Re-Visioning Romanticism

British Women Writers, 1776–1837

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Literary History, Romanticism, and Felicia Hemans

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AM. How agreeably "historical" we've all become in thinking about literature. But have we "returned to history" only to discover its ruins? Traditional historicism was difficult enough with "all those proper names and dates" beneath which "the contemporary mind staggers" (see Hartman, "The Culture of Criticism" 371–72). These new historicisms are worse. The older forms at least prized thoroughness and coherence. But a generation of fierce skepticism has brought historicism, like the rest of literary studies, to scenes of fragmentation — Lovejoy's splendid project turned into the *disintegration* of romanticisms.

JJR. So we are in a crisis? How romantic! How opportune!

> Effort, and expectation, and desire,
> And something evermore about to be. (quoting Wordsworth's *The Prelude*)

GM. "Endless play", in other words?

JJR. Georg, read some Oscar Wilde for a change. One needs critical distance to think clearly. Don't you think so, Anne?

I mean, if you're interested in exploring the historical shape of romanticism in England, it won't help very much to approach the problem in a romantic attitude. Wasn't it Blake who said you become what you behold? Assume a crisis and you'll get one.

AM. But a crisis does exist. The traditional picture of the Romantic Period has been smashed beyond recognition.

JJR. So what if it has. Let a thousand flowers bloom. Besides, this splintering may have been a fortunate fall, leaving the world all before us. "The prospects for a coherent and all-encompassing history of literature . . .

depend on a new politics of knowledge taking the place of the old belligerence of ideologies. Literary historians and critics must be willing to discover the limits as well as the power of their methods and must be open to the possibility of new linkages between their accounts of the literary past and the accounts of others" (Walter Reed, "Commentary" 678).

"There are no master narratives," right? — only stories told at different times, for different purposes. The most traditional story of English romanticism centers in *Lyrical Ballads* — that is to say, in a book published after the English reaction to the French Revolution had established itself. But suppose one were to emphasize the importance of a sentimentalist project like *The Florence Miscellany* (1785)?[1] What a different picture of English romanticism emerges from that vantage.

AM. Suppose that, suppose whatever you like! I suppose anyone could suppose anything!

JJR. It's not an arbitrary choice, after all, just an unfamiliar one. Because we've forgotten some of our history. *The Florence Miscellany* launched a decisive and influential early form of romantic writing. The importance of the Della Cruscans is partly measured by the amount of hostility they drew from conservative circles, and partly by the impact of their work on later romantic writing. Keats is probably the greatest product of the movement, the supreme example of its stylistic inertias.

GM. A charmingly outrageous view that I can't believe you mean seriously. And among its greatest charms is the way it might draw our attention away from your agreeably pluralist ideas about literary history. Your Keats remark exposes the poverty of what you're saying. To construct a literary history — any literary history, even a revisionist one like yours — one must torture poetry with gross instruments of scholarly rationalization. Among the worst of these are the periodic structures that march one through a historical bureaucracy of culture. No true poem will abide the questions that are raised by structures of periodization. Trash will abide such questions — that is to say, writing like Della Cruscan verse — but poetry will not. Keats will not.

AM. So we should abandon periodic categories altogether? Is Keats not properly a Romantic poet? Are the historical conventions of Romanticism not apparent in his works?

GM. Those are just the kinds of questions that literary history wants one to ask, but they are completely *mis*leading questions — *so far as the work of poetry is concerned.* For "Romanticism" as the term has come to be defined is nothing but an abstraction covering — I should even say *creating* — a mul-

titude of critical sins. If Keats is a Romantic poet, so is (we all agree, right?) Byron; and yet their work is utterly different. We have been taught to think of Keats as a great lyric poet and of Byron as a mediocre one at best. But the judgment is incompetent because they write completely different kinds of lyrics. What "To Autumn" has in common with "Fare Thee Well!"—in terms of stylistic procedures—is minimal, yet the commonplace evaluative judgment I just gave is licensed by drawing the two poems into an abstract and prefabricated comparison.[2]

Or ask yourselves: What are the great *topoi* of Romanticism? Subjectivity, Nature, Imagination, Reflexive Consciousness? Take any or all of those rubrics to different writers, or even to different works by the same writer, or even to the same work, and you will end up, if you are reading well, only with a mass of differences.

JJR. And yet the very existence of modern literary history argues that it serves the needs of writers and poets. Or are you arguing that the birth of a modern historical consciousness signaled the twilight of the gods of poetry?

GM. That common nineteenth-century view still seems relevant. Poetry entered its Age of Anxiety as much with Wordsworth and Shelley and Mill—its enthusiasts—as it did with Bentham and Peacock and Macauley—its elegists.

JJR. What a paradox lies there! For the renewal of the arts in the Romantic movement was closely connected to that new historical consciousness. The *philosophes,* the antiquarians, and finally the critical philologists and historians all came to break open the treasure houses of western and eastern cultures.

GM. You mean "to invade, plunder, and exploit." And the rape of the biblical inheritance by the historical imagination is the exemplary tale of what happened. When the bible began to be read in referential terms, when its truth was inquired after by factive and empirical measures, the texts were utterly alienated from themselves. The historicist reconstruction of the past was largely founded in that scientism of the text we call hermeneutics: the editing and interpreting of a vast corpus of classical, biblical, and national scriptures. The ultimate meaning of this project would not be the revelation or the renewal of the texts; on the contrary, it would rather bring a revelation of the "truth" of science, the establishment of science *at the ideological level,* as the fundamental myth of modern consciousness.[3]

Of course men like Bodmer, Lowth, Herder, and Wolf all thought that their hermeneutical projects would rescue poetry and even religion

from modern rationalism and skepticism. Their faith, however, was already grounded in the myth they were struggling against. Their explications of the texts and cultures of more primitive worlds often seem anything but rationalist or abstract—so filled can they be with minute particulars and "thick description." Nevertheless, the details emerge through the redeployment of the myth of objectivity, and they only function as signs for various conceptual categories (e.g., "primitive" and "modern," "naive" and "sentimental," or the more complex historical and structural schemas erected by scholars like Eichhorn and Wolf).[4]

This is a cultural world not merely turned upside down, but rent with contradiction. Out of the cooked comes the raw, out of the sentimental appears the naive. The cool light of the scholars creates a superheated literal scene that their own prose works then replicate: not necessarily in a positive extravagance of style—though some, like Herder, were so inclined—as in texts where restraint and methodical pursuit become negative signs of enormous moment.

The eighteenth-century antiquarians, philologues, and orientalists thus supplied only a fragile second order life to the ancient cultures and poetries they so loved. This fragility passed over into the poetry of romanticism, which plundered the philological tradition for many of its key theoretical ideas, generic forms, and tropic resources.[5] Indeed, the new philology was itself nothing more—and nothing less—than the orientalist's dream come true, a mechanism for appropriating alien forms of cultural life. The richness of the poetry of Keats, as Arnold was acute to see, was an ominous symptom of aesthetic disease. Is anyone surprised that the consumptive should have become an emblem of romantic imagination? The famous "pale hectic" is the *figura* of an illusory life, a false image, a death-sign.

AM. Meaning?

GM. I am narrating a cautionary tale.

AM. It sounds like literary history to me.

GM. I'd call it literary anti-history. With the advent of modern philology all the poets, ancient as well as modern, stand in peril of their lives. And in their peril we observe a serious threat to culture at large. Orientalism, like apartheid, is a fate that will not cease until its fruits, for good and for evil, are uniformly distributed.

AM. Meaning?

GM. That we want to unravel as many stories as we can. This is what literary anti-history might do. The poems must be removed to a world

elsewhere, alienated from their original homes. Literary anti-history, like the poems themselves, will then tell us equally of origin and of alienation, and of the relations that the two keep with each other.

JJR. Taking that point of reference, what would you say about Roger Lonsdale's recent pair of anthologies of eighteenth-century poetry?[6] Are they models of what literary anti-history might be aspiring toward?

GM. Yes, exactly that. Their very form—which is anti-narrative—shows us that these are anti-histories. Both anthologies urge us to re-imagine a historical shape for eighteenth-century poetry. And by foregrounding the poetry (rather than stories about the poetry) these books are committed to imagination and to acts of critical reimagination. *Literary* history should seek the truth of imagination, not the truth of science and history (thoroughness, accuracy) or the truth of philosophy (theoretical rigor and completion). The truth of the imagination is reimagination.

JJR. Reimagination of what?

GM. The poetry, of course! What else are we concerned with?

JJR. Well, some of us are at least as concerned with *history*. And Lonsdale's anthologies leave all the historical questions to implication. By keeping our attention on the poems, Lonsdale tends to invisibilize the theatre of their eventualities. In the end those anthologies are committed to an "imagination" that repudiates history for poetry and writing.

I'm not criticizing Lonsdale's work. I'm just suggesting that there are other things to be done—for instance, drawing out what his books leave only to implication. One starts by imagining an impossible object—let us call it "the origins of English romanticism." Every historian knows that even the simplest event is meshed in a complex network of relations that no one could hope to unravel. So the quest for "the origins of English romanticism" is an imaginative and hypothetical journey from the start—a romance-quest, which is, in that sense, also a kind of anti-history.

But then why even bother, one might ask? And the answer is that the quest is undertaken not to discover "the origins of English romanticism" but to clarify the various ways this imaginary object might be defined and interpreted. To reimagine "the origins of English romanticism" through a recovery of *The Florence Miscellany* and Della Cruscan poetry in general is, as you were arguing, to suggest a whole new series of related reimaginings. And so the ultimate object of the immediate hypothetical project emerges. We would not only have to read and re-evaluate a considerable body of unfamiliar poetry and cultural materials, we would have to re-read and re-evaluate the cultural deposits that have grown so familiar to us—perhaps,

indeed, all too familiar. And we would have to re-read and reimagine the instruments by which our received books of memory and forgetting were made.

GM. What for, a compendious treatment of the varieties of literary experience? Something like the fifteen-volume Cambridge History of English Literature, where we are given the materials to see (for example) "the origins of English romanticism" in a variety of possible perspectives? The Cambridge History's encyclopaedic character—its mass of details and scholarly apparatus—undermine the work's inertia toward coherent explanatory narrative. It is history and anti-history at the same time.

JJR. But its anti-historical potential is too obedient to the (historian's) signs of accuracy and thoroughness. I want a history at once more energetic and imaginative—a history that assumes the past has not yet happened, that it remains to be seen. If a history is to reflect its subject back to us, then the ideal literary history will be a structure of hypothetical worlds.

These will have to be precisely designed. To stay with our possible topic, "the origins of English romanticism," I imagine a critical narrative unwinding from suppositions like this. If we suppose romanticism to be structured on the double helix of the naive and the sentimental, what is the historical place, in English romanticism, of Burns's *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786)? Or of Sir William Jones's translations of the Vedic hymns published in the mid-1780s? Or of the Della Cruscans' poetry, Blake's *Songs,* or the *Lyrical Ballads*?

Then one might advance other suppositions altogether. The best history of this kind, to plagiarize Byron, will "suppose this supposition" itself, exposing the hypothetical character of the historical constructions and thereby encouraging other hypotheses. The point is to reveal what can be and has been supposed, what might be imagined and why. It is to reveal, precisely, not the truth of fact or of reason, but the truth of imagination as it operates in history.

AM. This is madness, or lies in the way to madness. It's worse than Georg's "literary history as cautionary tale." He comes in the posture of the critic, warning of the historian's abstractions. But you seem to be arguing for a kind of positive literary anti-history—as if the past were something that could be invented.

JJR. Romanticism, like its many works, *is* an artistic and poetical invention. And because the writers could not stop for death, scholarship came and kindly stopped for them, and escorted them to Beulahland. It is a killing kindness. Scholarship preserves the poetry of the past, but threatens

it with a night of the living dead. What I say is, let us reimagine what history can do—at least for those who live by imagination and who carry out its work.

AM. But you can't just *invent* the past according to your desire! History's devotion to accuracy and thoroughness are important exactly because of the limits they set to imagination.

JJR. Exactly, as you say. But what you forget is that the historian's tools are themselves inventions. We have to invent and continually reinvent the limits of imagination, along with the instruments that will define the limits. For we do not desire the unlimited. *Le goût de l'infini* is an emblem for a desire toward new limits, to have the shape of the world redefined. It is a form of desire that is, like all such forms, historically specific. The desire for the infinite is a finite—a human—desire.

GM. This is mere sophistical avoidance of the presence of the past and its eventualities. Of course we are always inventing new ways of seeing; but we don't invent what has been seen, what has been done. These things have an independent existence, and their value to us lies in that independence. If the desire for the infinite is—what did you say?—"an emblem for a desire toward new limits," then a "stubborn fact" is an emblem of everything that lies beyond desire and imagination. It is not a "limit of imagination," it is a stumbling block, the unaccountable. There are powers as great as the imagination—forbidding powers that put a limit on the truths we might want to imagine, for example, about John Keats on one hand and Charlotte Dacre on the other.

AM. Such powers exist and their emblems *are* those stubborn, difficult "facts" you want to celebrate. But they are never "unaccountable," those facts. We always fit them to our stories, if only by writing them out.

