

Marxism, Romanticism, Postmodernism: An American Case History

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PROF. J: Then what can it mean, to practice a Marxist literary criticism?

PROF. M.: As an American issue in the postVietnam period, Marxism in literary studies has largely involved the appropriation of a set of interpretive tools of a sociological and historical character. Marxian models set a special privilege upon materialist analyses of culture and society. Investigations of literary and artistic products--even primarily formal or hermeneutical investigations -- require, from a Marxian perspective, detailed study of the social and institutional determinant of cultural practice.

To the degree that Marxian thought has (historically) invested itself in a philosophy of historical determinism, its protocols for studying cultural works have tended to be coherently, sometimes even rigidly, organized. Marxian thought has always been closely tied to teleological, holist, and organic conceptions of human activity. This slant in Marxian thinking has proved significant so far as its American appropriation is concerned. Its holism marries well with some of the synthetic critical trends of mid- and late-twentieth-century American aesthetic theory. I'm thinking here of all the various types of high formalisms -- from Eliot's Neo-classicism to New Critical, structuralist, and psychoanalytic methods.

PROF. J.: In a Marxist view, however, synthetic processes are structured as a dialectic of collisions and contradictions. Classical Marxist theory would therefore incline to display

cultural works -- poems or novels -- as reflections, perhaps even instances, of significant social instabilities or dislocations. There is a liberal American equivalent of those kinds of contradictions that the New Criticism called "ambiguity." And while a clear analogy may be seen between these two ideas ("contradiction" and "ambiguity"), in the end they are just as clearly quite different. Where the one -- ambiguity -- serves to fund stabilities and continuities via what we would call a liberal and pluralist imagination, the other -- contradiction -- has in view instabilities and more or less radical change.

PROF. A.: This all seems a fairly abstract way of coming at your initial question about the practice of, the praxis of, a Marxist criticism.

PROF. M.: Well, if I talk here about "ideas" and "conceptions," I'm trying to describe and partially explain actual institutional behavior. I'm thinking about the ideological practices of certain parts of the American academy and about specific books, essays, and the pedagogical strategies they've produced.

This is important to remember in the context of the American academic scene of the past forty years or so, when we saw the emergence of "deconstruction in America." For the conceptual self-representations of deconstruction often display remarkable congruities with important aspects of Marxian thought. In the period of deconstruction, "ambiguity" and "tension" gave way to "the hermeneutics of suspicion" -- of "repressed contents," of "instabilities," of contradiction. Indeed, Marxian ideas and literary strategies flooded the American academic market in this very period. This is not to say that Marxian thought and deconstruction represent, or imagine themselves to be, congruent movements in recent American literary studies. On the contrary, in fact: for the social and historical orientation of Marxism has generally been despised by the subject-

oriented procedures of deconstruction, while the latter has often been judged simply as a set of textual technologies, more or less useful as technologies, but utterly void of an activist social agenda. Ivory tower shop talk fairly defined by that favorite and ludicrous word: transgressive.

This schematic history is familiar to all of us, I dare say. I give it here only to draw attention to a crucial element in Marxism that I've not yet emphasized, and that your initial question clearly had in mind: Marxism's commitment to fundamental (as opposed to reformist) social change. This commitment is foundational in the precise historical sense that Marxism is a reflection upon capitalist society made from the point of view of people living alienated within that society. A Marxian view is that alienation is class-based, that it is systematic, and that it can only be overcome by a radical transformation of political, social, and economic relations.

Permit me a brief but I hope not irrelevant digression. In the period since the Russian Revolution, the most important and influential Marxian thought did not emerge from that originary "Marxist" and socialist society, the Soviet Union. For the past eighty years Marxian thought has flourished, as it did from the first, in various pre- or parasocialist societies: the Western societies of Europe still dominated by capitalism or even by fascism, the third world, China. The exceptions to this rule – most spectacularly, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his circle -- operated at the periphery of Soviet cultural life. Their work came into play only after the brief and blessed time of Mayakovsky.

Reactionary commentators observing this situation take it as the sign of a god that failed, definitive proof of the poverty of Marxian theory and practice. But a "Marxian" -- as opposed to a "Soviet" -- view of the matter would be, has been, very different. For it is

arguable, and it has been argued (by New Left Marxists), that to the extent the Soviet Union organized itself -- bureaucratized itself -- against change and its own social contradictions, it had merely abandoned its revolutionary programs. Trotsky and Luxemburg stand at the head of a long and sometimes tragic red line that found its culmination in 1989.

In the late-twentieth-century emergence of a significant body of Marxian thought in America, then, an important question arises and must be faced: how does the Marxian critical imperative operate in the theater of American pluralism? Have Marxian ideas been appropriated to the American scene as a set of research tools and protocols for literary scholars, or do they involve a radical critique of the American theater of pluralism, and perhaps even a program of fundamental social and institutional change?

PROF. J.: That's exactly my question. And the problem strikes particularly at the work of certain Marxist-influenced critics and scholars whose work focuses on the modern period (i.e., the period which saw the rise of the novel, the institutionalization of Kantian-based aesthetics, and the emergence of American culture). This is of the period of triumphant capitalist development, early to late (so-called). For Marxist criticism, in that context, necessarily finds itself in an acutely problematical relation to its own materials, subject matter, and procedures.

I can explain this best by instancing the rise of "new historicism" in literary studies. This general rubric locates a heterogeneous group of academics who operate in sociohistorical frames of reference. Marxist-influenced critics and scholars have sometimes been associated with this phenomenon, but to the degree that they embrace Marxist ideas and procedures, to that extent they have generally refused to be included in

the designation. Marjorie Levinson explains this refusal by observing that "historicisms," whether the "old" nineteenth-century kind or the "new" types (like those associated with the journal *Representations*), do not characteristically make a problem of their own subject matter and critical procedures.ⁱ Historicism, new or old, is fundamentally a structural and formal set of operations; Marxist criticism, by contrast, is not Marxist if it is not dialectical.

Let's not forget: Marxism is a set of tools and ideas that emerged in a critical relation to its own immediate context (capitalism). Its founding years mark the period of its so-to-speak "happy consciousness," the period when Marxist studies underwrote themselves with the systematic formalisms appropriated from Hegelian categories. But Marxism, the critical method that included history in its procedures, would eventually find itself included in history -- included in ways it had not been able to imagine, and least of all foresee. As a consequence, Marxist thought from approximately 1930 to 1990 was driven to operate at a metacritical level. A set of descriptive, analytical, and problem-solving tools for studying human beings and societies in their historical relations, Marxist thought was "in the last analysis" forced to include itself in its own critical equations. Marxism, like its nemesis Christianity, turned out a variable value as much as any other. PROF. M.: Yes, and this understanding was forced by Marxism's own most privileged category, the experience of history. