SPONTANEOUS OVERFLOW: INTERNALIZATION AND EXCESS IN

BRITISH ROMANTICISM

A Dissertation in

English

by

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ABSTRACT

*Spontaneous Overflow* fixates on comic corporeality in the literature of British Romanticism: the bodily movements and moments that make the Romantic Movement move. Byron complains of a nausea induced by reading too much Wordsworth; Blake grumbles of a bowel complaint which nearly killed him while reading the *Excursion*. These moments read Romanticism differently. Odd articulations of aesthetic experience, they expose the comic contingencies written on the underside of Romantic sincerity, and give a glimpse of a different history of Romanticism: one in which the aesthetic impulse towards idealism contains and conceals corporeality as part of its poetic structure and style. A doctrine of sincerity, Wordsworth’s famous articulation of all good poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” takes on a surprisingly somatic force when re-read by Blake’s bowels and Byron’s nausea. Tracing the intestinal tract of Romantic internalization, writers in the history of what I call “Inside Out Romanticism” create counter-flows and blockages with their bodies that disrupt and redirect a totalizing discourse of Romanticism at the very moment of its inception. While critics have often turned to “internalization” as shorthand for the imaginative work attempted by Romanticism’s aesthetics of transcendence, I argue that sudden convulsions of the body create spontaneous counter-flows that expose something somatic embedded in aesthetics and re-write the inward-turn of Romanticism as a physiological phenomenon. Attending to the stylistic subtleties of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Thomas Love Peacock, my project interrogates the hidden presence of corporeality at the core of an ostensibly disembodied aesthetic tradition, and ultimately resituates Romanticism’s radicalism in and around the excesses and evacuations of the body.
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A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein
Introduction: Critical Excursions

I had the pleasure of reading to Blake in my best style (& you know I am vain on that point & think I read W[ordsworth]'s poems peculiarly well) the Ode on Immortality. I never witnessed greater delight in any listener & in general Blake loves the poems. What appears to have disturbed his mind, on the other hand, is the preface to the Excursion. He told me six months ago that it caused him a bowel complaint which nearly killed him.

—Henry Crabb Robinson, letter to Dorothy Wordsworth (1826)¹

I

Odd sorts of materiality infiltrate the experience of Romantic aesthetics. Lord Byron quips to Thomas Medwin that “Shelley, when I was in Switzerland, used to dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea.”² William Blake grumbles to Henry Crabb Robinson of “a bowel complaint which nearly killed him” upon encountering the Preface to William Wordsworth’s Excursion. Byron writes of John Keats’ poetry as “a Bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium”: “such writing is a sort of mental masturbation—he is always frigging his imagination.”³ What wisdom is there in such strange reactions to Romantic writing? Seemingly comic footnotes to the larger discourse of Romanticism, they offer serious critical insights into what it means to be “Romantic”: a difficult thing to pin down, it turns out.⁴ Some of Romanticism’s most evocative formulations for aesthetics oscillate between metaphor and material, making it a difficult discourse to describe. Take Wordsworth’s well-known definition of all good poetry: “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”⁵ Straightforward enough, but is it in fact a
definition? Or isn’t it really a metaphor, and as such open to endless articulation and interpretation? Notice how the reactions with which I began all hint at their own sorts of spontaneous overflow: physiological responses to an experience of aesthetics which question the affective register for “feelings” in Wordsworth’s formulation, redefining it in more tactile terms. Emphasizing the aberrational as a bodily phenomenon, these writers interrogate the material underpinnings of the irrational kernel of imaginative life so often exalted in Romantic poetics, showing how a history of Romantic internalization may be just as intestinal as it is imaginative.

This dissertation fixates on such odd bodily phenomena as Byron’s nausea and Blake’s bowels, arguing that they have their own peculiar history that must be read alongside the development of Romantic aesthetics in order to arrive at a critical interpretation of Romanticism that more fully integrates body and mind within a comic context. Attending to the conversations such hidden materialities create with broader, more canonical conceptions of Romanticism opens up new interpretive angles for observing the physical comedy and perverse materiality that underwrite stylistic nuances and imaginative aspirations in Romantic aesthetics.

From the start this is a project about zooming in on the small moments of Romanticism, almost unworthy of mentioning but in passing, that begin to slowly add up to something larger when carefully considered. Byron’s nausea is a good example: apparently a tossed-off comment, merely recollected in Medwin’s Conversations of Lord Byron (1824), should we even take it seriously at all? Perhaps not, but it initiates a critical conversation with Wordsworthian poetics that becomes a useful heuristic for negotiating the physiological problems of poetic transcendence. Others appear to have adopted it: notably Blake with his bowel complaint, but witness also Francis Jeffrey’s attempt, upon encountering the sheer bulk of the Excursion, to purge the Bard of the Lakes of his own aesthetic excess:
This small specimen, however, and the statements with which it is prefaced, have been sufficient to set our minds at rest in one particular. The case of Mr. Wordsworth, we perceive, is now manifestly hopeless; and we give him up as altogether incurable, and beyond the power of criticism. We cannot indeed altogether omit taking precautions now and then against the spreading of the malady;—but for himself, though we shall watch the progress of his symptoms as a matter of professional curiosity and instruction, we really think it right not to harass him any longer with nauseous remedies,—but rather to throw in cordials and lenitives, and wait in patience for the natural termination of the disorder.  

Even Wordsworth himself sickens on a system of transcendence, Jeffrey suggests. Maybe Byron’s nausea is not so far-fetched a notion after all. Small specimens, however ironically rendered, can build up to a critical mass. Indeed, Byron’s inclination to vomit becomes verbal vituperation in Jeffrey’s caustic opener, “This will never do”: a line spit out in almost literal distaste at the indigestible mass of Wordsworth’s poem that yields perverse materiality a critical life and legitimacy.

What’s at stake in such an inquiry? A long tradition in Romantic criticism revolves around the transcendental aspirations apparent in the works that most conspicuously fetish mental desire, such as Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” and Keats’s “Nightingale.” The imaginative register for Romantic poetics is often extracted into a critical discourse of internalization. Perhaps most influentially, Harold Bloom locates the paradigm for the imaginative vision of Romanticism in the long tradition of English quest romance: “The poet takes the patterns of quest-romance and transposes them into his own imaginative life, so that the entire rhythm of the quest is heard again in the movement of the poet himself from poem to
poem.” Bloom makes Romanticism a psychological essence of Romance: distilled from actual encounter into etherealized affect, the quest in Romanticism becomes a poetic search for a widened consciousness, the protagonist the individual creative process itself, and the antagonist any inhibitions to imaginative work. More paradigmatically still, M. H. Abrams maps a Judeo-Christian religious narrative of fall, restoration, and redemption onto the mind of the Romantic poet: “Romantic writers revived these ancient matters with a difference: they undertook to save the overview of human history and destiny, the experiential paradigms, and the cardinal values of their religious heritage, by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable, as well as emotionally pertinent, for the time being.” For Abrams this reconstitution generally entails a shift in poetic focus from overt religiosity to local subjectivity—“the Mind of Man”—in order to “naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine.”

Familiar territory, right? But here’s the thing: each of these accounts at least implicitly implicates Blake’s bowels in its argument for transcendence, suggesting that these canonical conceptions of Romanticism may rely as much on an intestinal as an imaginative understanding of poetic life. Bloom gestures towards “Blake’s complaint” against Wordsworth, getting close to a physiology of “spontaneous overflow”: “Wordsworth made his kind of poetry out of an extreme urgency, and out of an overfilled inner self, a Blakean Prolific that nearly choked in excess of its own delights.” A bowel complaint which nearly killed him: a Blakean Prolific indeed. Abrams can’t quite seem to shake it. He returns repeatedly to Blake’s bowels in Natural Supernaturalism, attempting to explain away their unsettling presence: “William Blake, who respected Wordsworth enough to read him closely and take his claims seriously, told Henry Crabb Robinson, in whimsical exasperation, that this passage [from the Prospectus] ‘caused him a bowel complaint which nearly killed him.’” Later he refers to Blake’s reaction as a “comic
hyperbole,” but this undercuts his own claims as to Blake’s serious attention to Wordsworth’s aesthetics. Blake’s bowels do read Wordsworth closely: they open up his imaginative aesthetics to physiological readings, anticipating the recent emergence of critical interest in Romanticism and embodiment. Their presence in fundamental studies of the “inward turn” in Romanticism, such as Bloom’s and Abrams’s, subtly traces the intestinal tract of internalization, revealing a physiology too often distilled into a psychology in accounts of Romantic aesthetics. The small specimen becomes an urgent critical affair—one that has not been adequately attended to.

Picking up on Blake’s prescient perversion of Romantic idealism, this dissertation interrogates the hidden history of bodily life in Romantic literature written over by a system of transcendent aesthetics. Broadly construed, it explores how bodily life in the guise of aesthetics—by which I generally mean the marshalling of literary structures (such as rhyme scheme, meter, punctuation, and grammar) together with evocative imageristic and affective techniques (such as metaphor) into a distinctive individual style—filters into the poetics and prose of Romanticism, becoming a concealed part of its literary life. More specifically, it fixates on a series of odd bodily phenomena—bowel complaints, laughter, nausea, and falling down—and interrogates how they both unsettle and underscore Romantic aesthetics and Romantic criticism. My fixation is the perversion of the peculiar: I persist in finding odd articulations of the development of aesthetic history in the comic gestures of the body turned inside-out or upside down. Seemingly ahistorical phenomena—endowed from birth with bodies, humans must always have been capable of such stomachic and somatic spectacles—they nevertheless make their presence felt within the particular period of Romanticism. Placed within a more precise historical context, each of these odd occurrences raises questions about the development of Romantic aesthetics: conceived as a chemically induced condition, laughter in the Romantic era
asks just how spontaneous spontaneity really is, and what artificialities an organic aesthetics covers over; nausea raises the specter of Enlightenment systems as a cultural force recognized and resisted by an alimentary aesthetics; and falling down challenges aesthetics to adopt an involuted mode of ironic vitality to capture the force of gravity as a physical law and a philosophical concept. Romantic aesthetics encounters and embraces these problems as questions to be equivocated over at the level of literary style. What emerges is a re-conception of the literal life of Romanticism as a bodily blip, a corporeal convulsion turned transcendent, with traces of materiality translated into style. Gone are the grand narratives of romance and religion: in their place, the particles they are built on—remainders of Romanticism that rewrite its history as an interrogation of embodied inspiration. Bowel complaints, then, are a question of criticism: they represent what must be evacuated in the critical extraction of terms necessary to develop a critical consensus on Romantic aesthetics: they as much resist critical distillation as they do Wordsworth’s *Excursion*.

II

What distinguishes this project from other recent studies on Romanticism and embodiment is its investment in the comic potentiality contained in the physicality of Romantic poetics. Blake’s shit is a humorous if also deadly serious matter: a fine bit of physical comedy. As such it raises the question not only of Romanticism’s material trappings but also of its comic condition. Against a long critical tradition that holds the comic spirit in diametrical opposition to the sincere “Spirit of the Age” of Romanticism, this dissertation presents the case for a comic history written on the underside of Romantic sincerity. When viewed from inside out or upside down, Romanticism looks surprisingly humorous. This is not to say that it is funny (a difficult quality to account for by any standards), but rather that its sublime aspirations and sentimental figurations
conceal comic contingencies whose traces are nonetheless inscribed in the aesthetic maneuvers designed to erase them. Rather than striking an antithetical, un-Romantic pose, comic life is embedded within the aesthetic movements of the Romantic Movement. Implicit in this argument is a deconstructive approach to literary language: one which emphasizes the ways in which linguistic gestures often contain the conditions of their own impossibility or opposite. Thus, “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” occasions a moment of physical comedy which appears to unsettle, but in fact merely underscores the complex aesthetic dynamics at play in a poetic discourse which foregrounds the mind of man as its transcendental aspiration, but cannot at the same time blot out his body. Blake’s complaint insists on the materiality of metaphor not in order to debunk or debase transcendental aspirations (he was in fact delighted with Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode,” according to Crabb Robinson) but rather to rewrite such aesthetic aspirations as always already bodily.

Throughout this project, I am drawn to moments like Blake’s bowel complaint that strike me as odd, aberrational responses to Romanticism, and that have probably not received their due share of critical attention: non-canonical in a Bakhtinian sense, they retain a non-canonical status in literary criticism. I read these moments as in either explicit or implicit communication and conflict with Romantic ideologies of transcendence, sincerity, and authenticity—all often written as “spontaneity.” Admittedly, these are terms that have been over-simplified in Romantic criticism (often with good reason), but one of my goals in this project is to show how strange complexities, affinities, and new meanings emerge for these terms in the context of comic Romanticism. In addition to Blake’s bowels, other incursions of the body—Byron’s nausea, Coleridge’s constipation, and Thomas Love Peacock’s tumbling bodies—have something to say about “spontaneous overflow” and the art of transcendence. I key in on these moments of
physical comedy to recreate and continue the conversation they initiate about Romanticism and its discontents, with the hope that they have the ability to expand our critical consciousness of the Romantic canon. Surely “Romanticism” contains multitudes, but just how these multitudes are contained is a question worthy of continual consideration and revision. I argue that in striving for sublimity and transcendence, Romanticism creates an aesthetic expansiveness that produces a language of excess and overflow which disperses Romanticism to encompass a broader frame of things, including its material remainders. From this perspective, a critical approach to Romanticism is as much about re-collecting Romanticism as it is about recollecting Romanticism. Memory may be a material process, if also mental.

My critical approach emerges from the confluence of two important studies: Marjorie Levinson’s *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems* (1986) and Steven Jones’s *Satire and Romanticism* (2000). Each of these studies stresses the hidden dialectic between the present and the absent, the represented and the repressed in Romantic poetry. Emphasizing a materialist and deconstructive approach, Levinson argues for “the literary work as that which speaks of one thing because it cannot articulate another—presenting formally a sort of allegory by absence, where the signified is indicated by an identifiably absented signifier.” Thus, those moments when a poem seems least historically or materially conscious—most disinterested in its local, contextual conditions—are rife with reality and social significance: material absences are poetic or stylistic presences, or as Levinson puts it, “Romanticism’s ideology of writing is deconstruction’s ideology of reading.” However much a work may fixate on explicit representation or political polemic, where it masks rather than manifests its materiality aesthetically is where its opens up a stylistic space to explore the operative logic of its ideology: “Precisely where the work blurs its manifest representations and where its smooth surface
thickens, invaginates, or breaks open, is where its ideological situation can begin to take shape for us.” Such a perspective is particularly useful for producing nuanced readings of the sociopolitical evasions or absences in Wordsworth’s most characteristic (canonical) poems, as Levinson demonstrates throughout her study:

Wordsworth is most distinctively Wordsworth, most Romantic, and most successful in those poems where the conflicts embedded in his materials, motives, and methods are most expertly displaced and where, as a result, the poetry looks most removed from anything so banal as a polemic or position. . . . [T]he extreme disinterest evinced by these works indicates their resumption of those problematic themes at the level of image and metaphysics, precisely because they were deadlocked at the practical level. 18

Levinson’s approach does not restore materiality, so much as it recognizes material displacements (thus absent presences) already located within the images and metaphysics of a disinterested aesthetics.

If this is “a criticism that uses the devices of deconstruction to materialize a greatly idealized corpus; or, to locate the body in Wordsworth’s poetry,” 19 it becomes particularly useful in a broader study of comic physicality in Romanticism: an aesthetic discourse which wears its disinterest on its sympathetic sleeve. Here Steven Jones’s more recent reflections on the presence of satire in Romanticism provide a means of updating Levinson’s insights for a more nuanced reading of the interrelations between high Romantic style and comic materiality. Jones shrewdly deconstructs the traditional opposition between the two modes—Romantic and satiric—showing how each critiques, but also creates and contributes to the other: “Romantic works are influenced by, infected with, and enfold within themselves examples of satiric writing. . . . The satiric and the Romantic . . . interpenetrate one another . . . in ways that finally go well beyond mere
dialectical opposition.” The Romantic mode, he writes, “remains only one dialectical step away from the unwanted but sometimes unavoidable, intrusive, and ironic smile against which it is defined.” Like Levinson, Jones applies this insight to a reading of Wordsworhian poetics, showing how it contains the seeds of its own comic un-writing or deconstruction: “[I]t would appear that the many parodies of Wordsworth’s poem [Peter Bell] brought out its own latent satiric tendencies, tendencies that it was part of Wordsworth’s deliberate intention to displace or subsume. . . . [T]he seeds of absurdity are planted in the text as part of its dialectical potential—then are resisted or displaced.”20 Refusing to read the comic critiques of Wordsworth as either pure vitriol or dismissive debunking, Jones considers the extent to which Wordsworth’s poetic style itself calls up such critiques as necessary conditions of its own development.21 In so doing he adopts and adapts Levinson’s “adversarial tactics” for a reading of comic Romanticism, laying bare a comic absurdity written on the underside of Romantic sublimity.22

Something like this critical combination infuses my approach to Blake’s bowel complaint at the outset of this project and will continue to inflect my readings throughout, even in those instances where comic materiality is much more explicit in the content of the work. In such cases, I stress the ways in which a poem’s structural and stylistic developments parallel and perform its present content, rather than attest to an absence. However, I often emphasize how the poetic performance of these presences amounts to an argument against the absences apparent in Wordworth’s aesthetic elisions.23 In this way a kind of “anxiety of influence” infiltrates the material movements of those writing in the wake of Wordsworhian Romanticism: an absent Wordworth haunts their texts and, as we have seen with Blake, often generates the need for an aesthetic and corporeal exorcism.24
Indeed, there is something excremental about Wordsworth’s poetics. At least, as we have seen, William Blake seemed to think so. The epigraph to this introduction is worth recounting in full, if only to register again the subtle suggestions that the sudden shock of Blake’s bowel complaint makes about Wordsworthian aesthetics:

I had the pleasure of reading to Blake in my best style (& you know I am vain on that point & think I read W[ordsworth]’s poems peculiarly well) the Ode on Immortality. I never witnessed greater delight in any listener & in general Blake loves the poems. What appears to have disturbed his mind, on the other hand, is the preface to the Excursion. He told me six months ago that it caused him a bowel complaint which nearly killed him.25

Spontaneous overflow indeed. What’s crucial to notice here is Crabb Robinson’s blending of the mental and the physical. Explicitly noting that The Excursion has disturbed Blake’s “mind,” he then goes on to describe effects that are very much bodily. Blake’s intestinal disturbance is a bodily manifestation of a mind diseased. By poetry. The passage (Crabb Robinson’s and Blake’s) suggests, then, a reading of Wordsworthian poetics in which body and mind, matter and imagination are equally impacted by aesthetics: poetry’s effects on the mind of man are wrought too on his body. A humorous reading of Wordsworth to be sure, but a subtle and incisive one nonetheless. For if, as Paul de Man has argued, one of the major aspirations of Wordsworthian poetics was “to banish all metaphor, to become entirely literal”—for poetic language, in other words, to “draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object”—Blake appears to have anticipated de Man; or at least his lower intestines have. Indeed, his evacuation completes what de Man argues was in fact a “movement . . . condemned in advance to failure.”26 Where the Romantic movement fails in its imaginative morphing of metaphor into material through a
system of aesthetic allegorization, Blake’s bowel movement succeeds. For Blake, “powerful feelings” have a tactile as well as an affective force. Or, put crudely, poetry poops: welding word to thing, Blake’s physiological reaction to Wordsworth is bound up in a history of aesthetic aspiration and interpretation. He unearths the hidden material principles feeding the ontological life of Wordsworth’s imaginative poetics, exposing with his body what lies beneath the surface of sincerity.

Shit as literary criticism. A queasy notion, but it filters into the observations of even the most astute of Wordsworth critics. Commenting on Blake’s excremental experience of Wordsworth’s poetry, Geoffrey Hartman emphasizes that

Blake has a figurative way of expressing himself which the bourgeois observer (a Crabb Robinson, for example) might take too literally. Perhaps Wordsworth’s exaltation of Nature in the Prospectus, and his vaunted ‘passing by’ of the visionary realms, did literally make Blake sick. Or perhaps the comment is Blake’s way of saying ‘Shit!’

The brilliance of Hartman’s brief commentary is its complex entangling of the literal and the figurative: while initially appearing to eschew the literal in favor of the figurative, it immediately entertains the possibility of Blake’s actual defecation, before apparently siding with the figurative. Yet, Hartman’s final analysis—that “the comment is Blake’s way of saying ‘Shit!’”—actually poses a third possibility: a blending of word and thing which suggests a much closer approximation of the figurative and the literal. If Blake’s shit is Blake’s way of saying “Shit!” in other words, Hartman takes him literally at his word. Shit!—exclamation point and all—is a form of billingsgate which at least approaches or closely mimics the nearly fatal eruption of Blake’s bodily lower stratum. It marks simultaneously a critical appraisal and an event: this is what Blake thinks and what he does. Hartman’s subtle suggestion that Blake passes his stools to
produce an embodied reading of Wordsworth’s visionary *passing by* further underscores the possibility that Blake’s reaction is as much a matter of linguistic interpretation as literal evacuation. His shit itself is a significant (signifying as well as presumably sizeable) form of literary criticism, or complaint.

Blake’s body also performs its own sort of close reading of Wordsworth’s title. Surprisingly few critics consider the term “excursion” in much depth—adopting from the narrative context of the poem the obvious meaning of “a journey, expedition, or ramble from one’s home”\(^{28}\)—but Blake’s shit reminds us that aside from this meaning, “excursion” also carries both a figurative and a physical weight that bear heavily on Wordsworth’s poetic project. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records “excursion” in its most figurative construction as referring to “an outburst (of feeling)”—the same type of metaphorical outpouring as Wordsworth’s famous formulation for all good poetry, “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Yet, this figurative flight has its physical counterpart in the *OED*’s primary definition of “excursion”: “the action of running out; escape from confinement; running to extremes; an instance thereof.” Thus, Wordsworth’s title encapsulates in a single word not merely the narrative context of his poem, but also the physical grounds for his figurative poetic posturing. In short, he welds the figurative to the physical in his very title, and thereby gestures towards the larger poetic project of his particular strand of Romanticism: “Excursion” is at once metaphor and material. Blake’s bodily excursion closely reads Wordsworth’s title, and registers these layerings, by actualizing the imaginative escapes—the figurative excursions—of his poetry. Blake’s reading of *The Excursion* both causes and is his own excursion in the form of a bowel complaint: a physical “running out,” an “escape from confinement,” a “running to extremes”—
bearing it out even to the edge of doom in Crabb Robinson’s account. At the very least it is “an instance thereof.”

By turning his own body into a site of literary criticism, Blake in this instance initiates a critical insight into an important if often overlooked dynamic operating beneath the surface of Romantic poetics: the unresolved tension between metaphor and materiality, word and thing, that must underwrite any poetic attempt at transcendence. If one of the fundamental ideologies of Romantic poetry is that it merely exists (without necessary recourse to a history of existing), Blake’s bowel complaint turns this *a priori* condition on its head, crudely exposing the quite literal *a posteriori* contexts out of which it might in fact be born. Blake makes forcefully observable the material impositions of Romantic transcendence, rooting it in a history of bodily life. Exposing the ends of aesthetic taste, Blake becomes an early critic of Romantic ideology: a writer in the literary history of taste creatively interrogating the evasions of aesthetics, filling a role Denise Gigante articulates for Blake’s Romantic contemporaries:

> Confronting the metaphor of consumption in the field of representation . . . writers [in the literary history of taste] perform their own critique of the Romantic ideology (conceived as a transcendence of history by aesthetics) in a manner that anticipates the kind of literary criticism that presumes to displace it.\(^{30}\)

Blake writes Romantic criticism with his body, momentarily freeing interpretation and critique from what Jerome McGann has called scholarship’s “uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations.”\(^{31}\) In so doing, he practices a critical version of what Robert Mitchell has recently termed *collapsurgence*: “the process by which one system for understanding the world collapses, and another, purportedly deeper, understanding of order surges forth.”\(^{32}\) Blake’s digestive system surges forth in place of what Francis Jeffrey dubbed Wordsworth’s “peculiar
system” of poetics, transgressing and thus making apparent the boundaries built by the ideological scaffolding concealed beneath the structures of style in Wordsworthian poetics. As Mitchell elaborates,

[I]n a world in which living human bodies come under the sway of systems, or a System, one can counter this control only by engendering corporeal shocks and affective counterflows. The mission of art, from this perspective, is to commit itself to sticky, slimy, oozing forms of transgression that will enable a controlled form of collapsurgence, and in this way allow audiences to achieve the extra-artistic goal of recognizing and freeing themselves from an otherwise hidden system. Blake’s bowels refuse incorporation, producing a \textit{collapsurgence} of criticism.

IV

Romanticism’s relationship to the body is a familiar enough territory for scholars of Romanticism, and one that has been compellingly revisited in recent critical discourses, but it is nonetheless a terrain that continues to perplex. W. J. T. Mitchell’s caveat about the lures of the material turn in Romantic studies elucidates the underlying complexities of this seemingly concretizing critical gesture:

The great temptation for romanticists is to think that our gesture of getting physical with romanticism is an accomplishment in itself. We are in danger of supposing that somehow the turn to the physical is a tough-minded and realistic gesture, a politically progressive act of getting down to the concrete, hard facts, the obdurate stuff of things in themselves, an escape from old-fashioned romantic idealism. And of course the more closely we look
at both romanticism and at the physical world, the more difficult it becomes to sustain any such illusions. The physical is a thoroughly metaphysical concept. Indeed, there lurks a false and all too easy dichotomy in the assumption that the body is in conflict, rather than critical conversation, with such broadly construed Romantic notions as idealism, transcendence, or imagination. And there lurks a danger of overlooking the precise nuances of those very terms—of falsely broadening or generalizing their particular resonance in an individual text and in the historical Romantic era—when the physical and the metaphysical are held in easy opposition. To be sure, it is tempting, but only somewhat correct to characterize Blake’s reaction to Wordsworth’s poetry as a physical specimen of what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the principle of “grotesque realism,” which takes as its essential feature “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.” Bakhtin is a pervasive presence—for better and worse—in the study of the literature of embodiment, and I invoke him in various contexts throughout this study, but as I have shown, Blake’s shit places us in murkier waters than this familiar mind/body dichotomy. It initiates a critical conversation and dialectical relationship between mind and body, and thus reminds us that the earliest Romantic criticism did not fall prey to the same types of reductive gestures Mitchell warns against.

I draw attention to Geoffrey Hartman’s analysis of Blake’s reaction to Wordsworth to stress the ways in which its progression is itself an intentional structure mirroring Romanticism’s quest to wed the word with the thing: mirroring, indeed, Blake’s own progression from imagination to defecation (figurative to literal). As such, it provides a fitting starting point for interrogating Romanticism’s vexed negotiations of not just the literal and the figurative, but also of the very much related binaries of body and mind, matter and imagination, physical and
metaphysical. For if Hartman takes seriously and even literally Blake’s embodied response to Wordsworth’s poetry he points us towards a new way of conceiving of Romanticism’s desire for an intimate communion between poetic image and object, imagination and experience. This is a desire consummated not in the work of the individual poet, but in the responses of his critics. In marking the failures of his poetry they paradoxically give it the materiality it sought but failed to grasp. To be sure, Blake’s “Shit!” names a failure (of Wordsworth’s poetry), but his simultaneous shit—embodying a failure (of the intestines)—succeeds in wedding metaphor to material. A consummation devoutly to be wished? Perhaps not. But the paradoxical snatching of success from the bowels of failure seems itself peculiarly Romantic. Thus, critical reactions such as Blake’s (and Hartman’s) need to be seen as participating in Romanticism’s aspirations for the real, even as they critique the (literal) ends of that project. To reiterate, recent critical commentary complicating the aesthetic relationship of imagination and experience implicitly builds upon the operative critical logic rooted in the physical comedy of Blake’s bowel complaint.

The most insightful recent scholarship on Romanticism and embodiment has adopted the type of complexity Mitchell urges and that Hartman performs in his subtle reading of Blake, seeking to restore a critical awareness of the particular presences of the body in Romanticism. Alan Richardson’s “Romanticism and the Body” charts the twenty-first century emergence of a critical discourse in Romanticism which troubles traditional notions of Romantic transcendence, positing instead a more muddled, but dialectical relationship between mind and body in the Romantic imagination: “the idealizing tendencies of certain Romantic-era authors and texts exist in a dynamic state of tension with opposing tendencies that locate the mind in the body and the thinking principle in the brain, anti-dualistic in tenor and materialist in implication.”37 Critical
studies investigating these tensions, in other words, have broadened the canonical conception of Romanticism to include even the seeming discontents of the Romantic imagination as essential parts of its composition. The series of discontents I began with merely reminds us that these apparently recent developments in Romantic criticism are in fact welcome returns to the underrated complexity with which Romantic-era contemporaries treated the mind/body problematic.

Like my own, many recent discussions of Romanticism and embodiment begin with William Wordsworth, in no small part because he foregrounds in his poetry this complex interplay of mind and body, often, as in the example of “excursion,” attempting to encapsulate this relationship in a single word or phrase. “Excursion” itself, as I have noted, is underwritten by Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” and as such functions as another term for “poetry,” figurative and literal, metaphorical and material at once. As an excursion, the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings has its material underpinnings too: for just as feelings refer to an emotional experience or imaginative flight, they are also grounded in the world of physical sensation. The distinction between these two realms, according to Noel Jackson’s recent account, was precisely what Wordsworth’s aesthetics sought to reconcile:

[S]ensation is for Wordsworth as much a category of cognition as of physical response; it is a term he generally uses to describe the activity of the mind under the influence of powerful feeling. Signifying a cooperative relationship between physical affection and reflective mental activity, sensation designates above all a provisional reconciliation of body and mind implicit as well in aesthetic experience.38
Recast in slightly different terms, in the context of Jackson’s timely re-formulation of Wordsworth’s project, we might say that for Wordsworth all good poetry is the aesthetic reconciling of metaphor and material.

Such a statement, of course, flies in the face of what a generation of Romantic critics have held to be a fundamental aspiration of Wordsworth’s most characteristic productions: the transcendence of materiality (historical, bodily, or otherwise) via aesthetics. Here, Wordsworth’s famous formulation for all good poetry has proved a significant stumbling block for the twentieth-century critical appraisal of Wordsworth’s relationship to materiality. In the phrase “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” M. H. Abrams located Romantic poetry’s impetus towards “the elimination . . . of the conditions of the given world.” For Wordsworth at least, he argued, “the materials of a poem come from within, and they consist expressly neither of objects or actions, but of the fluid feelings of the poet himself.”

The tendency of the Romantic imagination to “overflow” the container of the poet himself—to divorce itself from the material conditions of the poet’s body—became for much of the twentieth century, something of a commonplace in influential Romantic scholarship. Following Marjorie Levinson’s critique of Wordsworth’s poetic evasions in “Tintern Abbey” (noted earlier), Jerome McGann asserted of the “Intimations Ode” that

The poem annihilates its history, biographical and socio-historical alike, and replaces these particulars with a record of pure consciousness. The paradox of the work is that it embodies an immediate and concrete experience of that most secret and impalpable of all human acts: the transformation of fact into idea, and of experience into ideology.

For McGann this particular instance in Wordsworth is emblematic of the Romantic ideology at large: “the poetic response to the age’s severe political and social dislocations was to reach for
solutions in the realm of ideas. The maneuver follows upon a congruent Romantic procedure, which is to define human problems in ideal and spiritual terms.”

But characterizing Wordsworth as a strictly transcendent poet, one who sought to escape the body by means of the mind, may be overly reductive, as more recent criticism has convincingly shown just how invested Romantic-era writers, including Wordsworth himself, were in this “frame of things.” In fact, Paul Fry’s recent account of Wordsworth posits material “things” as the entire basis for, and paramount theme of, his most original, characteristically “Wordsworthian” productions; a sense of what Fry calls “the ontic unity of all things” pervades Wordsworthian poetics: “The ontic, unsemantic self-identity of things, underlying and no doubt fostering the imaginary timelessness of custom: this is Wordsworth’s true theme, constantly touched upon yet shied away from, masked at various times in more acceptable—but less original—pantheist, quietist, and idealist registers.”

Thus, while Wordsworth often seems to eschew the material—to embrace the transcendent—his hackneyed (for Fry) idealism or escapism merely masks a deeper investment in the material, which is the true source of his originality and inspiration.

Wordsworthian metaphors of imagination and transcendence, then, might be said to be already materialized. Indeed, the “powerful feelings” of his metaphor for poetry relate as much to physical sensation as to emotional experience; as Noel Jackson has recently pointed out, “literary historians have in the last decade begun to trace new sources for some characteristically Romantic models of mind, positing a vitally physiological basis for this period’s conceptions of consciousness, cognition, and subjectivity.” In the context of such an embodied basis for Romantic thought—scientifically and medically theorized in the moment of Romanticism itself—it may not be possible to talk about transcendent, dualistic tendencies in Romantic writing.
(tethered as they always already are to the body) without at the same time invoking their material basis. Thus, McGann significantly revises his earlier thesis, writing of “Tintern Abbey” (a poem often taken to negate the physical in preference of the spiritual) that “the spiritual condition it celebrates comes through a regimen grounded in the senses,” and emphasizes how a number of other Romantic-era writers register “the stakes involved in overturning the traditional understanding of the relations of mind and body.”

Nonetheless, even if critical accounts of Romantic transcendence were (for much of the latter half of the twentieth century) too narrowly constructed around a rigid mind/body dichotomy, Richardson writes, “the Romantic impulse towards transcending the body to reach a pure realm of ideas remains a pervasive and seductive one to reckon with.” To be sure, even if materiality is a central concern for Wordsworth, he often does really seem “forgetful of the biological body,” as Jonathan Bate writes. But what of the comic body? Wordsworth’s literary contemporaries—Blake, Byron, Peacock—certainly knew its force and reminded Wordsworth of it by writing their poetry and prose around a comic model of materiality. Their writing as aesthetic performances of materiality closely reads Wordsworthian poetics and offers us the most extended contemporary critique of the way a spectacular Romantic failure became a troubling exponent of ideology.

V

But just what is the ideology of “spontaneous overflow” and how does resituating it within the context of physical comedy alter its aesthetic implications? According to several influential accounts, Wordsworthian aesthetics articulates a desire to disappear from history. The “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” strives to capture an emotional authenticity that
exists prior to articulation, unmediated by any ideology other than its own immanence: “something far more deeply interfused.” Its humanist project is to save the human from its own history. Hence, the stylistic developments in an individual poem seek to negate the poem’s particular history and offer instead a transcendental account of its existence, which is to say a poem’s aesthetics seeks to divorce it from its local and immediate material contexts in favor of more permanent, less contingent origins. The aesthetic attempts to avoid poetic diction, to sound like spoken prose, and to escape the conventions of recent poetic history all argue for the organic occurrence of poetry outside the corrupting vicissitudes of history. Paradoxically coupled to this idealist movement, however, critics such as Paul de Man have noted the concomitant tendency of Romantic metaphors to court a material substantiality by repeatedly offering images and symbols that argue for the literal life of Romantic poetry. This paradox may only be apparent, for the poetic attempt to write the image into reality may actually produce greater abstraction instead of material emersion. Thus, idealism is from this perspective an effect of language’s material desire. The greater the proliferation of images surrounding it, the harder it is to actually grasp the object of Romantic poetry: just as metaphor repeatedly reproduces reality in an attempt at an ontological transformation into materiality, material must equally become metaphorized, drawn further and further away from its actual existence. Aesthetics obfuscates the distinction between representation and experience, word and thing, but it appears to do so by blandly assimilating the material into the metaphor.

By some accounts this is the crux of Wordsworth’s poetics: the relationship between the mental (however conceived—transcendental, spiritual) and the physical (bodily, earthly) posed as a problem of poetic language. Attempts to extricate the metaphysical from the physical on the one hand, or to reconcile the two on the other, constantly circle back to the not fully articulable
ontological phenomenon of poetic language itself: the “sad incompetence of human speech” to
disarticulate imagination from its carnal articulations, or even to fully explore the intersection of
the two. As Paul de Man writes of this frustrating tension, “Critics who speak of a ‘happy
relationship’ between matter and consciousness fail to realize that the very fact that the
relationship has to be established within the medium of language indicates that it does not exist
in actuality.”48 Language upsets both matter and consciousness by being both and neither at the
same time. Interrogating the possibility that language itself might be a material medium,
Wordsworth’s prose and poetry repeatedly probes the strange intersection at which language
confronts the very physic(s) of metaphysics.

Here the possibilities of physical comedy come back into play, reversing the
metaphorizing tendency of Romantic poetry by “restoring to the language the material
substantiality which had been partially lost.”49 Physical comedy reads Romanticism much more
subtly and gracefully than its awkward movements outwardly suggest, recognizing the delicate
dialectical distinctions between material and metaphor, event and image that Romantic aesthetics
sought to bridge; it also registers the frustrating ontological bind that such a movement entails.
Blake’s spontaneous overflow, I have suggested, touches on each of these critical issues, and in
its dispersal paradoxically re-centers Romanticism around what Geoffrey Hartman calls a
“touching compulsion.”50

If this reading of Blake’s defecation seems like an analytical overreach, consider briefly
the critical significance of Byron’s similar embodied appraisal of Wordsworth’s poetry: his much
recounted quip to Thomas Medwin that “Shelley, when I was in Switzerland, used to dose me
with Wordsworth physic even to nausea.”51 As a literal dis-taste, Byron’s nausea is also an
aesthetic assessment. Like Blake, Byron makes his own body the site of literary criticism:
Wordsworth’s “peculiar system” of poetics is once again considered, critiqued, and countered in the reversal of Byron’s digestive system. Where words won’t work, the body will do the talking.

Yet, even here, in what initially appears a clear materialist critique of transcendence, a subtler oscillation between the two emerges in Byron’s characterization of Wordsworth’s poetry as a “physic.” If it has a sure bodily impact in its primary medicinal use as a cathartic or purgative, physic also has more of a philosophical force as a “mental, moral, or spiritual remedy.” Indeed, a long critical tradition holds that Wordsworth’s poetry resonates most forcefully in this spiritual realm: an interpretation elucidated by the mentalist register in which he considers the readerly refinements wrought by his poetry in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

> “the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated. . . . If my conclusions are admitted . . . our moral feelings . . . will, I believe, be corrected and purified.”

From this perspective, “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” entails a process of *spiritual* purification, a figurative physic. But that’s only half the story. For Wordsworth also imagines bodily remedies in his rhymes: rhythmical regularities to counteract agitations as much corporeal as affective. Intricate and overly ornate poetic expressions “furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites,” writes Wordsworth of “the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers.” Phraseology has a corresponding physiology it appears, and “deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” produce a “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation.” When literary taste becomes literal taste, the alimentary becomes the site at which the aesthetic is explored and understood.

Thus, Wordsworth adopts an alleviative aesthetics in his poetry: prescribing doses of his own medicinal metric in order to counter the ill effects of such “sickly and stupid” productions.
The possibilities of the physiological purgative come back into play as Wordsworth seeks to balance the excesses of pleasure that even his own poetics of “spontaneous overflow” can tend to induce. “[T]here is some danger that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds,” he writes, before expounding on the mediating principles of metrical composition: “Now the co-presence of something regular, something to which the mind has been accustomed in various moods and in a less excited state, cannot but have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling.” Spontaneous overflow must have corresponding counterflows to temper its tendency to excess and agitation, and differentiate it from the “deluges” of verse upon which literary taste has slaked its “degrading thirst”: regulative rhythms slow the swell of this surge and bring everything into a proper balance. Yet, being regular is as much a feature of bodily excretion as of poetic diction: the very flow of Wordsworth’s verse is a bodily phenomenon. Wordsworhian poetics has a physiological force, but it is one that serves to make biological life a bit less lively and disruptive, to conscript it back within its proper bounds. Wordsworth tranquilizes his original formulation for all good poetry and in so doing removes its frame-shaking force by transferring its energy from the physiologically ambivalent “feelings” to the more purely imaginative and disembodied “emotion recollected in tranquility.”

But purging the physiological is easier said than done; and not so easily said at that: indeed, a humoral pathology—an oppressive melancholy that Wordsworth can’t quite phlebotomize—haunts the metaphorical language of his Preface, unsettling the delicate balance and transfer of vitality from physiological to psychological. “[R]eflecting upon the magnitude of the general evil,” Wordsworth writes, “I should be oppressed with no dishonourable melancholy, had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind.” Apparently a confident statement on the permanent power of the mind to transcend the malady of
modern writing, a subtle but significant ambivalence nonetheless pervades its development. The structure of the sentence turns on itself, calling into doubt the very qualities of the mind it purports to exalt. For if the tranquil mind calms and restores the health of the human, upset by the “gross and violent stimulants” of modern life and literature, that very mind has produced a paranoid reading and introduced the fear of infection in the first place. Indeed, in Wordsworth’s clause, mental reflection comes first, immediately introducing a problem of anatomy—an imbalance of the humors and a corresponding melancholy—from which it must save itself. Turns to transcendence merely circle back to the body. Wordsworth’s very language upsets his certainty of salvation. On the one hand, his “deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities” feels forceful and firm. Yet, on the other, its conviction is questionable. Wordsworth’s “deep impression” is a term in tension with itself: if an impression is an imprint, it is equally a barely tangible trace, a passing whim subject to modification. Similarly, “certain” as much entails unspecified as it does definitive: it equally gestures towards several vague possibilities as it does pinpoint locatable facts. What emerges in Wordsworth’s Preface is an energetic linguistic display, equally tumultuous as tranquil, written on the body as much as recollected in the mind.

This is a bind that Wordsworth does not escape. As the Preface’s unresolved intermingling of metaphor and material—replicated in critical commentary on the Preface—reveals, it is as much a linguistic as a philosophical problem. But as Blake and Byron show (not tell) this relationship does not have to be established within the medium of language. Bodily registers can entail their own unique literary interpretative practices that momentarily escape the binds of language. Perverse as it seems, Byron’s nausea—like Blake’s shit—is an oddly precise reading of Wordsworthian poetics. Byron couples the spiritually cathartic aspirations of
Wordsworthian poetics to a catharsis of the body, revealing a physiology at the core of Wordsworth’s aesthetics covered over by the more tranquil, transcendental registers ultimately espoused but not wholly attained in his Preface, as we have seen. More than merely a bodily debasement, Byron’s reaction grants Wordsworth’s poetry its “physic” life in both senses—spiritual and bodily—allowing Wordsworth the metaphorical and material mediation he seeks. In his apparent reversal, Byron thus recapitulates the metaphorical movements of Wordsworth’s Preface, and their unresolved conflict with material life, perhaps predicting a strand of Romantic literary criticism by naming spontaneous overflow “nausea”: a powerful physic rather than a feeling, a purgative poetics approaching the ontological status of overflow. It’s easy to miss in Byron’s joke just how closely he reads Wordsworth. The imperfect construction “used to dose” in Medwin’s account implies a continuous, ongoing past action, one which pours on dose after dose. Byron surfeits on courses of Wordsworth, but if he sickens it is because his close reading has gone below the surface to unearth new interpretive possibilities written in and on the body. To come full circle, Byron’s favorite nickname for the Bard of the Lakes, “Turdsworth,” brings Blake’s bowels to bear on a reading of Romantic poetics. Byron’s rhyme is a reality, as words become turds in a poetic transfer from metaphor to material.

As my consideration of Blake’s and Byron’s discontents has demonstrated, there is more at stake in these embodied reactions to Wordsworthian poetics than may initially appear to be the case. Reading past the surface reveals not just biological structures but complex critical structures operating at a deceptively tangible level. If the bodies of the Romantics can read and reflect as well as (r)eject, they open up a network of interpretive issues that might rewrite Romantic poetry as an intestinal as well as an imaginative aesthetic. Blake and Byron offer an insight into Romanticism not generally taken to be the norm: its most characteristic movements,
read from the inside out, look surprisingly bodily. If Wordsworth occasionally seeks to divorce his verse from its bodily registers, his aesthetics often produces a more intimate communion between the two. The very attempt to transcend poetically entails a lyric straining that merely reproduces internally that which it outwardly refuses. Once absent in obvious content, the body enters into the stylistic and structural developments of his writing, and makes itself felt as “something far more deeply interfused”: the linguistic and grammatical turns of the Preface are just one example of this. Aesthetics contains a visceral as well as an affective force, which it takes on in the very action of blotting out the body. Blake’s shit and Byron’s nausea make more obvious how the verse itself contains the bodily disruptions it has imperfectly effaced. If “spontaneous overflow” becomes the marker of “all good poetry,” aesthetics names an excess as much material as linguistic.

These moments of physical comedy—sometimes mentioned, but rarely developed in critical commentary—seem to be fully in conversation with a broad range of topics—materiality, transcendence, aesthetics, affect, and critical methodology—that continue to interest Romanticists (and literary critics more generally), and are thus worthy of further elaboration. The strange similarity and specificity of the critique each response offers seems hardly accidental, and yet could hardly be anything but, given the seeming spontaneity. Live action literary criticism. Or so it seems; but, aside from their crass depictions of bodily evacuation, these accounts share one other interesting feature worth pointing out: each is a second-hand story, recollected and recounted from a spatially, temporally, and physically removed perspective. These are not actions so much as accounts of actions, and as such they neither wholly escape the binds of language nor fully posit materiality in the place of metaphor, but are instead caught up in similar questions as Wordsworth’s Preface. Hence, their value as a heuristic for reading
Romanticism’s vexed aspirations for writing the real. As material markers of metaphorical gestures, neither a physic nor a bowel complaint entirely escapes its own linguistic life or tendency to abstraction: as with physic’s spiritual catharsis, the term “bowel” itself etymologically dissolves into Romantic idealism: “(Considered as the seat of the tender and sympathetic emotions, hence): Pity, compassion, feeling, ‘heart.’”

Directness becomes a fiction belied by the subtle evasions of language, and rather than spontaneous disruptions, the accounts of Blake and Byron are in accordance with the process of removal Wordsworth stresses as an essential aspect of composition itself.

Still, it would be difficult to deny the different tone these disruptions strike. Their material relationship to the Romantic canon replicates their content. Indeed, if their language tropes a removal, as documents they are physically removed: found in Crabb Robinson’s letters and Thomas Medwin’s Conversations and occupying an ancillary, often abject position outside of the literary texts they comment on. Criticism has generally accepted them as such, finding little literary worth in these words/turds: treating them mostly as amusing anecdotes or biographical curiosities. Like the Romantic offal they narrate, they are pieces of materiality flushed out of the canon and the criticism. But it turns out they have much to say: the return of the material repressed reconceives of the relationship between text and context, opening up a broader aesthetic discourse between literature and its discontents, in which each offers artful and insightful readings of the other. Timothy Morton suggestively asks, “Does the process of looking in a side-long way at literary texts, via their material ‘remainders,’ actually reinforce rather than undermine the aesthetic dimension? Might the mechanical insistence on contextualization paradoxically turn context into (aestheticized) text?” Delving more deeply into the literary life
of Blake’s and Byron’s Romantic remainders, I aim to demonstrate the aesthetic appeal and critical value of an affirmative answer to Morton’s questions.

VI

In the context of Blake, we would do well to recall that this dialectical and deconstructive critical procedure was a trend recognized and articulated by some of Wordsworth’s earliest critics, not just the (sometimes hegemonic) Yale school acolytes of Jacques Derrida: like Romanticism itself, deconstruction was as much retrograde as revolutionary. A point worth pausing over for it imbues Marilyn Butler’s wry suggestion that the “so-called Romantics did not know at the time that they were supposed to do without satire” with a deeper critical significance: satire was often a critical methodology (not just a genre) that arose from the very (Romantic) texts it encountered. In an insightful elaboration of Steven Jones’s reading of the Peter Bell parodies, Nicola Trott argues that

The reviewers’ satire and the Romantics’ poetry interacted during the period in extremely intricate ways; and one of the most shrewdly audacious strokes of the satirists was to see Wordsworth as, in some incongruous sense, his own best parodist. . . . Whatever is parodic in the [review] is merely a reflection of the text’s existing parodic features. The source of parody lies not in the critic, but in the poet himself. Embracing a withering ironic detachment, the reviewer as satirist leaves Wordsworth’s poem alone and merely points out where and how it dismantles its own structures. While Francis Jeffrey, reviewer-satirist nonpareil, perfected this technique, Anna Seward anticipates Jeffrey in an often overlooked 1807 letter to Walter Scott, which importantly fixes its deconstructive sights (in parodic but purposeful passing) on several emergent trends of the Romantic movement:
Surely Wordsworth must be mad as was ever the poet Lee. Those volumes of his, which you were so good to give me, have excited, by turns, my tenderness and warm admiration, my contemptuous astonishment and disgust. The two latter rose to their utmost height while I read about his dancing daffodils, ten thousand, as he says, in high dance in the breeze beside the river, whose waves dance with them, and the poet’s heart, we are told, danced too. Then he proceeds to say, that in the hours of pensive or of pained contemplation, these same capering flowers flash on his memory, and his heart, losing its cares, dances with them again. Surely if his worst foe had chosen to caricature this egotistic manufacturer of metaphysic importance upon trivial themes, he could not have done it more effectively!62

Seward’s critique contains the germinal seeds of several important strands of Romantic literary criticism, ranging from John Keats’ “Egotistical Sublime” to Harold Bloom’s “Internalization of Quest-Romance” to Paul de Man’s “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image.” In the very process of penning his poem, Seward seems to suggest, Wordsworth un-writes its sublimity, turning it into an absurd display of inflated egotism: his process of reflection is one of deconstruction, as the act of writing itself merely attests to the irrecoverable affective solemnity of experience, a presence that cannot be produced linguistically. The only thing left is laughter.

In this way, Wordsworth becomes his own “worst foe,” his poetics a satiric sketch, a caricature of itself. Seward exposes the comic contingencies at the core of one of Wordsworth’s most characteristic, canonical poetic commentaries on his own process. Sublimity tumbles over itself as Seward’s initial admiration degenerates into disgust. Perhaps more subtly, she interrogates the organic metaphors of Romantic poetry: if Romantic poetics flourishes forth like the flower, it must also wilt like the flower, and the same image—that of the dancing daffodil—
thus contains (almost literally) the seeds of its own destruction. If flowers bloom out of a kind of fertile waste, Romantic poetics by analogy is a by-product of corporeal remainders, and Seward’s critique unearths the offal out of which it grows. Blake’s bowels no longer seem an aberration, but consistent with a long line of Romantic critique that cuts both ways from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Indeed, Seward’s “egotistic manufacturer of metaphysic importance upon trivial themes” predicts Keats’ much more canonical “Egotistical Sublime,” and more clearly undercuts (or reveals the absurdity of) one of Wordsworth’s grand poetic achievements: what M. H. Abrams calls “a revolutionary mode of sublimity” in Wordsworth’s poetry, “the oxymoron of the humble-grand, the lofty-mean, the trivial-sublime.” It also reveals the artificiality of an organic aesthetics of transcendence: its metaphysic is manufactured through Wordsworth’s manipulation of metaphors, perhaps partaking in the productive logic of the Industrial Revolution which its apparent turn to nature has entirely eschewed. Seward’s oscillation from admiration to disgust “by turns” is suggestive not only of how a deconstructive reading of Wordsworthian aesthetics might operate, but also of more recent critical emphasis on the “inward-turn” in Romantic literature. Seward makes the inward-turn in Wordsworthian poetics the site of a corresponding critical disgust which borders on a literal dis-taste: “by turns” evokes in this instance the turning of a sickening stomach as the absent other of aesthetic critique, rewriting inward-turning Romanticism as a bodily phenomenon. Blake demonstrates its bodily effects.

I emphasize Seward’s critique here to underscore the critical interpretive practices that can emerge out of the comic contexts of Romanticism, and to recall that these practices emerged in the period itself as parts of the larger discourse of Romanticism. Thus, any criticism which seeks to resituate “Romanticism” around a satiric or comic tradition must acknowledge its
belatedness: the sublime, transcendent ideologies which came to be called a “Romantic”

movement by the mid-nineteenth century had already been re-written around other kinds of
comic movements by Seward, Blake, and other writers in what Gigante calls the “literary history
of taste.” Jerome McGann’s insightful critique of “Romantic Ideology” stringently argues that

Not every artistic production in the Romantic period is a Romantic one. . . . Indeed, the
greatest artists in any period often depart from their age’s dominant ideological
commitments. . . . The Romantic age is so called not because all its works are Romantic,
but rather because the ideologies of Romanticism exerted an increasingly dominant
influence during that time. 69

While this is certainly true, it may just be possible that the ideologies McGann seeks to expose
and exorcise are symptoms not solely of their own age’s commitments but also of a long history
of critical extrapolation and distillation. In the name of (necessary) critical taxonomy, terms like
“imagination,” “spontaneity,” and “metaphysics,” are leached of their expansive vitality, 70
becoming hardened versions of their former malleable selves, still containing the quintessence
but no longer the complexity or (importantly) the contradiction. There may not, in other words,
be such an historical opposition between a “Romantic ideology” and its artistic departures as
McGann supposes, especially given the considerable critical attention afforded to the divergent,
dialectical potential in even seemingly singular-minded metaphysic ideologies by the comic or
parodic moments already gestured towards. If a century and a half of criticism distilled and
disallowed this potential, the Romantics themselves (to hearken back to Marilyn Butler’s insight)
certainly did not. Critiques like Blake’s and Seward’s, if they sought to expose its fictions, also
sought to expand the aesthetic potential of Romanticism by recollecting and re-collecting its
multitudes. The Romantic era was one of complex cultural contestation out of which ideologies
of transcendence ultimately emerged, not unscathed but bearing satiric scars: the comic casualty left its mark on the underside of ideology.

VII

As a re-collection of the dispersed materialities of Romanticism, then, each major chapter in this project begins by drawing attention to a specific bodily phenomenon not usually considered to play a crucial role in Romanticism: bowel complaints, laughter, nausea, and falling down. While each of these phenomenon is explored in the work of an individual author or authors in each chapter (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, and Thomas Love Peacock, respectively), I consider as well the conversation they create with the larger discourse of Romanticism and Romantic criticism. Thus, I show how they alter our understanding of the aesthetic arguments of an individual work as well as our critical understanding of a Romantic movement. My general approach is to unearth the hidden presence of these phenomena in the poetic style of each work considered, though I also attend to more explicit occurrences that have been underexplored or misjudged in major criticism. In closing each chapter, I try to suggest some specific ways in which the bodily phenomenon discussed has troubled the history of Romantic criticism, stressing its role as the same sort of absent presence that a deconstructive reading of Romantic aesthetics entails. The trajectory of these chapters from the identifiably Romantic Wordsworth and Coleridge, to the less easily adaptable Byron, to the staunchly satirical, non-Romantic Romantic, Thomas Love Peacock, is mirrored by a shift in poetic engagement with comic materiality from implicit to explicit. Its forceful presence paradoxically tropes a corresponding absence from, an inability to be included in, canonical criticism: the bigger the body, the harder the fit, as it overflows its canonical container. Reversing Romanticism, this project moves from the
transcendent to the bodily, suggesting all the while an aesthetic continuity in their apparent conflicts.

The first chapter, “Inside Out Romanticism” confronts the problem of Romanticism’s “inward turn.” Arguing that critical accounts of “internalization” in Romanticism have too often privileged a psychology of inwardness in place of a physiology, it interrogates the aesthetic possibilities opened up by an embodied inward turn. I begin by briefly tracing a critical genealogy of “internalization” from M. H. Abrams, Northrop Frye, and Harold Bloom to more recent critics such as Robert James Allard, Joshua Wilner, and Noel Jackson. Where recent critics have begun to embrace the somatic side of inwardness, I emphasize the underrated complexity with which earlier critics treated the notion of internalization: their accounts, as I show in the middle section of the chapter, subtly develop versions of inwardness in which physiology and psychology are intertwined and enmeshed in an organicism that is as embodied as it is aesthetic. The hidden presence of Blake’s bowels both troubles and tropes transcendent notions of inwardness in Bloom and Abrams, and I trace their potential impact on the critical development of Romantic internalization, pointing out (with an example from Lionel Trilling) how the critical process of extracting and delimiting critical terms for use within a particular account of Romanticism—itself perhaps an unfortunate legacy of Enlightenment taxonomy—has often leached the terminology of inwardness of its full potential.

