore, for example, Shelley describes Peter as “a polyhedric Peter, or a Peter with many sides. He changes colours like a chameleon, and his coat like a snake. He is a Proteus of a Peter. He was at first sublime, pathetic, impressive, profound; then dull; then prosy and dull; and now dull – o so dull! it is an ultra-legitimate dulness” (340).
- 61 Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, 1814–1844, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1:25.
- 62 For accounts of Wordsworth’s efforts on behalf of copyright reform, see *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 3, 303–6; Paul M. Zall, “Wordsworth and the Copyright Act of 1842,” *PMLA* 70:1 (1955): 132–44; and Richard G. Swartz, “Wordsworth, Copyright, and the Commodities of Genius,” *Modern Philology* 89:4 (1992): 482–509.
- 63 Susan Eilenberg, *Strange Power of Speech: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Literary Possession* (New York: Oxford, 1992), 194, 196.
- 64 Andrew Bennett’s reading of Wordsworth’s “fantasy of survival” elaborates on the metaphysical implications of “his investments in personal, familial survival” (*Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 95).
- 65 Indeed, Wordsworth serves for both Woodmansee and Rose as the exemplary modern author (see Woodmansee, “The Genius and the Copyright,” 429, and Rose, “The Author as Proprietor,” 70).
- 66 Eilenberg, *Strange Power of Speech*, 196.
- 67 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Blake’s Poetry and Designs*, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York: Norton, 1979), 88.



## 6 THE RIGHT OF PRIVATE JUDGMENT

- 1 Peter J. Manning, "Wordsworth in *The Keepsake*, 1829," in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and the Marketplace*, ed. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 44–74; Herbert F. Tucker, "House Arrest: The Domestication of Poetry in the 1820s," *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 521–48; and Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing, 1800–1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 19–48.
- 2 Arthur Henry Hallam, "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson," in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 852. Subsequence references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text. Hallam's essay was first published in the *Englishman's Magazine* 1 (August 1831): 616–28.
- 3 John Stuart Mill, "What Is Poetry?" in *Mill's Essays on Literature and Society*, ed. J. B. Schneewind (New York: Collier, 1965), 109. The essay first appeared in the *Monthly Repository* 7 (January 1833): 60–70.
- 4 The phrase is Francis Jeffrey's (see *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, and Reception Materials*, ed. Susan Wolfson [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000], 549).
- 5 *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John D. Jump (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 50–51. The review was first published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 31 (May 1832): 721–41.
- 6 Jerome Buckley defines the "two-Tennyson" theory as "the struggle in Tennyson between a personal art for art's sake and an art keyed to the interests of nineteenth-century society" (*The Victorian Temper* [New York: Vintage, 1964], 67).
- 7 *New Monthly Magazine* 37 (1833), 72. Qtd. in Douglas Bush, "Tennyson," rpt. in *Tennyson's Poetry*, ed. Robert W. Hill, Jr. (New York: Norton, 1971), 601.
- 8 For T. S. Eliot's account of the "dissociation of sensibility," which he dates to the seventeenth century, see Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 59–67. Raymond Williams locates a similar shift in the nineteenth century: "What were seen at the end of the nineteenth century as disparate interests, between which a man must choose and in the act of choice declare himself poet or sociologist, were, normally, at the beginning of the century, seen as interlocking interests: a conclusion about personal feeling became a conclusion about society, and an observation of natural beauty carried a necessary moral reference to the whole and unified life of man. The subsequent dissociation of interests certainly prevents us from seeing the full significance of this remarkable period, but we must add also that the dissociation is itself in part a product of the nature of the Romantic attempt" (*Culture and Society, 1780–1950* [1958; New York: Columbia University Press, 1983], 30).

