

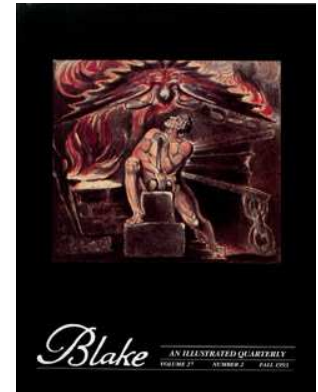
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R E V I E W

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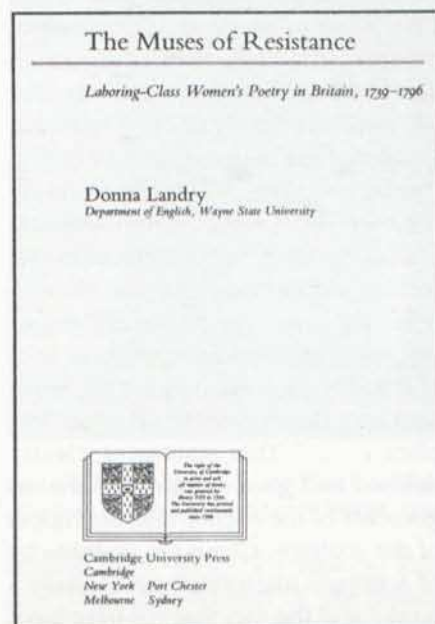
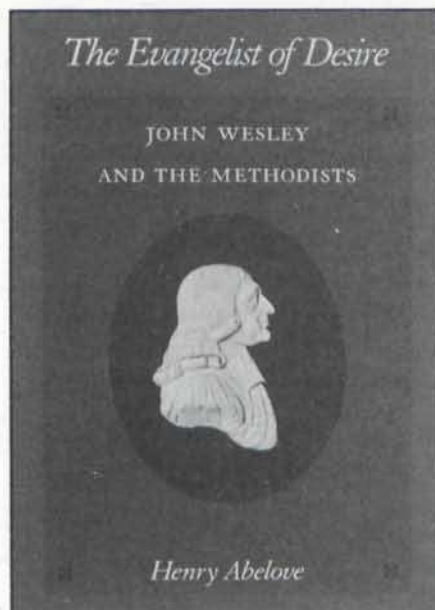
REVIEWS

Rehistoricizing Romantic Ideology: New Perspectives on Class and Gender Conflict, 1730-1800

Henry Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990. 136 pp. \$25.00; Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. 325 pp. \$39.50.

Reviewed by
Laura Mandell

Henry Abelove's *Evangelist of Desire* and Donna Landry's *Muses of Resistance* both contribute substantially to the fields of history with which they are concerned. Abelove enters into debates over why John Wesley had such an enormous influence among English plebeians during the eighteenth century; how Wesley contributed to the rise and spread of Methodism; and, specifically, how the construction of Wesley as a leader of the movement, a construction in which his brother Charles, George Whitefield, and other Methodists participated, ensured the movement's staying power even after "the revivalist wave ebbed" in Britain and America during the 1750s (5). Landry adds to the history of feminism by bringing to



light poems protesting the oppression of women which were written by laboring-class female poets living before "the advent of the organized women's movements of the nineteenth century" (15), before feminism as we know it. Landry analyzes works written from the 1740s to the late 1790s, and thereby contributes substantially to the history of "proto-feminism," the title often given to protests against sexism appearing before Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

But, more important than these specific contributions to history, Abelove and Landry also have a great deal to say about how to do a specifically *literary* history. The women of the laboring classes whose works Landry analyzes wrote pastoral poetry; they therefore tried to enter a tradition that excludes male and female labor from view (see Williams, *Country* 32). Landry explicitly addresses the difficulty these women had in entering such a tradition. Similarly, Abelove analyzes the diaries and journals of plebeian Methodists, marginal writers to be sure, recounting their own spiritual biographies. Unlike Landry, he does not explicitly address the problem of these accounts' relation to literature. However, I will show below that writing on the history of early Methodism means confronting the problem that a literary historian must confront, namely whether and how desires subversive of the existing social order can be represented in conventional forms. Insofar as both Landry and Abelove try to determine the extent to which merely entering conventional literary and religious discourses requires adopting classist and sexist interests, they enter into debates carried on both here in the pages of *Blake* and in romantic studies generally.

In *The Romantic Ideology* of 1983, Jerome McGann argued for using the methodology of what has come to be called American new historicism. McGann states the problem of literary criticism, and how to resolve that problem by turning toward history, in a passage worth quoting at length:

The example of Abrams helps us to see another characteristic of scholarly treatments of Romanticism: that the scholarship is everywhere informed by ideological commitments of various kinds. . . . The presence of ideology in criticism is particularly difficult to see because the chief disciplines of cultural analysis are themselves vehicles for the production of ideology. . . . The reader [of criticism] must therefore be on his guard to demystify such works of their ideological self-representations if he is to be in a position to assess the adequacy of their assertions. . . . [I have demonstrated] the inter-

ested, partisan focus which critical argumentation will take. . . . [C]riticism . . . will vitiate its own activity to the extent that it has not shown a clear understanding of the symmetries and differences which hold between the critics' values on the one hand, and the (historically removed) subject on the other. . . . We may take it as a rule, then, that any criticism which abolishes the distance between its own (present) setting and its (removed) subject matter—any criticism which argues an un-historical symmetry between the practicing critic and the descending work—will be, to that extent, undermined as criticism. (28-30)

The question is, how do we read literature written in the past in its own terms rather than forcing it to comply with our own? How do we read literature, not merely as an image of ourselves, reflecting our own ideological blindnesses back to us, but rather as distinctively Other or symbolically self-constituting, revealing its own ideological resistances and complicities rather than ours?

One answer which differs from McGann's is that we cannot. For some post-structuralists, the "Other" names the set of exclusions necessary for symbolization to take place, and therefore the Other by definition cannot speak to us (see Fuss 12). That kind of post-structuralist assumption suspiciously shifts responsibility for exclusions based on class, race, and gender from individuals to institutional structures, or worse, to language itself. S. P. Mohanty argues against the theoretical validity and practical efficacy of such a shift in responsibility: if we are to avoid "replicat[ing] the patterns of repression and subjugation we notice in [our] traditional conceptual frameworks," we must, he argues, assume that the Other *can* be symbolically self-constituting (4). As McGann says in this passage, the answer to the problem of how to avoid projecting our own beliefs onto past Others begins at least with the acknowledgment that we bear responsibility for erasing the interests of people writing in the past by confusing what they say with our own particular concerns. Returning to history is one way, McGann argues

here, to stop projecting ourselves onto the past. A large part of recent romantic criticism has been stimulated by the demand made by McGann and others like him that literary criticism become literary history and, by distinguishing past writers' interests from ours, try to make explicit "the ideological polemic of criticism" (McGann 30).

However, for some prominent romanticists who claim to follow McGann's lead, focusing on this polemic has not worked. It has not worked to give critics "a clear understanding of the symmetries and differences which hold between the critics' values on the one hand, and the (historically removed) subject on the other." Even Marjorie Levinson, a prominent member of McGann's critical school, charges the new historicism with containing "the positivism, subjectivism, and relativism of the rejected [old] historicist methodology" (*Rethinking Historicism* 20). Nor has focusing on "the ideological polemic of criticism" worked to turn critics toward history. "[L]et us above all refuse the consolation of a 'return' to history," David Simpson said in 1988, "and ponder instead all the reasons why we have not yet been there" ("Literary Criticism" 747).

Why hasn't McGann's program worked? One error frequently made by new historicist critics consists in assuming that it is inherently historical to ask questions about an author's attitude toward class, race, sexuality, or gender. It is not; one must question an author's attitude in historically responsible ways. For example, Wordsworth is often attacked for universalizing. To universalize *now*, to claim that a street person's spirit is just like mine, would be to deny that economic conditions constitute possibilities of subjectivity. However, universalizing in the 1790s had an entirely different political valence than does universalizing now. In 1792, the London Corresponding Society debated for five nights over whether "we who are Tradesmen, Shopkeepers and mechanics [have] any right to seek to obtain a parliamen-

tary reform" giving them the right to vote (qtd. in Goodwin 193). Universalizing *then*, saying that a beggar is no different from a member of the ruling class *then*, would be to take up the radical position advocating electoral reform. There is no "timeless conservatism,"¹ and the terms in which people debate issues of race, class, and gender change throughout time.²

One way to elicit a past writer's interests is to use historically responsive terms. As to the terms "laboring-class" and "plebeian," Landry specifies her usage:

[F]or 'laboring class,' read workers in an agrarian economy; for 'the poor,' a need on the part of contemporaries to signify a certain pathos within socio-economic hierarchies; for 'plebeian,' the mainly cultural opposition to 'patrician' or 'polite.' (9)

There is a difference between Ablove and Landry here. Ablove uses the term "plebeians" in order to avoid anachronistically projecting class consciousness onto the eighteenth-century working poor (see Thompson, "Class Struggle" 145, 146-150, 151). Landry, relying on the work of R. S. Neale and David Levine, would like to argue for the existence of some kind of class consciousness before industrialization (Landry 23-24, 56). But, more important than monitoring their own terms in order to avoid uncritically projecting our time onto the past, Landry and Ablove try to recreate the conflicts surrounding class and gender at that time.

The two books under review here change—drastically, as I hope to show—the meaning of certain terms and rhetorical structures used by Blake and Wordsworth because they give us knowledge of contemporaneous debates on class and gender issues. Landry and Ablove analyze two specific kinds of laboring-class or plebeian discourse, the highly conventionalized poetry written by women, and the forms of expression developed by Wesley and his followers. Insofar as Wordsworth and Blake entered into these discourses, assumed them as a context for their own work,

and appropriated them for their own purposes, we do not know what Blake and Wordsworth were trying to do in their poetry without knowing something about the religious exercises performed by the Methodists and the debates within and surrounding a "new form of literary production" emerging in 1739 and continuing throughout the eighteenth century, "the publication by subscription of volumes of verse by laboring-class women" (Landry 11).

Reconstructing conflicts that have been suppressed from the historical record, either because the subjects of history were unable to register them or because subsequent histories have elided them, thus provides greater objectivity, allowing Blake's and Wordsworth's texts to reveal their own ideological complicities and dissonances instead of ours. This reconstruction gives us a more objective view, but not because it keeps Abelow and Landry from projecting their own interests onto the past. It doesn't. As Landry says explicitly, the laboring-class, female poets whom she studies "attend to the 'muses of resistance,' but it is never entirely clear where the resistance is coming from. The political desires, both theirs and mine, out of which such an investigation and reconstruction emerge can never be fully articulated" (3). Abelow and Landry give us a better sense of what their subjects were trying to say not in spite of but precisely because of their partisanship; their partisanship enables them to be more, not less, objective.

The definition of objective knowledge bequeathed to us by logical positivism as knowledge which is absolutely true, regardless of who views the object, surreptitiously informs much literary theory despite having long been discredited (Mohanty 18). As Hilary Putnam puts it, even scientific descriptions of reality come from various and different perspectives: "As Dewey and Pierce taught us, real questions require a context and a point. But this is as true of scientific questions as it is of ethical ones" (177). There is no "single theory" upon which "science

converges," and therefore no "absolute conception of the world" which is independent of any description of it (171). Since all knowledge depends upon description, and all descriptions come from a perspective (Putnam 169-170, 173), the only way to get a view of the world of the eighteenth century is through retrieving perspectives that have been lost. Recovering plebeian and female perspectives of the eighteenth century will give us an objective view of it. But here getting such a view depends upon recovering histories that have not yet quite been written. To provide an objective account, the literary historian must adopt the partisanship necessary for extracting those histories from the conventions which threaten to conceal them.

Thus, in describing political criticism of Shakespeare, Walter Cohen claims that partisanship is not antithetical to objectivity, but, on the contrary, essential to achieving it: "The vast majority of political writing on Shakespeare has sided with the victims of state power, class hierarchy, patriarchy, racism, and imperialism, a partisanship, it is worth asserting, not only compatible with but also necessary to a commitment to objectivity in scholarship" (20). I will allow some of the insights gleaned from Abelow's and Landry's books to enter into some contemporary romanticists' debates over the politics, sexual and otherwise, of canonical romantic poetry, for the sake of providing an "objectivity in scholarship" otherwise lacking. Neither Landry nor Abelow distinguishes their work from American new historicism; in fact, Landry allies herself with it (3). But, I would like to argue that Abelow's and Landry's partisanship differs crucially from the partisanship to be found in attacks on Wordsworth's politics that come out of McGann's work. Before looking at how the implications of their work might change assumptions we make about Wordsworth and Blake, I will first try to show the difference between these two kinds of partisanship as a way of demonstrating Landry's and Abelow's achievement.

I. A Case in Which Opposition is not true friendship

In a sympathetic account of new historical romanticists, Paul Cantor praises them for critiquing romantic ideology by showing that gender, race, and class issues inform the poets' ostensibly "universal" truths. But Cantor gently admonishes and at the same time glosses over some new historicists' failure to acknowledge that the romantics "were Revolutionaries, indeed the first literary radicals," however ineffectual. It is surprising, he says, that the romantics would be subjected to this kind of critique since they protested against "social injustice, political oppression, and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization": "It is a sign of the increasing ideological purity in today's academy that these critics, who have demonstrated their genuine admiration for the Romantics by devoting their careers to them, are now convinced that as progressive as the Romantics may have been, they did not go far enough" (706-07). I would like to suggest that one very rarely gets the sense from reading new historicist accounts that the romantics went far but just did not go far enough; romantic radicalism in new historicist accounts seems much more constricted than that.

In McGann's account of Keats (1979), Levinson's account of "Tintern Abbey" (1986), and Marlon Ross's account of romantic, masculine desire (1989), one gets the distinct message that literature is always allied with ideology. Catherine Gallagher would disagree; she says that new historicists precisely do not ally literature and ideology:

New historicists were often bent on proving that the relationship between form and ideology was neither one of simple affirmation, in which form papers over ideological gaps, nor one of subversive negation, in which form exposes ideology and thereby helps render it powerless. The contribution of the new historicism has been to identify a third alternative in which the very antagonism between literature and ideology becomes, in specific historical environments, a powerful and socially

functional mode of constructing subjectivity. (44)

This statement might apply more to Renaissance than to romanticist new historicists. Romanticist new historicists do in fact see aesthetic form as that which "paper[s] over ideological gaps."

Thus, in a recent detailed analysis of McGann, Levinson, and Ross, Susan Wolfson complains that "[i]n the interests of locating and critiquing the text in a certain ideological constellation, these readers tend to neglect textual nuance, ambiguity of import, and ambivalence of tone, or treat such matters as a suspect aesthetic complexity that artificially resolves the ideological pressure of sociopolitical reality" (430-31). Wolfson explicitly reproaches McGann for allying literature with ideology: "My quarrel is not with the effort to discern an ideology behind ideas or interpretive emphasis; but I do want to suggest that literary texts often signal their own capacity for mounting the kind of critique that readers such as McGann assume can be made only from a point outside the poem's own procedures" (439).

To say as McGann and Levinson do that poems try to "transform lived contradiction" by "redemptive figural definition" (Levinson 4, qtd. in Wolfson 431) allies poems with ideology. That aesthetic form is capable of such resolutions and redemptions is also a suspect, and perhaps fundamentally New Critical assumption (see Fischer 36): although McGann values differently than the New Critics did the power of literature to resolve conflict, he believes it has that power. Thus, when in *Social Values and Poetic Acts* McGann does come up with the poets who are not merely ideological tools (Blake and the language poets), it turns out that art can only be non-consoling through representing the incommensurable. Refusing the consolations of form, heterodox texts "hold a mirror up to the [heterodox] world" revealing its real "incoherence" (*Social Values* 9). This is to say that representations can only work against ideology through failing to represent.

Because for McGann representation is ideological, only its failure could contest ideology, a questionable principle, to say the least.³ We are back to the conception of an unrepresentable Other, back to the idea that interests in conflict with hegemonic ones cannot be represented.

Romantic new historicists typically argue that, because writing literature is fundamentally a matter of cooperating with the reigning, conservative ideology, poets of the high romantic tradition therefore sacrificed their political radicalism to aesthetic requirements or to an overarching narrative of spiritual development. A bald summary of Levinson's work on "Tintern Abbey," however unfairly it flattens her critique of the poem, has the virtue of showing us the form that so much romanticist new historicism takes: as Cantor describes it, "Levinson brilliantly argues that 'Tintern Abbey' constitutes a kind of ideological smokescreen, a swerve away from genuine political engagement and into the Romantic myth of nature" (707). Ross could be said to have done the same thing: a poetry indistinguishable from gender ideology swerves into the myth of masculine and feminine desire. Wolfson objects to this "monolithic critique that finds all poetic self-contestation displaced from the contradictions of socio-historical reality into an aesthetics of reconciliation and spiritual transformation" (432). In the new historicist's tale, radicalism always capitulates to aesthetic or religious form. The same is true, according to Cohen, for new historicist critics of Shakespeare: "their readings of individual Shakespearean plays almost always demonstrate the triumph of containment":

This *non sequitur* involves a certain fidelity to Foucault, . . . whose historical analyses revealed the unconstrained victory of power. . . . Despite the presence of internal conflict, society and especially the theater are organized down to their smallest details for the benefit of those in power. . . . New historicism ends up if not with something like a totalitarian model, then at least with a sense of the almost

inevitable defeat of the poor, the innocent, and the oppressed. (Cohen 35)

Because new historicist accounts of "Tintern Abbey" focus on how Wordsworth tries to transcend politics and history, and how he thereby participates in power's inevitable victory over the oppressed, there is in these accounts nothing like Kenneth Johnston's recognition that it is the poem itself which insists upon our analyzing its politics. The poem, Johnston says,

is not required to supply an exact demonstration of the relation of aesthetic experience—whether landscape viewing or poetry writing (or reading)—to social responsibility and ultimate values. Nonetheless, the poem itself provokes such questions, and if in what follows I seem often to go outside the poem and to imply that Wordsworth is neglecting or sublimating unpleasant associations, it's not to suggest that he like any poet can't write the poem he wants to write, but that he himself has imbedded it with language which simultaneously invites and resists probing, opening up just those areas of concern that it determinedly seeks to elide or contain in more manageable terms. (7)

We are aware that the political is silenced in "Tintern Abbey" or *The Prelude* in part because Wordsworth is struggling with the relation between landscape viewing and social responsibility. In fact, it is only against a view of the romantics' radicalism that the insights of new historicism are startling, and most valuable: that even the young, radical Wordsworth holds views in common with Burke, or that Paine and Burke or Wollstonecraft and More are in ideological collusion⁴ is amazing *only* against a backdrop of their overt antagonism. That Wordsworth was really an escapist, and Blake truly a pious quietist is interesting only to people who care about them personally. Such information becomes theoretically significant only if it can tell us something about how ideology works. New historicist, romantic criticism shows us how radicalism (or less often, conservatism) can be coopted by the opposition. But that very insight depends upon recognizing that the romantics were radicals.

Thus Gallagher sees one of the greatest achievements of new historicism as the posing of this question: "Was it possible, we asked, that certain forms of subjectivity that felt oppositional were really a means by which power relations were maintained?" (42). The question, Gallagher says, relies on an insight gleaned from the women's liberation movement:

by focusing attention on our gendered individuation as the deepest moment of social oppression, some of us called into question the political reliability of our own subjectivity. We effectively collapsed the self/society division and began regarding our "normal" consciousness and "natural" inclinations as profoundly untrustworthy. We, along with our erstwhile political optimism, became for ourselves the objects of a hermeneutics of suspicion. (42-43)

Instead of naively believing that exposure of social oppression through "the discourse of liberation" would inevitably lead to the destruction of a fragile social system, or naively believing that poetry has a radical potential because it presents ideological contradictions to us, the new historicist shows how power structures contain radical opposition, shows that it may not "theoretically [be] possible even to differentiate the individual subject [radical or conservative] from a system of power relationships" (Gallagher 42).

There is a lot to be said about this hermeneutics of suspicion, about whether Foucault's historical analyses actually do participate in it, as Cohen says that they do; but suffice it to say here that suspicion as to the actual existence of the subject as defined by liberal humanism, the subject who *can* effectively choose to support the political program he or she wishes, does not rid new historicist analyses of an inherently fallacious subjectivity. On the contrary, it erects subjects even more fallacious than the one posited by liberal humanism, insofar as that latter subject is at least capable of unconscious motivation.

Thus, in her article "Sex and History in *The Prelude* (1805)," Gayatri Spivak rightly insists that she is talking about "Wordsworth" (only in quotation marks)

or Wordsworth's own "ideological victimization"; but she often slips into talking about Wordsworth as if he were deliberately, consciously, and malevolently calculating all of the counter-revolutionary effects of his poetry (211, 218-19). It is this fallacious subjectivity that Simpson tries to correct in formulating the idea of Wordsworth's "poetry of displacement." McGann used the term "displacement," Simpson says, "to describe an apparently conscious strategy whereby the unpleasant or challenging details of a real landscape are excluded or decentered from the poem, a process attended by a further displacement of the natural scene to the spiritual plane of attention" (*Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* 14). Simpson protests: "We can admit that there is in many poems an attempt to establish an alternative (displaced) consolation beyond the empirical-historical; but the language of such attempts very often contains the terms of its own undermining. If we are looking to judge Wordsworth as a moral agent, we must then entertain the possibility that displacement is something he experienced and perhaps even suffered as much as he achieved" (14). Although many new historicists agree with Simpson in theory, in their practice, Wordsworth appears to be consciously manipulating this displacement of political concerns by aesthetic ones.

Romantic new historicism turns all past subjects into a timeless, faceless, colossal image of conservatism: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Paine, perhaps even Blake—they are all just colossal Burkes in disguise. The new historicist partisanship is of an us-them kind (see Mohanty, esp. 20): "we" are cultural critics, sensitive to the exclusions of high literature; "they" are the writers of high literature who exclude history, politics, the Real, for the sake of producing "great" poetry. This undialectical antagonism of us against them erects the monolithic egos of an imaginary relation: the only "subjects" here have no unconscious mind, are not self-contradictory, but rather whol-

ly against each other. "Where we fall back into the received Romantic field," Levinson says, in incisive self-criticism, "is in our failure . . . to articulate the subject-object, present-past, criticism-poetry polarities as a mode of relation" (20), thus leaving them polarities, or poles, and the relation a mere binary opposition or imaginary antagonism.

The partisanship the new historicist takes, then, is his or her own part against those writing in the past, or representation *per se*. But these past writers under attack are disturbingly not someone else from another time. The new historical romanticists' assumption that representation is always on the side of ideology, that "all poetic self-contestation" is ultimately co-opted, that ideological fissures and gaps are always healed by poetry, denies them access to the past. As I hope to show below in examining Abelow's and Landry's accounts, the literary historian's partisanship with those who rather actively suffer class and gender oppression will give us a more objective view of that world: it will give us an understanding of a past which is past and not a mirror reflection of our present. This objectivity is achieved only through the assumption that aesthetics does not reconcile, that spirituality does not transform completely; that we can hear oppressed subjects (not victims, but full subjects) of the past contest, rework, and accommodate themselves to systems of oppression, and thereby speak to us on their own terms.

The subjects of Abelow's and Landry's histories existed outside the dominant discourses of the period; the stories they tell are, in many ways, the story of their struggle to represent themselves even though dispossessed of a means for doing so. Both Abelow and Landry are thus keenly aware of the temptation to "colonize" the histories of Methodists and early feminists in their own recounting of them, and each one adopts a particular strategy for dealing with that temptation, as will be seen below. Abelow and Landry therefore contribute to our understand-

ing of how to present the histories of classes traditionally underrepresented in the academic disciplines⁵ without rewriting those histories, without repeating in a more insidious because less visible way the very act of class warfare by which they were excluded from the tradition in the first place. Because Abelow and Landry ask how the lower classes and women registered their protests against oppression, they are able to historicize the terms of gender, class, and sexuality. Paradoxically, it is not through questioning the possibility of willful action by considering the subject to be an effect of power, but rather through assuming the existence of the subject of liberal humanism, a subject who has choices and can exercise will, that one can construct a history which allows for both unconscious and conscious effects.

II. What is a Church? & What Is a Theatre? are they Two & not One?⁶

While most of the historical work interesting to theorists of literature and of cultural studies is heavily theorized, Henry Abelow's elegantly written monograph on Methodism is very quietly so: you can read the short book blissfully unaware that anything even vaguely "theoretical" is taking place. The questions that occupy him are straightforward and simple: historians have long acknowledged the tremendous influence Wesley had on Britain; Abelow asks, "how did John Wesley succeed in attracting to himself so many long-staying followers? Of what he taught these followers once he had attracted them, how much did they really accept?" Yet these two "simple" questions have important implications for the theory of history.

Let me first discuss the number of Wesley's followers. Wesley was ordained in the Church of England and was thus himself "still . . . precariously within the church" (77) rather than a Dissenter. Relatively few of his "helpers" or lay-preachers were ordained in

the Church, although Wesley believed in 1769 that fully one-fourth of them could be ordained and could even seek preferment in the church if they wanted to (112). After John and his brother Charles had returned from a two-year mission to America in 1737, they were forbidden to preach in Anglican churches, prompting George Whitefield to inaugurate the practice of "field-preaching" (John Wesley's Obituary 282). Thus, the leaders of Methodism were deprived of the official capacity to administer sacraments of various kinds for the Church of England, at least insofar as the members of the church agreed in practice.

Although excluded from the Anglican Church, Methodism did not become a sect until the beginning of the nineteenth century; during the eighteenth century, it was an evangelical movement. While the writer of Wesley's obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* does call Wesley "the leader of a sect," he or she does so only to add that it was "a sect no way differing in essentials from the Church of England" (283). "[T]he Methodism of Wesley's day" that Abelow analyzes "was not a sect. It was a revival, a field of force." Because it was a movement, its numbers are difficult to determine: "It kept many adherents and affected many others without involving them in formal membership" (Abelow 44n11).

The movement began, Abelow tells us, "in the late 1730's, [when] virtually the whole Protestant world was undergoing an evangelical awakening" (4). Especially in the North American colonies, which "Wesley's collaborator Whitefield" visited seven times, there was a terrific "revivalist fervor" (5). But the awakening did not last: the American evangelical movement had died altogether by 1760, and other movements ebbed. Things turned out differently for Wesley: "When he died in 1791, the Methodists owned 588 preaching-houses in the British Isles, and their members numbered 72,476" (5). 72,476 may seem relatively few, in a population of between 6 and 8.5 million.⁷ However, "[i]n addition" to

these 72,476 actual members of Methodist societies, Abelow says, "there were thousands of people who never formally joined a society but were still Methodists, still followers of Wesley" (44). But even if that were not true, just to know the views shared in broad outline by 72,000 people is to know a great deal about attitudes of the time.

