

ENG 521

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October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010

### **Wordsworth' "The London Beggar"**

Throughout this course, we have often analyzed how travel narratives, British social customs, science, and literature come together to influence each other and produce knowledge and discourses. It is clear, for instance, that Romantic writers often turned to travel narratives as inspiration for their poetry and, in doing so, they, in a sense, got to travel to distant lands and take the reader along with them during those travels. However, from the analysis of how literary texts also reflect the state of eighteenth century British society, we can gather that Romantic poets were also travelers in their own land. In other words, they sought to represent British reality as much as what they perceived to be the truth about foreign lands. Consequently, this week I would like to focus on Wordsworth's "The London Beggar" and how Wordsworth manages to take the reader in a "literary trip" around the harsh realities of the city through the "eyes" of a blind beggar.

In "The London Beggar," Wordsworth opens the poem by recalling the feelings of isolation and confusion that he feels while staring at the faces of passing Londoners. For Wordsworth, these people remain "a mystery" (line 597) in spite of his conscious efforts to really "see" who they are:

Thus I have looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed  
By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,  
Until the shapes before my eyes became  
A second sight procession, such as glides  
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams  
And all the ballast of familiar life-- (lines 598-603)

In this description of how he is attempting to perceive passerbys, Wordsworth seems to be portraying an unidentifiable other whose identity is at best blurry, a mere outline. In this sense, he might be attempting to comment on the "invisible" nature bestowed on the lower classes by hegemonic British society. It is also interesting to note that these people become a "second sight procession," or a prediction of a ghastly future that is already here. This gift of foresight is particular thought-provoking when analyzed in conjunction with the figure of the beggar who is blind. In many classic myths, blind men are usually considered as prophets or, ironically, as people who precisely because of their physical limitation had the ability to see beyond the physical world. From this perspective, Wordsworth appears to endow the humble figure of the beggar with a power and aura that is subversive in as much as it allows this mostly ignored person to be made visible for the first time. In fact, Wordsworth is, by his own admission, "smitten with the view" (610) of this blind beggar who he considers to be an "emblem" (line 618) of humanity. Once again, Wordsworth seems to be bestowing power upon this lowly figure by equating himself and everybody else with the lowly beggar.

To conclude, the beggar's admonishment, which Wordsworth perceives in his "fixed face and sightless eyes" (line 621), also denotes a certain guilt, perhaps related to the indifference with which these types of people were treated. Therefore, one has to wonder if Wordsworth is not trying to admonish British society in general as well. This also leads the reader to wonder whether the mysterious crowd described at the beginning of the poem might not also represent

the British majority who, in their indifference towards human suffering, also render themselves as invisible and unrecognizable as the humble beggar who they are trying to ignore.

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### Does John Clare Prefer the Garden to the Wilderness?

I've been writing with much admiration about John Clare for a few weeks now. I appreciate his spiritual connection to the natural world and his radically progressive ecological awareness. But as I scanned a few of his poems for this week's annotation, a thought struck me: does Clare find such solace in nature because of the significant alterations that humans have made?

The answer to this question lies in the difference between the wilderness and the garden. I am defining wilderness much as the federal government does today: an area free from any significant alteration by human beings. I define the garden much as Leo Marx does in *The Machine in the Garden*: an area that has been significantly altered by humans, but which cannot be called urban. The garden is nature tamed, brought under control. The wilderness is nature untamed, resisting control.

Clare's brief "I am" on page 1237 of our anthology brought this idea to mind. He wrote this poem later in his life while incarcerated in an asylum. The first two stanzas express his profound despair and alienation. But in the last stanza, the poem becomes a fantasy of escape and release, envisioning a place of solitude and peace. This place is, of course, what we might call wilderness, a place where "man hath never trod" (13). Clare sees such a wilderness as conducive to reclaiming innocence and happiness, and there he imagines sleeping "untroubled where I lie, / The grass below – above the vaulted sky" (17-18).

This can possibly be read as entirely abstract fantasy, but given Clare's strong connection to the very real land of his childhood, it is perhaps better to read it more literally. But if so, then we run into trouble here. There is really no such thing as wilderness in England, not even one hundred and sixty years ago. Everywhere has felt the influence of humankind. The nature that Clare is longing to find solace in is the vastly altered landscape of rural England. Actual wilderness, free from significant alteration by humans, is not so innocuous as Clare seems to think.

I cannot help but compare Clare's envisioning of peace to my own experience in the wilderness of Washington. I sleep in the wilderness dozens of nights each year, and "untroubled" is not the exact word I would use to describe it. Exhilarating and intense seem more apt. When the sun goes down, one suddenly becomes hyper-conscious of the fact that bears, wolves, and cougars are your neighbors. Sleep is light and frequently interrupted by the various nocturnal beings come to check out the unfamiliar visitor or to forage uncomfortably close to your tent.

Of course, Clare had no such experiences in the garden that is rural England. According to the *Daily Mail*, bears were eradicated in England sometime in the first century, wolves in the thirteenth (Derbyshire). No other large predatory mammals exist in England. I cannot help but feel that the blissful peace that he imagines is in some part due to the fact that he is imagining himself in the garden, not the wilderness.

What are the implications of this? I'm still wondering. Clare had no choice in the matter, obviously. But do we need to reconsider his reputation as nature's visionary advocate? The nature he knew and described was a nature that had been bent to the will

of people, a nature tamed and yoked and made to serve humankind. Would he have been as in love with a true wilderness as he was with his garden?

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James Henry Leigh Hunt's "Canto III. The Fatal Passion"

Hunt's poem is an interpretation of Paolo and Francesca, a story that is first recorded in Dante's *Inferno*. Hunt however is clearly a product of Romanticism since in his poem he emphasizes nature with a detailed description of Francesca's garden. Since Dante wrote about Paolo and Francesca, additional poets have attempted to copy and retell the story of adultery. Each succeeding embellishment to the story usually works to flesh out the details of the crime, describing how Francesca was found out by her husband, and the manner of her and her lover's death, but Hunt's story focuses on the visual picture of the garden and the allusion to the first biblical temptation in the Garden of Eden.

Hunt is therefore working through two allusions within this poem, but I suggest that he still does so in a way that differs from his predecessors. The typical issue at hand within the story of Paolo and Francesca is the sin of adultery, which still is usually a reference back to original sin, but Hunt's direct Christian references are minimal. I think the presence of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* movement causes poets during the Romantic period to lean towards aesthetic descriptions rather than allegorical or metaphorical. While previous interpretations of Francesca's adultery are heavily laden with Christian guilt, caused by lust and passion; Hunt's poem centers on the colors, sounds, and textures pervading Francesca's garden. The scene is set for a lush garden, but the focus is too much on the aesthetics for the content of his poem. The intent of the Paolo and Francesca story is opposite the idea of valuing visual appeal overall, so the application of such a story falls flat when the content takes a backseat to literal, physical descriptions of the scene.

Perhaps this shift from the moral imperative to the visual is evidence of a change in the social value system. The arguably bleak daily life during these disease-ridden times could be reason for a need to emphasize the beautiful. Nothing new about the story is created (added) by Hunt except for the first two hundred lines which describe, in detail, the garden and the relief carved in the door, as well as various allusions to nymphs. The whole scene reads as very ethereal, something that is more fitting for a rendition from *Paradiso* rather than *Inferno*.

Hunt ends the poem with "That day they read no more", which is the same as the last lines of Dante's description of Paolo and Francesca (Hunt 801). This additionally interests me because of the issue of authorship and intellectual property. At what point do we stop being able to steal bits from other authors without acknowledgement? It is clear that Shakespeare stole most of the premises to his plays from previously recorded stories, and his work has been stripped apart, quoted from and integrated into the English language more than any other writer. My question then is how accurately do societies of the writer determine how the writer is going to interpret a story? Just as Hunt interprets Paolo and Francesca through aesthetic and descriptively visual appeals, we too have to interpret his appeal based on the society we are reading within. So, while I think that Hunt's attention to nature and the visual appeals, over the content of the Francesca story and moral issues at play, is the less interesting approach, I can understand why a society that is plagued by disease may reach for images in fiction which are more pleasing than the disease and death of reality.

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10-14-10

### Shelley, “With a Guitar, To Jane”

I was startled to learn that Shelley and Mary had serious marital problems toward the end of his life: I had always pictured them as an ever-passionate, sweetly devoted couple, and was touched by Mary’s portrayal of Percy as an otherworldly demigod in *The Last Man*. Yet here is Percy in April 1822, sending poems of desperate love to Jane Williams, wife of Captain Edward Williams, along with a hand-made guitar crafted by Ferdinando Bottari of Pisa. The poem that accompanied by the gifted guitar is at once a testament to the Shelleys’ failing marriage, to Percy’s dreams of timeless Italy, and to the regenerative quality of words, objects, and places associated with Percy Shelley’s short life.

The years in Italy were actually pretty bad for both Percy and Mary – daughter Clara died in Venice in 1818, son William died in 1819 in Rome. The Shelleys spent a miserable winter in Naples in 1818-19: Mary was distant, Percy was depressed, and there was a rumor that Percy had fathered a child in Naples out-of-wedlock. They were still having a bad time of it in the summer of 1822 when they moved to Villa Magni in Tuscany. That June, Mary miscarried and nearly died. Percy put her in an ice bath to stop the bleeding and the doctor later said that saved her life. Despite this trauma, Percy was spending more time with Jane than with Mary. It was Jane’s husband Edward that went out on the boat with Percy – I had never made much notice of who he was with – on the fateful day of July 8, 1822. Mary didn’t know of this until Leigh Hunt sent a frantic note saying, “Pray write to tell us how you got home, for they say you had bad weather after you sailed Monday & we are anxious.” How ironic that Mary and Jane rushed up to Livorno together, hoping that their husbands were still alive.

Marital drama aside (or perhaps to escape from it), Shelley became caught up in dreams of mythic Italy, which this poem to Jane reflects. Imagining himself as Ariel from *The Tempest*, Shelley writes: “To the throne of Naples he / Lit you [Miranda/Jane] o’er the trackless sea.” Naples – there is so much literature in that place! As I myself have known, it is so natural to stand looking out on the Bay of Naples and think of all the thousands of years of stories that it contains. The ancient Greeks, traveling up the coast of Italy, settled the “Island of Monkeys” in the Bay – *Pithecussae*, called Ischia now. That was the first colony of *Magna Graecia*. They went all around the Mediterranean but were so afraid of the sea, of death in the deep. You see this fear in the *Odyssey*, the dichotomy of solid land as the place of refuge and the sea as vast, incomprehensible, uncontrollable by man. When I visited Pompeii, another town by the Bay, there was a display about ancient literature and the creatures of the sea, the Romans’ naming of all the strange little animals so different from those of land they seemed magical, wild, grotesque, alien. That is the Bay of Naples – it makes you think of timeless literature, all the words and stories connected to this place. The Shelleys’ apartment in that miserable Neapolitan winter offered a good view of the Bay: Shelley knew it, he felt its pull. As he tells Jane of how the guitar was made from a tree “on the windswept Apennine,” how it speaks of “sweet oracles of woods and dells / and summer winds in sylvan cells,” he echoes Virgil telling of the oracles of Italy that Aeneas met as he traveled up the coast to Latium. And just like the guitar “had learnt all harmonies” of Italy, Shelley himself learned these harmonies, he has made his own literature of timeless Italy.

I tried and failed to find a picture of the guitar, which along with the poem’s manuscript is in the Bodleian Library but doesn’t seem to be in their online image collection. It’s in the bod, but doesn’t seem to be in their online images. I could, however, find the notice from the June 22,

1898 *New York Times*, in which “An American Presents [A Famous Shelley Guitar] to the Bodleian Library at Oxford”:

LONDON, June 21.—E.W. Silsbee of Massachusetts, who purchased the interesting memento for this express purpose, yesterday formally presented to the Bodleian Library at Oxford the guitar Percy Bysshe Shelley, the poet, presented to Mrs. Williams, the wife of Lieut. Williams, who was drowned with him off Viareggio, on the Mediterranean, on July 8, 1822, and which was the subject of Shelley’s beautiful poem entitled “To a Lady with a Guitar.”

I hadn’t realized there was a continuing romantic mythology around this guitar. In 1992 the Bodleian displayed the guitar along with other personal objects in honor of Shelley’s two hundredth birthday. The poet Michael Collier saw the Bod exhibit and published a poem called “Shelley’s Guitar.” Another contemporary poet, Richard Meier, titled his second collection of poetry “Shelley Gave Jane a Guitar” (2006). The poems allude to not only the guitar poem but also other Shelley works such as *Adonais* and *Prometheus Bound*. Just as Shelley talked about regeneration and rebirth in “With a Guitar, To Jane,” people after him made the poem and his final romance keep living, as he did for Italy and the Bay of Naples, as other poets and writers will do again.

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### O'er reaching

It's October now and time for dead-things. Looking forward to *Frankenstein*, leaving my boat behind for a time, I've been hovering around some of Mary Shelley's close associates, prying for details or instances of border-stepping in their works. Lord Bryon, whose challenge piece was left only as a horrific fragment (which I may take a look at next week), seems concerned with Promethian overreaching, and Wu points out that Prometheus was "much on the minds of Shelley, Mary Godwin, and Byron in the summer of 1816 (887). Though Byron was a landed noble, his life began somewhat humbly, as Byron's mother was abandoned by his father who died soon after in 1791 (Wu 837). George Gordon was invested as Lord Byron in 1798—at ten years old—after his great uncle's death. Thus, Byron's ascension was obliquely begotten, a possible source of anxiety for him, and potentially inspiration for his Promethean concerns, apart from his self-imposed exile amidst mounting scandal back in England. But Byron's libertinism is a form of border-stepping in its own right. His unbridled impulses and excesses could in several respects comprise the veritable antithesis to behaviors expected of his station at the time. A close (though volatile) associate of Byron's, John Polidori may have even cast him as the blood-sucking antagonist in *The Vampyre*. In countless respects, Byron was a living mearcstappa, pushing at and roving around boundaries. Composed in the summer of 1816, his poem *Prometheus* manifested as a mythological anchor to the very notion of transgression.

The poem's first stanza boldly addresses Prometheus's silent suffering for his efforts to improve humanity's condition: "What is thy pity's recompense?/A silent suffering, and intense" (5-6). By and large, Byron's tone toward the Titan is that of pity, and even self-identification. He goes on to describe "The suffocating sense of woe/Which speaks but in its loneliness,/And is jealous lest the sky/Should have a listener, nor will sigh/Until its voice is echoless" (10-14), calling out for an audience, the vehicle that drives authorship. As such, the later author highlights "The wretched give of eternity" (24) given to the Promethean figure—an accoutrement of both authorship and fame—which the subject has "borne" well.

The poem's central punitive figure—Saturn—seems more like a spiteful proctor than a god, suggesting a deep-seated bitterness toward the courtly establishment on the part of Byron. He writes of Prometheus's oppression,

All that the thunderer wrung from thee  
Was but the menace which flung back  
On him the torments of thy rack;  
The fate thou didst so well foresee  
But would not to appease him tell;  
And in thy silence was his sentence,  
And in his soul a vain repentance  
And evil dread so ill dissembled  
That in his hand the lightnings trembled.  
(25-34)

Clearly, Byron is overwhelmingly sympathetic toward the Promethean figure, and with bitter pride recounts his resistance to the viciously meted out punishment. The thunderer—whose identity is significantly juxtaposed with literal thundering in the sky and the act of ranting—reacts to transgression through rage and spite rather than careful reason, leaving Prometheus (and Byron) to wallow in angry self-pity.

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### Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Cholera Cured Before-Hand"

Although Samuel Taylor Coleridge remains famous for his role as an opium addict, he began taking the substance at the advice of a doctor. Opium dissolved in alcohol, which was named Laudanum, was a standard remedy for the chronic rheumatic pains from which Coleridge suffered. However, the stomach disorders that Laudanum produced urged Coleridge's dependency and addiction to the very drug that was issued by a doctor for his relief. Because the pathology of addiction was not yet recognized in the Romantic period, Coleridge regarded his dependency on Laudanum as a moral flaw, which induced a spiral of depression, guilt, and fear that he wasn't worthy of love. His opium addiction would take over his life, leading to a separation from his wife in 1808, his best friend, Wordsworth, in 1810, and finally his independence in 1814, when he moved into his physician's house and became dependent upon him for daily care. To be sure, Coleridge recognized doctors as a way to potentially rid himself of pain, but noting that his addiction stemmed from the effects of a prescribed drug, I assert that Coleridge also recognized the risks associated with seeing a doctor. Therefore, despite the fact that his poem, "Cholera Cured Before-Hand," offers distinct advice regarding how to "scape inward aches," it remains ambiguous whether Coleridge offers homeopathic remedies as a replacement to a visit to the doctor or if his advice pertains to those who have not yet been infected with cholera (7). Noting this ambiguity, I argue that Coleridge, deeply influenced by his personal experience with Laudanum, supplements his homeopathic remedies with another piece of advice: be wary of advice received from doctors.

Coleridge's poem's title, "Cholera Cured Before-Hand," supports his ambiguous intentions; he could either be offering ways to avoid cholera before infection or ways to cure cholera before visiting a doctor. After all, Coleridge's original health issue, rheumatic pain, was diagnosed and treated by a doctor and propagated other, more serious, health issues. "Cholera Cured Before-Hand" begins with a description of symptoms, referencing "Pains ventral, subventral/In stomach or entrail," and advises the sufferer to go "off to the doctor, fast as ye can crawl!/Yet far better 'twould be not to have them at all" (1-6). Although it may seem as though Coleridge offers cheeky, commonsensical commentary regarding the notion that it is better to be healthy than ill, his ambiguous use of the word "them" could be applied to doctors as well as the symptoms he has already described. Using his poem to advise readers about the dangers of trusting doctors reveals Coleridge's regrets regarding his experiences with Laudanum. Despite the fact that Laudanum was a common medicinal treatment of his condition, it altered and damaged Coleridge's life irreparably; he continued to live in his physician's residence until his death in 1834, separating him from his wife and opportunities to live independently within heteronormative society.

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Annotation #7

### Blumenbach and the Urge to Categorize

In his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall argues, “Stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place.” Indeed people within a shared culture have an urge to classify because “Social groups impose meaning on their world by ordering and organizing things into classificatory systems” (236). While cultures generally like to categorize, the urge to classify became extraordinarily great in late eighteenth-century scientific communities following the publication of Carl Linnaeus’ taxonomy in *Systema Naturae* (1767). However, the newness of the field led to the proliferation of ill-informed and fanciful taxonomies, especially about the supposed categories of humanity. German physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach grew impatient with the misinformation and wrote a treatise called *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1775), in which he asserted “That no doubt can any longer remain but that we are with great probability right in referring all and singular as many varieties of man as are at present known to one and the same species” (212). In other words, the different races and varieties of people are more similar to each other than they are different. Indeed, Blumenbach argues that “no variety exists, whether of colour, countenance, or stature, &c, so singular as not to be connected with others of the same kind by such an imperceptible transition, that it is very clear they are all related, only differ from each other in degree” (200).

Although Blumenbach dismisses the ideas of writers who wanted to place different people into different species, he still fell prey to the urge to categorize: “even among these arbitrary kinds of divisions, one is said to be better and preferable to another” (200). That is, for all that Blumenbach wants to show the unity of humanity, he can’t resist discussing the varieties and creating a chart to better understand their variations. For Blumenbach, “the Caucasian variety” is “the primeval one” (200). From them, humanity “diverges” into two directions, with the “Ethiopian” and the “Mongolian” at the remote end of the gradations, leaving “the American” and “the Malay” to “occupy the intermediate positions between the primeval one and these two extreme varieties” (200-201). Blumenbach continues explaining hierarchies between peoples in his “characters and limits of these varieties” (201). The “Caucasian variety” has “that kind of appearance which, according to our opinion of symmetry, we consider the most handsome and becoming” (201). Blumenbach makes a slight attempt to undercut the absolutism of this statement with “according to our opinion,” but in the same sentence, he says the beauty is based on “symmetry,” a measurable and quantifiable characteristic. Then, as he continues his descriptions of the other “varieties” of people, he uses the occasional pejorative. The “Mongolian variety has a “small, apish” nose (201). The “Ethiopian” variety has a “knotty, uneven” forehead. The “American” variety again has a “somewhat apish” nose and a forehead and head “artificially distorted” (202).<sup>1</sup>