Seeking to restore this potential, I rehabilitate the critical value of Mikhail Bakhtin’s insights on inside-out-ness in Rabelais and His World for a study of Romantic internalization and embodiment. Though his claims about grotesque realism and the history of laughter have lapsed into critical neglect in the wake of more nuanced ideological studies such as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, Bakhtin offers an
embodied aesthetic account of Romantic internalization that anticipates recent attempts to merge imaginative and material life. In the context of Bakhtin, inwardness offers an opportunity to explore the literalness of Romanticism’s fetishization of organicism: in a brief interlude, I show how Byron explores just such a possibility in his poetic performances in *Don Juan*, turning odd organs of the body into objects of desire that drive the aesthetic and actual appeal of his distinctively Byronic blend of textual and sexual, poetical and personal energies. Along the way I offer a brief stylistic reading of Wordsworth’s “A slumber did my spirit seal”—a poem which has proved to be a significant stumbling block for Romantic critics—according to the model of inside-out Romanticism suggested by Bakhtin. I close with a more extended reading of Coleridge’s constipation as a physiological bind troubling his poetics. His “Dejection: An Ode,” I argue, confronts a bodily blockage inhibiting imaginative work: its internal aesthetic structures perform the inside-out-ness of the poet’s body constricted in constipation, and seek an artistic and actual outlet for these obstructed energies. With this reading, I show how a project of Inside Out Romanticism not only challenges traditional notions of transcendence, but also urges scholars to attend more earnestly to the difference that a physiology of internalization can make in a critical approach to aesthetics. Internalization integrates the individual back within his own body as a microcosm of conflicting cultural impulses, mapped both mentally and materially onto the surface of style.

The second chapter, “The Factitious Air: A Romantic Metaphor,” explores the literary life of “laughing gas” and the other “factitious airs” created in the emerging scientific field of pneumatic chemistry in the late eighteenth century. Focusing primarily on the experiments of Thomas Beddoes and Humphry Davy at the Pneumatic Institute, this chapter argues that pneumatic chemistry challenges the organicism and spontaneity of Romantic aesthetics with
artificial inspiration and fabricated feelings. I begin with an overview of the major aspirations and findings of pneumatic chemistry, arguing that its radical belief in artificial inspiration as an alleviative medicinal force for the chest and lung complaints brought on by the growth of industrialism is mirrored by Romanticism’s revolutionary poetics of inspiration as aesthetic renewal. I use this connection to interrogate the metaphors of inspiration, air, and breathing in Romantic poetics, arguing for a more muddled relationship between the individual, air, aesthetics, and artificiality. Where several influential accounts of poetic breathing assume a holistic ideology of inspiration in invocations of breath, breathing, and breeze in aesthetic maneuvers, pneumatic chemistry reconstitutes atmosphere as an artificial assemblage, and thus offsets accounts of organic aesthetic unity and integrity; in its place emerges a more piecemeal production in which spontaneity and subjective authenticity are fictions inspired by artificiality.

An aesthetic attention to artificial inspiration, I argue, allows Romantic poetry its self-reflexive performativity. I run this argument through a reading of the opening line of William Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, “Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze,” suggesting how the breeze considered as a factitious air opens up the poem to a more intricate aesthetic reading in which the apparent spontaneity of inspiration ushered by the opening line exposes rather than hides the artificial materiality maintaining the growth of the poet’s mind. With this general critical framework in mind, I close the chapter by attending to the specific context of the nitrous oxide experiments for a reading of Romantic aesthetics. The laughter occasioned by laughing gas is a fiction of spontaneity that unsettles Romantic sincerity. To the extent that laughter has been considered a phenomenon wholly at odds with the sincere, sympathetic discourses of Romanticism, I argue for a scientific source for this disjuncture: nitrous oxide makes laughter an unnatural inspiration best written over by Romantic aesthetics. I explore this aesthetic approach
to laughter and nitrous oxide with an extended reading of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” Generally a poem taken to be inspired by opium, I argue instead for the presence of laughing gas in its shifting aesthetic energies. Turning to Humphry Davy’s scientific writing on the laughing gas experiments, I find a model for linguistic performance that Coleridge implicitly adopts as an aesthetic technique for replicating the sense experience of scientific experimentations such as those of pneumatic chemistry. In closing, I suggest some of the satirical possibilities that the laughing gas experiments occasion, and offer them as one possible alternative historical source for the development of deconstructive criticism. Ultimately this chapter argues for a new, historical framework within which to view the embodied aesthetics of laughter and breathing in Romantic poetry, positing Romantic subjectivity as an exchange between outside and inside, object and subject, matter and mind filtered through the artificiality of factitious air.

The third chapter, “Byron’s Nausea,” amplifies the aesthetic significance of Byron’s nausea when reading Wordsworth by connecting the embodied experience of nausea to a history of systems. The Romantics, as Clifford Siskin and Robert Mitchell have recently argued, experienced their world as a series of systems: social, economic, political, and importantly, literary. Byron’s nausea registers and resists the impact of an aesthetic system imposed upon him. The Romantics understood the alimentary canal as that which imbibed and incorporated systems into individual subjectivity. Reversing its trajectory and refusing digestion counteracts the interpellating tendencies of the digestive system. Byron’s nausea, I argue, becomes an embodied aesthetic technique throughout his career, underwriting his poetic mobility and resisting systematization. Where critics have long recognized Byron’s anti-systematic poetics, I draw attention to nausea as the mobilizing force for this tendency, suggesting that his discourse of Romantic irony emerges out of the sickness of systems.
I begin by amplifying the significance of Byron’s comment that “Shelley used to dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea” by setting it in the context of system critique. I show how Wordsworth’s poetics is a system that can be understood, and incorporated or resisted, digestively. This fact elucidates the aesthetic power of Byron’s comment. I then proceed to provide a reading of the aesthetic significance of nausea, vomiting, and sickness in Byron’s poetics, keying into several crucial scenes from both *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan* to show how they adopt an anti-systematic resistance to Wordsworthian aesthetics. More than this, I argue, an aesthetics of nausea also provides a self-reflexive critique of Byron’s own tendency to systematize. Thus, nausea is a self-critical reversal that reveals the pervasive paranoia of being systematized by “Romanticism.” I also attend to the history of Byron’s own body, emphasizing the effect that nausea and vomiting had on its shape and on the creation of his literary celebrity. I close the chapter with an extended reading of how Byron’s unsettled body has troubled Romantic criticism from T. S. Eliot to M. H. Abrams to Jerome McGann. Byron’s perverse embodiment tells the history of Romantic criticism from a different perspective, forcing us to reconsider the role that criticism plays in systematizing aesthetics into consumable bits.

The fourth chapter, “Headlong Fall: Thomas Love Peacock’s Gravitational Aesthetic” examines the concept of falling down as relates to Romantic aesthetics. Focusing on the aesthetic style of Thomas Love Peacock, a Romantic writer whose works frequently feature scenes of physical comedy and falling bodies, I argue that falling down becomes a question of language’s referential function explored in Peacock’s discourse of Romantic irony. Confronted with the concept of gravity, language attempts to function like a law, referring directly to a set of knowable and definable physical movements. Language’s metaphorical life resists this aspiration, denying direct referentiality. Thus, language must become performative, replicating
stylistically the falling movements it narrates. In the process, language becomes more tangible, approaching the status of the falling object itself and behaving more like a law. 

I examine how Peacock’s novel *Headlong Hall* explores these problems at the level of prose style, arguing that he structures falling down into individual sentence aesthetics to perform the scenes of falling down and physical comedy that the novel so frequently fixates on. This reading reveals Peacock’s intense aesthetic awareness of odd embodiment as a model for rewriting Romanticism around a literal fall. Where M. H. Abrams stresses the importance of the concept of a theological fall mapped onto the mind for Romantic consciousness, Peacock’s literal fall externalizes this internalization, providing us with an alternative model with which to read Romantic aesthetics. While a major portion of this chapter is dedicated to a reconsideration of Peacock’s artistic techniques around the principle of style rather than genre or form, and an approach to reading his aesthetics that more fully integrates his scenes of physical comedy within the larger thematic and generic arguments of his novel, I also consider the implications that these readings have for larger discourses of Romanticism and Romantic criticism. Thus, I stress the impact of a falling down style on the development of critical discourses of Romantic irony and deconstruction.

What emerges from these chapters is an aesthetic essence of Romanticism less ephemeral than is generally taken to be the case. Out of the odd materialities that collect around the central critical notion of “Romanticism,” a new conception of the legacy of Romanticism arises which embraces the comic contingencies created by Romantic style.
Notes


6 Lionel Trilling long ago objected to the idea of this formulation as a definition: “A large part of the literate world believes that Wordsworth defines poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. With such a definition we shall not get very far in our efforts to think about poetry, and in point of fact Wordsworth makes no such definition.” Lionel Trilling, “The Fate of Pleasure: Wordsworth to Dostoevsky,” in *Romanticism Reconsidered*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 73.

7 As critics have often noted, “feeling” denotes a somatic sensory experience as well as an emotional condition. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* records, emotion is both “A physical sensation or perception through the sense of touch or the general sensibility of the body,” and “The condition of being emotionally affected; an instance of this; an emotion.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “feeling.”


Steven Jones usefully sums up this critical commonplace: “If Romantic poetry is defined as vatic or prophetic, inward-turning, sentimental, idealizing, sublime, and reaching for transcendence—even in its ironies—then satire, with its socially encoded, public, profane, and tendentious rhetoric, is bound to be cast in the role of generic other, as the un-Romantic mode.” Steven Jones, Satire and Romanticism (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 3.


Crabb Robinson, Correspondence, 1: 99.

Mikhail Bakhtin offers a compelling reading of the “bodily lower stratum” and its relationship to classical and grotesque canons of art, insisting on a considered reconstruction and reappraisal of the historical development of a grotesque canon. Often dismissed in recent criticism as utopian, ahistorical, or ideologically naïve (see Stallybrass and White, Politics and Poetics), Bakhtin is actually quite nuanced here, anticipating the celebrated dialectic of “undecidability” so cherished in deconstructive criticism, in relationship to the formation of modern artistic canons. His statement on this is important to my understanding of the comic/grotesque life within the Romantic canon, and can be usefully contrasted with Steven Jones’ rehearsal of the traditional stance, noted earlier:

We understand the word canon not in the narrow sense of a specific group of consciously established rules, norms, and proportions in the representation of the human body. . . . The grotesque image never had such a canon. It is noncanonical by its very nature. We here use the word canon in the wider sense of a manner of representing the human body and bodily life. In the art and literature of past ages we observe two such manners, which we will conditionally call grotesque and classic. We have defined these two canons in their pure, one might say extreme, form. But in history’s living reality these canons were never fixed and immutable. Moreover, usually the two canons experience various forms of interaction: struggle, mutual influence, crossing, and fusion.

Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 30. Bakhtin’s influence on this study will be taken up more extensively below.

From this perspective, this project touches on a critical debate stretching back at least to Arthur O. Lovejoy’s provocative suggestion, not above, that the term “Romantic” be abandoned in scholarship altogether: “The word ‘romantic’ has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign.” Lovejoy, “On the Discrimination of Romanticisms,” 230. Stressing the multitude of signifieds “Romanticism” contains, Lovejoy argues for a “discrimination of Romanticisms.” Réne Wellek’s response to Lovejoy is an attempt to reify the basic tenets of a Romantic movement around the criteria of “imagination, “nature,” and “symbol,” stressing a basic unity in the development of these terms during the Romantic era. See Réne Wellek, “The Concept of Romanticism in Literary Scholarship,” Comparative Literature 1 (1949): 1–23. Wellek’s terms provide a useful heuristic, but are necessarily reductive, as are some of the other terms that revolve around the Romantic canon (which I stressed above). Even if we accept them as generally applicable, their precise layers of meaning in a given text or historical context are multiple, nuanced, divergent. The comic context of my project hopefully provides
another lens through which to revise these criteria, highlighting some specific layers of meaning in individual contexts that enrich a critical apparatus of “Romanticism” without at the same time dispensing with the term’s referent possibilities à la Lovejoy. See also Jerome McGann’s cogent analysis of the ideological stakes of this critical rift in Jerome J. McGann, The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 17–20. An underrated early disputant in the “Romanticism” debates, whose reading of the erotic sensibility in Romantic literature has at least a muted influence on this project, is Mario Praz who calls “Romanticism” “an approximate term,” useful for careful critical classification: “The epithet ‘romantic’ and the antithetical terms ‘classic’ and ‘romantic’ are approximate labels which have been long in use. . . . Like an infinite number of other words in current usage, these terms have a value and answer a useful purpose, provided that they are treated at their proper value—that is, as approximate terms—and that what they cannot give—exact and cogent definition of thought is not demanded of them. They are serviceable makeshifts.” Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, 2nd ed., trans. Angus Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), 1.


19 Levinson, 12–13.

20 Jones, Satire, 10, 28, 32.

21 It may be useful to think about this relationship between poem and parody as a tweaking of Michel Foucault’s dialectic of power and resistance, or Stephen Greenblatt’s more purely literary notion of “subversion and containment.” Here it emerges as a relationship across literary genre or mode. The dominant ideology of Wordsworthian poetics (a genre or mode of lyric sincerity) summons the specters of subversion (comic parody) merely to reify its own dominance and singularity of expression. But the dominant order can’t contain parodic resistance completely: satire still sneaks out at the cracks. See Stephen Greenblatt, “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion,” in Shakespearean Negotiations (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 21–65.

22 I stress the importance of Levinson’s study because her application of materialist and deconstructive techniques to a reading of Romantic poetics remains a largely unacknowledged influence on more recent studies of Romanticism and satire.

23 Levinson’s reading of “Peele Castle” shows how Wordsworth’s own more materially “manifest referents” in that poem argue tragically against the his poetry’s own absences, its own irrevocable losses: “It is his expression of terrible longing for those alien indifferences, for the un- or pre-figured Real, a concept of self-grounded Truth which he cannot relinquish.” Levinson, Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems, 101–3.


25 Crabb Robinson, Correspondence, 1: 99.


conspicuous kind of absent presence in their respective studies of Romanticism, as I indicated at the outset of this chapter: Abrams twice referencing it in passing in *Natural Supernaturalism* and Bloom more suggestively evoking it in the language of his “Internalization of Quest-Romance.” My argument for the absent presence of Blake’s bowels in Romantic criticism is more fully developed in the chapter on “Inside Out Romanticism” below.


29 M. H. Abrams discusses how the Romantic emphasis on the organic growth of its poetics creates the fiction of an aesthetic “coming-into-being” of a poem—the product of a moment of creation, rather than a history of creation:

The topics of ‘natural genius,’ of inspired composition, and of the literary ‘grace,’ or spontaneous stroke of invention totally beyond the reach of deliberate intention, method, or rule . . . became the very facts most easily comprehended by a criticism which analogized the artistic process to the spontaneous growth of a plant. The momentous historical shift from the view that the making of a work of art is a supremely purposeful activity to the view that its coming-into-being is, basically, a spontaneous process independent of intention, precept, or even consciousness, was the natural concomitant of an organic aesthetics.


How do flowers originate? They rise out of the earth without the assistance of imitation or analogy. They do not follow a model other than themselves which they copy or from which they derive the pattern of their growth. By calling them *natural* objects, we mean that their origin is determined by nothing but their own being. Their being coincides at all times with the mode of their origination: it is as flowers that their history is what it is, totally defined by their identity. There is no wavering in the status of their existence: existence and essence coincide in them at all times. Unlike words, which originate like something else (“like flowers”), flowers originate like themselves: they are literally what they are, definable without the assistance of metaphor. It would follow then, since the intent of the poetic word is to originate like the flower, that it strives to banish all metaphor, to become entirely literal.

De Man, *Rhetoric*, 4. For de Man, Romantic poetics desires to obliterate its own history of creation in favor of an organic, transcendent account of its origins.


Paul Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 6–7. Thomas Pfau’s approach to the Romantic lyric form suggests similar aesthetic commitments, awakening individual subjectivity to historical particularity while nevertheless aestheticizing the affective trauma such an awareness breeds: “[lyric form aims to awaken romantic subjectivity from its dormant state and to its perilous historical situatedness, all while sheltering (at least partially) the subject of such awakening from the traumatic impact of the knowledge so produced in the cocoon of aesthetic form.” Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 11.


In addition to the studies of de Man, Levinson, McGann, and Abrams already cited, see Alan Liu’s monumental *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*. Characterizing Wordsworth’s poetic style as “a lyric mode that was not so much any particular kind of lyric as an émigré flight from narrative,” Liu seeks to reconstruct the “shaped absence of context,” arguing that “the literary text is not just the displacement but the overdetermined and agonic denial of historical reference.” Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 51, 46, 47.


de Man, *Rhetoric*, 8. Hence also de Man’s claim that “this movement [towards ontology through poetry] is essentially paradoxical and condemned in advance to failure. There can be flowers that ‘are’ and poetic words that ‘originate,’ but no poetic words that ‘originate’ as if they ‘were.’” Ibid., 7. Thus, the fiction
of spontaneous origin as the desire for material (biological) poetic existence, discussed by both Abrams and de Man, gets hung up on its existence within linguistic life or utterance. Abrams’ attention to this issue has perhaps been underrated in the wake of de Man, but he too stresses the paradoxes of an organic aesthetics: “But, it will appear, no sooner were such ‘irrational’ aspects of [spontaneous] artistic invention satisfactorily accommodated in the new theory, than a different order of facts, hitherto readily taken into account, became, in their turn, recalcitrant to explanation.” For Abrams the “recalcitrance” is less a paradox of metaphor than a problem of organic life: if “the laws of the inanimate world . . . are fixed and given laws, and operate without consciousness or the possibility of choice,” then a poetics that embraces an organic existence turns a poetic genius into an automaton. Abrams, Mirror, 187, 224.

49 de Man, Rhetoric, 2.

50 Writing of what he terms “Wordsworth’s touching compulsion,” Hartman quotes Wordsworth’s Fenwick note to “Intimations of Immortality”: “I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality.” Quoted in Hartman, Unremarkable Wordsworth, 20.

51 Medwin’s Conversations, 194.

52 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “physic.”


54 My brief reading of Wordsworth’s Preface here is indebted to Paul Youngquist’s observations on “the physiological agenda of Wordsworth’s ‘Preface,’ its commitment to a poetry of bodily effect and physical healing.” Paul Youngquist, Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 33. Dubbing Wordsworth the “poet laureate of the proper body,” Youngquist argues that he “practices a physiological aesthetics that aims as much at normalizing bodies as soothing souls.” Youngquist, Monstrosities, 29. If my reading in truth adds nothing “new” to Youngquist’s paradigm, I stress the subtle ways in which a moment of physical comedy contemporary with Wordsworth reads this text in a manner that anticipates recent critical developments.

55 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, ix, vi, xvi.

56 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, xvi, xlv–xlvii, 1.

57 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, xvi–xvii, xv.

58 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “bowel.”


Seward’s withering of Wordsworth’s flowers anticipates de Man’s critique of organic poetries in The Rhetoric of Romanticism quoted above, rooting the origins of certain strands of deconstruction in the comic debasements of Romantic period reviewing.

Perhaps it is unsurprising in this context that the theorist most invested in analyzing the spectrum from the sublime to the ridiculous, Slavoj Žižek, has made headlines in recent years for his interest in the ideological significance of toilets, suggesting the enduring critical legacy of Blake’s bowels. Asked about the distinction between critique and comedy in his comments, Žižek responded in a manner evocative of the operative logic of the Romantic parodies I have gestured towards: “That's the whole point. I like to do it the other way round. The usual way to do it is you pretend to be serious, and really you mean it as a parody. I like to do what Mozart is doing in his best operas: It appears to be a comedy. But the trick is you have to take seriously what appears to be a parody.” Christopher Shea, “The Raw and the Flushed,” The Boston Globe, September 12, 2004.


This point is perhaps worthy of further consideration, for Seward seems to subtly gesture towards the kinds of aesthetic evasions of history that Marjorie Levinson seeks to expose.

Perhaps most influentially, Harold Bloom: “The internalization of quest-romance made of the poet-hero a seeker not after nature but after his own mature powers, and so the Romantic poet turned away, not from society to nature, but from nature to what was more integral than nature, within himself.” Bloom, “Internalization,” 26. Jerome McGann (in Ideology, 26) finds the roots of this concept in Abrams’ earlier essay. We should also add Northrop Frye’s insights from “The Drunken Boat” to the critical genealogy of the “inward turn,” noting as well the indebtedness of Abrams’ later thesis of Romanticism in Natural Supernaturalism (1971) to Frye’s brief insights. Stressing the “internalizing of the creative impulse,” Frye argues that “The poet has always been supposed to be imitating nature, but if the model of his creative power is in his mind, the nature that he is to imitate is now inside him, even if it is also outside. . . . [T]he metaphorical structure of Romantic poetry tends to move inside and downward instead of outside and upward, hence the creative world is deep within, and so is heaven or the place of the presence of God.” Northrop Frye, “The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism,” in Romanticism Reconsidered, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia UP, 1963), 13, 16. Abrams’ indebtedness to Frye is muted in Natural Supernaturalism, but Bloom acknowledges Frye’s influence on the thesis of internalization in his essay.

Noel Jackson has recently come close to articulating this physiological perspective on the inward turn, arguing that Romanticism’s “inward-turning language” contains a “uniquely social logic” that emerges
from the “kinship of medical science and literary aesthetics” to create a “vocabulary of embodied aesthetic experience”: “Within that shift towards aesthetic autonomy . . . the language of embodied aesthetic experience marks a path back into ‘history’ through the articulation of its sensuous content. Romantic poetry thus discloses through the empiricist rhetoric of its inward turn a close, if at times deeply conflicted, relation to empirical reality.” Noel Jackson, *Science and Sensation*, 1, 4, 14. I further develop the possibilities of a physiological inward turn in the “Inside Out Romanticism” chapter below.


70 See Réne Wellek’s reduction of Romanticism into component parts in “The Concept of Romanticism.”
Chapter 1: Inside Out Romanticism


1805 *Med. & Physical Jrn.** 14 430 She..had frequent vomitings and dejections.

—Oxford English Dictionary

I

The “inward turn” of Romanticism is a critical commonplace, turning up in more studies of Romantic literature than is useful to enumerate, and continuing to characterize the transcendental tendencies of Romanticism. Perhaps most famously, Harold Bloom’s “Internalization of Quest Romance”: “The internalization of quest-romance made of the poet-hero not a seeker after nature but after his own mature powers, and so the Romantic poet turned away, not from society to nature, but from nature to what was more integral than nature, within himself.” Jerome McGann finds the seeds of Bloom’s concept in M. H. Abrams’ earlier reading of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, in which Abrams asserts that “The militancy of overt political action has been transformed into the paradox of spiritual quietism . . . a wise passiveness. . . . [H]ope has been shifted from the history of mankind to the mind of the single individual, from militant external action to an imaginative act.” Northrop Frye’s emphasis on Romanticism’s “internalizing of the creative impulse,” particularly as it contains an early germ of Abrams’ extended argument in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), also deserves to be mentioned in a critical genealogy of the “inward turn”: 
The poet has always been supposed to be imitating nature, but if the model of his creative power is in his mind, the nature that he is to imitate is now inside him, even if it is also outside. . . . [T]he metaphorical structure of Romantic poetry tends to move inside and downward instead of outside and upward, hence the creative world is deep within, and so is heaven or the place of the presence of God.\textsuperscript{74}

*Natural Supernaturalism* picks up on the last clause of this excerpt from Frye,\textsuperscript{75} developing it into a major thesis of the Romantic movement as a whole by writing the inward turn as “the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking.” For Abrams, Romanticism writ large is the artistic process by which a long history of Judeo-Christian theological thought—a religious narrative of fall, redemption, and restoration—is transferred to and written on the mind of individual human subjectivity within its own historical and intellectual contexts: “[T]he general tendency was, in diverse degrees and ways, to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine . . . by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable, as well as emotionally pertinent, for the time being.”\textsuperscript{76} With Frye, Bloom, and Abrams, “inward turn” achieves canonical critical status as a phrase for the Egotistical Sublime, for the transcendent solipsism that marked Romanticism’s retreat from revolution and from history. In short, if one acquiesces in McGann’s ideology critique, “inward turn” becomes synonymous with Romantic ideology, or “Romanticism.”

Yet, some recent scholars have seen more subtlety in the critical development of the inward turn than accounts of aesthetic idealism or escapism allow. Robert James Allard perceptively notes the presence of the physical within the supposedly transcendentalist theses of each of these major critics of the inward turn:
But even as such traditional readings—featuring what Northrop Frye identifies as an ‘imaginative revolution’ and Harold Bloom calls ‘internalization’—emphasize the prominence of the metaphysical, they still acknowledge ‘the underlying physical analogy’ (Abrams) inherent in a poetry enabled by ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.’

Though none of these critics—Frye, Abrams, or Bloom—appears overtly invested in interrogating the physiological possibilities of an inward turn, their very language (Allard suggests) implicates the hidden presence of materiality inherent in the turn to transcendence. Joshua Wilner more pointedly interrogates the “problem of internalization as it finds expression in European Romantic literary tradition,” putting pressure on the critical tendency to abstract “internalization” so that “the notion itself remains obscure and thus that the problem of internalization and the problem of Romanticism may indeed, with respect to the discourse of literary history, be closely intertwined.” Wilner advocates a more nuanced approach to reading internalization both in the Romantic period itself and in its twentieth-century critical legacy, suggesting the possibility of psychological internalization as physiological incorporation. Noel Jackson has convincingly re-approached Romanticism’s “inward-turning language” from this physiological perspective, arguing that it contains a “uniquely social logic” that emerges from the “kinship of medical science and literary aesthetics” to create a “vocabulary of embodied aesthetic experience.” Unlike the earlier studies of Bloom et al., Jackson’s account avoids Romanticism’s ideologies of transcendence by returning us to its historical contingencies; thus, the inward-turn is not purely an imaginative escape, but is also an embodied emersion: it involves simultaneously a turn to the body, and (perhaps) a turn within the body. The very language of subjective, affective experience in Romantic poetry (for Jackson) expresses these
simultaneous registers, a spontaneous overflow at once free-floating and physically determined: “Within that shift towards aesthetic autonomy . . . the language of embodied aesthetic experience marks a path back into ‘history’ through the articulation of its sensuous content. Romantic poetry thus discloses through the empiricist rhetoric of its inward turn a close, if at times deeply conflicted, relation to empirical reality.”81 For Jackson, even Wordsworth’s most apparently inward-turning tendencies might reveal an empirical reality written on the body: “thoughts that do often lie to deep for tears” suggests an imagination that operates not beyond bodily representation but is in fact more deeply embedded within it, in an experience of the body in disorder: in the heart that leaps, the breath that stops, the tears that won’t come. The body shorting-out is an intensely physical experience concomitant with an equally powerful and spontaneous overflow of feeling and thought.

Which comes first: the heart-leap or the imaginative flight? It’s unclear if Romantic poetics meaningfully distinguishes between these moments, if only because the effusions of poetic language itself are an outpouring following closely upon and replicating the intense subjectivity of the inward turn. The inward must be represented outwardly (thus, is always also an outward turn) even if that representation is a non-representation, or a representation of absence: in asserting that thoughts “lie too deep for tears,” “tears” are in fact invoked (linguistically) and perhaps even evoked (in the reader).82

Thus, Jackson’s more literal account of the inward turn—one which passes into and through the nerves, tissues, and fibers of the human body, and indeed may emerge out of them—provides a crucial critical context for re-reading Romantic subjectivity. Similarly, Alan Richardson’s emphasis on a brain-based model of cognition in the Romantic era—a paradigm
that he argues infuses Wordsworth’s poetic imagination—helps to reconceive of the origins of
the organic imagination:

The poet of superior organic sensibility is not necessarily the one with the most
susceptible sensory organs. . . . But sensations felt (or rather, produced) by internal as
well as external ‘organs’ provide the material out of which mind is constructed, an active
sensibility stimulated or ‘quickened’ by emotion and contributing an affective tone to
cognition. . . . A genuine poetic sensibility, for Wordsworth, is one that continues to
register the permeation of thought with feeling and remains in touch with the sensational,
bodily, and emotive origins of mind.\textsuperscript{83}

Though he perhaps underrates the disruptions and disjunctures internal organs might produce for
an affective poetics, Richardson’s brilliant blending of the materiality of organs with the
affective tone of cognition offers a new approach to organic accounts of Romantic poetics by
emphasizing the literal life of organs in the organic.\textsuperscript{84} Jackson and Richardson provide useful
models for what I call \textit{Inside Out Romanticism}: a version of Romanticism in which its inward
turns are understood as bodily processes that move from the inside out rather than imaginative
retreats in the other direction. Romantic poetics is literally organic in this context—the organs of
the body participating in its inward-turning condition. Indeed, some of the terms so often relied
upon to critically characterize Romanticism, like “movement,” “revolution,” and “ruminative”
have bodily resonances: bowel movements, stomachic revolts, bodily digestion. The “inward
turn” itself, to extend Jackson’s reading, might be read as the movement of the body turning on
itself in disorderly digestive revolts. In a passage rife with significance for Inside Out
Romanticism, Byron in Canto IV of \textit{Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage} makes memory itself a disease,
referring to Horace’s poetry as “the daily drug which turn’d my sickening memory” (\textit{CHP}}
The process of remembering turns merely to a bodily process of retching, induced by a poetics of purgation. Doses of force-fed (inward-turning) poetry again induce the inward turn when Byron recalls to Thomas Medwin how “Shelley . . . used to dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea.” Byron—“being everything by turns”—seems intent on externalizing the internal, turning Romanticism inside out.

As Byron’s examples suggest, bodies can, of course, short-out or short-circuit in more or less poetic ways: for every tear, breath, or heartbeat there is a burst of laughter, a fart, an orgasm. The body in disorder also entails vomiting, constipation, diarrhea. Each of these (sordid) bodily phenomena turns up variously in Romantic poetry and prose, and its surrounding cultural discourses, in ways that I want to argue are entirely conversant with Romantic subjectivity. As Mikhail Bakhtin suggests in an under-appreciated passage, Romantic subjectivity may actually be conditioned on a profound engagement with the lower bodily stratum and all of its grotesque movements. If this is true, we ought also to consider the reverse: that the impulse towards an open body, towards turning the inside out, follows on the heels of a subjective turn inwards, from a closing off of the self and the body from the outside world. Romantic poetry’s impulse towards the inward turn similarly entails an impulse towards the eruptions that such turns might produce—the spontaneous overflows of Wordsworth, the ideal of poetic immediacy in Byron.

Even a basic understanding of biology shows that the physical body is full of inward turns that ever seek paths outwards: the intestines—everything by turns—are an obvious example that Blake so delicately sets forth in his reaction to Wordsworth’s poetics, turning the imagination intestinal.
II

In advocating an intestinal poetics, I hope to merely be extending the critical interest in the organic life of Romanticism to include its actual organs. Such a perspective can rewrite even a seemingly singular aesthetic technique as a complex entangling of biology, biography, poetics, and history. Consider, for example, Byron’s manipulation of textual materials in *Don Juan*, which sets its sights on an appendix as the mobilizing force for a dizzying display of aesthetic turning which blends fact and fiction into a spinning style of textual/sexual seduction:

Juan was taught from out the best edition,

Expurgated by learned men, who place
Judiciously, from out the schoolboy’s vision,

The grosser parts; but, fearful to deface
Too much their modest bard by this omission,

And pitying sore his mutilated case,
They only add them all in an appendix,º
Which saves, in fact, the trouble of an index;

For there we have them all at one fell swoop,

Instead of being scatter’d through the Pages;
They stand forth marshall’d in a handsome troop,

To meet the ingenuous youth of future ages,

Till some less rigid editor shall stoop

To call them back into their separate cages,
Instead of standing staring all together,
Like garden gods—and not so decent either. \(DJ 1.44–45\)\(^{91}\)

These stanzas take on their full import only when we recognize in the development of Byron’s description of Juan’s expurgated education a performance of his own text’s tantalizing evasions. It’s a clever little performance that begins to suggest something strange about the relationship between poem, protagonist, narrator, Byron, and his readers: referring to the appendix of Juan’s expurgated edition, Byron turns the reader to the appendix of his own poem, where he attests to the fact behind the fiction: “Fact. There is, or was, such an edition, with all the obnoxious epigrams of Martial placed by themselves at the end.”\(^{92}\) The series of convoluted turns Byron performs here is remarkable. The notation to his para-textual note embeds two turns in Byron’s text that compete with each other for the reader’s attention: one is the enjambment through the line, initiated by the comma, which turns the corner to complete the closing couplet of ottava rima; the second is the reference to Byron’s para-textual material which interrupts the enjambment with a turn of its own to the appendix to \textit{Don Juan}. The turn to Byron’s appendix merely opens up the text to further turns. He piles at least three different, but related texts on top of each other: the fictional text Juan learns from, its real life counterpart that Byron’s note attests to, and importantly \textit{Don Juan} itself as a simultaneous evocation and effacement of the grosser parts of Byron’s own life. The turn to the biographical Byron implicates two other texts in his “appendix” which show the aesthetic expansiveness of Byron’s extra-textual imagination: his famous prose Memoirs burned after his death, and his reference to those memoirs in \textit{Beppo}. In a wry comparison of English society and Eastern education in \textit{Beppo}, Byron includes a suggestive glance at the scenes from the separation crisis that accelerated his exile from England, before quickly directing attention elsewhere, averting the aroused gaze of the reader:

\begin{quote}
They stare not on the stars from out their attics,
\end{quote}
Nor deal (thank God for that!) in mathematics.

Why I thank God for that is no great matter,

I have my reasons, you no doubt suppose,

And as, perhaps, they would not highly flatter,

I’ll keep them for my life (to come) in prose . . . (78–79)93

Referencing the perverse sexual secrets of his own separation crisis in the dig at Annabella Milbanke’s mathematical mind, Byron slyly hints at how his Memoirs make a para-textual commentary on the seductive evasions of his text. Bracketing “(to come)” off from the main body of his text, Byron defers the reader’s textually transgressive desire to know him intimately to some time and place marginal to the text itself: “(to come)” rolls textual completion and sexual consummation together in a parenthetical embrace, at once inside and outside the text. Thus, do the suggestive erotics of the appendix come to infiltrate Byron’s aesthetics. The “grosser parts”—which is to say the sexually explicit parts—are always just about (to come). This reading goes some way into explaining the threat that Byron’s poetry posed to middle-class sensibility: his textual incursions always feel sexual. Despite (or perhaps because of) his exile from England, Byron’s body feels especially present to the reader of his poetry, even as his aesthetics is always attesting to its absence. Hence the fascination occasioned by the infinite deferral of Byron’s Memoirs, burned in John Murray’s parlour: their absence creates a critical fetish for filling in the blank Byron. More and more memoirs emerge: Thomas Medwin, Leigh Hunt, Thomas Moore, and Lady Blessington all have something to add as an appendix to Byron’s aesthetic evasions. But memoirs miss the point—or perhaps make it more forcefully—for, in a sense, Byron’s Memoirs were always already burned. Byron makes their absence a
mobilizing force for his own aesthetics: only without them does his text achieve its sexual seduction; with them his aesthetics lacks its allusive/elusive appeal.

All of this sits in back of the turn to Byron’s appendix; and, perhaps, is even necessary to understanding the implications of the turn: Don Juan, *Don Juan*, Byron, and *Beppo* blended in an aesthetic orgy of erotic absence in which the “grosser parts” are never quite locatable, until suddenly they all come together “at one fell swoop” to “stand forth marshall’d in a handsome troop” whose erect posture overcomes even the rigidity of the editor. The appendix enables the perverse appeal of this textual/sexual consummation by offering the opportunity for the text (and its reader) to overflow the boundaries of its body and become something different. In Byron’s passage, the “grosser parts” are always both a text and a sex—a genre and a gender very much performed by Byron’s aesthetic masquerade, turned into something strange, suggestive, and seductive.

In the context of Inside Out Romanticism, Byron’s appendix has a biological as well as a biographical life. The biological appendix is hardly a seductive organ—usually only about eleven centimeters long—but it does perhaps underwrite the appeal of Byron’s aesthetics of absence. The appendix is a confounding little organ: mostly because it only makes itself known by failing to function properly. The appendix—whenever it makes itself known—always attests to its own need to be absent in order for the body to carry on functioning. Historically, medical procedures for removing the vermiform or cecal appendix—a vestigial organ thought to have once aided the digestive or waste management processes of the body—were slowly on the rise in the latter half of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. A 1736 volume of the *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society of London* records the first successful appendectomy: a procedure performed at St. George’s Hospital in London to remove the
appendix of an eleven-year old boy, a swallowed pin being the culprit. A proliferation of appendectomy procedures over the following century was accompanied by an increasing medical interest in the appendix’s function in the body. A variety of theories were proposed—digestion, waste management, immune function, endocrine, exocrine, and even neuromuscular functions—but no medical consensus was reached; hence, the Encyclopedia Britannica’s 1778 entry: “of the little vermiform appendix of the ceacum, it will be sufficient to say that its uses have never yet been ascertained.” Whatever its former purpose in the biological functioning of the human body, it was generally agreed that organ no longer played a role in the properly functioning body. Hence the organ’s designation as an appendix: something cast off from the main part—a related, but not constitutive part of the whole.

The problematic relationship between the biological appendix and the functioning digestive system in nineteenth-century medical discourse materializes the relationship between the appendix of “grosser parts” and the expurgated text Juan reads from, and also materializes the relationship between the appendix to Don Juan and Don Juan itself. By performing an organic aesthetics in his poem, Byron structures failure into the functional apparatus of his text. He blends the biological appendix with the literary appendix by performing absence as the organic quality which allows his poem to continue functioning. By turning the reader outside the text with his appeal to the appendix, Byron invites the reader inside his body where desire is ultimately defeated but continually aroused by an essential lack at the corporeal core. Thus, the biological appendix as an absent signifier of functional failure initiates the narrative desire that fuels Don Juan. Robert Southey’s “dry bob”—coition without emission—is another organic absent presence that spurs on Byron’s satire with its hollow desire: a sexual functional failure turned textual when Byron actually starts his epic with the desire-laden “I want,” a phrase which
attests to both the longing and the lack that underwrite the narrative development of *Don Juan*. Performing an appendectomy on his poem, Byron begins a process of bodily extraction that sustains his narrative throughout. Body parts frequently malfunction and are threatened with removal: most notably Juan’s head, the lopping off of which Byron envisioned as the wished for end of his narrative of sexual/textual desire. It’s a textual consummation which gestures back to the sexualized circumcision suggested by Juan’s handler Baba in the brothel canto, and thus also to Southey’s lack of spontaneous overflow in the Dedication. As Byron’s own biography bears out, organs come to dominant the narrative drive of *Don Juan* as it indeed ends with the overflow of organic life: the blood, vomit, and fecal matter leeched and purged from Byron’s body on his deathbed. Thus, Inside Out Romanticism’s approach to organs opens up individual aesthetic maneuvers like Byron’s “appendix” to broader interpretive implications not only stretching across works, but also reaching outside of them and into the lives of the bodies that produce them. Considered biologically, his appendix introduces the reader into Byron’s body where the consummation that the text is ever in readiness for is once again deferred—infinitely even—by an internal absence, outwardly represented by the burning of Byron’s memoirs: a textual act meant to efface a sexual history. An act which makes the appendix an erotic organ in Byron’s corpus.°

III

In addition to opening up new readings of the intestinal as an organicism interwoven in the textual life and context of Romantic poetics as in *Don Juan*, Inside Out Romanticism also re-characterizes the inward turn of Romanticism not as an escape but as an emersion, and therefore re-writes its radicalism. According to Inside Out Romanticism, Romanticism’s inward turn can
hardly be seen as a conservative quietism at all, but is rather a radical (r)ejection of despotism and systemic state power. In a revolt of the bodily system, inward turns open the body up to the outside world and reconstitute the relation between human and nature in a purely interpersonal space.\textsuperscript{97} Thus, by not properly functioning the inward turning body (and mind) are an affront to ordered, teleological narratives of state power.\textsuperscript{98} Like the Romantic lyric, they continually defy containment and explanation. Such a version of Romanticism obviously takes its cues from Bakhtin who is writing out of and about entirely different sets of historical circumstances. Yet, given Romanticism’s exceptional commitment to subjectivity and an inward-turning eye/I, and the apparent gulf this movement has produced between the conception of carnivalesque selves and the Romantic and (perhaps) modern self, reconciling the bodily lower stratum with the Mind of Man revises critical commitments to a Romantic ideology of the self, and turns its telos in a different direction.

Bakhtin should perhaps occupy a more prominent theoretical position than he has been granted in recent studies of Romanticism and the body. Despite his emphasis on the “rehabilitation of the flesh” as a cultural phenomenon and artistic principle, as well as his insistence on the broad relevance of his own project to divergent fields of literary studies, scholars have generally found his assertions to be of limited applicability. For scholars wishing to complicate the familiar mind/body crux in a post-Cartesian literary discourse, Bakhtin’s opposition of materiality and spirituality seems overly simplistic and outmoded. His utopian enthusiasm for the subversive, radical power of the carnivalesque and its artistic representations in grotesque realism has struck others as ideologically misguided and idealistic.\textsuperscript{99} Moreover, his aesthetic concepts appear too historically contingent to be easily grafted onto later, different cultural discourses. Yet, Bakhtin’s genealogy of grotesque realism in fact offers a more nuanced
account of the artistic relationship between body and mind than has often been supposed, especially as relates to the Romantic life of grotesque realism. Influential recent studies stressing the bodily life of Romantic aesthetics and imagination, like those of Alan Richardson and Noel Jackson, make this a timely moment to return to some of Bakhtin’s more subtle gestures.

Where Bakhtin stresses the opposition of grotesque realism to idealizing artistic tendencies early in *Rabelais and his World*, his account of its development in later traditions complicates this antagonistic relationship, posing instead one in which the material lower stratum inspires rather than deflates airy idealism. Indeed, in the Romantic tradition particularly, he stresses, the subjective *interior infinite* of man—the inward turn generally taken to be a mental escape or transcendental flight from the external world and its material, mortal condition—is conditioned on a profound appreciation of gross materiality:

But Romanticism made its own important discovery—that of the interior subjective man with his depth, complexity, and inexhaustible resources. . . . [This] discovery made by the Romantics was made possible by their use of the grotesque method and its power to liberate from dogmatism, completeness, and limitation. The *interior infinite* could not have been found in the closed and finished world, with its distinct fixed boundaries dividing all phenomena and values. . . . [Romanic grotesque] was a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism; it was a rejection of that which is finished and completed, of the didactic and utilitarian spirit of the Enlightenners with their narrow and artificial optimism. Locating Romanticism in its historical clash with the Enlightenment, Bakhtin argues that its turn to the irrational, infinite “within which surpasses show” in order to counter Enlightenment claims to man as a known and knowable rational entity reaches back to the pre-Enlightenment tradition
of grotesque realism. From this perspective, Romantic subjectivity is birthed from the grotesque body of Renaissance folk culture. It might also be possible to slightly invert this claim: Romanticism invested grotesque realism with an imaginative life, revealing the metaphysics of its physical operations. For if what Bakhtin calls the “cold rationalism” of Enlightenment thought divested grotesque realism of its ever-burgeoning potential by professing an absolute knowledge that contains, Romanticism rescued it as part of its Enlightenment critique in the only way it could: by making it an inconsumable part of mental life. Thus, the hidden body is stylized into a more purely aesthetic existence in Romantic literature, taking on a subterranean life that studies such as Marjorie Levinson’s can unearth with the tools of deconstruction. Bakhtin develops a series of dialectics throughout his study—high/low, official/unofficial, classic/grotesque—but that between grotesque realism and Romanticism, because underdeveloped, has remained largely unacknowledged as an early critical heuristic for reading Romanticism’s inside-out-ness, its aesthetic evasions and possible textual inversions. Apparently a recapitulation of the classic canon’s cleanliness, Romanticism’s aesthetic (in the context of Bakhtin) is in fact something altogether different: a kind of low idealism, common at its core if abstract in its artistry, emerging out of but grounded in a material bodily principle.

Bakhtin’s genealogy of the aesthetic life of grotesque realism in Romanticism intuits a complex, ever-shifting relationship between imaginative subjectivity and base bodily functions that recent critics have begun to probe with more historical specificity. Indeed, Bakhtin’s earlier and more purely aesthetic argument about the inward turn of Romantic subjectivity compellingly links up with Noel Jackson’s historical account of the scientific underpinnings of Romantic literary aesthetics, as well as Alan Richardson’s attention to the brain-based model for cognition. Jackson and Richardson both locate the material strata of subjectivity in the Enlightenment itself,
perhaps revealing the shortcomings of Bakhtin’s historical classifications. Yet, they reveal the scientific truth of his aesthetic intuition: once opened up, the body reveals in its gross matter a complex imaginative potentiality. Enlightenment science peels back the layers to reveal an anatomical carnivalesque at the core of the burgeoning Romantic imagination.

But more than merely confirming the critically undervalued complexity of Bakhtin, returning to Bakhtin and re-reading his insights in the context of the recent revival of interest in Romanticism’s physical life allows us to recover a lost comic tradition inspiring Romanticism, as well as the latent laughter attending that tradition. Indeed, what risks being lost in the rush of historical contextualization surrounding the scholarly interest in Romantic science and medicine, as well as in the more theoretical discourses seeking the literal life of Romanticism’s metaphorical language, is that which has never been fully uncovered in the first place: a comic tradition in literature and art that lives inside of Romanticism, a submerged but substantial force. If grotesque realism informs Romanticism’s imaginative life, its transcendence may be conditioned on the comic. At the core of Romanticism, then, is the paradox of a transcendence that emerges out of its own deflation. Without dismissing the many valuable recent accounts of Romanticism’s physical life, I should merely like to suggest that the bodily sources of subjectivity are colored over with a comic tone that has not quite been fully filled in. My emphasis, then, is on this odd, seemingly paradoxical source informing Romanticism and the laughter that marks its hidden presence.
IV

Romanticism comes trailing clouds of grotesque glory, and the silent memory of lost laughter haunts its imaginative desires. Again, Bakhtin is instructive:

Pre-Romanticism and Romanticism witnessed a revival of the grotesque genre but with a radically transformed meaning. It became the expression of a subjective, individualistic world outlook very different from the carnival folk concept of previous ages. . . . But even at that stage all the basic elements, which have a clearly carnival origin, retain a certain memory of that mighty whole to which they belonged in the distant past.\(^{104}\)

Where for Abrams Romanticism rewrites religion as (seemingly secularized) subjectivity, for Bakhtin Romantic subjectivity attests to the absent influence of its grotesque genealogy. Romantic memory itself longs for the pre-lapsarian unity of “that mighty whole to which [it] belonged in the distant past.”

One of the operative metaphors for loss and memory in Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode” is that of mobile parts in relation to a mighty whole. Wordsworth writes it as a sort of indistinct metaphorical relationship between ship/sailor and sea:

Hence in a season of calm weather

Though inland far we be,

Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea

Which brought us hither,

Can in a moment travel thither,

And see the children sport upon the shore,

And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore. (162–68)\(^{105}\)
The sea figures as a kind of host body for the alien soul of Romantic subjectivity. The fragmented soul’s yearning for the discovery of its divine origins, its desire to merge with its immortal existence is a fitting image for the internalization of quest romance or natural supernaturalism. The dimming “clouds of glory” that carry tinges of “celestial light” about their edges slowly flickering out, provide another image for “shadowy recollections” of divine “worlds not realized.” The “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of Matthew Arnold’s “Sea of Faith” and his light that “gleams and is gone” rewrite each of these images for bleaker religious contexts. But there’s also another context. Bakhtin’s casting of the relationship between Romanticism and grotesque realism around the metaphor of the “memory of that mighty whole” imbues the absences and desires of Wordsworth’s poetry with shades of the grotesque.

One of the central losses charted throughout the Ode is the waning of festive, rejuvenating laughter. For Wordsworth, this is a divine quality as well as a quality of common humanity: “Ye blessèd creatures, I have heard the call / Ye to each other make; I see / The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee” (36–38). The radical humanism of this passage has been underappreciated: Wordsworth levels god and man in a universal laughter, the heavens in fact participating in the great belly laugh of the people. The affective force of the passage comes when we notice how isolated Wordsworth is from this natural supernaturalism written as communal laughter: Wordsworth the Romantic poet no longer participates in, in truth cannot even hear the boisterous sounds of this laughter, but merely sees, observes from the distant perspective of aesthetic removal. Romantic aesthetics, as Bakhtin correctly surmised, has little room for laughter:

However, the most important transformation of Romantic grotesque was that of the principle of laughter. This element of course remained, since no grotesque, even the most
timid, is conceivable in the atmosphere of absolute seriousness. But laughter was cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm. It ceased to be a joyful and triumphant hilarity. Its positive regenerating power was reduced to a minimum.”

The “Immortality Ode” poetically depicts this departure, filling the void left by laughter with only another type of absence, the “Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.” In the context of laughter, Wordsworth’s “tears” are a double negation, a double absence, loss multiplied. They both evoke the loss of their absent other—the laughter of the heavens and the children—and are themselves already an absence, signaling their own not coming forth, gesturing towards a spectral something “too deep,” which “tears” does not have access to: a hollow absence beneath the surface of the signifier “tears.” This is the hollow absence of “thoughts” which brood upon the infinite and are therefore unrepresentable by the human body, but it is equally a laughter which can no longer be heard but only seen negatively through “tears,” or even the tears which are denied by the poem’s language but elicited by the affect of absence. The inward turn to thoughts beyond the range of external expression opens up an absent space in the text which evokes the lost laughter that has in part occasioned the poem’s aesthetic aspirations to transcendence.

The poem as a (w)hole contains a repetition of represented absences, impartially articulated. The festive laughter that begins the fourth stanza yields to a vision of abject isolation and loss:

—But there’s a tree, of many, one,
A single field which I have look’d upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?

Where is it now, the glory and the dream? (51–57)

The same tale desperately repeated, poetically rewritten to forge an aesthetic wholeness, merely attests more forcefully to an absence at the core of the poem: to the stark impossibility of recovery. A “something that is gone” hovers invisibly beneath the represented images and words of the poem, speaking not a poetry of “what we are,” but instead a poetry of what we are not now. The tree, the field, the pansy: these are the fictions Wordsworth’s poetry tells repeatedly to fill the void of absence—“felt in the blood, and felt along the heart”—that is the true subject of his poetry. Loss is an irrevocable condition of his poetry: the closest Wordsworth can come to laughter is not crying—“too deep for tears”—a representation of what is no longer attainable, a poetry of what we are not now. Perverse, then, but not incorrect to suggest that the “Immortality Ode” represents the waning of laughter and the loss of the material bodily principle to merge with the wholeness of the world. The poem in fact remembers what it cannot represent: a bodily opening out of which laughter emerges to mingle perversely with the divine.

According to William Hazlitt, such absences were not merely aesthetic tendencies, but were represented or written on Wordsworth’s physical body as well. Consider Hazlitt’s suggestive account of an absent laughter written about Wordsworth’s mouth: “I think I see him now. . . . There was a severe, worn pressure of thought about his temples, a fire in his eye . . . , an intense high narrow forehead, a Roman nose, cheeks furrowed by strong purpose and feeling, and a convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face.” The “convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth” disrupts Hazlitt’s anatomy of the Romantic poet, upsetting his blazon with a
burst of Bakhtinian mirth. That Bakhtinian orifice, the mouth, opens up to swallow and spit back out the “solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face.” But it is also an absence or a void that it represents: an unrealized representation, “the inclination to laughter” is written on the face, but unrealized by the mouth. Laughter becomes an unseemly, even threatening aberration written on the face of Romantic sincerity.

This description pops up again in an oddly similar formulation two years later in Hazlitt’s *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), only this time the laughter itself has entirely disappeared—or rather, has ceased to sound at all: Hazlitt notes Wordsworth’s “marked features of an air somewhat stately and quixotic . . . grave, saturnine, with a slight indication of sly humor, kept under by the manners of the age or by the pretensions of the person.” The “convulsive inclination” has become a “slight indication”: a laughter subdued and silenced by the spirit of the age or “the pretensions of the person.” A compelling paradigm for Bakhtin’s model of Romantic laughter, these accounts of absence (taken together) chart the waning of laughter as a narrative of Wordsworth’s body. In this way his body might be said to underwrite the silences, absences, and losses of the “Immortality Ode.” Laughter is written “around” or “about” as an aesthetic inclination or indication, summoned only silently: we see not hear its force. Wordsworth’s very body is the paradigm for his poetics.

V

The silent force of submerged materiality has been my theme throughout, and I want, before closing with Coleridge’s constipation, to consider in a bit more depth the impact that this force has had on the critical concept of internalization, arguing that hidden representations of the bodily lower stratum have had a much more significant impact on the development of this
influential strand of Romantic criticism than has been previously acknowledged. I argue all the while that the hiddenness is precisely the point: carefully considered, the major critical accounts of internalization and the inward-turning language of Romanticism contain a latent physiology covered over by, but no less important than, the psychological interiority they appear to overtly espouse.

Blake’s bowel complaint, recounted by Henry Crabbe Robinson, is a hidden presence in Harold Bloom’s influential account of Romanticism’s inward turn in “The Internalization of Quest Romance,” which initially becomes, then, exemplary of what Jerome McGann has called Romantic criticism’s “uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations”: it conceals the material, bodily conditions out of which a major trend in Romantic criticism developed, replicating a similar tendency in the idealist aspirations of Romantic aesthetics which it elaborates. Here is Bloom discussing Wordsworth’s failure to poetically fuse mind and body, self and world, and his consequent turn away from the outer world to the metaphysical world within:

Wordsworth . . . no more overcame a fundamental dualism than Freud did. Essentially this was Blake’s complaint against him. . . . Wordsworth made his kind of poetry out of an extreme urgency, and out of an overfilled inner self, a Blakean Prolific that nearly choked in an excess of its own delights. This is the Egotistical Sublime of which Keats complained.  

Blake’s complaint: Bloom’s language can hardly be accidental. Indeed, as with Hartman’s commentary on Blake, there is a performative element and an underrated subtlety to the development of Bloom’s argument, as he flirts perversely with the material strata of his analysis. By merely suggesting the trace of gross corporeality, Bloom’s language summons the specter of
Blake’s bowels not to show, but to perform the material effacements enacted in Wordsworth’s inward turn: it (a)voids physicality. Shrewdly, Bloom negatively presents the very absence which aesthetic internalization apparently aspires towards. Consider the series of terms he then deploys to depict Wordsworth’s poetry: “extreme urgency,” emerging “out of an overfilled inner self,” “nearly choked in an excess of its own delights.” These metaphors simultaneously conceal and reveal their material underpinnings, and by placing his portrayal of Wordsworth within the (hidden) context of Blake’s bowel complaint, Bloom shows the language and aesthetics of spontaneous overflow—poetic markers of the inward turn—to be based on a creative excess that threatens to choke and clog physically as well as poetically. Not merely Blake’s bowels, but also Byron’s gag reflex, are tested in this description which does little to distance itself from bodily resonances, and much to remind us of their force.

Of course, Bloom is rehearsing Blake’s critique, according to which Wordsworth wallows in a kind of fertile filth (“a Blakean Prolific”) so his language is perhaps unsurprisingly material. Yet, Bloom’s corporeal gestures in this essay have generally been overlooked in favor of an interpretation of his account of Romanticism as a purely mentalist, ultimately transcendent endeavor. But pay attention to how close he comes to offering a materialist interpretation of even Wordsworth’s most characteristic maneuvers: “This is the Egotistical Sublime of which Keats complained,” Bloom concludes, but just what “This” is—the metaphor or the material—remains muddled. Bloom’s vague pronoun allows one of the most cherished terms for characterizing Wordsworthian transcendence—the Egotistical Sublime—to take on a bodily life. Bloom’s account tantalizingly leaves open the possibility that the Egotistical Sublime is an emergence of base materiality rather than the power of the transcendent mind, as Byron sharply surmised when
he turned the tables on Keats, labelling his poetry a “mental masturbation”: an Onanistic, rather than an Egotistical Sublime.

