

# Literature and the Body

Essays on Populations  
and Persons

edited by  
Elaine Scarry

Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1986

New Series, no. 12





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## Introduction



Each of the seven essays in this volume is about literature and the body. Together they illustrate what Perry Anderson not unsympathetically calls “A sudden zest, a new appetite, for the concrete.”<sup>1</sup> It is part of the work of this introduction to suggest what beyond this “zest for the concrete” is at issue in the present attention to the human body.

The body gradually comes forward in the course of this book in many capacities and attributes: its vulnerability to injury and disease, its erotic powers and fragilities, its capacity to enter states of sleep and work, to swim, to flirt, to discard class merely by performing calisthenics, its power to absorb the artifacts of culture into its own interior matter, its self-experience of gender and race, its endless separation into parts (hands, tongue, skin) and reacquisition of wholeness. What is steadily being looked at in the midst of all these attributes is the body’s relation to the voice, to language. Only for a moment, however, does this simplify the question, since the introduction of the voice reintroduces multiplicity. The forms of speaking that gradually make their way into these essays are many (oath, riddle, prayer, curse, valediction, insinuation, gossip, declaration) as are the literary genres (scriptural narrative, elegy, song, sermon, meditation, ode, allegory, romance, novel).

It is useful, then, to begin with the simplest fact about the body, whether it is present or absent, and the verbal form in which this is most habitually registered, the act of counting. The different forms of speaking mentioned a moment ago each contain a different claim about the relation between language and the material world: the announcement that something is “an oath” and the announcement that something is “gossip” assert two very different quantities of material content. It would not be difficult to arrange the many verbal forms along a spectrum at one end of which language is loaded with referential obligations and at the other end of which it is nearly empty. If

one were to make such a spectrum, the act of counting would probably be placed at both ends.

On the one hand, counting makes an extreme claim about its correspondence with the material realm. It asserts a one-to-one correspondence between itself and its subject matter: its vocabulary exists solely to register increases and decreases in the content it calibrates. Its proximity to the physical is also indicated by its inseparability from the body. The act of counting is an act, and was called this even before language came to be understood as speech acts. People who count tend to do so with their bodies (tapping a finger; bobbing the head; bouncing the entire body slightly as they number the people around the room); it is as though the existence of matter must be registered in matter itself. The fact that very young children find counting words wildly interesting and urgently important long before, for example, color words,<sup>2</sup> is suggestive of their physical primacy, as is the fact that people resort to counting in moments of bodily emergency. On the other hand, numbers and numerical operations are, presumably with good reason, habitually thought of as abstract, as occupying a space wholly cut off from the world. Even forms of counting that claim to have worldly content sometimes seem instead characterized by the complete lack of it: the "body count" in war is a notoriously insubstantial form of speech. Because numbers fall at both extremes of the spectrum, they provide a useful way of illustrating the more general capacities of language. In peace, as in war, the body count becomes a testing ground of the referential sturdiness of language; and the generic elaboration of the act of counting, the population tract, becomes a kind of skeletal model against which the materialist aims of other genres can be seen.

The "population treatise" is a useful model in several senses. In its self-announcing capacity for census-taking and speculation on bodily numbers, it becomes a demonstration of the way language both continually absorbs and empties itself of material content. It provides a stark background against which it is possible to see the more complex materialist reflexes of language as they habitually take place in elegy, in the novel, in biography, in historical narrative, even if "the problem of

population" may now surface in the presence or absence of only one person (as in a love poem) or a small group of persons (the novelistic act of bringing into being a small population of characters, and then causing them to disappear or die). The human voice, the written word, continually regulate the appearance and disappearance of the human body. The population treatise makes this practice overt by making what is at stake inescapable.