I suggest we look—right now—very closely at a few of those unaccountabilities. For instance, do we know (or remember) that Felicia Hemans was the most published English poet of the nineteenth century? Do we know, or even think we know, what that might mean? Do we remember any of her poems? And if we do, are we so certain that the Victorians' admiration for her work was misguided? What would it mean to reimagine a work like "The Homes of England," once so celebrated—or are we to reimagine only the rightful inheritance, the works that come to us sanctioned by what is now taken for established authority? The fate of "The Homes of England" might well serve as a lesson to all literary authorities. Where is the coward that would not dare to fight for such a poem?

THE HOMES OF ENGLAND

Where's the coward that would not dare
To fight for such a land? Marmion

The stately Homes of England,
How beautiful they stand!
Amidst their tall ancestral trees,
O'er all the pleasant land.
The deer across the greensward bound
Through shade and sunny gleam,
And the swan glides past them with the sound
Of some rejoicing stream.

The merry Homes of England!
Around their hearths by night,
What gladsome looks of household love
Meet, in the ruddy light!
There woman's voice flows forth in song,
Or childhood's tale is told,
Or lips move tunefully along
Some glorious page of old.

The blessed Homes of England!
How softly on their bowers
Is laid the holy quietness
That breathes from Sabbath-hours!
Solemn, yet sweet, the church-bell's chime
Floats through their woods at morn;
All other sounds, in that still time,
Of breeze and leaf are born.

The Cottage Homes of England!
By thousands on her plains,
They are smiling o'er the silvery brooks,
And round the hamlet-fanes.
Through glowing orchards forth they peep,
Each from its nook of leaves,
And fearless there the lowly sleep,
As the bird beneath their eaves.

The free, fair Homes of England!
Long, long, in hut and hall,
May hearts of native proof be rear'd
To guard each hallow'd wall!

> And green for ever be the groves,
> And bright the flowery sod,
> Where first the child's glad spirit loves
> Its country and its God! (1827)[7]

Hemans recurs to this fantastic scene again and again, in a rich variety of poetical transformations. Speaking of another of those transformations, Kingsley Amis has described Hemans's once equally famous "The Graves of a Household" as a "superficially superficial piece" (*Faber Popular Reciter* 15). The phrase is apt in either case, for it calls attention to this poetry's deep involvement in the exposition of wealth and power as spectacle, ideology, *superficies.*

GM. Do you seriously mean to offer a troglodyte like Kingsley Amis as a voice of authority?! That spokesman, that *epitome,* of reaction.

AM. All the more reason to listen carefully to what he has to say. As I recall, Trotsky quoted liberally from the Tsar's and Tsarina's papers, and from government police reports, when he constructed his *History of the Russian Revolution.* Every word uttered makes a commitment to the truth — even those which are mistaken or duplicitous, even those which are self-deceived. In Amis's case, his very historical backwardness gives him a privileged view of Hemans's poem.

GM. An interesting theory that would allow you to translate any text into anything you might want it to say. But there are no secret subversive meanings in the intense inanity of Hemans's "The Homes of England," and I hardly think that Amis meant to suggest there were. In any case, Hemans's poem offers no resistance to its own superficialities. The bland verbal surface is the index of the poem's sentimental attachments to its subjects.

AM. Those are the judgments of a mind schooled in twentieth-century critical canons. But perhaps, by invoking them before this poem, you have merely made it impossible to see or read "The Homes of England," which evidently works through conventions not favored by classical modernist styles. Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Stevens, Auden: these are the wrong points of departure for an encounter with Hemans.

If we want to read her, we would do better to start from the expectations and conventions of an early postmodern style like that of John Ashbery or — Ashbery's precursor in these matters — Gertrude Stein.

Hemans's poetry covets an undisturbed appearance: "bland," your word, is a fair description, just as it is a word one sees applied fairly often to Ashbery. Nineteenth-century readers of Hemans repeatedly remark on this

quality in her work when they praise its "elegance," its "purity," its "taste" and "harmony." Francis Jeffrey's once famous 1829 review of *Records of Woman* and *The Forest Sanctuary* typifies this now forgotten tradition of reading. Hemans's poetry, he says, is

> regulated and harmonised by the most beautiful taste. It is singularly sweet, elegant, and tender — touching, perhaps, and contemplative, rather than vehement and overpowering; and . . . finished throughout with an exquisite delicacy, and even severity of execution.[8]

With due allowance made for the differences between a Romantic and a Modern dialect, this passage might easily be applied to the work of Gertrude Stein. The critical terms here all carry a double burden, in that they are addressing at once the aesthetic and the moral qualities of the verse. Jeffrey's commentary shows that he refuses to distinguish the two. In this respect the analysis rhymes with its poetical subject. Not only is there to be no apparent divorce between content and form in this work, that wedding is to be celebrated in an equally intimate relation with moral and spiritual values.

"The very essence of poetry," Jeffrey observes (sounding not a little like Coleridge), "consists in the fine perception and vivid expression of that subtle and mysterious Analogy which exists between the physical and the moral world." Because Jeffrey finds this axiom perfectly illustrated in Hemans's work, he praises its harmony, regularity, and delicacy — the latter (its delicacy) because Hemans has managed not only to execute the Analogy, but to convey its "subtle and mysterious" character as well. What Jeffrey calls her "deep moral and pathetic impression" (475) — her elegiac tone, the emotional sign of a condition or experience of inveterate loss — places her work in the center of the romantic tradition, which Hemans of course consciously appropriates.

GM. She sounds to me like a debased Wordsworth: "Accomplishment without genius, and amiability without passion" is how I should characterize her writing. She "expresses with the richest intensity the more superficial and transient elements of Romanticism. She is at the beck and call of whatever is touched with the pathos of the far away, the bygone. . . . Her imagination floats romantically aloof from actuality, but it quite lacks the creative energy of the great Romantics, and her fabrics are neither real substance nor right dreams."[9]

AM. That is not the Hemans Wordsworth elegized in his famous lines about her:

Mourn rather for that holy Spirit,
Sweet as the spring, as ocean deep;
For Her who, ere her summer faded,
Has sunk into a breathless sleep. ("Extempore Effusion Upon the Death of James Hogg" 37–40)

Besides, a work like "The Homes of England" illustrates the special paradox of a style that seems at once so rich and so empty. The poem is a celebration, but an indirect celebration. A superficial reading will only see it as a piece of sentimental Burkean ideology, a hymn in praise of the values of vertical and horizontal social continuities, and a statement of their perduring strength. But the poem is actually a celebration not of those ideological reference points but of the images and forms the ideology requires for its sustenance.

"The Homes of England," that is to say, operates at two interconnected semiological levels: the linguistic level and the level of an iconic semiology of architecture. This is another of Hemans's superficially superficial poems. It is a poem evoking the superficiality of those apparently substantial things (language and architecture), and the substantiality of those apparently intangible things (ideas and moral attitudes).

To say that "her fabrics are neither real substance nor right dreams" seems to me exactly right, though in my view to say this is also to explain why the work is important rather than why it should be dismissed. Hemans's poetry does not respect the distinction between substance and shadow that is posited in those anomalous Keatsian terms "real substance" and "right dreams." In her poetry what appears as substance is imagined on the brink of its dissolution, just as what comes as shadow continually refuses to evaporate. This is why she says that she has "a heart of home, though no home be for it here" (Harriett Hughes, *Memoir of the Life* 188): like the stately houses reimaged through her poem, Hemans's works understand that they are haunted by death and insubstantialities. And like Tennyson's *Idylls of the King,* her work is a vision of the doom of an order of values which it simultaneously, and paradoxically, celebrates as a solid and ascendant order of things.

Mrs. Hemans herself commented on these paradoxical experiences of substantial apparitions and superficial superficialities in one of her notebooks:

> Our home! — what images are brought before us by that one word! The meeting of cordial smiles, and the gathering round the evening hearth, and the interchange of thoughts and kindly words, and the glance of eyes to which our hearts lie open as the day; — there is the true "City of Refuge;" — where are we to turn when it is shut from us or changed? Who ever thought his home could change? And yet those calm, and deep, and still delights, over which the world seems to have no breath of power, they too are like the beautiful summer clouds, tranquil as if fixed to sleep for ever in the pure azure of the skies, yet all the while melting from us, though imperceptibly "passing away!" (*Memoir of the Life* 131)

In a letter of 1829 she commented on her "passion for intellectual beauty" as an ambiguous gift and compared it to a "rainbow, made up of light and tears." This evaporating imagination, so close to Shelley's, acquires an entirely different character when it is carried out in the tents of prosperity, in the stately homes of England:

> I heard a beautiful remark made by the Chief Justice, when I met him at Kilfane. I think it was with regard to some of Canova's beautiful sculpture in the room, that he said — "Is not *perfection always affecting?*" I thought he was quite right; for the highest degree of beauty in art certainly always excites, if not tears, at least the inward feeling of tears. (*Memoir of the Life* 249)

Hemans's comments help to explain (and expand) the relation Jeffrey and others have noticed between the melancholy of her work and its exquisite surface. Hers is a "finished" poetry, in both senses — an imagining of ultimate loss through the presentation of ultimate forms of gain.