The number of Methodists at Wesley's death is one-fourth the number of those who could vote in England and Wales: the electorate was 282,000 for the years 1754-90 (O'Gorman 179, table 4.2). We quite often take enactments of law as material testimony to attitudes of the time, despite not only the corruption of the voting system, but also the questionable assumption that voters in the Commons adequately reflected the interests of their constituents. John Cartwright, founder of the Society for Constitutional Information in 1780 (Goodwin 63), describes how absolutely unrepresentative the Commons actually was in 1777: "Those who now claim the *exclusive* right of sending to parliament the 513 representatives for about 6 million souls (amongst whom are one million five hundred thousand males, *competent as electors*) consist of about two hundred and fourteen thousand persons; and 254 of these representatives are elected by 5,723 . . ." (Cartwright 33, emphases in the original). Another way to describe the number of Wesley's followers, then, is to say that there were 12 times as many Methodists (72,476) as there were people who could vote for half of Parliament (5,723).

Because the Methodists were for the most part poor, studying their attitudes will give us insights into "the age" which the official history, history made by and from canonical texts, might leave out or repress. Any history of ideas, as critics like McGann have pointed out, will be classbound: it will be the history of the ideas of the class that had the power to represent its ideas; or worse, and as McGann explicitly contends against M. H. Abrams, such a study will not only be the history of an

ideology used to oppress subaltern classes, it will continue that work.⁸ Notice how adroitly Abelow's second "simple" question moves us out of a history of ideas: he will not tell us Wesley's doctrines in order to describe the attitudes of Wesley's followers; rather, he will look for evidence of which among those doctrines the Methodists adopted, which they rejected, and how they revised them. "It cannot be assumed, or rather it can be assumed only naively, that what Wesley taught was what the Methodists learned. To discover how they reacted to him, what they actually absorbed of what he taught, must be a matter for actual inquiry" (3). This move packs quite a theoretical punch, one which is directed not only backward to the historian of ideas, but also forward to new historicists who still remain caught, as Cohen argues, within "formalist assumptions," those who "commit a methodological error by deducing [the sociological] effect [of cultural productions, in this case Shakespeare's plays] from form and context" (Cohen 36).

Abelow's interest in Methodism was inspired by E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, he tells us in an afterword, but he objects to one of Thompson's methodological assumptions: "[Thompson] writes of [the] Methodism [of Wesley's lifetime] as though it were something entirely foreign to England's plebeians, something just imposed on them. It seemed to me unlikely that they would have valued it as they did if they had not found in it the means to fulfill needs and purposes of their own" (119). Rather than deducing Wesleyan Methodism from Wesley's doctrines (from "form and context," as Cohen puts it), Abelow examines the letters, diaries, journals, confessional diaries, autobiographies, memoirs and pamphlets written by Wesley's followers, and the minutes of conferences and portions of Wesley's journals reflecting what his followers said to him, as well as the concerted actions they took, to determine what they accept-

ed, used, and modified of the doctrines Wesley offered them. They did not modify Methodism just for themselves, but also for Wesley. In each chapter of his analysis, Abelow explains first what Wesley taught, and then takes an historical turn, examining what the Methodists actually learned from him (45, 48, 58, 63).

Historians often attribute part of the success of Methodism to Wesley's talent for organization. However, as Abelow points out, Wesley did not so much organize his flock as learn how to organize from them. One of "the great organizational features of Methodism, the class meeting, was suggested by a member of the Bristol flock in 1742" (48n21). Rather than attributing the size and persistence of Wesleyan Methodism to Wesley's theology or to his organizational skills, Abelow insists that the movement rose and endured precisely because it provided for its plebeian members a space of articulation and resistance.

Some of Wesley's doctrines were directly empowering. His doctrine of "free grace," his insistence that anyone could have eternal life who wanted it, reassured his plebeian followers whose "self-esteem was in many ways low. They could believe salvation was possible for them only if they were continually assured that it was available on easy terms to everybody" (32). Through his discouragement of marriage, and through "the ongoing pastoral arrangements" which encouraged same-sex intimacy (67), Wesley unwittingly provided a space for resisting power relations constructed by "family life as conventionally ordered" (72) and those new power relations being constructed by a new valuation of sex for reproduction.⁹ The weekly meetings called "bands," made up of small groups of members of the same sex, and "select-bands," made up of Methodists "already Perfected," and more intimate still, encouraged same-sex feeling:

These arrangements—separate seating [male on one side, female on the other] at worship, bands and select bands, the con-

tinuous exhorting to stay single—they resisted but they also lived with. They found themselves often thrown together intimately, men with men, women with women, and they responded to each other. . . . Sometimes they not only responded but actually fell in love. (67)

In addition, Wesley's doctrine of Perfection allowed for a distinctively feminist resistance by sanctioning "long-term conjugal abstinence at the wife's insistence," one of the only ways, besides abortion and infanticide, that a woman had to assert her reproductive rights during this period (70): women who had attained Perfection or "freedom from all inward sin" (70) were perfectly justified in refusing to have sex with their husbands (70, 81). While Wesley did not intend to deliver a protofeminist message, his doctrines may have had a feminist effect, not only in giving women a choice in their own reproductive practices (81), but also in allowing women to feel justified in rejecting other demands made upon them by their families. Contemporaries worried about the diversion of women from their domestic tasks, so much so that the absence of a wife from her home actually stimulated an anti-Methodist riot at Wednesbury in Staffordshire (64-65).¹⁰

While some of Wesley's ideas were directly empowering to the laboring classes, most of his doctrines were empowering only because his followers were able to modify them. Wesley's "doctrine" as a whole, a hodgepodge of his particular inflection of Anglicanism, was motivated less for theological reasons than for the sake of securing his followers' emotional attachment to him. Both consciously and unconsciously, Wesley wanted to keep himself at the center of the movement and "keep the attention of his flock fixed firmly on himself" (74). Wesley's doctrine changed over time so that he might constantly distinguish himself from competitors and thereby demand the full love and attention of his adherents. Paradoxically, the strength of his leadership gave his followers the capacity to dissent from his doctrines,

and to use them for their own purposes.

Abelove relies on Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* to explain how this is so. Wesley's popularity and his followers' ability to revise his doctrine came from the same source: Wesley's seduction of his followers. Through many means exhaustively documented by Abelove, Wesley "seduced" his followers into loving him. Such seduction does not exact blind obedience, but, on the contrary, enriches "intellectual life" (119). With Wesley in the position of ego-ideal, the Methodists were able to identify with each other:

It might be supposed that because Wesley had magnetized all these many thousands, because they deferred to him and loved him, they would do anything he asked, learn what he taught, believe what he said. But that supposition would be mistaken. For the result of their attachment to him was not just docility. It was something else as well, something almost contrary to docility. It was union with one another. (45)

Putting Wesley in the place of the group's ego ideal allowed them to hear what he said "in ways that suited them mutually," and thereby to convert Wesleyanism into a Methodism which "was a compromise between his word and their need" (48).

From Wesley's instructions, the Methodists "selected out what they jointly knew and valued already, Puritanism" (86). They selected three main elements: "the ideal of a new birth; the ideal of a personal relation of spiritual experience, as an important facet of membership in the group; and the ideal of an imminent apocalypse" (88). They interpreted Wesley's doctrine of Perfection as "just the old Puritan apocalypse, internalized" (92). That is, as Hester Roe Rogers's journal puts it, the change wrought in those who were Perfected turned their world into "a Heaven below" (qtd. on 92). Many confessional diaries, journals, and spiritual letters also relate stories of "new birth," of the moment when a follower of Wesley's would realize that he or she was in fact saved (88-89).

The striking thing for Abelove is that these conversion narratives repeatedly show the Methodists discovering grace "[i]n everyday scenes and everyday circumstances"—on a walk, or when gathering eggs from the barn (90).

Methodist spirituality, organized around weekly class meetings, can be characterized, Abelove says, as "the Puritan relation made continuous." While the Methodists did not have to publicly relate their conversion experience in order to gain admission to the church, as did the Puritans, they did have

to make some kind of public relation of their spiritual experiences at least once every week at a class meeting; again at a band meeting . . . ; again at a select band meeting . . . ; possibly at the monthly or quarterly lovefeast ["a special meeting of the flock held at night" often for relating spiritual experiences (82)]; and possibly also at the full society meetings, whenever they happened to be scheduled. (94)

The Methodists heard Wesley speak "only a couple of times a year"; but on a weekly and an almost daily basis, they "share[d] with one another the developing record of their hopes and fears, faults and successes, doubts and certainties, anxieties and loves" (94). This description of Methodist spirituality could easily be used to describe "Tintern Abbey."