The essay at the midpoint of this book—Frances Ferguson's "Malthus, Godwin, Wordsworth, and the Spirit of Solitude"—shows that population numbers may be stable reflections of the people counted, or may instead give way to a speculative, futuristic arithmetic, severed from any material reality other than the "actuarial terror" of the person doing the counting. Precisely how one counts (more specifically, how Thomas Malthus, or David Hume, or William Godwin performed the act of counting) depends in part on what the person envisions as the material attributes of "liberty" or of "consciousness." Philosophic debates about liberty and consciousness become debates about how much physical room these apparently nonphysical phenomena take up, especially when they belong to other people (it is as though consciousness has the capacity to swell matter itself, further magnifying the space-taking fact of the body). How one counts also depends on national pride and on what can be called a kind of "century pride"—present habits of self-replication are measured against both the fertility of ancients and the imagined incontinence of unborn descendants. What is poised in back of the pre-Romantic and Romantic numerical speculations is a speculative poetics, "the sublime," which also has depopulation, an emptying of the landscape, among its goals. Frances Ferguson makes dramatically visible the political volatility of the sublime: because it widens the realm of objects considered appropriate for aesthetic contemplation, it acts within perception as an equivalent to the widening of the franchise within the political realm; yet what it has designated aesthetic is an individual consciousness whose consciousness requires the elimination of all other persons. The impulse toward depopulation in major Romantic texts such as Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" opens out into a more generalized impulse toward



dematerialization. The emptying out of persons from the land leads to an eventual emptying out of all matter, even the soil and substance of the land itself. In the fragile precision of a phrase—"hedgerows, hardly hedgerows"—the material world is for a moment posited, then subtracted out again. Hedges, like persons, may be subjected to a linguistic fatality.

As we move from the spatial center of this collection to the periphery, the population model remains in place, for the opening and closing essays are also arguments about the pressure of corporeal additions and subtractions on the production of narrative. Throughout "The Rape of Narrative and the Narrative of Rape," Mieke Bal reminds us that the book of Judges is itself a population treatise: the problem of Judges "is the problem of fatherhood, the fatherline, and the construction of the people through it." Population tract and narrative are at this early time not yet severed texts that may be juxtaposed at our will; they are so fused that the narrative itself seems to come out of the act of numbering—specifically, the riddle of whether a woman should be numbered among those in the father's or instead those in the husband's household. Because the generation of both the nation and the narrative requires that women be eliminated, "violented," Mieke Bal must reposition them within the narrative, count them, confer standing upon them, in order to speak about them. Her account thus opens with, would be impossible without, her own act of census-taking: "The three young women who are murdered have no names, in spite of their crucial role in the narrative; this anonymity eliminates them from the historical narrative as utterly forgettable. I wish to speak about them and, in order to be able to do that, I will give them names. Jephthah's daughter, whose death is caused by her being daughter, will be referred to as *Bath*, the Hebrew word for daughter; Samson's first wife, killed because her status as a bride was ambiguous, will be called *Kallah*, which means bride but which also plays on *kalah*, destruction, consumption. The victim of chapter 19, who is dragged from house to house and gang-raped and killed when expelled from the house, will be called *Beth*, house." I cite this passage at length because of its beauty (and the same stately cadence of call and recall continues throughout),



but also because it illustrates the interventionist impulse of materialist criticism, an impulse that will be briefly unfolded below and returned to more fully at a later moment.

A materialist conception of language ordinarily has two companion assumptions: first, that language is capable of registering in its own contours the contours and weight of the material world; second, that language itself may enter, act on, and alter the material world. The two tend to be inevitable counterparts: the first attributes to language the features it has to have in order to fulfill the claims of the second. Only the substantiveness or weight accorded language by the first endows it with the force it must have to make an imprint on the resistant surfaces of the world. The inseparability of the two has, within philosophic conversation, a visible measure in the regularity with which the two words “materialism” and “practice” appear in one another’s company. The insistent coupling recurs throughout the present volume and becomes especially striking in the opening and closing essays.

It is the weight of the hurt female body in scriptural narration that permits the conversion of words into speech acts: “the story is not told; it is *done*,” Mieke Bal writes; “lineage and history . . . establish themselves.” This issue of enactment—the capacity of the voice to shape the physical matter of history—returns in the closing essay, “The Souls of White Folk,” where the identification of the Progressivist project “to save the souls of white folk” leads Walter Benn Michaels to assess the role of aesthetics in the formative policies of United States citizenship. Central literary texts of the 1920s—Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and *The Beautiful and Damned*, Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*—are positioned against two distinct sets of writings from the first quarter of the century: first, racially unstable writings addressed to a wide popular readership, such as Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* and *The Leopard’s Spots*, or again Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color* and *Re-Forging America*; second, a more sober set of texts issuing out of the United States courts and Congress, such as the 1896 case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1898 case, *Williams v. Mississippi*, and the Johnson Immigration Act of 1924. The interventionist capabilities of language are visible in this double tiering of the historical

frame: in the end, enactment, for Walter Michaels, is not aesthetics as politics but aesthetics as legislative practice.

The legal and literary writings from the American twenties together form a treatise on the birthing of a nation, a Progressivist "Essay on Population." The counting of persons takes place with loud alarm in the racial and political maps of Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color*. But the act of census-taking—the quietly reiterated, "Are you white? Are you black? Are you American?"—recurs steadily in all the books. Like other "essays on population," these texts become concerned with what within demography is routinely designated "reproductive practice." In passages both acute and painful, Michaels shows how a national absorption with "race," "breeding," and the "well-bred" is dispersed outward into a mystified idiom of skin color and eventually merged into the aestheticized vocabulary of Fitzgerald's "beautiful" and Hemingway's "nice."

Recommendations about "population" or "depopulation" (according to Bal, Ferguson, and Michaels) carry a fatal weight for women in the Hebrew Scriptures, for the poor in Romantic political discourse, for blacks in modern America: the stakes of counting remain high across the three historical periods. What also remains constant across the three historical moments is the entry of those recommendations into both aesthetics and ethics—into the beautiful and the sublime, as well as into the good, the free, the conscious, and the nice.

Insofar as a collection of essays may be said to have a structure, the attention to the birthing of nations forms a consistent concern at the opening, midpoint, and close of the book. But interspersed between these three "Essays on Population" are four others that might be called simply "Essays on Persons." John Donne. Again John Donne. Lord Byron. Eliza Wharton, and her historical counterpart Elizabeth Whitman. The body now comes forward in its monolithic singularity. Nonfictional language models still float in the background, but now we find not the population treatise but the letter, the biography, the life history, the medical case history, genres where the attempt to regulate the appearance and disappearance of a body is exercised in terms of a centrally locatable person.

This alternation between “Essays on Population” and “Essays on Persons” may seem to position “the collective” against “the individual,” as though to present them as antagonistic sites. But this is not right. The error occurs in both directions. The essays about population are also about individual persons, often catching them at the moment when they disappear, as though to stop them from dropping off the edge of the page: Beth’s mute hands straddle the threshold, the place of exit; and Homer Plessy is prevented from slipping back yet once more into the “stunning incoherence of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.” The converse is also true: to enter into the acutely individual terrain of Donne or Byron or Hannah Foster’s Eliza Wharton is to reencounter populations and nations. John Donne, I try to show, “continually takes an inventory of the body—tongues, heart, arms, legs, eyes, and brain—and finds the often graphically described tissue coinhabited by towns, books, nouns, names, narrative, cross, lens, and compass.” His poetry uncovers a wide cultural impulse practiced by art, religion, and medicine: the collective work of revising the essential nature of bodily matter by the inlaying of narratives and artifacts is visible in the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci as well as the writings of churchmen like Nicholas of Cusa and physicians like Leonardo Botallo, Athanasius Kircher, and Daniel Sennert. The title of Jerome Christensen’s essay, “Setting Byron Straight: Class, Sexuality, and the Poet,” announces an analogous concern. He proceeds by a sequence of intimate physical portraits: a man engaged in the display of calisthenic strength; two men swimming; a man and a boy separated by a sun-filled parasol; a husband and wife in the bedroom; a woman and her lawyer lost in hushed innuendo. Yet built into the intimate facts of sexual history is a wider cultural practice, the relation of Greeks to Turks, of British to both, of man to woman, of men to men, of aristocracy to bourgeoisie, of lawyer to client, of wife to reading public. And in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s “Domesticating ‘Virtue’: Coquettes and Revolutionaries in Young America,” we come full circle back through the individual to the birthing of a nation. By charting the intimate bodily fatality of the heroine in Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette*, she shows the formation of the middle class through the revisionary narratives of republican political