No one ever thinks her home can change until she escapes the imagination of the home's substantiality. In *Brideshead Revisited,* Waugh's hero Charles Ryder loves the "buildings that grew silently with the centuries, catching and keeping the best of each generation." England once "abounded" in such forms of a stable and continuous social fabric, Charles thinks, but now they seem so fragile that he must "salute their achievements at the moment of extinction" (226–27).

Charles dates the period of dissolution in the Edwardian age, but Hemans knows better. Her superior knowledge comes from her understanding that the stately homes and all that we associate with them are only signifying systems. Hemans distances and reimagines the stately home by raising it up again in the form of an ideological network, a system of images and signs. In that condition the home as figure of continuity and substance is already actively "melting from us."

This is the experience set forth in Hemans's poetry, and this is why the stately homes of England are the perfect topic for such an act of reimagina-

tion. Although those edifices were always homes, they were also always emblematic forms, part of a non-linguistic and widely dispersed system of social signification. The great English houses "were not originally . . . just large houses in the country in which rich people lived. Essentially they were power houses." In this respect they functioned at two related levels, one administrative, the other ideological. The country house was "the headquarters from which land was administered and power used," of course, but it was also "a show-case" and "an image-maker" through which to display the credentials of power (see Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* 2–3).

From at least as early as the seventeenth century, the discourse of the stately home and the country house was firmly in place. The contemporary tourist is no more than the latest representative of a long tradition of people who would visit such places not as guests but as spectators. Ladies and gentlemen regularly went on trips to celebrated and picturesque country homes, as we know from Pepys and other diarists. Dudley Ryder's diary for 1 June 1817 is the record of a picnic to Dyrham Park in Glouchestershire by himself and a company of his friends (see Lees-Milne, *The Country House* 97).

But even the guests in a stately home behaved as observers, judges, and interpreters. This happened because such places were always on display—indeed, were conceived and constructed, from the very first, as demonstrative and signifying forms. When Henry James describes his experience of Compton Wynyates, in Warwickshire, he says "It is impossible to imagine a more perfect picture" (*Portraits of Places,* quoted in Lees-Milne 9). James is looking at an aesthetic and symbolic object—something that is understood to have been imagined, and hence as a signifying thing.

GM. Are you arguing that Hemans's poetry is valuable because it is clichéd and sentimental?

AM. No, I am arguing that Hemans's is a poetry of quotation, a conscious elevation of various inherited and signifying signs. I do not mean so much her language as the materials and topics she handles. She favors the representation of legendary materials because what is legendary (whether ancient or modern) is already seen to be quoted. Furthermore, to be able to "quote" from what appears to be real—which is what happens not only in a poem like "The Homes of England" but in her many historical texts—is to erode the distinction between what is real and what is mediated, between referent and sign, between acts and texts.

As for Hemans's language as such, it is not in fact clichéd and conventional, it is rather a vision and prophecy of such things, and of the signifi-

cance of such things. It appears as a poetry asking to be repeated, rewritten, recited. Her poetry is not clichéd and sentimental, as many have charged, it is a prolepsis of the ideas of cliché and sentimentality. In the work's actual achievement, therefore, in its century of success and imitation and repetition, Hemans executes a remarkable critique of the ideology of cultural endurance—a critique all the more stunning for its domesticity and lack of pretension. Modernism and its muscular academic spokesmen would labor to sweep away Hemans's poetry in order to preserve and re-establish the romance of art's power, and of Power's art—that is to say, in order to preserve the illusion of such things. These are not illusions that can endure—in either sense of that word—Hemans's cabinets of perfection and polished surfaces. They are not illusions that can endure her success, or the success which her own work prophecies for them.[10]

Hemans's work is not so elaborate an achievement as Tennyson's, nor so demonic as D. G. Rossetti's. But it is the same order of achievement, and coming at the beginning of the Victorian Age, it announces much of what the poetry of that age had to bring. Idolatries, monuments, and illusions: one of the great missions of Victorian poetry was to expand itself in the service of such things, and to leave, thereby, little room for reimagining them as anything but whited sepulchres.

The poet of all that is admirable, exquisite, and celebrated, Hemans saw deeply into a (textual as well as human) condition governed by attributions and adjectives:

> A moment's transient entertainment—scarcely even that at times, is the utmost effect of things that "come like shadows, so depart." Of all things, never may I become that despicable thing, a woman living upon admiration! (*Memoir of the Life* 188).

And yet this result would be, like that of her age, her fate. As her fame grew during that now forgotten decade, the 1820s, she came to lament "the weary part of *femme célèbre,* which I am now enacting." More and more, like some prescience of Emily Dickinson, she shrank from leaving the narrow confines of her house: "my heart is with those home enjoyments, and there, however tried, excited, and wrung, it will ever remain" (*Memoir of the Life* 189; see also 169–70). That last remark is particularly telling for the way it probes painfully for the truth of her own most cherished fiction, the fiction of the stable and love-founded hearth.

GM. An elegant reading, but also a sublimed and generalized reading—a reading, indeed, after the manner of Francis Jeffrey, or Arnold, or

any number of other nineteenth-century critics. In avoiding a close examination of the poem's language you betray the illusion of your reading. "The Homes of England" will not stay for a close critical exploration carried out in the manner of Brooks's and Warren's *Understanding Poetry.*

AM. My commentary was not meant to be exhaustive. I was simply sketching a framework where the poem's more localized and particular details might be able to be reimagined. But a "close" linguistic reading of the kind you want would not be difficult to develop.

One could begin, for instance, with the poem's determined resort to a certain kind of diction: words like "greensward," "gladsome," and "hamlet-fanes," along with their equivalent syntactical units ("O'er all the pleasant land," "Some glorious page of old"). The text comes before us as a careful reconstruction made from materials that in 1827 are not only "legend laden" but *evidently* legend laden. Unlike Keats, Hemans does not strive after "right dreams" or lament their loss; her poem accepts from the start that these kinds of social dreams are the constructions not of the unconsciousness but of the consciousness, even of the super-ego. Their conscious origin is the source of their extreme fragility.

In that context, lines like "Or lips move tunefully along / Some glorious page of old" begin to float free, like ghosts seeking their local habitations and their names. The "glorious page of old" snatches vainly for a specific referent—in real history (perhaps some act of public service in war); in some book or record of the event itself, perhaps an old ballad; in the text of Hemans's poem, which may be imagining its own recitation, its setting to music by someone in the future. The eternal present imagined by the poem calls out each of these possibilities, but in doing so it pulls itself into its own imagining. "The Homes of England" itself becomes one of the glorious pages of old, and the lips that move along its evanescent surface are the lips of shades. The poem's eternal present is what Keats earlier called a "pleasant death," but in Hemans's case we are left with no room for imagining that death as anything but an unreality. The poem that begins "The stately Homes of England! / How beautiful they stand" does not, as Byron once put it, "c[o]me like truth, and disappear . . . like dreams"; it comes as a dream from the start, and what it announces is the fading of the "truth" of the dream, the emergence of the dream as a construct.

Who, then, is the "God" referred to in the poem's last line? The "country" is named—it is "England"—but that word, by the end of the poem, has acquired the same kind of nominal existence as everything else in the poem. The god of this work, we might want to say, is Felicia Hemans—

a mother-god answering the calls of the children evoked in the poem's penultimate line. That reading works because it is so consonant with Hemans's fundamental myth of domesticity—and, of course, because Hemans is this text's constructor. But in a poem built up through citation and recitation, Hemans can seem no more than a local deity in an odd kind of pantheistic landscape—or I should say, "textscape." The god of "The Homes of England" is one whose center is nowhere and whose circumference is everywhere. Many would see him as a certain set of social relations and social values—a god very like Jehovah, with his chosen people, his favored nation. In our critical age, he is usually called Ideology.

The great tradition of Cynical philosophy held that one did not philosophize in order to learn how to live, one had first to live and then come later to study and reflect upon that condition of our human being. I am reminded of the Cynical view here because I think one cannot begin a close study of Hemans's work, or of the work of any poet for that matter, until one enters into its life. And you cannot even hope for such an event if you come to Hemans forearmed with the knowledge and truth you think you have acquired.

JJR. I applaud you, Anne. What a splendid reading. Not merely inventive but perverse, not merely perverse but utterly resolute in its perversity. What you say is too good to be true. Which makes it, in a certain sense, even better than if it *were* true.

GM. Is Jay right, is this reading of yours just a critical game? If you're serious I simply say this: I have great difficulty imagining Felicia Hemans as essential reading, even in a radically reorganized canon.

AM. It might prove less difficult if we remembered what sort of values the received canon, from which she was expelled, has come to stand for—and perhaps has always stood for.