As Abelove points out, the "Puritan relation made continuous" is a kind of "egotistical sublime":

This phrase is of course Keats's description of Wordsworth's poetry. I use it here to lead up to a point I want to make in passing. It seems to me that to review this account of the spirituality of the Methodist people is to gain a potentially useful perspective on the origins of Romanticism. The discovery of grace at everyday places; the internalization of apocalypse; the privileged and continuous self-exploration and self-expression: these are the basic features of the Methodist appropriation of the Puritan tradition, and they may also have been among the basic features of the poetry that Wordsworth and Coleridge introduced in 1798. (95n73)

What would be the effect of situating "Tintern Abbey" in the context of Methodist religious exercises, rather

than, as we so often automatically do, within John Stuart Mill's distinction of poetry from mere rhetoric or, as he calls it, "eloquence": "eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*"; at the moment when the poet, "turns round and addresses himself to another person; when the act of utterance is not itself the end, but a means to an end . . . , by that desire of making an impression upon another mind, then it ceases to be poetry and becomes eloquence" (Mill 539-40). Locating romantic lyrics within Mill's insistence that poetry is purely disinterested soliloquy, the effect of isolation from the world rather than intercourse with it (540), has a history. In his article, "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age" (1963), Abrams asserted that good poetry came from a withdrawal from active political engagement.¹¹ The distinction between quietist poetry and activist rhetoric is often uncritically repeated by historical critics who ignore Thompson's 1969 rebuttal of Abrams's argument.¹² Thus, Marilyn Butler simply repeats the notion that high romantic poetry is a- or even anti-political. Poetry as Wordsworth and Coleridge developed it after renouncing their radicalism merely "ponders the experiences of recluses and private men," in contradistinction to pamphleteering, journalism, real "political prose" which we have only been taught to denigrate by Wordsworth and Coleridge, "by literary men after their political defeat" (16). Butler uncritically opposes poetry to prose, and "personal experience" to "public problems," just as Mill and Abrams do, while claiming that such distinctions were fabricated by the romantic poets through renunciation.

James Chandler's *Second Nature* also unwittingly and uncritically grants Abrams's proposition that the hope for the reformation of society "produced mainly declamation" (66) while "disillusionment" produced "the higher poetry" (69, 72). Chandler's argument goes along with the idea that the radical Wordsworth who wrote *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* could not have

written great poetry, and intensifies the last part of Abrams's proposition: the Wordsworth of the great period was not only disillusioned; he had renounced his radicalism, although he could not consciously admit to himself that he was in fact a "conservative" (45).

Chandler claims that his argument is convincing if we accept the idea that Wordsworth's "sense of opprobrium [was] sufficiently powerful . . . to account for an effort on Wordsworth's part to conceal his changed opinions (as much from himself as from the world)" (275n24). I would like to suggest that Chandler's argument is sustained by much more than biography. That Wordsworth felt an inordinate need to repress from his own consciousness "the thought of turning his coat" (275) is made convincing by the tacit collapse of poetry into ideology: before launching into his "golden decade" and writing his greatest poetry, Chandler feels, Wordsworth *must* have renounced radical politics (31-32; 62-63). *The Prelude*, Chandler says, "the magnum opus of the great decade . . . is written from an ideological perspective that is thoroughly Burkean. In later chapters I will try to show," he continues, "that if we understand 'conservative' to mean ideological proximity to Burke, then the visionary and experimental writing for which Wordsworth is revered, his program for poetry, is from its very inception impelled by powerfully conservative motives" (31-32).

The Burke of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is spearheading the counter-revolutionary reaction in England, to be sure, but in whose interests? Is Burke "conservative" because he is promoting the interests of the aristocracy, or bourgeois interests? If trying to conserve the aristocratic order, Burke was indeed a conservative *then*, but would be allied with progressives who wish to demystify bourgeois ideology *now*. There may be some deep affinities between Burke's idealizations in the *Reflections* and Marxist idealizations of pre-

capitalist culture. If by "conservative" Chandler means that Burke was instrumental in the institution of bourgeois hegemony, as Macpherson and the UEA English Studies Group maintain, he was progressive *then*, though he would be considered conservative *now*.¹³ In this a-historical use of the term "conservative," Chandler has slipped into the present and is in this passage fighting present battles rather than analyzing one of the past.¹⁴ It often seems to me that new historicists who attack Wordsworth for aestheticizing and thereby "resolving" historical problems are really angry at Abrams for his assertion that good poetry is made out of bad politics, but, because they accept that assertion as true, their anger gets displaced onto "good" poetry: great poetry is always already coopted.

But Wordsworth did not separate poetry from radical politics; as Johnston points out (quoted above), Wordsworth's poetry questions the separation of poetry from politics. This poetry gives us the relation between poetry and politics as a problem. It is an imposition to read back into romantic poetry the context of Mill, Kant, and Abrams who give us a solution to the problem rather than the problem itself. The opposition between "disinterested" aesthetics and politics, attributable to Mill and to Kant, like Abrams's opposition between political declamation and a-political lyric, may be imposed on the romantics only by anachronism. "Tintern Abbey," *Lyrical Ballads*, the *Intimations Ode*, Blake's *Songs*, all of these might differ slightly in meaning if the lyric is seen not as a soliloquy, but rather as self-expression directed to an audience who, like the Methodists, is seen as judging one's spiritual development, and where spiritual development potentially has more consequences for the community than for the individual.¹⁵

Of course, romantic lyrics have long been interpreted as fundamentally dramatic in structure, but the context of Methodism provides an historical basis for doing so. It further provides

an historical basis for claiming, as Johnston, Wolfson, and Simpson have done, that romantic lyrics portray not the triumph of form or spirituality as a way out of politics, but anxieties aroused by the fact of self-expression taking place in an inevitably formal mode—anxieties about theatricality.¹⁶ For the Methodists, telling how one felt "inside" oneself, whether one truly loved God or not, was no simple matter, despite Wesley's repeated assurance that it was (Abelove 38). Methodists rejected theater even "more enthusiastically" than Wesley had wanted them to (104), in part because of their predilection for Puritanical aspects of Wesley's teaching (86). As Jonas Barish has shown, Puritans attacked the theater for the same reasons they attacked the theatricalism of Rome, and, in their prejudice against theater, puritanical Methodists reiterated sentiments that had led to the Reformation.¹⁷ In addition, Abelove contends that it was precisely because of their anxiety over establishing the sincerity of the spiritual autobiographies they recited before an audience of their peers that the Methodists were so hostile to theater:

[T]he Methodists disapproved of adult play, and especially theater, because they had an ongoing theater of their own, which they liked better than the one dramatists provided. In their theater they were the stars as well as the audience. Their lines were the lines that were remembered and commented upon afterward. Their concerns were the subject of the play, and . . . the words were familiar, even if heightened . . . If the Methodists, then, were making a theater of their own among themselves, they might easily have felt impelled to a hostile view of ordinary theater and ordinary play. . . . [T]he all-too-obvious similarity might be threatening enough to evoke fear and anger. (105-06)

The Methodists angrily rejected theater as a way of "abjecting" the possibility of theatricality from self-expression itself. But, as Lacan would say, what is disavowed in psychic life has a way of returning in the Real: Abelove points out that the Methodists sometimes rented empty theater buildings in which to hold their meetings, and ad-

mitted members to society meetings only if they had what the Methodists called "tickets" (106); the admission ticket was an article of faith so important to them that some members asked to be buried with them (108).

Situating romantic lyrics in the context of Methodist religious exercises makes it more likely that the "egotistical sublime" was conceived of as a public rather than a private affair, with the poets expecting to have scrutinized the spirituality of the speaker portrayed, and with residual, unconscious anxieties over the contradiction between private meaning and public form. Was such self-expression a radical political act? That is a real question. For the Methodists, the weekly public relation of their spiritual trials was something they "liked to do [and something] they found 'comfortable'" (Abelove 94). Such "recollection in [the] tranquility" of each other's eyes was for plebeian Methodists a rhetorical mode enabling the assertion of their interests, and whether such self-assertion defused or encouraged radicalism is perhaps still up for grabs. But, to take a cue from Abelove, we can only begin to listen to their interests by assuming that the "Puritan relation made continuous" in their diaries, memoirs, and spiritual letters is capable of communicating their needs and wants.

III. What is a Poet? . . . He is a man speaking to men¹⁸

The cultural debate carried on before and during the romantic period over poetry's relation to class and gender has been described in all its material detail by Donna Landry in *The Muses of Resistance*. But this debate rarely enters into arguments about Blake and Wordsworth's alleged sexism, classism, anti-classism or feminism. To begin with, no studies have been done on how the early romantics responded to female writers' poetry: it's as if the only women writers they knew were Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Wollstonecraft. Wordsworth's praise for the poetry of

Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, situates her very much in the landscape of his predecessors, right up there with Pope: "Now, it is remarkable," Wordsworth says, in his *Essay Supplementary to the Preface of 1815*, "that, excepting the nocturnal Reverie of Lady Winchilsea, and a passage or two in the Windsor Forest of Pope, the poetry of the period intervening between the publication of the *Paradise Lost* and the *Seasons* does not contain a single new image of external nature . . ." (73). Wordsworth's relation to Pope as a literary predecessor has been well documented (Chandler, "Pope"; Griffin). But Wordsworth's relation to Finch remains unexplored, despite his praise for her in the *Essay Supplementary* and elsewhere.¹⁹

Marlon Ross's *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* tries to correct such myopia in criticism of the romantics, primarily by adding women to the list of poets writing at the time: Hannah More, Anna Barbauld, Felicia Hemans, Joanna Baillie, Letitia Elizabeth Landon. But Ross's study is marred by his ignorance of eighteenth-century female poets. He claims that a tradition of what he calls "feminine poetry" was born during the romantic period: he mentions some of the "Augustan foremothers" (193) influencing Barbauld and More (Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is the only one he actually discusses), but argues that women did not begin publishing poetry for the most part until the 1780s (187-91). This would be quite a surprise to Roger Lonsdale: "From the 1730s, for various reasons, women began to find it easier and more acceptable to publish their verse" (xxvi). Lonsdale ruthlessly excerpts long poems, and claims to have been faced with terrible editorial choices about whom to exclude from his 550-page volume of eighteenth-century women poets. Women did not begin to publish poetry in the 1780s, as Ross claims; they began 40 years earlier. If anything, the number of published volumes of occasional verse written by

women of the working classes declined after 1796 (Landry 276-80).