The development of Bloom’s argument does indeed distance itself from this physical potentiality, particularly in his later summation, from which several recent critics quote in sketching out critical genealogies of Romantic transcendence:  “The internalization of quest-romance made of the poet-hero not a seeker after nature but after his own mature powers, and so the Romantic poet turned away, not from society to nature, but from nature to what was more integral than nature, within himself.” Here Bloom apparently participates in promulgating and treasuring a critical ideology of transcendence. In the broader context of his essay, however, it should be clear that this is not the case. In fact, it should be clear that his essay demonstrates by its own development the intentional structures by which those ideologies are produced: that it possibly argues for the material conditions out of which transcendence appears to spring full grown. Romantic idealism becomes homogenized and indeed enters into the ideologies of Romantic criticism when inward-turn or internalization—or even Egotistical Sublime—become synonymous with transcendent, mentalist, or imaginative: indeed become shorthand for writing off a potentially much more nuanced elaboration of Romanticism’s metaphorical negotiations. But this is far from the complex account Bloom offers, even if his followers have been less subtle in adopting and adapting his model. While McGann’s wry observation that “certain figures—Harold Bloom in particular—manifestly pursue a Romantic approach to the subject of Romanticism and its works” must probably be generally accepted, Bloom’s subtle treatment of this particular Romantic ideology reveals him to be far more self-critical than McGann allows.

This process—in which subtle critical maneuvers become convenient generalizations that caricature rather than complicate an understanding of Romanticism—mirrors an older process
rooted in Wordsworth’s own critical writing and responses to it. Indeed, in extracting Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow” and other of his aesthetic arguments, we would do well to recall Lionel Trilling’s trenchant remarks regarding the “deplorable” process by which Wordsworth’s “famous utterances” have become “proverbs of criticism”:

> A large part of the literate world believes that Wordsworth defines poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. With such a definition we shall not get very far in our efforts to think about poetry, and in point of fact Wordsworth makes no such definition. Much less does he say, as many find it convenient to recall, that poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility.117

While objectively wrong—insofar as Wordsworth actually does write in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”—Trilling’s reminder that abstracting Wordsworth from his context will never do for an appropriately detailed account of Romanticism is an important caveat. For, to be sure, Wordsworth does affix addendums and exceptions to the spontaneity he initially espouses, and this is crucial to understanding his poetics. Spontaneity is a kind of fiction that Romantic poetry seeks to write, and Wordsworth reveals in the larger aesthetic discourse of the Preface just how carefully controlled and composed this apparent spontaneity really is. Nevertheless it is for Wordsworth a necessary fiction, and hence he grants it a central importance in his Preface, but not without drawing attention to its limits and qualifications. Though Trilling doesn’t further elaborate on his comments, there is probably a subtler point as well. His problem appears to be with “definition”: a sticking point which reminds us that Wordsworth’s famous statement may not be so much a definition as a metaphor. A metaphor is, of course, a literary device—an aesthetic construct that draws attention to its own fictiveness. Thus, Wordsworth’s phrase alone already calls into
question its definitional truth. If good poetry is metaphorically the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, it is then definitionally different from spontaneous overflow: and this is perhaps precisely a problem that Wordsworthian poetics articulates, encounters, and seeks to overcome. This proverb contains a critical prolixity that complicates its apparently easy application to the ideological truth claims of Romanticism, just as Harold Bloom’s “internalization” carries with it a set of contradictory claims which open internalization up to externalization, metaphor to material.

Could the same be said of Abrams? More stringently than Bloom even, he appears to have written Romanticism around an ideology of spiritual transcendence. Yet, Blake’s bowels occupy an odd space in his study, offsetting its pretensions to idealism and revealing a critical performance of its thesis. Developing his argument in *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams comes across an uncomfortable truth: his high argument of the Romantic movement emerges out of, revolves around, and constantly returns to the very same Preface to *The Excursion* that caused Blake his, well, Blakean Prolific. Abrams confidently states his intentions:

The book is organized as a sequence of movements out of and back to various passages in the programmatic statement, first written at the turn of the century, which Wordsworth put forward in his Preface to *The Excursion* as “a kind of *Prospectus* of the design and scope” of his intended masterpiece, *The Recluse*, and of the entire corpus of his lesser poems. My rationale is that Wordsworth (as his English contemporaries acknowledged, with whatever qualifications) was the great and exemplary poet of the age, and his *Prospectus* stands as the manifesto of a central Romantic enterprise against which we can conveniently measure the consonance and divergences in the writings of his contemporaries.
With whatever qualifications. Blake’s qualifications were certainly considerable, even if Abrams feels the need to vaguely bracket them off from the body of his own substantial response to Wordsworth’s Prospectus. One always appreciates a clear statement of purpose; still, one gets the impression that Abrams may be protesting a bit too much: Blake’s bowels unsettle his confidence in the seriousness of his own critical endeavor.

He just can’t quite seem to get rid of them. Demonstrating how Wordsworth rewrites the Christian quest of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* onto the Mind of Man—internalizing the theological, naturalizing the supernatural—Abrams quotes from the Prospectus:

> Not Chaos, not
> The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
> Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
> By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe
> As fall upon us often when we look
> Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man—
> My haunt, and the main region of my Song.

It’s a passage which supports his thesis, and Abrams reads it quite faithfully: “What Wordsworth claims is that the mind of man is a terra incognita which surpasses in its terrors and sublimities, hence in the challenge it poses to its poetic explorer, the traditional subject matter of Milton’s Christian epic.” Yet, Abrams must account for Blake’s divergent “reading” of the same passage in order to bolster the weight of his own apparently more serious reading: “William Blake,” he writes, “who respected Wordsworth enough to read him closely and take his claims seriously, told Henry Crabb Robinson, in whimsical exasperation, that this passage ‘caused him a bowel complaint which nearly killed him.’”120 Though he emphasizes the respect and seriousness with
which Blake received Wordsworth’s poetry, Abrams doesn’t quite account for why Blake’s bowel complaint should be characterized as “whimsical exasperation” rather than a legitimate close reading: it’s a quick way of dispensing with Blake, sure, but it doesn’t quite follow. Abrams disregards the anal trepidation that infuses this passage, haunting Wordsworth’s Mind of Man, exposed by Blake’s bowels as the “touching compulsion” of his transcendent aesthetics. The Mind of Man digs deeper even than the “darkest pit of lowest Erebus” and “Chaos”—both womb/tomb spaces located in the bowel regions of the cosmos—“scooping out” profounder, more terrifying “vacancies.” Blake’s materiality brings these metaphors to the forefront of Wordsworth’s Prospectus, burdening the mind of man with the “dark materials” of Milton’s Chaos. Blake closely reads the material movements of Wordsworth’s aesthetic procedure and refuses to acquiesce in its ideology, taking it not at its word, but at its turd: a compelling, if also crass reading of something like natural supernaturalism—the terror of the cosmos turned quotidian, as man meets his mortality in even the most mundane and common of daily human activities.

Once again the development of Abrams’ argument follows a circuitous path back to and through Blake’s bowels, even as he proceeds in his reading of Wordsworth’s Prospectus. Stressing the “wedding of man’s mind to the natural world,” Abrams highlights the divine beauty—exceeding the utmost aspirations of earthly aesthetics—Wordsworth seeks to unite with human subjectivity:

Beauty—a living Presence of the earth,

Surpassing the most fair ideal Forms

Which craft of delicate Spirits hath composed

From earth’s materials—waits upon my steps.
Before elucidating Wordsworth, Abrams stumbles over Blake: “This statement defines Wordsworth’s essential difference from Blake: it is the chief reason that reading Wordsworth’s Prospectus caused Blake—as he said in the comic hyperbole with which he delighted to confound Henry Crabb Robinson—‘a bowel complaint which nearly killed him.’” Comic hyperbole it may be, but it still provides a useful heuristic for examining Blake’s complaint against Wordsworth—a point Abrams acknowledges when he says that this passage is the chief reason Blake shat. Wordsworth’s aesthetics no more escapes the binds of materiality than Blake’s bowels. The natural beauty which Wordsworth exalts and seeks to map into and onto the individual Mind—in an effort to forge “with blended might” a divine creation of aesthetic subjectivity—is itself (for Blake) as much a fiction of the fallen world—a false Eden, a Bower of Bliss—as the human art Wordsworth seeks to surpass. Thus, the imagined aesthetic apotheosis is in fact a second fall and Wordsworth circles back on himself. For Blake, Wordsworth wallows in fallen filth: his “spousal verse / Of this great consummation” is not a Hymeneal celebration but an anal eroticism: a non-procreative pleasure, troping not the teleology of religious redemption written as cleansing of the individual conscience, but rather a dispersal of self—“Of joy in widest commonalty spread”—as a fortunate fall back into earthly absorption. This is no way to commune with the divine, according to Blake, and perhaps Wordsworth missed his mark here; but Blake’s bowels remind us that human communion with the divine is often as much a digestive as an imaginative process, and the products of that transformation may be represented bodily as well as expressed in more spiritual or transcendental forms. Internalization, Blake shows, often entails physiological fixations which are hard to (sur)pass: a prescient critique that Abrams folds into the subtext of his own more transcendentalizing account of Romanticism’s inward turn.
But not unwittingly. Like Bloom, Abrams performs the ideology he appears to critically promulgate and thus opens up his own procedures to critique, shedding light on the process by which idealism becomes inscribed as aesthetic ideology. His attempts to grapple with Blake’s bowels at the several points throughout his study, detailed above, demonstrate his awareness of their critical force. But like Byron, Blake’s bowels make their presence most felt in absentia in *Natural Supernaturalism*. Returning to the passage that caused Blake such fits for the third time, in the final chapter of his study, Abrams omits Blake’s bowels altogether.\(^{123}\) He needn’t mention them at this point: their presence has now entered into the traces of Wordsworth’s own text, as critically situated twice before with respect to Blake’s bowels in Abrams’ study. The passage from Wordsworth’s Prospectus does not emerge untainted, in other words, but carries the burden of Blake’s bowels on its aesthetic underside. Abrams briefly explores these abyssal voids in Wordsworth’s verse (“In his Prospectus Wordsworth tells us that his poetic journey through the mind of man will ascend higher than ‘the heaven of heavens.’ But Wordsworth’s landscape of the mind . . . has its abysses too.”) before emerging from them and reflecting back from “a somewhat higher point of vantage.”\(^{124}\) Like Wordsworth’s poetry, the “somewhat higher point of vantage” of Abrams’ criticism comes only through what Jerome McGann labelled in “Tintern Abbey” a “regimen grounded in the senses.”\(^{125}\) It narrates a process by which it attempts to evacuate its own material underpinnings. For Abrams, Blake’s bowels are a beginning, a middle, and an end: an opening out of which criticism crafts its own becoming.

VI

But what becomes of Romantic subjectivity if it is conditioned on—indeed controlled by—bodily movements outside the purview of the inward-turning eye/I? Coleridge’s *bottom-wind*
provides an instructive example. In a letter to Thomas Wedgwood, Coleridge writes of an experience familiar to many of the Romantic poets—an aesthetic or philosophical subjectivity arising out of a sympathetic exchange with nature:

In simple earnest, I never find myself alone within the embracement of rocks & hills, a traveller up an alpine road, but my spirit courses, drives, and eddies, like a Leaf in Autumn: a wild activity of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion, rises up from within me—a sort of bottom-wind, that blows to no point of the compass, & comes from I know not whence, but agitates the whole of me; my whole Being is filled with waves, as it were, that roll & stumble, one this way, & one that way, like things that have no common master. The farther I ascend from animated Nature, from men, and cattle, & the common birds of the woods, & fields, the greater becomes in me the Intensity of the feeling of Life.¹²⁶

The passage articulates an imaginative inspiration welling up inside of the poet to match and even exceed the natural grandeur surrounding him. In Kantian terms, the mind feels itself superior to its surroundings, recognizes its own sublime subjectivity: “The farther I ascend from animated Nature . . . the greater becomes in me the Intensity of the feeling of Life.” From this perspective, Romanticism retains its ideal, transcendental aspirations; and indeed, critics have often been content to describe Coleridge’s philosophy here in just such a fashion. But look again at the passage from Coleridge: there is something importantly physical about his account. Locked in the “embracement of rocks & hills,” the activity of Coleridge’s imagination attains a tangible presence, a literally frame-shaking force that manifests itself as a bottom-wind “agitat[ing] the whole of me.”
What is the precise nature of this bottom-wind? Coleridge provides a hint in a letter from several weeks later detailing “an attack in my stomach, & right side, which in pain & the length of its continuance appeared to me by the far the severest, I ever had.” In the context of Coleridge’s constant constipation and bowel complaints, his bottom-wind takes on an added physiological significance more closely bordering on bodily sublimation—the transformation of a solid into a gas—than on the philosophical sublime. Thus, Coleridge’s formulation places at stake the very foundations of Romantic subjectivity: the mind may feel itself above Nature, but human nature proves a stumbling block over which it cannot cleanly leap, for the bottom-wind, if it is an emblem of imaginative inspiration and transcendence, is at the same time a fart which grounds the poet more deeply in his own disorderly physiology. The thinking self is also at the same time a digesting self: ruminating tropes ruminating; in fact, if Kant’s purely ideal model of sublime subjectivity makes a mental failure the crux of its transcendent power, Coleridge’s model adds a corresponding bodily failure into the mix: a ballast to Kant’s conscientious judgment floating between nature and freedom. Indeed, Coleridge’s constipation introduces us to a new kind of Kant—one we’re unaccustomed to encountering—who tethers organic rumblings to mental perturbances and risks undercutting his own idealism as just so much philosophical gas: “I have such a difficult and usually insufficient evacuation every morning that the remaining feces that accumulate become the cause, as far as I can tell, not only of that gas I mentioned but also of my clouded brain.” If the body blocks the brain, Kant seems to forge a causal relation between the two that rewrites transcendence as conditioned on a properly functioning body.

Yet, the actual relation in the “Analytic of the Sublime” appears just the opposite: the body and mind fail in unison so that the latter may recover a sense of its own sublimity. Sublimity is the most spectacular failure of the human: “The feeling of the sublime is a pleasure
that arises only indirectly, being generated, namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them.” 129 Though everything happens very quickly in the Kantian sublime, “the momentary inhibition of the vital powers”—a statement that comes close to articulating a bodily blockage—is a kind of Kant-stipation: a necessary blockage of the body that leads to a powerful release. The feelings of displeasure—or negative pleasure—attendant upon the sublime experience in Kant’s account summon the specter of bodily distress, and are even seemingly contingent upon it.

The transcendent self—the Romantic subject in Coleridge’s case—becomes in Dominique Laporte’s phrase, the subject of shit. 130 There is a kind of sloughing off of the excesses of the abyss that the sublime mind must achieve for aesthetic judgment to function properly:

The mind feels itself moved in the representation of the sublime in nature. . . . This movement (especially in its inception) may be compared to a vibration, i.e., to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object. What is excessive for the imagination (to which it is driven in the apprehension of the intuition) is as it were an abyss, in which it fears to lose itself, yet for reason’s idea of the supersensible to produce such an effort of the imagination is not excessive but lawful, hence it is precisely as attractive as it was repulsive for mere sensibility. 131

Pulled from out the abyss, the imagination’s terror of excess becomes a lawful feeling: one eased and permitted by the structures of the sublime mind. Pleasure attends the overcoming—the rational ridding—of the excesses. But not completely, for repulsion still remains: a sickening feeling that there is still more to get rid of. The imagination still fears to lose itself in the abyss: the clouds have not entirely parted from the brain. Kant’s constipation, once more, proves an
oddly lucid reading of his convoluted philosophy: “I have such a difficult and usually insufficient evacuation every morning that the remaining feces that accumulate become the cause, as far as I can tell, not only of that gas I mentioned but also of my clouded brain.” His constipation catches us in the sublime bind between release—an indirect, negative pleasure—and repulsion. In this moment of sublime sublimation where excess hasn’t quite lost its terror, Kant’s clouded brain sits on the cusp of recognizing its own unlimited capacity: his constipation draws out the momentary inhibition of the vital forces into a slow-motion sublime, the more powerful outpouring still waiting in the wings, a sense of something evermore about to be.

The sublime waits on the body to make its movements. If Kant’s insufficient evacuation registers an incapacity of the body, that very failure—a continual, daily occurrence, he notes—builds up an unlimited capacity within: an apparently endless accumulation of feces. As in his formulation of the sublime, an incapacity reveals and creates an unlimited capacity for the mind to meditate on, which both fascinates and repulses:

The quality of the feeling of the sublime is that it is a feeling of displeasure concerning the aesthetic faculty of judging an object that is yet at the same time represented as purposive, which is possible because the subject’s own incapacity reveals the consciousness of an unlimited capacity of the very same subject, and the mind can aesthetically judge the latter only through the former.\textsuperscript{132}

For Kant, failure facilitates the honing of aesthetic taste and the development of universal principles of close reading: “incapacity” or finiteness as failures of the human paradoxically open the human up to an aesthetic awareness of an expansive, infinite capacity within. Just as Blake’s bowel complaint as a particular type of bodily or digestive failure \textit{reads} the material movements of Wordsworth’s transcendent aesthetics, Kant’s constipation as a physical
incapacity facilitates the development of the sublime as a transcendent aesthetic category. First the fart, then the philosophy: both are bound up in a Romantic aesthetics whose transcendence constantly calls into question its own process of becoming. Hence, the mysterious production of Coleridge’s *bottom-wind* which fuses low with high, solid with gas, farting with figuration in a dialectic of aesthetic inspiration which approaches the literally organic processes producing artistic “spontaneous overflow.” It is indeed possible to understand Coleridge’s bottom-wind as a comic reading of Romantic authenticity. If sudden fits of feeling trope sincerity, sudden fits of the body are more often risible, though perhaps no less sublime.

If calling Coleridge’s bottom-wind a fart seems a bit far-fetched, it may help to recall that he often describes his farts as such violent and uncontrollable bottom-winds, shaking him to the very core: “breezes of Terror blowing from the Stomach up thro’ the Brain,” and elsewhere, “winds & breezes, gusts from the bowels of the Volcano upward to the Crater of the Brain, rushings & brain-horrors.” As in Kant’s constipation, the physiological disturbances of the stomach are played out on the brain as well as the bowels, as they work their way upward from the bodily lower stratum to make mental life a literally gut-wrenching experience. It could be that the rhetoric of Romanticism—the “correspondent breeze” of poetic inspiration so often relied upon in Romantic poetry—gives Coleridge a language in which to couch his constipative condition. Or, from another perspective, he rewrites Romanticism around his constipation. Romanticism and bowels are mutually constitutive: the latter affirming the physiological force of the former, the former lending imaginative credence to the latter.

It is possible—if somewhat perverse—to re-approach Coleridge’s poetic process from this perspective. Take Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode,” for example. Certainly the poem charts a creative failure, but the extent to which this failure is based on a bodily blockage has
been perhaps underrated. This connection—one which Coleridge’s chronic constipation helps to elucidate—importantly colors how Romantic poetry imagines its bodily life. The swings in the aesthetics of the poem itself—its ever-varying rhyme scheme, its indecisive meter, its tonal shifts from conversational to prophetic to apostrophic—of course perform the sudden undulations of the raging storm “that rav’st without” (99). But they also register the corresponding inward agonies of the poet himself—both mental and importantly bodily, under the horrors of introspection and indigestion. In a significant revision of his pantheistic optimism in “The Eolian Harp,” Coleridge makes his own body the center of Romantic subjectivity: with dire consequences, for he becomes an embodied wind instrument through which screams of agony rip. There is no subjective self that is not at the same time a somatic self.

In a passage from “Dejection: An Ode” that critics regularly associate with the bottom-wind passage, Coleridge movingly describes his creative constipation:

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,

A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,

Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,

In word, or sigh, or tear— (21–24)

Critics have often referred to this moment as marking “the waning of [Coleridge’s] creative imagination,” but it’s really more of a blockage, and it feels less aesthetic than actual. More painful than poignant, what Coleridge describes here is a physical failure: the body does not perform its proper part—“no relief, / In word, or sigh, or tear.” If words, sighs, or tears do come, they offer no relief; but it is also possible that they don’t come forth at all: if cogitation is clogged in “Dejection,” so too is the corpus, and a failure of emotion follows hard upon a failure of motion. Too deep for tears even, Coleridge’s problem is lodged within the inward turns of his
intestinal tract. If grief names a “mental pain, distress, or sorrow,” it equally locates “a bodily injury or ailment . . . a disease, sickness.”

Or doesn’t locate. Part of the poetic performance in “Dejection” is how often Coleridge denies words their function as referents and thus intensifies the pain he cannot name. “Pang” is an especially potent word here, especially as it is evoked only as an absence: “a grief without a pang.” The clause initially seems to deny the physiological force behind Coleridge’s grief: it is without “a sudden sharp spasm of pain which grips the body or a part of it.” So much for constipation. Yet, “pang” is also “a sudden sharp feeling of mental anguish or intense emotional pain,” suggesting the lack of a clear affective register for grief as well. Neither “pang” is apparently relevant to Coleridge’s grief which must name something else altogether. But it is the precise absence of “pang” through its self-cancellation that gives grief its poetic power and terror in Coleridge’s account. Grief itself becomes an absence in the poem—“a void, dark, and drear”—which names nothing but its own unknowability. “Pang” encapsulates the kind of tense spasm it names by containing conflicting accounts of what it is and contradictory accounts of its origins, forging its own absence. “Pang” is a linguistic bind whose force becomes only more potent when absented from the poem: “without a pang” is a double negative, negating the already self-negated and thus calling it back into existence as a named but un-nameable force. “Grief” becomes synonymous with “pang” in the very instant it claims to be without “pang.” This linguistic bind perhaps approaches the problem of why no mere “word” will give relief to this grief, but it also reinforces the nearly tangible pain of Coleridge’s grief by producing poetically a tension which approaches physiological constipation.

In the absence of a “natural outlet” to give him relief, Coleridge yearns for an “impulse” to “startle this dull pain, and make it move” (19–20). Just what sort of movement does he
anticipate? In addition to aesthetic or creative stirrings from the imagination within, and possibly
the Wordsworthian “impulse from a vernal wood” from without, a diarrheic development
appears an apposite solution to break up his bind. Where words won’t work, the bowels just
might come through. Compare the dull pain of Coleridge’s “Dejection” with this account of his
actual constipation: 140

Weight, Languor, & the soul-sickening Necessity of attending to barren-bodily
sensations, in bowels, in stomach, or organ of Taste. . . . the Obscure, or the disgustful—
the dull quasi finger-pressure on the liver, the endless Flatulence, the frightful
constipation when the dead Filth impales the lower Gut. 141

If Coleridge can’t quite put his finger on the problem in “Dejection,” here it lays its “dull quasi
finger-pressure” on him, locating a physical source for psychological—“soul-sickening”—
turmoil. The idealist register of “Dejection” finds its bodily counterpart in Coleridge’s
constipation. Its mysterious “smothering weight” and “stifled, drowsy” grief are here named the
“Weight” and “Langour” attendant on “barren-bodily sensations.” Obscure origins haunt
Coleridge here as well, for just as in “Dejection” there is something far more deeply interfused
about his pangs than he can quite name or locate, “in bowels, in stomach, or organ of Taste”: 
turn where he will, Coleridge’s soul sickens as his body lays bare its organic life. Rather than
anchoring him in a more certain sense of self, Coleridge’s body responds to his inward turn with
its own series of inward turns, shifting his subjectivity like “a sort of bottom-wind, that blows to
no point of the compass, & comes from I know not whence, but agitates the whole of me.”

If the “barren-bodily” is “soul-sickening,” Coleridge’s alliterative pairs forge not merely
a somatic relation between body and soul, but also a poetic relation. Indeed, just as a prosaic
ethic often spurs on his poetic output in “Dejection,” an imaginative poetics undergirds his
apparently frank depiction of “barren-bodily sensations.” His bare self stripped and laid open to examination, Coleridge finds passing comfort in the aesthetics of experience. His “dull quasi finger pressure on the liver” is at once obscure and painfully precise, coming close to a tactile sublime: it’s a kind of disgust that finds delight in the very development of the elongated, syllable by syllable description that performs its bodily occurrence, as the repeated “ur” sounds slowly but surely grind in, sonically imitating the pressure that they name. Coleridge delights in the description, as he does of the ensuing “endless Flatulence”: an unsurpassable depiction of sublime sublimation as a literally un-envision-able (if sonically resonant) infinity that both frightens and fascinates. The subtly alliterative “Fs,” occasionally capitalized, that call out to each other through Coleridge’s description aesthetically perform his endless Flatulence: a continuous Fart that echoes across his very description.

What Coleridge invokes in “Dejection,” is in fact a sort of flatulent bottom-wind to relieve his dull pain. Indeed, the “Mad Lutanist” that breaks up the middle of the poem with “a scream / Of agony by torture lengthened out” (97–98) functions like a release valve for stomachic turmoil, yielding a sudden, silent calm: “But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence! / And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd, / With groans, and tremulous shudderings—all is over—” (114–16). It perhaps seems odd that Coleridge should quiet down his poem with two forceful exclamations: if they reinforce the urgency, the grammatical markers seem to undercut the tone that the imperatives seek to initiate. Thus, hush! and silence! encapsulate the poem’s attempt to link rupture with release, bodily turmoil with tranquil restoration and imaginative transcendence. They turn up the volume on transcendence: their exclamation points grammatical reminders of the violent exertions that attend even the most ephemeral forms of transcendence. Hence, the “tender lay” that takes place of the “tremulous shudderings” is more tumultuous than
it may at first seem, and loud screams again punctuate the end of the stanza, undercutting the soporific effect the poet tries to induce on himself: “’Tis midnight, but small thoughts have I of sleep” (126). The bodily tensions Coleridge seeks to negotiate and resolve are structured into the aesthetics of the poem itself. The problems of the body are equally problems of language.

It’s significant in this context that Coleridge turns to Wordsworthian poetics to break up the bind and calm his intestinal attack. The “tender lay” summons a lyrical ballad to temper the ode’s own tendency to excess, to restore tranquility to its intestinal tumult:

It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and loud!

A tale of less affright,

And tempered with delight,

As Otway’s self had framed the tender lay,—

’Tis of a little child

Upon a lonesome wild,

Not far from home, but she hath lost her way. (117–123)

The inward-turn conceived of physiologically must seek relief outside of itself: Wordsworth the physician comes carrying poetic physic, doses of regulative rhythms to phlebotomize the continually crazed Coleridge and slow the swell of his ever burgeoning body. Just look how it turned out for Blake! Turning outside of himself, Coleridge momentarily achieves the release he desires. Bodily release, of course, as Coleridge well knew, has its pains as well as pleasures. The odd exclamation point again grammatically offsets the image that the language it punctuates has explicitly set forth: “sounds less deep and loud!” Emotion recollected in tranquility waits on spontaneous overflow: no tranquility without tumult. Delight just as soon turns to distress, as the
dialectic rears its ugly head in the closing couplet: “And now moans low in bitter grief and fear, / And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear” (124–25).

The strange shifts, aesthetic absences, and continual contradictions in the Dejection Ode take their life from Coleridge’s constipation. He knew well what it was “to weep & sweat & moan & scream for the parturience of an excrement with such pangs & convulsions as a woman with an Infant heir of Immortality,” and he aestheticized these pangs and convulsions into a poetic statement of utter abjection detailing the failure even of Romantic aesthetics to relieve him of his bodily distress. Transcendence is no easy matter, but neither is matter: Coleridge, on finally getting an enema:

The Surgeon instantly came, went back for Pipe & Syringe & returned & with extreme difficulty & the exertion of his utmost strength injected the latter. Good God!—What a sensation when the obstruction suddenly shot up!—I remained still three-quarters of an hour with hot water in a bottle to my belly (for I was desired to retain it as long as I could) with pains & sore uneasiness, & indescribable desires—at length went/O what a time. . . .

To be sure, the “mountain-birth” he prays is passing in the Dejection Ode returns here with cathartic, but confounding implications: “indescribable desires” that combine penetration, ejaculation, and evacuation in “a void, dark, and drear.” Void becomes verbal in this context: “to discharge (some matter) from the body through a natural vent or orifice, esp. through the excretory organs; to eject by excretion or evacuation.” Indeed, “Dejection” itself describes not just a “depression of spirits; downcast or dejected condition,” but also an “evacuation of the bowels, faecal discharge.” Coleridge named his poem precisely what it was. Critics just haven’t taken him enough at his word.
Which brings us back to “internalization” and the problems of critical extraction. Inside Out Romanticism restores the intestinal integrity of Romantic internalization by expanding the terminology of imaginative aesthetics beyond the limits of critical extraction. A simple *Oxford English Dictionary* search seemingly might do as much, but expanding definitions also expands the history of aesthetics in odd ways. Attending to the internal rhythms of physiological life in Romantic poetry restores a critical complexity to Romantic thinking itself. It is not enough merely to point out that Romantic transcendence may be more material than imagined. Inside Out Romanticism puts pressure on Romantic criticism to reinvest its attention in the odd affective affinities between sincerity and slapstick that emerge from an embodied account of Romantic aesthetics. Blake’s bowel complaint is a deadly serious matter. But if we take it seriously as a critique of the constraints of a close reading that privileges affective and imaginative sincerity, which I insist (contra Abrams) that we must, it produces an endless Flatulence that we hear again in the creative consternation of Coleridge. Attending to the organs (and their discontents) of Romanticism’s organic aesthetics recovers a comic tonal quality lost in the turn to transcendence, but captured in the linguistic constipative bind that voiding materiality necessitates. Such is the metaphysics of the physical that W. J. T. Mitchell emphasizes: the paradox of getting organic with Romanticism is that, like Byron’s appendix, it leaves us searching for something that can’t quite be recovered, that may have already in fact been removed. What I call a “comic tonal quality,” in other words—though suggested by the substantial turns of physiological inwardness implicated in Blake’s bowels, Byron’s appendix, and Coleridge’s constipation—is almost impossibly insubstantial, ephemeral, difficult to account for in any context. The physical is, as Mitchell rightly notes, “a thoroughly metaphysical concept”:146 even as it is experienced it flits away into airy aesthetics. The only thing left is to
give to that airy nothing a local habitation and a name. Attending to Romanticism’s factitious airs, the next chapter seeks to do precisely that.
Notes

71 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “Dejection.”


73 M. H. Abrams, “English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age,” in Romanticism Reconsidered, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 58–9. See also Jerome McGann’s critique of Abrams’ positive critical commitment to an ideology of Romantic self-representation in Jerome McGann, The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 21–31. J. Hillis Miller, though not cited by McGann, anticipates McGann’s critique in his review of Abrams’s Natural Supernaturalism: “Natural Supernaturalism is questionable, it seems to me, both in its fundamental assumptions and in the more or less unspoken methodology it employs. . . . Abrams’s presuppositions . . . are themselves a version of Western metaphysics, even a version which might be defined as Romantic. . . . In all these modes of interpretation Abrams perhaps takes his writers a little too much at face value, summarizes them a little too flatly, fails to search them for ambiguities or contradictions in their thought, does not ‘explicate’ in the sense of unfold, unravel, or unweave.” J. Hillis Miller, “Tradition and Difference,” Diacritics 2.4 (Winter 1972): 8, 11. McGann’s brief comment on the indebtedness of Bloom’s thesis to Abrams’s earlier essay can be observed in Bloom’s statement: “The Real Man, the Imagination, emerges after terrible crises in the major stage of the Romantic quest, which is typified by a relative disengagement from revolutionary activism, and a standing-aside from polemic and satire, so as to re-center the arena of search within the self and its ambiguities.” Bloom, “Internalization,” 22.


75 Abrams’s indebtedness to Frye is muted in Natural Supernaturalism, but Bloom acknowledges Frye’s influence on the thesis of internalization in his essay, though he parts with Frye on the objective of internalization: “Northrop Frye . . . says that ‘in Romanticism the main direction of the quest of identity tends increasingly to be downward and inward, toward a hidden basis or ground of identity between man and nature.’ The directional part of this statement is true, but the stated goal I think is not.” Bloom, seemingly following Blake’s critique of Wordsworth, claims that Frye over-emphasizes the unity of nature in his formulation, arguing that “nature could not provide adequate context . . . [for] a wider consciousness that would be free of the excesses of self-consciousness.” Bloom, “Internalization,” 21.


77 Robert James Allard, Romanticism, Medicine, and the Poet’s Body (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 2.

78 It may be useful to consider Abrams’ elaboration (gestured to by Allard) of Wordsworth’s metaphor of “spontaneous overflow” in The Mirror and the Lamp, as his earlier formulation of Romantic aesthetics here sets up his later explication of internalization in Natural Supernaturalism: “Wordsworth’s metaphor ‘overflow,’ suggests the underlying physical analogy of a container—a fountain or natural spring, perhaps—from which water brims over. This container is unmistakably the poet; the materials of a poem come from within, and they consist expressly neither of objects nor actions, but of the fluid feelings of the poet himself. . .
The orientation is now toward the artist, the focus of attention is upon the relation of the elements of the work to his state of mind, and the suggestion, underlined by the word ‘spontaneous,’ is that the dynamics of the overflow are inherent in the poet and, perhaps, not within his deliberate control.” M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1958), 47. Curiously, for Abrams, ‘spontaneous overflow’ is a metaphor of internalization.


81 Jackson, *Science and Sensation*, 14. Susan J. Wolfson has also recently interrogated what she calls the “turns of literary action” from solitary consciousness to social authorship engaged in “a web of reciprocally transforming and transformative creative subjects.” For Wolfson, the solipsistic turn inward is refracted “through a countervailing dynamics of interaction” that “suggests a social investment.” Susan J. Wolfson, *Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 2, 1. Where Wolfson continues to stress a notion of psychological inwardness in her preference for an account of authorial consciousness as a socially productive force, I argue for authorial embodiment as a form of aesthetic social emersion.

82 I develop this point more fully below in my reading of the “Immortality Ode.”


84 He notes that while Jerome McGann stresses an organic sensibility in Wordsworth’s poetics, McGann doesn’t interrogate fully enough the scientific resonance of the term “organic” as relates to early 1800s psychology and philosophy. Ibid., 70.


89 Wilner is suggestive on this point, stressing the inadequacy of an inner/outer dichotomy for describing “the literal, metaphorical, or phantasmatic transfer of some entity and its associated functions from an ‘outside’ to an ‘inside.’” The “inhibition and involution of energies arising from within and tending toward outward discharge” operate according to a different sort of inner/outer dialectical logic when conceived of poetically. Wilner, *Feeding on Infinity*, 3-4.
In addition to Jackson and Richardson, Denise Gigante has compellingly interrogated Romantic aesthetics according to paradigms offered by contemporary understandings of biological life, showing how the spontaneous excess of Romantic aesthetics derives part of its ideology from a scientific notion of vitality, a self-animating life principle existing mysteriously beyond the mere mechanical operations of the organs. The life of the body was not wholly reducible to the functioning of its organs, according to the debates over vitality in the late nineteenth century. Thus for Gigante, turning to the organs of the body as a source of Romantic inspiration opens up what W. J. T. Mitchell calls the “profoundly metaphysical” concept within the physical: “As the concept of vital power sparked a preoccupation with self-generating and self-maintaining form, it quickened the category of the aesthetic, elevating natural researchers into natural philosophers attempting to account for a mysterious power buried deep within the structures of nature. Life scientists focused on the dynamics of organic form in an effort to explain how form emerged and maintained itself, despite the laws of a physical environment that worked, meanwhile, to reduce it to its constituent parts. Aesthetic theorists and practitioners alike focused on the vitality of form.” Denise Gigante, Life: Organic Form and Romanticism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 5. Attending to the actual organs underneath organic form thus allows for an understanding of aesthetics as poised between the material and the transcendent, articulating something like a mysterious materiality. See also Denise Gigante, “The Monster in the Rainbow: Keats and the Science of Life,” PMLA 117. 3 (May 2002): 433–448.


Ibid.


Both Jerome McGann and Bernard Beatty raise the problem of applying organic metaphors to a reading of Don Juan. Beatty writes, “Indeed since the openness of Don Juan to its future is shown to be dependent upon Byron’s relation to his, we can see why organic metaphors are both appropriate and yet, as Professor McGann argues, inadmissible.” McGann and Beatty both resist the tendency to refer to growth or process as the operative metaphors for poetic development in Don Juan, but as Alan Richardson points out, “organic” is a more complex term when considered in the context of internal organs: while McGann and Beatty may ultimately be correct in resisting simple organic metaphors, the complex functioning and failure of an organ like the appendix shows that a different sort of organicism may get closer to describing the narrative poetic processes at play in Don Juan. Indeed, Beatty’s description of the strange devices that sustain the narrative allows for an odd sort organicism underwriting Don Juan: “For when we read Don Juan, we cannot avoid noticing the bizarre but recognizable devices by which it is sustained. Moreover, as the obstacles to the poem’s course and survival thicken and deepen so the poem’s abilities to incorporate, withstand, bypass or repel alien life-forms increases. Of course, the use of an organic metaphor such as this can scarcely be neutral but the appeal to the reader’s undoubted acknowledgement of process and kind may be admitted for it is given definition by pain.” Bernard Beatty, Byron’s Don Juan, (Totowa: Barnes & Noble, 1985), 8, 2.
Robert Mitchell recently raises this possibility: “[I]n a world in which living human bodies come under the sway of systems, or a System, one can counter this control only by engendering corporeal shocks and affective counterflows. The mission of art, from this perspective, is to commit itself to sticky, slimy, oozing forms of transgression that will enable a controlled form of collapsurgence, and in this way allow audiences to achieve the extra-artistic goal of recognizing and freeing themselves from an otherwise hidden system.” Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013), 105. My formulation for space within the human body that reconstitutes the relation to nature may also be usefully considered in the context of Giorgio Agamben’s reformulation of humanism around a “mobile border”—a species divide—“within living man” through which “the division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human” first passes: “What is man, if he is always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae? It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way—within man—has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values.” Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 15–16.

It may also be worth noting that an inside/out approach to language has long characterized various “deconstructive” approaches to criticism that challenge the traditional critical search for basic paradigms of (lost) historical unity, teleology, and cultural knowledge in literary texts. Turning traditional accounts inside out, or reading backwards from the front, these accounts argue that the “origin” of modern fragmented subjectivity was itself already a dispersal: “They affirm that the situation of dispersal, separation, and unappeasable desire is the ‘original’ and perpetual human predicament. The dream of primal and final unity, always deferred, never present here and now, is generated by the original and originating differentiation. The beginning was diacritical.” Miller, “Tradition and Difference,” 12.

Stallybrass and White appear to have done the most damage to Bakhtin’s critical value, though his study is a necessary antecedent for their own. Calling Bakhtin’s “false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression” a “generous but willed idealism,” and concluding that it is “wishful and finally unusable as an analytic tool,” Stalybrass and White characterize the carnivalesque as a “mobile set of symbolic practices . . . reveal[ing] its political dimensions to be more complex” than Bakhtin suspected. They go on to argue that “the politics of carnival cannot be resolved outside of a close historical examination of particular conjunctures: there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression.” Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 14, 10, 15, 16.

“The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.” Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 19–20.

Ibid., 44.

“But this aspect is outside the scope of our work.” Ibid.

Stallybrass and White’s paradigm of high and low culture might thus be seen to recapitulate in slightly different terms the relationship that Bakhtin suggests between Romanticism and grotesque realism: in its flight from the body Romanticism discovers a dependence on its movements and metaphor-making possibilities: “The ‘top’ attempts to reject and eliminate the ‘bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is frequently dependent upon that low-Other . . . but also that the top includes that low
symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life.” Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics*, 5.

104 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 36, 47.


106 Consider in this context Geoffrey Hartman’s concluding remark on Wordsworth: “Wordsworth, despite his love for the older writers, and especially for Milton, can turn to no one in his desire to save nature for the human imagination. He is the most isolated figure among the great English poets.” Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 338. When Milton controversially injects laughter into his cosmos, it is to show a God laughing *at* human foibles and conjectures. In a significant revision of Milton, Wordsworth’s heavens laugh *with* humanity, making his own isolation all the more poignant.

107 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 38. In Manfred Pfister’s *History of English Laughter* one comes across a common critique of Bakhtinian laughter: “In terms of such a historical project, Bakhtin’s highly influential and persuasive model of ‘carnivalesque’ or transgressive and subversive laughter is perhaps somewhat unfortunate, as it has tended to obliterate historical difference once again and thus re-instated one particular form of laughter as laughter’s anthropological and timeless essence.” Manfred Pfister, “Introduction: A History of English Laughter?,” in *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond*, ed. Pfister (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), vi. This is simply not true: even if his primary interest is the carnivalesque form of Rabelaisian laughter, Bakhtin carefully delineates several historical deviations away from this model. He may be overly in thrall to the carnivalesque as an originary concept from which other paradigms emerge, but the claim that he “has tended to obliterate historical difference” is an un-nuanced caricature of a complex historical study.

108 In the Prospectus to *The Recluse*, Wordsworth writes of penning a poetry “by words / Which speak of nothing more than what we are.” Paul Fry makes takes this for the title and thesis of his recent account of Wordsworth, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*; following Abrams in making the Prospectus a thesis of Romantic poetry, but implicitly reversing Abrams’ narrative of internalization, Fry argues that “The ontic, unsemantic self-identity of things, underlying and no doubt fostering the imaginary timelessness of custom: this is Wordsworth’s true theme, constantly touched upon yet shied away from, masked at various times in more acceptable—but less original—pantheist, quietist, and idealist registers.” Paul Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 7. There’s an ambiguity to Wordsworth’s phrase from the Prospectus that Fry underrates: from another perspective, the lines can be construed as exalting “nothing” as the primary thing Wordsworth’s poetry speaks of. In other words, absence is his theme over and against what we are.


It’s interesting, although probably not overly significant, that Bloom reprints his essay in a collection dedicated to Geoffrey Hartman. Indeed, Bloom’s dense and elusive/allusive style owes much to Hartman, suggesting a similar subtle stylistic performance, and an appreciation for the odd tone that Blake’s bowels strike in a reading of Wordsworthian poetics.

In addition to Robert James Allard and Noel Jackson, Joshua Wilner makes significant use of Bloom’s thesis in his exploration of the critical genealogy of internalization.

It’s worth noting that J. Hillis Miller takes M. H. Abrams to task in his review of *Natural Supernaturalism* for precisely this oversight: an unsubtle embracing of Romantic metaphors as signs whose meaning is ultimately stable and directly translatable: “[Abrams’s] own theory of language is implicitly mimetic. Language is taken for granted as the straightforward mirror of an interchange between mind and nature, or between mind, nature, and god.” Hillis Miller, “Tradition and Difference,” 10.

In this way his own study significantly mirrors “The Circuitous Journey” of religion and literature he develops throughout the study.

Rather, he goes on to discuss “occasions when Wordsworth trembled on the brink of the inner abyss, but found consolation.” Ibid., 449.


Ibid.


Laporte locates the creation of a liberal subject in the identification of the individual with his shit: “To touch, even lightly, on the relationship of a subject to his shit, is to modify not only that subject’s relationship to the totality of his body, but his very relationship to the world and to those representations that he constructs of his situation in society. . . . Thus it was that the politics of waste branded the subject to his body, and prefigured, not so insignificantly perhaps, the Cartesian ideology of the I.” Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Bernabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 29, 31.

Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 141–42.

Ibid.


See John Beer’s argument that “In this passage Coleridge comes closest, perhaps, to expressing the philosophy of life that he had recently been exploring.” John Beer, *Coleridge’s Poetic Intelligence* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1977), 208.


Ibid.

I am indebted here to Paul Youngquist’s brief, but cogent reading of Coleridge’s constipation as “an occasion for moral introspection and reform. Coleridge resolves to submit to the imperatives of proper embodiment, to avoid stimulants and adhere to more healthful norms of bodily function and behavior.” Though Youngquist notes that “The phrase ‘bad bowels’ occurs like an alias at the mention of his name in Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals,” he does not attempt to connect his observations on Coleridge’s bowels to a reading of his poetics, which is what I undertake here. Paul Youngquist, “Romantic Dietetics! Or, Eating Your Way to a New You,” in *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism*, ed. Timothy Morton (Houndsmills Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 244, 242.


Ibid.

Ibid., 2086.
144 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “void.”

145 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “dejection.”

Chapter 2: The Factitious Air: A Romantic Metaphor

Oh Tom! such a Gas has Davy discovered! the Gazeous Oxyd! oh Tom! I have ha[d] some. it made me laugh & tingled in every toe & finger tip. Davy has actually invented a new pleasure for which language has no name. oh Tom! I am going for more this evening—it makes one strong & so happy! so gloriously happy! & without any after debility, but instead of it increased strength & activity of mind & body—oh excellent air bag! Tom I am sure the air in heaven must be this wonder working gas of delight.

—Robert Southey, letter to Thomas Southey (1799)

I

This chapter explores the poetic life of the Romantic era’s “factitious airs”: the artificial, laboratory-produced chemical combinations—such as nitrous oxide, hydrocarbonate, and carbon dioxide—developed in the burgeoning scientific sub-field of pneumatic chemistry. In the wake of the discovery of oxygen as an element in the 1770s, breathing—apparently the most organic and natural of human processes—takes on an artificial life: air itself can be broken down into its component parts and rearranged into alien forms. I argue that this specific historical context challenges the authenticity and organic unity of Romantic poetics: reread in the context of pneumatic chemistry, artifice, not authenticity, becomes the primary ethos of Romantic poetry. The experiments with factitious airs at the Pneumatic Institution in Bristol in the last years of the century—headed by Thomas Beddoes and his energetic assistant Humphry Davy, and attended
by Coleridge, Robert Southey, and *Lyrical Ballads* publisher Joseph Cottle—create a cultural conversation that comes to characterize the aesthetic arguments of early Romantic poetry.²

Several influential critical accounts of the aesthetics of breathing in poetry, particularly those of Charles Olson (1950) and M. H. Abrams (1957), postulate that invocations of breath and breeze in poetry—as metaphors or as rhythmic or sonic techniques—underscore an organic humanism, a kind of natural truth, operating within aesthetics.³ I use the factitious airs of pneumatic chemistry to test the limits of these valuable critical accounts, suggesting that a more historically particular account of air unsettles the easy assurance with which these critics map atmosphere onto aesthetic authenticity. I show how the recourse to metaphors of breath and breeze in the poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular undercut as often as they endorse a wholesome humanism. Thomas H. Ford’s recent critical return to Romantic-era atmospheric aesthetics makes this a timely moment to reconsider the artifice that an historical consideration of atmosphere infuses into the fictions of Romantic poetics, lest such critical accounts continue to re-inscribe ideologies of authenticity already offset by the poetic life of factitious air in the Romantic era itself.⁴ Recent historical accounts of the rise of pneumatic chemistry in the late eighteenth century—especially those of Mike Jay and Richard Holmes—have established compelling scientific paradigms within which to read Romantic literary productions. In throwing Romanticism into sharp scientific relief, I follow the recent work of Sharon Ruston and Robert Mitchell who have extended the scientific turn in Romantic literary studies to include the elucidating if complex contexts of laboratory science and experimental medicine.⁵

Implicit, and at times explicit, in my account is an argument about critical methodology. If pneumatic chemistry offers a perfect test-case for new historical criticism by providing a set of contexts, documents, and cultural conversations within which to reconceive Romantic literature,
the new historical approach comes back through time to reconceive the origins of deconstruction. If atmosphere is conceived of as inherently deconstructive, or deconstruct-able in the late eighteenth century, its appearance as aesthetic form in Romantic poetry underwrites the ideology of deconstruction at play in Romantic aesthetics. If, as Marjorie Levinson argues, “deconstruction’s ideology of reading is Romanticism’s ideology of writing,” deconstruction has a life in the sciences that its own apparent adherence to linguistic structures has effaced. A chemical combination ceaselessly rewritten, deconstruction is another type of factitious air.

What about laughter? The scientific experiments with factitious airs at the Pneumatic Institution are an important, often neglected chapter in the history of laughter. Laughter is notoriously difficult to pin down, but pneumatic chemistry provides a tangible context: the development of nitrous oxide, or “laughing gas,” becomes something of a public spectacle at the turn of the century and makes the life of laughter more mysterious. Like the other artificial laboratory atmospheres at the Pneumatic Institution, laughter is literally fake. A scientific simulation that apes authenticity, it hovers somewhere between the human and the alien, the spontaneous and the scientific, the ideology of Romanticism and the reality of Romanticism. If the satirical tendencies of laughter undercut the sincere, sympathetic side of Romanticism, the scientific life and language of laughter expose the fictions of spontaneity and authenticity that spur its aesthetics. Where Bakhtin argues that laughter loses something of its full festive potential in the Romantic era, I posit a scientific explanation for this waning: the laughter of the laboratory is an enthusiastic artifice that comes close to mirroring Romantic poetry’s aesthetic ideology of authenticity so as to reveal its essential artifice. Romantic poetry writes over this artifice, incorporating a lost laughter into its aesthetic style. In this chapter, I explore this possibility in a perverse reading of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” showing how its aesthetics
emerge out of the laboratory of laughing gas rather than the opium den of the Romantic imagination that continues to sweep scholars off their feet.

Like Romantic poetry, the nitrous oxide experiments contained the seeds of their own comic un-writing. The experiments at the Pneumatic Institute occasioned a good deal of sometimes serious, sometimes genial satiric backlash. I consider several satirical spin-offs from the experiments—particularly a verse parody and a print caricature—to show how, as with Romantic verse parody, these satires expose the latent comedy of Romantic-era laboratory experimentation by offering faithful renderings that deconstruct themselves when put into the relief of different generic settings. The importance of the comic life of the nitrous oxide experiments to developments in Romantic poetry and parody, and also then to the development of deconstructive criticism, is a perspective that has not been fully developed in the major accounts. By bringing together several different critical discourses, this chapter seeks to reinvest the aesthetic history of breathing in the Romantic era with the language of laughing gas and to show how this combination creates a kind of factitious air of criticism: a breeze that vexes its own creation in a satirical deconstruction of its component parts.

II

Pneumatic chemistry was in the air in the late eighteenth century: much to the surprise of respiring humans everywhere, oxygen was first discovered in 1772. Swedish apothecary Carl Scheele, French chemist Antoine Lavoisier, and English philosopher and amateur scientist Joseph Priestley all apparently breathed it in at about the same time. “Hard-luck Scheele,” who first discovered oxygen in 1772, but was not able to publish his findings until 1777 never quite got his due: by then Lavoisier and Priestley had already published their own conclusions on the new element. Scheele called it “fire air.” Unfortunately the name didn’t stick—publish or perish
indeed—and Lavoisier’s somewhat incorrect and generally blander “oxygène” or “oxygen” entered the English language as the preferred term by the end of the century. Priestley’s “dephlogisticated air” was, apparently, too much of a mouthful.  

His findings, however, first published in the second and third volumes of his *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air* (1774–1786), proved more influential than his nomenclature: particularly for the medical community in England, ever searching for new treatments and cures for old diseases, especially the ubiquitous consumption, newly exacerbated by the noxious fumes of the Industrial Revolution spreading a pall over the increasingly urban landscape of England. If deadly chest and lung complaints were created by inhaling bad air, could they not be cured, treated, or at least alleviated by inhaling good air? So Priestley’s logic and that of his later eighteenth-century acolytes, Thomas Beddoes and Humphry Davy, seemed to run. Observing the effects of purified oxygen on a candle, Priestley hypothesized in his *Experiments*: “From the greater strength and vivacity of the flame of a candle, in this pure air, it may be conjectured, that it might be peculiarly salutary to the lungs of certain morbid cases, when the common air would not be sufficient to carry off the putrid effluvium fast enough.” Beddoes and Davy set out to verify Priestley’s conjecture with the opening of their Pneumatic Institution in Bristol in 1798: initially a kind of outpatient clinic experimenting with the effects of inhaling various combinations of air on patients with lung and chest complaints. As historian Mike Jay writes, “Beddoes would bring the latest discoveries in pneumatic chemistry into the sphere of medicine by setting up a combined pneumatic laboratory and infirmary where he would isolate all the airs that chemistry could produce, and systematically test them on patients suffering from consumption and other lung conditions.” The 1799 public notice for the
Institution suggests the extraordinary optimism Beddoes and Davy had for their oxygen compounds:

It is intended among other purposes for treating diseases, hitherto found incurable, upon a new plan. . . . [T]he attendance of persons in Consumption, Asthma, Palsy, Dropsy, obstinate Venereal Complaints, Scrophula or King’s Evil, and other diseases, which ordinary means have failed to remove is desired. . . . The application of persons in confirmed consumption is principally wished at present; and though the disease has heretofore been deemed hopeless, it is confidently expected that a considerable portion of such cases will be permanently cured.10

“Incurable,” “hopeless,” “ordinary means have failed”: the fin-de-siècle rhetoric of decay sets off the remarkable wonders expected from the Institution and its aspirations to literally breathe new life into the dying century. The paradox of this medical revolution was its reliance on old sources made new: an atmosphere broken apart and put back together differently, as Beddoes insisted, “The more you reflect, the more you will be convinced that nothing would so much contribute to rescue the art of medicine from its present hopeless condition, as the discovery of a means of regulating the constitution of the atmosphere.”11 For Beddoes, the development of internal medicine must draw its inspiration from external sources: reorganizing the atmosphere might just re-organ-ize the human body—filling the lungs with new materials with which to infuse the healthy life of the body—the artificial made literally organic.

With the advent of pneumatic chemistry, then, the late eighteenth century suddenly had new ways of breathing and new types of air to breathe: the discovery and isolation of oxygen as an element led to the laboratory creation of more or less respire-able chemical compounds like nitrous oxide, hydrocarbonate, and carbon dioxide, as well as pure oxygen itself. More than just
scientific curiosities, these airs offered the possibility of a revolution in medical treatments for the ubiquitous chest and lung conditions such as miner’s lung, asthma, and consumption that preoccupied much of eighteenth-century medicine. Unlike the dubious benefits of pills and purgatives, topical ointments and salves, which in truth offered little more than a temporary alleviation from symptoms, pneumatic chemistry’s “factitious airs” promised to act directly on the human lungs by breathing new life into them. “Several years ago,” wrote Beddoes, “a firm persuasion settled upon my mind that the system might be as powerfully affected by means of the lungs as of the stomach.”

Re-centering the focus of medical attention around a different set of organs, Beddoes sought the (literal) reorganization of medical approaches to internal disease through the use of factitious airs.

As he wrote to Erasmus Darwin, pneumatic chemistry has given us “the command of the elements which compose animal substances. . . . [I]t is the business of pneumatic medicine to apply them with caution and intelligence to the restoration and preservation of health.”

Breathing had an added scientific significance in the late eighteenth century: it offered new possibilities for old diseases, a new way forward for a suffocating century. However novel and promising, the application of chemistry to medicine went against the prevailing opinion of the medical “profession” at the time: despite ever more intricate discoveries in the fields of anatomy and botany—probing the very metaphysics of physics—most physicians remained oddly committed to a staid, simpler range of remedies: powders and purgatives, emetics and herbal balms. Chemistry brought with it specters of alchemy and iatrochemistry: the magic of medievalism long exorcised along with its aspirations for unnatural transmutations. If they were in fact a breath of fresh air, the factitious airs also carried the suspicious scent of charlatanism. Pneumatic medicine—and the new types of breathing it ushered into the eighteenth-century
consciousness—toed the unenviable line between the proven and the speculative, the actual and
the fantastical, the old and the not-quite-yet new. Like a breath taken in and held momentarily,
about to be expelled, it was poised on the cusp of a sense of something evermore about to be.