discourse and best-selling popular romance. Fascinating its public, the novel of seduction works to gender the body politic by anchoring central national texts in the substantive matter of economic and corporeal circumstance.

At the same time, the emphasis on singular, even monolithically singular, individuals has the important effect of reaffirming the possibility of human agency, about which we might grow sceptical in the population essays. Language does not, independently of us as agents, just happen to absorb us or empty us from its content. The users of language regulate the degree to which language describes or instead discards the material world. The deliberateness of this authorization—as well as the paths along which it is carried out—becomes especially visible in writers like Donne, and Byron, and Hannah Foster, who so directly concern themselves with problems of embodiment.

Human responsibility for the “materiality” of language has often been portrayed by directly tying language to the body itself, as when Sartre, echoing Marx, described the writer’s voice as “a prolongation of the body.”<sup>3</sup> Language, through this imagery, is made to honor its referential obligations to the material world. John Donne affirms the continuity between the materiality of the world and the immateriality of language by reconceiving language in terms of physical attributes: he imagines a word or sentence as something that can *contain*—or more graphically, as something that can be *wrapped* around—bodies and other substantive objects. He repeatedly speaks of language in terms of a “page” which, because made of cloth, rag, vellum, or even glass, itself has sensuous properties. The resulting hybrid of “body and cloth,” “body and page,” or “body and book” is central both to Christopher Ricks’s argument in “Donne After Love” and to my own in “But yet the body is his booke.” Somewhat remarkably, this fusion of material body and materialized voice reappears in the body-flower hybrids of Byron’s botanical codes: in their exchanges of letters, Byron and Matthews create what Jerry Christensen identifies as “a class of equivocal beings, half boys, half flowers.” And the process of hybridization then migrates from Britain to the United States where it now reappears not, as in Byron, in the object of desire but in the object of political envy.

"The gentry," writes Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "had denied that commercial men, living in the fantastical, passionate and unreal world of paper money, stocks and credit, could achieve civic virtue. . . . [So, too,] middle-class men endlessly accused bourgeoisie women of being untrustworthy and incapable of virtue because they lived in another fantastical, passionate, and unreal world of paper—the world of the novel and the romance." Access to representation is dismissed as the insubstantial tissue of passion and paper. But the complaint about men-into-paper and women-into-pages actually registers an anxious recognition of the newly acquired capacity for self-materialization. If paper has less substantive density than the body, it has far more than do words unheard, dissolving into thin air.

John Donne, Lord Byron, and Hannah Foster all affirm the individual's authorization over the space of passage between the physical and the verbal. They have for a moment been collapsed together under the rubric of "hybridization," the fusion of body with cloth, page, or petals. But the three provide very different models of the relation between language and the material realm—even disagreeing about whether the continuity is achieved by carrying the substance of the world into language, or instead by building the insubstantiality of language back into the world.