Although readers can be grateful to Ross for his discussion of female poets important during the romantic period and yet ignored by us now, his account of eighteenth-century women's poetry is inaccurate. He says that, besides Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, and a group of women known as the blue-stockings (Elizabeth Vesey, Elizabeth Carter, Frances Boscawen, and Elizabeth Montagu), the women "who presumed to write poetry . . . were only a handful from the most privileged class, and their urge to write was usually limited to their diaries and journals." This would be a surprise to Landry: "In eighteenth-century Britain a specific form of literary production emerges, the publication by subscription of volumes of verse by laboring-class women" (11); it began with the publication in 1739 of "The Women's Labour," a poem written to Stephen Duck by Mary Collier, "the Petersfield washerwoman," as she was called. Although seventeenth-century women writers may have been few and confined to the upper classes, Ross erroneously assumes the same to be true of women writers of the eighteenth century: "There were in fact dozens of women at all social levels who, with variable ambition and competence, [wrote] verse and, by one means or another, found their way into print" (Lonsdale xxi). Can Ross have adequately "chart[ed] the rise of a uniquely feminine poetics out of the specific historical circumstances of eighteenth-century British culture" (13) based on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu?

Ross's argument would also have been a surprise to eighteenth-century Britons. Late in the seventeenth century, when there were as Ross claims only a few, upper-class publishing female poets, John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* encouraged women's intellectual endeavors by inviting them to ask questions of the members of the Athenian Society who ostensibly edited the journal (actually Dunton himself was editor).²⁰ The *Mercury*

explicitly defended the idea that women can think as well as men even though less educated (3.13, Sept. 8 1691; 5.3, Dec. 8, 1691), insisting "that we have receiv'd *Questions of as great weight and concern from their Sex, as from any of ours* . . ." ²¹ The Athenian Society maintained that women could become as learned and accomplished as men (Dunton, *Supplement* 24; Gildon, *Oracle* 382-83), and entertained questions like "Whether Sappho or Mrs. Behn were the b[est] Poetess?" (5.13, Jan. 12, 1691 [1692]). Further, it indirectly encouraged women to write poetry: the Athenian Society encouraged "the Ingenious of Either Sex" to write to them in verse by proposing to answer any poetical queries with verse of the same form. ²² Lonsdale notes that "Elizabeth Singer Rowe . . . [was able to] anticipate the opportunities offered by the developing periodical press at a later period by sending . . . large quantities of her verse for anonymous publication . . . in John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury*" (xxii).

Although the publication of female poets did not begin in earnest until the 1730s, women were beginning to publish verse right at the beginning of the eighteenth century. At least one of Charles Gildon's collections (1701) contained poems written by women other than Aphra Behn (Anne Finch, Mrs. Wharton); *The Nine Muses*, a collection of "Poems written by nine several ladies upon the death of the late famous John Dryden," appeared in 1700 and contained "Poems by Mrs. Manley, Lady Pierce, Mrs. Field [Sarah Fyge Egerton], Mrs. Pix, Mrs. C. Trotter [Catherine Trotter Cockburn], and Mrs. D. E." In the 1750s, there was a spate of books printed about women who write poetry. ²³ Among them, George Ballard's *Memoirs of Several Ladies* (1752) was printed 27 years before the appearance of the first volumes of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. Volumes called *Poems on Several Occasions* ²⁴ which were published before 1780 were written by: Katherine Philips (1664; 1667 [rpt. 1669, 1678, 1710]; 1743); Aphra Behn (1684), Mary Barber (1734,

rpt. 1735), Mary Chudleigh (1703, rpt. 1709, 1722), Elizabeth Carter (1738; 1762, rpt. 1766, 4th ed. 1789), Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1751), Sarah Fyge Egerton (1703, rpt. 1706), Mary Jones (1750), Mary Leapor (1748, 1751), Anne Killigrew (1686), Mary Monck (1716), Margaret Lucas Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1653, rpt. 1664, 1668), Laetitia Pilkington (1748-1754), Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1696, rpt. 1736, 1738, 1759; 1736, rpt. six times in England by 1759, three times in the United States by 1784; 1734, rpt. 4 times by 1749, enlarged and rpt. 1750, 1756, 1772), Eliza Fowler Haywood (1724), and Joan Philips (1679, rpt. 1682), just to name a few. There were so many women writers, and enough people interested in them, that a collection of poetry devoted exclusively to women poets was published in 1755. ²⁵ This poetry was not just published but discussed: the poetry of Mary Leapor, a cookmaid who died in 1746, for example, was noted, reprinted and discussed throughout the second half of the century, by Samuel Richardson, Christopher Smart in *The Midwife* (1750), John Duncombe in *The Femininead* (1754), Alexander Dyce in *Specimens of British Poetesses* (1827), Frederic Rowton in *The Female Poets of Great Britain* (1848); by the *Monthly Review* (1749, 1751), *The Lady's Poetical Magazine* (1782), *Gentleman's Magazine* (1784), and *Blackwood's Magazine* (1837). ²⁶

It is within this context that high romantic writers wrote: they were responding to debates over "natural genius" in these women writers. ²⁷ Ruminations over the problem of natural poetry first took place in discussing women writers who were considered "natural" because uneducated. "Stephen Duck," Landry writes,

was presented to the world with a long covering narrative by the Rev. Joseph Spence, making much of his class privations and his thus nearly incredible poetic genius. . . . Duck's female counterparts [i.e., female laboring-class poets] . . . come down to us [as] . . . the curious productions of a 'natural genius,' a working-class prodigy . . . As Morag Shiach has

observed, polite interest in this poetry in the eighteenth century lay in the extent to which it could "support particular theories about the relations between nature and poetic writing, rather than in any desire to re-evaluate the cultural and social role of the peasantry." ²⁸

"And my thoughts natur'ly fall into Rime," a seventeenth-century poet, Hester Wyat wrote, "Rude and unpolish't from my pen they flow / So artless I my native tongue scarce know"—I'm so natural, she says sarcastically, I barely know how to talk. ²⁹

The romantics inherit the debate about natural diction on this ground, and perhaps a lot of what they say about "effeminacy" is an attempt to change the ground. It is sexist for Wordsworth to speak of poets as if they were only men, and only spoke to men. Yet in the Preface and Appendix to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth uses "men" most often to mean ordinary people. What is the political valence of calling common people "men" in a culture which is in the process of feminizing the lower classes? In a culture which insists that unlettered female (and lower-class) male poets are "natural geniuses," effeminate, and interesting not because of their poetry but only because of the oddity that they, as lower-class men and women, have the capacity to produce poetry at all—is it sexist *then* to assert that natural diction is manly? is it patronizing *then* to idealize rustic speech as poetic? Potentially not. Attributing manliness to ordinary language and defending it as poetic is potentially in fact feminist and anti-classist: when "feminine" is a pejorative term, it may be feminist to call a female "masculine"; it may be anti-classist to resist the feminization of the lower classes by calling them real men, and their language the language of real thought. Studying the debates surrounding laboring-class, male and female poets changes—dramatically, I would say—the meaning of Wordsworth's prefaces.

But studying laboring-class, female poets provides an objective basis for arguments about romantic ideology in

another way as well. Ann Yearsley, also known as the "milkwoman from Bristol" (Landry 120) was first patronized and later dropped by Hannah More (16-22). Blake's "Nurse's Song" in *Innocence* and his "Nurses Song" in *Experience* would be profitably discussed in the context of Yearsley's *To Mira, On the Care of Her Infant* (1796).³⁰ Landry discusses Yearsley's poem in connection with the Blessed Babe passage of *The Prelude*, showing how these idealizations of mothers (Yearsley's from the mother's point of view, Wordsworth's from the child's) depend upon the exclusion of the laboring-class, hired "mother," the wetnurse (264), who then returns as an evil threat to the child in Yearsley's poem and perhaps, I would say, in the nurses' songs written by Blake.

Yearsley, Wordsworth, and Blake all participate in and resist this consolidation of the bourgeois family by "abjecting the lower-class nursemaid," visible to us in Yearsley's poem because of the blatant contradiction between her attack on laboring-class hirelings and her own self-construction, in other poems, as "Lactilla, the savage milkwoman and resentful antagonist of the propertied classes" (Landry 266). Here one can see how listening to the voices of laboring-class female poets, however contradictory, can bring about greater objectivity in the study of canonical poets: classist and antifeminist exclusions become especially visible when they deprive the author of a place in her own poem; Yearsley's *oeuvre* thereby provides a model for such exclusions, and resistances to them, that they might be visible elsewhere.