Beddoes’ language also subtly suggests a new concept of human composition in which
the elemental pieces making up the substantial essence of the human scientifically considered
can be isolated and recombined—composed differently—so as to create a healthier, or more
substantial, human. Such a possibility opens up an important dialogue between pneumatic
chemistry and early Romantic poetry. Wordsworthian poetics seeks something similar: a new
method of composition in which language is stripped down to something almost elemental, to its
earthly, human essence so as to promote the health and restoration of the reader. Wordsworth
speaks of a “plainer and more emphatic language” that will communicate the “elementary
feelings” of man “incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” so as to
counteract the sickly and stupid productions of the day. Wordsworth’s Preface remixes the
linguistic atmosphere of aesthetics in order to create novel effects: “The principal object, then,
proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate
or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by
men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby
ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.”15 Wordsworth takes the
elemental materials of language and filters them through the apparatus of the imagination to
create unusual and alleviative poetic forms. His radical poetics partakes of the revolutionary
logic of pneumatic chemistry’s factitious airs: by getting closer to the human it will heal him, but
it first must be broken apart and recomposed. Poetic composition writes chemical compositions
onto the Mind of Man: and on his body too, literally composing him, soothing and alleviating his
depraved modern condition, psychologically and physically fragmented by the rapid advances of industrialism and the hopelessly muddled politics of the French Revolution. But it must embrace its own artifice to do so. The organic unity which Wordsworthian poetics seeks only comes through a heightened awareness of aesthetic artifice and intentionality. Like the supposed health benefits of factitious airs, its authenticity emerges from an atmosphere of artifice: a fake composition with reality effects. The scientific life of Wordsworthian poetics, considered in the context of pneumatic chemistry, is less natural than it appears: an aesthetics of artifice which paradoxically spurs its humanist hopes.¹⁶

Literary critics who have attended to the importance of “breathing” and “air-in-motion” as metaphors for inspiration in Romantic poetry have too often neglected the novelty of pneumatic chemistry’s “factitious airs” and the radical concepts of composition they introduce into the atmosphere of Romantic poetics. Thomas H. Ford’s recent account of Wordsworth’s atmospheric aesthetics betrays the same oversights that characterize M. H. Abrams’s much earlier study of Romanticism’s “correspondent breeze”: namely, a lack of critical attention to the scientific developments of the eighteenth century that made atmosphere an historically novel concept for the Romantic poets. Such oversights tend to perpetuate a Romantic ideology of all-encompassing poetic spontaneity—autonomous and authentic—that effaces the meticulous artifice of poetic expression. “Breathing,” writes Abrams, “is only one aspect of a more general component of Romantic poetry. This is air-in-motion, whether it occurs as breeze or breath, wind or respiration—whether the air is compelled into motion by natural forces or by the action of the human lungs.”¹⁷ To this formulation we should add “whether the air is compelled into motion by hydraulic bellows and a green silk bag,” for the experiments at the Pneumatic Institution confront us with another type of air-in-motion: a factitious, laboratory-produced wind that more
subtly moves through the borders of the artificial and the organic that Romantic poetry sought to probe. Abrams is quick to point out that the “symbolic equations between breeze, breath, and soul, respiration and inspiration, the reanimation of nature and of the spirit, are not peculiarly Romantic, nor in any way recent,”18 and a major aim of his essay is to elucidate precisely what is distinctively Romantic about how these metaphors are used by the Romantic poets. His conclusions are unconvincing, or at least incomplete, as he claims that “above all, these writers exploited attributes of the wind which rendered it peculiarly apt for the philosophical, political, and aesthetic preoccupations of the age.”19 To the philosophical, political, and aesthetic preoccupations of the age we need to add “scientific preoccupations,” for what was really new or novel about wind, or air at the end of the eighteenth-century—and therefore peculiarly Romantic and recent—was that it could be produced and inspired in the controlled conditions of the scientific laboratory.

If Abrams’ account of atmosphere in Romantic poetry overlooks one of air’s historical registers—leading to an incomplete account of its poetic function during the Romantic era—Thomas Ford’s recent study relies too much on what Romantic poetry has to tell us about its own breathing, leading to an over-emphasis on breathing as the special province and authentic truth-claim of Romantic poetry, differentiating it from the human insights of nearly all other fields:

[U]nlike the knowledge attained in biography, history, chemistry, botany, mineralogy, medicine, law, natural philosophy, or navigation—all of which Wordsworth specifically names by point of contrast—poetry does not create statements that can be confirmed in records, verified experimentally, or proved in court. . . .[T]he evidence for the truth claims of poetry resides in the way those truth claims are communicated. And the only
distinguishing feature of this communication that Wordsworth allows, as we have seen, is rhyme and meter, atmospherically conceived.\textsuperscript{20}

Atmosphere breathes truth into Romantic poetry. At least according to Wordsworth, whose conclusions Ford adopts for his own. Yet, Wordsworth’s claims come out of a dialogue with Humphry Davy (as Sharon Ruston has pointed out),\textsuperscript{21} whose scientific experiments in breathing different types of air unsettle the apparently natural truths that only poetry is privy to through its atmospheric aesthetic of rhyme and meter. If poetic statements cannot be verified experimentally, they perhaps partake of an experimental logic in their aesthetic inspiration: a testing out of different atmospheres that offsets a singular vision of universal poetic truth. Wordsworth unsurprisingly glosses over this scientific inspiration to exalt his own craft, but a critical account of atmospheric Romanticism should not replicate his own evasions.

While Ford offers a welcome return to an aesthetics of atmosphere as a means of exploring the material underpinnings of poetic language—perhaps offering another version of what Paul de Man has called Romantic poetry’s aspirations for the real—his critical perspective is too often clouded by Romanticism’s own self-representations. Because Romantic poems seem comfortable with their own atmosphere, Ford is comfortable making atmosphere a central tenant of their poetic aspirations:

[I]n the early nineteenth century, the poetic transmediation that moved between and knit together the discrete material strata of language was understood as atmospheric. Perhaps this is why the poetic imagination was so frequently described by the Romantic poets as a cloud, a fog, a mist, as the element of air under one of its tangible, visible, perceptible aspects; why it was that Romanticism was so aerial, so vaporous, so transitory.\textsuperscript{22}
Ford appears to take for granted the assurance with which Romantic poets make recourse to atmospheric language and aesthetics to develop their own poetics; thus, Romanticism becomes aerial, vaporous, transitory (though one might well wonder where Wordsworth’s “rocks, and stones, and trees” fit into such a formulation). Yet, Romantic poetry frequently calls into question its own insistence on such metaphors for inspiration and imagination: indeed, uses such metaphors to undercut their own apparent function. Thus, in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, the breeze that seems to rise so spontaneously and organically from the poet himself in correspondence with the natural atmospheric breeze that enlivens his verse from the very start quickly becomes “a tempest, a redundant energy, / Vexing its own creation” (46–47). Wordsworth’s atmospheric aesthetic vexes its own creation, adopting a critical perspective on its own emergence and development as a generative poetic force. As in Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode,” the harmonious, gentle breeze is also a deconstructing tempest, at least momentarily confounding the type of transmediation Ford attributes to a poetic language based on breathing.

Breathing, in short, is as often the problem of Romantic poetics as it is a wholesome solution binding together poet, poetry, and material world: in Wordsworth it unbinds precisely the “material strata” it is assumed to bind. Or, put in another way, breathing is not as natural a process as it initially appears. It is possible that Romantic poems so often develop a critical reading of their own operations—explore and unearth their own artifice—because their natural breathing also at the same time entails an artificial breathing. The characteristic operations of Romantic poems might be said to derive their aesthetic self-awareness from the advances of atmospheric science. Embracing an aesthetic of the atmosphere in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century entails embracing an artificiality that undercuts the supposed organic unity of Romantic poetics. Rather than a transmediation between material strata and poetic language,
atmosphere allows for an uneasy and reflexive relationship between naturalness and artifice that characterizes the tension in many Romantic works.

III

Romantic poems often offer in their very development a critical reading of their own poetic operations and procedures, thereby exposing the artifice of the poetic performance. Wordsworth’s opening to The Prelude provides an important example of how this simultaneous process of poetic development and deconstruction occurs with or is even created by an invocation of a breeze that is at once organic and artificial—a breeze that blows from everywhere in nature, but whose mysterious origin belies the poetic artifice exposed in that very evasion: “Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze” (1.1). At the same moment the line develops the narrative context of the poem, it performs what Ford calls its “breezy mediality” with the single-syllable opener, O: a sound which announces a process of breathing, allowing for an intake and an output of air, a circulation troped by the very shape of the letter and the mouth pronouncing it. A reading or a speaking of the poem, then, creates—from the very first syllable—the gentle breeze it narrates. In fact, “this gentle breeze” in the opening line refers not merely forward to the narrative development of the poem—the breeze “[t]hat blows from the green fields and from the clouds, / And from the sky” (2–3), literally surrounding the poet and inspiring his epic—but also back to the “O” which began it. The best way to see this is to imagine the line with a colon after the initial syllable: “O: there is a blessing in this gentle breeze.” This gentle breeze is the O.

There is a religious sanctity and blessing in the halo-like eternity of the circular O: a breeze or breath which is a spiritus, as heavenly as it is human and earthly. Thus, the “mind of
man” is exalted into a “fabric more divine” in the final line of the epic, welding together and apotheosizing (or making transcendent) the dynamic at play in the initial movements of the poem as the spiritus inspires and is inspired literally by the poet. The poem comes full circle, back to its opening. As it moves forward, then, the poem also moves backwards in a kind of circular motion like the O that begins it. As the poem immediately progresses, the breeze now blows from the fields and from the clouds and from the sky, encircling the poet in an “O”-like embrace: a new, welcome type of captivity for the poet “from yon City’s walls set free, / A prison where he hath been long immured” (7–8). If the poet is surrounded by the gentle breeze, he himself and not merely the epic begins in media res. The poem creates and reflects back on the breeziness or breathing it narrates to reveal its own constructed-ness: the gentle breeze is a factitious air—some combination of the actual and the artificial played out in Wordsworth’s atmospheric aesthetic.

The initial “O,” then, is also the “corresponding mild creative breeze” the poet memorably feels rise from within him some forty lines later: the poet’s mouth opening and breathing forth his creative verse: “For I, methought, while the sweet breath of Heaven / Was blowing on my body, felt within / A corresponding mild creative breeze” (41–43). In truth, the opening line of the poem has already established precisely this correspondence between inside and outside, between poet and nature, between artistic creation and heavenly inspiration: Wordsworth merely circles back to it in a moment of poetic correspondence. The spots of time blended in Wordsworth’s process of poetic remembering, which create the characteristic temporal dialogism reconciled only in the poet’s mind, are equally spots of sound: or rather, breaths which call out to other breaths creating the circulation that inspires the poem itself.25
Thus, the opening line of *The Prelude* is precisely that: a literal opening that places the poet at the site of somatic inspiration. As such it welds together in one moment—one sound—the metaphor for inspiration with the material of inspiration, an output with an intake. But a broad, or an epic view of the poem as a whole—if it does in fact reveal that it is a hole, or an opening—reveals that this is not an opening line at all—or, at least not a straight line—but rather a line that aspires to become a circle.\(^{26}\) Just as an individual segment of a circle, viewed minutely, will appear as a straight line, so does the opening line of verse, taken singly, appear to proceed forward: its poetic feet advancing along, walking like the poet himself several lines later. Of course, the poet is not advancing, but is rather retreating, going backwards, returning to the home from whence he came. So too does the line loop back on itself, as the epic develops a series of poetic returns and repetitions: its circular aspirations become visible as the poem develops and slowly zooms out to reveal the (w)hole. A more minute view of the poem—the line broken up into its component parts—also reveals the circular operation at play in *The Prelude*. Obviously the circular “O” (sound, letter, word) begins this process, but the meter itself pronounced as poetic feet is merely a series of repeated sound patterns: if it walks forwards, it equally treads the same terrain over again, always circling back on its own movements. An accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable couples a line to a loop: a terse move forward to a meandering path backwards. An initial glance at the poem thus positions us *in media res*—somewhere in between the zoom-in and the zoom-out: at the line and not its component parts, at the line and not the poem. The poem’s fluctuations between and among these perspectives, then—epitomized by the “O”—model a process of reading the poem and thinking about it: proceeding in order to reflect. Its breathing creates a critical paradigm of reading and reflecting: deconstructing and contextualizing.
If this all seems like a long-winded way of merely returning to where I began—with a breeze that vexes its own creation, a poem that charts and critiques its own growth and development (as well as that of the poet’s mind)—it is because the complex range of critical practices that an atmosphere of aesthetics introduces into Wordsworth’s poem bears continual reiteration. Atmosphere is understood as inherently deconstructive in the early nineteenth century. Pneumatic science shows it to be a potentially artificial assemblage of component parts able to be taken apart and manipulated to mean differently. Atmosphere is also a tool of contextualization: attended to in its historical representations, it re-contextualizes the apparent spontaneity of nature (as a metaphor for imagination) within a less natural and more controlled, contingent framework. It often fulfills these two roles in Wordsworth’s poem, showing us how the methodologies of new criticism, deconstruction, and new historicism converge around a radical shift in the poetic conception of atmosphere chemically considered in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Where in Abrams’s generally historical account, metaphors of breeze, breath, and wind are “peculiarly apt for the philosophical, political, and aesthetic preoccupations of the age,” Romanticism’s atmospheric aesthetics also appear an apposite paradigm for our own twenty-first-century amalgam of critical discourses in the aftermath of Eliot, Derrida, and Foucault. Atmosphere’s historical artificiality opens up new interpretive possibilities that might also force us to reconsider the origins—literary and scientific—of these dominant critical practices.

To reiterate, in the context of pneumatic chemistry, breathing takes on a new life: an artificial life that complicates the naturalness of an aesthetics of atmosphere or inhalation. The laboratory-created chemical combinations of Joseph Priestley, and later, those of Thomas Beddoes and Humphry Davy—respi-able only through various scientific apparatuses—trouble
Romantic poetry’s (literal) aspirations for organic, authentic existence with their artificial life. What Charles Olson influentially termed “Projective Verse” in his 1950 manifesto advocating an aesthetics of breathing, was for the Romantics closer to prosthetic verse: breathing in Romantic poetry couples a human being to a machine, to an inorganic other that literally inspires organic life.

Readers will have already recognized this dialectic at play in Wordsworth’s formulation for all good poetry which affixes a process of artificial production and prosthetic composition to the apparently organic “spontaneous overflow of power feelings.” The well-rehearsed “emotion recollected in tranquillity” initiates a process of poetic removal which intensifies into a more scientific rhetoric of artificiality. Feelings function poetically only when filtered through an artificial technology—possibly in this case the quill or the pen of the poet—but more importantly the language of poetry itself, a metered, rhythmic language which combines artifice with reality, in order to imbue Romantic poetics with its continual restoration through an appropriate blending of pleasure and pain, its characteristic “complex feeling of delight”: “an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely.” Wordsworth’s blending of the organic and the artificial, in short, anticipates Brian McHale’s cogent insight that “All poetry, indeed all language use whatsoever, appears to be what Donna Haraway terms a cyborg phenomenon – a human being coupled to a machine – or what David Wills characterizes as prosthesis.”

Wordsworth’s formulation bears quoting in a bit of length if only for the complex scientific language it employs to present an apparently organic poetic process:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of
reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on . . . 29

Spontaneous overflow? Maybe not: its origin—the very source from whence it springs (or doesn’t)—is Wordsworth’s laboratory of aesthetics in which emotion is carefully mixed and prepared in the most gradual of processes, finally meted—or metered—out in poetic doses. “By a species of reaction,” almost as if chemical, real feelings are distilled into fake feelings and transmuted into poetry. What appears natural—what according to Wordsworth “does itself actually exist in the mind”—is in fact “gradually produced” out of an original feeling of which it is a “kindred,” but artificial version. Spontaneity is the myth of Wordsworthian poetics that belies its origins. If intense imaginative contemplation does in fact replace tranquility, spontaneity is not its substitute, but rather a gradual mounting to poetic overflow.

This passage is remarkable for the process of distillation it exposes. Not an emotion, but a recollected emotion is the origin of poetry—an origin that is not an origin, but a shadowy memory of an origin. This recollected emotion must then be reproduced in the mind in order to yield successful composition. When poetic composition finally does begin, the poetry itself contains hardly a tangible trace of any authentic emotional origins. In fact as composition continues it proceeds only in a similar vein to its initial thrust: some parts of a poem are more artificial than others—a seemingly strange notion which the fragmentary ethos of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” bears out. Like that poem, what Wordsworth’s formulation reveals is a fundamental lack of origins at the core of his poetics—indeed, the search for an original source
for poetry in each writer’s Preface merely reveals the lack of that original, as it is continually replaced by further artificialities.

While in this respect Wordsworth’s aesthetic approach mirrors the Pneumatic Institution’s approach to the possibilities of factitious airs—adopting and adapting certain elemental structures of existence into an effective artifice advancing a radical humanist agenda for medicine—it’s difficult to determine just how much Wordsworth’s movement from authenticity to artificiality in his Preface is motivated by a scientific ethos, particularly given how extractable and applicable his metaphors are for other contexts. Wordsworth was well-read in the developments of pneumatic chemistry, as Sharon Ruston has compellingly shown. Certainly he wanted to differentiate the existence of his own poetics from the findings of other fields of knowledge, as Thomas Ford stresses; but doing so meant developing a decently sophisticated knowledge of scientific thought, the traces of which infiltrate the language of Wordsworth’s program for poetics. Aesthetics may exist above and outside of a life in the sciences, but in Wordsworth’s Preface aesthetics partially thinks itself through the language of science.

Pneumatic science in particular. Articulating the relationship of Poetry and Science, Wordsworth turns to atmospheric metaphors: “Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science.” Aesthetics offers an affective account of the statements written on the surface of science, but it does so only by first becoming a part of the ether, a finely distilled and purified piece of the air: a participant, in short, in an atmosphere artificially conceived—one that can be purified, refined, made uncommon. Poetry itself appears to transmute the materials of science by its own process of affective aesthetic refinement: it appears to operate experimentally with science, manipulating
materials of science into different forms. Science itself is a kind of factitious air inspiring the emotional outpouring of Romanticism: on the surface its findings seem coldly rational—if not artificial then purged of affect and absent of human cares—but poetry unearths the humanist principle at its core. Science’s findings are novel, radical, life-changing: like the hydraulic bellows and green silk air-bag of the Pneumatic Institution, Romantic aesthetics transfers scientific materials into human terms, allowing them their restorative possibilities. The factitious airs show Romantic poetry a means of welding artifice and organicism together into a humanist project.

Hence Wordsworth’s tolerance for and even generosity towards science in his Preface: he accepts its developments as part of a poetic discourse broadly construed. As critics have noted, he poses a relationship of mutual exchange and influence between the two discourses, in which each has valuable, even indispensable material to offer the other: 

If the labours of Men of science should ever create any material revolution . . . [the Poet] will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself. The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet’s art as any upon which it can be employed . . .

The objects of science provide poetry with material to translate from “general indirect effects” into subjective sensation, rewriting bland or abstract conjectures and conclusions according to the effects they produce for the experience of individual human existence. Poetry gives science the affective force it has not yet developed a linguistic register for and thus naturalizes it into something like human form:
If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.  

A new form of life emerges from the comingling of science and poetry: a “Being thus produced” that is at once human and not, “a genuine inmate of the household of man.” This is a being whose “genuine” authenticity and origin is offset by its outsider status as an “inmate,” a stranger within the walls of the human. The confluence of science and poetry extends the household of humanism to include strange others, alien forms of life reconceiving the nature of an inclusive humanism. Atmosphere importantly facilitates this “transfiguration” as the “divine spirit”—a holy breath coursing through and out of the poet—creates the medium in which science mixes with poetry and is sublimated into a different form. The language of pneumatic science infuses the all-encompassing spirit of poetry with strange powers of transfiguration, creating a broken apart and dispersed atmosphere in which the poet moves and mingles with “all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things” to reconfigure the relationship of the human to himself and his world: “The objects of the Poet’s thoughts are everywhere; though the eyes and senses of man are, it is true, his favourite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings.” In Wordsworth’s Preface, the expansiveness of the poetic imagination is opened up by the atmospheric advances of pneumatic science which create ever new types of air and thus ever new types of relationships between subject and object, interior and exterior, aesthetics and atmosphere.
IV

From this perspective, Coleridge’s well-known rhetorical question from “The Eolian Harp” might be re-read as a question probing or even posing a symbiotic relationship between the organic and the artificial that imparts an imaginative potential to the Mind of Man:

And what if all of animated nature

Be but organic harps diversely framed,

That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps

Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,

At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (44–48)

Could this “intellectual breeze” be a “factitious air”? “Plastic” is a curious word here. For Coleridge it often implies a creative, generative force that hovers somewhere between the material and the immaterial: in its most literal sense, “causing the growth, or production of natural forms, esp. of living things; formative, procreative”; in its more figurative application, “generating or adapting non-material, aesthetic, or intellectual ideas, concepts, etc.” His emphasis on an “intellectual breeze,” then, implies primarily the aesthetic creation entailed in “plastic,” but his equal attention to the “organic” life of nature posits “plastic” as more of a physical growth. Thus, the phrase “tremble into thought” encompasses the oscillating meaning of “plastic” by welding literal movement to intellectual creation.

So far, nothing new really: by many critical accounts, Romantic aesthetics sought precisely this blending of the ideal and the actual. But “plastic” also comes to mean “artificial,” an etymological evolution connected to its relationship to malleability: “plastic” as something that can be manipulated out of and made different from its naturally occurring state, or a process or art of so manipulating. Thus, Coleridge’s “intellectual breeze” may in fact be less natural than
it feels. It may in fact be more closely related to the factitious, or artificial, airs of pneumatic chemistry, which Coleridge himself respired on several occasions. His “plastic” at least flirts with the factitious, and this characteristic Romantic utterance, postulating the authentic, organic life of its aesthetic aspirations, is conditioned on potentially artificial inspiration. Coleridge’s rhetorical posturing becomes a troubling and timely interrogation of the hierarchies of humanism: what if all animated nature thinks through—is indeed partly controlled by—artificial life?

This might be a new way of posing the question. At the very least it complicates one highly influential version of poetic breathing that provides the impetus for many of Thomas Ford’s recent observations on Romanticism’s atmospheric imagination. The humanist aesthetic discourse of Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” (1950) emphatically sets forth breath as the true ontological objective of poetry. “Breath,” he writes, “is man’s special qualification as animal. Sound is a dimension he has extended. Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these as they are in himself (in his physiology) . . . then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size.”⁴¹ Attending to and representing the breath of his own body, the projective poet recaptures and expresses nothing short of his own soul: “the projective poet will [go] down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama, has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all acts spring.”⁴² Origins are in the poet himself—his very life-breath—and are the special province of the human when he is fully attuned to his whole self—a self which incorporates flesh and spirit, body and soul.

It’s a wholesome way to think about breathing, but ultimately not very nuanced. Breathing, sound, and even language are surely not the human’s special qualifications. Breathing
in Romantic poetry often attests to this fact: “’Tis my faith that every flower / Enjoys the air it
breathes,” Wordsworth writes, indicating a central tenant of his poetics. Breathing places man in
relation to other, non-human breathers. Even when represented sonically in a poem as the breath
of the poet — by a syllable, a foot, a space, an enjambment, a caesura — breathing calls out to the
breath of other breathers, notably the reader, but also to the non-human antecedents of breathing
that filter air and make it respire-able. Projective verse is not as unifying as Olson would have it:
breathing incorporates not one body (and soul), but many different types of bodies; it implies not
unity, but dispersion just as breathing entails a taking in as well as a going out. Thomas Ford
cogently develops this more nuanced perspective in his re-articulation of projective verse in the
earlier context of Wordsworth’s atmospheric aesthetic:

Through the exercise of poetic breathing, we inhale a new understanding of the objects
that surround us. . . . Entering into the body of air that is the poem, forms and substances
acquire a new objectivity—paradoxically by being desubstantialized. Interspaced by
shared patterns of breath, language—the common language of prose—allows the aerial
experience of even inanimate objects to be communicated.43

Thus, Coleridge’s question again, slightly tweaked: what is man if he breathes the life-breath of
non-man?

With its many invocations of breeze, breathing, and air-in-motion in implicit historical
conversation with the factitious airs of pneumatic chemistry, this is a prescient question that
Romantic poetics may pose more persistently than critics have tended to notice. It’s a question
that Giorgio Agamben gives central importance in his recent reformulation of humanism which
stresses a “mobile border”—a species divide—“within living man” through which “the division
of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human” first passes:
What is man, if he is always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae? It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way—within man—has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values.44

A poetics of breathing probes this mobile border, reproducing (or even producing) as it does an operation occurring within the human body that is nonetheless manifestly not a specifically human process: the mobile border is crossed, “the intimate caesura” breached. As in the experience of other bodily processes, the myth of the body’s human autonomy is shattered. But if breathing does in fact cross a mysterious relational border within the human, it is also a far stranger process than this in the early nineteenth century. In the context of pneumatic chemistry, breathing ushers the artificial into the realm of the human and its organic others.

Romantic poetry is of course often deeply relational, but the extent to which this relationality is situated towards artificiality rather than organic nature or animal life can often go unnoticed. Take for example Wordsworth’s well-known concluding lines from his *Immortality Ode*:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,

Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, its fears,

To me the meanest flower that blows can give

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears. (205–9)45

Ostensibly the lines chart a not fully articulable relation between nature and human cognition: the flower yields a sublime depth of poetic contemplation that defeats material representation. The sympathetic beatings of the human heart open up a channel of communication between
human and nature which, while presumably restorative, nevertheless cannot quite be communicated. What’s crucial to notice here is the barely present breeze that nonetheless plays a part—and that a needful part—in this process. A poetics of breathing or breeze itself lies too deep under this set of lines that it might at first remain unnoticed. A breeze does indeed blow through these lines that not only ruffles the meanest flower, but also recalls and re-invokes the restorative wind that enlivens the poet earlier in the poem and (as in this final set of lines) intensifies his relationship to the natural world: “The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep, / And all the earth is gay” (28–9). The sympathetic pathway to the outside world opened up within the heart is itself created and mediated by a process of breathing facilitated by the oxygen that the flower provides: the human heart by which we live must pump oxygenated blood through its chambers and pathways in order to live. It’s a passage, in short, that subtly develops the concept of the correspondent breeze that Wordsworth later articulates in *The Prelude*.

Thus, breathing might be said to inspire this entire process of sympathetic exchange: “blows” is the most important word in this passage for it invokes an invisible, ungraspable pathway between poet and nature that may well explain the barely articulable nature of the final lines. To the extent that the solace offered in Wordsworthian poetics is often ungraspable—a feeling rather than a realization—to the extent that, despite the poet’s own sense of assurance and comfort in his own conclusions, the poem still imparts a strangely troubling sense of uncertainty, this sense may arise from the feeling of an invisible, ominous breeze threatening to vex its own creation. Indeed, the rhythm—or poetic breathing—of the final lines of the poem might be said to be broken or disrupted by this breeze, as the line containing its blowing breaks the even pentameter with an odd eleven-syllable line. This line jars with the soothing sounds of poetic diction which Wordsworth imagines literally composing the reader (in his Preface to *Lyrical*
Ballads), structuring into the very fabric of the lines the sense of unease that pervades Wordsworth’s wished for closure. In addition to its rhythmical uncertainty, “blows” opens up a space of verbal ambiguity in the line: is the flower acting here—expelling oxygen—or being acted upon by an outside presence? It has, simultaneously, an active and passive presence in the line that interrogates the pathetic fallacy it apparently invites by momentarily denying the flower’s ability or agency to breathe naturally, from itself. It is rather potentially blown on by some mysterious breeze whose origins are elsewhere—arising earlier in the poem “from the fields of sleep,” whose uncertain referent has long troubled critics. Thus, as I earlier argued, invocations of atmosphere as often trouble the organic unity of Romantic verse as they do bind it together. The stability of the poetic paradigm of sympathetic transfer offered in the final lines of Wordsworth’s “Ode” is destabilized by the very structures of imagery that purport to hold it together. Possibly because it rests on potentially artificial inspiration: the factitious airs that pneumatic chemistry breathed into the early nineteenth century taint the naturally occurring breezes invoked in Wordsworth’s poetry with an artificiality that unmakes what it inspires.

V

On or about April 8, 1799, the nitrous oxide experiments became the laughing stock of pneumatic chemistry’s revolutionary aspirations. One of the most spectacular failures of pneumatic chemistry, nitrous oxide, like the other factitious airs, promised consumptives, asthmatics, paralytics, and syphilitics a cure for their more or less constant conditions, but ended up merely pulling the rug out from under the Pneumatic Institution. Almost literally: if it ultimately did little to alleviate the symptoms of patients, nitrous oxide lightened the atmosphere of the laboratory by transforming it into a site of physical comedy from which laughter emerged
and towards which laughter was directed, in a comic combination of the artificial and the authentic. In what follows, I chart the curious developments of Humphry Davy’s laughter laboratory in the Pneumatic Institution, showing how the nitrous oxide experiments both inform and trouble Romantic poetics, bringing insincerity and artifice to bear on the apparently spontaneous organicism of Romantic verse. In this context, I re-read Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” as an aesthetic reflection on the life of the laboratory: a scientific poem whose development more closely links it with the spontaneity of nitrous oxide than the soporifics of opium. Like nitrous oxide itself, it attempts to replicate, not actually reproduce, the experience of opium. The spontaneous but somehow also controlled excesses of experimentation that the nitrous oxide experiments publicize motivate the movements of Coleridge’s poem, and its unfulfilled attempt to encapsulate the experience of experiment aesthetically. If laughter troubles the Romantic imagination, as it so often seems to, I argue that the roots of this antipathy are as much located in the artifice of Romantic science as they are in the insincerity of satire, both dark doubles of the sympathetic humanism Romantic aesthetics aspires towards. Satire also finds a space in pneumatic science, and I conclude by considering how closely connected its comic observations are to the genuine hypotheses of pneumatic science, revealing the linguistic and artistic truth of a deconstructive atmosphere.

The relationship between the nitrous oxide experiments and Romantic poetry has become of increasing interest to Romanticists recently, particularly amongst scientifically-minded scholars seeking to expand the critical consciousness of the overlap of literary and scientific discourses; to these accounts, my own version adds an emphasis on how the actual occurrences of laughter and physical comedy in the laboratory disrupt particular ideologies of Romanticism, as well as how the comic side of science that the nitrous oxide experiments expose comes to
anticipate, via parody and satire, the later development of deconstructive models of literary interpretation.

A vibrant and dynamic culture of intellectual exchange—which extended to include Coleridge, Robert Southey, Joseph Cottle, and (at various points) Wordsworth, in addition to Thomas Beddoes and Davy—sprung up in the years surrounding the establishment of the Pneumatic Institution in Bristol. Sharon Ruston, Catherine Ross, and Alice Jenkins are correct in characterizing these relationships as dialogues of mutual exchange and altercation out of which new conceptions of both science and poetry emerged; for just as the poetic aspirations of early Romanticism fueled Davy and Beddoes’ optimistic vision for pneumatic chemistry’s salvific future, so too did the speculations of science filter into the rhetoric of Romanticism.\textsuperscript{47} The mere chronology of momentous poetic and scientific events in these years is itself revealing of this intellectual osmosis: the first edition of \textit{Lyrical Ballads} is published in 1798, the initial nitrous oxide experiments take place in 1799, Davy’s \textit{Researches} with his observations on the experiments come out in 1800, the same year that Wordsworth writes the first Preface for \textit{Lyrical Ballads}. Davy actually proofread the second volume of \textit{Lyrical Ballads} for Wordsworth in 1800, and Wordsworth ordered a copy of Davy’s \textit{Researches} on the very day the second edition of \textit{Lyrical Ballads} was published, just months before making additions to the 1800 Preface for the eventual 1802 version.\textsuperscript{48} Echoes and allusions abound in these texts, suggesting just how intriguingly enmeshed the discourses of science and literature were. Molly Lefbure’s half-farcical portrayal of the Bristol group as an “elitist drug circle,”\textsuperscript{49} is actually quite suggestive of this process of energetic exchange, for as the laughing gas experiments demonstrate, passing the pipe—or the air-bag, in this case—often tropes passing the poetry, the philosophy, and the physic.
The experiments also provide us with a different conceptual model for the Romantic imagination. Consider again Coleridge’s passage from “The Eolian Harp” which I earlier read in the context of factitious air:

What if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversly fram’d,
That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the soul of each, and God of all?

M. H. Abrams cites this passage as emblematic of Romantic poetry’s infatuation with “air-in-motion” as a metaphor for poetic inspiration, wryly observing of the wind-harp that “without this plaything of the eighteenth-century, the Romantic poets would have lacked a conceptual model for the way the mind and imagination responded to the wind, so that some of their most characteristic passages might have been, in a literal sense, inconceivable.” Yet, Davy’s subjects—with recourse instead to the green silk air-bag—often made startlingly similar conceptual leaps: “I feel,” wrote one, “like the sound of a harp.” “As if all the muscles in my body were put into a violent vibratory motion.” Indeed it is possible that the air-bag rather than the wind-harp provides us with another, less natural conceptual model for the negotiations Romantic poetry sought between mind, body, and imagination; respiration and inspiration.

“O! excellent air-bag!” exclaimed Robert Southey in a letter to his brother Thomas recounting his initial experience inhaling nitrous oxide—that “wonder-working air of delight”—at the Pneumatic Institution in July of 1799. His inflated apostrophe to Humphry Davy’s green silk bag, from which he inhaled this “dephlogisticated nitrous air” or “laughing gas” as it came to be known, marks simultaneously the exuberance and absurdity that characterized the nitrous
oxide experiments. If on the one hand they offered the possibility of fulfilling the Institution’s mission of “treating diseases, hitherto found incurable, by a new plan,” or in short, as Thomas Beddoes wrote to Jos Wedgwood, of “realis[ing] the expectations and conjectures I originally started,” on the other hand, they transformed the Institution of Dowry Square, Hotwells, into something not unlike the pantomime of Drury Lane, London. As Mike Jay writes, “By day it remained a clinic for the sick, and a laboratory for Davy’s animal experiments; but at day’s close it became a philosophical theatre in which the boundaries between experimenter and subject, spectator and performer were blurred to fascinating effect, and the experiment took on a life of its own.”

Odd antic motions—stomping, capering, and tap-dancing about the rooms—accompanied fits of convulsive laughter. In one case, a female subject dashed from the laboratory and into the street, leaping over a great dog in her way. James Tobin rained down a series of good-natured blows on Davy, Davy himself “shouting, leaping, running”: the same sorts of physical displays, in other words, with which Joseph Grimaldi was just beginning to enthrall the London stage. The most memorable depiction of this “science as spectacle” was, of course, James Gilray’s satirical print detailing Davy’s public nitrous oxide demonstration at London’s Royal Institution several years after the initial trials at Bristol. The green silk bag features prominently in the cartoon, as a devious Davy oversees the transfer of the factitious air from hydraulic bellows and chemical apparatus to portable green bag and human subject, a genteel fellow in evening attire. As he inhales, the subject simultaneously emits a copious effluvium of gas from his bowels, much to the shock and amusement of his well-dressed peers. Excellent air-bag indeed.

That the spectacle of the laughing gas experiments themselves could and can indeed generate laughter is itself a point worthy of further consideration. For if the signature effect of
nitrous oxide—a wild burst of laughter—was almost always described as uncontrollable or spontaneous, it was of course, anything but: in order to induce such a response, Davy and Beddoes had to carefully heat potentially explosive crystals of ammonium nitrate in a specially designed chemical still, transforming them from a solid to a liquid, and finally to the gaseous state suitable for inhalation. The very name “factitious,” which is to say artificial, given to such chemical airs as nitrous oxide affirms that this was, to be sure, laboratory fabricated laughter. It occasioned its organic other, however, in the amused and bemused responses of witnesses to what Joseph Cottle called the “laughable and diversified effects produced by this new gas on different individuals.”

To experience the nitrous oxide experiments, then, either as a participant or as a witness, was to be caught somewhere between the artificial and the organic, the deliberate and the spontaneous. The energetic Davy—both scientist and spectacle, observer and participant at once—brings together in his person these apparently antithetical concepts, and his observations published in *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical; Chiefly Concerning Nitrous Oxide* (1800) often chart the curious overlapping of meticulous rigor and reckless abandon entailed by the term “experiment” itself. As Davy records, “In April, I obtained nitrous oxide in a state of purity, and ascertained many of its chemical properties. Reflections upon these properties and upon the former trials, made me resolve to endeavour to inspire it in its pure form. . . . I was aware of the danger of this experiment.” Even in this description, controlled steps in the scientific process—obtaining, ascertaining, reflecting—are tied up in danger, uncertainty, and chance, generating something like the “new imaginative intensity and excitement” that Richard Holmes argues characterized Romantic science: “it was driven by a common ideal of intense, even reckless, personal commitment to discovery.” Davy’s very language detailing his thought process—
“reflections made me resolve to endeavour to inspire it”—is methodical but oddly tortuous, getting close to, leading up to, but also dancing around the explosive encounter itself. Thus, it nicely encapsulates a linguistic effort—a lyrical straining—to weld together experience and recollection.\(^{58}\)

Similar binaries—of rumination and spontaneity, of observation and emersion—inform William Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, a text itself which Wordsworth presents as a type of experiment, “scientific in its methods,” as Sharon Ruston has recently emphasized.\(^{59}\) In Wordsworth’s famous metaphor for all good poetry “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” is tempered—“modified and directed” he writes—by moments of thoughtful reflection and recollection;\(^{60}\) his very formulation for the writing of valuable poetry, then, parallels the trajectory of Davy and Beddoes’s experiments. For if Davy’s visceral responses to nitrous oxide constitute a spontaneous overflow of their own sort, they too yield to a scene of contemplative reflection. “In ten minutes I had recovered my natural state of mind,” Davy writes; after passing a night in “undisturbed repose,” he begins to account for and articulate what he explicitly calls the “strong emotion” elicited. Yet his account of this emotion, recollected in tranquility, amounts to a memory imperfectly recalled: “the next morning the recollections of the gas were very indistinct, and had not remarks written immediately after the experiment recalled them to mind, I should have even doubted of their reality.”\(^{61}\)

Like Wordsworth’s Preface, then, the laughing gas experiments pose tangled questions of writing and recollection, in which the failure of language to account for the exact emotion produced by the experience constitutes its own type of sublime substitution for scientific precision. As Mike Jay writes, “Language itself needed somehow to be hijacked to give an adequate sense of the experience. . . . Beddoes’ prose was stretched to its limits to accommodate
[the sensations of profound pleasure]. Davy and Beddoes’s grasping after language—and their ultimate inability to successfully use it to encompass experience—stands in for the particularity of observation that scientific research supposes; in that failure itself, however, lies a more perfect sublime sense of the results of the experiments. Like the Wordsworthian process, which “involves,” Jerome McGann notes, “a technique of soft focus that melts the ‘whats’ of the experience in a meshed network of ‘hows,’” Davy and Beddoes’ observations consistently conjure an ineffable sense of an experience not quite reducible to a mere record of facts. Similarly, Wordsworth writes in The Prelude that “the soul, / Remembering how she felt, but what she felt / Remembering not, retains an obscure sense / Of possible sublimity.” This obscure sense of possible sublimity is diffusively if also humorously felt in Southey’s “O! excellent air-bag!”—for, like the experiments themselves, his expression emerges at the border of the sublime and the absurd from which laughter erupts. Seeking a heightened rhetoric with which to depict the experiments, he can only manage this inadequate, nearly spluttering platitude of enthusiasm, which serves merely to call forth further laughter. The language—its sublime aspirations and failures—becomes in the process its own type of laughing gas.

But laughing gas occasions more strictly poetic forms of expression as well. Consider Humphry Davy’s “On Breathing the Nitrous Oxide”—the scientist waxes poetic in a performative display of the aesthetics of atmosphere:

Not in the ideal dreams of wild desire
Have I beheld a rapture-wakening form
My bosom burns with no unhallow’d fire
Yet is my cheek with rosy blushes warm
Yet are my eyes with sparkling lustre fill’d
Yet is my mouth replete with murmuring sound
Yet are my limbs with inward transports thrill’d
And clad with new born mightiness around.65

Davy’s verse strives to capture the spontaneous thrill of the nitrous oxide experiments: in its garbled grammar, linguistic leaps, and rapid repetitions of images it attempts to replicate the experience of inhaling nitrous oxide. Scientific structures become poetic forms, just as chemical combinations trope aesthetic techniques. Despite the physicality of Davy’s imagery, his grammar initially makes the focus of his poem difficult to discern: “Not in the ideal dreams of wild desire / Have I beheld a rapture-wakening form.” His grammar of negation—Not—leaves the reader momentarily adrift with no clear referent other than that which is being denied, producing a kind of disorienting idealism even as the clause denies the power of an idealist register to account for the experience it narrates. If experience surpasses the ideal or the imaginative, it must nevertheless invoke the absence of the ideal as a necessary condition of its own superiority. The overwrought, erotic experience detailed in the following lines relies as much on the supposedly negated “wild desire” of idealism for its force as on the repetitive series of physical images that seek to continually reproduce the experience. In fact, the series of images, while ostensibly arguing for the lasting power of nitrous oxide’s physical effects, might be said to account for its fleeting airiness. As one image quickly succeeds another, a series of cancellations occurs in which nothing quite coheres. The images themselves are transitory—rosy blushes, sparkling eyes, murmuring sounds—passing away almost even as mentioned. The series of Yet’s seem argumentative interjections rather than affirmative assertions, undercutting the solid verbal pronouncements of present being: islare. In short, an uncertainty and instability lurks in the language of Davy’s poem, appropriately replicating the experimental life of its subject matter.
The mysteries of a deconstructed atmosphere entering into the lungs and momentarily disorienting the stability of mind and body, imagination and matter, infuse the awkward aesthetic of Davy’s opening lines and their reliance on something which doesn’t seem to exist.

The language of laughing gas thus provides us with a new critical lens through which to read Romantic poetry. Laughing gas inspires the spontaneity of Romantic verse, revealing its scientific sources and chemical life. But the nitrous oxide experiments also divulge spontaneity as a fiction. Re-reading Romantic poetry in the context of scientific experimentation allows us to see how carefully constructed and controlled its apparent spontaneity is. Consider a central moment from Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”:

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river. (17–24)

A mighty fountain suddenly bursts forth from the earth: apparently an image of spontaneous artistic inspiration. But pay attention to how carefully Coleridge controls this eruption, leading up to it by degrees with a series of single syllable sounds: “As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing.” Notice the passive voice and grammatical structure which hides the action of the overflow at the end of the sentence when Coleridge describes the outburst: “A mighty fountain momentarily was forced.” Coleridge slows down the spontaneity of his poem. Even the
colon momentarily pauses the power of the overflow—its burst is indeed “half-intermitted” by the poetic form itself. Like Davy carefully heating his crystals, Coleridge uses poetic technique to control the spontaneity of his verse. Considered as a heuristic for reading Romantic poetics, nitrous oxide, like Blake’s bowels, opens up new interpretive possibilities, or at the very least allows us to reconsider the origins of interpretive practices already in use. In the next section, I build on this possibility, extending my reading of “Kubla Khan” in the context of nitrous oxide.

VI

Coleridge could hardly resist: all the cool kids, after all, were doing it. Inhaling the gas, he felt a sensation resembling “that which I remember once to have experienced after returning from the snow into a warm room.” In a later trial he found himself in a state “of more unmingled pleasure than I had ever before experienced.”\(^67\) Beyond these notes for Davy’s *Researches*, however, Coleridge would never write about his trials with the gas again. Critics have struggled to account for this uncharacteristic silence. Nicholas Roe and Neil Vickers have convincingly shown just how tangled Coleridge’s engagement with pneumatic science was as he negotiated its advances against his own evolving and sometimes contradictory philosophies of materialism, mentalism, and religious and poetic transcendence.\(^68\) Mike Jay persuasively sums up Coleridge’s reticence: “For Coleridge to acknowledge the experience as truly transcendent would be to bring the faultline between materialism and religion into a focus that he wished to avoid. By trapping transcendence itself within a material cause, it threatened to reduce the religious sense to chemistry.”\(^69\)

But was Coleridge really silent about the nitrous oxide experiments? Certainly his correspondence, lectures, and private notebooks bear no traces, no echoes of the experiments, but
Coleridge (as we all know) was also a poet, penning some of his most characteristic verses in the years surrounding Davy and Beddoes’ experiments. I should like to pursue the possibility that the echoes of the experiments are in fact felt in Coleridge’s poetry; if not explicitly taken up, the language of laughing gas registers implicitly in the shifting energies and structural and stylistic swings that characterize his verse. Indeed, Coleridge’s ultimately debilitating opium use—now de rigeaur in major scholarship—also remained conspicuously unmentioned in his notebooks and correspondence for many years, but it was (as every undergraduate knows) a major context for his poetry.

Critics generally agree that “Kubla Khan” arises out of Coleridge’s drug-induced slumber—in no small part because this is how he insists we read the poem with its preface intervening between title and text—but perhaps we’ve been paying attention to the wrong drug. Paul Youngquist insists that “one only enters Xanadu under the influence of opium,”70 but what if we were to say that one only enters Xanadu under the influence of nitrous oxide? One thing this would allow us to notice—over and above the poem’s memorialization of the Dionysian—is the way in which it oscillates back and forth between order and chaos: “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree” (1–2). Even in the first few lines, the pleasures of Xanadu are prepared, decreed, carefully dosed out. If the “pleasure-dome” is stately it is also of the state, which is to say institutional. With an almost banal scientific precision, Coleridge immediately undercuts the “caverns measureless to man” by providing us with a few measurements: “twice five miles of fertile ground / With walls and towers were girdled round” (6–7). True, these walls—meticulously mapped out by Kubla Khan and Coleridge—are shattered and churned up in the seething core of the poem, but only after they are carefully measured out. If the poem does in fact leave us in a fit of Bacchic transport, its Dionysian transcendence comes
out of a regimen of scientific precision. Perhaps it might be better to say “one only breaks out of Xanadu under the influence of nitrous oxide.”

The Romantic era’s most interesting pleasure-dome was Humphry Davy’s nitrous oxide chamber. No longer content with the necessarily brief inhalations from his green silk air-bag, Davy commissioned James Watt to build him a small chamber in which he could immerse himself in the gas for longer periods of sustained inhalation. “On December 26th,” Davy records in his *Researches*, “I was enclosed in an air-tight breathing-box, of the capacity of about 9 cubic feet and a half.” In the course of a little more than an hour, Davy’s assistant Dr. Kinglake pumped 80 quarts of nitrous oxide—in increments of 20 quarts per fifteen minutes—into the chamber, as Davy recorded various physiological effects: changes in body temperature, pulse, sensory perceptions, and muscular sensations. Exiting the breathing-box, Davy immediately respired another 20 quarts of “unmingled nitrous oxide” from his air-bag. In a curious flight from the physiological to the psychological, Davy’s initial immersion in the sensual intensifies into an extra-sensual experience as the gas works its wonders. Initially he charts a series of heightened sensory perceptions:

A thrilling extending from the chest to the extremities was almost immediately produced.

I felt a sense of tangible extension highly pleasurable in every limb; my visible impressions were dazzling and apparently magnified, I heard distinctly every sound in the room and was perfectly aware of my situation.

Airy nothing though it is, nitrous oxide grounds Davy in a more perfect physical sense of himself and his relation to other objects. He soon becomes divorced from his surroundings, however, entering into a “semi-delirious” ideal state:
By degrees as the pleasurable sensations increased, I lost all connection with external things; trains of vivid visible images rapidly passed through my mind and were connected with words in such a manner, as to produce perceptions perfectly novel. I existed in a world of newly connected and newly modified ideas. I theorised; I imagined that I made discoveries.

Davy’s enclosure in the pleasure dome ultimately precipitates the spontaneous “eureka” moment of the laughing gas experiments: his giddy, near delirious exclamation to Dr. Kinglake, “Nothing exists but thoughts!—the universe is composed of impressions, ideas, pleasures and pains!”

What’s crucial to notice here is just how scientific this spontaneity really is. As Mike Jay rightly notes, this moment was far “more carefully constructed than it appeared.” Yet, it would be a misreading of Davy’s *Researches* to suggest, as Jay seems to, that Davy intentionally effaces the constructed nature of his epiphany in service of a philosophical pronouncement *a la* Kant or David Hartley. In fact, Davy’s account is, if typically vibrant, also subtly plodding: it reveals the careful scientific process out which the epiphany comes. Where Jay stresses Davy’s extra-sensual experience as a sudden, seemingly unanticipated development in his account, Davy himself is in fact careful to draw attention to its essential connection to his heightened sensory state: it is merely another, quasi-logical step in a progression of sensory development. “By degrees as the pleasurable sensations increased” he writes, stressing the incremental development of this process from the sensory to the extra-sensory, “I lost all connection with external things.” Davy’s transcendence only comes through a regimen grounded in the senses. His proclamation that “Nothing exists but thoughts!” is a thought made possible only through a materialist scientific process. Just as the “wild gas” itself emerges out of a carefully controlled process in which the gently heated crystals of ammonium nitrate transform from a solid into a liquid and
finally into a gas—the material made immaterial by degrees—so Davy’s own detachment from materiality, and its resulting psychological and philosophical meanderings, is realized through an intensification of the physiological; in this case, an actual heating up: Davy records the temperature of the box escalating from 50 degrees to 88 degrees over the course of the hour, and his own body temperature warming a couple of degrees. Thus, Davy’s very language—“by degrees as the pleasurable sensations increased”—approaches his material existence in the breathing-box: the laughing gas has intoxicated his language. If Davy’s Researches is obviously a “History of the Discovery,” it is also a record of the mind made material. Davy’s breathing-box—Romanticism’s real pleasure-dome—posits transcendence as a bodily process, the metaphysical as an extension of the physical: it produces intoxication by doses, and cuts loose the mind only by containing the body.

“Pleasure-dome” is of course Coleridge’s term, not Davy’s. But the phrase itself contains the paradox that Davy’s account of his breathing-box experiment and its philosophical aftermath poses: a physical pleasure that extends and increases into the infinite realm of the metaphysical comes out of a process of containment. A dome, or a box, literally places a ceiling on transcendence: a limit to pleasure. Just how high is this ceiling? What are the lineaments of gratified desire? Apparently they measure about 5x5 in Xanadu. Indeed, the first stanza of Coleridge’s poem constantly oscillates between containment and escape, the measured and the measureless: “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree” (1–2). The sentence structure itself surrounds and contains the “pleasure-dome” with emblems of institutional control: if “stately” is “grand” it is equally “of the state,” and therefore carefully controlled and mandated, as Kubla’s monarchical “decree” reminds us. The tight tetrameter of the poem similarly
imposes order on the pleasure it constructs: meting out its measurements in carefully controlled doses.

As the poem proceeds this control is undercut by the overflowing Alph: “Where Alph, the sacred river, ran / Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea” (3–5). Like the image of the Alph pouring through measureless caverns, there is something uncontainable about these very lines. Just as the Alph runs through the caverns, so too does Coleridge’s sentence run through the line. At the structural level, his enjambment performs the image of overflow that the poem develops at the narrative level. In fact, it performs the very words it enjambs—“ran / through”—becoming a version of the river itself, as it registers grammatically and narratively its overflow. Even the tetrameter breaks down in these lines. The final prepositional phrase in the sentence—“down to a sunless sea”—is an excess line of trimeter, breaking the orderly rhythmic progression of the poem and troping the overflow it narrates. As the poem proceeds from this moment of rupture, its meter is consistently inconsistent: irregular, measureless.

Coleridge again brings the poem back to an orderly measure, but its walls are no longer stable enough, once having been breached, to withstand another assault. As he seeks to impose order on his poem in the following lines, he provides a couple of measurements to offset the measureless overflow of the previous image: “So twice five miles of fertile ground / With walls and towers were girdled round” (6–7). The verse hovers awkwardly between a regular eight syllable tetrameter and an odd nine syllable line, revealing at the level of the poetic line the impossibility of the “girdling round” process it narrates. Both “miles” and “fertile” can be pronounced with one more syllable than a line of tetrameter requires. The rhythm is thus regular and irregular at the same moment, performing precisely the oscillation between containment and
eruption that the poem narrates. This becomes clearer in the second line—“With walls and towers were girdled round”—where the potentially ambiguous “towers” nearly insists on a two-syllable pronunciation, making an odd nine syllable verse. The two-syllable “towers” functions effectively in the line because its pronunciation easily elides one syllable into the next, suggesting the possibility of an even line of tetrameter at the very moment it denies that reality. Significantly, the two words of ambiguous measure—“miles” and “towers”—are “girdled round” by the very lines they disrupt: they are contained in the middle of their respective lines just as they break them in half and deny that very containment.

Thus, the apparent rupture in the poem—the spontaneous overflow of the “mighty fountain momently . . . forced”—is in fact nothing of the sort: in truth this moment has been carefully prepared by the movements and measurements of the poem itself. It is the logical progression of an incremental process—we might even say that its pleasure increases “by degrees,” the very feet of the poem leading step by step to its apparent spontaneous overflow. Its Bacchic transport, the Dionysian transcendence, of the poem arises out of its poetic procedures, but is indeed also grounded bodily in these procedures.

Indeed, there is a kind of heating up process in “Kubla Khan,” and it may well be productive to experience the poem in terms of its fluctuating physical energies or temperatures. If its final stanza provides a vision of the Romantic sublime, it also narrates a process of scientific sublimation similar to the heating of Davy’s ammonium nitrate crystals. The very solid walls and towers of the first stanza morph into the liquid center of the poem, as the five miles of fertile ground become aqueous measurements: “Five miles meandering with a mazy motion, / Through wood and dale the sacred river ran” (25–26). The walls and towers of the pleasure-dome are indeed destroyed and replaced by the river and Coleridge’s liquid style. Ultimately the
aqueous becomes gaseous as the poem completes its process of sublimation: the pleasure-dome but a shadow dancing on water, and finally an airy-nothing to be breathed by the Bacchic poet:

Could I revive within me

Her symphony and song,

To such a deep delight ’twould win me,

That with music loud and long,

I would build that dome in air,

That sunny dome! those caves of ice! (42–47)

The very pairing of heat and cold in the sunny dome and caves of ice hints at the oscillating temperatures and atmospheric imagination of the poem.

The rupture in the poem practically pants with heat: “And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething, / As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing” (17–18). The less than subtle sexual energy of this passage is also a scientific energy, and it heats up by degrees as Coleridge’s series of single syllable words—“as if this earth in fast thick pants”—leads to the elongated, two-syllable “breathing”: a kind of releasing of the tense energy built up in the first nine syllables of the line. The line performs on the reader the very image it describes: reading the line aloud, one is nearly forced to draw a breath at the end of the line—in fact, visually on the page, “breathing” is very closely connected to the “was forced” that concludes the following line, suggesting something controlled rather than spontaneous about the poem’s development. A sigh of relief after the rapid succession of syllables? At the very least it provides a pause before the “swift half-intermitted burst” of the mighty fountain re-energizes the poem: there is a possibility that the poem is playing out on the reader precisely the shifting energies it narrates. The “fast thick pants” are merely a simile in the image described in the poem, but the simile becomes
somatic when put into and pronounced by the mouth of the reader—its own kind of deep romantic chasm ejecting the “fast thick pants” and “half-intermitted burst” of the poetic language of the poem. Indeed, as with *The Prelude*, the mouth of the poet or the reader is the true topic of “Kubla Khan”: the site where the poem really takes place or space. Thus, its similes become somatic, its metaphors material, its very transcendence pronounced by the body.

It would, therefore, be incorrect and a misreading of Coleridge’s poem to say that one only enters into Xanadu under the influence of opium. “Kubla Khan” is not in fact a drug-induced vision, but is rather an experiment in replicating the Dionysian experience of opium. This subtle distinction reveals the scientific operations that undergird the poem’s development. Indeed, in the couplet that concludes his stanza of spontaneous overflow, Coleridge describes not only the narrative events of the poem, but also his own poem’s strange existence: “It was a miracle of rare device, / A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice” (35–6). The miracle of the poem—its apparent spontaneity—is merely a device: a clever apparatus meticulously constructed to create transcendence. Thus, the stanza ends with a neat couplet of iambic pentameter, reasserting order and rebuilding the walls and towers torn up at the narrative level of the poem. The poetry itself tropes the process it narrates, a lyrical straining approaching an experiment rather than an experience.

Coleridge stresses in the preface to “Kubla Khan” that this is in fact not quite the poem he composed under the influence of opium, but is rather an unfinished version of that poem. The real poem contains the “two to three hundred lines” Coleridge composed “in a profound sleep.” This is a poem that we can never really read and that Coleridge can never really write: “Kubla Khan” itself is a kind of place-holder representing Coleridge’s failure to write (or remember) “Kubla Khan”: “Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently
purposed to finish for himself what had been, originally, as it were, given to him. . . . [B]ut the
to-morrow is yet to come.” It’s a poem, in short, about another poem. Coleridge even ends his
preface by directing the reader elsewhere, to another poem (“The Pains of Sleep”) that he was able to write: “As a contrast to this vision, I have annexed a fragment of a very different
color, describing with equal fidelity the dreams of pain and disease.” 74 Like Byron’s
digressions in Don Juan, “Kubla Khan” is merely a poetic marker of a poem that we are not in
fact reading, that Coleridge is not in fact writing. As such, it proceeds scientifically, much more
closely approaching the process of Davy’s nitrous oxide experiments than a fog of opium. We
ought to recall that Davy’s experiment with his own pleasure-dome was also at least partly an
attempt to replicate—with a different drug—the mental and physical effects of a strong dose of
opium—a fact that has gone relatively unnoted in recent critical assessments of Davy’s
experiments:

To ascertain with certainty, whether the most extensive action of nitrous oxide
compatible with life, was capable of producing debility, I resolved to breathe the gas for
such a time and in such quantities, as to produce excitement equal in duration and
superior in intensity to that occasioned by high intoxication from opium or alcohol.75

Just like Coleridge’s poem, the laughing gas experiments are an attempt to artificially recreate,
reconceive, and rewrite man’s experience with the external world.

