

Criticism, Politics, and Style in Wordsworth's Poetry

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This essay is based on a reading of two of William Wordsworth's poems, "Alice Fell" and "Gipsies." I have chosen these poems for the ways in which they illuminate problems we might describe as political: how Wordsworth felt and reacted to others less fortunate than himself and whether he could or should have felt differently. My emphasis on the political is a deliberate response to the emphasis marking the most recent and influential reconstructions of Wordsworth, which I see as an emphasis on the visionary and aesthetic self-interrogations in the poetry.

In accounting for the political identities of these poems, I shall ask whether the insights and assumptions deployed by a deconstructionist criticism can be of any help at all. If the answer to this question is dominantly negative, I shall try nevertheless to expose one element of the deconstructionist methodology that has at least a potential contribution to make to a historical and political criticism. That neither Jacques Derrida nor his American followers have developed this potential tells us something about deconstruction and also about some of its opponents, who have not developed it either. Both exponents and opponents have, I think, conspired in the abstraction of language from any place in a political economy and have simultaneously inhibited any reflection on the historical situation of their disagreement itself. The answer to deconstruction is

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not be found in any version of naive realism, however sophisticated. Literary statements are not well served when treated as ordinary-language statements in performance and thus open to simple verification processes; they are no better explained by E. D. Hirsch and his followers than they are by the deconstructionists themselves. Both factions regard literary statements as ahistorical, occasionally paying lip service to the argument that they are not so but never really working out how and with what consequences. There has been little interest in the United States (though a good deal in Europe) in looking carefully for the historical and political significations in language that themselves arguably produce various forms of determinacy and indeterminacy.

I begin very deliberately with readings rather than with "theory" and do so to invert an order of events which seems to me all too common, rather than to proffer any (suspicious) faith in openness of mind or absence of predisposition or interest on my part. My purpose is to ground my argument about theory and its prospects firmly in the contexts of these readings, which in turn will, I hope, make some applied sense of the theoretical part of the essay.

Questions could and should be raised about the political profile of English Romanticism both in particular and in general. Wordsworth's poetry is especially useful to me here because of the way in which, through formal discontinuities, it dramatizes political conflicts. Reacting against these discontinuities, aesthetically minded critics have simply tended to leave out of the canon those poems which have the greatest capacity to help us become aware of a political poetics. In this respect it may well be that Wordsworth is the most stylistically perverse of the Romantic poets. Not the most difficult to read, necessarily—Percy Bysshe Shelley's breath-suspending songs and William Blake's determination to produce "variety in every line" with the aim of unfettering poetry surely make more aggressive and obvious demands on the reader.¹ But in these cases we can be reasonably sure that the difficulties are part of a conscious and coherent intention to set imagination to work in kindling sparks from ashes. Wordsworth also set out to do this, and we can agree that he did so with some success in some poems. But critics from Samuel Taylor Coleridge onward have rightly questioned the unity of Wordsworth's canon in this respect. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge notices the "INCONSTANCY of the style," an unevenness and a general inability to satisfy the demands of "good poetry" conceived as something possessing an

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Canon that includes Alice Fell etc - T.A. is not going to make it. why?

Of all poetry, if everything is what is political

English identity etc. but, as intellectual activity, most Wordsworthian non-intellectual and more political than politics have become too broad to be useful. Better to speak of language as work - as allusion: choice is what is literary? what is interest?

organic form.² This concern with a wholeness and consistency of artifice is more Coleridge's than Wordsworth's, and it seems to me that it is precisely the disjunctions in the poems that embody some of their most original and historically urgent meanings. The blemishes recorded by Coleridge—alternating and dissimilar states of feeling, overminuteness in description, and obsession with “accidental circumstances” (BL, 2:126), overuse of the dramatic mode, disproportion of thought to event, and so forth—can in fact serve as eloquent signals for discerning the complexities of the poems as they address a historical crisis in consensus (both social and literary) embodied exactly in the unstable vehicle of the Wordsworthian speaker.³

No organic poetic form could achieve this function, and equally, I shall suggest, no critical approach that ignores the political dimension can do it justice. In the readings that follow, I try to explore the terms of a connection between stylistic and political indeterminacy, by focusing on poems which make us wonder not only whether Wordsworth is a good poet but also whether he is a good man. We must all have wondered, in reading and teaching “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” for example, whether Wordsworth might have been devoid of certain basic human sympathies for the intrinsic well-being of aging vagrants. In the two poems I discuss, I shall describe two forms of stylistic-political relations. In the second section of the paper, I shall then pursue some general implications of these readings for the politics of modern critical reconstructions of Romanticism.

no one disagreed with charity (in American version) but the role of government should take as common sense since that gov. worked best if money is not diverted to poor by the

I answer question not asked = question is asked in absent: poem as response to a political issue about charity, not bit wisdom & state

“Alice Fell” is one of the poems Coleridge thought would have been “more delightful” to him “in prose, told and managed . . . in a moral essay, or pedestrian tour” (BL, 2:69). I offer the poem here as an example of the political allusiveness of language, and of the relation of that language to an ambiguously undifferentiated Wordsworthian speaker. The political identity of the Wordsworthian speaker in relation to more highly developed formal discontinuities will later be the focus of my reading of “Gipsies.”

For convenience, I quote the whole of “Alice Fell”:

The post-boy drove with fierce career,
For threatening clouds the moon had drowned;
When, as we hurried on, my ear
Was smitten with a startling sound.

As if the wind blew many ways,
I heard the sound,—and more and more;
It seemed to follow with the chaise,
And still I heard it as before.

At length I to the boy called out;
He stopped his horses at the word,
But neither cry, nor voice, nor shout,
Nor aught else like it, could be heard. 10

The boy then smacked his whip, and fast
The horses scampered through the rain;
But, hearing soon upon the blast
The cry, I bade him halt again. 15

Forthwith alighting on the ground,
“Whence comes,” said I, “this piteous moan?”
And there a little Girl I found,
Sitting behind the chaise, alone. 20

“My cloak!” no other word she spake,
But loud and bitterly she wept,
As if her innocent heart would break;
And down from off her seat she leapt. 25

“What ails you, child?”—she sobbed, “Look here!”
I saw it in the wheel entangled,
A weather-beaten rag as e'er
From any garden scare-crow dangled. 30

There, twisted between nave and spoke,
It hung, nor could at once be freed;
But our joint pains unloosed the cloak,
A miserable rag indeed! 35

“And whither are you going, child,
To-night along these lonesome ways?”
“To Durham,” answered she, half wild—
“Then come with me into the chaise.” 40

Insensible to all relief
Sat the poor girl, and forth did send
Sob after sob, as if her grief
Could never, never have an end. 45

“My child, in Durham do you dwell?”
She checked herself in her distress,
And said, “My name is Alice Fell;
I'm fatherless and motherless. 50

“And I to Durham, Sir, belong.”
Again, as if the thought would choke
Her very heart, her grief grew strong;
And all was for her tattered cloak! 55

The chaise drove on; our journey's end
Was nigh; and, sitting by my side,
50

Historical context of Wordsworth's poetry
organic form
no one disagreed with charity
I answer question not asked

As if she had lost her only friend
She wept, nor would be pacified.

Up to the tavern-door we post;
Of Alice and her grief I told;
And I gave money to the host, 55
To buy a new cloak for the old.

"And let it be of duffil grey,
As warm a cloak as man can sell!"
Proud creature was she the next day,
The little orphan, Alice Fell! 60

Most of the poem is given over to emphasizing the obsessiveness of Alice's grief, her unwillingness to be distracted from lamenting the loss of her cloak.⁵ But beyond this, the poem clearly addresses the important contemporary argument about the rights and wrongs of charity as against official and systematic provision for the poor and vagrant classes.

Alice's age is not specified, but we can infer from her declaration "And I to Durham, Sir, belong" (l. 45), that she may be entitled to some kind of care from her parish, as orphans or bastards often were. This is by no means explicit, however, and the uncertainty is increased when we note the contrast between Alice's reply and the question she was asked: "My child, in Durham do you dwell?" (l. 41). "Dwelling" implies a roof, four walls, and a fixed abode; "belonging," in Alice's terms, seems much more ambiguous and, in her own logic, is related simply to her being "fatherless and motherless" (l. 44). She could be on the books as a recipient of official care, or she could be loosely associated with the community by virtue only of continuous presence, compelled to live off the same sort of casual charity that she has received from the speaker of the poem. This might indeed explain her being away from Durham in the first place.

The contemporary debate about how—and if at all—the poor and dispossessed should be cared for was widespread and often virulent. I have not the space to describe it here in any detail, but it informs such writings as Edmund Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, Thomas Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*, and various tracts by Henry Fielding, Jonas Hanway, and others; the same texts provide a context for poems such as "Simon Lee" and "The Old Cumberland Beggar." In "Alice Fell," given the absence of any reference to houses "misnamed of INDUSTRY" (*PWW*, 4:239), the controversy is occluded or avoided. The emphasis seems rather to be on the child's obsessive psychology and the speaker's act of charity. One might indeed thus argue that the poem is uncomfortably evasive on a matter of considerable polemical urgency and political affiliation—that it unquestioningly substitutes a single and inexpensive act of charity for a proper consideration of the general

problem which makes such charity necessary in the first place. Is this another example of a rather familiar late eighteenth-century genre, describing an act recalling the gestures of Laurence Sterne's sentimental traveler, who gives alms for the emotional *frisson* of witnessing gratitude? I think that the intelligence of the writing consists in the delicacy with which it suspends (though it does not preempt) this possible resolution. Take the speaker's comment after he has invited the child into the coach with him:

Insensible to all relief
Sat the poor girl, and forth did send
Sob after sob, as if her grief
Could never, never have an end.

[ll. 37–40]

This might indeed seem to argue for the pointlessness of the speaker's kindness, since she remains insensible to it. By extension, it might seem that the general provision of warm places for vagrant children is relatively unimportant. The rhyme on "grief" seals the apparent repudiation of "relief." And "relief" is a very important word. In contemporary discourse it was the term always applied to the general enterprise of assisting the poor: the *Oxford English Dictionary* records it as applying specifically to the Poor Laws and to parish doles, but only up to 1865. The polemical role of this word would certainly have been close to the surface for the reader of 1807, even if we have lost it today. (The 1807 text reads "She sate like one past all relief.") So an extension of reference seems particularly justified: the speaker may be surreptitiously voicing a social judgment—that relief does not answer the problems of the poor.⁶

This is where the poem starts to become very interesting. The speaker is obviously not going as far as William Cowper goes in arguing that "Scripture is the only cure of woe":

The soul, reposing on assur'd relief,
Feels herself happy amidst all her grief,
Forgets her labour as she toils along,
Weeps tears of joy, and bursts into a song.⁷

Here, promise of an afterlife is flagrantly proffered as an alternative to worldly relief—which Cowper also allows us to see as unassured. But there are no tears of joy for Alice Fell, only those of obsessive grief, as the speaker notes:

and, sitting by my side,
As if she had lost her only friend
She wept, nor would be pacified.

[ll. 50–52]

Has she indeed lost her only friend in losing the tattered cloak? If we interpret the simile literally, we undermine the speaker's seemingly naive astonishment as we also ascribe a deeper sense to his utterance. This cloak might well have been *all* that she had, her only lasting support against the climate, something more reliable than experiences of occasional charity. We begin to wonder if she does indeed spend most of her life outdoors and is not officially cared for. This would certainly explain the obsessiveness of her grief. The kind gentleman and the coach are not substitutes for the lost cloak, because they will disappear, and she will be left with nothing. That the cloak was ragged even before the accident only adds point to this; it was still all that she had. (Do we see just a hint of her sense of the speaker's social distance in the vocative "Sir" [l. 45]?) This is why only the new cloak makes her happy: it is something she can hang on to in a world where general "relief" seems to be unreliable, bandied back and forth in debate between middle-class politicians. The new cloak also makes her "proud," demonstrating that even in extremes of adversity a human dignity and self-respect can be maintained or created; she is raised in her own self-esteem as well as materially benefited. The psychological benefits of "property" are part of Wordsworth's general idea of ownership.

I do not consider it useful to limit the scope of this reading to what might or might not have been *consciously* in Wordsworth's mind at the time of writing or revising. In 1815 he did add the subtitle "or, Poverty," as if encouraging contemplation of the general import of the particular event. But identifying the poet's own position is complicated when we discover that the incident did not actually happen to him but to his friend Robert Grahame. One could argue either that this reinforces the good faith of the speaker (since Wordsworth *chooses* the first person) or that it undermines it. I believe this question to be genuinely indeterminate. We do know from Dorothy Wordsworth's account of the incident that Alice "belonged to the next town" (*PWW*, 1:359). But it is not at all clear from the poem, though it could be inferred, that Alice is sent forth into *Durham* in her new coat. As written, the poem manages to heighten the question of her displacement in not specifying her destination. It has converted a personal tale into a debate, a debate existing in the language and the dialogue of the poem and quite independent of whether "Wordsworth" himself approved or did not approve of the speaker's act of charity as a substitute for the general provision of relief. It is precisely the understatement or *silence* of the poem on certain questions that allows them to be asked. Its deeper meanings must be sought in what is half-mentioned or not mentioned at all.

Let me give some further, brief examples. Only if we are aware of the contexts of this poem do we register the fact that Alice does not beg. Many arguments about the moral integrity (or lack of it) of the poor made use of the problem of beggars (as does Wordsworth himself, else-

where). William Godwin, in *The Enquirer* (1797), provides an instance of the kind of condescending judgment often passed by the affluent upon the poor, noting

the impostures which we frequently discover in this species of suitors. The whole avocation seems reduced to an art. They cannot be always in that paroxysm of sorrow, the expression of which so many of them endeavour to throw into their voice.⁸

Alice's heartfelt grief is obviously an implicit answer to this sort of argument, but the argument itself is not stated as such in the poem. We have to know the potential for it in order to recognize its absence and to appreciate the way in which the poem may well be rebuking the pomposity of directing such rhetoric (and perhaps also that of the debate between charity and relief?) at the phenomenon of a poor shivering child without a cloak.

Again, we cannot be completely sure of whether Alice is illegitimate or merely orphaned. She is *called* an orphan by the speaker, but the two categories are somewhat imperfectly distinct, both in common speech and under certain sections of the law. William Blackstone stated that the rights of the illegitimate person are very few, for "he can *inherit* nothing, being looked upon as the son of nobody, and sometimes called *filius nullius*, sometimes *filius populi*."⁹ Might Alice's confession, "I to Durham, Sir, belong," then be an idiomatic version of her status as a daughter of the people, in Blackstone's terms? We cannot be sure, and once more the poem suggests the irrelevance of such considerations. But only if we are aware of the possibility, do we sense the *point* of rendering it irrelevant. This is quite different from not seeing the connection at all. The historical weight of the poem lies, as I have said before, in its emptiness. By having Alice refuse grateful participation in any community of awakened sympathizers—in the suspiciously momentary catharsis that such participation would provide—and by stressing the very materialism of her obsession, the poem opens up a political perspective. This political perspective is further vindicated in the use of the word "relief," in the gentle contrast between "dwelling" and "belonging," and in the allusion to the possibility that Alice is a daughter of the people. The poem is neither simply radical nor simply conservative on the subject of charity versus relief; rather, it exposes the texture of the debate within and beyond the speaker's control. It thus exhibits the historicity of language play and its definite referentiality.

There is a further intriguing coincidence compounding this referentiality. We know from Dorothy Wordsworth's journal that Alice Fell was the child's real name; Wordsworth did not invent it. He almost might have invented it, however, since it suits to a remarkable degree the themes of his poem. For "fell" has the meaning "skin" or "fleece"—either the

skin or the natural hair that grows out of it.¹⁰ This sense is almost lost to us now, though it appears in Gerard Manley Hopkins' famous punning line "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day." But it would have been much more immediate for Wordsworth, perhaps from Robert Burns or John Dyer (cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) or from Shakespeare. The surname further suggests an allusion to the landscape of northern England ("fell" as hill or mountain) and perhaps even to the pairing of two other senses of the word, frequently found in Milton: "fell" as fierce—wild—and also as a description of the fallen state (the one a result of the other).