GM. Fair enough. But then you will have to make more clear, at least for me, what place *your* Felicia Hemans might occupy in a reimagined canon. You may think that I have appropriated too much of the traditional (masculine) framework for reading literary texts, but your own commentary is hardly innocent in this regard. It is in many ways little more than a classic example of Adornian negative dialectics. The sentimentality of Hemans's poem, in this reading, seems devoid of positive values. It serves merely as a stylistic device for critique and deconstruction. Are those the banners under which your feminist program means to march?

AM. One of the most impressive things about Hemans's poetry is the difference it marks off from the conventions of most Modernist styles in art.

Stein, of course, is the great exception—and (of course) Stein is about as far removed from our canonical views of Modernism as Hemans is from our literary histories of 1815–1835. In "The Homes of England" sentiment is revealed as a ghostly presence, like everything else; but if it comes only in apparitional forms, the poem has not, at any rate, abandoned its faith in what its own sentimentality stands for: an imagination of a communal world held together by sympathy.

GM. But in Hemans's poem it is a sympathy without an object—a kind of abstract sympathy.

AM. Yes, but that is not to be taken simply as a critique of the poetry. It comprises, rather, a definition of the world of Hemans's experience. From our vantage this experience may seem threadbare and limited—as if it were unable wholly to resist its own adverse experiences, the way we imagine Dickinson and Stein did. And so we would say of Hemans that she is not, perhaps, so great a writer as Dickinson or Stein, that she became too much of what she beheld. That is certainly my view. But it is also my view that what Hemans has to offer is distinctive and important.

GM. It can be had for the asking in the magazines and annuals of the nineteenth century.

AM. You are wrong. There is a great deal of what has been called "sentimental verse" in those magazines and annuals, but if you read much of it—by the way, *have* you read it?—you may begin to see the work differently. It is by no means so uniform as (y)our literary histories suggest. In any case, the whole question of the sentimental in poetry needs to be rethought and the relevant texts reread.[11]

GM. And then what? I think then we shall see Hemans's poems sink back into their former "breathless sleep."

AM. We shall see.

Notes

1. Printed privately in Florence in 1785, the volume launched what would become the most important literary movement of the 1790s. See Edward E. Bostetter, "The Original Della Cruscans and the *Florence Miscellany*."

2. For a relevant discussion of Byron's "Fare Thee Well!" see Jerome J. McGann, "What Difference Do the Circumstances of Publication Make to the Interpretation of a Literary Work?"

3. This is very clear, for example, in Herbert Butterfield's account of the rise of modern historical scholarship. See his *Man on His Past: The Study of Historical Scholarship*, especially 1–26, 44, 50.

4. For particular discussions, see Emery Neff, *The Poetry of History: The Contribution of Literature and Literary Scholarship to the Writing of History Since Voltaire*; Peter Hans Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*; Max Wehrli, *Johann Jakob Bodmer und die Geschichte der Literatur*; F. A. Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer: 1795*.

5. See especially Elinor Shaffer, *"Kubla Khan" and The Fall of Jerusalem* and Jerome McGann, "The Ancient Mariner: The Meaning of the Meanings."

6. See Roger Lonsdale, *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse* and *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*.

7. The poem was first published in 1827 in *Blackwood's Magazine*; Hemans printed it again the following year as the first of the "Miscellaneous Pieces" in her *Records of Woman: With Other Poems*.

8. From the *Edinburgh Review* 50 (1829), reprinted in *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review by Francis Jeffrey* 474.

9. GM is quoting C. H. Hereford's judgment of Hemans set forth in *The Age of Wordsworth* (1897). See George Benjamin Woods, *English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement* 1271.

10. Noel Coward's wonderful parody of "The Homes of England," in his *Operette* 53–56 is by no means simply a farcical destruction of the original poem. The parody travesties Hemans's work in order to resurrect the central ideas of the poem in another quarter and on new terms. *Operette* is a celebration of the power, and the necessity, of maintaining appearances. In Coward's play, the standard for a saving artificiality is located in the "low" world of the stage and music hall, not in the insignia of the aristocracy. By inverting the apparitional terms of Hemans's poems, this transformation gives an explicit form to ("explicates") what Hemans was doing in more indirect ways.

11. For some efforts in this direction, see Anne K. Mellor, ed., *Romanticism and Feminism*; Marlon B. Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry*; Laura Claridge and Elizabeth Langdon, eds., *Out of Bounds: Male Writers and Gender(ed) Criticism*.