We probably don’t need nitrous oxide to arrive at all of these conclusions, but the
controlled chaos of the Pnuematic Institution sounds an awful lot like the lost music of Xanadu,
and Davy’s Researches seek but ever fail to find the words: “agreeable,” he writes, “beyond
[my] conception or belief.” The very structure of the poem moving as it does from order, to
chaos, and finally to an attempt to recall, to revive that chaos lyrically, mirrors that of the
Romantic laboratory. Coleridge’s preface serves as a set-up for this poetic procedure: here he fittingly characterizes the poem as a “psychological curiosity”—an artifact of the mind, a phenomenon which both begs and beggars scientific explanation. The “half-intermittent burst” of the “mighty fountain momentarily forced” actually does function in the poem like an irrepressible flight of sublime laughter in Davy’s laboratory: for in addition to erupting out of the institutional enclosures of Xanadu—not unlike Davy’s subject dashing from the laboratory, leaping into the street—it also necessitates a heightened, impossible to achieve language to replicate and rebuild as a sublime shadow what it has shattered with its spontaneous overflow. “Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song,” writes Coleridge,

To such a deep delight ‘twould win me,

That with music loud and long,

I would build that dome in air,

That sunny dome! those caves of ice! (42–47)

Coleridge of course cannot revive her song; and the final stanza of the poem marks the failure, the impossibility of the ideal of lyric poetry—and language more generally we might say—to recollect, recover, and recreate experience. Unable to sustain its transcendence, his lyric poetry is a controlled chaos—a delicate and violent balance between order and disorder, tranquility and upheaval—seeking but ever failing to replace the thing with the word. “[O]h! . . . deep romantic chasm”; “O! excellent air-bag!”

VII

The laughing gas experiments walk the fine line between the sublime and the comic, the transcendent and the laughable, revealing just how enmeshed these concepts might actually be.
The nickname “laughing gas” itself reveals something stomach-shaking about transcendence, welding as it does the guttural to the gaseous, what Bakhtin calls the bodily lower stratum to the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Even taken separately, each of the terms might be said to encapsulate this oscillation between the earthy and the exalted. Embodied though it may be, laughter emerges from the body into the air (is actually experienced as air), ever escaping its lower bodily origins. Vaporous and intangible, gas nonetheless brings us back to the body which produces it through a process of sublimation—chemical or intestinal.

James Gillray’s satiric print picks up on this last possibility, ostensibly characterizing the aspirations of pneumatic chemistry as just so much hot air, by turning “dephlogisticated nitrous air” into a mere fart. More than merely a fart joke, however, Sir John C. Hippisley’s flatulence in the print is a brilliant parody of the actual chemical process of sublimation needed to create nitrous oxide, and as such Gillray’s print offers an oddly precise account of the laughing gas experiments and demonstrations. What’s so interesting about this print in Gilray’s oeuvre is how normal it is. Aside from the billowing bowel gas, it is almost entirely devoid of the grotesque depictions of gaping mouths, bodily protuberances, and ghoulish deformities usually present in Gillray’s prints. Remove the fart and Davy’s leering, devilish grin, and the print could be a faithful sketch of its rather bland subtitle: “an Experimental Lecture on the Powers of Air.” The spectators scribble notes dutifully and look on with genuine, but moderate curiosity: an eyebrow raised in mild astonishment here, a monocle applied for a closer look there. Part of the fun is of course the incongruence between the scientific scribblers on the right and the uncouth riot on the left upsetting the pretensions of pneumatic(k)s, but the full force of the Gillray’s humor, I argue, rests in the near literal, barely farcical depiction of the laughing gas experiments, for it reveals a seed of comic potentiality at the core of the chemical sublime. Treating the
experiment with the utmost seriousness, the spectators in the center and right of the print mimic the satirist’s art of mimicry: of faithfully rendering to deconstruct, exalting to debunk. Only by considering Gillray’s print as a literal rendering can we fully appreciate the joke: Hippisley’s fart isn’t all that different from what actually transpired at the Pneumatic Institute.

But there is also another joke at play in Gillray’s tendency to the normal in this print. Moving from left to right, the print performs a reading of its full title: *Scientific Researches! New Discoveries in Pneumaticks! or, an Experimental Lecture on the Powers of Air*. As in the title, things get less interesting as we move along. The wondrous, the strange, the exclamatory becomes a collection of droll notes and austere nods. From this perspective, the print traces the actual trajectory of pneumatic chemistry and Beddoes’s Institution, from revolutionary new possibilities to empty (airy) rhetoric. Despite its promises, pneumatic chemistry ultimately offers nothing new at all: powdered wigs, monocles, snuff boxes, and top hats all still remain when the smoke settles, reinforcing middle-class respectability. These not grotesque, but rather quotidian items are perhaps the real subjects of Hippisley’s fart, but noses notwithstanding, the structures of society are still intact. The true import of Gillray’s satire, to reiterate, emerges most fully when considered as a faithful rather than a farcical portrayal. Amidst a grove of grotesqueries, the normal becomes the abnormal, the serious comic. The most perfect satire, as Swift’s “Modest Proposal” so deftly demonstrates, is the one that is taken entirely seriously, for it reveals the existence of the absurd on the underbelly of the actual. It is just possible that the vaporous film between the sublime and the comic conjured by the laughing gas experiments themselves provided Gillray with this new mode of representation in which exaggeration yields to exactness in a more subtle and perfect satiric rendering.
It wasn’t the first time the laughing gas experiments were faithfully translated by satire. In what amounts to a fairly decent, informative verse history of the experiments at the Pneumatic Institution, Richard Polwhele in *The Pneumatic Revellers: An Eclogue* sets out to lambast the experiments as something like a drunken orgy turned scientific, or the other way around. What becomes clear in reading Polwhele’s lively farce is that this isn’t all that new. It induces a kind of *déjà vu* for the scientifically-minded reader who has read this account before, in at least two other places: Davy’s *Researches* and Beddoes’s *Observations*. In fact, Polwhele prefaces his verse with authentic quotations taken directly from the *Observations*, insisting (perhaps) on the reality of the account to follow. Yet even without these snippets, the verse still rings true. Take, for instance, Beddoes’s grand proclamation to his guests late in the poem:

> Yet, soon shall this potent Nepenthe, I trust,
> My poor fellow-creatures exalt from the dust;
> Inspirit the weary, and banish Ennui,
> And rouse from his languor the frail debauchee;
> Give muscular power to the palsied and grey,
> Nor let trouble turn ‘an old man into clay.’

None of this differs materially from Beddoes and Davy’s actual predictions for the possibilities of pneumatic medicine. Read in the context of the advertisements for the Pneumatic Institution or in their scientific pamphlets and researches, none of these claims seem particularly comedic: exaggerated and grandiose perhaps, but covered over by a genuine sense of scientific optimism and ambition. Placed in a different medium, however, the same story tells a different tale. When pneumatic prose becomes potshot poetry, science turns satirical. One only need add a few line breaks and end-rhymes to his medical treatises and Beddoes becomes a sublime comedian. Like
Gillray’s print, Polwhele’s “Eclogue” exposes the latent comedy embedded within the sublime aspirations of pneumatic chemistry. As Beddoes concludes his oration on the dignity of laughing gas, he invites his fellow revelers “To rejoice in an air from corruption so free / As the gas, my good sirs, just emitted by me.” Here lie the early rumblings of Hippsley’s fart—the silent but deadly craft of serious satire.

But there is perhaps a subtler critical point to be made about the convergence of Gillray’s print, Polwhele’s eclogue, and Beddoes and Davy’s scientific experiments. Taken together they make up an odd dialectic, in which satire becomes the antithesis of scientific hypothesis merely by restating its central claims. The same material, in short, means differently in different mediums. Here is a kind of challenge to facile New Historicisms which map meaning across different cultural documents in apparent implicit historical conversation with each other; but as these documents show, contextual shifts are also stylistic and tonal shifts that undercut or at least trouble simple historical groupings. An apparently perfect moment for New Historical literary criticism, bringing together as they do the scientific, the philosophical, and the literary, the laughing gas experiments don’t quite seem to fit the mold. Instead of seamlessly weaving together divergent strands of historical meaning, they stand at a moment of dispersal and divergence. The laughing gas experiments are an important addition to more nuanced new historical literary criticism because they provide a model for how to read Romantic poetics deconstructively. They are in fact in implicit historical conversation with the development of a critical reading practice only later elucidated in the theoretical work of de Man, Hartman, et al. In this context it is possible that the roots of deconstruction are in eighteenth-century chemistry: not merely a literary or linguistic life, but an organic life produces the kinds of dispersals and divergent meanings deconstruction attends to. If the seeds of deconstruction are embedded into
structures of language, they are perhaps far more deeply interfused even than this: in the context of pneumatic chemistry there is indeed something literally elemental about deconstruction.

Such a possibility should cause us to reconsider Noel Jackson’s insightful recent claim that the inward-turning language of Romanticism emerges at the cross-roads of medical science and literary aesthetics. To this thesis I would merely add that the critical practices that emerge out of Romanticism’s dynamic, self-reflexive language of introspectivity also emerge out of this historical kinship. In such a context, deconstruction is more democratic and less literary. While often ostensibly a cynical levelling practice that exposes the limits of language to reveal its shortcomings, deconstruction still (perhaps arbitrarily) privileges the linguistic signifier.

Resituated historically to the 1790s rather than the 1970s, however, it achieves the dispersal of origins it so often fetishizes. The factitious airs of pneumatic chemistry infuse deconstruction with a life beyond language, exactly as organic and as artificial as breathing: “the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science.”

VIII

Breathing, it turns out, was very important to the Romantic poets: a fact made morbidly clear by the occasion of so many of them ceasing to do it at so young an age. Breathing, it also turns out, was becoming increasingly difficult to do in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as the advances and encroachments of industrialism spread a pall over the increasingly urban landscape of England. For instance, of Birmingham, Mike Jay writes, “The clank and din of wheels, furnaces, and forges never ceased; the air was thick with the acrid and oily scent of burning, grinding and polishing, and the city was dusted with a fine layering of soot, tar and clinker.” As a result, “whole families of occupational diseases, particularly chest and lung
conditions from inhaling noxious fumes, were becoming endemic.” Pneumatic chemistry and its factitious airs promised a new method of treatment for these diseases—particularly consumption—or even a means of preventing their occurrence. In this context, the restorative and inspirational metaphors of breathing and air-in-motion in Romantic poetry take on a bodily life. Significantly, at the very moment he apotheosizes that most poetic victim of consumption—the dead Keats—in Adonais, Shelley invokes the rejuvenating breath of the “wild West Wind” of his own earlier poetry:

The breath whose might I have invoked in song

Descends on me . . .

Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven

The soul of Adonais, like a star,

Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are. (55)

But metaphors are of feeble assistance, and the eternal vision of the final three lines is upset by the mortal turbulence of the preceding six. Keats is still dead, and if Shelley had striven for a resurrection rather than an apotheosis he might well have called not upon the correspondent breeze, but the factitious air. Rather than enjoining us to weep and weep again for Adonais, Shelley might have done well to encourage us to laugh. “O wild West Wind!” “O! excellent air-bag!”
Notes


7 See Jay, Atmosphere of Heaven, 34–38, for a more extensive account of the issues involved in publishing and naming the new chemical discoveries: “Where Priestley saw himself as part of a communal endeavor to elucidate the mind of God, for which no man deserved credit, Lavoisier was predatory in claiming such discoveries for his own: the Swedish chemist Carl Scheele had an equally good claim to having discovered oxygen, but his researches too were annexed by Paris” (37).


10 Notice from the Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser, March 21, 1799.

From Thomas Beddoes’ *A Letter to Erasmus Darwin MD on a New Method of Treating Pulmonary Consumption and Some Other Diseases Hitherto Found Incurable* (July 5, 1793). Quoted in Jay, *Atmosphere of Heaven*, 89.

See Mike Jay, *Atmosphere of Heaven*, 23–34, esp., 26, 33: “Physicians still tended to see their role in Hippocratic terms as the providers of a gentle and holistic framework of care, intervening as minimally as possible to restore the balance of health, with chemical fixes regarded as a risky and final resort. Their treatments consisted predominantly of herbal palliatives, dietary recommendations and lifestyle advice. . . . Qualified physicians with their expensive services were vastly outnumbered by herbalists, quacks and a vernacular culture of medical advice” (26).


Sharon Ruston and Robert Mitchell have both emphasized the scientific perspective of *Lyrical Ballads*. “The *Lyrical Ballads* has been viewed traditionally as a text hostile to science, and yet it is possible to see this text as scientific in its methods. Wordsworth states very clearly in the 1798 ‘Advertisement’ to the original edition: ‘The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments.’” Ruston, *Creating Romanticism*, 11. Mitchell makes the point more forcefully than Ruston: “Yet in fact literature first became ‘experimental’ in the Romantic era. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, explicitly described many of the poems in their 1798 volume *Lyrical Ballads* as ‘experiments’ . . . and this terminology was taken up by early reviewers of the volume, many of whom claimed to assess the success or failure of these experiments.” Mitchell, *Experimental Life*, 16. Yet, Mitchell argues that this recourse to the language of experimentation, insofar as experiment entails the production of differential and differentiating systems, actually does much to produce a rift between art and science in the Romantic era: “Wordsworth and Coleridge’s invocation of the language of experiment was the moment when this principle of the production of differences traversed the space between the sciences and the arts and was thus the point at which the arts began actively to solicit this power of differentiation from the sciences.” Ibid., 36.


Ibid., 121.


Ford, “Poetry’s Media,” 461.

Ruston compellingly argues that Wordsworth’s elaboration on the differences between the Poet and the Man of science in his revised 1802 Preface is a response to Davy’s 1802 *Discourse, Introductory to a Course of Letters* (itself a response to Wordsworth’s 1800 Preface and its statement of poetry and science as philosophical opposites): “There are many textual echoes between Wordsworth’s poetry and Preface in 1800 and Davy’s 1802 lecture, but there are also echoes between the 1802 lecture and Wordsworth’s changes to the ‘Preface’ in 1802. . . . [I]t certainly does not seem to be a coincidence that in the revisions to his ‘Preface’ published in 1802 after Davy’s Discourse, Wordsworth inserts a lengthy new section on the differences between ‘the Poet’ and the ‘Man of science.’ Responding directly to Davy’s confidence that science would
change the human condition, this passage discusses the various merits of poets and men of science, acknowledging Davy’s claims for science and further explicating Wordsworth’s concept of the differences between them. Ruston, *Creating Romanticism*, 21, 24. As I will argue below, this section of Wordsworth’s 1802 Preface incorporates an atmospheric aesthetic into its argument as well (Wordsworth had read Davy’s *Researches* on factitious airs as well as his *Discourse* by 1802), recasting the relationship of the poet and the scientist according to atmospheric artifice. Thus “rhyme and meter, atmospherically conceived” are not “distinguishing features,” but rather dialectical structures which position poetry in metaphorical relation to science, and expose the (meticulous, necessary) artifice at the core of its truth claims. Ruston does not fully explore the implications of pneumatic chemistry’s blending of artifice and organicism for Wordsworth’s relationship of the poet and scientist.

22 Ford, “Poetry’s Media,” 458.


25 It is possible that the circular “O” is a significant emblem of Wordsworth’s “spots of time”: circling back on itself, it becomes an image of spatial enclosure and temporal repetition, fusing together the stasis and continuity that Geoffrey Hartman argues characterize the spatial and temporal logic of *The Prelude’s* narrative development. See Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 212.

26 This perspective is consistent with Coleridge’s notion of narrative development: “The common end of all narrative, nay, of all, Poems is . . . to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a strait Line, assume to our Understanding a circular motion—the snake with its tail in its Mouth.” Letter to Joseph Cottle, March 7, 1815, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Griggs, 6 vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 4: 545.


30 Ibid., 1: xxxvii.

31 In addition to Sharon Ruston’s emphasis on the dialogue between Wordsworth and Humphry Davy that imbues Wordsworth’s Preface with its scientific ambiguity, see Catherine E. Ross, “‘Twin Labourers and Heirs of the Same Hopes’: The Professional Rivalry of Humphry Davy and William Wordsworth,” in *Romantic Science: The Literary Forms of Natural History*, ed. N. Heringman (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003): 23–52. Neither Ruston nor Ross considers how the atmosphere of factitious air enters into this dialogue: an important perspective I hope to add to their insights.


33 Ibid., 1: xxxviii-xxxix.
According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “inmate” refers both to a familiar relation and cohabitant and “one not originally or properly belonging to the place where he dwells; a foreigner, stranger.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “inmate.” Thus, Wordsworth’s language acts like a laboratory inhalation, making the foreign familiar.

See Robert Mitchell’s cogent articulation of this transformative possibility: “The eccentric desire that motivates the artistic experiment in the Romantic era is thus not truly proper to either art or science but is rather a desire to transform art by means of the sciences, to make art something other than what it has properly been to date.” Mitchell, *Experimental Life*, 35-6.


Ibid., 1: xxxvii-xxxviii.


“Artificial, unnatural; superficial, insincere.” Ibid.


Ibid.

Ford, “Poetry’s Media,” 462.


In addition to the studies of Ruston and Ross already cited, see Alice Jenkins, “Humphry Davy: Poetry, Science and the Love of Light,” in *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Richard Cronin (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998): 133–150. Jenkins stresses Davy’s influence on the poetics of his Romantic contemporaries: “Perhaps there is a similar case, and a strong one, for including Humphry Davy in the literary community of the late 1790s and 1800s. If the quality of his poetry does not always impress us as it did his contemporaries, nonetheless his topics and his influence, knitting greater poets together in a yet more intricate pattern, should recommend him to us” (147). Ross, Ruston, and Jenkins all draw on the earlier insights of Roger Sharrock who drew attention to Davy’s influence on Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in “The Chemist and the Poet: Sir Humphry Davy and the Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 17 (1962): 57–76.


50 Abrams, “Correspondent Breeze,” 114.  

51 Davy, Researches.  

52 Letter to Thomas Southey, July 12, 1799, quoted in Jay, Atmosphere of Heaven, 176.  


54 Ibid., 178.  


56 Humphry Davy, Researches, Chemical and Philosophical; Chiefly Concerning Nitrous Oxide (London: J. Johnson; Bristol: Biggs & Cottle, 1800), 455–6.  

57 Holmes, Age of Wonder, xvi.  

58 Jay writes, “Despite [Davy’s] cautious practice of blind testing, he nevertheless created an atmosphere in which antic impulses could be indulged, and after which science and poetry competed to encapsulate the experience.” Jay, Atmosphere of Heaven, 182-3.  

59 Ruston, Creating Romanticism, 11.  

60 William Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads (1802), 1: xi.  

61 Davy, Researches, 458, 459.  


65 This poem was written in one of Davy’s notebooks in late 1799, quoted in Jay, Atmosphere, 194-5.  


67 Davy, Researches, 516–18.  

68 As Vickers writes, “It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Coleridge was ultimately too divided a thinker to be able to make up his mind definitively about the comparative merits of mentalism and materialism . . . [but] Coleridge’s medical materialism needs to be understood in the context of his increasing commitment to medical mentalism.” Vickers, Coleridge and the Doctors, 163, 161.

70 Paul Youngquist, *Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 98.

71 Davy, *Researches*, 486.

72 Ibid., 487.


75 Davy, *Researches*, 484.


77 Ibid., 117.

78 Ibid.


Chapter 3: Byron’s Nausea

I have now lost 2 stone & a half . . . with the assistance of a great coat, 8
Waistcoats, flannel Bandages, daily Physic, no Ale, one meal a Day, & the Hot
Bath, in truth I believe you would not recognize ‘George Gordon,’[’] at least many
of my acquaintance, who have seen me since our meeting, have hardly believed
their optics, my visage is lengthened, I appear taller, & somewhat Slim, &
“mirabile dictu!!” my Hair once black or rather very dark brown, is turned (I
know not how but I assume by perpetual perspiration) to a light Chesnut, nearly
approaching yellow, so that I am metamorphosed not a little.

—Byron, letter to Edward Noel Long (1807)

So quipped Byron to Thomas Medwin. This chapter investigates the literary and critical life of
Byron’s nausea by putting it into conversation with the recent critical interest in “systems.”
Clifford Siskin and Robert Mitchell have compellingly argued that the Romantics inherited a
legacy of Enlightenment taxonomy which parsed a known and knowable world into systemic
sectors, making it not only possible but nearly requisite to understand individual human life and
subjectivity as tied up in the movements of much larger, seemingly uncontrollable forces:
systems of thought and action—economic, social, political—that governed daily existence and
the tide of history, the particular and the universal. In such contexts, human agency could
become a mere footnote to the “always already” sway of systems. Conversely, as a cog caught up
in a system, the individual retained great disruptive potential: a power contained within the mind and body to resist incorporation and rewrite the rules of the system from within by tangling its operative logic. If, as Mitchell argues, “the Romantics found plausible a materialist understanding of reality that suggested that systems took hold of, and in fact animated, individuals at the level of their bodies,”⁴ perverse bodily practices might just turn on the system and unsettle its interpolating inclinations.⁵ Byron’s nausea grapples with the system of Wordsworthian aesthetics in just such a fashion: it threatens to perform a bodily revolt, a literal reversal of the digestive system, to expose and expel what Byron called “a wrong revolutionary poetical system, or systems.”⁶

The ideology of Wordsworthian poetics was, from the moment of its inception, a system of aesthetic affect, as Siskin has pointed out: “Embedded within Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems are the basic components of a system: explanatory principles and ‘things’ to be known. All of the reviewers of the 1798 edition read the poems through the frame of the Advertisement, and, in critiques of subsequent editions and other volumes, Wordsworth was explicitly portrayed as writing ‘upon’ system.”⁷ Reversing the ruminative system of Wordsworthian poetics, Byron makes nausea and vomiting a part of his poetic practice, allowing it to permeate the aesthetics and imagery of his literary productions, often in order to induce different physiological responses in his readers than the tranquilizing tendency of Wordsworth’s system. For Wordsworth, poetic composition entails being physically composed, tranquil and contemplative; Byron pens a mode of counter-composition with his nausea: a model of aesthetics which emerges from the body in a state of physiological upheaval. Its primary register is not idealist but stomachic, and it seeks to upset the physiological condition of the reader.
Mitchell’s recent insights into the aesthetic force of nausea allow us to put Byron’s nausea in its proper relation to what was most unsettling about Wordsworth’s poetry—its systematizing objective—as well as to the broader implications of how an historical awareness of systems informs the way we think about texts and their relationship to readers in the Romantic era:

A]n attempt to produce nausea by means of texts could emerge as a coherent strategy for freeing readers from their living participation in systems, for reading a text could mean reversing the flow of ‘mental digestion.’ To induce nausea by means of texts was a first step that would allow an individual to grasp that seemingly autonomous choices were in fact animated by a system, and thus also a first step in enabling readers to retreat or escape from a system.\(^8\)

Wordsworth imagines an alleviative aesthetics, a poetry with medicinal principles that will properly compose the reader. Part of Byron’s joke in calling that poetry a “physic”—a medicinal purgative—is that Wordsworth’s pretension contains the physiological collapse of its own system. Byron actualizes this collapse with his nausea, the premonition of an imminent physiological counter-flow that rewrites the affective system of a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” onto the body. Producing and inducing nausea in his own aesthetics, Byron also adopts a critical self-awareness absent in Wordsworth that recognizes and resists the systematizing potential in his own poetry.\(^9\)

The complexity of Byron’s literary relationship to Wordsworth—usefully summed up in Byron’s own remark that “there can exist few greater admirers or deplorers [of Wordsworth] than myself”\(^10\)—has been remarked upon by several prominent critics, most notably Michael G. Cooke, Jerome McGann, and Peter T. Murphy.\(^11\) The account I offer focuses on one particular
bodily phenomenon—that of nausea—which opens up a network of complex possibilities for reconceiving this relationship. Byron’s nausea produces a paranoid reading of Wordsworth that reveals his anxiety of influence to be as much physiological as psychological. This perspective, then, should also help us to re-read the physical life of Byron’s poetry. Reading nausea as a phenomenon that registers the individual’s relationship to his world-historical existence and his agency to alter those circumstances, for example, goes some way to reconceiving McGann’s influential account of Byron’s poetic debut and development. For McGann, Byron in Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage (and later in Don Juan) mythologizes his personal life into a reflection of the political condition of Europe. McGann stresses “a condition of psychic and cultural alienation” that creates this aesthetic awareness, but his language also opens up the possibility of a physiological interpretation:

[Harold] is disgusted with himself and the world as he has thus far seen it. He finds when he flees to other lands and in particular to the fabulous Levantine seat of western culture, that his own personal anomie, experienced in the tight little island of Britain, mirrors the condition of Europe (or, in Byron’s startling and important variation on this ancient topos, that Europe and the entire world mirrors his personal condition). . . . What his book says is not simply that we should deplore the condition of western culture at this critical time, but that we should deplore it because its debasement has poisoned its chief, indeed, its only value: the individual human life.

Disgust at the poisoning of individual human life by invasive and imperializing social and political systems pervades Byron’s poetic ethos. Not just a psychic condition, then, but a physical condition of bodily loathing underscores Harold’s journey as well as Byron’s application of this journey to his overall aesthetic project. At the core of Byron’s re-conception
of individual aesthetic agency is an unsettling nausea that allows us to re-read Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage as an “Internalization of Quest Romance” physiologically conceived.

Nausea, like laughter, initially seems a universal, trans-historical phenomenon: so long as people have had bodies, they presumably have contained an organic capacity for nausea within. But late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century scientists, philosophers, and reformers were beginning to reconceive of the organic life of the individual body as tied up in larger world-historical developments: particularly the organs of digestion, the stomach and intestines, which chemically translated the products of urbanization and global trade into the health (or sickness) and composition of the individual human body. Thomas Trotter, physician to the British navy, forgest this connection in his A View of the Nervous Temperament (1807), a kind of paranoid account of the individual overwhelmed by the shock of systems. Trotter makes the stomach the center of subjectivity, showing how a digestive system incorporates external social and economic systems not just into the digesting, but the thinking self: “the human stomach is an organ endued by nature, with the most complex properties of any in the body; and forming a centre of sympathy between our corporeal and mental parts, of more exquisite qualifications than even the brain itself.”14 As Mitchell elucidates, the inward-turning organs of digestion in Trotter’s account fold external forces into their movements, resituating the historical significance of the stomach:

Where eighteenth-century physiologists often sought to understand digestion as an isolated and ahistorical bodily system, Trotter viewed the digestive system as a sort of tricky surface that mapped and retained the intersections of a series of intertwined social and physiological systems. The digestive system connected the rest of the organs to the individual body; this individual body was folded into the system of urban community,
which was itself folded into a nation, and this latter was folded into a global network of trade.\textsuperscript{15}

Within this context nausea takes on a particular historical significance: understood systemically, it registers an individual’s unsettled relationship to his historical milieu, the experience of what Matthew Arnold would later call “repeated shocks, again, again / Exhaust[ing] the energy of strongest souls.”\textsuperscript{16} Nausea is both a revolt against and an experience of a world experienced in systems. Its translation into aesthetic energies in Byron’s poetry reveals the historical and literary arguments of his productions to be motivated by an underlying sense of somatic, stomachic revolt.

Throughout this chapter, I demonstrate how an aesthetics of nausea and vomiting endorses Byron’s broader critique of the Romantic establishment. Like the political radicals and economic activists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Byron makes his own body the site around which his larger critique must be measured. The form of Byron’s body, as I will show, was very much a product of purgation and disorderly digestion: it enters into his aesthetics as a poetic performance of nausea and bodily overflow. In Byron’s poetry, disorder and disgust become dazzling displays of poetic performance and aesthetic disguise as he turns painful physiology into aesthetic agency. In so doing, Byron crafts himself into what Keats calls a “camelion Poet”—a negatively capable dialectician existing as “every thing and nothing” at once, unclassifiable in a system;\textsuperscript{17} and he does so by adhering aesthetically to the changes wrought on his physiology by a history of purgation.

Rapid reductions in size through regimens of dieting, exercise, and vomiting gave Byron a perverse sense of performance that permeates not only his public persona but his poetical output as well:
Now, if I know myself, I should say, that I have no character at all. But, joking apart, what I think of myself is, that I am so changeable, being every thing by turns and nothing long—I am such a strange \textit{mélange} of good and evil, that it would be difficult to describe me. There are but two sentiments to which I am constant—a strong love of liberty, and a detestation of cant.\textsuperscript{18}

Understood physiologically, the “turns” that characterize Byron’s changeable self are digestive registers: stomachic or intestinal movements that either incorporate difference into the self or resist the incursions of alien systems on the individual, constantly shifting the relation between internal and external, self and world. The turning stomach is the queasy core of Byronic freedom. In his person, Byron significantly welds together freedom and disgust—a “love of liberty, and a detestation of cant”: two sentiments that nausea, understood in the context of systems, underwrites as part of what Mitchell has called its “controlled form of collapsurgence”—“the process by which one system for understanding the world collapses, and another, purportedly deeper, understanding surges forth . . . and in this way allow[s] audiences to achieve the extra-artistic goal of recognizing and freeing themselves from an otherwise hidden system.”\textsuperscript{19}

Practicing an aesthetics of \textit{collapsurgence} with his nausea, Byron achieves his artistic freedom: “Changeable too—yet somehow ‘\textit{Idem semper},’” he writes in the final moments of \textit{Don Juan}.\textsuperscript{20}

If Byron turns his body into a text in order to rewrite a wrong revolutionary poetical system, his body also poses a challenge to the systematizing tendencies of Romantic canon criticism. I conclude this chapter by considering the nature of this challenge, suggesting that Byron’s own extended poetic attention to his bodily excesses and absences foregrounds the major critical arguments over where to locate his presence in Romanticism. Charting a critical genealogy from T. S. Eliot to M. H. Abrams to Jerome McGann, I show how the developments
in the twentieth-century critical reception of Byron amount to an argument over where to place not just his literary, but his physical remains. Ultimately, I suggest that the problem of Byron for these critics was a problem of embodiment, subtly anticipating the resurgence of critical interest in bodily disruptions in Romanticism in the work of scholars such as Timothy Morton, Denise Gigante, and Robert Mitchell. Attending to the material relationship Byron stages between his poetry and its remainders, in a short epilogue I argue for and briefly demonstrate a possible critical approach to Byron’s Romanticism that embraces a messier process of incorporating his aesthetics of abjection into a reading of Romantic embodiment.

II

In his notorious evisceration of Wordsworth’s *Excursion* in the *Edinburgh Review*, Francis Jeffrey denigrates the “peculiar system” of Wordsworthian poetics. The phrase bears a bit of critical consideration, as it locates Wordsworth’s poetry within the broader historical dimension of “systems”: a pressing matter for the emergence of Romantic aesthetics. Clifford Siskin has recently argued that the historical making and breaking of systems elucidates the complex relationship between Enlightenment and Romanticism. Turning to Blake’s famous howl, “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create,” Siskin asserts that “System is as crucial to Romantic writing as Blake’s embattled declaration makes it sound; in fact, invocations of, and accusations regarding system are the discursive weapons with which Romanticism configured itself.” Certainly the various “schools” into which Romantic poetry came to be grouped, or systematized—the “Lake School,” the “Cockney School,” the “Satanic School”—bear out his claim that the Enlightenment “spirit of system” came to classify and configure the aesthetic dimensions—generic, structural,
theoretical—and debates of Romantic literature. Even if Romanticism often sought to resist such classificatory gestures, the uncomfortable legacy of Enlightenment taxonomy left the Romantics with only so many imperfect tools with which to dig out of the past and uncover its own present presence. Getting self-reflexive with systems is tantamount to adopting Romantic subjectivity.

If system itself presumes a comprehensive knowledge of an empirically knowable world that Enlightenment desires, Siskin’s turn to system itself is systematic, elucidating a muddled, but ultimately recoverable history:

In the system, then, lies the secret history of Romanticism—its tale of self-configuration and thus its continuities with and departures from Enlightenment. . . . By recovering the history of system as something embodied—as something that embodies things—we can cast off some of the confusion surrounding the Enlightenment/Romanticism divide.²³

For Siskin, system uncovers a secret history of embodiment: a story of how things came to be grouped into recognizable representations. Yet, his language of embodiment also opens up other lines of inquiry into the “system,” notably the paths by which the human body itself comes to function in a world of systems, both as a system itself and in continual interaction with external systems. Indeed, the biological system of the human body—digestive, reproductive, respiratory, etc.—which both incorporates and is incorporated by Romantic writers in relation to the aesthetic concerns of their work, is as crucial to Romantic writing as the other types of systems—social, economic, political, etc.—that emerge in and evolve from the Enlightenment. The Oxford English Dictionary’s first two entries for the biological system fall historically on either end of the Enlightenment/Romanticism arc—the first in 1740, the second in 1838—suggesting that the conceptualization of the human body as a system is concomitant with the broader paradigms of systemic thinking Siskin discusses.²⁴
What would it mean to re-approach Wordsworth’s “peculiar system” of poetics from this biological perspective? Emerging midway between the etymological origins of the biological system, with the Preface and poems of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworthian poetics expresses a physiological aesthetics that may just be systemic. Siskin likens it to an empirical system, containing “explanatory principles and things to be known,” but it’s also possible to think of it as a digestive system, or an aesthetic system whose effects are digestive. Recent critics, especially Paul Youngquist and Denise Gigante, have been alive to the implications of an alimentary aesthetics in Wordsworth’s poetry, arguing that he imagines his poetry as both medicinal and digestive, functioning physiologically to restore the human to his natural form. Or, put another way, Wordsworth’s aesthetic system imagines an intimate relationship with the biological system of the reader, physically collecting and composing it. Indeed, putting the insights of Youngquist and Gigante into conversation with the critical interest in systems allows us to more fully conceive of the role Wordsworth’s aesthetics plays in situating individual subjectivity within a history of systems. His system inscribes its aesthetics in and on the reader’s body, incorporating and subsuming subjectivity within a broader paradigm of poetics and physiology.

Robert Mitchell’s recent extension of Siskin’s system critique to the individual body allows us to reconsider the tangibility of a ruminative poetics: conceived of as a system or series of systems, the human body gives Wordsworth’s imaginative aesthetics a particular impact. For the Romantics, Mitchell writes,

*Systems extended into the interior of the individual, which meant that the life of the individual expressed the system and, conversely, that the system expressed itself in the life of the individual. This intimacy of life and system was indexed in the link, proposed by many authors, between thoughts and digestion: thoughts, like food, were understood...*
to have a certain tangibility and thus were, in a certain sense, swallowed and assimilated by the body.\textsuperscript{27}

In this context, asking a reader to think well amounts to asking him to eat well. Understood systemically, subjectivity feels surprisingly somatic: a possibility Wordsworth explores by penning his own “peculiar system” of poetics in which aesthetics have an impact on bodily composition. Linking his physiological aesthetics to a world of systems, Wordsworth expands the implications of his poetics for the politicized or economized individual. If thought is imbibed and embodied by the mind’s digestive organ—the brain—imagination is far more than just the sharpening and refining of individual consciousness: it is the mental theater in which the materials shaping world history are translated into the lived and living history of the body.

Thinking itself, understood as a digestive process which incorporates external influence, does not escape so much as underscore the vast impositions systems make on even the most minute, remote, and intangible areas of individual existence. To the extent that Wordsworthian transcendence has been read as an ineffectual attempt to escape history, his creation of a psychosomatic system of subjectivity in fact roots his aesthetics in a far more complex terrain, for if the system is the secret history of Romanticism, Wordsworth writes his reader back into history by situating him within a system.

But the well-functioning digestive system, as all eaters know, produces tangible if often inscrutable remainders: potent reminders of the very failures that sustain and ensure its proper functioning. Thus, if for Siskin the system either works too well or consistently breaks down, the digestive system does both at the same time, complicating a totalizing schema of the system by literalizing its internal contradictions. Comparing the diverse actions of digestion to “a very complicated manufactory”—an industrial system—Romantic-era physician Thomas Beddoes
suggests some of this factory’s stranger output: “Some of the elements, after undergoing new combinations, shall be given out in the form of air; some in a liquid state; and the remainder shall be unlike any thing the body contained at first.”⁴²⁸ What the body incorporates into itself it transforms into itself as a part of its system; but such an incorporation and transformation also entails an abjection of materials “unlike any thing the body contained at first” in order to ensure the continued functioning of the system. These waste products are reminders of the constant failures entailed in the very success of the body as a series of systems. Further, they are small, but all too noticeable reminders of the ultimate failure towards which the biological system always tends: its own death, a bodily abject which cannot simply be flushed away. As Julia Kristeva writes, “These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit.”⁴²⁹ To succeed as a system is to experience continual failures of the self along a mobile border of subjectivity and shit.

This strange relationship between the abject and the incorporate in the digestive system informs the rhetoric of the growth of the poet’s mind in Wordsworth’s best poetry. Youngquist and Gigante have both convincingly argued for a digestive poetic practice at the core of Wordsworth’s aspirations to transcendence. If, as Jerome McGann (and others) have suggested, poetic transcendence in “Tintern Abbey” only comes through “a regimen grounded in the senses,”⁴³⁰ this regimen is not merely Wordsworth’s deployment of what de Man calls a rhetoric of Romanticism, but is also a dietetic regimen, as Youngquist argues: “Wordsworth must digest the world he incorporates. In ‘Tintern Abbey,’ memory functions as an organ of digestion, the
stomach of cognition that assimilates the bounding boy Wordsworth was to the solitary man he has become in order to sustain the growth of the Poet’s Mind.” The digestive becomes aesthetic when Wordsworth deals poetically with this “bounding boy,” placing him in parenthetical relationship to the growth of the poem and the poet: “(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days, / And their glad animal movements all gone by,). . . .” (74–75). This gesture—banishing the “glad animal movements” of his boyish days to the parentheses of his great poem—has occurred to some critics as a prime example of Wordsworth’s willful avoidance of materiality. Yet, this technique nicely mirrors the well-functioning digestive system’s relationship to its own parentheticals—the abject offal it disposes of, but needs to dispose of to function. Just so, the parenthesis itself demarks these glad animal movements as sensory phenomenon paradoxically both separate from and importantly informing the effusions of the imagination ultimately exalted by the poem. Indeed, if on the one hand parentheses are the marker of an abject other that does not quite belong, on the other hand they simultaneously embrace and even might be said to underscore the presence of the abject. Thus, where Youngquist suggests that the digestive tendencies of the poem assimilate these movements, I would add that digestion always runs both ways: it assimilates or incorporates as it also abjects or evacuates.

Youngquist does emphasize the inassimilable leftovers of “Tintern Abbey’s” digestive memory when he writes that “there is something diarrheic about the way ‘Tintern Abbey’ develops.” From this perspective, “glad animal movements” become bowel movements flushed out of Wordsworth’s verse. A perverse, but historically tenable claim: Tintern Abbey itself was at one time a medieval repository for the disposal of monkish offal, as Youngquist writes, “The monks who inhabited Tintern Abbey devised for their cloacae an ingenious drainage system, living as they did within flushing distance of the tidal basin of the river Wye.” Thus, the river
signals the removal of materiality that enables the proper functioning of a digestive memory. Indeed, the gentle flushing sound of the water itself soothes Wordsworth when he returns to Tintern Abbey: “again I hear / These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs / With a soft inland murmur” (2–4). This is the sound of stasis, as Wordsworth’s odd note—“The river is not affected by the tides a few miles above Tintern”—makes clear, but it is also the sonic suggestion of lost origins: the distant echo of mountain-springs still resonating in the soft murmur, present but barely tangible. In short, it’s an emblem for the major tensions of the poem: the water reflects the continuity of self and the search for origins that Wordsworth argues are only recoverable by growth of the imagination above and away from the sordid and unsettled life of the body.

Recapitulating in part the full title of his poem—“a few miles above Tintern”—Wordsworth’s note makes the sound of the river a mobilizing force for his materially removed poetic imagination. Historically situated, the river carries away the waste of digestion. Here it drains the materiality from Wordsworth’s mind, becoming a kind of toilet for transcendence. The untidy digestive remainders of the “glad animal movements”—“a presence that disturbs” indeed—are carried away and immaterialized, now only recalled in the sound of the water as an emblem of imaginative aesthetics. A willfully perverse reading perhaps, but taking the digestive system seriously as a critical heuristic for reading Wordsworth’s poetry allows us to balance the nuances of its aesthetic operations against its hidden history, revealing an ambivalent interdependence between aesthetics and history that approaches the inner-workings of the “complicated factory” of the digestive system.
III

Wordsworth’s earliest critics recognized this digestive dialectic—between incorporation and abjection, success and failure—at play in his aesthetics, making it the bodily paradigm for one of their most clever critical gestures: reading Wordsworth as his own best parodist. As Anna Seward, Francis Jeffrey, and John Hamilton Reynolds were quick to point out, the most perfect realization of Wordsworth’s poetic project simultaneously entails its abject failure. The success of his “peculiar system” of poetics in some ways depends on the submersion of satirical elements hidden within its operative logic. Like the digestive system, a mode of aesthetic sincerity creates and contains at the border of its condition of being elements which are “unlike any thing the body contained at first.” Intent on exposing these elements of the digestive system dispersed, critics like Seward and Jeffrey offered subtle but scathing appreciations of Wordsworth’s poetry, registering not just its effects on biological systems, but also revealing how it functions like a digestive system: incorporating its own failure as a part of its continued existence and development.

The extreme ambivalence of Anna Seward’s 1807 letter to Walter Scott, rehearsed in the introduction to this project, tethers digestive discontent to a critical recognition of the tendency of Wordsworth’s poetry to simultaneously succeed and fail, or succeed by failing: “Those volumes of [Wordsworth’s], which you were so good to give me, have excited, by turns, my tenderness and warm admiration, my contemptuous astonishment and disgust. . . . Surely if his worst foe had chosen to caricature this egotistic manufacturer of metaphysic importance upon trivial themes, he could not have done it more effectively!” Her reaction to Wordsworth’s poetry is implicitly bodily: the extreme emotional turns from admiration to contempt trope the turns of her stomach, occasioning a sense of disgust at least approaching physical sickness.
Disgust itself is primarily a bodily phenomenon related to digestion’s discontents: it is, indeed, a refusal to digest, a recognition in advance that digestion will have its discontents, as the OED records: a “sickening physical disinclination to partake of food, drink, medicine, etc.; nausea, loathing.” Seward’s disgust is a bodily condition occasioned not merely by a reading of Wordsworth’s poetry, but by its systemic life. As she concludes, Seward characterizes Wordsworth as an “egotistic manufacturer”—the creator and producer of a system of inward turning poetics. Intestinally situated within the digestive tract, an inward turning system merely nauseates or evacuates, as Seward’s critique demonstrates “by turns.” What emerges from this digestive crisis is a new awareness of precisely how this system functions. Coining a characterization later echoed by Francis Jeffrey, Seward amusingly but perceptively observes, “Surely if his worst foe had chosen to caricature this egotistic manufacturer of metaphysic importance upon trivial themes, he could not have done it more effectively!” For Seward, the true character of Wordsworth’s poetry contains its own caricature as a vital part of its makeup. To take his poetry seriously is also to take it as satire. Thus, it occasions both admiration and disgust: as it exalts, it abjects; or rather, it abjects in order to exalt. Where critics have labelled this tendency to void materiality in quest of transcendence an ideology of Wordsworth’s poetry, it might be more correct to call it the system of his poetry. As Seward’s bodily response acknowledges, the digestive function of Wordsworthian poetics opens it up to an aesthetic ambivalence in which the sublime becomes the satirical, because it has in no small part been occasioned by the successful incorporation, assimilation, and corresponding abjection of materials “unlike any thing the body contained at first.” The failure represented by the abject other of a digestive system is never far away.
In his typically withering review of “The White Doe of Rhylstone,” Jeffrey rehashes Seward’s critique, noticing how the tendency of Wordsworthian poetics to cut both ways is an effect of improper digestion. Labelling his aesthetics an effect of “poetic intoxication,” Jeffrey notes that “Mr. Wordsworth seems hitherto to have been unlucky in the choice of his liquor”: “a little mistake as to the dose or the quality of the inspiring fluid may make him absolutely outrageous, or lull him over into the most profound stupidity, instead of brightening up the hidden stores of his genius.” This farcical account of digestive disorder, emphasizing opposite effects of the same system, underwrites Jeffrey’s Sewardian skewering of the latent satire subsumed in Wordsworth’s system:

It is just such a work, in short, as some wicked enemy of that school might be supposed to have devised, on purpose to make it ridiculous; and when we first took it up, we could not help fancying that some ill-natured critic had taken this harsh method of instructing Mr. Wordsworth, by example, in the nature of those errors, against which our precepts had been so often directed in vain. We had not gone far, however, till we felt intimately, that nothing in the nature of a joke could be so insupportably dull.37

It’s a fine line between the sublime and the ridiculous: one which, according to Jeffrey, Wordsworth has breached too many times. The brilliance of the final line is that it turns Wordsworth’s poetry into a punch-line by concluding that his poetry is not a joke. Taken most seriously, Wordsworth’s poetry is its own satire; and, as Jeffrey’s emphasis on “poetic intoxication” makes clear, its own sickness: a failure of the digestive system operating under the influence of excess. There are some things which the system cannot wholly consume.

Jeffrey’s scathing review of The Excursion includes an extended account of the failure of Wordsworth’s biological system as one of its satirical centerpieces, which brings into focus the
physiological possibilities of Wordsworth’s “peculiar system.” For Jeffrey, Wordsworth writes too much system and not enough poetry:

    It bears no doubt the stamp of the author’s heart and fancy; but unfortunately not half so visibly as that of his peculiar system. His former poems were intended to recommend that system, and to bespeak favour for it by their individual merit;—but this, we suspect, must be recommended by the system—and can only expect to succeed where it has been previously established.

Clogged with an excess of system, Jeffrey has Wordsworth experience the same sickness as Byron, dosed “with Wordsworth physic even to nausea.” Disgusted with the excessive impositions of an aesthetic system, Jeffrey takes it out on Wordsworth, satirically staging the revolt of his biological system:

    The case of Mr. Wordsworth, we perceive, is now manifestly hopeless; and we give him up as altogether incurable, and beyond the power of criticism. We cannot indeed altogether omit taking precautions now and then against the spreading of the malady;—but for himself, though we shall watch the progress of his symptoms as a matter of professional curiosity and instruction, we really think it right not to harass him any longer with nauseous remedies,—but rather to throw in cordials and lenitives, and wait in patience for the natural termination of the disorder.38

Understanding the digestive implications of Wordsworthian poetics, Jeffrey argues against an aesthetic system by putting Wordsworth’s bodily life on the line. He shows how a digestive register for poetics upsets the ease of aesthetic incorporation by simultaneously entailing its abjection. Jeffrey’s final clause is a satiric gem: written over with intimations of mortality, it subtly signals Wordsworth’s demise. Unable to effect meaningful change against the sway of the
system, the critic patiently waits for the poet to die: “the natural termination of the disorder.”

Nearly a decade later, Henry Crabb Robinson rehearses Jeffrey’s death-warrant: “[T]his great poet survived to the great decennary of the nineteenth century, but he appears to have dyed in the year 1814 as far as life consisted in an active sympathy with the temporary well-fare of his fellow creatures.”

For Jeffrey and Crabb Robinson, Wordsworth ties bodily life up in the sway of an aesthetic system, and he must bear the consequences.

Jeffrey’s interest in the literal life of the Wordsworth’s peculiar system reveals something physiological about his caustic opener, “This will never do.” Jeffrey’s remark, like Seward’s disgust, Blake’s bowels, and Byron’s nausea, is a kind of biological failure or refusal, registering the difficulty of digesting Wordsworth. While “This” most nearly names Wordsworth’s *Excursion*—its failures as a poetical and physiological system—it also references the failure of Jeffrey’s criticism itself in the face of such an indigestible mass as *The Excursion*. Wordsworth, he says, is “beyond the power of criticism.” Drawing attention to the futility of his own critical endeavors with his “this will never do,” Jeffrey indexes disorderly digestion as the source of satirical success. The success of his review and its lasting legacy lies in its testament to its own abject failure. Giving up on nauseous remedies, Jeffrey refuses to minister to a mind diseased by poetry written upon a system. But he just might have something to flush out the body: “Throw in cordials and lenitives,” he writes, prescribing a dose of laxatives for his ailing patient. But therein, it seems, the patient must minister to himself.

Blake, at the very least, was a good patient. Indeed, Blake with his bowels, and Byron with his nausea, make materially manifest these strange failures and paradoxes of a digestive poetry, exploring the abject dimensions of an appetitive aesthetic. If one can never really beat the system, one can always challenge it by refusing to participate properly. This is precisely what
Blake’s bowel complaint and Byron’s nausea propose when confronted with Wordsworthian aesthetics. Even in the limited critical commentary on Blake’s bowel complaint, it’s surprising that Blake’s critique of Wordsworth’s poetical system has gone relatively unnoticed. Most critics have assumed that Blake reacts to the poetic project announced in the Prospectus—a perspective generally supported by the broader context of Crabb Robinson’s letter—yet, if we take Crabb Robinson at his word, it was the prose Preface—with its more particular insistence on a hidden system taking hold of the reader—not the poetic Prospectus, that caused Blake his disturbance. Wordsworth hints just enough at a system at stake in his poetics to cause Blake the paranoia registered in his physiological “Prolific”:

> It is not the Author’s intention formally to announce a system; it was more animating to him to proceed in a different course; and if he shall succeed in conveying to the mind clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings, the Reader will have no difficulty in extracting the system for himself. And in the meantime the following passage, taken from the conclusion of the first book of “The Recluse,” may be acceptable as a kind of “Prospectus” of the design and scope of the whole Poem.\(^{40}\)

Setting up a series of systems and extractions, Wordsworth’s Preface practically begs for the type of bodily parody that Blake performs. Consider again in this context the Blakean howl that Siskin emphasizes: “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.” Feeling himself “enslav’d by another Mans” system in the Preface to *The Excursion*, Blake turns to his own “business”: the bowel complaint that mobilizes his own digestive system to resist incorporation.

That Byron’s own bad digestion—the nausea induced by Wordsworth’s “physic”—levels a critique at the systematizing tendencies of Wordsworth, can be briefly observed in the opening
two stanzas of *Don Juan*, Canto IV, where Byron relates the proliferation and competition of systems to processes of digestion. Bad digestion:

\[\text{One system eats another up, and this}\]
\[\text{Much as old Saturn ate his progeny;}\]
\[\text{But System doth reverse the Titan’s breakfast,}\]
\[\text{And eats her parents, albeit the digestion}\]
\[\text{Is difficult.} \quad (DJ \ 14.1–2)\]

The logic of this passage is difficult to follow—leading the reader through not only line breaks but a stanza break as well—and its tortuous progress might be said to replicate the difficult digestion it discusses. Systems beget only more systems which feed off and consume their creators, Byron’s logic seems to run. But this continual feeding ultimately sickens. Byron’s line breaks here are significant: the first line of the second stanza—“System doth reverse the Titan’s breakfast”—initially implies a vomiting forth: the reverse peristalsis of the digestive system backfiring. Yet, the second line makes this reversal a symptom of bad eating: the cannibalism of the new system feasting on the old. The child is eater of the man. Eating, as always, has its unsavory remains, and Byron’s next line break signals this incomplete digestion by abjecting the difficulty of the digestion into an incomplete remainder in the next line: “digestion / Is difficult.”

This convoluted and piecemeal performance plays out poetically the constipative and cannibalistic effects of systems: they’re simply not good for digestion—“You bind yourself” writes Byron several lines later. Byron understood systems digestively, and his nausea thus wages intestinal war with the incorporating effects of Wordsworth’s “peculiar system.”
Everyone knows Byron resists systems—by some accounts this is the crux of his poetic mobility. But the extent to which his anti-systematic aesthetics is mobilized by an underlying sense of bodily nausea, has perhaps gone unnoticed. Following Schlegel, Anne Mellor’s influential account of Romantic irony—epitomized by Don Juan—makes the paradox of systems the enigma that motivates aesthetic agility in the ironic mode: “With energy and agility, then, the ironic artist constantly views and projects himself as simultaneously free and governed by instinct, as sentimental and naïve, as committed to no system and yet deeply involved in a system, for as Schlegel said, ‘It’s equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two.’” For Mellor, Byron’s antithetical impulses coalesce in the anti-systematic form of Don Juan, in which he “carefully balances a romantic enthusiasm against a skeptical conviction of human finitude,” by manipulating the constraints of the ottava rima stanza structure into a poetically potent, self-reflexive performance of life as it defers and dances around the impositions of systems:

Thus the ongoing creation of the poem reflects the narrator’s ever-changing, ever-expanding consciousness. The process of the poem, an activity, a performance through time, imitates the process of life itself, making and unmaking patterns and forms. . . . Linguistically as well as epistemologically, the poem knowingly operates within the boundaries of a romantic-ironic consciousness, creating and de-creating itself. . . . It is an exercise of the romantic-ironic consciousness, an act of self-creation and self-destruction that immediately engages the reader in the ongoing experience of ‘hovering’ that is the poem and the life it metaphorically images.42 Mellor stresses “consciousness” as the “ever-changing, ever-expanding” force driving the poem’s continual commitment to unbuild the systems it creates, but the extent to which Byron
experienced the problem of systems as a bodily bind reveals a physiology underwriting his irony as well. Mitchell’s “collapsurgence” translates Mellor’s Romantic irony into a physiological condition in which the body in disgust or nausea registers a repulsion towards the systems that it incorporates, thus achieving bodily the combination of system and freedom that Schlegel says must be reconciled in the mind. From this perspective Byron’s mobility—the vehicle of his Romantic irony—is a form of negatively capable nausea.

IV

Let’s begin with the famous sea-sickness episode of Don Juan, Canto II, paying particular attention to how this scene positions nausea in relation to reading and potentially summons the specter of Wordsworthian poetics as part of its stomachic critique. The returns of memory—Juan’s lovesick reflections on his “dearest Julia”—are interrupted by the turns of Juan’s stomach—his seasick ejections:

‘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 thine 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),

‘O, 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)—

O, Julia!—(this curst vessel pitches so)—

Beloved Julia, hear me still beseeching!’

(Here he grew inarticulate with reaching.)

He felt that chilling heaviness of heart,

Or rather stomach, which, alas! attends,

Beyond the best apothecary’s art,

The loss of love, the treachery of friends,

Or death of those we dote on, when a part

Of us dies with them as each fond hope ends:
No doubt he would have been much more pathetic,

But the sea acted as a strong emetic. \((DJ\ 2.18–21)\)

There’s a lot to say about this passage, but for now notice the parentheses that cordon off Juan’s sea-sickness from the body of the text. They pose a structural competition between organs of sympathy and organs of digestion, heart and stomach, the pathetic and the emetic; and also, perhaps, literary text and material remainder. Byron balances the claims of mind and body aesthetically (at least initially) by showing the equal part each plays in making up his stanza structure: “‘A mind diseased no remedy can physic—’ / (Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew sea-sick.)” Mental life has a bodily correspondent, the two making up a poetical pair; but as in Blake’s bowel complaint, the mind diseased morphs into the body in distress, revealing the claims that the bowels make on memory. Byron doesn’t enjamb the mind into the body so much as he presents the body interrupting and overtaking the movements of the mind. Sitting at the bottom of his stanza, Byron’s parenthetical here is a kind of bowel structure towards which the turns of his verse tend, feeding its digestive revolt.

“Physic” should put us in the mind of Wordsworth, and the courses of metaphysical physic with which Shelley dosed Byron, but what really ropes the Bard of the Lakes into this display of literary nausea is the abjected material in parentheses. Condemning Juan’s sea-sickness to grammatical exile, Byron follows in the footsteps of his dark double, parodying an aesthetic technique of transcendence from Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” Charting a course from physical emersion to sensory surplus to contemplative reflection in his relationship to the natural world, Wordsworth subordinates his most assertive depiction of materiality to a parenthetical clause:

For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,

And their glad animal movements all gone by.)

To me was all in all.