Blumenbach addresses the fact that some writers “badly instructed in physiology” have claimed the “Ethiopian variety” to be “a peculiar species of mankind” more closely related to apes. However, Blumenbach refutes these assumptions, saying that “which is clear to everyone

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<sup>1</sup> While there are some indigenous people throughout the Americas that practiced head shaping (the Maya of Central America and the Salish of North America), they are largely in the minority.

who has carefully considered the difference between a few stocks of this variety” (207). He also undercuts two of the “astonishing and humiliating” fables spread about the “American variety”: that the men have no beards and the women never menstruate (implying that the men aren’t really men or the women really women, but genderless monstrosities). Despite refuting these racist and fantastical claims, Blumenbach can’t resist creating hierarchies among his “varieties of mankind.” The most condemning evidence of Blumenbach’s own prejudices comes in his “scattered notes” about each variety (205). He explains that he takes the name “Caucasian” from “Mount Caucasus” region because “all physiological reasons converge” to indicate that this region seems

with the greatest probability to place the autochthones of mankind. For in the first place, that stock displays, as we have seen, the most beautiful form of the skull, from which, as from a mean and primeval type, the others diverge by most easy gradations on both sides to the two ultimate extremes. . . . Besides, it is white in colour, which we may fairly assume to have been the primitive colour of mankind since, as we have shown above, it is very easy for that to degenerate into brown, but very much more difficult for dark to become white. (205)

The white race is the “most beautiful; it is humanity’s original, “primeval,” or “primitive” color. The others are “degenerate.”

With his vast collection of skulls and knowledge of comparative anatomy, Blumenbach wants to lead the way in categorizing people scientifically and without hierarchies. He wants to assert that while there may be “natural varieties,” there are not necessarily gradations. However, even he falls into the trap of cultural categorizing. Rarely are there categories without rankings.

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 10 October 2010

### William Ellis' Catalogue of Native Wonders

In *An Authentic Narrative of a Voyage*, William Ellis, the surgeon of His Majesty's ships *Revolution* and *Discovery*, attempts to objectively catalogue the many discoveries and encounters made over the course of Captain James Cook's final journey. He tirelessly devotes himself to recording every scientifically useful detail possible, ranging from the uses of exotic plant life to the effects of consuming penguin dung on livestock. Yet perhaps his most interesting--and by consequence most emotional--observations are of the various indigenous tribes that the crews encounter. Ellis presents a rich and varied picture of the many types of communities they engage, varying from dirty and thieving to civilized and friendly. Yet he presents even those tribes that possess more civilized qualities as savage, and whether Ellis intends to present such a fearsome picture or not is unclear. He does outright acknowledge his inability to understand a culture without adequate knowledge of its language and customs, which he credits as "the only clue to guide us to the truth," and to compensate he appears to make every attempt at being objective (Ellis 76). However, regardless of such efforts, his recollections of even the most beloved native friends exude some sinister and monstrous qualities.

Take, for example, his description of Tongans, Fijians, and Samoans. Upon arriving at these island groupings, Ellis is impressed by the sophisticated architecture, government, religion, and general demeanor of the people. He is most impressed by the modesty of the women, who remain fully clothed and resist private audience with men. In many ways, he finds their most positive qualities similar to those of his own culture. In fact, he goes even further to present these natives as noble savages who discourage the Englishmen from killing animals. The presented picture is not unlike that of the usurped Duke's utopian forest court in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, although in the end this portrayal of natives as the Englishmen's betters is short-lived.

A degenerative transition begins as Ellis describes the physical attributes of the Fijians, especially the women. Even though he notes that the people in general are "tall, well-made and exactly proportioned," he does not hesitate to capitalize on the spectacle of their foreign attributes in noting their savage and powerful nature. Of the women, he marvels at the tall and masculine stature, flat noses, and "complexions nearly approaching black" (91-92). The description of the Fijian women bears a disturbing similarity to an earlier depiction of a monstrous eel, which Ellis also described as large, "spotted or variegated with brown and black," and possessing a flat face (53).

Ellis does seem to conflate the animal and the human, especially in his depictions of native violence that follow in Chapters X and XI. The vision of a serene, civil society is quickly destroyed by accounts of tribal officials committing fatal beatings and ritualized human sacrifices. While he attempts to record these atrocities without judgment, one can't help but note his condescending tone as he "rationally" records the impulsive violence of a native other. Detailing these foreign activities of humans, animals, and plants from a vantage point that assumes itself superior, Ellis presents a conflated savage spectacle cloaked in the guise of scientific record. We could as well be on Jonathan Swift's Brobdingnag.



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14 Oct. 2010

Anna Letitia Barbauld's "An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley's Study"

The preceding poem of Barbauld's in this anthology is "The Mouse's Petition" in which she uses the perspective of a mouse caught in one of Dr. Priestley's traps which would be used for experiments with different kinds of air. Dr. Joseph Priestley was a teacher at the university where Barbauld attended, and he was also a clergyman, political theorist, and a prominent scientist. In this poem, Barbauld continues the meditation on Dr. Priestley's position as a scholar and scientist during this age of scientific advances. Barbauld maintains a somewhat satiric undertone in the description of his study, and this represents the theme of much of her work on politics and social issues. This poem is more than just a cataloguing of items in the study—the items represent Barbauld's negative perception of Britain's role in politics, war, and the advancements in science used for oppressive purposes.