Remarkably, all these resonances can be brought to bear on the poem. Alice is a child of nature in that she is traveling alone in wild places (the fells) and is exposed to the elements; she is also "half wild" (l. 35), being obsessed with grief. Additionally, the poem tells the story of the reinstatement of her fleece, or protective covering; she receives, as it were, a new skin. And this too is a political point, for the debate between nakedness and clothing was an urgent and familiar one to Wordsworth's generation. Burke believed that clothing is what makes us human, redeeming us (as far as anything can) from the indignity of our fallen state, of which it is also the primary signifier. To go without clothing is to threaten civilization itself: to abandon all that we have acquired since the fall and, most especially, to remove the public signification of social rank and difference. Hence his case against the "new conquering empire of light and reason" which he saw embodied in the French Revolution:

All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.¹¹

Not for nothing are Blake's images of innocence and energy those of nakedness, icons of Spartan virtue destructive of the images (and the economy) of robes and furred gowns. In Burkean terms, then, the re-clothing of Alice Fell is a reclaiming of one who is potentially wild (and hence exiled and accusatory) into the society of property and possession. The acceptance of the need for clothing is also an acceptance that perfection is not open to us (all clothing being a version of the fig leaf); so Alice's readmission into society by means of charity covertly embodies a declaration that there will never be a world in which poverty and suffering would not exist. Read in this way, the poem becomes once again an argument against the prospect of general relief.

This coincidence of theme and name, which I suggest as adding meaning to the poem, also suggests that the speaker's simple gesture of charity (as I have hitherto described it) should not be construed merely as one displacing the moral and political debate but as itself occupying a place within that debate. In other words, not simply language but also social behavior, seemingly spontaneous, must be regarded as potentially predetermined. Because Wordsworth as poet does not offer a definitive commentary on the behavior of the speaker, the poem is not simply an expression of Burkean ideology, although many of its details can be seen to tend in that direction. Alice's refusal to beg makes her one of the proud poor (the favorites of Tory social commentators), as does her reluctance to draw attention to herself when the chaise is first stopped (see ll. 11–12). Her final pleasure ultimately vindicates the psychological benefits of having possessions. But we also register the harsh materialism of her refusal to be pacified and, indeed, of her final pleasure. Considered from the other side of the political fence, the poem can suggest that no one is beyond reclamation into society if the proper incentives are offered. It can also suggest that the gulf between the haves and the have-nots is of the sort that can be bridged *only* by an increased material prosperity or basic well-being for the latter.

I pass on now to a more notorious poem, "Gipsies." For the sake of brevity, I shall not try to expound the importance of understanding the contemporary debates about gypsies. Such debates certainly existed, and analogues can be found in the poems of Cowper and John Clare, and in Fielding's *Tom Jones*, as elsewhere. To recover all this material here would be to repeat some of the methodological points that I have made in my reading of "Alice Fell." Instead, I want to concentrate on the diction of "Gipsies" and its implications for the state of mind of its speaker, an unintegrated subjectivity if ever there was one! Here is the poem in its 1807 version:

Yet are they here?—the same unbroken knot
Of human Beings, in the self-same spot!
Men, Women, Children, yea the frame
Of the whole Spectacle the same!
Only their fire seems bolder, yielding light: 5
Now deep and red, the colouring of night;
That on their Gipsy-faces falls,
Their bed of straw and blanket-walls.
—Twelve hours, twelve bounteous hours, are gone while I
Have been a Traveller under open sky, 10
Much witnessing of change and cheer,
Yet as I left I find them here!

The weary Sun betook himself to rest.
 —Then issued Vesper from the fulgent West,
 Outshining like a visible God 15
 The glorious path in which he trod.
 And now, ascending, after one dark hour,
 And one night's diminution of her power,
 Behold the mighty Moon! this way 20
 She looks as if at them—but they
 Regard not her:—oh better wrong and strife,
 Better vain deeds or evil than such life!
 The silent Heavens have goings on;
 The stars have tasks—but these have none.¹²

This is surely one of Wordsworth's prickliest poems—so much, it would seem, for Wordsworth as a friend to the less fortunate! I choose it deliberately because of its revelatory power as apparently one of his most morally repugnant poems. Coleridge's criticism remains the starting point for any reconsideration:

The poet, without seeming to reflect that the poor tawny wanderers might probably have been tramping for weeks together through road and lane, over moor and mountain, and consequently must have been right glad to rest themselves, their children and cattle, for one whole day; and overlooking the obvious truth, that such repose might be quite as necessary for *them*, as a walk of the same continuance was pleasing or healthful for the more fortunate poet; expresses his indignation in a series of lines, the diction and imagery of which would have been rather above, than below the mark, had they been applied to the immense empire of China improgressive for thirty centuries. [BL, 2:137]

As if to make matters worse, Wordsworth seems to panic and amends the last lines of the poem for the 1820 edition:

Yet, witness all that stirs in heaven or earth!
 In scorn I speak not;—they are what their birth
 And breeding suffers them to be;
 Wild outcasts of society!
 [PWW, 2:227]

Awkward affirmations of cultural relativism—they cannot help it; they were born that way—now replace the moral rebuke; but in dissociating himself from scorn, the speaker manages to introduce only condescension.

This poem poses difficult problems for editors and critics alike. Among those who do not subscribe to Coleridge's argument or completely ignore the poem out of a sense of embarrassment, David Ferry's account is worth attention. He finds that Wordsworth "blames the gypsies for their mortality,

for not participating sufficiently in the eternal": Wordsworth's mood is not that of "trivial irritability" but a "sublime arrogance" in which the commonsense considerations expressed by Coleridge must take second place.¹³ This goes about as far as one can go, I think, in treating the poem sympathetically—the poet is carried away by enthusiasm and thus goes a bit further in his enthusiasm (don't we all?) than he would in a more measured state of mind.

Still, we must question the license by which the speaker, as a man of leisure, identifies himself with the great laws of nature, as someone obeying natural laws. "Gypsies" could almost stand as one of that group of poems in which Wordsworth seems to rebuke himself for allowing enthusiasm to result in the perpetration of inhuman misunderstandings, as he does in "Anecdote for Fathers" and the "Point Rash-Judgment" poem (the fourth of the "Poems on the Naming of Places"). But in "Gypsies" no formal directive leads us to question the speaker's integrity, except the hyperbole of the sublime mood itself. There is no incorporated moment of correction. Thus it is tempting to dismiss the poem as evincing the limits of Wordsworth's social sympathies, which extend to impoverished property owners, and perhaps to shivering orphans, but not to those who choose, or seem to choose, to remain rootless vagrants. Can this case be answered?

First, we may notice that the tone and content of the speaker's address place him in the society of other Wordsworthian protagonists who are clearly not sanctioned by the poet. Thus the Vicar of "The Brothers," in misjudging Leonard Ewbank, sees him as one who

Will look and scribble, scribble on and look,
 Until a man might travel twelve stout miles,
 Or reap an acre of his neighbour's corn.
 [PWW, 2:1]

The Vicar's mood is described as that of "gay complacency" rather than of any sublime self-abandon (PWW, 2:4). Again, the speaker of the "Point Rash-Judgment" poem refers to the "vacant mood" in which the rambles are "feeding" their "fancies" when they pass their improper verdict upon the old fisherman (PWW, 2:116). The speaker of "Gypsies" belongs within this genre, except that there is nothing in the poem itself to dramatize his culpability.

We must, then, search for clues in the construction of the sublime mood itself; we have to try to contextualize the hyperbole. The speaker treats the sight of the gypsies as a "Spectacle" (l. 4), often an uneasy word in Wordsworth's vocabulary, at least when associated with the unreflective habits of mind encouraged by the metropolitan theaters. And if the human elements of the landscape are part of a *tableau vivant*, then there is also something less than imaginative about the sun depicted as "weary"

(l. 13)—a poeticism which the true poet of the Lakes seldom allows himself in good faith. And what of the line “Then issued Vesper from the fulgent West” (l. 14)? This reminds me of another line in Wordsworth’s writings: “And reddening Phoebus lifts his golden fire.” But this line is not by Wordsworth. It is by Thomas Gray, and it occurs in the sonnet quoted in the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” as an example of vicious poetic diction.¹⁴ Wordsworth goes through the sonnet and picks out the five valuable lines; this one is not among them. The line from “Gipsies” has the same uncomfortable personification, the same pathetic fallacy, the same declamatory authority—surely not that of a man speaking to men but that which tends to impress “a notion of the peculiarity and exaltation of the Poet’s character.”¹⁵ It may be contrasted, moreover, with the much more modest address to the evening star in the sonnet “To the Planet Venus, an Evening Star,” in which the mood is one of love, peace, and humility rather than sublime self-reflection (see *PWW*, 3:274–75).

There is thus evidence to suggest that this is an odd piece of poetry, not simply in itself (which is obvious) but also in central Wordsworthian terms—the terms that bind together most coherently his theoretical pronouncements and many of his other poems. Can we deduce an unconscious faltering in the poem, a level of implicit self-undermining which is not technically manifested in a formal structure, as it would be if the speaker were cast as a dramatic persona, in the manner of the old sea captain of “The Thorn”? Similar questions arise about the ungainly lines in John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” There, one of the most mellifluous poets in the language delivers lines such as “Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared” and “O Attic shape! Fair attitude!” thereby prompting us by these uncomfortable clashes to wonder about the speaker’s state of mind.

Decisions about “Gipsies” can also be made around the question of whether the speaker has unconsciously “dramatic” status. It is as if Wordsworth offers us at the same time an affirmation and a critique of the mood of sublime enthusiasm; the poem becomes the product of a sort of schizophrenia. On the one hand, we have the pompous sermonizer and enforcer of accepted social divisions; on the other, and in the very excessiveness of the style, we see a trace of a man speaking to men and of the guilt-afflicted rambler of the “Point Rash-Judgment” poem. The poem then becomes not just the transcription of a political position but also (as so often in Wordsworth) the vehicle for analyzing the subject who articulates that position. Whether or not we choose to “excuse” him, in a judgmental way, matters less than that we try to understand the implications of his resorting to this particular language—implications for the historical conditions of subjectivity itself.

Before I address this question, I shall first point out that the literariness of “Gipsies” is not exhausted by the oddly out-of-place echo of Gray. The traveler-speaker also echoes two moments in book 4 of *Paradise Lost*, the first when Satan beholds Paradise for the first time

for the sun
Declined was hastening now with prone career
To the Ocean Isles, and in the ascending scale
Of heaven the stars that usher evening rose¹⁶

and the second when Uriel has just departed

Hesperus that led
The starry host, rode brightest, till the moon
Rising in clouded majesty, at length
Apparent queen unveiled her peerless light,
And o’er the dark her silver mantle threw.
[*PL*, 4.605–9]

Most important of all, Wordsworth’s speaker echoes Adam’s sermon on prelapsarian labor. Day is the time for work, and night for rest:

other creatures all day long
Rove idle unemployed, and less need rest;
Man hath his daily work of body or mind
Appointed, which declares his dignity,
And the regard of heaven on all his ways;
While other animals unactive range,
And of their doings God takes no account.
[*PL*, 4.616–22]

Having almost cast himself as the sun, as one who travels for “twelve bounteous hours” (l. 9), Wordsworth’s speaker gestures by quotation toward seeing himself as the paradisaical Adam, speaks of the necessity of labor, and condemns (by allusion) the gypsies to being ignored by God (though the image is softened—it is the moon that they ignore [see ll. 19–21]). They become, it seems, “animals unactive” (*PL*, 4.621). The hyperbole of this poem is in part a result of its quotation of Milton—a gesture which it cannot quite afford to explain but to which it alludes nevertheless.

What, then, do these two sorts of allusion, that to Gray (not at all explicit) and that to Milton (which is more explicit but still somewhat evasive, though presumably less so to a reader of 1807), have to say about the historical condition of the subjectivity that might be behind this poetic speaker? The clue, I think, lies in the dramatization of the fact that the poet is, to use Adam’s terms, one who does his daily work in mind rather than in body (see *PL*, 4.618), if indeed he could be said to labor at all. He is certainly not earning a living by the sweat of his brow: the “Point Rash-Judgment” poem in fact refers to a mood of “idleness.” The speaker cannot thus project with any complete confidence the persona of honest laborer that would be necessary to admonish the gypsies with full conviction and credibility. He can hardly accuse them of wasting time in leisure

when his own occupation is so darkly ambiguous in precisely the same way. Wordsworth had already gone into print on the virtues of giving over a day to idleness (see *PWW*, 4:60). The voice of self-righteous disapproval that "Gipsies" expresses is thus thwarted and ambivalent; accordingly, it takes the form of improbable hyperbole. And the understanding (conscious or otherwise) that creates this ambivalence is a social and political one. Wordsworth is at some level aware of the ambiguous position of the poet, neither a laborer nor an idler, and aware therefore of the whole predicament of the writer in the early nineteenth century. He presents himself, in the formal discontinuities of his poem, as a potentially alienated figure, whose purpose in wandering across the landscape cannot be specified and whose exact place on the scale between Adam and the beasts is thus unstable.¹⁷

Handwritten notes in the left margin: "T.M.P.", "purpose is social", "of the", "plotted in the", "talking in", "the poem", "recurring", "many times", "education".

Gypsies as vulgar & speaker as man of taste. T.M.P. whose perception is different & makes his being nothing different than that of the gypsies & like that of the speaker T.T.

Much more would be needed to produce an efficient vocabulary for reading the politics of Wordsworth's poetry. In particular, very careful attention to the relation between the public positions adopted by Wordsworth on various issues and the manifestation of these positions in his poetic writing would have to be undertaken. This would specifically illuminate the problem of how *unconscious* the language of poetry might be as compared to that of prose, and of how arguably historical the unconscious itself might then appear to be. I have no space here for this task, although it will be clear to those who know Wordsworth that my evidence so far indicates the ways in which his poetry complicates or counterbalances positions that were sometimes expressed more directly in other writings, whether by the poet or by his contemporaries. The techniques of poetry, including the presentation of ambiguous speakers and allusive slips of the tongue, might then be deemed appropriate for the expressions of unresolved political positions whose authority can be artfully (even if unconsciously) displaced.

For the moment, I want instead to try to set the above readings into the contexts of current literary criticism. My account of "Gipsies" demonstrates the degree to which the phenomenon of the unintegrated subject, as there described, differs from what we might expect a deconstructionist explanation to involve. I do not take Wordsworth's allusions to Gray and Milton as evidence of anything at all *in themselves*. They suggest neither an anxiety of influence nor an inescapable literariness in all perception and experience; they do not speak for an inevitably involuted ingenuity and self-referentiality in the poetic mind. My account differs rather less from the standard assumption about tales and tellers, wherein we are encouraged to trust the first and not the second, that is, to pay attention to the writing as it may offer evidence against the interpretations of the

persona reporting it to us. I do, however, put this formulation to use in a new way. Here, the complexities of the tale do not simply "transcend" the teller, so that subjectivity tends to become irrelevant in their exposition and unraveling. This approach, typical of much of the New Criticism of mid-nineteenth-century literature, tends to produce a merely formal conclusion about the "truth" of the story in relation to the "character" of the teller. In contrast, I suggest that this "character" and its particular motivations might have arguably historical and objective determinations and that through its forms of expression we can trace an intersubjective experience both empirical and psychological.

Neither of the two poems offers a formally differentiated dramatic speaker, and it might well seem that in attempting to account for the uncertainties that yet remain in the positioning of the speaking subject, I have tacitly consented to one of the major tenets of the Derridean or deconstructionist criticism. This has been well expressed by George Steiner, who attributes it to Martin Heidegger:

It is not so much the poet who speaks, but language itself. . . . The poet is not a *persona*, a subjectivity 'ruling over language', but an 'openness to', a supreme listener to, the genius of speech. . . . We do not 'read' the poem in the traditional framework of the author's *auctoritas* and of an agreed sense, however gradually and gropingly arrived at. We bear witness to its precarious possibility of existence in an 'open' space of collisions, of momentary fusions between word and referent.¹⁸

I have indeed written of the poems as occupying a "space of collisions," and I have not tried to restrict attention to an authoritative subjectivity invoked as a principle able to limit allusions. At the same time, these allusions are much more than "momentary fusions between word and referent." If language is a place of collision, then there is nothing precarious about the elements that collide. The contest of significations is one of polemically charged vocabularies and concepts with very precise empirical implications. It is not a matter of anyone passively recording the "genius of speech"; or at least, even if a degree of passivity is operative, then the speech that is transcribed is *itself* highly active and highly referential. The debates invoked by the linguistic and stylistic features of Wordsworth's poems are the great debates of contemporary legislation and social theory—about the relations of work and leisure, charity and relief, property and vagrancy, rich and poor. The dislocated subject who "speaks" in "Gipsies" is not rendered as dislocated by some universal fact of language but rather by the condition of specific alienation traceable within his *use*—whether conscious or unconscious—of that language.

Thus, in insisting on the historical grounds of this play of possibilities rendered into language, I am not consenting to what I take to be another

major tenet of the deconstructionist movement: that language reflects ultimately upon itself, upon its own coming-into-being, and that such self-reference should discourage the search for a verifiably empirical context or motive for utterance. This has often seemed the most intoxicating aspect of Derrida's thought for his American followers (however congruous it might or might not be with the whole of that thought, still in progress); the sophisticated superficiality of language must, when recognized, frustrate any move toward causal hypotheses about its origins. Here is Paul de Man on the ubiquity of self-deception:

When modern critics think they are demystifying literature, they are in fact being demystified by it. . . . What they call anthropology, linguistics, psychoanalysis is nothing but literature reappearing, like the Hydra's head, in the very spot where it had supposedly been suppressed. The human mind will go through amazing feats of distortion to avoid facing "the nothingness of human matters."¹⁹

All available archives for making serious sense of literature are here disestablished and subjected to the same law of bad faith. There is nowhere for the literary critic to go except round and round the text. It is not necessary to disagree with de Man on the naive level: we can agree that so-called empirical reference is itself subject to analysis as a merely figurative representation and is, in this sense, like literature. But we must then grant that this can lead the way to an analysis of the *historical* generation of efficient figures. The work of Michel Foucault, however much it fails to declare on the precise nature of historical *change*, is of the greatest importance here. The symmetries that Foucault demonstrates between different disciplines and discourses are inevitably historical; the arguments arise over how coherent they are, how they endure, and how they change. The singular lack of interest shown by Derrida's followers in this alternative approach is striking and is a subject to which I shall return.

The presence of a highly dislocated subjectivity in the poetry of Wordsworth makes it, I think, a particularly useful body of writing for any investigation of the relation between the Derridean theory and an accessible historical discourse. The situation of Wordsworth's writing, and the preoccupation of his audience, was precisely with the issues of fragmentation, alienation, authority, and irony, which have themselves informed the construction of modern "theoretical" problems. Thus, as we may be assisted or even enabled by modern theory to detect these issues in Wordsworth, we yet find upon close examination that they exist in his writings as more than convenient tools for generating new readings. They open up a whole discourse in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, one not limited to literature but concerned with the same issues as appear in literature.

This is, or ought to be, the difference between the now standard Derridean reading of a text (any genre, any period) and an awareness

of Derridean tools that are helpful in reading Romantic writers. The first position—the standard Derridean reading—by depriving itself of any reference to historically identifiable discourses, ends up by implying some theory of reading (of "fictionality," irony, and so on) in which language reflects on its own cunning levels of artificiality. This results in the production of a rhetoric, in which it is always *language* and never a specific text that is discussed (so that, if the text is well chosen, the critic takes the text itself simply at face value). I associate this approach with the work of de Man and J. Hillis Miller and their followers, who seem uninterested in the *evidence* for the conditions of production—in history in the largest sense—of any *particular* writer or text. This tendency is itself symmetrical with Derrida's own increasing abstraction of the language/speech/writing syndrome (for example, in Jean Jacques Rousseau) from any context more specific than "Western metaphysics." Readings of Rousseau's views on language become suddenly independent of his political economy and of anything that might reveal them as motivated (historically and subjectively). The natural result of this is a "theory," or a statement about "the nothingness of human matters," for language has now been stripped of so many potential complications that a "theory" now seems to be possible. This theory then redigests the very things that it has previously excluded in order to constitute itself in the first place and whose continued independent presence would threaten its whole existence. Thus de Man finds a rhetoric of infinite displacement in Rousseau's political texts and makes *this* their meaning. It is never proposed that there might be a historical explanation for such textual syndromes or that they might be opened to further analysis.²⁰

To make any use, in a comprehensive literary criticism, of Derrida's insights about linguistic slippage and the unintegrated subjectivity, we must, then, remain primarily committed to explaining their incidence in particular cases; we can never accept them as universal necessities to be deduced from the nature of writing itself. This inevitably takes us back to questions concerning the conditions of the production of such indeterminacies as are traceable in language. These conditions, if they are to be convincing, will always be *specific*.

In the case of Wordsworth, special mention must be made of the work of Geoffrey Hartman. Hartman's book on Wordsworth, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814*, first published in 1964, could be described as having established the scope and direction of Romantic studies for the twenty years since. It also established the intellectual majority of Wordsworth himself, hitherto often considered as a poet of the feelings or as a modified Lockean with something to say about the relation of mind and world. This important and continually creative book was in fact written before the importation of Derrida into America, but it prepares the way for the deconstructionist enterprise in that Wordsworth is taken out of the historical and put into the visionary mode. The Wordsworth canon is thus redesigned

around the poems in which the speaker successfully abstracts himself from contingent history. For Hartman at this stage, Wordsworth's achievement is human and imaginative, but the way is nevertheless prepared for his poems to be seen as more and more autonomous of anything that is not a "literary" input. In fact, with a hindsight that may yet be prophetic for all of us writing now, Hartman is his own best critic: in "Retrospect 1971," published with the 1977 reprint of the book, he confesses the subordination of "psychology, epistemology, religious ideas, politics" to the elucidation of Wordsworth's "'consciousness of consciousness'" (WP, p. xii). In a fine passage, he continues:

Perhaps Wordsworth never did emerge to an assured sense of self or a decisive poetry. There is something peculiar in the way his text corrupts itself: the freshness of earlier versions is dimmed by scruples and qualifications, by revisions that usually overlay rather than deepen insight. I should have paid some attention to this problem but was more interested, I now see, in the integrity of the mind than in that of the single poem. I wanted to identify the forces ranged against emergence, against the achievement of a humane imagination, and I did not count among these forces intellectual confusion or a Coleridgean metaphysical hangover. [WP, p. xvii]

Here Hartman himself signals quite consciously, as the best critics sometimes do, the need for an examination of the evidence he once ignored. Both with the wisdom of hindsight and in the fabric of his original argument (for example, in its awareness of the imagination as a dangerously modifying faculty), he points to an alternative approach to that which stresses the emergence of the visionary mode (and its "decline" in *The Excursion*). This alternative, I think, will not focus on "intellectual confusion" or Coleridgean hangovers but on the historical conditions informing the writing of a subjectivity that is unassured and a poetry that is indecisive and prone to scruples and qualifications—a poetry where self-corruption is not a matter of linguistic self-reference, or visionary failure, but of acute existential disorder—a poetry and a subjectivity with specific historical coordinates.

