



*ROMANTICISM
AND THE
HUMAN
SCIENCES*

*Poetry, Population, and the
Discourse of the Species*

MAUREEN N. MCLANE

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MAUREEN N. McLANE

Society of Fellows, Harvard University



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Introduction, or the thing at hand

If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
as if the water were a transmutation of fire
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.
Elizabeth Bishop, "At the Fishhouses"¹

A need for poetry.

John Cage, *Themes and Variations*

Any particular academic monograph in the humanities appears as a creature whose species is known in advance. Whether we choose to classify it via "the system" or "the method," as Michel Foucault distinguishes the taxonomic procedures of natural history, nevertheless the particular kind of thing before us tends to display all or some of the following characteristics: an impressive array of footnotes (scholarly and/or discursive), an extensive bibliographic apparatus, a statement on method, acknowledgments, a title page, chapters.² All this above and beyond "the argument" or the body of the thing, which itself of course must simultaneously internalize, disguise and yet manifest the requirements of those regimes – intellectual, institutional, interpersonal, economic, ideological – that variously sponsor (even as they impede) the production of academic things. Institutions and academic disciplines require their sanctioned products to be thus identifiable; rightly so. And those desirous, however ambivalently, of institutional sanction and

collegial discussion submit to, embrace, or otherwise navigate these requirements, in hopes of producing a thing recognizable as a literary-critical book.

This thing began as an experiment, an experiment not in its form but rather in its aim: to see whether and to what extent the writing of a literary dissertation was possible in the 1990s at a research university in the US. This question quickly mutated into at least two others, one explicitly personal and the other historical-material: would the writing of such a thing be impossible for me, and further, was the very category of “the literary” now impossible? Having completed the dissertation, and having revised that monograph into the book before you, I consider myself able to lay that first sub-question to rest. As to my second sub-question, about the obsolescence or impossibility of the literary itself, it has been posed and transposed into a variety of keys throughout this text. It is, as you will see, one of the guiding questions and concerns of this project. It is one of my claims – an assumption, really, informed by the work of such diverse scholars as Raymond Williams, David Bromwich, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, Paul de Man, Jerome McGann, and Alvin Kernan – that romantic writers intuited, articulated, and suffered (as McGann might say) this predicament and shadowed its contemporary form.³ Reading romantic poetry through this predicament, one begins to suspect that inasmuch as the literary, and its kindred but not twin category “poetry,” may be obsolete (or may be, to invoke a locution of Williams’s, residual), so too may such affiliated concepts and “keywords” (to invoke Williams again) as subjectivity, interiority, imagination, the aesthetic, and the human.⁴

I am bordering here, as must be obvious, on a much-discussed and tendentiously described territory: the crisis in humanism and the concomitant crisis in the humanities. Confronted with such portentous titles as *The Death of Literature* (by Alvin Kernan), one feels immediately and contrarily incited both to dance on the grave and to eulogize the corpse.⁵ It is revolting, if intellectually stimulating, to be so consistently provoked and divided. One feels one must declare one’s allegiance, that one must or inevitably will encode in a work of literary or cultural criticism a subliminal “Declaration of a Humanist” or, conversely, a “Declaration of an Anti-Humanist.” Certainly readers of different persuasions will find traces of each kind of declaration in this project. Under this perceived (and, I would argue, objective) ethical and political pressure, my writing has ranged from a kind of polemical heroizing (for example, of Wordsworth and of “the human” in the “Do Rustics

Think?” chapter, and of “poetry” throughout) to a mode of negative critique (conducted in the chapter on *Frankenstein* and also through Shelley’s encounter with Wordsworth in the final chapter). I have let such fissures in tone, mode, and attack stand as a kind of testament to the faultlines this project both responds to and re-describes. To some extent, then, this project testifies to an active if occasionally hapless ambivalence.

Readers of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* or Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” may know the sensation of inescapable bind such vertiginous anti-humanist critique can induce. Any number of more recent books and essays could leave you feeling thus bound but also, paradoxically, relieved. That some have found this mode of critique – variously and complicatedly inflected by post-structuralist, post-Marxist, post-Freudian, and most recently post-colonial analytic tools and commitments – unproblematically liberating suggests how deeply sedimented with bad conscience “the humanities” and “the human” had become. (As Homi Bhabha has asked, with real seriousness, “What authorizes the post-foundational humanities?”⁶) It seems to me, however, that the peculiarly optimistic face that some American intellectuals have turned toward these movements of thought bespeaks a reliance on a reification of both “the human” and “the humanities.” That “the human” is always under construction, or may be put violently into question, is something acknowledged by Mary Shelley’s monster as well as by Hannah Arendt, who declared that “nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things.”⁷ In this project terms such as “the human,” “literature,” and “poetry” are alternately embraced and resisted in an attempt to avoid what Jerome McGann has identified as two particularly vexed (and particularly romantic) critical modalities, the fire of repetition and the ice of reification.⁸ Translated into other, more crudely political terms, this project wishes to elude and thus to criticize both neo-conservative humanist pieties and the anti- or post-humanist contempt for literature. To my friends and former colleagues at the University of Chicago it is no news that the former position can seem naive, while the latter signifies a certain sophistication. When meditating on this, I have found Wordsworth and Blake to be especially helpful, envisioning as each poet does – and so differently! – a poetry of sophisticated naiveté, of naive sophistication.

However much an academic monograph discusses or addresses “the naive,” nevertheless the work itself is supposed not to be naive: the writer

is supposed to know something (viz. Lacan's definition of the analyst: the one who is supposed to know), or to have learned something, and the reader of such a work is supposed to be able to walk away with, if not some new knowledge, a new arrangement of old knowledge. When considering my own ongoing work, I have often found myself arrested by one of the more heartstopping phrases in academic circulation: "the production of knowledges." The genealogy of this phrase points, it would seem, to such post-Marxist thinkers as Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey, the latter of whose book, *A Theory of Literary Production*, explicitly calls for a critical science which would produce, rather than assume, an object of knowledge. Literary criticism thus emerges, in his account, as a kind of knowledge which should produce its object, literature.⁹ As circulated now, however, the phrase "production of knowledge" tends to disperse, to lose its rigor and focus. Invoked by American academics, the phrase often loses its grounding in the Althusserian critical project, although its use does demonstrate, and is of course meant to demonstrate, that the speaker recognizes the "constructed-ness" of knowledge. One's writing and one's teaching and one's conversation may be assimilated, it would seem, to this overarching project, the production of knowledges. The phrase has a vigorous and, to my ear, quaintly anachronistic cast – brainworkers transformed in a flash to decent hardworking artisanal producers. (The wish to imagine oneself a producer and not a consumer is a particularly telling symptom of the unease left-leaning academics feel – and should feel – about our semi-oppositional relation to the institutions that house us and the economic and ideological systems that structure our livelihoods.) While it is true that I have produced a monograph, it is not at all clear that I have produced any knowledge; nor would I wish to describe my project in this way. Indeed, inasmuch as this book is a long meditation on the status of poetry, in England around 1800 and indirectly in a precinct of the contemporary US academy and in my life, I would say that this book directly confronts and perhaps allegorically re-enacts a rift between "poetry" and "knowledge."

This rift – between positive "knowledge" and the more elusive "poetry" – Wordsworth and after him Shelley identified as a particularly volatile cultural faultline. In a famous passage in the revised *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1802, Wordsworth distinguished between "the knowledge of the Poet and the Man of Science":

The knowledge both of the Poet and the Man of Science is pleasure; but the knowledge of the one cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our

natural and inalienable inheritance; the other is a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings. The Man of Science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge: it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science . . . In spite of soil and climate, in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.¹⁰

It is especially curious, from this vantage, to see how Wordsworth describes scientific knowledge as merely individual, a "personal and individual acquisition," whereas the Poet's knowledge stands as a generalizable, imperial, transhistorical, human "inheritance." It is more customary for us (despite the work of such historians, archaeologists, and sociologists of science as Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway) to consider scientific knowledge impersonal, permanent, objective, public, collectively ascertained and validated, and to regard whatever knowledge the poet may possess as highly personal, even idiosyncratic, subjective, private, un-verifiable, and perishable. Wordsworth was, of course, polemically reversing what were the already established fields of connotation of "poetry" and "science." (And he was also re-vivifying and transforming the famous arguments made on behalf of poetry by Aristotle and Sir Philip Sidney.) Wordsworth is less interested in the content and material efficacy of these competing knowledges than in their differing modes: what the Man of Science conspicuously lacks – at least in terms of his knowledge-project – is "passion," whereas "the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge."¹¹