IV. How can I be defiled when I reflect thy image pure?³¹

One might expect that neoclassical rhetoric, with its obvious privileging of the upper classes—its "overcultured" allusiveness and diction; its tendency, for example, to represent the lower classes satirically, as clowns or buffoons, or to exclude them from view

altogether—would be inhospitable to laboring-class poets. However, Roger Lonsdale and Margaret Doody describe an entirely different state of affairs. "In view of the rising flood of publications by both women and undereducated men" in the 1730s, Lonsdale says, "(the situation deplored by Pope in the *Dunciad*), it is clear that the high ideals of Augustanism, 'polite' taste and 'correctness,' did little to inhibit many writers and their readers" (xxvii). In fact, Doody argues persuasively that Augustan satire and neoclassical style enabled lower-class and middling women writers of both the early and late eighteenth century to find a voice ("Swift"; review). While one would think that learning to imitate educated, upper-class modes would silence the interests of "these laboring women, these upstarts, these cookmaids, laundresses, field hands, and women of obscure parentage" (5) discussed by Landry, it does not. They are able to use neoclassical conventions for subversive purposes:

Writing verse that ventriloquizes and thus challenges the verse forms and values of mainstream culture is a way of speaking out, and of altering social discourse. This is ventriloquism in the sense employed by Margaret Doody and others, that is, ventriloquism with a subversive twist. It is as if the dummy did not merely serve to demonstrate the master's skill at speaking through another's body, but took on a life of its own, began to challenge the master by altering the master's text. (6)

Thus, pastoral poetry became a vehicle for class protest as can be seen in Stephen Duck's *The Thresher's Labour* discussed by Raymond Williams and in works by the female poets Landry discusses, despite (or perhaps because of) the tendency of pastoral poetry to obscure labor from view. As Williams has shown in *The Country and the City* (32), the pastoral form represses agrarian labor by deploying images of an edenic nature freely furnishing forth by its own agency a bountiful store. The pastoral thus idealizes class oppression out of existence (Williams 32). However, in *The Thresher's Labour* (1736), Duck put the laborers' "toil"

back into the pastoral landscape (Williams 32, 88). Mary Collier's *The Woman's Labour: An Epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck* (1739) shows that female labor is doubly invisible in the pastoral: even Duck himself, in his protesting modification of that tradition, excludes women's labor from view. Collier "reformulat[ed] the plebeian georgic mode in the service of laboring women" (Landry 76) by putting female labor back into the landscape of pastoral poetry.

In detailed analyses of Collier's use of Duck and Mary Leapor's use of Pope, Landry demonstrates that writing was for these women and others like them "a site of resistance." Leapor was probably dismissed from service at Weston Hall for her writing. One of her poems describes a servant's defiance of her master's injunction to stop writing. The poem imitates Pope's *First Satire of the Second Book of Horace*, which represents his refusal to stop writing; Pope's poem "enables Leapor's defiance, and perhaps her dismissal from service" (Landry 102). The examples of Collier and Leapor justify Landry's assumption of the following premise:

[W]riting that has been dismissed as derivative, conventional, or imitative needs now to be reread for its dialogic, innovative, and critical possibilities, for its muted protests and attempts at subversion, its curtailed yet incorrigible desires. . . . If Collier turns the georgic to plebeian feminist protest against male workers' scorn and refusal even to "see" women's labor as productive, Leapor turns the pastoral dialogue, the neoclassical epistle and the country-house poem to surprisingly unconventional ends. (7, 13)

Yet the radical potential of these poems is not always simply available, as in the case of Collier's insistence that women laborers work hard, and Leapor's demand that she be allowed to write. Despite a female poet's conscious desire to adopt bourgeois values, as in the case of Yearsley's poem on mothering, her text "tell[s] a different story, of the politicization of the laboring-class writer encountering bourgeois subjectivity and making a contradic-

tory, sometimes radical accommodation to it" (21): the poem remains a site of conflict despite the poet's conscious desire to adopt the values she portrays. In the case of the female poet's direct appropriation of conventions and male poet's voices for her own ends, for the sake of protesting her condition, or in the case of her attempt to fit herself into those conventions and voices, with contradictory results—in either case, "[b]eing ravished by the master's text means empowerment for the unknown female poet" (50):

For the female laboring poet, transference on to a poetic text often involves a class-conscious dynamic compounded of ambition and humility, eroticism and homage. Ravished by the beauty of a poetic discourse which is alien to her, and from which she is often specifically excluded, yet ironically aware of the space occupied within that discourse by subservient female figures in the form of muses, she raids and ravishes by both praising and appropriating what she admires. (46)

The ravished laboring female poet does not "reflect [the master's] image pure," but, on the contrary, ravishes it right back; her desire to ravish "the great male bard" (Landry 46) precisely enables her to use traditional literary forms to articulate her own demands.

Both Landry and Abelow describe a relation of desire between plebeians and the fathers—Wesley on the one hand, Pope and Duck on the other—which enables British plebeians to manipulate a form—be it Methodist spirituality, or neoclassical conventions—in order to express their needs. The stunning results, Abelow's and Landry's access to histories previously unavailable to us and the potential for greater objectivity in analyses of canonical poets provided by these histories, offer a twofold lesson to romanticist new historical critics, articulated by Levinson in her retrospective on the limitations and achievements of new historicism.

New historicists certainly declare their partisanship in battles against other contemporary critics, but they do not articulate it in their analyses of the past. Landry and Abelow are firmly on

the side of the lower classes whose protests against and refusals of sexual, gender, and class oppression they are determined to recover. New historicists are not: in trying not to impose a predetermined point of view on the past, they evince what Cohen has called a "commitment to arbitrary connectedness" of texts and events; as it turns out, Levinson says, this refusal to use "some . . . model of epochal relatedness," be it "a dynamic concept of ideology on the one hand, [or] of structural determination on the other" (Levinson 20), constitutes a refusal to take sides, a refusal to decide whether the lower-classes effectively subvert or are always already contained by the dominant culture (Cohen 34). By their partisanship, Abelow and Landry give us objective history, whereas many romantic new historicists do not. About the failure of new historicists to take sides, Levinson concludes:

It is precisely our failure to articulate a critical field that sights *us* even as we compose *it*, that brings back the positivism, subjectivism and relativism of the [old] historicist methodology. (20)

The new historicists' refusal of partisanship with their objects of study leaves them out of the objective field of view—they are making another stab at the old positivist view of objectivity, unwittingly trying to deny that objects can only be viewed from a perspective. Instead they use their objects of study in an imaginary battle. This imaginary partisanship of us against them vitiates the history they would present.

Second, Abelow and Landry do not equate representation or form with ideology. Both of them reject, for example, Thompson's assessment "of working-class religion, particularly Methodism and evangelicalism, in the latter part of the eighteenth century as 'the chiasm of despair.'"³² Mary Collier writes poetry both to articulate "resignation to continued servitude" and to protest the occlusion of female labor; this "may strike us as paradoxical," Landry says, "but that sense of paradox marks the difference of our historical moment from hers" (76). Gallagher has shown

that it is part of our historical moment to be suspicious over whether "certain forms of subjectivity that [feel] oppositional" actually are oppositional. Landry and Abelow would say that there is something to be gained first in assuming that oppressed people of the past had the power, if not to oppose outright, at least to resist and modify the terms of their oppression, and second in figuring out what transferences, what "loves," enabled them to do so. Partisanship is necessary to an objective recovery of the past, but it must be partisanship with the subjects of histories so far neglected, not the partisanship of us against them, now against then, critics of ideology against an always already ideological literary form.

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¹ I am indebted to Michael Fischer for this phrase.

² On McGann's misuse of the term "radical," and his subsequent misconception of the kind of radical Keats could have been, silenced or not, see Fry 211-14.

³ McGann thus opens *Social Values and Poetic Acts* by declaring the genius of Paul de Man. De Man comes perilously close to connecting the aim of rhetorical theory (revealing that linguistic structures are undecidable) with ideology critique in his essay "The Resistance to Theory" (11). However, it is a mistake to associate "undecidability" with the successful suspension of meaningfulness and thus to overcoming ideological closure. Dan Miller fully analyzes this mistake in his review of *Unnam'd Forms* (120). Miller points out that the post-structuralist notion of the incommensurate is often unwittingly

used to stand, not for the problem of meaning, but rather for the most meaningful of meanings: incommensurability is often asserted to be a meaninglessness which is absolutely significant, as it is here in McGann's case, where it signifies the refusal of ideology for the sake of history. It is impossible to communicate meaninglessness or formlessness, as deconstructionists readily recognize; meaning reconstitutes itself faster than any deconstructor can trace out its dispersal.

⁴ On the young, overtly radical Wordsworth's relation to Burke, see Chandler, "Burke Blamed and Praised" (*Wordsworth's Second Nature* 15-30). On how Burke and Paine collude in economic ideology, see Aers 156-59. On how their "shared socio-economic ideology" leads to "collusions of discourse," see UEA English Studies Group (Punter, Aers, Clark, Cook, Elsasser) 87-91. On how Burke and Paine collude in revolutionary concepts of language, see Smith 38-39. On More and Wollstonecraft, see Meyers 211, 201, qtd. in Landry 257-58.

⁵ This is significantly not true in Blake studies, though some Blake scholars may have experienced marginalization by the discipline as a result.

⁶ Blake, *Jerusalem* 57: 8-9 (E 207).

⁷ In 1777, John Cartwright asserted that there were "6 million souls" in England (33). The figure for the year 1801 was 8.5 million.