The inventory begins with a sense of global charting: "A map of every country known,/ With not a foot of land his own" (1,2). Barbauld gives the perspective of the foreign countries that were being charted and colonized by British forces by highlighting this item as 'furniture' in a British scientist's study. Emphasizing the nature of the countries as "not his own" evokes the sense of possession as something inherent to the European white man. By going on to list the pictures and books of powerful men of the past,—the British kings and "Fathers" (Catholic Church Fathers)—Barbauld imagines that Dr. Priestley "hopes...Some day to get a corner there" and attain that high stature (6).

Probing into the number of scientific instruments and objects, Barbauld identifies a "shelf of bottles, jar and vial" (17). In describing that they contain "lightning keen and genuine," the impression of unknown energy that was being greatly experimented with during the time is perhaps playfully commented on as something truly understood and contained by such a scientist as Dr. Priestley. In recognizing that Dr. Priestley is a man well aware of his stature, the poem identifies "a rare thermometer" that is not only used for its scientific purposes but also as gauging the amount of fervor needed to write his rhetoric: "He settles, to the nicest pitch,/ The just degrees of heat, to raise/ Sermons or politics or plays" (26-28). Barbauld identifies this thermometer representing such objects (owned by scientists of his status) and juxtaposes it with the intensity to which he devotes his contributions to politics and religion.

The poem continues in depicting the new books as well as books with "limbs unfashioned, and rude" like (Cadmus's) soldiers as their limbs developed amid the combat: "And all, like controversial writing,/ Were born with teeth, and sprung up fighting" (53,54). Barbauld portrays these books and the writings of Dr. Priestley as representing the warfare and antagonistic politics that were taking place during the time.

Being active in the contemporary politics and issues, Barbauld gives an image of this study as the features of Britain and its political motivations.

Barbauld, Anna Letitia. "An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley's Study." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*. 8<sup>th</sup> Edition, Volume D. Ed. Jack Stillinger and Deidre Lynch. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. 28-29. Print.

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### Blake's "The Tyger"

The first thing I notice when I start reading William Blake's *Songs of Experience* poem, "The Tyger," is how similar it sounds to "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." It's not just the identical meter and rhyme scheme that the two share, but it's the word "burning," the mention of the "skies," and possibly the shared reference to the Christian God that strike a resemblance. Even though "Twinkle" was written after "The Tyger," the striking similarities force me to think of the heavens, stars, and especially the Sun when reading "The Tyger." The tiger in the poem is compared to the Sun again when the story of Icarus is alluded to: "On what wings dare he aspire?" (7). What with the burning, the Sun, and even allusions to Dante's Hell, "In the forests of the night," my mind instantly thinks of heat (2). Heat leads to questions of morality—heat was a bad thing in the Romantic period because it often suggested disease and poverty, the heat of the factory, the crowded rooms of a poorhouse, and therefore immorality. Every description of the tiger in this poem suggests heat, which also suggests foreignness, since heat is often seen as a "tropical" inconvenience. The connections between Hell and foreignness instantly suggest to me that the tiger is a foreign other, as opposed to the more native (to England) lamb of the companion poem in *Songs of Innocence*, "The Lamb."

It is probably just common sense to think of the tiger as a foreign other in this poem—tigers are not found in England; they are wild, exciting, dangerous and foreign to the author. But it is more than just the foreign animal that is questioned by the narrator of this poem—it is foreign people in general. The two companion poems are often thought of as a metaphor for good and evil (the lamb is obviously the good animal that God created, while the tiger is the bad animal and it is questioned whether or not God had a hand in creating it). On the same note, however, the poems are illustrating the British fear of what is foreign, and the embrace of what is known, as well as the superiority of the white, British people to the "wild" peoples of other parts of the world.

The tiger is certainly portrayed as evil and sublime—possibly created by a blacksmith of sorts, rather than the Christian God. The imagery of the furnace and the anvil certainly evoke pictures of Hell rather than Heaven. The connection with heat itself, as stressed above, suggests immorality. Finally, the million dollar question, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" strengthens the deep inferiority of the tiger to the superior lamb (20). In "The Lamb," while the narrator still asks the question, "who made thee?" he also suggests that the God who made the lamb also made "us," and "we" are ourselves like God. Yet, in "The Tyger," the question "who made thee?" is answered with disbelief that God could be the tiger's maker. "We" are not connected to the tiger at all in this poem, as "we" were to the lamb. The tiger is a foreign other and it presents the same fears British people must have had about foreign people: "Could the God that made me also make something as terrible as you?" Whether or not Blake was advocating this type of xenophobic behavior is up for discussion, but I would like to believe that again Blake is being sarcastic here and making a statement about the holier-than-thou attitude of his fellow Englishmen.



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#### Annotation 7: Letter from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to John Thelwall

As the curiosity and wonder of the Romantic period grew, so did the fascination with science. Science, as we know from studying pseudo-sciences in class, was a very loose term that included everything from the study of chemistry and elements to the study of race and bodies. All such studies were considered science to the Romantics. Perhaps one of the most fascinating and popular sciences of the day was the science of the face, body, and how character and physical traits were connected. The physiognomy of a person was as much an indicator of who that person was as their character traits and personality. This belief that facial features and body construction was an outward manifestation of the “true” person is made known in many works of the period. A letter from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to John Thelwall is just one example.