The model that emerges in John Donne—in the composite portrait given by Christopher Ricks and myself—recapitulates on an individual level the two-part rhythm of absorption and eviction by now familiar here. Donne lifts the body into language; he also (at the end of his poems) works to lift it out again. The lifting of the body into language, the subject of my essay, is visible across a broad sweep of his poetry and prose where language constantly aspires to bring about a mimesis of materiality. Words only acquire the material attributes of the world—mass, weight, substance—through their referential transparency out to that world, and Donne pictures this transparency as a cross-inhabitation of one another's interiors: matter inside the body (tears, blood, heart, brains) is relocated to the inside of some language-soaked artifact to whose material form it now contributes; alternatively, that language-soaked artifact will at times itself be transported back

into the inside of the body. The resulting set of cultural repositionings can be summarized as “volitional” or “consensual materialism,” a phrase which, as a description of Donne, has two distinct meanings, one philosophical, the other attitudinal. Philosophically, it means that Renaissance science, art, and religion together acted to revolutionize matter, revising it so that it would cease to be accidental and contingent, and become instead volitional, subject to the will—thus eliminating the medieval options of accepting the material world on its own (inevitably humiliating) terms, or rejecting it altogether through mystic disavowal. As a description of an intellectual attitude, “consensual materialism” also means that Donne does not merely happen to accept the body, but willfully accepts it, enters into it as though it were a contractual arrangement. He recognizes the ease with which he might divest himself of the material world and refuses to disavow or be repelled by it. The renunciation of the body is what he most forcefully renounces.

But it is precisely this bodily revulsion and renunciation that Christopher Ricks hears in the endings of the poems. In an essay that proceeds with the force of a legal brief, Ricks charges Donne with willful and repeated repudiation of the material world—or of, at least, one particular subzone of the material world, the sexual body. “Donne’s poems, whether or not they are personal memories, record a dislike of having come. Postcoital sadness and revulsion are grimly seized, but what is more grim is that the poems are so often driven to bend this animus upon their own previous act of creative love.” From this opening statement, Ricks moves in a rapid, tour de force declamation through the endings of an astonishing sequence of poems (“Farewell to Love,” “Love’s Alchemy,” “Air and Angels,” “The Curse,” “Woman’s Constancy,” “Go, and Catch a Falling Star,” “The Canonization,” “The Triple Fool,” “The Good Morrow,” “A Valediction: Of Weeping,” “A Fever,” “The Second Anniversary,” “The Cross,” “Twickenham Garden”) as well as through a several-century sequence of critical reactions to those endings (Samuel Johnson, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Swinburne, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, Helen Gardner, J. E. V. Crofts, Leslie Fiedler, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Peter Brooks, Tilottama Rajan, Arthur Marotti, John Carey).

Donne, after love, disavows his own body, the body of the poem, and the generous materialism at the poem's center. The final lines damage all that comes before, lines that are not "more merely beautiful, but that . . . have a depth, a corporeal and spiritual grace, worth gaining." Ricks does not describe this dispassionately. In fact, he denounces it, using many ethical sites to bring to account the action of the final lines against the center: in the end, Donne is guilty of physical assault (he "rends" the earlier lines, "bends" them, cuts them with "acid"), verbal misrepresentation (he "libels his masterpiece"), adultery and infidelity ("the poem is more false to itself than any of its convenient women could ever be"), political appropriation (the endings "usurp entire rights over the poem"), and finally, cowardice ("the poems turn on their heels"). A more dispassionate description would merely reenact the disavowal; and it is precisely this disavowal that Ricks finds in the paraphrases by critics who rise above revulsion to make the last lines less corrosive, less cruel, more cheery and safe: the profession has "inured itself against joy and pain," forgotten the world that "hurts and kills."

The pair of essays on John Donne are at once starkly opposed and strangely compatible. It is as though having hurled himself into the text, Donne's body is so lodged there that when he tries to get it back out again (reclaiming for himself what he a moment ago lent to the poem) he cannot do it. So successful is his mimesis of material presence that he cannot disengage himself without severe forms of self-invalidation. "The trouble is Donne at times wrote more deeply than he meant or than he could bear." The model of language that results accommodates the extremes of absorbing and emptying itself of the material world.