In such passages Wordsworth criticizes a version of knowledge as mere information as well as knowledge as an unfeeling objectification of and abstraction from the world. He theorizes the poet's "knowledge" and work over and against an obviously polemical account of the self-involved Man of Science. He is, in fact, allegorizing through his personifications – "Poet" and "Man of Science" – a reconfiguration of knowledges and discourses at the end of the eighteenth century. Shot through his *Preface* are the shards of eighteenth-century discourse on sensibility: thus the repeated recourse to the language of "sympathy" and "feeling." Also evident is the emergent utilitarian discourse which

would so dominate English moral thinking in the early nineteenth century: Wordsworth defines “[t]he knowledge both of the Poet and the Man of Science” as “pleasure,” and indeed he finds it sufficient to refer to “pleasure” as the ground and purpose of all human projects. The difficulty of theorizing “pleasure” is only one of the many aporias of Wordsworth’s *Preface*, as it is in other contemporaneous aesthetic and moral treatises (see, for example, Coleridge’s analogous, if philosophically more rigorous, invocation of “pleasure” in his *Lectures on Poetry* in 1810 and 1811).

Wordsworth’s “Poet,” allied with a generalized human pleasure-project, is implicitly an enemy both of professionalization and of specialization: herein lies a cautionary tale for a graduate student in the humanities. “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.”¹² That Wordsworth conflates “human Being” and “Man” in his pronouncement need not give us fatal pause: what continues to leap out as a vital commitment is the goal of general, pleasurable communication – the poet conceived as providing good experiences for his readers. We might even discern, below the crust of Wordsworth’s decidedly unerotic reputation, the lineaments of the poet as a linguistic erotist.

What, then, is the value of Wordsworth’s distinctions? If knowledge does not distinguish men of science, or lawyers, or physicians, from poets, what does? Here Wordsworth’s invocation of “the human” becomes critical. For the poet, in his vocational allegiance to “the heart of man,” is – unlike the Man of Science – “the rock of defence of human nature.” In his role as binder and animator of knowledge, im-passioner of knowledge, the poet “will be at [the scientist’s] side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the Science itself.”¹³

As the foregoing passage reveals, Wordsworth does not distinguish poets from men of science on the basis of their commitment to “knowledge”: both kinds of men possess a “knowledge,” yet their motives and modes are quite different. In fact, rather than dissociate “poetry” from “knowledge,” Wordsworth boldly assimilates “knowledge” to the category of “poetry”: “Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge – it is as immortal as the heart of man.” Such pronouncements link the permanence of poetic knowledge to the permanence of the human heart: poetry and “the heart of man” are thus conceived as “immortal,” deathless, transhistorical, as in fact resistant to historicism. The heart of

man is, however, an arguably historical heart: the successive waves of feminism, or to reach further back, the anti-slavery movement, are (among other things) arguments for rejecting the romance of timeless structures of emotion. One question this book implicitly asks is whether one can endorse a Wordsworthian or Shelleyan vision of poetry as resistant to historicism without committing oneself to their proposal of poetry as an imperial, universal and universalizing project.

I have mentioned the word “allegory” in relation to this project, and while there may not be four levels here as medieval theory would suggest, nevertheless it does seem to me that various parts of this book often point, in semi-veiled fashion, elsewhere. Buried in this project may be, in fact, the rubble of the book on Anglo-American modernism that years ago I thought I would write. From this vantage it is clear that my Wordsworth, my Shelley, my Malthus, *et al.* are inevitably mediated figures, mediated most powerfully by my own affinities with the aesthetic and philosophical projects associated with modernism and its various avant-gardes. Of course, the poets and writers I discuss conceived of themselves as moderns if not modernists, and (to address this conjunction from another angle) one could quite reasonably date the crystallization of “modernity” in Britain to the late eighteenth century. It is also true that one could describe early twentieth-century “modernism” as the last moment of a protracted literary-historical period whose beginnings we conventionally term “romanticism.” Paul de Man has written what may be the two most acute essays on the aporias of the literary-historical project: his astonishing critique of conventional periodization may have fortified my commitment to treat these writers and their works as if their temporality and historicity were to be discovered as contemporary rather than assumed as past.¹⁴ While I generally suspend questions of literary periodization in this work, nevertheless the question of the specificity and the difference of this period, and these writers, hangs over this project as a kind of genial ghost. I have chosen to let it hover rather than to exorcise it or to lay it to rest.

If the poets I discuss often become modernists or even post-modernists *avant la lettre*, so too they become, perhaps inevitably, autobiographical figures. As I have written these chapters, the opportunities for identificatory, mirroring, hostile, and other such transferences proliferated. It is impossible not to figure oneself – or a monstrously abject version of oneself – when, for example, one writes a long essay on the