At the moment, we have a divided Romantic criticism, it seems to me, with the major historical scholars remaining implicitly or explicitly antitheoretical and the "theorists" ignoring history. Thus E. P. Thompson, who (I dare to hope) might well approve of the sort of reading I have given to "Alice Fell," shows in his own literary criticism a fear of admitting any fracturing elements into poetic statements conceived in the voices of (for him) objectively documentary observers; the speakers of "Songs of Experience" must therefore be telling the truth, rather than dramatizing in their statements another sort of truth, that of the alienated subjectivity itself.²¹

Thompson is, I would argue, the most important historian of the period for the literary critic. No single work of historical scholarship approaches the scope and the profitable controversy of *The Making of the English Working Class*. It is all the more important, then, that Thompson, who is admirably willing to cross disciplinary boundaries, should do so in a way that is so negative about the claims of (in this case, Marxist) "theory."²² His scruples are of course directed at the Althusserian arguments which (as he sees them) allow the conscious subject no authoritative insight into the objective conditions of his environment, with the result that all forms of perception and expression are in some way refracted through a discursive superstructure. (This is analogous to the debate between the deconstructionists and their opponents, except that it is as full of history and specificity as that debate is empty of them.) Obviously, Thompson is right in a very simple sense. It would be absurd to have said of a "bread-or-blood" rioter, or to say to a modern South African protesting apartheid, that he has misunderstood his historical situation. Empty stomachs and the absence of basic civil rights are not to be thought away. But literary statements are very seldom open to this sort of resolution (though when they are, they embarrass literary critics all the more). At his weakest, Thompson is dangerously close to those critics who try to make examples of ordinary language-use prove something about complex literary statements, for which the constitutive constraints of ordinary language-use are almost never available. *eg. Thompson on Althusser. (Poverty of Theory)* ^{is there a literary language?}

The model of Romanticism which Thompson's arguments would, if carried to an extreme, leave us with, needs to be made to accommodate the recognition that there is a crisis in the manifestation of subjective authority and that this crisis has a *historical* identity. To give merely a few examples, it appears in the theories of irony proposed by Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Schlegel (different as they are from one another), in the imperfectly maintained dramatic distances in the poems of Keats and Byron, in the artful Chinese-box narratives of Scott, in the neurotic world of imperfect self-other differentiation in Sterne (and its positive-negative oscillation in Blake). The very theory of personal identity had been famously put into crisis by David Hume; the political economists of the later eighteenth century were almost to a man aware of the potential effects of the division of labor on the integrity of the psyche; and Godwin had the same worries about the effects of party, faction, and interest on the body politic.²³ All these various kinds of writing and speculation demonstrate a common concern with an observed or predicted disintegration of the individual identity and, reciprocally, of the society from which the individual acquires his sense of self and which he then further reconstitutes. Becoming aware of the scope of this obsession ought to prevent the literary critic from slipping into fantasies about the autonomy of language. The idea that language is the primary agent of dislocation

in identity is a Modernist initiative and cannot be demonstrated in Romanticism without ignoring all the evidence in the other direction.

What, then, we might ask, is the difference between this formulation of mine and any other theory? Simply that it is not a theory at all. A theory must presuppose some useful continuity between the objects to which it will be applied, and there can be no theory of literary language that will be thus useful, because the specific conditions of referentiality change too drastically from case to case. The archive of discourses and events that makes sense of these references also changes, both particularly and historically. There is no place for a theory of how percepts are converted into or predetermined by language, or of how this process is influenced by idiosyncratic or cultural paradigms. There is only a continually acquisitive (and admittedly theoretically *alert*) practice of interpretation, in which our intuitions are tested against the most comprehensive archive that can be constructed—one so comprehensive that it gives us some chance of fracturing the peace of mind of those hermeneutic gestures that we all recognize to be at least in part self-reflecting.

Of course, this practice does not produce *truth*, which is another inhibiting theoretical obsession. And this is what seems to have arrested our movement into pursuing more useful objectives and into a "modern" political criticism (at both ends of the hermeneutic equation). The distinguished work that has been done on the political dimension of Romanticism has been very much at the level of discovering the archive—I am thinking of such major contributions as those of David Erdman and Carl Woodring. The "theorists" (and I shall surely be chastised for saying this) are still for the most part locked into a false dialectic in which the search for purity and propositional closure, on the one hand (a goal borrowed from analytic philosophy?), is answered, on the other, by an equally reified counterstatement declaring for universal contamination (whether anguished or joyous matters little). Each goes on casting itself as the slave to the other's master.

This brings us back to the second position I mentioned before (see pp. 68–69), that which can claim some use for part of the Derridean apparatus, albeit not for the whole. Hartman has described deconstruction as a movement which "refuses to identify the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning and shows how deeply such logocentric or incarnationist perspectives have influenced the way we think about art."²⁴

The key word here is "embodied." To say that words do not embody meanings is both true and trite. The entire Western nominalist tradition—the major philosophical tradition—supports and assumes this principle. Despite the heyday of Leavisite cults of the concrete, Shelley represents the majority view in declaring that language has relation to thoughts and not to things. On the other hand, to say that words have no referential relation to something called a "world" is even more absurd and should

require no demonstration. A poem about Napoleon is in some way a poem about Napoleon. But there is a third and more fruitful interpretation of this denial of "embodiment," which asserts that a poem cannot refer to a world that is not itself subject to the same problems of projection and displacement that effect the construction (creative) and elucidation (critical) of the poem's language. Thus we have a poem about Napoleon, indeed, but about a particular Napoleon who is constructed and interpreted by Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, or whomever else. "Napoleon" is a class term holding together a variable number of conceptual particulars—liberator, atheist, tyrant, and so forth. One can always add to these, though they are often in practice found to be cultural constants. But the point is that some particulars are addressed by one poet, others by others. Now, for many theorists this is the end rather than the beginning of analysis (and some would, I am sure, argue that theory ought to end here, leaving application to the "literary critic"). For as soon as we wonder why each poet perceived the Napoleon that he did, we must begin an exploration of the relation of intention to history and of language to politics. This goes far beyond the dry sanctioning of interpretative communities as a matter of theory, because it commits itself to an archive that is objective in its existence (if not in its interpretation) and can thus be the focus of argument. Historians have always done this. To debate the accuracy of Arthur Young or William Marshall or William Cobbett in their accounts of rural England is not to call in question whether there was a rural England to account for. Correspondingly, to accept that their views are motivated in particular ways is not to reduce them to the helplessness of what de Man calls "literature" (see above, p. 68) nor to make all further inquiry somehow pointless.

Let me make the point again: the presence of figurally restrictive perceptions in both the creative and the critical act is a failure only if we set it against some fantasy of an achievable, universal *truth*. Here is a passage from an influential essay by de Man:

For it is in the essence of language to be capable of origination, but of never achieving the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object. Poetic language can do nothing but originate anew over and over again: it is always constitutive, able to posit regardless of presence but, by the same token, unable to give a foundation to what it posits except as an intent of consciousness. The word is always a free presence to the mind, the means by which the permanence of natural entities can be put into question and thus negated, time and again, in the endlessly widening spiral of the dialectic.²⁵

This essay, first published in 1960, in fact predates the importation of Derrida and may help to explain why he has been used as he has. De Man goes on to argue for the "intrinsic ontological primacy of the natural

object" in nineteenth-century poetry and thus for an accompanying "nostalgia for the object."²⁶ This can surely be seen in some poets. But what de Man entirely fails to explore, throughout his work, is the nature and structure of "intent[s] of consciousness" as something other than theoretical impasses and imperatives to despair (or Nietzschean celebration) resulting from a failed objective satisfaction. This failure means that de Man writes from within the condition he proposes to describe; the specifically historical incidence of this loss of control can never then be brought to analysis.

Anyone seriously interested in the politics of poetry must explore these intents of consciousness not as some kind of inept compensation for the truth (like de Man), nor as propositional elements in some universal phenomenology (like Edmund Husserl and his followers), but as specific motivations and effects. Perspectivism and predetermined vision are not "theoretical" matters but always implicated in particular spectrums of choices and consequences with definite intersubjective coordinates. Derrida, as far as I know, has done nothing to encourage this sort of curiosity. Indeed, we need not go to Derrida for an education in how to construe the politics of intents of consciousness when we can go to Pierre Macherey, Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams, and a host of others. This European tradition, though known and mentioned, has been very little used in American literary criticism.