In response to a letter from John Thelwall, Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes his face and body in detail. Coleridge tells Thelwall that “my face, unless when animated by immediate eloquence, expresses great sloth and great (indeed almost idiotic) good nature,” and “’Tis a mere carcass of a face—fat, flabby, and expressive chiefly of inexpression” (610). From this description, any reader can begin to assemble an image of what Coleridge looks like. His face is slothful, fat, flabby, and inexpressive; however, he goes on to say that his “eyes, eyebrows, and forehead are physiognomically good” (610). Further, Coleridge even states that he “cannot breathe through [his] nose, so [his] mouth, with sensual thick lips, is almost always open” (610). Since the physiognomy of one’s face was—to many Romantics—an indication of who the person was, Coleridge thought it better to give his physical description than tell Thelwall through words who he was as a person.

Coleridge does tell Thelwall a bit about who he is and his interests. He calls himself a lover of chemistry, and states that he is “a so-so chemist.” He tells Thelwall that “In conversation I am impassioned, and oppose what I deem error with an eagerness which is often mistaken for personal asperity” (611). Obviously, it is important for Thelwall to know these things since Coleridge tells him. However, it is important to notice the order in which Coleridge chooses to expose his self. Coleridge chooses to tell Thelwall a few things about himself only after he shows him a physical description of his face and body. The physical description is more importantly placed at the beginning of the letter. The order of the letter also shows how the physical traits of a person were important in determining who a person was.

It was more important to Coleridge to show himself to Thelwall. More than simply a poet’s inclination to show rather than tell, this letter is an example of how important the science of how the body looked was to the Romantics.

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Form and Containment in Wordsworth's "These chairs they have no words to utter"

The passage of time inspires a reinterpretation of the value of solitude in William Wordsworth's "These chairs they have no words to utter." Brief, painfully constricted meter partitions the poet's statements, reducing his speech to a series of gasps, or a distant and helpless echo. Wordsworth bodies his distress in the formal construction of the poem. Despite the power that his feelings exert over the verse, his conclusion seems to dismiss the contrary portrayal of isolation as a state of harmony or terror. Rather than dismissing the close of the poem as an elision of crisis, I regard the ending as celebratory. Wordsworth seizes control of silence by commingling fear and comfort in his reflection.

The poem's emotional tension has its source in the halting utterances that fall between Wordsworth's elaborations. The poet describes his "hushed and still" surroundings before abruptly withdrawing into a series of clipped, broken effusions: "I am alone,/Happy and alone" (Wordsworth 528.4-6). The simplicity and brevity of these lines invite speculation. Due to some unstated restriction or hesitation, Wordsworth reduces his condition to a set of simple descriptors, though his repetition of the word "alone" overshadows his claim to happiness. The ensuing question and transition dispel the illusion of any sincere positive feeling as Wordsworth asks, "Oh, who would be afraid of life,/The passion, the sorrow, and the strife,/When he may lie/Sheltered so easily—/May lie in peace on his bed,/Happy as they who are dead" (529.7-12). Again, the division into brief, inconsistent lines—first four stresses, then five—interrupts Wordsworth's exposition. Further, Wordsworth leaves the question unanswered, and thus assents to the very silence that appears preferable to the "sorrow" of life.

The most significant interruption occurs immediately after the question ends. A chronological note, "*Half an hour afterwards*," serves as the only indication of an impending change, either by Wordsworth's design or mere happenstance (529). Immediately thereafter—perhaps to emphasize the intensity of his hesitation to abandon life—Wordsworth asserts, "I have thoughts which are fed by the sun;/The things which I see/Are welcome to me" (529.13-15). Here as before, Wordsworth's effusions seem at odds with a restriction that inflicts a violence on the text, but by inexplicable means, and for no clear reason. A momentary submersion in total silence and seclusion functions as a purgative reminder of why "shelter" from life serves as little more than a substitute for death. The "deep delicious peace" that attends Wordsworth's "thoughts that are fed by the sun"—the return to life—heralds the apparent end of any ill feeling (529.25, 21). Still, the poem ends with repetition and brevity: "Peace, peace, peace" (529.30). Silence prevails in all its mystery and immensity, and takes hold of the entirety of Wordsworth's speech. Yet the assent to silence encloses and describes silence. Wordsworth concretizes the force that appears to undermine his expression by permitting muteness to exercise an influence on his verse, as a source of dubious comfort as well as fear. Accordingly, his final celebration of life is thus a claim to victory, for he has compartmentalized silence, and partitioned the mistaken appreciation for nothingness in solitude.

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Annotation of William Wordsworth's *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, 3 September 1802*

Reading and annotating Wordsworth's *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, 3 September 1802*, the footnote given interests me just as much as the poem does. A walk that Wordsworth and Dorothy took out of London towards France early in the morning inspired the poem. Here, the urban environment that surrounds Wordsworth and Dorothy interests me, for they are viewing the city while standing on a bridge constructed by humans. The encompassing metropolitan area adds an interesting dialectic to Wordsworth's poem that is, in essence, an exultation of the scene's beauty.

According to the footnote, Dorothy wrote: "The houses were not overhung by their cloud of smoke and they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly, with such a pure light, that there was even something like the purity of one of Nature's own spectacles" (535)<sup>1</sup>. The evidence of industrialization pervades the urban landscape, and Dorothy finds beauty in the fact that smoke had not yet blanketed the city and that she could witness "pure light" that morning. Part of the wonder of the morning, therefore, appears to exist in the mitigation of the noxious consequences of industrialization. That being said, Dorothy also finds the seemingly endless expanse of buildings a beautiful site, and these buildings are incorporated into the sight that is "something like the purity of one of Nature's own spectacles" (535). While the buildings are obviously of human fabrication, Dorothy names them and this scene as an approximation of purity—rivaling the purity of Nature's 'own' spectacles. In this parallel, Dorothy holds "Nature" and the urban landscape as distinct, and yet both become part of the beautiful environment.

Moving on to Wordsworth's poem, these same thoughts are evident within the first line, "Earth has not any thing to show more fair"—a bold declaration that gives the sight of urban dwellings precedence over any "natural" landscape "bared" of human contact or influence (line 1). Wordsworth proceeds to write: "A sight so touching in its majesty:/ This city now doth like a garment wear/ The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,/ Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie/ Open upon the fields, and to the sky;/ All bright and glittering in the smokeless air" (lines 3-7). This description manifests the dialectic within this poem, for Wordsworth ascribes majesty to the urban environment—a description that allows for beauty but that also allows for dominion. In seeing the sun and "smokeless air" fall upon the city, Wordsworth significantly endows the city itself, as a construction, as majestic and dominant. This being said, there is still an obvious struggle between the smoke and the sun—and part of what gives this morning the ability to be "All bright and glittering" is the sun's ability to overwhelm and mitigate the city's smoke. Moreover, there is an interesting dialectic in Wordsworth's inventory of buildings, "Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples," that he describes as lying "Open upon the fields" (line 6,7). The urban squashing of these buildings does not leave much open space, and Wordsworth's word choice of "fields" is noteworthy as well. Perhaps I am reading this line incorrectly and Wordsworth is describing a city juxtaposed to open fields, but it sounds as if he is imbedding the connotations of "fields" and "open" within the domesticated, urban city—an incorporation of the connotations of the "natural" into the traditional connotations of the "unnatural" manmade constructions. Perhaps Wordsworth is taking this poem to describe the

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<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth, William. "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, 3 September 1802" Ed. Wu, Duncan. *Romanticism: An Anthology*. 3rd ed. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006. 534-535. Print.

beauties of the urban environment and to blur the boundary between the natural and the unnatural—therefore disrupting the hierarchy that places a seemingly pure, “Edenic” nature as inherently more beautiful than an urban nature.

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Melancholy Freedom:  
Felicia Dorothea Hemans' "Indian Woman's Death Song"

When I read a poem for the first time, I try not to read anything about it (if possible) including an introduction to the poem or about the poet. This poem is the exception to that general practice, because the title drew me in, and I began to read the introduction before I was aware that it was the background to the poem. The poem also has two quotes after the introduction, lending more information about the poem.

The introduction and quotes before the poem reveal have varying degrees of focus and information. The introduction is simply a background of the inspiration for the poem, while the quotes relate to what the poem is about. The quote in French from the play *Bride of Messina* speaks to the Indian woman's desire to leave this world for the "spirits of the air" (Wu 1287). The other quote implies that being a woman is a sad life, which leads into the text of the poem. The first stanza, though slightly playing on nature as positive notes, is a somber beginning to the poem. The sorrow twinge is solidified by the last words, declaring it a "song of death" (15). The first stanza also has a freeing aspect throughout, with the voice of the "proudly, and dauntlessly" (7) strong woman singing her last song.

The shape of the poem is distinctive, with the first stanza containing lines almost half the length of all subsequent stanzas. This heightens the speed during this first stanza, as though the reader were along with her for the ride down the river. Once her intentions are revealed at the end of the first stanza, the pace of the poem is slowed significantly, with the woman in the poem slowly moving through the "dark foaming stream" (31).

By the third stanza the reader learns the cause for the woman's woe, assuming the introduction and quotes that preface the poem are not read first. Her sorrow is because her "warrior's eye hath looked upon another's face" (20) while her own "hath faded from his soul" (21). To her, it is as though her existence has become unnecessary, and all her personal identity was wrapped up in his vision of her. The sound of the past becomes "lonely music [that] haunts" (25) the discarded wife and she "cannot live without that light" (27). She has lost all her will to live, simply because the past that was once happy has become a depressing present as her love is gone.

In the fifth stanza, the woman questions whether her husband will miss her and all the things she did for him and their life together. She may have "made his home an ever-sunny place" (29), but she decides that he will not miss her. Therefore, she makes the decision to move on, though it is not in this life, but "on to the better shore" (31). The woman is determined not to let herself or her baby live the "woman's weary lot" (36). Instead, she continues on the "dark

rolling stream” (43) to the end of life for her and her child, free from the constraints of life dependant on the man who has abandoned her.

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