- 9 “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface,” in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 80.
- 10 Hallam refers to the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* but clearly has in mind the argument of the “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface.”
- 11 For an account of the political implications of private judgment in Tennyson, see Daniel Denecke, “The Motivation of Tennyson’s Reader: Privacy and the Politics of Literary Ambiguity in *The Princess*,” *Victorian Studies* 43:2 (2001): 201–27.
- 12 Robert W. Hill, Jr., “In Defense of Reading Tennyson,” in *Tennyson’s Poetry*, 609; A. C. Bradley, “The Reaction Against Tennyson,” rpt. in *Tennyson’s Poetry*, 585–92; and Harold Nicolson, *Tennyson: Aspects of his Life, Character and Poetry* (1923; New York: Anchor Books, 1962).
- 13 Nicolson, *Tennyson*, 9.
- 14 Nicolson, *Tennyson*, 10.
- 15 *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 246–47. Subsequent references to Tennyson’s poems are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 16 Herbert Tucker calls Mariana “a minor poet” and argues that in the poem’s descriptive passages Tennyson creates “a poetry of sensation that raises the unconscious projection of feeling to the articulate power of fable” (*Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988], 71).
- 17 Mill, “Tennyson’s Poems,” in *Mill’s Essays on Literature and Society*, 144–45.
- 18 The allegory depends upon what Tucker describes as “the split between the otherworldliness of the singer and the world through which her song passes” (*Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, 104). James Chandler has read the poem as “an early allegorical construction of the English situation in the early 1830s” (“Hallam, Tennyson, and the Poetry of Sensation: Aestheticist Allegories of a Counter-Public Sphere,” *Studies in Romanticism* 33:4 [1994]: 530).
- 19 This process of self-reflection and objectification is central to what Isobel Armstrong has called the Victorian “double poem”: “There is a kind of duplicity involved here, for the poet often invites the simple reading by presenting a poem as lyric expression as the perceiving subject speaks. Mariana’s lament or Fra Lippo Lippi’s apologetics are expressions, indeed, composed in an expressive form. But in a feat of recomposition and externalisation the poem turns its expressive utterance around so that it becomes the opposite of itself, not only the *subject’s* utterance but the *object* of analysis and critique” (*Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* [1993; London: Routledge, 1996], 12). For Armstrong, the double poem produces a form of “double reading” which recalls Shelley’s aesthetic of reception in the *Defence*: “The active reader is compelled to be internal to the poem’s contradictions and recomposes the poem’s processes in the act of comprehending them as ideological struggle. There is no end to

struggle because there is no end to the creative constructs and the renewal of content which its energy brings forth” (17). What this echo of Shelley suggests, I would argue, is that the dynamic Armstrong describes is a development in a longer history of literary self-consciousness which reached a kind of crisis in the early nineteenth century and, by 1830, had begun to assume a more stable form. Where Armstrong offers the double poem as a testament to the modernity of Victorian poetry – she argues that “[i]t would not be too much to claim that the genesis of modern form and its problems arise in the double poem” (17) – I would suggest that it would not be too much to claim that the genesis of these “double forms” is the Victorian transformation of the Romantic problem of audience into a program for the production of poetry (13).

- 20 Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, 116, 104.
- 21 This phrase is Tucker’s as well (*Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, 116).
- 22 Paula R. Feldman, “Endurance and Forgetting: What the Evidence Suggests,” in *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*, ed. Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 18.
- 23 T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 80, 91, 92.
- 24 See Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977).
- 25 Feldman, “Endurance and Forgetting,” 16.
- 26 Feldman, “Endurance and Forgetting,” 15.
- 27 Byron, for example, does not figure in M. H. Abrams’s summa of Romanticism (see *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* [New York: Norton, 1971]). Jerome McGann comments on this exclusion in *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 26.
- 28 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
- 29 See Marlon B. Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women’s Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and Susan J. Wolfson, “A Lesson in Romanticism: Gendering the Soul,” in *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion*, ed. Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 349–75.
- 30 Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 53. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 31 See, for example, Anne Mellor’s claim that, “having accepted her culture’s hegemonic inscription of the woman within the domestic sphere, Hemans’s poetry subtly and painfully explored the ways in which that

- construction of gender finally collapses itself, bringing nothing but suffering, and the void of nothingness, to both men and women” (*Romanticism and Gender* [New York: Routledge, 1993], 142). For the claim that the “common and recurring story” of *Records of Woman* is “the failure of domestic ideals, in whatever cultural variety, to sustain and fulfill women’s lives,” see Susan J. Wolfson, “‘Domestic Affections’ and ‘the spear of Minerva’: Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender,” in *Re-visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 145.
- 32 Jeffrey’s review, of the second editions of *Records of Woman* (1828) and *The Forest Sanctuary* (1829), was published in the *Edinburgh Review* (50 [October 1829]: 32–47); the quotations from the *Quarterly Review* appeared in an omnibus review of Hemans’s works (24 [October 1820]: 130–39); the comments in the *Edinburgh Monthly* in a review of *The Sceptic* (3 [April 1820]: 373–83). All three reviews are reprinted in *Felicia Hemans*, ed. Wolfson, 554, 534, 531. Subsequent references to Jeffrey’s review and to Hemans’s poetry are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 33 See Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 34 On Jeffrey’s echoes of Wordsworth, see Wolfson’s notes to his review of Hemans (*Felicia Hemans*, ed. Wolfson, 555).
- 35 Wolfson has remarked of Hemans’s poetry in general: “Encased in a culturally orthodox language of the domestic affections, the emotional and affective center of her poems frequently exposes women’s devastating struggles against the structures, both domestic and national, in which these struggles are set” (“Felicia Hemans and the Revolving Doors of Reception,” in *Romanticism and Women Poets*, ed. Linkin and Behrendt, 221–22).
- 36 Tricia Lootens, “Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine ‘Internal Enemies,’ and the Domestication of National Identity,” *PMLA* 109:2 (1994): 241.
- 37 See Wolfson, “Felicia Hemans and the Revolving Doors of Reception,” in *Romanticism and Women Poets*, ed. Linkin and Behrendt, 214–41.
- 38 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), 516.

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