—

I cannot paint

What then I was. (73–77)43

Brushing over in one swift stroke the “glad animal movements” of his boyish days, Wordsworth provides a poetic paradigm for imaginative transcendence. Here, then, is the poetic predecessor and parallel for Byron’s parentheses, which parody their progenitor by modeling its movement. Byron uses his final couplet of ottava rima to expose the latent logic of an aesthetics of transcendence by offering a bowel movement to realize Wordsworth’s glad animal movements gone by.

What happens next is the revolt of one system (the digestive) against another—the sympathetic—as Stanza 20 stages the return of the grammatical repressed. The parentheticals (carrying along their abject materiality) take over the stanza, burgeoning from one line in the previous stanza to four and a half lines here, unbalancing the structural mediation between mind and body. The very act of the ship lurching and Juan vomiting, detailed in a single parenthetical line in Stanza 19—“(Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew sea-sick)”—takes up more structural space in Stanza 20, as Byron uses one and a half parenthetical lines to detail the recurrence of the same event: “(this curst vessel pitches so)— . . . / . . . (Here he grew inarticulate with reaching.)” Byron gives grammatical girth to the expression “he grew sea-sick,” parenthetically performing its verbal description. It’s not insignificant that the final parenthetical of each stanza (19 and 20) includes a reference to growing: the body burgeons in sickness, dispersing its materiality outside of itself. As a poetic performance, then, Byron’s parentheticals attempt an aesthetics of nausea: like the ship it discusses, the stanza—overburdened with
parentheses—becomes unbalanced, lurches, pitches, and adopts a literary style of nausea. Within the strange meta-fictional world of *Don Juan*, it is just possible that Juan sickens on this style; at the very least, Byron performs on the reader a series of stylistic swings and shifts that seek to induce nausea, and “allow audiences to achieve the extra-artistic goal of recognizing and freeing themselves from an otherwise hidden system” of Wordsworthian aesthetics. 44

If the nausea in this scene is Juan’s and the reader’s, it is equally Byron’s, dosed “with Wordsworth physic even to nausea.” In this episode, Byron raises the specter of Wordsworth’s “glad animal movements,” calling them out of the parenthetical grave in which Wordsworth had buried them; or rather, he gives that parenthetical grave a much larger plot in his own verse. When abstracted and amplified, as Byron’s verse viscerally shows, Wordsworthian aesthetics sickens. The organs of sympathy yield to the organs of digestion, as one system supersedes the priority of another: “He felt that chilling heaviness of heart, / Or rather stomach. . . .” Jamming the heart down into the stomach, Byron re-organ-izes Wordsworth’s poetic priorities and topples his transcendence: “No doubt he would have been much more pathetic, / But the sea acted as a strong emetic.” A humoral pathology purges Juan of his commitment to an existence in affect alone, forcefully reminding him of the appetitive and alimentary necessities of life, so perversely explored in the ensuing cannibalism episode.

Indeed, a tendency towards Wordsworthian aesthetics in Juan’s romantic temperament tropes a physiological forgetfulness. It’s important to remember, as Paul Fry has recently emphasized, that the lovelorn Juan becomes a Laker: a Wordsworthian poet that Byron puts through the wringer of romantic love to test the sturdiness of Romanticism’s stomach. Poking fun at Wordsworth’s unintelligible poetical system, Byron also notes its adverse effects on Juan’s digestive system when adopted as an alleviative metaphysical philosophy:
Young Juan wander’d by the glassy brooks,
Thinking unutterable things; he threw
Himself at length within the leafy nooks
Where the wild branch of the cork forest grew;
There poets find materials for their books,
And every now and then we read them through,
So that their plan and prosody are eligible,
Unless, like Wordsworth, they prove unintelligible.

He, Juan (and not Wordsworth), so pursued
His self-communion with his own high soul,
Until his mighty heart, in its great mood,
Had mitigated part, though not the whole
Of its disease; he did the best he could
With things not very subject to control,
And turn’d, without perceiving his condition,
Like Coleridge, into a metaphysician.

He pored upon the leaves, and on the flowers,
And heard a voice in all the winds; and then
He thought of wood-nymphs and immortal bowers,
And how the goddesses came down to men:
He miss’d the pathway, he forgot the hours,
And when he look’d upon his watch again,
He found how much old Time had been a winner—
He also found that he had lost his dinner. (DJ 1.90–91, 94)

In this set of stanzas, Byron makes the Egotistical Sublime minister medicinally to the love-sick Juan, but Juan’s “self-communion with his own high soul” only partially mitigates his diseased condition, for the physic of a metaphysician treats merely the soul to the neglect of the stomach. Adopting an aesthetic ideology of Lake District Romanticism means missing out on one’s dinner: as Juan pores over the objects of Wordsworthian poetry, he skips his supper, sacrificing the appetitive to the aesthetic.

In an important insight that occurs almost by the way in his study of Wordsworth, Paul Fry subtly links Byron/Juan’s nausea, Francis Jeffrey’s review of The Excursion, and Blake’s bowel complaint together in a reading of the implications of this passage for a critique of Wordworthian poetics:

Juan falling in love becomes a Laker. . . . Juan in love has become a nature lover, and this leads directly to echoes of the indictment of Wordsworth in Jeffrey’s review of Alison—and of The Excursion. . . . Broadly with reference to The Excursion, Juan here becomes the author of the “Prospectus to The Recluse,” where somehow or other ‘The Mind of Man— / My haunt and the main region of my song” (as Blake likewise complained) “to the external World / Is fitted,” all to create “the spousal verse / of this great Consummation.”45
Though Fry doesn’t pursue the implications of Byron’s ensuing nausea in Canto II for an indictment of Wordworth’s systematic impositions, it becomes clear that Byron’s aesthetic experiments with nausea in *Don Juan* are aimed at producing more than merely general shock: they occur as specific reactions to Wordsworth. Returning to the sea-sickness episode—now with the aesthetic overlapping of Juan and Wordsworth written as a problem of digestion in mind—Byron, it appears, does more than merely implicate Wordsworth in his parenthetical performance of purgation: he pumps his stomach. Byron forces Wordsworth as Juan to “change [his] lakes for ocean” and grow seasick at the prospect. By using Wordsworth’s own poetic techniques to introduce and induce sickness, Byron not only writes metaphysic as a physic, he doses Wordsworth with his own physic, even to nausea. Byron induces retroperistalsis on a system of ruminative poetics, purging emotion recollected in tranquility—here written as Juan’s reflections on Julia—and replacing it with his ideal of poetic immediacy. Thus, one system of aesthetics replaces another in a poetic performance of nausea that creates what Robert Mitchell calls a *collapsurgence of system* “by which one system for understanding the world collapses, and another, purportedly deeper, understanding of order surges forth.” Nausea explicitly facilitates an aesthetic exchange of Wordworthian and Byronic poetical systems in the sea-sickness scene, rewriting their literary relationship as a competition of heart and stomach, love and leftovers:

But worst of all is nausea, or a pain
About the lower region of the bowels;
Love, who heroically breathes a vein,
Shrinks from the application of hot towels,
And purgatives are dangerous to his reign,
Sea-sickness death . . . (DJ 2.23)

Love’s romantic reign meets an abrupt end as Byron phlebotomizes the diseased realm of Romanticism.

But if a Byronic system surges forth where a Wordsworthian was, it is an aesthetic advanced only with skeptical self-awareness. Juan’s nausea is directed at Byronic poetic posturing as much as at the sympathetic sincerity of Wordsworth. Here Byron plays another parenthetical trick that parallels a process of reading with a process of purging. Juan’s parenthetical retching follows closely on the heels of parenthetical reading: “(Here he drew / Her letter out again, and read it through.)” By making retching and reading parallels in punctuation, Byron suggests something sickening about aesthetics—not just Wordsworth’s, but his own. Wracked with self-doubt and full of melancholy despair, the content of Julia’s letter resembles Byron’s own early productions:

. . . all is o’er

For me on earth, except some years to hide

My shame and sorrow deep in my heart’s core:

These I could bear, but cannot cast aside

The passion which still rages as before,—

And so farewell—forgive me, love me—No,

That word is idle now—but let it go. (DJ 1.196)

More than merely containing a suggestive tonal similarity, however, the letter bears a more literal Byronic flourish: he almost goes out of his way to stamp it with a motto borne by one of his own seals: “The seal a sunflower; ‘Elle vous suit partout’, / The motto, cut upon a white cornelian, / The wax was superfine, its hue vermilion” (DJ 1.198.1582–1584). Thus, Byron
places his own poetry into Juan’s hands in the sea-sickness scene as he begins to vomit. As he will throughout Don Juan, Byron adopts an ironic perspective on his own earlier, gloomy verse. By refusing even his own system, Byron simultaneously acknowledges his complicity in creating “a wrong revolutionary poetical system or systems,” and looks for a way out of system. Nausea signals a self-critical movement in Byron’s aesthetics which motivates his mobility: the means by which he ultimately crafts his artistic freedom. The only way out is through the alimentary canal.

V

*Elle vous suit partout.* She follows you everywhere. A paranoiac’s motto if there ever was one. Byron stamps Julia’s letter with his own seal to mobilize disgust in his protagonist and to thus perform Juan’s paranoid reading of his own narrative. Juan is constantly in thrall to plot and oppressed by his own narrator, who vies with him for central billing in the role of “hero.” “I want a hero,” Byron states simply from the start, attesting to both the desire and the lack that are essential unfulfilled energies of his epic. Juan feels his lack of agency desperately, but even if Byron’s ever-burgeoning digressions represent the narrator wrestling control away from his protagonist, Juan is always already enslaved by an author from the start. Byron merely plucks him from the plot of the pantomime and inserts him into the *ottava rima:* “I’ll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan, / We have all seen him in the pantomime / Sent to the devil, somewhat ere his time” (*DJ* 1.1.6–8). Byron’s selection of Juan is as much a matter of rhyme as of reason: he simply fits well into the structure and scheme of *ottava rima:* “I condemn none / But can’t find any in the present age / Fit for my poem (that is, for my new one); / So, as I said, I’ll take my friend Don Juan” (*DJ* 1.1.37–40). Deciding on a hero is a casual affair for Byron—much
more so than Wordsworth’s fraught search for an epic theme in *The Prelude*—and his choice of Juan—an “ancient friend” already plotted by the pantomime and a historical litany of literary and cultural productions—reflects an interest in exploring the “always already” of narrative systems. Byron as narrator thus experiments with what an author can really do within a poetical system. And he often plays out this experiment on Juan’s body. *Don Juan* is full of experiments wrought on Juan’s body: Byron packs him into the crevices of Julia’s mattress, forces him to nibble on the paw of a beloved family pet, crams him with enough food “to make a horse ill,” and, in a memorable scene of ludicrous physical distress, changes him into a woman at the mercy of a sultan and his bride in a Turkish harem—a transformation apparently preferable to the circumcision suggested by his handler Baba. Byron even hinted at ending the poem with the removal of one of Juan’s body parts: his head. These experiments can be understood as commentaries on the function of plot and narrative. Byron uses Juan to figure out just what will fit into the framework of a closing couplet, a stanza, a canto: inherited forms that structure narrative and thus must be resisted in some way if a systemizing scheme is to be avoided.

With Juan, Byron models his own aesthetic paranoia of plot and of literary systems. Encountering Byron’s seal enclosing Julia’s letter, Juan senses that he has been folded into an already developing narrative. Realizing that he can’t escape his own narrator—she follows you everywhere—Juan vomits. Finding himself written into a pre-fabricated plot, he nauseates. Plot becomes a kind of disease in *Don Juan*, for which Byron is ever in search of alternative remedies: cannibalism, dog paws, and purging all get their chance to cure our hero of his narrative fever. But it’s not so much narrative as narrator that oppresses Juan with his devious designs. Pay attention to what Byron as narrator does to Juan just before he nauseates: he throws him into the plot of a story he’s already written:
'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! (DJ 2.18)

We’ve read this before: it’s Childe Harold bidding adieu to “Albion’s lessening shore.” Here we go again. Things can only end badly. No one gets out alive. Except Juan, who spectacularly triumphs over his tormentor in the final moments of the poem by outliving him, escaping from the plot of the poem in the *collapsurgence* of Byron’s body. The final scene of Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* is an imaginative type of *Don Juan*’s actualized aesthetic, accidently realized by Byron’s death, brought on by a fever exacerbated by purgatives and blood-letting. Juan’s nausea and vomiting are thus tied up in the crucial questions of narrative, aesthetics, and autobiography that *Don Juan* as a whole is concerned with posing.

Byron’s choice of Don Juan as protagonist is also at least partially motivated by his own narratorial nausea, a fact that has more far-reaching implications for Byron’s blending of fact and fiction than may at first appear:

I want a hero: an uncommon want,

When every year and month sends forth a new one,

Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,

The age discovers he is not the true one; . . . (DJ 1.1.1–4)

The cloying cant of the age feeds Byron’s own sense of satiated disgust which pervades not only this stanza but the famous dedication to Robert Southey as well; and his choice of Don Juan and indeed the ensuing narrative design registers a need to de-cant, to empty out, to purge. Hence
also the piling up of Cantos: Byron tacks an “O” onto the end of “Cant”; unlike Wordsworth’s “O there is a blessing in this gentle breeze” at the outset of his epic, this is not an intake valve for inspiration, but an abject opening out of which cant is evacuated in Byron’s aesthetics of excess, or what T. S. Eliot called the “torrential fluency of his verse.” In fact, Byron’s lists of potential, but discarded heroes in stanzas 2–4 perform his growing sense of nausea for the reader, as we quickly grow sick of this parade of protagonists: “Wolfe, Hawke, / Prince Ferdinand, Granby, Burgoyne, Keppel, Howe, . . . Barnave, Brissot, Condorcet, Mirabeau, / Petion, Clootz, Danton, Marat, La Fayette. . . . Joubert, Hoche, Marceau, Lannes, Dessaix, Moreau” (1.2.9–10; 1.3.17–21). On and on, as if ad nauseam. Purged of these “followers of fame” (1.2.14), Byron finds Juan a more “fit” choice, both poetically—Don Juan rhymes rather nicely with “new one” and “true one” we learn very quickly—and physically: “he learned the arts of riding, fencing, gunnery, / And how to scale a fortress—or a nunnery” (1.38.303–4). His lithe, supple, at times even feminine body—“young, slender, and pack’d easily” Byron writes (1.166.1323)—makes him particularly adaptable to the series of misadventures Byron has in store for him. And Byron makes sure Juan maintains this slender physique by occasionally purging him, most famously in the sea-sickness episode just discussed. Less obvious are the ways in which Byron’s own personal history of purgation infiltrates his aesthetic designs for Don Juan/Don Juan. In what follows, I explore the aesthetic implications of Byron’s biography for a reading of Childe Harold’s nausea, arguing that that earlier work folds a history of vomiting into its development which presages the more explicit aesthetics of nausea in Don Juan.
This is not just any letter that Byron stamps with his seal and hands to Juan in the sea-sickness episode. As he is writing out the fair copy of Canto II, Byron details his own retching fit in a letter to John Murray: “Within this last fortnight I have been rather indisposed with a rebellion of the Stomach—which would retain nothing—(liver I suppose) and an inability or phantasy not to be able to eat of any thing with relish.”

Byron’s “rebellion of the Stomach” becomes Juan’s “chilling heaviness of heart, / Or rather stomach”; but more than merely an interesting biographical context, Byron’s letter performs nausea as a relationship between text and margin. Its material existence as a literary remainder shows how the discontents of literary discourse can inform and perform the aesthetic arguments of a text broadly conceived. The strange enjambments of narrator and protagonist, stomach and style, letter and literature in the sea-sickness scene bring to mind Timothy Morton’s suggestive questions: “Does the process of looking in a side-long way at literary texts, via their material ‘remainders,’ actually reinforce rather than undermine the aesthetic dimension? Might the mechanical insistence on contextualization paradoxically turn context into (aestheticized) text?”

Byron’s clever use of parentheses demonstrates how the marginal becomes central, how appetite becomes aesthetic, how leftovers are turned into literature.

Byron’s own body motivates much of the marginal aesthetics of nausea in his poetry. If Julia’s letter brings us to the scenes of Byron’s biography, here we read a brief history of nausea as a performative practice of the body. Byron understood self-fashioning as a narrative of the body. Even before the publication of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* I and II launched him into a life of literary and cultural celebrity, Byron perfected his persona physiologically. Understanding the stomach as the site in which surface-level style is first produced and out of which it is
ultimately cultivated, he fixated on the function of the digestive system in altering outward form. If aesthetics can be understood as a kind of archaeology in which form follows function, it also has its analogies to the digestive system, in which the proper or improper functioning fixes a form for the body. With his own body Byron becomes fascinated with the prospects of acting on, or performing, the digestive system differently. He frequently reverses its flow to resist its incorporating tendencies, at the same time revealing just how reliant he is on its formative influence. The stomach catches Byron up in a dialectic of delight and disgust. Tantalized by its possibilities but repulsed by its requirements, Byron finds a way to turn the stomach into an aesthetic performance by mapping its movements onto literary paradigms: in Don Juan he shows how narrative can nauseate, how function might disrupt form, and how “Turdsworth” writes Wordsworth as a “peculiar system” of the body as well as of the mind. Byron does “system” differently with his body, underscoring an aesthetics of appetite as an autobiographical flourish in his poetics.

“I grow thin daily,” writes Byron to Edward Long in April of 1807, “since the commencement of my System I have lost 23 lbs. in my weight.” Indeed, the spring of 1807 must have been particularly “enlightening” for Byron, as he shed the heavy load of some fifty odd pounds in the span of just a few months, ridding himself of the excess weight through a strict regimen of diet, exercise, and evacuation. “You will be surprised to hear that I am grown very thin,” he writes to John Hanson,

I have taken every means to accomplish the end, by violent exercise, & Fasting, as I found myself too plump . . . I wear seven Waistcoats, & a great Coat, run & play at Cricket in this Dress, till quite exhausted by excessive perspiration, use the hot Bath daily, eat only a quarter of [a] pound, [of] Butchers meat in 24 hours, no Suppers, or
Breakfast, only one meal a Day, drink no malt Liquor, little Wine, & take physic occasionally.\textsuperscript{49}

To his abstemious one meal a day, Byron occasionally tacked on the additional course of vomiting, induced by medicinal purgatives. His proclivity to purgation merely burgeons as what he refers to as the “disposal of my superfluities” continues throughout the spring:\textsuperscript{50} writing to John Pigot less than a month later, Byron now grants the occasional physic central billing in his program of weight loss: “Since we met, I have reduced myself by violent exercise, \textit{much} physic, \textit{& hot bathing.”}\textsuperscript{51} Two weeks later, writing to Long again, it appears he has further upped his intake (and presumably his output) to a nearly compulsory daily dosage: “I have now lost 2 stone \& a half . . . with the assistance of a great coat, 8 Waistcoats, flannel Bandages, daily Physic, no Ale, one meal a Day, \& the Hot Bath.”\textsuperscript{52}

For Byron, these were truly formative months: shaping his body to “vie with the \textit{slim} Beau’s of modern times,”\textsuperscript{53} Byron begins to conceptualize with his physiology the persona that will come to dominate the literary world with the publication of \textit{Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage}. Sloughing off the baby fat through perspiration and physic, Byron updates himself as he enters into his majority: getting rid of the gorging George Gordon to become the brilliant Byron. “In truth I believe you would not recognize ‘\textit{George Gordon[,]’}” he continues to Long, at least many of my acquaintance, who have seen me since our meeting, have hardly believed their optics, my visage is lengthened, I appear taller, \& somewhat \textit{Slim, \& “mirabile dictu!!’} my Hair once black or rather very dark brown, is turned (I know not how but I assume by perpetual perspiration) to a \textit{light Chesnut,} nearly approaching \textit{yellow,} so that I am metamorphosed not a little.\textsuperscript{54}
Reflecting on his sudden slenderness, Byron recognizes how identity itself is an unfortunate construct of appearance; physic, however, is a miracle-worker—“mirabile dictu!!”—that activates Byron’s agency to alter his identity by deconstructing and reconstructing his appearance. In this context, “George Gordon” merely names one identity amongst a multitude of possibilities opened up by the body metamorphosed. Byron begins to sense the possibility of renaming the self through the performance of one’s own system, writing to Elizabeth Pigot, “I find I am not only thinner, but taller by an Inch since my last visit. I was obliged to tell everybody my name, nobody having the least recollection of my visage, or person. . . . Some say I look better, others worse, but all agree I am thinner, more I do not require.” Better or worse is no matter to Byron—these are merely terms to which surface value is arbitrarily attached on a sliding scale of relative exterior merit—it’s different that he really covets: a way out of the same system of naming. His body provides the opening, allowing—nearly requiring—him to adopt a new persona: “I was obliged to tell everybody my name, nobody having the least recollection of my visage, or person.” Writing to the Earl of Clare a month later, Byron again delights in the disguise his body offers him from even the closest of friends: “Since we met, they tell me I am grown taller, & so much thinner from Illness & violent Exercise, that many who had lived with me in habits of Intimacy, even old Schoolfellows, found great difficulty in acknowledging me to be the same person.” Physic provides Byron with a kind of stomachic subterfuge: a subterranean style that refutes sameness by allowing him to move fluidly from one persona to the next.

In the absence of solid identity, it’s up to Byron now to re-name himself, and he does so many times—Harold, Conrad, Lara, Manfred—but first, and most importantly, Lord Byron—part person, part projection—or what Jerome McGann dubs “that imaginative (but not
imaginary) world-historical figure known as Byron.” If the features of this figure are consolidated in the first edition of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, as McGann argues, they have a longer life in Byron’s physiology of self-fashioning—namely his purging of “George Gordon” to produce “Byron.” Harold is a reflection of modern psychology and, it turns out, physiology: as he registers in his person both the world weariness and the bodily disgust that reflect the individual’s recognition of the systems that circumscribe subjectivity. The genesis of “Byron” and Byronism is supremely physiological: a seductive story of “personal and political freedom in the oppressive and contradictory circumstances which Byron observed in the world of his experience,” begun with Byron’s body as a site of system critique and identity transformation, and continued in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* with Byron’s metamorphosis into “Byron,” the world-weary and nauseating persona to which his nineteenth century readers would react with their own levels of nausea, disgust, and outrage.

In addition to providing a physiological lens through which to read Byron’s Byronism, his letters of this period also suggest a characteristically equivocal approach to displays of embodiment, which is written as an aesthetics of excess that presages similar techniques in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Typically, Byron’s accounts of *dissipating* are merely the extreme ends of Byronic *dissipation*: “When I do dine,” he writes several years later, “I gorge like an Arab or a Boa snake.” Counteracting what T. S. Eliot famously called Byron’s “tendency to corpulence” and what W. H. Auden referred to as “some kind of glandular malfunction,” his purging only occurred in the context of an abundance of materials to purge. Vomiting engages Byron in a dialectic of delight and disgust: he both relishes and reviles “the dispos[al] of his *superfluities*,” affixing multiple exclamation points to his pronouncements of weight loss and giving added emphasis to key terms like *slim*, *thinner*, and *superfluities*, as if balancing his
diminishing materiality with grammatical exuberance: “I weigh less by three Stone, & 9 pounds, than I did 6 months ago.—My weight was then 14 Stone & 6 LB. It is now 10 Stone 11 LB!!”

Loss becomes a type of gain for Byron, and disgust in his own excessive indulgences becomes delight in their disposal, as dissipation tropes dissipating. Losses in weight enlarge his aesthetic. Not content to merely display the difference, he adds superfluous subtractions to his accounts: “I think you would have been surprised at my figure, for since our last meeting, I am reduced four stone in weight. I then weighed 14 Stone 7LB.—and now only ten stone and a half;—I have disposed of my superfluities by means of hard exercise and abstinence, and an occasional complaint which attacks me on every excursion to Town.” Byron’s prose proliferates around what has been lost, and importantly, his subtractions add up to a different “figure”: a self-consciously calculated figure, mobile enough to immerse himself in an “excursion to Town” and reflexive enough to write out the painstaking process of physical performance. The personal—or the persona—for Byron, when written, becomes a strange aesthetic blend of the mathematical and the grammatical that makes up a distinctive voice. In his depictions of the delight and disgust entailed by a system of digestive dissipation and dissipating, then, Byron begins to explore the aesthetic possibilities that will come to inform his poetic persona.

VII

If vomit becomes verbal exuberance in Byron’s letters, purging becomes poetic at least as early as Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Canto I. Though Jerome McGann emphasizes Harold’s motivating disgust as a psychological condition from which he flees in pursuit of cultural renewal, a sense of bodily loathing underwrites his pilgrimage as a quest for physiological renewal as well. Nearly from the pseudo-invocation, Byron emphasizes Harold’s corporeality as
Harold’s early dissipations—the “riot most uncouth,” the “revel and ungodly glee,” “the concubines and carnal companie”—have left him, like Shakespeare’s Falstaff, “surfeit-swelled.” “He felt,” Byron writes, “the fullness of satiety: / Then loath’d he in his native land to dwell” (CHP 1.4.34–5). While such a state of satiety and self-loathing registers psychologically as a metaphorical fullness suggesting the world-weariness typical of Harold and Byron, it also clearly contains physiological weight. If not quite tipping the scales like Shakespeare’s fat knight—that “bolting hutch of beastliness”—Harold is nonetheless physically stuffed, bloated, almost literally flyblown, as Byron describes him basking in the “noon-tide sun / Disporting there like any other fly” (1.4.28–29). Surfeiting on the excesses that, as Byron writes, “long had fed his youthful appetite” (1.11.95), Harold becomes not just “sore sick at heart” but sore sick at stomach as well—ready to overflow from the “goblets brimm’d with every costly wine” (1.11.96)—and his pilgrimage becomes in part a quest to purge his imbalanced body of its superfluities:
And now Childe Harold was sore sick at heart,
And from his fellow bacchanals would flee;
’Tis said, at times the sullen tear would start,
But Pride congeal’d the drop within his ee:
Apart he stalk’d in joyless reverie,
And from his native land resolv’d to go,
And visit scorching climes beyond the sea;
With pleasure drugg’d, he almost long’d for woe,
And e’en for change of scene would seek the shades below. (CHP 1.6)

Why else would Byron send poor Harold—drugg’d with pleasure—off to the “scorching climes beyond the sea” than to test out on his poetic avatar a similar regimen of purgation that he himself underwent several years prior? Surely the excessive perspiration of Byron’s own efforts glistens too upon Harold’s brow as “he quits, for ever quits / A scene of peace” (1.28.325–26); surely, like Falstaff, he too “sweats to death, / And lards the lean earth as he walks along.”

To be sure, the physical difficulties of Harold’s journey—and their healthful bodily effects—repeatedly make their way into the poem in direct contrast to his earlier life of “bloated Ease”:

O’er vales that teem with fruits, romantic hills,

. . . .

Whereon to gaze the eye with joyaunce fills,

Childe Harold wends through many a pleasant place.

Though sluggards deem it but a foolish chase,

And marvel men should quit their easy chair,
The toilsome way, and long, long league to trace,

Oh! there is sweetness in the mountain air,

And life, that bloated Ease can never hope to share. (CHP 1.30)

From this perspective, the poem might be said to begin in nauseous disgust and proceed into an extended disquisition on weight loss, as dissipation morphs into dissipating. This transformation registers not only at the narrative level as Harold proceeds on his journey, but also at the level of poetic form. The extra poetic foot in the final Alexandrine of the stanza becomes a marker of Harold’s diminishing materiality: an extra step on his journey, another pound shed, another stone lost, another exclamation point filling in the extra space, as Byron performs aesthetic addition by subtraction. Rather than neatly closing the Spenserian stanza, the extra foot overflows its boundaries; purged from the tight, rhythmic course of the verse, this foot lards the lean earth as it walks along.

Biologically, of course, Byron was very much in need of an extra foot, and this contributed to his “tendency to corpulence.” For Edward Trelawney, Byron’s deformity—“always uppermost in his thoughts, and influenc[ing] every act of his life, spur[ing] him on to poetry”—was intricately related to his dalliances with digestion: “Disposed to fatten, incapable of taking exercise to check the tendency, what could he do? If he added to his weight, his feet would not have supported him; in this dilemma he was compelled to exist in a state of semi-starvation.”63 Where actual feet produce an unbalanced body, poetic feet come to the rescue, balancing the body in a purgative aesthetics of abjection. While it would be callous to write over Byron’s painful physiology in attending merely to aesthetic endeavors, his selection of Spenserian stanza as one that “admits of every variety”—providing him a kind of aesthetic mobility—lends material credence to Brian McHale’s depiction of poetry as “prosthetic verse.”64
William Hazlitt, in his curious fashion, picked up on this possibility early on, tracing the vengeful tone of Byron’s poetry back to his body: “This was what made Byron so mad—that he had mis-shapen feet. . . . [T]hat was the cause of all his misanthropy—he wanted to be an Adonis, and could not. Aye, and of his genius too; it made him write verses in revenge. There is no knowing the effects of such sort of things, of defects we wish to balance.”65 It’s not really a new insight, then, but attending to the biographical and biological Byron lends a particular physiological agency to his aesthetics, opening up the possibility that his concept of poetic mobility was ultimately motivated by a physical disability that became the grounds for purgation. From this perspective, nausea, not just deformity, undergirds Harold’s tortuous steps across Europe and Byron’s inclusion/exclusion of these steps as aesthetic form.

Byron’s stanzas on the “Lisbon Packet,” or “Lines to Mr. Hodgson,” a verse letter written to Francis Hodgson on June 30, 1809, as Byron was departing for Portugal to commence the journey he later mythologizes in Child Harold’s Pilgrimage, reveal the scene of Harold’s departure from Albion to be a nauseating affair. What Byron writes as homesickness in Canto I was in fact seasickness in the scene of Byron’s own life. The “Lines to Mr. Hodgson,” depicting several instances of seasickness and vomiting, also suggest how an aesthetics of nausea might inform Byron’s poetic style. As in the seasickness episode of Don Juan, Canto II, Byron uses bodily ejections to develop an ideal of poetic immediacy—this is happening now:

        Now our boatmen quit their mooring
        And all hands must ply the oar;
        Baggage from the quay is lowering,
        We’re impatient—push from shore—
        “Have a care! That Case holds liquor—”
“Stop the boat—I’m sick—oh Lord!”

“Sick Maam! damme, you’ll be sicker
Ere you’ve been an hour on board.” (33–39)

Now we’ve reached her, lo! the Captain
_Gallant_ Kidd commands the crew,
Passengers _now_ their berths are clapt in
Some to grumble, some to spew,
Heyday! call you that a Cabin?
Why ’tis hardly three feet square,
Not enough to stow Queen Mab in . . . (17–24)

Byron begins three out of the five stanzas with the temporal “now,” bringing the reader into the moment with the body in a state of upheaval. The tossed-off, jaunty quality of his style—now developing a narrative, now folding in a bit of dialogue, now reflecting on the circumstances of narration—as well as his clever, seemingly improvised rhymes (Cabin / Queen Mab in), gesture forward to the more developed techniques of immediacy in _Don Juan_, and show Byron’s early interest in the stomachic as a site of the aesthetic. Notice how Byron literally rolls purgation and poetics into one turn of the sickening stomach:

_Fletcher, Murray, Bob, where are you?

Stretched along the deck like logs.

Bear a hand—you jolly tar you!
Here’s a rope’s end for the dogs.
Hobhouse muttering fearful curses
As the hatchway down he rolls,
Now his breakfast, now his verses
Vomits forth and damns our souls.
Here’s a stanza
On Braganza;
Help!—a couplet—no, a cup
Of warm water,
What’s the matter?
Zounds! my liver’s coming up.
I shall not survive the racket
Of this brutal Lisbon Packet.— (49–64)
The now’s pile up on each other, as breakfast and verses are aesthetically assimilated in Byron’s dizzying display of poetic purgation: the rapid rhymes, inconsistent meter, and choppy enjambments perform the rollicking motion that upsets the stomach: the very verses are vomiting with Hobhouse’s breakfast. Perhaps more subtly, Byron folds systems of trade and empire into his imagery and aesthetics of nausea in this scene. Aboard the Lisbon Packet, the individual, as much as the case of liquor, is a product of international trade. Byron and his friends are incorporated into a system of world trade and travel: packed alongside goods for sale and consumption, checked and taxed by a custom house official: “Here’s a rascal / Come to task all / Prying from the custom house, / Trunks unpacking / Cases cracking” (9–13). In such a process, the stomach itself is imperialized, incorporating the goods of empire into the individual.
Recognizing itself as in thrall to empire, the stomach revolts. As Hobhouse pens his verses on the royal house of Portugal—“Here’s a stanza / On Braganza”—he simultaneously vomits. A poetics of empire entails regurgitating the contents of one’s breakfast. As Byron sets out for Europe, then, nausea underwrites his understanding of the individual’s relationship to world systems.

When Byron comes to write this scene in the delicate Spenserians of *Childe Harold*, it is with considerably less ruckus:

The sails were fill’d, and fair the light winds blew,
As glad to waft him from his native home;
And fast the white rocks faded from his view,
And soon were lost in circumambient foam:
And then, it may be, of his wish to roam
Repented he, but in his bosom slept
The silent thought, nor from his lips did come
One word of wail, whilst others sate and wept,
And to the reckless gales unmanly moaning kept. (*CHP* 1.12)

Not unlike Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” and elsewhere, Byron tranquilizes the physicality of this scene: Harold’s crossing is ethereal, practically vaporous, as the “light winds” that “waft” him from home assimilate physical particularity into a bland, if beautiful, covering of “circumambient foam.” Yet, by the end of the stanza, the fair, light winds have become “reckless gales,” turning the crossing into a more tempestuous affair. The “fill’d” sails themselves gesture back to “fullness of satiety” that pervades the previous stanzas, particularly the “goblets brimm’d with every costly wine” from the immediately preceding stanza. The “unmanly moaning” that concludes the stanza—apparently a sign of homesickness—is also possibly a sign of seasickness,
especially in the context of Byron’s “Lines to Mr. Hodgson.” Though Harold, as always, is exempt from the course of common humanity, the moaning raises the specter of seasickness that Byron has buried in his letter to Hodgson, revealing the unsettling nausea that permeates the pilgrimage from the start.

Harold’s nausea, like Byron’s, also has immediate implications for naming or re-naming one’s identity. Like “George Gordon,” Childe Harold too must in some fashion become “Byron” in order to yield Byron the mediation he seeks between poetry, politics, and personality. “Childe Harold” names the debauched reveler under the horrors of digestion; “Byron” names the slender and seductive hero, putting on personas to continually adopt new poetic perspectives. The distinction Byron sought between the two, however, was in vain: for Harold becomes “Byron” by transforming his body through excessive perspiration and purgation. Significantly, reflections on Harold’s name occur just after the stanza detailing his “riot most uncouth” and just before he feels the “fullness of satiety” leading to his flight from home:

Childe Harold was he hight:—but whence his name
And lineage long, it suits me not to say;
Suffice it, that perchance they were of fame,
And had been glorious in another day:
But one sad losel soils a name for aye,
However mighty in the olden time;
Nor all that heralds rake from coffin’d clay,
Nor florid prose, nor honied lies of rhyme,
Can blazon evil deeds or consecrate a crime. (CHP 1.3)
Recognizing his position at the end of a long line of decadent decay from a once noble name, Harold flees from his nominal identity, but in the course of the canto, making a new name for oneself becomes tantamount to finding a new body. He redeems himself as a hero by becoming “Byron”—the persona of the nineteenth century, perfected through a process of purgation.

If Harold indeed discovers, as McGann cogently notes, “that Europe and the entire world mirrors his personal condition,” he discovers a land like his own body—swollen with sickness and in dire need of purging—almost as soon as he disembarks from his vessel on the shores of Portugal. Harold’s nausea is the nausea of empire, and Byron prescribes a divine phlebotomy to purge the diseased realm:

Oh, Christ! it is a goodly sight to see
What Heaven hath done for this delicious land!
What fruits of fragrance blush on every tree!
What goodly prospects o’er the hills expand!
But man would mar them with an impious hand:
And when the Almighty lifts his fiercest scourge
’Gainst those who most transgress his high command.
With treble vengeance will his hot shafts urge
Gaul’s locust host, and earth from fellest foemen purge. (CHP 1.15)

The land itself is appealingly appetitive—“delicious” with “fruits of fragrance”—but the march of empire has poisoned its produce, creating a kind of contagion which contaminates all who come near, as Byron’s reflections on the Peninsular War and in particular the Convention of Cintra make clear:

What beauties doth Lisboa first unfold!
Her image floating on the noble tide,
Which poets vainly pave with sands of gold,
But now whereon a thousand keels did ride
Of mighty strength, since Albion was allied,
And to the Lusians did her aid afford:
A nation swoln with ignorance and pride,
Who lick yet loathe the hand that waves the sword
To save them from the wrath of Gaul’s unsparing lord. (CHP 1.16)

Portugal, England, France: no nation escapes Byron’s derision and all, like Harold, have
sickened on the excesses of empire. Byron’s sentence structure even makes it unclear which
nation, England or Portugal, is “swoln with ignorance and pride”: the colon initially establishing
a relationship with Albion’s aid, but the closing couplet setting its sights on Portugal.
Distinctions are difficult to abide when every other nation seems in thrall to an empire, but the
brunt of Byron’s venomous spleen is directed back at Britain in the wake of the Convention of
Cintra: “And ever since that martial synod met, / Brittania sickens, Cintra! at thy name”
(1.26.306–307). Making Harold the digestive center in which the diseased condition of Europe is
distilled, Byron shows how Harold’s personal pilgrimage of purgation has world-historical
implications.

Nausea facilitates Byron’s poetic identification of Harold with Europe in the
revolutionary era. Byron projects Harold’s nausea out into a larger area—the map of Europe
during the upheaval of the Peninsular Wars—allowing him to glimpse a model of individual
aesthetic agency. Just as his own vomiting allows Byron the perspective of multiple personae, so
too does Harold’s nausea open up a pathway to merging with the outside world, moving through
it, and reflecting on it. Sickness may ultimately yield only to further sickness, but the individual nonetheless retains a core of subjective freedom, an emboldened sense of will to go on. If recognizing the system of empire as a sickness wrought on the individual ultimately does little to alter the operative logic of that system, at the very least it allows the individual to continually recommit the self to further endeavors, to moving forward “like the thunder-storm against the wind” (CHP 4.98.875). Hence, Harold’s literal mobility: he is always on the move, ever searching new horizons. His very entrance into the epic is a scene of departure against the backdrop of nausea:

He felt the fullness of satiety:

Then loathed he in his native land to dwell

. . . . .

And from his native land resolv’d to go,

and visit scorching climes beyond the sea (CHP 1.4.34–5; 1.6.51–2).

This is the marginal comfort that Byronic nausea produces for his poetics and his protagonist: a mobility fraught with an awareness of personal failure, a self-reflexive commitment to continue to exist in the world, “even though in pain.” This is the *collapsurgence* of system in the Byronic mode.

VIII

If Byron did in fact spontaneously overflow—or at least experience a queasy intestinal quiver—on first looking into Wordsworth’s physic, it wouldn’t be the first time he had gagged on doses of force-fed medicinal poetry. Recalling his youthful experiences reading Horace—a poet to
whom, like Wordsworth, he attributes an admirable “lyric flow” yet lacking an emotional intensity—Byron in Canto IV of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* writes of

The drill’d dull lesson, forced down word by word

In my repugnant youth, with pleasure to record

Aught that recalls the daily drug which turn’d

My sickening memory. (*CHP* 4.75.674–5; 76.676–7)

Though time has intervened to mediate the experiences of the past and restore the body by means of the mind, Byron is careful to note that it has not alleviated his queasy revulsion:

\[
\text{. . . though Time hath taught}
\]

\[
\text{My mind to meditate what then it learn’d . . .}
\]

\[
\text{. . . I cannot now restore}
\]

\[
\text{Its health; but what it then detested, still abhor. (*CHP* 4.76.677–684)}
\]

In his seemingly off-the-cuff crack to Medwin of the daily doses of Wordsworth prescribed by Shelley, then, Byron returns to the scene of his youthful nausea (not unlike Wordsworth returning to “Tintern Abbey” and the “glad animal movements” of his boyish days), but unlike Wordsworth he finds no abundant recompense, but merely returns to vomit more forcefully upon the gross material movements of his own repugnant youth; for Byron, memory sickens.

This set of stanzas in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* also performs the overflow it narrates, and thus prepares us for Byron’s aesthetics of abjection in *Don Juan*. Here, Byron’s use and abuse of his Spenserian stanza form is significant: referencing his own composition of the poem, “with pleasure to record,” Byron immediately jumps through Stanza 75 into Stanza 76, continuing his sentence: “Aught that recalls the daily drug which turn’d / My sickening
memory.” Disavowing the container of the stanza, Byron’s writing itself registers the uncontrollable overflow it writes about. Similarly, the first line break of Stanza 76 is important, for it ejects sickness from its borders, abjecting it and excluding it as its own separate part, cut off from the main body: “aught that recalls the daily drug which turn’d / My sickening memory; and, though . . . .” Even the grammatical marker of the semi-colon marks off sickness as separate from the body of the stanza. If “My sickening memory” is in fact abjected, Byron’s enjambment nonetheless forces us to turn to sickness as we read through the line. Thus, just as the daily dose of reading “turns” Byron’s memory to sickness, so do we as readers turn to sickness: Byron’s verse sickens only by turns. And like the bodily abject, the poetical or grammatical abject can never be wholly cast off. The enjambment forces the turn on us, and the semi-colon separates, but only for a moment; sickness comes to pervade the stanza, as Byron concludes it with another suggestive turn: “I cannot now restore / Its health; but what it then detested, still abhor.” These final two lines rewrite the opening two lines of the stanza, but this time “health” is abjected—restoring or returning is impossible—and sickness remains, becoming an essential part of the functioning whole of the stanza.

In addition to turning from one stanza to the next and one line to the next, Byron also embeds another type of material turn in these two stanzas: the turn to his own notes to the poem. In the midst of the turn between the lines “forced down word by word / In my repugnant youth,” Byron includes a footnote after “word by word” that impels us to turn not to the next line, but to the end of the poem. Here we find another abjection from the stanza which brings us to the scene of Byron’s own life. What follows in the lengthy footnote is a screed against the rote memorization and didactic conditioning characteristic of much late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century schooling: “[W]e can never be aware of some of the finest passages of
Shakespeare . . . from the habit of having them hammered into us at eight years old, as an exercise, not of mind but of memory: so that when we are old enough to enjoy them the taste is gone, and the appetite palled.”67 Appetite versus exercise. The true aesthetic taste is appetitive for Byron: it grows rather than purges. Byron performs this appetitive aesthetic by stuffing the stanza with his notes. At the same time, he performs the abject ends of appetite, cramming more into the stanza than can possibly be digested: just as we finish reading “forced down word by word,” Byron forces down the words, turning us to his repugnant youth at the level of the line and the extra-poetic material.

Of course, Byron does not merely continue his sentence—“with pleasure to record / Aught that recalls the daily drug . . .”—through the stanza. The stanza number, seventy-six, sits in the middle of the sentence. This too is a significant marker of sickness in Byron’s poem and importantly tropes his notion of “sickening memory.” Aurally, “six” recalls “sick”; as it is words in the context of these stanzas that cause Byron to sicken, the stanza number pronounced is a phonetic reminder of sickness. Even as Byron records the stanza number just after writing “with pleasure to record,” he finds himself turning to sickness in the next stanza. Recording “seventy-six,” Byron records “aught that recalls” his “sickening memory.”

Beginning with “remembrance” and ending with “abhor”-rence, the two stanzas record a process of remembering which only yields sickness and disgust. What might in Wordsworth be a therapeutic, alleviative process—remembering, repeating, and working through, to use Freud’s terms—is for Byron merely a process of turning over in the mind that leads to a turning of the stomach. Byron’s use of the stanza number performs this “sickening memory,” as he uses it to work back through time in an actual countdown to sickness. His footnote to stanza seventy-five—its own appetitive stuffing leading to purgation—begins this process. In the note, Byron
recalls his schooldays, force-fed on literature “at eight years old.” As we turn to the final line of
the stanza after this note, and then into the next stanza, we move from “eight” to “seven” to
“six”: the stanza number records a countdown, moving back in time and memory. As the stanzas
themselves count up, burgeon and grow from seventy-five to seventy-six, Byron’s memory
moves in the opposite direction—eight, seven, six—reversing the process, as the incremental
becomes the excremental, and Byron makes sickness a part of a process of memory. “Six” is
“sick,” or at least approaches sick. A turning back in time for Byron is also a turning of the
stomach.

Like Byron’s own youthful experience reading Horace, Juan’s early education in the
classics threatens to bring him to the brink of bodily overflow:

Lucretius’ irreligion is too strong

For early stomachs, to prove wholesome food

. . . . .

And then what proper person can be partial

To all those nauseous epigrams of Martial. (DJ 1.43.337–44)

Byron’s alliterating “p’s”—“what proper person can be partial”—pronounce his nauseous
distaste, aurally imitating lips pursing together and quickly coming apart to hastily eject some
inconsumable bit from the mouth, the tongue trying to cleanse the palate of the sickening taste.

To be sure, the next stanza shows that these “grosser parts” have indeed been spit out, the canon
itself needing to be purged of such unwholesome ingredients to be made more palatable for the
young Juan:

Juan was taught from out the best edition

Expurgated by learned men, who place,
Judiciously, from out the schoolboy’s vision,

The grosser parts; . . . \textit{(DJ 1.44.345–48)}

As usual, Byron’s line break here is significant, as it performs the expurgation that the first half of the stanza discusses by expelling the “grosser parts” and setting them apart from the body. The caesura signaled by the grammatical marker, the semi-colon, following “grosser parts” ensures their exclusion. Just as they are kept out of Juan’s vision in the narrative being related, these grosser parts are kept out of our vision as readers when we reach the end of the third line.

But only momentarily: the enjambment forces us to read on and find that the grosser parts are only just out of sight, that they have only been incompletely expelled. Their exclusion is but partial; the semi-colon itself merely separates but for a moment, and even that incompletely, implying in fact not a separation but a close, suggestive connection. This is the brilliance of the final half of the stanza, which becomes a commentary on precisely what the first half of the stanza has performed:

. . . but fearful to deface

Too much their modest bard by this omission,

And pitying sore his mutilated case,

They only add them all in an appendix,

Which saves, in fact, the trouble of an index. \textit{(DJ 1.44.348–51)}

The grosser parts are only ever just out of sight, collected together in an appendix, which need merely be turned to in order to “have them all at one fell swoop” \textit{(DJ 1.45.352)}, just as we turn to the “grosser parts” in reading through the enjambment. The teasing and suggestive quality of Byron’s verse—revealing things but partially and by turns—tropes not only the type of expurgated text he details, but also the sexual/textual education of the young Juan for whom
grosser parts are always, tantalizingly, just around the corner. In the ensuing narrative of Canto I, the grosser parts of Juan himself are kept just from out our—and Don Alfonso’s—vision, as he lies folded away—“young, slender, and pack’d easily”—in Julia’s mattress (DJ 1.166.1323). As with Don Juan, so with Don Juan.

If Byron’s aesthetics perform his narrative, he also performs the performance: after the word “appendix” in the line “they only add them all in an appendix,” Byron adds a footnote, referring us to the appendix of his own text. Turning to this footnote, we find Byron’s insistence on the literal life of the details from his stanza: “Fact. There is, or was, such an edition, with all the obnoxious epigrams of Martial placed by themselves at the end.” Fact. Byron’s simple statement moves us out of the fiction into the biography of his own life. The appendix to Byron’s poem, as all Byron scholars know, is the grosser parts of the biography of his own life. If there wasn’t such an edition, however, there now is: Byron’s text is it. In the writing of the narrative of his poem he creates what he is writing about. The “Fact” is not, in fact, an edition of Martial, but is instead Don Juan itself as a performance of Byron’s life, the grosser parts referred to the appendices. So, as always with Byron, the fact is a fiction, the fiction a fact.

The astonishing similarity between these two poetic performances from Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and Don Juan suggests something strange about how nausea facilitates the immediacy of aesthetic and autobiographical interaction in Byron’s poetics. Byron’s graceful and deft handling of his materials is underwritten by a scene of literal inner turmoil that extends his imagination outward into an all-encompassing act of poetic ventriloquism in which history, autobiography, and poetics are churned and turned into something strange that resists all efforts at critical systematization. In Canto III of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, it’s a heave that initiates
Byron’s poetics of immediacy, his dashing aesthetics, and his narrative quest to piece together “the shattered links of the world’s broken chain”:

—Awaking with a start,

The waters heave around me; and on high
The winds lift up their voices: I depart,
Whither I know not; but the hour’s gone by,

When Albion’s lessening shores could grieve or glad mine eye. (CHP 3.1.5–9)

The startling textual incursion—signaled by the dash—breaks in mid-stanza, disrupting Byron from his melancholy reflections on a past parting (“When last I saw thy young blue eyes they smiled, / And then we parted,—not as now we part, / But with a hope.—” [3.1.3–5]), and launching him “Once more upon the waters!” (3.2.10)—out of the fact of his own life and back into the fiction of Harold, “the wandering outlaw of his own dark mind” (3.3.20). This is a crucial passage in Byron’s oeuvre for its realization of the immersion in aesthetics that will allow Byron a commitment to a continual quest. What’s even more crucial to notice though is how Byron in the sea-sickness scene of Don Juan, Canto II rewrites the heave—here “to rise and fall, as a floating object upon the waves”—as a stomachic event—“an effort to vomit, to retch”—for it shows how nausea becomes an aesthetic anodyne for Byron, that which alleviates his memory by agitating his person, allowing him a commitment to continuing even though in pain.69 The scene replicates the opening of Canto III of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, casting Juan on the waters as he bids farewell to the country of his birth and reflects longingly on family and past loves:

‘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 thine 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.) (DJ 2.18–19)

As in Childe Harold, the dash gives way to a lurching ship; but here, the lurching ship yields a heaving stomach. In Don Juan, Byron raises the specter of the seasick retching fit as the absent other of Child Harold’s poetics of immediacy. As if comically rereading and rewriting his own earlier, gloomy verse, Byron revisits Child Harold’s Pilgrimage not merely to remember, but also to retch, and in retching to recall us to the nauseous satiety out of which that poem and its aesthetic energies were born.
IX

“Shelley, when I was in Switzerland, used to dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea.”

What interests me here is how Byron makes his own body the site of literary criticism: what Francis Jeffrey called Wordsworth’s “peculiar system” of poetics is countered by Byron’s digestive system. Byron’s nausea—a premonition of an imminent digestive reversal—as a literal dis-taste is also then an aesthetic appraisal. Jeffrey merely verbalizes Byron’s vomit as his notorious “This will never do”: Jeffrey’s screed against Wordsworth’s system throughout his review of The Excursion is written over with the language of sickness, disease, and purging.

But what critique, precisely, does Byron’s nausea level at Wordsworth’s poetics? In Wordsworth’s literary system, spelled out in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads and elsewhere, composing explicitly entails collecting oneself or recollecting/re-collecting oneself: “it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” To compose one must first be composed: one must collect oneself in order to recollect oneself. Byron’s nausea reacts against collecting: he refuses to be collected or systematized. By failing to remain composed physically, Byron resists Wordsworthian composition. His nausea is an elusive gesture in that it performs a bodily dispersal that, once enacted, is difficult to re-collect. Thus, with his nausea, Byron not only resists inclusion in a literary system, he stages a kind of sleight of stomach in which excessive materiality serves as a screen for a disappearing act. The composed and composing poet is imminently locatable, if occasionally just a few miles above—collected and ready to be collected—but the intestinally agitated poet evades notice, “being everything by turns and nothing long.” “Turns” here read as a kind of stomachic upheaval resisting incorporation.

A strange way of thinking about Byron’s nausea, but it shows how Byron’s bodily disruptions, disorders, and failures are enmeshed in crucial questions of criticism, canonicity, and
collecting: and further, how his forceful bodily presence is intricately tied to tantalizing absences. In this context we would do well to reconsider the relationship Byron’s unsettled body has to developments in Romantic criticism. Byron’s body has always characterized and complicated his relationships—not just to his contemporaries, like Wordsworth and Keats, but also to the canon of Romantic criticism. But just how his body fits or does not fit into these discourses is not always clear. The extent to which Byron’s critical legacy in the twentieth century circled around the themes his nausea foregrounds has perhaps been underrated and might further elucidate Byron’s vexed, often antithetical relationship to the canon of twentieth-century Romantic criticism, epitomized by M. H. Abrams’s now notorious failure to accommodate Byron in his otherwise quasi-comprehensive account of the Romantic movement in *Natural Supernaturalism*. “Byron I omit altogether,” he pronounces, hardly pausing to consider whether Byron—whose poetry repeatedly dramatizes his own outsider status (“wandering outlaw,” “born for opposition,” “the lion is alone, and so am I,” etc., etc., etc.)—would like to be included in the first place. Jerome McGann’s welcome correction of such critical oversights in *The Romantic Ideology* is now *de rigueur*: citing Rene Wellek’s major Romantic criteria—imagination, nature, and symbol—McGann notes that “the ‘three criteria’ which he calls ‘central’ to a Romantic ‘practice of literature’ do not at all fit Byron, who is perhaps the single most important figure in the history of European Romanticism.” Or perhaps better yet, Byron does not at all fit them, for his disorderly body is too present in his poetics, and therefore too resistant, too uncontainable. Indeed, if Abrams’s primary reason for excluding Byron is that “he speaks with an ironic counter-voice and deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries,” this counter-voice is also at least partly a counter-body or a non-canonical
body, and the satiric opening Abrams locates is also a Bakhtinian bodily aperture resisting containment.

Partly; though not entirely: for Byron’s oscillations between material and immaterial reveal a characteristic ambivalence at the core of his poetic vision, and a hesitance to firmly exalt one vision over the other. As Peter Graham remarks in his cogent reading of Byron’s appetitive imagination,

As a sharp-eyed realist and idealist in spite of himself, Byron acknowledges the powers of both [the flesh and the spirit]. . . . What all these antithetical pairings [of flesh and spirit] suggest is not so much that the higher social and transcendental feelings of Juan and all humanity are false (though they may be) as that lower, more visceral claims coexist with and often supersede such aspirations.73 If transcendental aspirations are often superseded by the bodily lower stratum they are not wholly subsumed within it, and indeed neither set of phenomena—those of the mind or those of the body—occur without recourse to or relationship with the other. Thus, even as he gives to airy nothings a local habitation and name, they flit and flicker away like just so much fiery dust. If Byron’s disorderly body is too present in his poetics, it is equally not present at all, and this enigma is perhaps what most nearly approaches his challenge to Romanticism and Romantic criticism.

Tellingly, Byron only makes his presence felt in Natural Supernaturalism when he is not there, when Abrams can make him an absent presence. This is, of course, precisely how Byron creates his poetic fame and dramatizes his poetic character. In one of the most astonishing (and in retrospect hilarious) literary debuts, Byron arrives merely to announce his own departure: if he did in fact awake one morning to find himself famous upon the publication of Childe Harold I
and II, he could hardly have greeted his adoring public with a less present poetic persona than the always already leaving Childe Harold: “Apart he stalked in joyless reverie, / And from his native land resolv’d to go, / And visit scorching climes beyond the sea” (CHP 1.6.50–3). Shaking the dust of England from his shoes, Harold jumps a ship to Portugal almost before we have the chance to behold him in all his debauched Byronic glory. As Byron’s own biography—particularly his exile from England in 1816—bears out, awaking to fame often tropes awaking to departure: a point he makes clear, however, in Childe Harold, Canto III as well, when he recasts his own sudden awakening into literary consciousness (and fame) as a scene of departure: “Awaking with a start, / The waters heave around me; and on high / The winds lift up their voices: I depart, / Wither I know not” (CHP 3.1.5–8). Characteristically, Byron announces Harold’s (and his own) triumphant return as a retreat.

Here too, the trope of departure infiltrates Byron’s aesthetics: what McGann calls his ideal of poetic immediacy, which reaches its apex in the digressive manner of Don Juan, is anticipated by Byron’s poetic rupture midway through the stanza that signals Harold’s departure. He breaks off to dash away (grammatically, fictionally, literally), often in mid-thought, with hardly a reflective glance back: “but the hour’s gone by, / When Albion’s lessening shores could grieve or glad mine eye” (3.1.8–9). But as Harold diminishes on the horizon, Byron’s own presence in his poetry becomes paramount, as he writes to John Cam Hobhouse of Childe Harold IV, “With regard to the conduct of the last canto, there will be found less of the pilgrim than in any of the preceding, and that little slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his own person.” As Harold continues to depart, Byron continues to arrive, his own poetics taking on the feverish, impulsive, dashing qualities of his fading hero. Finally merging himself with Harold—whom whose identity his own was hopelessly enmeshed from the start, as Byron’s
readers correctly surmised—Byron becomes at once an absence and a presence, a kind of spectral enigma unto himself, haunted by himself, seeking a self-oblivion he cannot achieve.