If it should indeed begin to be used, then some important qualifications must be made about the tendencies in "Marxism" itself, as well as those of the environment into which it would be adopted. Among its own tendencies, we must warn against a stultifying preoccupation, once again, with "theory." This means that, from the literary critic's perspective, the concepts that are adduced to support the formalistically presented features of the text will be themselves grandiosely simplistic and historically crude. They will be, in other words, highly *unspecific*. For example, here is Fredric Jameson, trying to work a more sophisticated notion of ideology into a reading of Joseph Conrad and therein advising us to pay attention to the following topics to explain the genesis of "inner-worldly values":

first and foremost, the secularization of life under capitalism and the breaking up . . . of the older tradition-oriented systems of castes and inherited professions, as the combined result of the French Revolution and the spread of the market system. Now indeed, for the first time in any general and irreversible way, the realm of values becomes problematical.²⁷

This kind of writing gives Marxism a bad name, and rightly so. One is tempted to agree with de Man that "all is fiction"! I shall not go into what is valuable in Jameson's reading (and there is much); but it is a reading that fails at the most elementary levels to do justice to what we all recognize as literary problems—for example, the relation of the narrator

Marlow to Jim (and to Conrad). Thus it cannot but be an impoverished notion of ideology that emerges, one that other critics can dismiss all too easily. If the deconstructionist must become more historical, then some Marxists must do so too. They must also become more textual.

This leads to my concern about the environment into which any new version of a political criticism must be launched. The digestive organs of the academic establishment have a great appetite for "isms." Ultimately they are all relegated or "promoted" to mutual coexistence in an alienated and unintegrated series of methodologies, of which every department seeks at least one exponent. Everyone then becomes identified with an "approach." An interest in the politics of writing may even become fashionable, as many who have heard or read this essay have told me. But as long as it is specified (and specifies itself) as "just one approach," and especially if that approach is preoccupied with theory, then it will merely take its turn in the cycle of change for its own sake that the profession demands. I think it would be naive to mistake such a prospect for a sign of life. On the contrary, the separation of specializations is the perfect vehicle for the containment of our energies as intellectuals, and it keeps us fighting among ourselves, about nothing. The dislocation from hegemonic culture (which is no longer seen, even as it may be pulling the strings or letting them pull themselves within certain limits) is now complete.

We have to aim, then, at an *undivided* literary criticism. No doubt some readers will wince at what might appear a megalomaniac desire to inscribe the "political" as the only credible center to this enterprise. To such readers I would reply that to envisage the political (which might also simply be called the "historical") as the organizing energy behind the coming-into-being of writing involves no displacement of individual talents, traditional or otherwise. Deconstruction and New Criticism have in different ways shown us how texts do "comment upon themselves" and appear after close reading to emerge into states of (respectively) disunity or unity. The editor explains how these texts came into being; the bibliographer, how they were produced; the historian and biographer illuminate all stages of this process and its general and specific contexts. In practice, the notion of the political must always be broken down into particulars and explored on all fronts simultaneously. Emphatically, it should not be seen to imply the application of a prior theoretical weaponry to an undefended text. In my account, Marx has been of rather little use in reading Wordsworth, even as the concepts most critics know of only through Marx (alienation, division of labor) are important in Wordsworth and for his early contemporaries.

This undivided literary criticism, as here envisaged, is also something quite different from the pluralism whose existence we all already recognize. Pluralism as practiced (it is, by definition, seldom theorized) seems to me to imply that everything has a limited value and a partial application, but nothing is absolute. It is *not* a holistic practice, because it regards

whatever seeks to be "complete" as a form of the totalitarian. Pluralism's ethic of toleration and fear of monism are too strong to allow any one "approach" to raise its head above the others. Thus it is itself a symptom of what the sociologists call alienation, with the added sophistication that such alienation now takes on the moral imprimatur of a humane tradition. *Within* the terms of the presently available critical spectrum, one could hardly disagree with this pluralist suspicion of monism: Jameson's Marxist reading does not seem to me any more satisfying than that of other versions of Conrad. But the idea of an undivided literary criticism involves precisely going *beyond* the presently available spectrum and beyond the terms in which pluralism casts the debate. This is the harder to envisage because it also involves making a gesture against the wider social syndromes which that debate reproduces, themselves predicated upon alienation and specialization. It is hard for us to imagine a critical practice in which all specialties might be organically integrated, so that each *constitutes* rather than merely illuminates the others—hard, because we all have essentially divided minds, able to do some things better than others. An alternative prospectus smacks of the utopian because the whole history of modern academic practices runs against it: hence the separation of English from comparative literature and from the classics, of women's studies from a "mainstream," of "theory" from whatever is not theory, of textual scholarship from interpretation.

Literally since working on earlier versions of this argument, I have become aware of recent work that seems to me to come very close to fulfilling some of the requirements of an undivided literary criticism, at least in its recognition that literary statements are inevitably socially referential and allusive. If I limit myself simply to what appeared in the year 1983, I can point to books and essays by Jerome McGann, Ronald Paulson, Roger Sayles, Heather Glen, Kenneth Johnston, and John Barrell.²⁸ Perhaps the specific form of inclusiveness—the political—for which I have been arguing, is already a thing of the present, so that my special pleading partakes of the traditional wisdom of the owl of Minerva. It should be said that there is also much in feminist criticism which gestures toward an inclusive methodology. To examine the status of women and the image of the feminine is, since they are very different things, necessarily to initiate an attentiveness to the historical and the political. Once feminism frees itself (as much of it has) from a normative psychology of male and female, it readily leads to an analysis of more general forms of power and their specific manifestations: race, class, vested interest, and so forth.

At least, it should do so. For to point out that there is a significant body of recent work that is in the spirit of the changes of direction for which I am asking does not assume that it will be noticed or that it will escape designation as another "ism." It may become, as so much else has, just another of de Man's "literatures," just another partial fiction. And here I return, finally, to the question of why it is that the preference for

Derrida (over, say, Foucault or Althusser) has been so striking in the United States. Can it be that the conditions for seeing the importance of the political and historical in literature do not exist, or exist at an inadequate level of conviction? Derrida has been much more influential here than he ever has been in Europe. The big difference between America and Europe in this respect is that here there is no discourse of class consciousness.

There *are* of course different interests in America—very much so. But they do not have an established place in the official discourse, which is still very much composed by the self-articulations of the white middle class and is still very much governed by the canons of exemplary individualism. Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics have not yet achieved/been granted participation in this official discourse; they exist rather as the focuses of its definitions and condescensions, as if part of a third world. Linguistic and political "representation" are obviously connected here, perhaps mutually determining. The official discourse is uncannily seamless and unfractured and functions very comfortably on an assumption of the normative (which includes, of course, permitted forms of antagonism). Interestingly, this is least true of the study of American literature, where we might expect the issue of intentionality of consciousness to be most readily politicized. Deconstruction seems to have made smaller advances in this field, perhaps because there is more of an instinctive resistance to the application of a merely theoretical position. (The logic by which American literature was itself subordinated as a specialty or "junior partner" in the early years of many English departments is itself symmetrical with the priority of theory, whether traditional or modern, though of course there have been "theories" of American literature.)

The absence of any real representation of social interests and antagonisms inside the academy may then go some way toward explaining why it is that white middle-class critics vacillate between mutually confirming extremes of truth and relativism, with only the most theoretical of murmurings about interpretative communities. There are debates, indeed, but debates without any content or consequence for an outside world in which neither truth nor literature are fetishized. Perhaps there is so little substantial application of the intents-of-consciousness insight because there is no official (that is, available) discourse in which such a struggle of languages might be effected and hence no perceived reality to such a struggle. This is surely enhanced by the fact that the British is not a "native" literature, though it might be challenged if there were a greater representation within the universities of the "unofficial" factions within American society: Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics. The proverbial *Heart of Darkness* would become a very different text.