A second model emerges in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's analysis of the popular American novel in the late-eighteenth century. The body, according to this model, will always exist in relation to some text: that is a given. The only question is, "Which text?" In other words, achieving the capacity for self-authorization requires not, as in Donne, that the body be somehow lifted into language (that has apparently already happened), nor that it be gotten out again (that is not posited as a



possibility). Rather, one must be able to shift it from one vehicle of representation to another. Hannah Foster's Eliza Wharton relocates the textual model for embodied experience. She shifts the reference for physical sensation away from the equally flawed models of "romance" and "sermon" to the Declaration of Independence. In doing so, she revises the nature of the body itself: it is still the acuity of sensory pleasure she seeks, but what gives rise to the thrill of pleasure is not the erotic (desire, deprivation, and dependence) but the immediate experience of bodily "independence" or physical "wholeness"—a kind of sensuous self-regard. Eventually Eliza "falls," not because she enters a prohibited sexual affair but because, unable to sustain the new textual model, she reverts to the old, now lethal, one.

Eliza Wharton's assumption that she can transport herself into the ethical space of a document about "life, liberty and happiness" is, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues, symptomatic of a widely felt assumption among middle-class women and men that the meaning and import of words like "liberty" and "virtue" were theirs to revise. The popular novel, like republican political discourse, catches these terms at the moment when they are being renegotiated by a wide public. The philosopher Thomas Nagel writes that "The ethical commonplaces of any period include ideas that may have been radical discoveries in a previous age," and he names "modern conceptions of liberty, equality, and democracy" as central instances. He designates ethical revision as among the most "democratic" of phenomena: "Because the questions are about how [people] should live and how society should be arranged, the answers [can't be pursued exclusively by experts but] must be accepted and internalized by many people to take effect."<sup>4</sup> "Domesticating Virtue" could have been entitled "Democratizing Ethics" for it finds in the "coquettes and revolutionaries in young America" the broadening of the definitional act, and the extreme risks entailed in the ethical work of inventing the commonplaces through which we now live.

Byron, in Jerome Christensen's account, provides a third, very different, model of the continuity between the material realm and language. Rather than carrying the substantiveness of the world into language,

he forces the dissoluteness of language back into the material world, out of whose shattered surface then issues the genre of romance “pure and violent.” The phenomenon of “equivocation” belongs to the verbal realm—the linguistic evasions of Mary Wollstonecraft; the codes and coded letters circulating among Byron, Hobhouse, and Matthews; the whispered legal conversations of Lady Byron and her attorney; the century-long practice of insinuation and critical gossip about the Separation Controversy (“the moment of greatest debate among biographers. What awful secret did Lady Byron tell?”). The dissolute verbal realm may at first seem opposed to the clarity or decisiveness of the very acts—murder, sexual transgression—rumored to have taken place, if only one could know them. And Christensen, wanting us to know them, does track the mystery.

But the solution to the mystery, which by replacing a question with an answer should work to dispel the element of equivocation, instead does the reverse. When the biographical narrative becomes clear, what becomes clear is that Byron practiced equivocation on the material world itself. Byron, argues Christensen, established his own difference from others not simply by passively disregarding the material principle of difference but by actively shattering it, acting violently against it, dissolving the ways of “East and West, past and present, boy and girl, pro and con, fore and aft.” The last pair of terms provides the final test case: more elemental even than the willful confusion of gender (bisexuality), nationality (homosexuality), family (incest), or age (pederasty) is the “Byronic confoundment” of the front and back of the body (sodomy). If this series of confoundments gives rise to his monolithic individuality—his “genius,” “sovereignty,” and “aristocratic style”—it also returns us to the population treatise. Byron’s rearrangements of matter approach the emptying out of matter in the Romantic sublime. So, too, his attempts to materialize the principle of “equivocation” in order to generate romance echoes the processes by which in Judges “the riddle” form is materialized in the female body in order to “restart” a historical narrative that has become “stalled” in its own immateriality.

The seven essays in this volume were not originally written as part of a book entitled “Literature and the Body” or to be framed under the