Thus, Abrams omission of Byron from *Natural Supernaturalism*, if at once a classic example of what McGann calls Romantic criticism’s “uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations,” is also at the same time an oddly precise reading of Byron’s poetic project. By refusing to include Byron—and thus signaling his lack of presence, or rather his absent presence—Abrams (accidentally) adheres to Byron’s own refusal to participate: in this he shows that he understands Byron as profoundly as McGann. That Byron’s poetics of departure—the specter of which broods over the hollow Byronic space in Abrams’s study, is indeed summoned by that space—should prove a significant precursor to what McGann insists is a crucial feature of Byron’s poetic alterity (his ideal of poetic spontaneity or immediacy) shows how close Abrams and McGann actually are in their (apparently antithetical) appreciations of Byron. Each critic finds a fit space for him: the one by attesting that he indeed cannot fit, the other by making the space larger.

The real enemy over and against whom Abrams and McGann are both writing is of course T. S. Eliot, whose aversion to the sentimental tradition in Romantic poetry led him to denigrate its twentieth-century resonance. Yet, it was the “profoundly mistaken” Eliot who first called for a modern reappraisal of Byron’s poetry in *On Poetry and Poets*. Prescribing the proper limits for this critical investigation to “half a dozen essays about him” (and, one somehow imagines, absolutely no more), Eliot “start[s] that ball rolling” in what amounts to an almost comical specimen of damning with faint praise. “[S]o does Byron write a dead or a dying language,” observes Eliot before admitting that “[he] deserves a certain sad admiration for his degree of success.” Though Eliot adopts an apparently detached, critical perspective on
Byron’s work alone—"I am speaking of the qualities and defects visible in his work, and important in estimating his work: not of the private life, with which I am not concerned"—is a perfect example of how Byron’s body, as well as the private dalliances and public fame in which that body figured so prominently, comes to trouble Romantic criticism.

One of the main obstacles for Eliot in turning over Byron is the sheer size: “The bulk of Byron’s poetry is distressing, in proportion to its quality; one would suppose that he never destroyed anything.” Behind these lines one can almost hear Ben Jonson’s exasperated quip on hearing that Shakespeare never blotted a line: “would that he had blotted a thousand.” One also senses Byron’s actual body behind the body of work, a presence Eliot draws explicit attention to in his very next paragraph as he famously derides “that pudgy face suggesting a tendency to corpulence, that weakly sensual mouth.” The excesses of Byron’s poetic output suggest the excesses of his body, neither of which the ascetic Eliot can stomach any more than Prufrock can dare to eat a peach. Curiously he employs Byron’s own metaphor—that of nausea—to depict his early poetic excesses: “The continual banter and mockery, which his stanza and his Italian model [in Don Juan] serve to keep constantly in his mind, serve as an admirable antacid to the high-falutin which in the earlier romances tends to upset the reader’s stomach.” For Eliot, Byron’s verse might be said to ultimately adopt a nauseous perspective on itself: sickening at its earliest excesses, it must find a way to calm its queasy disgust. An antacid would hardly have been Byron’s cure, but rather purgation in the form of a poetic emetic: the digressive style that Eliot in a rare moment of admiration calls the “torrential fluency of verse.” Eliot’s aversion to the bulk and excesses of Byron’s poetry, his resultant upset stomach, are intricately related to Byron’s personal, bodily excesses. To the extent that Byron must be received as one sheer bulking mass, Eliot gags; but, as his considerable appreciation for Don Juan demonstrates, when he is able to
pare him down and take him piecemeal, Eliot finds him more palatable. As Byron moves from fat to fit, in other words, he is more worthy of critical consideration and inclusion in the canon. Eliot can find a fit space for *Don Juan*/*Don Juan* in the critical canon—“light, slender, and pack’d easily” as he is—so long as he only takes up “half a dozen essays” or so.

Eliot’s vexed relationship to Byron’s materiality, which in many ways instigated the critical consternation of Abrams and McGann, eerily replicates the fate of Byron’s actual body after his death in Greece. As Fiona MacCarthy writes, “Byron’s remains attracted as much controversy as his living persona had done.”85 Just where to put them became a hotly contested question, which reached its boiling point when, in what amounts to his first (material) exclusion from the canon, Byron’s body was refused interment in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey. Typically, Byron’s own interest in such a triumphant public burial was equivocal. “One request let me make you,” he reportedly told his doctor before dying, “Let not my body be hacked, or be sent to England. Here let my bones moulder—Lay me in the first corner without pomp or nonsense.”86 Even in his final moments Byron performs his body noncanonically: any corner will do, so long as it’s not Poet’s Corner. His requests were of course ignored: his body hacked up and sent back to England on a ship with the heart, brain, and intestines riding shotgun in several urns next to the corpse; the lungs and larynx left in Greece to inspire the independence effort with an apparently ghostly serenade, as Petros Kapsalis said at the time, “we wished to have his lungs and larynx because he had used his breath and voice for Greece.”87

The piecemeal legacy of Byron’s mangled body nicely tropes the dominant trends of Romantic canon criticism: for if Eliot could only take him part by part, and Abrams not at all, McGann feels the need to resurrect and piece him back together. At least in part, then, Byron creates his own antithetical relationship to the canon and indeed to twentieth-century Romantic
criticism, and he does so at the level of his material remains. Finally given a floor stone in Poet’s Corner in 1969, merely two years before Abrams will grant him the same type of cenotaph space in *Natural Supernaturalism*, Byron’s body, his figure, attains the figurative space Keats would deny him, as he is written into, but remains outside of the canon. Rejecting the burial proposal of Byron’s executors, Dr. Ireland, Dean of Westminster, advised Byron’s relations to “carry away the body, & say as little about it as possible.” Abrams, at the very least, was listening.

But, even in what can at best be described as a skeptical appreciation of Byron, Eliot does open up the door for a compelling approach to embodied appraisals of Byron’s poetics. Praising the *ottava rima* of *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, Eliot notes that “the stanza that he borrowed from the Italian was admirably suited to enhance his merits and conceal his defects, just as on a horse or in the water he was more at ease than on foot.” While the comment contains another thinly-veiled joke about Byron’s physical deformity, it potentially forges a crucial link between Byron’s aesthetics and his riotous body: between the figurative and the figure that so irked Keats. For if Byron’s verse takes its inspiration from Italian literary traditions, it also has its analogies to Byron’s own body, not merely as substance or size as earlier in Eliot’s essay, but also as the aesthetic form that his poetry takes on, becoming perhaps what Brian McHale has called a poetry of prosthesis or what Donna Haraway calls a cyborg phenomenon, coupling a human being to a machine. Byron’s style, his stanza form, in short his characteristic digressive aesthetics of immediacy, crucially relate to his own view of his often uncontrollable body and his attempts to control it: to both conceal and reveal it. Thus, Byron’s mobility, what Jerome McGann calls his ideal of immediacy, or even Anne Mellor’s version of Byron’s Romantic irony all have their bodily registers. The recent criticism of Denise Gigante, Paul Youngquist, and Jane Stabler has all picked up on the possibilities opened up by more subtle readings of the relationship between
Byron’s body and his poetics. My goal here has been to add to this recent work by introducing the embodied concept of nausea into an account of Byron’s aesthetic techniques and relationships to other poets, particularly Wordsworth. It has also been to retell Byron’s twentieth-century critical history from a slightly different perspective, suggesting that when we think about Byron and criticism, it may be that the things that we can’t quite seem to collect or compose completely are precisely the things we’ve been writing about all along.

X

In his Journal of April 19, 1814, Byron waxes poetic, turning to Shakespeare’s Macbeth to reflect his own sense of despair in the wake of Napoleon’s overthrow and the subsequent restoration of the monarchy in France: “And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death.” But despair quickly turns to disgust as Byron turns from poetry to his own prose:

I will keep no further journal of that same hesternal torch-light; and, to prevent me from returning, like a dog, to the vomit of memory, I tear out the remaining leaves of this volume, and write, in Ipecacuanha,—“that the Bourbons are restored!!!”—“Hang up philosophy.” To be sure, I have long despised myself and man, but I never spat in the face of my species before—“O fool! I shall go mad.”

This concluding passage from Byron’s Journal remarkably performs the disgust it narrates. Byron’s characteristic dashes are a kind of grammatical spitting out, troping both his spitting “in the face of my species” and the process of literary purgation completed as he tears out “the remaining leaves of this volume.” He writes, he says, under the vomit-inducing effects of the Ipecacuanha plant, the roots of which were often used as a medicinal emetic in the nineteenth century, and the physical function of which is paralleled aesthetically by Byron’s immediate dash
to grammatical exuberance: the excessive exclamation points that do not cap his disgusted “the Bourbons are restored!!!”, but merely perform his growing nausea as it overflows, dashing into the next statement of disgust. Byron’s subsequent re-turns to Shakespeare—“Hang up philosophy”, “O fool! I shall go mad”—turn the melancholy reflections of *Macbeth* with which he began into vituperative ejections, both folded into and spit out of Byron’s prose. Reflection sickens—the vomit of memory threatens to spew forth—causing Byron to purge the pages of his own journal: an act which may call into question Leslie Marchand’s description of his edition of Byron’s *Letters and Journals* as “the complete and unexpurgated text of all the letters available in manuscript.” Unexpurgated by Marchand himself perhaps, but not, it seems, by Byron who at this moment materializes the disgust he narrates and aestheticizes, by physically performing it on his own writing.

This threatened act of literary destruction that brings a sudden stop to Byron’s *Journal* of 1814 presages the more famous destruction of his memoirs in John Murray’s drawing-room ten years later; but, perhaps more importantly (though less obviously) it also portends the unintended final full stop that places a period on *Don Juan*, and on Byron: “as if she had kept / A vigil, or dreamt rather more than slept” (*DJ* 17.14.111–12). The literary purgations of April 19, 1814, and the abrupt end they stamp on Byron’s *Journal*, eerily suggest the literal purgations of April 19, 1824 when Byron’s sickness, exacerbated by courses of bloodletting and purgatives, places an abrupt end on his own life. The final stanza of *Don Juan* accidentally welds these two moments together, as the literal stop of Byron’s life becomes a literary stop, just as the literary becomes literal: the metaphor of sleep made material in death.

Like the ghost suddenly turned “into something much like flesh and blood” in the final stanza of the previous canto, the life of the poem suddenly appears in its very death (*DJ* 16.123).
As in Paul de Man’s reading of Shelley’s *Triumph of Life*, the body of the poet “is present in the margin of the last manuscript page and has become an inseparable part of the poem. At this point, figuration and cognition are actually interrupted by an event which shapes the text but which is not present in its represented or articulated meaning.”\textsuperscript{92} The final stanza is haunted, in other words, by more than just the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke—the fake ghost imbedded within several fictions—but also by Byron himself: “Ghost, or none, / ’Twere difficult to say” (17.14.105–6). Ten years to the day before his demise, Byron uncannily plays out in his *Journal* the very scenario his actual death enacts on his masterpiece: the blending of metaphor and materiality real-ized by a moment of embodied sickness become aesthetic style.

This should all seem like a sinister—or better yet sick—version of Romantic poetry’s aspirations for the real, or what de Man has called poetic language’s “desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object . . . to banish all metaphor, to become entirely literal.”\textsuperscript{93} Though de Man calls this a “movement condemned in advance to failure,” the extent to which this desire is actually consummated in the interplay between the text and its margins has perhaps been underrated. It’s a consummation at least flirted with in the relationship between Byron’s poems and his letters and journals, as I hope to have demonstrated above, and one which circulates around the metaphors and materials of nausea and disgust that pervade Byron’s poetry and prose.

Despite recent interest in nausea, disgust, and digestion in Romantic criticism—particularly in the work of Timothy Morton, Denise Gigante, and Robert Mitchell—Byron’s interest in vomit and nausea as embodied metaphors through which to read Romantic aesthetics perhaps remains underrated; especially for the work of a poet who spent so much of his own time vomiting. “I am always better after vomiting,” he declares to Edward Trelawney in the latter’s
Recollections, after depositing the better part of his partially-digested lunch in the Mediterranean during an afternoon swim. This throwaway comment, welding as it does a new, improved sense of self to a digestive, bodily failure, nicely encapsulates the strange dynamic of freedom and failure, or failure as freedom, that Robert Mitchell singles out as a feature of literary nausea: “In a world in which living human bodies come under the sway of systems—or a System,” writes Mitchell, “one can counter this control only by engendering corporeal shocks and affective counterflows.” The very digestive failure that nausea evokes—the revolt of a bodily system against its own container—succeeds in countering the claims of various invasive and imperializing social systems. Thus, nausea offers a counter-model to Clifford Siskin’s recent paradigm of the legacy of the Enlightenment system, which for Siskin either works too well or constantly breaks down: as a system of embodied abjection, nausea is each of these by the other: it only succeeds by continually representing its failures. Confronted with a wrong revolutionary poetical system, Byron’s body registers a revolt: “Shelley, when I was in Switzerland, used to dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea.” His poetry—in its relationship to his Letters and Journals—attempts to reproduce this embodied response to critique the systems or ideologies of his Romantic contemporaries. An aesthetics of nausea sheds new light on, or is a version of Denise Gigante’s argument that “writers [in the literary history of taste] perform their own critique of the Romantic ideology (conceived as a transcendence of history by aesthetics) in a manner that anticipates the kind of literary criticism that presumes to displace it.”

The ideology critique levelled by an aesthetics of nausea might not merely characterize a dynamic at play in Byron’s poetry and prose, but might also counter or unsettle our own systems of criticism. If a material reading of a particular passage in Byron’s poetry through a seemingly unconnected journal entry of ten years prior seems strange or strained it may partly be because
critics have generally been content to rely on tidier processes of historical and biographical contextualization: critical systems of literary classification that seek to consume and digest entirely. But even the most well-functioning digestive system, as all eaters know, produces tangible, if often inscrutable remainders: potent reminders of the very failures that sustain and ensure its proper functioning. The seeming unconnected-ness, in other words, may be precisely the point. Byron’s *Letters and Journals*—cast-off waste products existing somewhere outside the poetic canon that variously draw attention to their status as such—are literary and critical remainders too often subsumed within or consumed by biographical readings of Byron’s poetry: readings that seem to “work” or function by assuming an orderly transference of meaning from margin to text. Yet the actual relationship between the letters and journals and Byron’s poetry is far stranger and more disorderly than this—or at least it can be. Rather than literary and extra-literary documents in implicit biographical or historical conversation, it more closely parallels the discomfiting, nauseating relationship of a producing body to its abject others: parts that are not really or are no longer assimilable parts of the whole. A critical, material methodology might reapproach Byron’s letters and journals from this perspective, accounting for how they unsettle a reading of Byron’s poetics by revealing its own unsettling aesthetics. Such an approach might answer in the affirmative Timothy Morton’s suggestive questions from *Eating Romanticism*: “Does the process of looking in a side-long way at literary texts, via their material ‘remains,’ actually reinforce rather than undermine the aesthetic dimension? Might the mechanical insistence on contextualization paradoxically turn context into (aestheticized) text?” Byron’s nausea as a literal force turned literary challenges the course of critical digestion by becoming a phenomenon in a cultural aesthetics not so much of Eating Romanticism as Retching Romanticism.
Notes


9 Jerome McGann repeatedly stresses a self-contradictory ethos at the core of Byron’s poetic mobility connected to the ventriloquism that spurs on an all-encompassing aesthetics in *Don Juan*: “[The poem] involves a complex act of poetic ventriloquism through which Byron is able to develop, simultaneously, a polemical analysis of recent European history and a self-conscious critique of his own character and professed social ideals.” Jerome McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 271. My perspective stresses that this mobility may be motivated by a self-loathing that is situated bodily as well as poetically.


12 Connecting nausea to paranoia, David Trotter argues that paranoia “mobilizes disgust at moments of crisis, moments when the ‘still persisting central core of the personality’ . . . is felt to be under threat.” David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67. In introducing the notion of a paranoid reading, I am thinking specifically of paranoia’s faith in the exposure of systemic oppression and its negative affect, considered and critiqued in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Byron’s exposure of his own systemic procedures (as well as Wordsworth’s) perhaps creates a self-critical paranoia that comes close to what Sedgwick means by reparative reading: “it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices. And if the paranoid or the depressive positions operate on a smaller scale than the level of individual typology, they operate also on a larger: that of shared histories, emergent communities, and the weaving of intertextual discourse” (150). Indeed, Byron’s cosmopolitanism or mobility could be profitable read in the context of this last clause rather than according to the more paranoid Butlerian notion of performativity. It is also worth noting that Sedgwick makes a parenthetical parallel (134) between paranoid reading and Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*.


23 Ibid., 105.


Youngquist in *Monstrosities* takes up Wordsworth’s physiological aesthetics in terms its aspirations to literally shape the human body: “Wordsworth is in some ways the poet laureate of the proper body. He practices a physiological aesthetics that aims as much at normalizing bodies as soothing souls. . . . [I]n his early poetry especially, Wordsworth practices a more material sort of healing. The poems of *Lyrical Ballads* as well as its famous ‘Preface’ communicate a surprisingly physical sense of what poetry does. They speak directly to the body and seek to cultivate its health.” Paul Youngquist, *Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 29. Youngquist later extends the implications of a “material sort of healing” in Wordsworth’s poetics to a reading of his fixation on digestion, arguing that memory functions like a digestive organ in some of Wordsworth’s most famous poetry. Paul Youngquist, “Romantic Dietetics! Or, Eating Your Way to a New You,” in *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism*, ed. Timothy Morton (Houndsmills Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 237–56. I pay extended attention to this argument below. Denise Gigante in *Taste* argues for the digestive underpinnings of imaginative internalization in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*: “To interpret the feeding mind of *The Prelude* as the disembodied activity of autopoesis . . . is to interpret it as Wordsworth probably intended it to be read. But Romantic Naturphilosophie and its material rendering of digestion inform the psychoanalytic concepts of assimilation and internalization.” Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 73.


30 Paul Youngquist, “Romantic Dietetics,” 250. Here I more thoroughly demonstrate the aesthetic possibilities of Youngquist’s insights, adding more aesthetic specificity to his account.


32 Ibid., 250, 249.


35 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “disgust.”


43 *Selected Poems*, 68.


50 Ibid., 145.

51 Ibid., 117.

52 Ibid., 119.

53 Ibid., 127.

54 Ibid., 119.
55 Ibid., 122–23.

56 Ibid., 133.

57 McGann, The Beauty of Inflections, 259.

58 Ibid., 261.

59 Byron, Letters and Journals, 3: 226.


61 Byron, Letters and Journals, 1: 133.


66 McGann, The Beauty of Inflections, 259.


69 Thus Byron’s nausea potentially underwrites the tendencies of his poetry to oscillate uneasily between remembering and forgetting in order to achieve continual aesthetic and personal renewal. Jerome McGann and Alan Rawes both write of the new vitality that emerges from a kind of collapsurgence of self. McGann writes of a Byron “Plunged into a kind of death-in-life in which he can find neither love, nor hope, nor meaning” but his “immediate desire for forgetfulness is allied to his more fundamental need to recover . . . as sense of his own vitality.” Jerome McGann, Fiery Dust: Byron’s Poetic Development (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 114. Alan Rawes emphasizes Byron’s interest in the “redemptive possibilities opened up by the human capacity to forget,” arguing that “forgetfulness is sought so that sources of renewed life, of new vitality, which might exist on the other side of forgetting pain, can be discovered and explored.” Alan Rawes, “1816–17: Childe Harold III and Manfred,” in The Cambridge Companion to Byron, ed. Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 118, 120. Immersed within the immediate, Byron’s purges himself of the past and looks forward to the future.


72 Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 13


76 McGann himself shrewdly suggests this point towards the end of *The Romantic Ideology*: “My interest in Byron was triggered years ago largely because he seemed so different from the other Romantics. The differences were marked out by the criticism itself, which preferred to set Byron aside, or to treat his work as marginal to the central projects of Romanticism. And of course Byron is in many ways a figure who covets the stance of an ‘outsider,’ and who presented himself as the ‘enemy within,’ the gadfly and critic of his own age and culture.” Ibid., 137. McGann admits that his work on Byron may not be able to escape his own criticism: he may be merely trading one ideology for another. Thus, if Abrams’s omission is an absent indicator of Byron’s own ideology, McGann’s need to fill in that gap merely reproduces that ideology, brings it back to life. This was, one cannot help but feel, a necessary resurrection.


79 Ibid., 235.

80 Ibid., 239.

81 Ibid., 224. It is of perhaps more than passing interest that one of the most notorious instances of literary destruction in history was the posthumous burning of Byron’s memoirs in John Murray’s drawing room. Obviously Byron did not have a hand in this, and all reliable accounts suggest that he always intended his memoirs for publication, but Eliot’s focus on the “absence of a destructive element in his composition” in conjunction with his insistence on a lack of interest in Byron’s private life, suggests just how strange a pose he strikes with respect to Byron’s biography. At this moment in Eliot’s essay, Byron’s memoirs become another absent presence in twentieth-century Romantic criticism.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 234.

84 Ibid., 227.

Ibid.

Quoted in MacCarthy, 527.

Ibid., 534.


Chapter 4: Headlong Fall: Thomas Love Peacock’s Gravitational Aesthetics

The whole process of the action was mechanical and necessary. The application of the poker necessitated the ignition of the powder: the ignition necessitated the explosion: the explosion necessitated my sudden fright, which necessitated my sudden jump, which, from a necessity equally powerful, was in a curvilinear ascent: the descent, being in a corresponding curve, and commencing at a point perpendicular to the extreme line of the edge of the tower, I was, by the necessity of gravitation, attracted, first, through the ivy, and secondly through the hazel, and thirdly through the ash, into the water beneath.

—Thomas Love Peacock, Headlong Hall (1816)¹

I

“The history of philosophy after Newton could be thought of as a series of confrontations with how to talk about falling.”² So writes Cathy Caruth in Unclaimed Experience (1996). Her claim goes some way towards historicizing the concept of falling down by placing it within a particular scientific context with broad cultural implications. Newton’s discovery of gravitational force reconceived of the world as a mechanistic universe in which objects fall towards each other; more than this, it rewrote all aspects of the world in motion as a physical law represented by a mathematical formula. Applying an explanatory principle to an observable but previously inarticulable force, the discovery of gravity thus radically reconstituted ways of referring to the external world by positing a law to trace the motion of things. Fixed to a law, everything in the
universe seemed to fall together. Yet, as an invisible entity or concept, gravity still retained a resistance to reference; for if mathematical law provided a perfect lexicon for applying and explaining gravity’s force on the world, language itself lagged behind: its descriptive, and therefore metaphorically detached, powers proved inadequate for capturing the physical forces so succinctly and somatically summed up in a formula.

This conundrum raises an important question about literary works which frequently feature falling bodies: do they confront the problem of language’s referential inadequacy to describe a world under the force of gravitational pull?; or, in other words, do they figure out how to talk about falling? This chapter asks this question of Thomas Love Peacock’s *Headlong Hall* (1816), a novel fixated on falling and physical comedy. The title itself should be a hint: “Headlong,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* records, “with reference to falling or downward motion”; yet, despite its central force, Peacock scholars themselves haven’t quite figured out how to talk about falling down in his novels. I argue in part that Peacock explores the aesthetics of falling down with his peculiar prose, structuring paradigms of falling into his style. In so doing, he makes falling bodies a mobilizing force for Romantic irony, an aesthetic mode which Anne Mellor has described as “the difficult but exhilarating balancing between self-creation and self-destruction.” When falling bodies enter into the stylistic dimensions of a text, they sustain a self-reflexive ironic process of collapsing and becoming that turns the problem of talking about falling down into a satirical strategy which has aesthetic implications for Peacock’s larger critique of Romantic transcendence.

Thus, while physical comedy often appears to interrupt the narrative developments and dialogue set-pieces of Peacock’s novel, it is in fact already a hidden presence in the prose style that structures narrative and dialogue. Fully integrating falling down within his aesthetics,
Peacock writes *Headlong Hall* as “Headlong Fall” to explore the performative possibilities of physical comedy for an exposure of Romantic ideology. Indeed, an implicit critique of Wordsworthian poetics undergirds his falling down style, reversing as it does a trajectory towards transcendence. Witness Wordsworth’s performance of perilous suspension in *The Prelude*:

Oh! when I have hung
Above the raven’s nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill sustained, and almost, as it seemed,
Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag; Oh! at that time,
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears! (1.342–39)

Wordsworth’s wobble, but they don’t fall down. Teetering on the edge of an abyss, Wordsworth sustains himself with style. His poetics perform the suspension he names: “hung” left hanging at the enjambment and “Suspended” suspended through the enjambment by the “almost” and “as it seemed” that delay its development. Suspension is a style as much as a state of being, and it translates into transcendence: “almost suspended” in “Tintern Abbey,” we “become a living soul” (45–6). Peacock’s prose tumbles headlong, and thus articulates aesthetically a different direction for Romanticism: one which embraces rather than eschews the fall to earth as a politically potent site of continual collapse and recreation for the individual.
The particular example of Peacock’s *Headlong Hall* literalizes, externalizes, and thus exposes for satirical critique the paradigm of rising and falling that M. H. Abrams argues characterizes Romantic literature more broadly. For Abrams, Wordsworth and his major contemporaries “undertook . . . radically to recast, into terms appropriate to the historical and intellectual circumstances of their own age, the Christian pattern of the fall, the redemption, and the emergence of a new earth which will constitute a restored paradise.”

In the critical context of this influential thesis of Romanticism as a teleology of the fruits of falling mapped onto the immaterial movements of the mind, attending to how an author such as Peacock simultaneously literalizes and aestheticizes the concept of falling—or externalizes the internal with a stylistic performance—has significant implications for the majorness of the impact falling bodies might make on the course of Romantic criticism. This chapter, then, puts pressure on Romantic critics to rediscover and account for the difference that the literalness of falling makes in the aesthetic maneuvers of major works.

As Paul de Man writes, “By falling (in all senses of the term, including the theological Fall) gracefully, one prepares the ascent, the turn from parabola to hyperbole, which is also a rebirth.” His insight links the theological to the theatrical and the actual, melding Abrams’s internalization of the Biblical Fall into both a fictional and factual expression of graceful freedom, underwritten by a body in motion. The emphasis on the gracefulness of falling, however, opens up de Man’s argument to the difference that an *awkward* descent makes for a model of Romantic transcendence. Indeed, the graceless tumble troubles the transcendent future of theology internalized by turning upside-down the directional discourse of divine consummation that a critic such as Abrams imagines as the course of Romantic aesthetics.

From this perspective, Anne Mellor’s *English Romantic Irony* can be read as a realization of the falling down theology of M. H. Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism*: it literalizes the
imaginative movements of his argument to expose the contingencies that falling creates for canonical conceptions of Romanticism. Falling down tugs back on the telos of transcendence, denying its assertive directionality: “Not all romantic works present a confident movement from innocence to experience to a higher innocence, that circuitous journey which leads the protagonist spiraling upward to a more self-aware and therefore more meaningful communion with the divine,” Mellor writes in offering an alternative to Abrams: “To the contrary, many central romantic works exhibit a structure that is deliberately open-ended and inconclusive.”

Thus, Byron becomes the champion of Romantic irony for Mellor, where for Abrams he is a critical nuisance, best left out altogether. Abrams notorious omission of Byron from his comprehensive study is a problem of literal falling. Byron comes too close to opening up spiritual internalization to external exposure with his transcendental tumbling. As Mellor writes,

Rising and falling are what *Don Juan* is all about . . . Things go forward, get pushed back, then rush forward again. More often, they leap into the air, tumble awkwardly or deftly back onto the ground, then energetically rise again. The poem behaves like an acrobatic clown, rushing in where angels might fear to tread, being unceremoniously hurled back, then rushing in again, this time with more energy, dexterity—and success. Or like a clown jumping on a trampoline, arms and legs hysterically flailing, but each leap higher than before until he somersaults several times in the air and lands deftly on his feet.¹²

Though Mellor likely understates the self-critical equivocation with which this breathless aesthetic enthusiasm is exercised,¹³ her formulation—embracing as it does an energy born of enthusiasm and awkwardness—goes some way towards conceiving an aesthetic paradigm for
literal falling that might help characterize Peacock’s procedures and his challenge to Romanticism.

Where the major works emphasized by Abrams—such as Wordsworth’s *Excursion* and Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*—internalize the theological fall as a matter for subjective speculation and imaginative regeneration, Peacock literalizes the fall into a realization of Romantic irony as an aesthetic expression of regenerative potentiality tethered to skeptical self-awareness. This literalness troubles canonical conceptions of Romanticism by exposing the escapist logic of theological internalization. Hidden from history, hope springs eternal, but once exposed to the laws of a world in motion its movements become much more muddled. In literalizing the fall, Peacock strives for a more realistic representation of regeneration and renewal which accounts for the gracelessness of descent as well as the gracefulness of rising. In Peacock’s hands, armed with a gravitational aesthetic, Romantic irony becomes a simultaneously graceful and graceless assault on and actualization of the force of gravity, nicely encapsulated by Friedrich Schlegel’s dialectical term “transcendental buffoonery.”

By making literal falling an aesthetic technique in his prose style, Peacock also shows how materiality underwrites a long tradition of Romantic transcendence. Peacock’s style as an aesthetic expression of falling down is perhaps less literal than the scenes of physical comedy he depicts, even if it seeks to perform those scenes. Thus, falling down style reads “Inside Out Romanticism” as internalization real-ized: the latent internal structures facilitating the function of an individual sentence are exposed in their clash with the external movement of a body in motion. Talking about falling down maps the internal onto the external—linguistics onto the law of gravity—and reveals “inside-out” to be a redundant, self-reflexive term integral to an understanding of Romantic irony as an aesthetic attempt at externalization.
Mr. Cranium’s tumble from the tower in the central chapter of *Headlong Hall* provides a good example of the collision of language and law in Peacock’s prose style, revealing a “transcendental buffoonery” in the comic condition created out of the collapse of language around a falling body. Startled by a nearby explosion, Cranium leaps with a start into the air:

His ascent being unluckily a little out of the perpendicular, he descended with a proportionate curve from the apex of his projection, and alighted not on the wall of the tower, but in an ivy-bush by its side, which, giving way beneath him, transferred him to a tuft of hazel at its base, which, after upholding him an instant, consigned him to the boughs of an ash that had rooted itself in a fissure about half way down the rock, which finally transmitted him to the waters below.\(^\text{15}\)

I will develop the implications of this passage for Peacock’s critique of transcendence more fully later, but for now notice how the sentence has to follow the force of gravity on the falling body in order to develop the image, piling up a series of clauses, commas, and grammatical shifts—*and, but, which*—that attempt to capture Cranium’s descent. As Cranium falls, the sentence converges around his tumbling body; or doesn’t: not in fact really quite catching up with him until his fall is arrested in the plop into the waters below. The law of gravity is a bit ahead of language’s referential function. Cranium keeps slipping out of grasp. Language actually misses him the first time, as he “alighted *not* on the wall of the tower, but in an ivy-bush by its side.” Even as it locates him, language is seemingly a step or two behind: the bush gives way to a tuft, the tuft to roots, and language can only pick Cranium up after gravity has had its way. In this
passage Peacock performs language’s belated rush to reference in its sudden encounter with the law of gravity.

Such a performance begins to suggest the historical dimensions of Peacock’s gravitational aesthetics. According to Caruth, the concept of gravity made writing about falling an historically fraught endeavor:

Insofar as this notion was made by Newton into a law, or was represented by a mathematical formula, it allowed mathematical science to explain aspects of the world it had not been able to explain previously. But insofar as gravitation was also a concept, represented by a word—gravity—it remained philosophically incomprehensible, and seemed an ‘occult quality’ or magical invisible entity that made no rational sense. That is, as a mathematical formula it could be applied perfectly to the world, but as a thing referred to by philosophical discourse it seemed a pure fiction.16

Even as late as the early Romantic era, as Caruth’s examples of Kleist and Kant suggest, writing about falling entailed a familiar philosophical crux of how to link “the sciences of language (logic, rhetoric, and grammar) with the sciences of the world in general (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music),”17 with the added difficulty—realized in the discovery of gravity as law and a concept—that the sciences of language cannot refer, or point, to an event in the same fashion as a mathematical or physical law. They instead produce an aesthetic fiction around an event. Language thus had to adopt a self-consciously performative dimension, to not merely refer or point, but to act.18 “From the pseudo-cognition of tropes,” writes Paul de Man of Kant, “language has to expand to the activity of performance,” in order to integrate what he elsewhere calls the “ontological status of the object” into its aesthetics.19 “Such is language,” writes de Man of the difficulties of reference: “it always thrusts but never scores. It always refers but never to
the right referent. The next textual model . . . will have to be that of the text as a system of turns and deviations, as a system of tropes.” A text that twists and turns aesthetically acts out an event: in this case the event of a fall. In acting out, language might perform a fall and become something not unlike that law which it attempts to name, and might even reveal itself to operate according to the empirical logic of that law. However, if language must perform gravity, rather than be performed upon by gravity, it also reveals the shortcomings of gravity’s force. In its performance, language shows itself to be beholden to but also free from the laws of gravity. Putting on the mask of gravity, language announces its universal freedom. Peacock’s prose registers this precise endeavor as its commitment to a style of Romantic irony: it adopts an aesthetics of falling to show itself free to fall—its gravitational aesthetic paradoxically allows it to transcend an ideology of Romantic transcendence.

In this context, consider the mathematical lexicon Peacock adopts in order to capture the force of gravity with his language in the description of Cranium’s fall: perpendicular, proportionate curve, apex. Peacock attempts an aesthetic performance of the law of gravity here—marshalling his words to mirror the path charted by Cranium’s falling body—revealing his commitment to probing with his prose the intersection of language and law, fiction and formula, made a referential problem with the discovery of gravity. His performance poses the problem of reference, as language appears to trail behind law. However, language also has an affective force that floats free of the physical law of gravity: the scientific specificity with which Peacock depicts Cranium’s fall is funny. Taken in the aggregate, his clauses add up to a comic rendering of this event, rewriting the law of gravity as a scene of great levity. Where language can’t quite refer, it can cause laughter: a psychological and physiological response that explodes—echoing the catalyst of Cranium’s descent—to assuage and overcome the discordance and discomfort
caused by the failed effort to adapt law to linguistics. If the law of gravity dictates the
movements of all objects in relation to each other, it doesn’t dictate the affective human response
to this conundrum of always falling. Literary language has the power to name, or rather to
suggest, something strange within the human ungoverned by law but which registers the
affective response to law. Why, Peacock’s prose style seems to ask, should falling be funny?
Why, when gravity acts on a human in the localized context of a harmless fall, does laughter
result?

Henri Bergson’s notion of “something mechanical encrusted on the living” is a useful
formulation for thinking about what within the image of falling evoked, and within the prose
style that evokes it, is particularly productive of laughter. The mechanical motions of gravity
enforce themselves onto the mobile human frame, turning it into a thing. In such a moment,
according to Bergson, laughter emerges as a corrective force to smooth out the jarring collision
of mobile and mechanical:

[T]his view of the mechanical and the living dovetailed into each other makes us incline
towards the vaguer image of some rigidity or other applied to the mobility of life, in an
awkward attempt to follow its lines and counterfeit its suppleness. . . . We laugh every
time a person gives us the impression of being a thing. . . . The comic is that side of a
person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through
its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of
movement without life.

Peacock’s prose style itself dovetails the mechanical and the living into each other by creating a
syntactically scientific structure within which to view the mobile movements of the body. By
combining so many conditional clauses, scientifically parsed and arranged, it draws attention to
its own mechanical movements, showing how language, when it melds aesthetics to law, is its own type of laughter.

A comic vitality, then, emerges from Peacock’s gravitational aesthetic to refute the mechanistic principles pulling his prose along. His comic irony and the laughter that attends it exist in excess of the events they attempt to account for descriptively and physiologically. Partaking partially of the referential conundrum of gravity and partially of the mysterious materiality ushered into nineteenth-century philosophical discourses by scientific theories of vitality, Peacock’s aesthetic irony sit precariously balanced between lucid legality and linguistic excess.

More contemporary to the Romantics than Newton, scientific discourses of vitality in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries countering the cold mechanism of Newton’s material universe—particularly the work of British physiologist John Hunter—were beginning to make their way into the realm of Romantic aesthetics, as Denise Gigante has argued:

Although Hunter was not the first to renounce the mechanical application of Newtonian principles to the living organism, he lent the weight of extensive empirical experimentation to the idea that life was something superadded to—in excess of—physical organization. Against the materialism represented by [William] Lawrence, vitalists in the wake of Hunter sought to define the science of life beyond the mechanistic sphere of Newtonian science that had dominated the physiology of the first half of the eighteenth century. 23

Vitality suggested the existence of a strange life force—a “living principle”—within the human irreducible to mechanistic understandings and interpretations of physical life and the universe. In seeking a source for life as something superadded to physical organization, scientific theories of
vitality gestured towards something in *excess* of purely mechanistic physical life: a kind of overflowing life force emerging mysteriously within the organic operations of the human body and continuing to fuel those operations as a self-perpetuating system independent or at least in excess of external laws. In the theories of John Hunter and the debates between John Abernathy and William Lawrence, discourses of vitality undertook to explain and account for what might best be called a mysterious materiality within human life over and against a mechanistic interpretation of the physical laws governing life. Vitality interrogated the metaphysics of physics: that which is beyond physicality because deeper than physicality, which promotes and motivates mobile life.

Entering into the aesthetic aspirations of Romanticism as spontaneous overflow, excessive emotional expenditure, and affective attempts to access aesthetically that which runs deeper than the physical, discourses of vitality reveal the scientific source of the metaphysical physics underwriting Romantic aesthetics. As Gigante writes, “As the concept of vital power sparked a preoccupation with self-generating and self-maintaining form, it quickened the category of the aesthetic. . . . Aesthetic theorists and practitioners alike focused on the vitality of form.” Ushering an anti-mechanistic materiality into the movements of Romantic style, such aesthetic gestures can be understood as implicit responses to Newtonian gravity, particularly in texts like Peacock’s which so frequently fixated on gravity’s falling force. As a style of *physical comedy*, Peacock’s *gravitation aesthetic* becomes a *vitalist* “living principle”: each of these terms welds gravity to levity, materiality to metaphysics, and life to laughter, integrating the difficult history of gravity’s law into a satiric mode of unmaking irony in which things fall apart and fall back together again in an endless excess that outdoes gravity.
Cranium’s fall from the tower sits in the central chapter of *Headlong Hall*, thus foregrounding falling as a mobilizing force for the novel’s comic dimensions. Most critics tend to consign Peacock’s physical comedy to the footnotes: interesting punctuation marks, not much more. Carl Dawson notes an incongruity between Peacock’s prose and the image it depicts, not pausing to consider the implications of this tonal absurdity for a reading of performative irony, despite his important insight that structural or stylistic clauses may precipitate or at least sustain Cranium’s fall: “The pseudo-exhaustive account, wholly out of proportion to the fall . . . reduces Cranium, one of the most pompous of Headlong’s guests, into a mere bouncing object, cascading in slow motion down a series of absurd clauses.”

Peacock’s most comprehensive critic, Marilyn Butler, affords Cranium’s fall the importance it deserves—placing it with the historical context of the landscape architecture debates between Richard Payne Knight, Uvedale Price, and Humphry Repton—and singling it out as “an event described with such splendid particularity that it imprints itself on the mind as the acme of dilettanti activity. . . . Peacock’s central symbol for the tastelessness, pointlessness, and extravagance of advanced society.”

Yet, depictions of physical comedy, I argue, are not merely symbolic, but are also stylistic gestures that critique Romanticism’s aesthetics of transcendence by displaying “something mechanical encrusted on the living” in language itself: an aesthetic occasion for laughter. While Butler’s general critical approach is to zoom out and broadly contextualize Peacock’s work within a wide historical context, revealing the cultural comprehensiveness of his subtle satiric craft, my own approach here is the opposite: I zoom in to show how individual sentence style fixates one broad historical development—the conceptual problem of gravity—into aesthetic craft, revealing the subtleties of Peacock’s comprehensiveness.
Zooming in on the particularities of Peacockian prose to reveal the stylistic minutiae of physical comedy in the next section, I show how Peacock’s aesthetic decisions in individual sentences are tied up in the larger themes, narrative structures, and generic forms in his novel. Broadly, I argue for a stylistic complexity at the sentence level that opens up a more intricate reading of Peacock’s ironic mode throughout the novel. While Peacock scholarship has been dominated by considerations of the formal concerns of his satiric craft—generally linked to his investment in Menippean satire—I shift the focus to the stylistic dimensions of his novel, putting these into conversation with the physical comedy that occurs throughout, to arrive at a reading of his Romantic irony. To the extent that Romantic irony is considered a deconstructive model of satire, Peacock’s style shows the literal gravity that underwrites a largely linguistic concept. But more than merely this, Peacock’s style anticipates literary criticism of the Romantic ideology by rewriting the Romantic turn to nature as a tumble towards earth, showing how sincerity occasions its satiric other.

III

*Headlong Hall* is a novel about falling down. From the first paragraph, the twists and turns of Peacock’s prose style register this theme, presaging the Reverend Doctor Gaster’s actual awkward dismount from the mail-coach which concludes the first chapter:

The ambiguous light of a December morning, peeping through the windows of the Holyhead Mail, dispelled the soft visions of the four insides, who had slept, or seemed to sleep, through the first seventy miles of the road, with as much comfort as may be supposed consistent with the jolting of the vehicle, and an occasional admonition to
remember the coachman, thundered through the open door, accompanied by the gentle breath of Boreas, into the ears of the drowsy traveller.\textsuperscript{27}

Of Peacock critics, Bryan Burns is the most attuned to the subtleties of Peacock’s prose here, emphasizing the “fresh and disconcerting” style it strikes: “The tone seems impossible to pin down, hovering between ironic acerbity and the coy pathetic fallacy of ‘peeping.’ The syntax contributes to the uncertainty, suspending clauses rather sharply apart, giving an air of separateness, not of cohesion.”\textsuperscript{28} Burns cogent take on Peacock’s stylistic originality informs a reading of Peacock’s performative dimension as well. Like the vehicle carrying the three philosophers and their “pious” friend, which bounces and jolts along, the progression of Peacock’s prose, though subtle and intricate, is far from smooth. Its initial trajectory is often impeded and turned (around the corner of a comma) in an unexpected direction. For example, as our vision opens on the four travelers, we find them apparently just awakening from a slumber, but not really: “who had slept, or seemed to sleep.” Our initial vision is not quite the correct one: it is shifted or knocked slightly off kilter as we read on. As the lengthy sentence drives on, its clauses again turn in unfamiliar directions: “with as much comfort as may be supposed consistent with the jolting of the vehicle.” The sentence structure initially offers a comfort that it ultimately retracts or upsets when the final prepositional phrase is tacked on: consistent is turned inconsistent, actually \textit{means} inconsistent in Peacock’s quasi-sarcastic construction. Thus, the image that opens the novel sheds light as well on its stylistic misdirection, as Peacock’s prose performs on the reader the shifting vision of the “ambiguous light,” which elucidates nothing so much as an uncertain direction. On the one hand, such a prose technique might be characterized as a stabilizing force: constantly correcting its own course as it proceeds; on the other hand it might also be said to trip itself up: continually deviating from or falling off its presumed original
course. It simultaneously makes and unmakes itself, rises as it falls. In short, Peacock’s prose falls over itself as it proceeds in order to proceed. The course of its development acts out a process of falling and rising, leading astray and correcting, that mirrors the mobile forces at play on the clattering mail-coach and its “four insides.”

The genealogy of the ancient Headlong family—to whose seat the travelers are clattering along—has progressed similarly through the years: namely, by a tradition of falling down, or a descent that is a descent, or a falling into place. Detailing this history, Peacock’s peculiar prose characteristically disguises its true trajectory until it falls down; literally, in this description, performing the scene it narrates:

[A] tradition having been handed down in Headlong Hall for some few thousand years, that the founder of the family was preserved in the deluge on the summit of Snowdon and took the name of Rhaiader, which signifies a waterfall, in consequence of his having accompanied the water in its descent or diminution, till he found himself comfortably seated on the rocks of Llanberris.  

As in the initial images of the slumbering (or not) travelers, the comfort of the final clause here is undercut (literally) by the jagged rocks of Llanberris. The physical calamity visited on Mr. Cranium in the middle chapter of the novel, occasioned by jagged rocks and a waterfall, is here structured into the history of the family seat and Peacock’s prose itself. The classical lightness of Peacock’s style makes it possible to miss Rhaiader’s literal descent in this brief family history: an apparently gradual settling into the vale of Llanberris as the Biblical floodwaters recede, carrying him down from the summit of Snowdon. Insofar as it gradually descends to “Llanberris,” the sentence itself performs the history that it narrates.
The gradual descent, however, becomes more of a plunge, as “waterfall” morphs into “headlong”:

But, in later days, when commercial bagmen began to scour the country, the ambiguity of the sound induced his descendants to drop the suspicious denomination of Riders, and translate the word into English; when, not being well pleased with the sound of the thing, they substituted that of the quality, and accordingly adopted the name Headlong, the appropriate epithet of waterfall.30

The subtle qualities structured into the name “Headlong” are a substitute for the cascading sounds of “waterfall,” just as Peacock’s style tropes his imagery, making his sensory appeals a qualitative feature of his prose. An “ambiguity of sound” much like the “ambiguous light” that opens the novel is translated into a stylistic quality which approaches the ontological status of the image it tries to replicate. Peacock names this quality “Headlong.” It is the name of the story, the Squire, the seat, but also of the style: a falling style, which trips over itself as it proceeds, but also conceals a delicate beauty—a cascading waterfall—beneath its descending movements.

Thus, the Reverend Doctor Gaster’s inelegant descent from the carriage which unexpectedly brings the first chapter to a close, has in truth been structured into the prose style of the novel from its very first sentence. The final (lengthy) sentence of the chapter realizes the aesthetic trajectory of its opening sentence:

Here, the coach stopped, and the coachman, opening the door, vociferated—‘Breakfast, gentlemen’; a sound which so gladdened the ears of the divine, that the alacrity with which he sprang from the vehicle superinduced a distortion of his ankle, and he was obliged to limp into the inn between Mr. Escot and Mr. Jenkison; the former observing that he ought to look for nothing but evil, and, therefore, should not be surprised at this
little accident; the latter remarking that the comfort of a good breakfast, and the pain of a sprained ankle, pretty exactly balanced each other.\footnote{31}

Just as the coach comes to a stop in this final sentence and the rumbling journey reaches a brief resting point, so too does Peacock’s prose, by turns, reach its destination, punctuated by Gaster’s tumble and the turning of an ankle, which makes proceeding a precarious balancing act. Indeed, if the comfort of breakfast and the pain of a turned ankle balance one another, Gaster himself is balanced between Escot and Jenkison as the chapter closes; just so, in an ironic turn, does Gaster’s headlong fall balance the first chapter of \textit{Headlong Hall} by returning to, in order to realize, its opening stylistic movements.

These opening and closing moments significantly balance between them a debate over the perfectibility of man. The descent of a Biblical man in the final sentence of the chapter, which ironically recalls and perhaps rewrites the Biblical descent of the Headlong family, also reflects back on the central debate over the descent of man as a species. Mr. Escot continually argues that man’s descent is truly a descent, or a falling away from his original dignity: “every human being . . . degenerates so rapidly from the primitive dignity of his sylvan origin, that it is scarcely possible to indulge any other expectation, than that the whole species must at length be exterminated by its own infinite imbecility and vileness.”\footnote{32} Like the legend of the Headlong family’s history, Escot’s version of the history of man is rooted in a literal “descent or diminution,”\footnote{33} a sense of growing smaller, as he later articulates: “the stature of mankind has been in a state of gradual diminution, and I have not the least doubt that it will continue to grow small by degrees, and lamentably less, till the whole race will vanish imperceptibly from the face of the earth.”\footnote{34} Mr. Foster, on the other hand, argues for descent as progress and growth towards perfection: “everything we look on attests the progress of mankind in all the arts of life, and
demonstrates their gradual advancement towards a state of unlimited perfection." The two perspectives weigh against each other, with Mr. Jenkison, the statu-quo-ite offering the middle perspective that the human species neither perfects nor deteriorates, but remains exactly the same.

The Reverend Doctor Gaster’s fate in the final scene plays out the various sides of the debate: his is a literal descent suggesting the ignominious fate of man that Escot heralds, but it also leads to a scene of Jenkisonian balance, opening on a breakfast spread which will indeed feed the growth of the human frame—a version of Fosterian progress and perfectibility. If the final image of the chapter comments on its central debate, so too does its opening prose style, which is simultaneously Fosterian and Escotian. Peacock’s prose, as I have argued, is both constantly correcting or perfecting itself, perhaps in a “gradual advancement towards a state of unlimited perfection,” and undoing itself, deviating or deteriorating from its origins, by falling down or away. Thus a descent—a gradual development towards the present—is also a descent—a falling away from. Peacock’s prose stages in its development the very debate that Escot and Foster wage throughout the novel by underwriting a tension between a desire for perfect stylistic fluidity and continual deviations from a smooth developmental direction: in short, a tension between “waterfall” and “headlong.”

The intricate relationship Peacock crafts between dialogue, event, imagery, and prose style in this opening chapter, punctuated by a literal fall, characterizes a broader investment in aesthetic performances of mobility throughout the novel. Often Peacock parallels the central dialogues of his chapters with moments of physical comedy, the doubling of which draws into doubt the possibilities of prose performance and the direction of dialogue: everything is woven together in a way that paradoxically unbinds the seeming commitment to stylistic integrity. The
text simultaneously underscores and undercuts its thematic commitments with its literal and linguistic falls. In such a fashion Peacock’s novel approaches the problem of a gravitational aesthetics. Just as the linguistic performance of falling comes close to but doesn’t quite capture the way the law of gravity collects the mobile body into a chaotic force, Peacock creates a kind of chaotic cohesion with his amalgamation of images, aesthetics, and events which don’t so much figure out how to talk about falling as they do figure out how to pose the problem of talking about falling.

The problem of gravity as a referential conundrum, then, posed with these paradoxical parallels, begins to uncover just what it is that critics have found so difficult about pinning Peacock’s perspective down in his novels. Again, de Man (reading Kleist’s pantomimic performances) is persuasive:

> A second dialogue of gestures doubles the dialogue of words, and the parallelism between both is far from assured. . . . This stress on staging, on the mimesis of the diegetic narratives—the text shows people engaged in the act of telling—emphasizes the self-consciousness of the representational mode within the hermeneutic context of a persuasion and problematizes the relationship between a rhetoric and a hermeneutics of persuasion. When a persuasion has to become a scene of persuasion one is no longer in the same way persuaded of its persuasiveness.36

Because Peacock appears so intent on staging dialogues as the central mode of his satire, critics are often content to puzzle out the novel’s meaning solely within that context; hence, the critical reliance on Menippean satire and the characterization of “novels of talk,” a perspective which paradoxically enforces a monological reading of dialogue’s function. This approach neglects other possible dialogues that open up the already contentious conversational mode to further
complications: namely, the movement of bodies and the aesthetic performance by which Peacock makes bodies material and mobile. Rather than reinforcing the direction of the central dialogues, these forces complicate and counter the systematic logic that structures dialogue’s search after fact, upholding a kind of artistic freedom from scientific law that approaches comic vitality. Thus, by building a gravitational aesthetic into his style, attempting to weld word with thing, language with law, Peacock creates an aesthetic autonomy in his work, showing how neither historical pattern developed in the dialogues—that of perfectability or that of deterioration—adequately accounts for the material movements of man, often in thrall to gravity but also in control of maneuvering the self within a world of falling. Sufficient to stand though free to fall, Peacock’s gravitational aesthetic makes the failure of reference a satirical strategy resisting the sway of systems.

Pay attention to how Escot’s reaction to Cranium’s fall into the water fails to follow the logic of laws of motion.

Mr Escot had considerably outstripped his companions, and arrived at the scene of the disaster just as Mr Cranium, being utterly destitute of natatorial skill, was in imminent danger of final submersion. The deteriorationist, who had cultivated this valuable art with great success, immediately plunged in to his assistance, and brought him alive and in safety to a shelving part of the shore.37

It’s a seemingly simple gesture, but a strange one for a philosopher whose part in the dialogues has so often insisted upon the antipathy of empiricist logic to individual responsibility. According to Escot, the Age of Enlightenment has all but divested man of his innate sympathy in the name of scientific rationality and false progress. Thus an Enlightenment science like Newton’s turns gravity into a law but not a concept, accounting only for the legal relationship it
dictates for moving parts and not the affective influence it allows for the force of the relationship between one individual and another:

Sir, if I fall into a river, an unsophisticated man will jump in and bring me out; but a philosopher will look on with the utmost calmness, and consider me in the light of a projectile, and, making a calculation of the degree of force with which I have impinged the surface, the resistance of the fluid, the velocity of the current, and the depth of the water in that particular place, he will ascertain with the greatest nicety in what part of the mud at the bottom I may probably be found, at any given distance of time from the moment of my first immersion.  

Escot’s gesture in pulling Cranium from the waters threatening him with the “imminent danger of final submersion” thus contradicts the conclusions of his dialogue, as he fails to follow the empiricist approach of Enlightenment observation. The individual affect of Escot, enacted upon his relationship with Cranium over and against the laws of gravity, upsets the forces of gravity and shows how the narrative of the novel might fail to follow the teleology plotted for it by the law of a mechanistic universe.

Escot of course actively provides the counterexample for the type of content complacency for which he castigates Mr. Foster, so it is perhaps no surprise that he bounds to the rescue, except that it is an event which introduces individual agency into a world in which things seem so persistently bound to a point. Cranium chalks it all up to the laws of gravity:

The whole process of the action was mechanical and necessary. The application of the poker necessitated the ignition of the powder: the ignition necessitated the explosion: the explosion necessitated my sudden fright, which necessitated my sudden jump, which, from a necessity equally powerful, was in a curvilinear ascent: the descent, being in a
corresponding curve, and commencing at a point perpendicular to the extreme line of the edge of the tower, I was, by the necessity of gravitation, attracted, first, through the ivy, and secondly through the hazel, and thirdly through the ash, into the water beneath. The motive or impulse thus adhibited in the person of a drowning man, was as powerful on his material compages as the force of gravitation on mine; and he could no more help jumping into the water than I could help falling into it.\textsuperscript{39}

But Escot’s action strikes an odder tone than this for it allows an autonomy to seep into the scene that doesn’t appear to be governed by gravity. Escot is in excess of the material universe: he outstrips his companions and overcomes the forces of nature working against Cranium. Thus, Escot’s sense of individual responsibility stirs up an affective vitality in him that momentarily frees him from the forces of gravity. Going back to de Man, the doubling that Escot’s gesture to Cranium creates with the discourse of the dialogues disturbs the direction of deterioration that Escot himself philosophically upholds. With an aesthetic amalgamation of dialogue and gesture, Peacock frees the form of his novel from the forces of gravity that seek to weigh it down. Accounting for the clashes such amalgamations create with the dialogue set pieces of Peacock’s novel is crucial to understanding the impact of his dialogic mode. In the next section, I rehearse the critical work that more extended attention to aesthetic clashes can accomplish in the context of falling bodies.