Of course, we must admit that no well-meaning fiat by well-meaning academicians is going to change things overnight. But at the same time, one does not have to accept the inevitability of defeat and the uselessness

of examining the alternatives. Let me give a more specific and manageable example. Very few Romanticists would object to the assertion that Erdman's *Blake: Prophet against Empire* is one of the most important books on the period or on any writer within it. It is also obvious that, with a few exemplary exceptions, Erdman's work has not inaugurated a tradition, as Hartman's book (also important) on Wordsworth certainly has. To read the recent interview that Morris Eaves conducted with David and Virginia Erdman is to perceive some clues about why this might be.²⁹ Erdman led an active and visible political life in the early 1950s, and his associations with Marxism seem to have had a good deal to do with his losing his job at that time. McCarthyism did much to kill off the Left in America, and the protest against the Vietnam War, when it came, was the more moderately liberal because of this. (I note only that the *most* threatening movement of the time—the Black Panthers—was ruthlessly and efficiently suppressed even as other forms of “protest” were allowed to continue. I mention this to preempt any simple assumption of the political coherence of the antiwar movement or its existence as a “complete” alternative.) It would be hard not to suspect, at least, that without any conscious decisions on anybody's part (for this is not how ideology works when most efficient) these factors have something to do with the continuing latency of Erdman's work for the founding of any kind of tradition and with the reciprocal flowering of deconstruction and other formalist methods during the same period. (Compare the British situation, where there is such a “political” tradition of work, operating under the inspiration of writers like Williams and Thompson.)

Can we then take seriously the claims of the Derrideans to be an antiestablishment movement? I think not—but if at all, then only in a way that involves going outside the terms of assimilation that they themselves would allow us. Deconstruction is indeed an alternative to pluralism. Where the pluralist marches beneath the Terentian flag, with room beneath it for everything that is human, deconstruction attacks humanism itself. It questions the assumption of the “human” and the possibility of holding polemically efficient opinions, all in the name of the serious and inexorable superficiality of language. But there is another alternative to humanism, one which does not resort to language as an autonomous principle but to the historical and political relativity of *representations* of the “human.” The alternative provided by deconstruction seems, in its attack on the “theoretical” possibility of referential “meaning” that is also in some sense “true,” to be merely a negation of the fullness of identification which humanism might have seemed to promise. It does not investigate the “inabsolute” middle ground between fullness and absence, a middle ground which is *not* at all a merging or fusion of the two extreme positions but rather (and this cannot be emphasized enough) a denial of the very opposition which their mutual antagonism presupposes. Deconstruction can thus be viewed historically (and regardless of which texts it might

happen to illuminate or not) as only a discursive frustration, a gesture striving for something it cannot articulate as an alternative, because such an alternative is beyond what the received discourse can allow to be perceived. Thus the only possible articulation becomes one of molestation and self-laceration. This can produce an alienated hyperbole not dissimilar from that of the speaker of “Gipsies”—and as in the case of Wordsworth's poem, we must try here to recover an archive that explicates this hyperbole. Thus, in one of his exuberant moments, J. Hillis Miller embraces a histrionic joy in despair, a pleasure in perversity itself, whereby the “deconstructive procedure . . . may reach . . . interpretation as joyful wisdom, the greatest joy in the midst of the greatest suffering, an inhabitation of that gaiety of language which is our seigneur.”³⁰ The other side of this falling and galling is a hysterical claim to “world-historicity” and absolute urgency, wherein the deconstructionist becomes “a bad son demolishing beyond hope of repair the machine of Western metaphysics.”³¹ The weary sun has done his work in the heavens, and so has the professor. But the gypsies are still there, remarkably immune to metaphysics thus conceived, and to the man striding by in too much of a hurry to stop and speak. But he would not know what to say even if he had the time, for he has a language problem, and he is trapped by his mood of “sublime” vision. The Romantics—or Romantic writing—never forgot the social and political context of these moods nor their social implications, even when its speakers tried to make it forget. Perhaps this can teach us a more critical and less individualistic interest in the language of the Derrideans. For to embrace the other extreme, that of a stubborn commonsense realism, is merely to answer hysteria with smugness. This is an even more cunning acquiescence in the mythologies of the official discourse. It says “they are just gypsies”; it says “no problem,” as the language teaches us.

1. William Blake, “Jerusalem,” *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, rev. ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), p. 146.

2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1983), 2:121; all further references to this work, abbreviated *BL*, will be included in the text.

3. I have explored the “formal” implications of this crisis in *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (London and Totowa, N.J., 1979), and the terms of its historical discourse in *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real* (London and Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1982).

4. William Wordsworth, “Alice Fell; or, Poverty,” *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1940–49), 1:232–34; all further references to this work, abbreviated *PWW* and with volume and page numbers, will be included in the text.

5. This is pointed out by Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814* (1964; New Haven, Conn., 1977), p. 143; all further references to this work, abbreviated *WP*, will be included in the text.

6. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London, 1950), p. 50.

- People of the same period and community, who have lived through the same events, who have raised and avoided the same questions, have the same taste in their mouth; they have the same complicity, and there are the same corpses among them. That is why it is not necessary to write so much; there are key-words.
7. William Cowper, "Truth," *Poems*, 3d ed., 2 vols. (London, 1787), 1:96.
 - ✓ 8. William Godwin, "Of Beggars," *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature, in a Series of Essays* (London, 1797), p. 188.
 9. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1765-69), 1:447.
 10. I am grateful to Martin Mueller for pointing this out to me.
 11. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 171.
 12. Wordsworth, "Gipsies," *Poems in Two Volumes, 1807*, ed. Helen Darbishire, 2 vols. in 1 (Oxford, 1914), pp. 229-30.
 13. David Ferry, *The Limits of Mortality: An Essay on Wordsworth's Major Poems* (Middletown, Conn., 1959), p. 9.
 14. Thomas Gray, quoted in Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1974), 1:133.
 15. Wordsworth, "Appendix to *Lyrical Ballads*," *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, 1:162.
 16. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London, 1971), bk. 4, ll. 352-55; all further references to this work, abbreviated *PL* and with book and line numbers, will be included in the text. The connection was brought to my attention by Patricia A. Parker, "The Progress of Phaedria's Bower: Spenser to Coleridge," *ELH* 40 (Fall 1973): 385. See also her account of this passage in *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton, N.J., 1979), pp. 117-23.
 - ✓ 17. For an account of Wordsworth's poetic vocation as an instance of divided labor, see my reading of "When to the attractions of the busy world," in *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real*, pp. 31-34 and 37-38.
 18. George Steiner, "On Difficulty," *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (New York, 1978), p. 46.
 19. Paul de Man, "Criticism and Crisis," *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York, 1971), p. 18.
 20. See de Man, "Political Allegory in Rousseau," *Critical Inquiry* 2 (Summer 1976): 649-75. De Man does admit that allegory can "generate history" (p. 675) but does not entertain the possibility that history might reciprocally generate allegory.
 - ✓ 21. See E. P. Thompson, "London," in *Interpreting Blake*, ed. Michael Phillips (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 5-31.
 - ✓ 22. On this subject, see Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980), a book which bears very importantly on questions in contemporary literary criticism.
 - ✓ 23. The dramatization of fragmentation and alienation in the immediately "pre-Romantic" period is the theme of an important new book by John Barrell, *English Literature in History, 1730-1780: An Equal, Wide Survey* (London, 1983). For similar concerns applied to the relation of parliamentary and popular culture, see John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976).
 24. Hartman, preface to Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York, 1979), p. vii.
 - ✓ 25. De Man, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Bloom (New York, 1970), p. 69.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
 27. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp. 248, 249.
 - ✓ 28. See Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago, 1983), pp. 81-92; Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution, 1789-1820* (New Haven,

Conn., 1983); Roger Sayles, *English Literature in History, 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics* (New York, 1983); Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's "Songs" and Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads"* (Cambridge, 1983); Kenneth R. Johnston, "The Politics of 'Tintern Abbey,'" *Wordsworth Circle* 14 (Winter 1983): 6-14; and for Barrell, see n. 23, above. This is a considerable body of work to appear within any twelve months on a subject as specific as the politics of Romanticism, and it does suggest a trend. Moreover, both McGann and Johnston address themselves to "Tintern Abbey," traditionally one of the most "aestheticized" poems in the canon.

29. See Morris Eaves, "Bread, Politics, and Poetry: Morris Eaves Interviews David and Virginia Erdman," *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (Fall 1982): 277-302.

30. J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," *Deconstruction and Criticism*, pp. 230-31.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 251.