⁸ McGann, *Romantic Ideology* 32, 38. "McGann is much harder on twentieth-century critics of romanticism than he is on the romantics themselves," Fischer 34.

⁹ On the increasing insistence, throughout the eighteenth century, that "sexual intercourse" be defined as cross-gender intercourse for reproduction, and on the possible reasons for such a change, see Ablove, "Some Speculations."

¹⁰ Keith Thomas has similarly analyzed the extent to which Puritan sects of the civil war period unwittingly provided justification and means for "female emancipation."

¹¹ Abrams calls it a "militant quietism" (73-74), but it is quietism nonetheless.

¹² David Garcia pointed out to me the connection between Thompson's "Disenchantment or Default?" and Abrams's "The Spirit of the Age."

¹³ See Williams, *Marxism*, for a definition of "hegemony" (108-14) and for an account of ideological change which takes account of shifts in power ("Dominant, Residual, and Emergent," 121-27).

¹⁴ Kramnick contests the picture of Burke as the "father of conservatism" (4) and argues that historians writing before the late 1970s have used Burke's alleged "conservatism" in order to express cold-war era, anti-communist sentiment (3). Just

as Chandler uses Burke as an image of contemporary conservatism, literary critics begin to wage present battles when discussing in an a-historical manner Burke's anti-"theory" sentiment, so vividly expressed in the *Reflections*. They forget that Burke attacks the systematizing impulse of Enlightenment philosophy, the very rationalism assaulted by Derrida and Lacan.

¹⁵ That is, where "spiritual development" does not automatically imply an individual quest, as it did to earlier critics, Abrams among them.

¹⁶ See Simpson on Wordsworth's "dramatic method" (*Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* 7) and Wolfson on how Wordsworth "stages . . . his struggles with historical self-awareness" (435); her concept of Wordsworth's "interrogative mode" (439-40) may fit into an account of theatrical lyric soliloquy. Ablove mentions "Jean-Christophe Agnew's observations [in Agnew's *Worlds Apart*] on the revival of what he calls a 'theatrical perspective' among the literate classes in eighteenth-century England" (Ablove 106n42). On eighteenth-century and romantic theatricality, see also Marshall, *Figure of Theater and Surprising Effects of Sympathy*. On theatricality and Wordsworth, see Marshall, "The Eye-Witnesses of *The Borderers*," Parker, and Jacobus.

¹⁷ Barish 159. Morton Paley suggested to me that Methodist anti-theatricality lies firmly within this tradition, which has its foundations in Plato; on the "Platonic foundations" of anti-theatrical sentiment, see Barish 5-37.

¹⁸ William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyric Ballads* 138. These two lines do not appear in the 1800 version, but rather in the much expanded Preface of 1802.

¹⁹ The connection has been noted by scholars interested in Finch. Thus, Roger Lonsdale points out that in the only anthology of poetry which Wordsworth compiled, an anthology compiled for Lady Mary Lowther in 1819 and not published until 1905, "seventeen of the fifty poems he included were by Lady Winchelsea. In October 1829, [Wordsworth] told Alexander Dyce that he was 'especially partial' to [Finch] and had 'perused her Poems frequently'. A few months later he sent Dyce detailed comments on her verse and in May 1830 wrote that 'her style in rhyme is often admirable, chaste, tender, and vigorous; and entirely free from sparkle, antithesis and . . . over-culture'" (qtd. in Lonsdale 6).

When Wordsworth wrote to Dr. Robert Anderson in 1814 asking him, on behalf of himself, Coleridge and Southey, to expand his edition of English poetry, he asked him to include poems by "Lady Winchelsea"

(154). In 1829, Wordsworth tentatively approached Dionysius Lardner, compiler of *The Cabinet Cyclopaedia of Eminent Literary and Scientific Men*, with the idea of contributing "an Account of the Deceased Poetesses of Great Britain—with an Estimate of their Works," but decided not to undertake the project (4). Later that year, he asked Alexander Dyce for the "honor of being consulted by [him]" on a second edition of *Selections from the Poetry of English Ladies*. "By accident, I learned lately that you had made a Book of Extracts, which I had long wished for an opportunity and industry to execute myself" (157).

²⁰ Early in the *Athenian Mercury's* history, women were invited to send questions by a change in the journal's title. To the original title, "The Athenian Gazette or Casuistical Mercury, Resolving all the most Nice and Curious Questions Propos'd by the Ingenious," Dunton added "of Either Sex" (2.17, April 19, 1691, advertisement; see also the title page to vol. 2). In the eighteenth volume, the *Mercury* announced that it would devote papers published on "the first Tuesday in every month" to answering only questions received "from the Fair Sex" (2.18, May 23, 1691); other papers answered questions from both sexes.

Jonathan Swift thought that there was indeed a society of "far-exalted men" in charge of the journal ("Ode to the Athenian Society," line 60, 48); Swift "was put out," Rogers says in his note to the poem, upon discovering that he had really written his Ode to Dunton, "sole editor" of the *Mercury* (Rogers 604).

²¹ 5.3, Dec. 8, 1691. The *Mercury's* protestations on behalf of the "other" sex seem to be serious—the Society argues very well that "the soul of Woman" cannot be "inferiour to the Soul of Man"—but Dunton includes in the paper a letter from a woman asking how to cure her corns, which provides the *Mercury* with the opportunity to indulge in a little misogyny: one of the "many weighty Reasons assigned for this sore Calamity," the Society says sardonically, is that woman is "a Flinty-hearted Creature."

²² Dunton decided upon this procedure 5.1, 1 Dec., 1691; 5.11, 5 Jan., 1691 [1692]. In examining only the first year and a half of *Mercuries*, I was able to find examples of poetical questions which were explicitly written by women in 8.6, 17 Sept., 1692; 8.21, 8 Nov., 1692.

²³ See Ballard, Colman and Thornton, Duncombe, Shiels. Shiels's *Lives* was attributed to Theophilus Cibber; according to Lonsdale, it contained the biographies of 15 women, Anne Finch among them (Lonsdale xxix, 5). Ferguson has noticed

this "mid-century burgeoning of sympathetic male interest in women authors," and adds two more: Thomas Armory's *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1755) and an anonymous *Biographium Feminum* (1766) (Ferguson 359).

²⁴ For variations on this title in specific cases, please see the list of Works Cited.

²⁵ Also, Dodsley's *Collection of Poems* (1748) contained poems by women, and a poetic manifesto, written by Anna Seward's father Thomas, called "The Female Right to Literature" (2.296-302; see Lonsdale xxix).

²⁶ Landry 78. On Samuel Richardson's introduction of Leapor's poetry to Christopher Smart, and on Richardson's letters

about Leapor whose poetry he printed, see Rizzo (24-25).

²⁷ Lonsdale xxvii-xxix; Landry 18-22, 255-56, 262-67.

²⁸ Shiach 6, qtd. in Landry 4.

²⁹ See Greer, ed., 6. This particular poem of Hester Wyatt's may have been published for the first time in Greer's anthology *Kissing the Rod*, but by the time Colman and Thornton published their anthology in 1755, the idea that women poets were natural, unaffected, and uncultivated was common coin (Colman and Thornton, iii-iv; Lonsdale, xxix).

³⁰ Lonsdale was only able to provide an excerpt from the poem; Landry discusses it in great detail, 260-67, especially the figure of the nurse, 266.

³¹ William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* 3: 16 (E 47).

³² Landry 74; see also Abelove 119, qtd. 21-22 above. Landry quotes Thompson's discussion of Joanna Southcott who prophesied during the late 1790s and early 1800s. Thompson sees the evangelism of the earlier eighteenth-century as containing "dormant seeds of political Radicalism"; but for Thompson those seeds remain dormant in Methodism because of John Wesley, without whom "19th-century Non-conformity might have assumed a more intellectual and democratic form" (*The Making of the English Working Class* 36-37).

NEWSLETTER

PLACING AND DISPLACING
ROMANTICISM: THE FOURTH
RESIDENTIAL CONFERENCE OF
THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR
ROMANTIC STUDIES,
UNIVERSITY OF WALES,
BANGOR, 15-18 JULY 1995

The fourth residential conference organized by the British Association for Romantic Studies will be held at the University of Wales, Bangor, 15-18 July 1995. The theme of the conference will be "Placing and Displacing Romanticism." Papers are invited from a wide range of disciplines (art history, history, intellectual history, music, cultural studies, political philosophy, philosophy, etc., as well as literature) on both the literal and figurative aspects of the placing and displacing of romanticism.

Abstracts of papers (around 500 words) should be submitted by 1 October 1994. Confirmation of the program will be issued on 1 March 1995.

Inquiries and offers of papers to:
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els027@bangor

SECRETS OF ETERNITY

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JOB REVIVAL

This summer, the Birmingham Royal Ballet revived Dame Ninette de Valois's *Job* ballet. "Job had not been staged for 20 years. . . . *Job* is distinguished in every respect. Its score by Ralph Vaughan Williams resounds with solemn beauty. . . . At the conclusion of *Job* at the Royal Opera House, there was a moment of silence. It was as if a church service had ended. But hearty applause followed. *Job* is decidedly worth preserving" (*The New York Times*, 26 September 1993).