IV

Despite the frequency with which Peacock depicts falling bodies, the dominant critical view of his works as “novels of talk” continues to persist, partly because scholars haven’t quite figured out how to fully integrate falling into the framework of his satires.\textsuperscript{40} I argue for a more
comprehensive stylistic reading of physical comedy in Peacock’s work, stressing how his prose performs the physiology materially manifested in moments of falling down. Such an aesthetic approach more fully accounts for the pervasive presence of physical comedy in his novels, and shows how integral it is to the chaotic cohesion of his structural and thematic concerns. Carl Dawson notes a structural significance to Peacock’s scenes of physical comedy, emphasizing their importance for the formal development of his satiric craft:

Peacock resolves individual scenes, occasionally with a physical upset, more often with a song or a call to dinner, which impose a temporary harmony—so that all may begin once more. However, the process is not merely repetitious or arbitrary. The resolution of specific scenes prefigures the ultimate resolution of the whole story, the unmistakable signs of which are feasts and weddings.41 Dawson’s admirable attempt to relate the parts to the whole in what he calls Peacock’s “amalgams of diverse attitudes and literary forms yoked together for new purposes” perhaps overrates the harmony and resolution fostered by bodily mishaps and appetitive intrusions;42 or, more precisely, he overlooks the extent to which disharmony and openness endorse a sense of chaotic becoming as the novel’s structural aspiration. Individual scenes of physical comedy are integral to the satiric whole, but not in a way that binds the novel’s interrogative mode to a fixed resolution. In fact, bodily impositions often comment on and critique the central questions which form the core of the novel’s conversational set-pieces, opening up those questions to further complications. This conflict between physiology and philosophy is thus reflected in and underwritten by an aesthetic contingency in Peacock’s structure and style. From this perspective, his underexplored fixation with the physical—which fosters and develops the debates that structure the philosophical dialogue of the novel—approaches the ideational end of Mikhail
Bakhtin’s *menippea*: “The creation of *extraordinary situations* for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea. . . . not for the positive *embodiment* of truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and most important, *testing* it.” Peacock does negative capability with bodies in motion: he continually performs aesthetic attempts at capturing materiality which, insofar as it is difficult to *know* a body linguistically, deny the reassurance of resolution and open up contingency as the intellectual aspiration of his novel’s aesthetics and, possibly, its thematics.

Marilyn Butler suggests the thematic implications of Peacock’s physical comedy in her reading of *Headlong Hall*’s debate over landscape architecture when she notes that Mr. Cranium’s fall from the tower “becomes Peacock’s central symbol for the tastelessness, pointlessness, and extravagance of advanced society.” Like Dawson, she relates the physical parts of the novel to its philosophical whole, but doesn’t quite consider the extent to which the scene may not be so much the tangible culmination of the novel’s central themes as it is the realization of physical comedy’s latent stylistic presence throughout the novel. In other words, physical comedy does not suddenly focus the novel’s thematic interests: it is already structured into the development of the novel’s debates as an aesthetic form. Butler affords limited attention to Peacock’s style, stressing the indebtedness of his prose to the philosophical dialogue, but arguing that “though Peacock all his life was interested in questions of language, grammar and metre, he was always more interested in content.” Butler’s comprehensive contextual study of Peacock’s oeuvre bears out the important historical and cultural insights this claim makes possible, but style suffers, as her attention to aesthetics is muted.

Much more attuned to the aesthetic possibilities of Peacock’s style are the critics, such as Paulina June Salz, Edmund Wilson, and A. H. Able, who have argued for a musical setting within which to read his curious conversational quality. Arguing that Peacock “uses musical
forms in the structures of his plots and applies tone and rhythm both internally and externally in
the verbal style,” Salz finds “an audible texture in the prose itself.” Her reading of the
interwoven textures of dissonance and harmony present in Peacock’s prose provide an aesthetic
lens through which to re-approach Dawson’s emphasis on the “temporary harmony” imposed by
“physical upset,” and to consider how such a paradigm as Dawson’s is structured into Peacock’s
stylistic gestures:

One may be in dissonance with another but the weaving together of these separate
melodies . . . creates a harmonious whole. And the factor of dissonance is imperative; if
the melodies were in constantly harmonious relation with each other the effect would
soon become cloying and boring. Dissonance is needed to create interest and provide
contrast; whenever dissonance resolves into harmony there is created a feeling of
relaxation and rightness.  

Like Bryan Burns who emphasizes “the felicitous glitter of Peacock’s style,” Salz is among the
few Peacock critics to attempt a comprehensive account of his style.  
What she leaves out,
despite the emphasis on “an audible texture,” are the physical dimensions of Peacock’s prose
performances. The tangibility of Peacock’s prose produces tension and tumult rather than
relaxation and rightness: its sources are less musical than material. Where Butler stresses the
dialogue as a model for the dialectical difficulties of Peacock’s prose, and Salz argues for a
musical model that makes his prose a compositional competition akin to Bakhtin’s dialogism, I
argue for an odder non-aesthetic source for his stylistic swings and shifts: the falling body. Even
when Peacock’s language is not strictly talking about falling down, its directional contingencies
create a delicate stylistic balancing act which looks forward to the falls which so frequently
punctuate his dialogues.
Despite frequent references to Peacock’s “peculiar art and style,” surprisingly few critics seriously attend to Peacock’s prose aesthetics as a distinguishing literary feature of his novels. Butler’s primary concerns are historical contextualization and formal considerations rather than stylistic complexity. Though Dawson briefly notes Peacock’s “mock-formal language,” he similarly emphasizes Peacock’s “eclectic form”: “Urbane yet learned and widely allusive, tending towards gentle mockery, though at times sharply indignant, his novels are amalgams of diverse attitudes and literary forms yoked together for new purposes.” How sentence stylistics might inform this rich formal amalgam is an unanswered question hovering in the background of Dawson’s study. Howard Mills is openly dismissive of Peacock’s craft in *Headlong Hall*, labelling it a “rickety prototype” sophisticated only in the later efforts, and emphasizing its “indifferent handling of themes”: “The novel is not very fertile in serious thought, satirical analysis or ‘intellectual gaiety.’” Yet, Peacock’s prose is distinctive and purposeful, and it frequently mirrors the more noticeable characteristics of his novels: their Menippean satire and Horatian tolerance. The graceful assurance with which his prose often sweeps on belies its complex grammatical structures and turns of phrase: his classical delicacy disguises an equally classical complexity of structure. Among Peacock critics, Bryan Burns has been most receptive to the relevance of Peacock’s prose style to a reading of his satiric originality, “the allusive texture of Peacock’s prose [is] much more various than has been supposed. . . . The felicitous glitter of Peacock’s style is an essential feature of the sort of fiction he intends to create. If we do not have rounded characters in his books, or much of a story, or any direct view of society, at least we have language of great poise and animation.” Following Burns, I here endeavor to trace some of the peculiar features of Peacock’s prose, ultimately
stressing how the development of a mode of Romantic irony emerges from “the felicitous glitter of Peacock’s style”—a connection that has not been made in the major criticism.

For one thing, his sentences are long. Crammed with commas and semicolons, conditional and unconditional clauses, lists of objects and names, interjections of Greek quotations: the connective tissue is often difficult to discern. Lots of things happen in an individual Peacock sentence, to the extent that a true subject or purpose is frequently obscured. Though we know that the sentence is developing meaningfully, moving from one idea to the next, it’s tough to figure out just how it all comes together. Just as the first clause is digested, a second clause interrupts to modify but also carry us further away from the original focus of the sentence: a third clause builds from here, moving to a separate topic altogether, and so on and so on. We arrive at a destination only by twists and turns, and as a result find ourselves wondering just how we got there.

The second sentence of Headlong Hall is a good example:

A lively remark, that the day was none of the finest, having elicited a repartee of quite the contrary, the various knotty points of meteorology, which usually form the exordium of an English conversation, were successively discussed and exhausted; and, the ice being thus broken, the colloquy rambled to other topics, in the course of which it appeared, to the surprise of every one, that all four, though perfect strangers to each other, were actually bound to the same point, namely Headlong Hall, the seat of the ancient and honourable family of the Headlongs, of the vale of Llanberris, in Caernarvonshire. The purpose of the sentence seems to be to communicate that all four travelers are heading to the same place. This is at least its end point, but its scope is far broader than this. It begins, in fact with a seemingly unconnected remark on the weather which plunges us into an apparently
exhaustive discussion on meteorology, offering Peacock a brief chance to characterize and satirize the thrust of “English conversation” more generally: his interjecting clause—“which usually form the exordium of an English conversation”—moves us away from the specific scene being narrated to a broader commentary on English habits, customs, ways of living, which develops but also distracts from the main clause that it interrupts (itself subordinate to the larger sentence). If it turns briefly outside of itself, the early part of this sentence, with its meteorological discourse, also refers us back to the December morning which opens the novel just a (long) sentence earlier. Thus, the sentence moves forward only by glancing sideways and backwards. As it proceeds, conversational topics alluded to though never developed nonetheless momentarily distract us, as “the colloquy rambled to other topics.” The sentence itself haphazardly buzzes like the conversation it narrates. “[T]he ice being thus broken,” the sentence splinters like fragments from a sheet of ice, floating separately, though still somehow shaped as pieces of the whole. The final development of the sentence comments on the stylistic procedures Peacock has been developing throughout: “it appeared, to the surprise of everyone, that all four, though perfect strangers to each other, were actually bound to the same point.” Just as the separate entities inside the mail-coach suddenly find themselves headed to the same destination, the sentence binds its various discontents—seeming “strangers to each other”—to the same point: the final narrative development where we finally get “the point” of the sentence, but also the grammatical period which brings a brief halt to the twists and turns along the way. Thus, the sentence is as much “about” its own structure and development as it is “about” the narrative it expounds.

This self-reflexivity allows Peacock to develop an introspective critique of his own satiric procedures. If everything finally converges on one point, the sentence nonetheless threatens at all
times to break apart into its component pieces. Like Shelley’s cloud, Peacock’s sentences unbuild the very system they create and are created out of. By subtly scrutinizing and undercutting his own technique, Peacock acquits himself of the same charge his characters and satirical subjects are often guilty of: that of blindly systematizing.\(^{53}\) Peacock’s epigraph to *Headlong Hall* comments on this tendency and hints at how his own sentence structure may resist it:

> All philosophers, who find
> Some favourite system to their mind,
> In every point to make it fit,
> Will force all nature to submit.\(^{54}\)

By forcing everything to fit to a point, Peacock’s prose performs the systematizing tendency he critiques in order to reveal its arbitrary—if seemingly consistent—development and totalization. In this, Peacock shows himself a practitioner of what Anne Mellor, following Schlegel, has influentially called romantic irony, an aesthetic mode which emerges out of a sense of the world as a fertile “universal chaos [that] has no specifiable direction, no telos, no comprehensible pattern or purpose.”\(^{55}\) Romantic irony includes as essential elements “a literary structure that reflects both . . . chaos or process of becoming and the systems that men impose upon it; and a language that draws attention to its own limitations.”\(^{56}\)

Indeed, as we have seen, Peacock’s sentences cleverly draw attention to their own limitations by periodically denying the telos that they inevitably are bound to develop. Thus, the several different directions that his sentences tend towards—the multiple contingencies they open up—are nonetheless shut down in service of the single “point,” revealing the limitations language itself imposes as a systematizing force. The turns in his sentences are exceptions that
prove the rule, deviations that assert its direction. Still, a potent sense of “becoming” emerges from the heady assurance with which Peacock starts down one road only to slightly, but swiftly change course. His sentences continually open up on new possibilities even as old possibilities are “discussed and exhausted.” His complex style might be read as delicate evasions of an ending, a parry and thrust with structure, an ironic triumph over a grammatical death drive. If in this he shows himself a phoenix rather than a peacock, he also then adopts the mode of Romantic irony, “a form or structure that simultaneously creates and de-creates itself.”

VI

While critics have frequently read Peacock’s novels as Menippean satire—indeed, Northrop Frye’s critical “anatomy” recurs like a bad nickname in Peacock scholarship—it may be just as useful to read his novels through the lens of Romantic irony, particularly as relates to style rather than form. Readings of Peacock’s Menippean satire tend to rely heavily on Frye’s emphasis on what Mellor describes as “a form that combines prose, dialogue, and verse in an elaborate dissection and playing off, one against another, of varying mental attitudes,” as well as his claims about the form’s tendency to abstract particularities into social types: “The Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. . . . [It] presents people as the mouthpieces of the ideas they represent.” Undoubtedly such readings correctly identify the major satirical accomplishment of Peacock’s formal tendencies, but the extent to which such tensions are structured into individual sentence style has perhaps been underrated. Broadly construed, Menippean satire describes the universe of Peacock’s novels—the interplay of poetry, prose, song, drama—but it does little to uncover the minutia of that universe—the individual words, phrases, and sentences in relation to each other and the greater whole. In short, the
component parts deserve as much critical attention as the forms that they come together to create. The turn to Romantic irony potentially opens up the possibility for more nuanced stylistic readings of Peacock’s craft. Unearthing the enigma of Peacockian style may be an equally important endeavor as tracing the sources of his satirical character types. Where Peacock’s characters appear an amalgamation of sources, constantly confounding critical guessing-games, his very prose models a style of satirical subterfuge that underwrites the evasions of his characters. This shift in focus from character to literary style has implications for classifying Peacock’s brand of satire—where the critical focus on Menippean satire constantly refers back to a series of character types encompassing an amalgamation of ideas, Romantic irony shows a subtle stylistic subversion of critical systematization. Further, where Menippean satire roots Peacock in a larger tradition of generic satire, Romantic irony updates his satiric craft, revealing his underrated importance to the development of a characteristically Romantic literary style. Romantic irony thus reveals Peacock’s style as a forward-looking, rather than retrograde, form of satire, anticipating the critical inquiries of Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* and Anne Mellor in *English Romantic Irony*.

Closely related to Menippean satire, Romantic irony more forcefully interrogates how a text operates to un-systematize its own systems. Not merely content with describing a text as a combination or arbitrary mixture of competing forms and genres, Romantic irony—with its emphasis on an “aesthetic mode” that sustains a process of collapsing and becoming—provides an impetus to examine specifically how these forms interact with one another to create a continuous cycle of simultaneous destruction and renewal. As Mellor writes, in the romantic ironist we find “[t]he artist who . . . sees his own consciousness as simultaneously limited and involved in a process of growth or becoming; who therefore enthusiastically engages in the
difficult but exhilarating balancing between self-creation and self-destruction; and who then articulates this experience in a form that simultaneously creates and de-creates itself.\textsuperscript{62} This last clause is curious for its final turn to “form” as the mode in which the phenomenon of Romantic irony is articulated and experienced. Romantic irony, in order to be irony, must militate against form itself as an accepted procedure. Form, as Mellor knows, is the red-herring of her study, for what she really emphasizes is a critical style—that which eludes form in its subtle subterranean movements and shakes the very foundations upon which form is constructed. As Mellor earlier articulates about the literary craft of the romantic ironist, “Clearly, he cannot merely impose a man-made form or system upon this chaos. . . . He deconstructs his own texts in the expectation that such deconstruction is a way of keeping in contact with a greater creative power.”\textsuperscript{63} Thus, a style of deconstruction upsets formal developments, and the two must be kept in tension with each other for the true romantic text to develop and unravel at once.

While Mellor is dismissive of Paul de Man’s deconstructive tendencies—partly because of a perceived (negative) skepticism towards the creative possibilities of deconstructed fictions on de Man’s part\textsuperscript{64}—de Man’s emphasis on a text that performs its own narrative, and indeed produces a critical reading of its own structures in its very development, appears apposite to a reading of Peacock’s style as Romantic ironist, particularly at moments when that style emerges from Peacock’s attempt to reconcile language with the laws of motion that so often upset the progress of his characters. In such an instance, gravity appears to mobilize the aesthetic discourse of Romantic irony by necessitating a performative prose technique that opens up aesthetics to a self-reflexive commitment to continual creation and critique. De Man’s attention to poetic development or a process that folds back on itself in a re-reading that critiques its initial sincerity provides one critical lens through which to notice how a Peacock sentence simultaneously
creates and de-creates itself. If de Man’s approach is (for Mellor) ultimately needlessly cynical—re-reading to deconstruct and dismiss—there are, of course, always other sentences. Attending to individual sentence stylistics rather than broader formal concerns suggests how Peacock’s novel may be tied together as much by a series of interwoven sentences that comment on, correct, and critique each other as any overarching generic rubric. Thus, no critical discourse can exhaust the possibilities opened up by the true dialogue at the heart of Peacock’s novels: that among individual sentences calling out to each other across the novel. Style itself in *Headlong Hall* wavers between the perspective of the deteriorationist and the perfectibilian: constantly aspiring to set forth a more perfect vision than the ambiguous light which opens the novel, but also constantly confusing the reader in the clutter of clauses that attempt to achieve clarity. Thus, the central dialogue of the various character types in *Headlong Hall* has already been staged in the self-reflexive satire that sentence style produces.

Just as the second sentence of *Headlong Hall* finally converges on one point and asserts an ending, another sentence opens up new possibilities which trouble the closure of the previous sentence. A shorter, seemingly simpler sentence, the third sentence of the novel nonetheless proceeds in the same “ambiguous” vein as the previous two by raising specters of instability:

>This name [Headlong] may appear at first sight not to be truly Cambrian, like those of the Rices, and Prices, and Morgans, and Owens, and Williamses, and Evanses, and Parrys, and Joneses; but, nevertheless, the Headlongs claim to be not less genuine derivatives from the antique branch of Cadwallader than any of the last named multiramified families.65

Like the first two sentences of the novel, this sentence begins with appearances which are deceiving, or not quite what they seem to be. Just as we’ve finally reached the point towards
which the first two sentences have been (by no means inevitably) tending, we find that we’ve settled on a destination which has no origin, an ending which has no known beginning. The rug, as it were, has been pulled out from under us: for what seemed to be a stable “seat” is toppled in the turn to uncertain origins. If the first two sentences narrate and perform an indirect movement towards an uncertain destination that is ultimately realized, this sentence reveals that even once realized, the destination merely opens up other possible paths of development: the destination itself has ambiguous origins, an unknown genealogy. Hence, the lengthy list of other family names: a turn to other origins, other possible starting points. Unlike the apparently genuine origins of the other ancient families, Headlong’s genealogical development seems hazier—at least initially. Like the previous sentence, this sentence becomes a search for stability, a search to recover the origins which at first appear lacking. Despite appearances, a stable story can be (re)constructed out of the “multiramified” possibilities: one name emerges from the many. Of course, the very next sentence shows “Headlong” to not be the name at all, but rather “Rhaiader” or “waterfall.” Thus, the apparently genuine “Headlong” is merely a substitute for the true name. “Headlong” itself, then, is a kind of misnomer that encapsulates Peacock’s style of misdirection, a cycle of continually creating merely to de-create.

What’s so interesting about Peacock’s version of Romantic irony is that he constantly realizes his stylistic and formal procedures in moments of physical comedy. Mellor characterizes the Romantic ironist as “engag[ing] in the difficult but exhilarating balancing between self-creation and self-destruction.” The only thing that makes a balancing act interesting, of course, is the possibility that somebody might fall down, and Peacock repeatedly enacts this possibility. Hence, the opening chapter of *Headlong Hall*, which as I have argued aesthetically balances so carefully, yet precariously between creation and collapse, closes with
Reverend Doctor Gaster springing gracelessly from the mail-coach. Significantly, Peacock reasserts Gaster’s religious role in this final sentence, referring to him only as “the divine.” His personal fall, or near fall, then, should recall a more general “fall,” that of humanity itself in the Biblical narrative, which closes a story of creation with the realization of death. The introduction of death and the exile from Eden, however, leads to the fortunate fall with the introduction of the resurrection into the narrative development of the Biblical genealogy. Thus, man falls to rise again: he is created to die and live again. In the same sentence that the Reverend Doctor falls, he rises again. A sadder but a wiser man? He is at least hungrier, limping hopefully towards an ample breakfast spread at the inn. As Gaster leans on the shoulders of the two philosophers, the novel reasserts the balancing act between falling and rising, destruction and creation. Performing the religious rites of the Romantic ironist in his fall and rise, the Reverend Doctor becomes a comic form of Romantic irony realized.

In the context of Romantic irony, one of Peacock’s greatest satirical moves in *Headlong Hall* is marrying Mr. Escot with Miss Cephalis Cranium in the final chapter, thus making him the vehicle of human happiness and regeneration. Escot’s principles of human degeneration—developed and expounded at length throughout the novel—merely end in an example of regeneration. More than merely symbolic, the marriage hearkens a performative speech act which reconciles falling with rising, deterioration with perfectibility: a perfect realization of the performance Peacock’s style has been attempting throughout the novel, and an act which binds to a point the different directions of the apparently irreconcilable critical discourses of irony and deconstruction. This final narrative development of Peacock’s novel, then, parallels the stylistic and formal concerns throughout: a process of continual renewal born out of a cycle of destruction. The novel ends with the kind of “never-ending becoming” it has developed
throughout. Mr. Jenkison’s final commentary not only reflects on the ironic balancing act Peacock has thus achieved, its last gesture also performs stylistically the aesthetics of becoming or possibility that characterize Romantic irony:

“Your theory,” said Mr. Jenkison, “forms an admirable counterpoise to your example. As far as I am attracted by the one, I am repelled by the other. Thus, the scales of my philosophical balance remain equally equiponderant, and I see no reason to say of either of them, OIXETAI EIΣ AÏΔΑΟ.”

The final Greek phrase with which Jenkison, and the novel, concludes is a curious turn. For one thing, Jenkison explicitly marks it off as a phrase that should not be said, that has no reason to be included in the text at all. Like the series of clauses that lead us slightly astray in the opening sentences of the novel, this final clause concludes the novel with a statement that apparently contains no truth whatsoever. As in those early sentences, we finally arrive at an ending point, or destination, which is in fact no destination at all, but merely turns us in other directions in search of other meanings and origins.

If there’s no reason to say it, properly speaking the final clause of *Headlong Hall* should be a blank; and it actually *does* have a kind of fill-in-the-blank quality to it. The Greek phrase opens the text up in its very closure to multiple interpretations and possibilities. The footnote to the phrase, providing two different translations to fill in the blank, reveals how this ending is merely a process of continual revision, rewriting, recreation: “It descends to the shades: or, in other words, it goes to the devil.” The text ends with three slightly different, not exhaustive possibilities. It also ends in the midst of a process of becoming, as the initial translation is slightly tweaked, “in other words,” into another (potentially better) version. As in the initial sentences of the novel, Peacock’s style here is to continually correct or shift his initial direction.
This is also another clever joke on the reader. If we reach the final page of the novel expecting a stable ending—closure seems to be offered by the traditional joining of hands in marriage—its final turn upsets that expectation by opening the text back up. The sense of an ending becomes the sense of a never-ending, or of an opening. Yet if this final turn topples us, in doing so it allows Peacock to pick us up again: the final phrase together with the footnote it requires provides us with another foot, or other feet on which to balance, even as our readerly gaze falls to footnote, or *descends to the shades*. The final phrase also starts us off again down a road in the process of becoming directional, as we find that everything is not, in fact, “bound to the same point”; or rather, we find that that point is not a destination, but rather a starting point for feet heading off in several slightly different directions.

Our first true vision of the Headlongs’ ancient family seat bears out the instability hinted at in the initial difficulty of pinning down a genuine origin for the family name. Indeed, Squire Headlong himself is not quite locatable when we apparently find him at Headlong Hall:

> Squire Headlong, in the meanwhile, was quadripartite in his locality; that is to say, he was superintending the operations in four scenes of action—namely, the cellar, the library, the picture-gallery, and the dining-room,—preparing for the reception of his philosophical and dilettanti visitors.\(^70\)

What’s crucial to notice here is the four different directions that this single locality opens up. This opening sentence of the second chapter unravels the second sentence of the opening chapter by unbinding the point towards which the four “perfect strangers” were bound. Just as the four dispersed entities converge on one point in the earlier sentence, here that point becomes nothing so much as a dispersal itself—quadripartite in its locality—denying any sort of coherent focus. Significantly, a globe and quadrant, items which focus different vectors of direction into
individual locations, or points on their surfaces, are amongst the items haphazardly heaped throughout Headlong Hall just two sentences later.

In fact, the lengthy list of products from around the globe that arrive at Headlong Hall in this chapter nicely tropes Peacock’s characteristic style of simultaneously bringing together and pulling apart. If on the one hand, these disparate items are pulled together into the confines of the Squire’s abode, on the other hand, they constantly threaten the harmony of the household: a point made humorously clear in the case of the Squire “converting some newly unpacked article, such as a book, a bottle, a ham, or a fiddle, into a missile against the head of some unfortunate servant.”71 Each individual item carries with it multiple possibilities: can be translated into something different, made to tell a different tale. The Peacock sentences I have been discussing here are not unlike the book, bottle, ham, or fiddle tossed into the air and converted into a missile. At some point in the air, bound for an end point, the object undergoes a change, becomes something other than what it seems to be. The book, bottle, ham, or fiddle is simultaneously knowable and unknowable: its trajectory determined by the laws of gravitation, but its identity uncertain as it morphs from manuscript, medicine, meat, music into missile. Similarly, Peacock’s sentences are generally determined by the laws of grammar (loosely construed), but they also morph as they develop, becoming hybrid forms always somewhere in a state of becoming. Formally, the novel itself also morphs as it develops, becoming a Menippean hybridization. This formal development, though, is presaged by the stylistic turns that Peacock folds into his prose from the very beginning. When we arrive at the end of the trajectory we find that things literally look very different—OIXETAI EΙΣ ΑΙΔΑΟ—than they did at the start. But, if it is at once an opening onto multiple potentialities, the image is also a rebinding of the first sentence of the chapter, as four different entities—book, bottle, ham, fiddle—merge into one identity and one
locality: the missile headed for the servant’s head. It is thus also a rewriting of the second sentence of the novel in which four strangers and their disparate conversations finally collapse into one. As its narrative unravels, the novel is in a continual state of binding and unbinding, creating and de-creating. If this is a trend that the formal possibilities of Menippean satire allow for, it is also at a less noticeable level a stylistic development played out in individual sentences and in the relationships that these sentences develop with each other. Such a reading of Peacock’s style should hopefully reconcile de Man and Mellor, revealing Romantic irony as an aesthetics of deconstruction—implying a creative art that emerges from it—rather than a critical dismantling.

VII

Peacock’s sentences proceed by directional subterfuge full of the potential of chaos. Intent on ultimately getting their meaning across, they attempt several different directions to their destination, hinting at the possibility of aesthetic freedom from narrative teleology. The sentence develops (and is perhaps dictated by) the plot, but on its own stylistic terms. It will appear at this point that tracing the course of Peacock’s meandering style has led me away from where I began—with gravity and with falling down—but misdirection merely reasserts the hold that gravity has on seemingly remote stylistic developments. A Peacock sentence metaphorically trips over itself—clauses bumping into each other, running in opposite directions—and takes on a material substantiality in the performance. When words take on a material tangibility such a paradigm of stylistic development deploys a gravitational aesthetics in its misdirection. Gravity dictates a direction for words: words must negotiate this force with their own aesthetic counter-force in order to arrive where they want to—to getting the point across.
To what extent does Peacock invest his words with material substantiality in *Headlong Hall*? While Mr. Cranium’s lecture on phrenology provides an important historical context within which to situate *Headlong Hall*’s central debate over man’s perfectibility, as Marilyn Butler has noted, it is equally important for what it has to say about language. Phrenology places the mind within the body: reducing its developmental potentiality to a series of “corresponding lumps and bumps, exuberances and protuberances.” Perhaps more importantly, Peacock shows how placing the mind in the body gives words (and possibly ideas) themselves a physicality that borders on the ludicrous. Peacock places this performance of ludicrous linguistics into Mr. Cranium’s mouth as he announces his lecture on skulls to the dinner guests at Headlong Hall:

> I invite you, when you have sufficiently restored, replenished, refreshed, and exhilarated that osteosarchæmatosplanchnochondroneumuelous, or to employ a more intelligible term, osseocarnisanguineoviscericartilaginonervomedullary, *compages*, or shell, the body, which at once envelopes and develops that mysterious and inestimable kernel, the desiderative, determinative, ratiocinative, imaginative, inquisitive, appetitive, comparative, reminiscet, congeries of ideas and notions, simple and compound, comprised in the comprehensive denomination of mind, to take a peep with me into the mechanical arcana of the anatomico-metaphysical universe.\(^1\)

Mr. Cranium’s absurdly lengthy hybridized terminology reduces words to a series of sounds: tongue twisting signifiers which accomplish nothing so much as translating their signifieds into material muddle. Once words are made material they are governable by the same laws that govern the body: mathematical and gravitational laws that shape the physical relations of things to each other. Peacock toys with this notion in the lecture on phrenology, and it is perhaps the key to the indirections and circuitous approaches of Peacock’s sentences.
Sigurd Burckhardt’s suggestive reading of *Tristram Shandy*’s “law of gravity” provides a useful critical framework within which to read this seemingly odd take on grammar as an effect of gravitation. Stressing Sterne’s commitment to the bodily existence of words, Burckhardt seeks to “restore to the word ‘gravity’ the physical weight and concreteness which we too readily vaporise into the evanescence of an idea” by reading the literal life of Sterne’s language and his aesthetic maneuvering of this language as a grapple with gravity:

Locke wanted to purify language and disentangle thought by making words conformable to simple ideas; Sterne shows that in any sense that is communicable—which is to say, in any *sense* at all—*ideas do not exist*; only words exist. And words, unlike ideas, have body; that is the price we have to pay for their being communicable. Having body, they are subject to gravity, so that nothing is surer to make a man miss his target than the philosopher’s notion that the only requirement is to aim straight. . . . By giving words body—or rather, by showing that they *have* body—the writer exposes them to the danger of falling. . . . for this he has to compensate by “wit”—i.e., by devising paths for them which will get them to their true destination. . . . if you want to project something over a gap, your line can never be straight, but must be indirect, parabolic, hyperbolic, cycloid.73

For Burckhardt, Sterne “out-wits gravity” by getting performative: he obeys gravity by going beyond its directional pull with a performance of self-reflexive, self-defining aesthetics. His aesthetic indirection—designed to compensate for the law of gravity—ultimately circles back on itself to deny any direction of development other than its own self-defining circular gesture:

[T]here is something in the very nature of a work of art which is circular and self-defining, so that the verbal artificer’s task is not the relatively simple one of aiming his missiles at the properly indirect angle to compensate for gravity, but that of managing the
esthetic circle in such a way that it transmits meaning, carries a message along a path
similar to, but arising from a more complex motion than the parabola. Conceptually this is a difficult notion to grasp, as Burckhardt’s vague “something in the very nature of” attests, but the suggestion seems to be: if there is something about gravity that can’t quite be captured by language, there is also something purely immanent within language that can’t be controlled by gravity. Following, or accounting for, the laws of gravity with a series of linguistic leaps, a sudden levity emerges within a sentence’s style that doesn’t seem to conform to any known or definable law of gravity.

This free floating levity is the unexpected comic vitality that emerges from moments of supposedly simple mechanistic description in Peacock’s prose. Let’s return again to Cranium’s tumble:

His ascent being unluckily a little out of the perpendicular, he descended with a proportionate curve from the apex of his projection, and alighted not on the wall of the tower, but in an ivy-bush by its side, which, giving way beneath him, transferred him to a tuft of hazel at its base, which, after upholding him an instant, consigned him to the boughs of an ash that had rooted itself in a fissure about half way down the rock, which finally transmitted him to the waters below. Unluckily: what could be less mechanistic than this odd adverb which makes the force of gravity in this scene more a matter of happenstance than a habitual occurrence? Controlling Cranium’s crash with an injection of his own stylistic input, Peacock adds a kind of metaphysical mystery to the core of mechanism. In doing so, he makes this moment a substantial commentary on the metaphorical movements of Romantic transcendence. Where Wordsworthian aesthetics works through a regimen grounded in the senses to ultimately exalt the Mind of Man “above this
earthly frame of things,” Peacock shows the stakes of such a transcendent trajectory for re-reading materiality. Embedded within material movements are the intangible stylistic gestures that make Romantic transcendence possible. Aesthetics unearths these vital signs of somatic style, revealing how Romanticism may be just as important for what it has to say about the properties of physiology as it is for exalting the air that encases us. Returning from the rarefied air above the Lake in depicting Cranium’s fall from the tower, Peacock’s gravitational aesthetic makes the Romantic movement move, putting Wordsworth back in his proper place.
Notes


7 Building out of Schlegel, Mellor stresses the sense of fallen-ness that underwrites Romantic irony: “The artist who is a philosophical ironist must always play a dual role. He must create, or represent, like God, a finite, ordered world to which he can enthusiastically commit himself; and at the same time he must acknowledge his own limitations as a finite human being and the inevitable resultant limitations of his merely fictional creations. The artistic process, then, must be one of simultaneous creation and de-creation.” Mellor, *Romantic Irony*, 14. From this perspective, Romantic irony builds on the concept of the fortunate fall. Peacock, I argue, simultaneously literalizes and aestheticizes this concept with his prose performances of falling bodies.


9 Jonathan Mulrooney most recently interrogates the impact of falling for Romantic aesthetics, arguing that falling measures a “new kind of aesthetic experience . . . by representing the ways in which movement, both physical and affective, remains possible even when historical circumstances limit political, social and aesthetic freedom.” Paradoxically, the constraints of gravity, when performed poetically, allowed for a renewed personal commitment to individual freedom.” Falling, he argues, “necessitates a figural rendering that marks poetry’s representational limits. . . . As physical, temporal, and rhetorical movement coalesce, falling becomes a way of feeling the history that, in Frederic Jameson’s famous formulation, ‘hurts.’” Jonathan Mulrooney, “How Keats Falls,” *Studies in Romanticism* 50.2 (Summer 2011), 253–54. Mulrooney’s account provides a good framework within which to consider how an aesthetics of falling in Peacock might critique Romantic ideology by forcing it to confront the conditions of history.


12 Ibid., 64, 63. Steven Jones adopts a similar material approach by reading the development of Romantic irony in Byron’s poetry through the lens of pantomime theater: “Romantic irony considered through
the lens of pantomime offers another, more materially performative, way to characterize the play of contradictions at the heart of Byron and his work. . . . [T]he example of Romantic irony closest to hand, in the air, for English Romantic-period authors would have been popular pantomime. . . . In this sense, the pantomimic theater is the missing link between high theories of Romantic irony and Byron’s poetic practice.” Steven E. Jones, *Satire and Romanticism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 189. Jones focuses mostly on the plot improvisations of pantomime and the self-reflexive relationship it adopts with the audience, neglecting the possible significance of thrown objects and falling down to a discourse of irony. Paul de Man’s explication of a similar German theatrical tradition articulated in Kleist’s *Marionette Theater* explicitly connects the grace and gravity of the theater to a textual model of critical irony: “The aesthetic power is located neither in the puppet nor in the puppeteer but in that text that spins itself between them. . . . Balanced motion compellingly leads to the privileged metaphor of a center of gravity. . . . On the other hand, it is said of the same puppets, almost in the same breath, that they are antigrav, that they can rise and leap, like Nijinsky, as if no such thing as gravity existed for them. . . . By falling (in all senses of the term, including the theological Fall) gracefully, one prepares the ascent, the turn from parabola to hyperbole, which is also a rebirth.” Paul de Man, “Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 285–86. In the turn from parabola to hyperbole, law is made literary, gravity turned to levity: an aesthetic mode of free-floating ironic improvisation.

13 Jerome McGann’s critique on this point is the most substantial: while Mellor offers her study of irony as an apparent opposition to Abrams, McGann points out the similar ideological commitments of each author which obscure an experience of failure and agony explicated in the “other” Romanticism of Byron or late Coleridge: “Abrams’ historical characterizations, then, are a function of a certain ideology, and their persuasive force waxes and wanes to the degree that we can agree to accept that ideology. Mellor secularizes the model by introducing the element of Romantic skepticism, but she does so only to the point where such skepticism does not ‘turn from celebration to desperation.’ No agonies are allowed in her Romantic world which is, like Abrams’, a good and happy place: a place of enthusiasm, creative process, celebration, and something evermore about to be.” Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 26–27.


16 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 76.

17 Ibid., 75.

18 As Caruth writes, “Knowing itself as a grammar or a system of tropes, philosophy must, and yet cannot, fully integrate a dimension of language that not only shows, or represents, but acts. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 87.


22 Ibid., 38, 58, 87. Though absent the emphasis on laughter, a similar notion of “something mechanical encrusted on the living,” appears to undergird de Man’s notion of the aestheticized text evolved from the marionette theater: “All the aesthetic charm [of the puppets] stems from the transformations undergone by the linear motion of the puppeteer as it becomes a dazzling display of curves and arabesques. . . . The aesthetic power is located neither in the puppet nor in the puppeteer but in the text that spins itself between them. . . . This text is the transformational system, the anamorphis of the line as it twists and turns into the tropes of ellipses, parabola, and hyperbole.” de Man, “Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist,” 285–86.


30 Ibid., 10.

31 Ibid., 13.

32 Ibid., 12.

33 Ibid., 9.

34 Ibid., 15.

35 Ibid., 11.


38 Ibid., 26.
40 “Novels of talk” is a phrase so often extracted in Peacock criticism it’s difficult to discern quite where it came from. J. B. Priestley and Walter Alexander Raleigh appear to have initiated this critical perspective in the early twentieth century. Priestley writes, “Perhaps the shortest way of describing these novels is to say that their action is talk. . . . All of his characters that are of any importance exist to talk.” J. B. Priestley, Thomas Love Peacock (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 133. Priestley follows Raleigh who notes that “Talk gives structure to his books. They are a world of talk.” Walter Alexander Raleigh, “Thomas Love Peacock,” in On Writing and Writers (London: Edward Arnold, 1926), 152. James Mulvihill expands these earlier insights to bring Northrop Frye’s Menippean satire which “presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent” to bear on a reading of Peacock’s interest in conversation: “Peacock’s novels are . . . novels of talk, their characters seeming to exist solely for the sake of what they have to say. And in the end it is the ideas that these characters utter that determine who they are, what they do, even what happens to them. Tensions and conflicts in a Peacock novel arise when these ideas clash, as they almost always seem to do.” James Mulvihill, Thomas Love Peacock (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), preface. Most recently, Lisa Vargo falls in line with this genealogy of talk: “Peacock’s novels are novels of talk, to the extent that at times they lose their narrative and become predominantly dialogue.” “The true appeal of the work neither lies in the plot nor in its roman à clef aspects . . . but in the witty and urbane conversations between characters.” Lisa Vargo, “Introduction,” in Thomas Love Peacock, Nightmare Abbey, ed. Lisa Vargo (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2007), 33, 26. This amounts to almost a century of critical consensus, but Peacock’s falling bodies put pressure on the predominance of talk in his novels, or rather open up new readings of what talking does in his novels. If “novels of talk” persists as the dominant critical paradigm for Peacock’s novels, figuring out how they talk in the context of corporeality is an important matter for Peacock criticism to pursue.

41 Dawson, His Fine Wit, 172.

42 Ibid., 173.


44 Butler, Peacock Displayed, 46.


46 Paulina June Salz, “Peacock’s Use of Music in his Novels,” Journal of English and Germanic Philology 54 (1955), 370–2. See also Edmund Wilson, “The Musical Glasses of Thomas Love Peacock,” in Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951): 404–11. Aside from its emphasis on the “delicious music” of Peacock’s prose, Wilson’s account is notable for exalting Peacock’s style: “As for his style . . . it seems one of the best in English. Light, lucid, neat and dry, it is as far from the prose of his own period, mossily clogged or grassily luxuriating, as from the showy upholstery of the later age. . . . When we come to Peacock . . . we are aware of his restraint and distinction, of the spareness and sureness of the pencil which he uses for his prose line drawings.” Ibid., 406–7. Preferring a light, practical sensibility, Wilson underrates the intricacy of Peacock’s cadences. Salz’s emphasis on the importance of dissonance is a good corrective, though it ultimately falls back on harmonious cohesion, as does A. H. Able’s account of how “contradictory points of view are shown to be complementary, for each is a segment of truth made contributory to a rounded whole.” A. H. Able, George Meredith and Peacock: A Study
in Literary Influence (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933), 103. Over cohesion and harmony, my own emphasis tends towards the aesthetic openness that an internally conflicted style creates, particularly as it attempts to pick up the motions of a body rather than a musical cadence.

47 Burns, The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock, 35.


49 Dawson, His Fine Wit, 178, 173.


51 Burns, The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock, 24, 35.

52 Peacock, Headlong Hall, 9.

53 As usual, Burns is suggestive on this possibility: “The only possibility seems to be that Peacock is indicating doubts as to this hackneyed style of writing itself—but how obliquely! In this case, as in many others, one is left adrift, deliberately, I think, unable quite to accept such writing as straightforward, but equally unable to pin down its undertone of disquiet. This is disorienting: its effect is to prevent us from exercising any clarity of literary judgment.” Burns, The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock, 18.

54 Peacock, Headlong Hall, 3.

55 Mellor, Romantic Irony, 4.

56 Ibid., 24-25.

57 From this perspective, Peter Brooks’ model of narrative deferral may be a useful paradigm within which to read Peacock’s prose as a narrative technique. For Brooks, narrative sustains itself on the “vacillating rhythms” of plot in order to defer and make more desirable its consummation. It lives—thrives even—on a deferred drive towards death: “The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative.” Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 104. Applied to Peacock, such a model for reading plot helps demonstrate how his prose style is not only tied up in the major questions of his formal amalgamations, but also the type of material performance I have been stressing. Brooks makes the human body driving towards death according to its own temporal deferments the model for narrative contingency: “Deviance, detour, an intention that is irritation: these are characteristics of the narratable, of “life” as it is the material of narrative, of fabula become sjuzet. Plot is a kind of arabeque or squiggle toward the end. It is like the arabeque of Tristram Shandy, retraced by Balzac, that suggests the arbitrary, transgressive, gratuitous line of narrative, its deviance from the straight line, the shortest distance between beginning and end—which would be the collapse of the one into the other, of life into immediate death.” Ibid.

58 Mellor, Romantic Irony, 5.
Carl Dawson, Marilyn Butler, and James Mulvihill all make use of Menippean satire as an apt characterization of Peacock’s formal tendencies. See Dawson, *His Fine Wit*, 171, and Butler, *Peacock Displayed*, 56–7. Mulvihill characterizes the Menippean tradition as “essentially a medley form, incorporating, in what may seem to be a slapdash manner, everything from lengthy digressions on sundry apparently unrelated topics to verse interludes,” and extends this formal quality to the surface level abstraction of characters into ideas, existing solely as “intangible qualit[ies], neither purely a matter of form nor of content, but of attitude.” James Mulvihill, *Thomas Love Peacock* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 34.


Ibid., 5.

“[T]he romantic ironist must be sharply distinguished from modern deconstructors. A radical demystifier like Paul de Man subjects all linguistic discourse to skeptical analysis and rejects poetic symbolism as ‘ontological bad faith.’ In so doing, de Man arbitrarily privileges one form of literary discourse, the allegorical, over another, the symbolic.” Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid., 13.

Ibid., 14.

Ibid., 68.


Ibid., 81.

Conclusion: Byron’s Pooh!, Blake’s Shit!, and the Collapsurgence of Criticism

Ah!—What should follow slips from my reflection:
Whatever follows ne’ertheless may be
As a propos of hope or retrospection,
As though the lurking thought had follow’d free.

—Byron, Don Juan 15.1.1–4

What then? Where does the Romantic Movement move from here? Peacock’s critique of Romanticism in *Nightmare Abbey* (1819) shows how falling down both summarizes and satirizes the aesthetic tendencies of Romanticism and looks forward to the emergence of the Victorian after-life of Romanticism. Paying brief attention to Peacock’s novel here in closing will bring us back to the odd materialities which have permeated this project and, hopefully, provide a way out. *Nightmare Abbey* relies on stylized sentence structures far less frequently than *Headlong Hall*, yet it too betrays a want of stability and a tendency to topple, possibly structured into its style from the very first sentence:

Nightmare Abbey, a venerable family mansion, in a highly picturesque state of semi-dilapidation, pleasantly situated on a strip of dry land between the sea and the fens, at the verge of the county of Lincoln, had the honour to be the seat of Christopher Glowry, Esquire.²

A seemingly straightforward sentence, it nonetheless piles up a heap of descriptive clauses that threaten to topple over, the shaky foundations of the semi-dilapidated mansion notwithstanding.
The most curious turn of phrase is the final distinction bestowed upon Nightmare Abbey, that it “had the honour to be the seat of Christopher Glowry.” “Honour” implies a kind of metaphorical integrity and uprightness belied literally by the crumbling foundations of the mansion. The sentence is not quite as straightforward as it seems. If it is in fact a “seat,” Nightmare Abbey rests on creaky legs, on the verge of tipping its occupants over. The conflation of Nightmare Abbey with *Nightmare Abbey* reveals this sentence to be as much about the novel as the about the mansion: the ancestral pile immediately becomes a pile of adjectives and descriptive clauses. As a phrase itself the “highly picturesque state of semi-dilapidation” is semi-dilapidated: a tired hold-over from the crumbling Gothic tradition. Thus, while obviously a wry glance at macabre Gothic tendencies, this initial sentence ironically undercuts its own assertions paradoxically in order to further enforce its own instability.

Instability and incongruence indeed become the means through which Peacock exacts his satire on Romanticism in *Nightmare Abbey*. He deploys a series of falls—bodies in comic contrast with the impositions of powerful feelings—to induce a laughter that purges Romanticism of its melancholy condition. Peacock writes Romanticism as the malady of an imbalanced body: physical comedy comes to the aid of a body in humoral distress, purging its pathology and recalibrating it around other overflows that counter the melancholy collapse of the system. Peacock recognizes how “spontaneous overflow” operates as a purgative metaphor which registers an excess of emotion that requires a counterflow of comedy. This dynamic is established early in one of Peacock’s two epigraphs to *Nightmare Abbey*, a dialogue from Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humour* which links poetic overflow and excessive emotion to bodily purgation:
Matthew: Oh! it’s only your fine humour, sir. Your true melancholy breeds your perfect wit, sir. I am melancholy myself divers times, sir; and the do I no more but take pen and paper presently, and overflow you half a score or a dozen of sonnets at a sitting.

Stephen: Truly, sir, and I love such things out of measure.

Matthew: Why, I pray you, sir, make use of my study; it’s at your service.

Stephen: I thank you, sir, I shall be bold, I warrant you. Have you a stool there, to be melancholy upon?

Matthew offers a literary cure for Stephen’s melancholy condition, but Jonson’s pun on “stool” makes poetical purgation a bodily process: a counterflow as much physical as poetical, that recalls Blake’s bowel complaint when constrained by Wordsworthian affect. Setting Nightmare Abbey within the tradition of the Renaissance humours comedy, Peacock’s epigraph reveals the body balancing act that underwrites his satire. He writes this balancing act into the stylistic dimension of his novel in the very first sentence, in which the questionable stability Glowry’s seat reflects the state of the semi-dilapidated sentence itself. But “seat” also echoes Jonson’s “stool,” and thus brings the bodily overflow of the epigraph to bear on the stylistic aspirations of Peacock’s sentence. Nightmare Abbey is indeed a stool, or seat upon which Glowry can be melancholy, as the second sentence articulates: “This gentleman was naturally of an atrabilious temperament, and much troubled with those phantoms of indigestion which are commonly called blue devils.” For Peacock, Glowry’s individual condition mirrors the condition of Romanticism more generally, as he writes to Percy Shelley of the “morbidities of modern literature” and “its atrabilious complexion.” The “atrabilious”—“of or pertaining to black bile; melancholy”—thus focuses the novel’s satire around an imbalanced body, individually and collectively the seat
of Romantic melancholy. The epigraph from Jonson thus looks forward to the first two sentences of the novel, establishing a link between poetry and purgation, style and sickness.

This relationship is played out in the novel’s first significant fall, which opens up the imbalance of aesthetics to the counterflows of the body. Alluding to a moment in *Horrid Mysteries*, Scythrop proposes to Marionetta: “Do as Rosalia does with Carlos, divine Marionetta. Let us each open a vein in the other’s arm, mix our blood in a bowl, and drink it as a sacrament of love. Then we shall see visions of transcendental illumination, and soar on the wings of ideas into the space of pure intelligence.” The proposal looks forward to the excesses of the Romantic imagination, mingling aesthetics and affect in a transcendental vision of unity. It instead occasions a moment of physical comedy which flushes out the morbidity of the proposed phlebotomy by placing the body in a position of ludicrous distress from which it is unlikely to be extricated by aesthetics alone:

Marionetta could not reply; she had not so strong a stomach as Rosalia, and turned sick at the proposition. She disengaged herself suddenly from Scythrop, sprang through the door of the tower, and fled with precipitation along the corridors. Scythrop pursued her, crying, “Stop stop Marionetta,—my life, my love!” and was gaining rapidly on her flight, when, at an ill-omened corner, where two corridors ended in an angle, at the head of a staircase, he came into sudden and violent contact with Mr. Toobad, and they both plunged together to the foot of the stairs, like two billiard-balls into one pocket.

While most obviously a bodily debasement of ideal aspirations *a la* Bakhtin, this moment is equally important for what it has to say about the balancing of bodies in the realm of Romanticism. Marionetta’s reaction to “transcendental illumination”—an overflow which recalls Byron’s nausea—reflects back on the paradigm of purgation established with the novel’s
Jonsonian epigraph and its first two sentences, and thus authorizes bodily abjections as alimentary reactions to Romantic affect. Following closely on the heels of this imbalance, the collision and collapse of Scythrop and Toobad can be understood as a humoral event: one which purges the pathology of Romanticism by repositioning the physiology of the body into a comic condition. Encrusting something mechanical onto the living—plunging “like two billiard-balls into one pocket”—Peacock opens up the image of the fall to a laughter which redeems Romanticism from “the morbid anatomy of black bile” from which it is suffocating. In this fall, then, Peacock literalizes the imbalance of humors which has infected Romanticism, and deploys physical comedy as a redemptive force of physiological counterflow.

Looking forward from Romanticism, what’s so interesting about a moment like this is that it appears to presage similar techniques developed for dealing with the anxiety over Romantic aesthetics in the Victorian era. In Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë lames the legacy of the brooding Byronic hero by sending him sprawling. Evoking the galloping persona of Byronic bravado—

> Who thundering comes on blackest steed?
> With slacken’d bit and hoof of speed,
> Beneath the clattering iron’s sound
> The cavern’d echoes wake around
> In lash for lash, and bound for bound. (180–84)

—Rochester’s entrance into the novel heralds the domineering influence of solipsistic Romanticism: “A rude noise broke on these fine ripplings and whisperings, at once so far away and so clear: a positive tramp, tramp, a metallic clatter, which effaced the soft wave-wanderings.
The din was on the causeway: a horse was coming.” But Brontë undercuts the overwhelming force of the Byronic persona with the force of gravity that enacts a scene of physical comedy:

The horse followed,—a tall steed, and on its back a rider. . . . He passed, and I went on; a few steps, and I turned: a sliding sound and an exclamation of “What the deuce is to do now?” and a clattering tumble, arrested my attention. Man and horse were down; they had slipped on the sheet of ice which glazed the causeway.¹⁰

Clearing a space for Jane and creating agency for herself as an author against the masculine aggression and melancholy aesthetics of the Byronic personage, Brontë turns to the force of physical comedy.

What should be clear by this point, however, but perhaps bears reiterating, is that Byron himself does the same thing in Don Juan. Turning an ironic eye on his own earlier productions, Byron turns the Byronic hero upside down both by submitting Juan to a series of physical feats and by evoking physical falling with the aesthetic twists and turns of his digressive style. In such a fashion, Byron seeks to purge his own Romanticism of the morbid anatomy of black bile. Byron recognized within the seeds of the earlier development of his poetic style the potential for physical comedy concealed beneath brooding sincerity. Moments of physical comedy apparently antithetical to the discourse of Romanticism in fact emerge from the aesthetic maneuvers by which Romanticism created its poetic personas. Thus, Victorian anxieties over Romanticism, played out as physical comedy, actually articulate and emphasize—far more than they avoid the pratfalls of—the aesthetics of Romantic poetics.

Such an approach to the development of Romantic aesthetics, as I have been emphasizing throughout this project, opens up the legacy of Romanticism to a different trajectory: one which accounts for the comedy of early Charles Dickens, the thrown objects of Emily Brontë’s
Wuthering Heights, and the ever-burgeoning body of William Thackeray’s Jos Sedley as realizations of the contingencies of a Romantic aesthetics that so insistently asserts its ability to achieve poetic grace that it topples over into physical comedy. Consider in this context the odd occurrence of the “Ode to an Expiring Frog” in Dickens’s Pickwick Papers:

Can I view thee panting, lying
On thy stomach, without sighing;
Can I unmoved see thee dying
On a log,
Expiring frog!

Say, have friends in shape of boys,
With wild haloo, and brutal noise,
Hunted thee from marshy joys,
With a dog,
Expiring Frog!

According to Inside Out Romanticism, “Ode to an Expiring Frog” is truly the last great poem of Romanticism. Simultaneously evoking the sympathetic sincerity of Wordsworth and the satiric social barbs of Byron, it dissects the dialectical commitments of Romantic aesthetics, putting a final full stop on its “sense of something evermore about to be.” With the last panting sounds of the expiring frog, it bids farewell forever to the glad animal movements of Romanticism’s boyish days and prepares for the Reform Bill. “Can I unmoved see thee dying?” Dickens asks. Can we indeed? Articulating an utterly serious lament for the loss of Romanticism within the context of an utterly satirical poem, Dickens brings together in this poem dueling discourses of sincerity
and satire, revealing himself an early and unacknowledged heir of a tradition of Inside Out Romanticism. Attending to the odd materialities of Romanticism and the aesthetic expansiveness that emerges from them allows unexpected alliances to converge around comic potentiality. When an ordered teleology of Romanticism collapses, a chaotic cohesion surges forth in its place.

It may ultimately be that my attention to these comic discontents in Blake, Coleridge, Byron, and Peacock finds me in thrall to Romantic ideology after all: I respond to a momentary quality in them that approaches an ideal of spontaneity and seek to bring them back within the artistic fold of Romanticism. Yet, I persist in finding them funny. The tonal discord they seem to strike with Romanticism appeals to me, and throughout this project I have been guided by the principle that critical writing about the comic, about a joke, or about laughter, unless it utterly fails in aspiring towards its creative potential, must ever seek to capture some of the qualities it responds to. I pun incessantly, make jokes often, and generally try to punctuate serious critical contentions with a deflating punchline or two. This is more than merely a stylistic point or apology. Following Blake, it looks towards the possibility of a critical *collapsurgence*: a way out of absorption within Romanticism’s own self-representations “by engendering corporeal shocks and affective counterflows” through a critical discourse of irony.  

Again, Blake’s bowels are instructive: a deadly serious matter, they nonetheless clear the critical mass of Romantic ideology with a balance of bodily humor. But my more immediate model is Byron, whose reflexive and self-critical aesthetics, often achieved through a susceptibility and openness to immediate influxes of contradictory feelings, refuses systematizing critical endeavors by comically un-writing its own pretensions to sincerity—a fact epitomized by M. H. Abrams notorious failure to accommodate Byron in his otherwise
apparently comprehensive account of the Romantic movement. If *Don Juan* is the dazzling display of Byron’s poetic powers, it derives part of its force from the truth of its comic contradictions: an un-systematize-able discourse of corporeal shocks and affective counterflows written as poetic immediacy or spontaneity:

> Ah!—What should follow slips from my reflection:

> Whatever follows ne’rtheless may be

> As a propos of hope or retrospection,

> As though the lurking thought had follow’d free.

> All present life is but an Interjection,

> An “Oh!” or “Ah!” of joy or misery,

> Or a “Ha! ha!” or “Bah!”—a yawn, or “Pooh!”

> Of which perhaps the latter is most true. (*DJ* 15.1)

Delight alternates with disgust, exuberance with boredom, as the interjections threaten to burst from their container. The truth of Byron’s “Pooh!” bring us back to Blake’s bowels, or better yet his “Shit!”: at once a critical statement and corporeal performance resisting incorporation, a sublime joke that rewrites criticism “As though . . . free.” Wittgenstein remarked that “a serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes.” One wonders if he had never read Byron’s *Don Juan*. Holding fast to the joke, Byron’s poetry paradoxically frees itself from the mimetic critical procedures Jerome McGann warns against by merging with the truth of its own fictive reflections:

> The poetry supplies a reflection of the world (as we commonly say), but the image is generated from the poetry’s “reflex” or response to that world and its own act of observation. In this way the poetry draws itself into the world it is “reflecting.” The
process forces the poetry to become what it beholds, to translate its observations (via the images) into equivalent emotional signs, and finally to open itself to further acts of self-conscious “reflection” in (and upon) the poetry itself.\textsuperscript{13}

Byron’s poetry as criticism is a more mimetic mirror, faithful to the true fiction of a mirror: an image inverted, turned on itself, containing a vision of its own opposite. Byron writ backwards is the critical punchline of the joke his poetics plays on representational Romanticism: it un-writes the system it reflects.
Notes


3 Ibid., 46.

4 Ibid., 47.


8 Ibid.


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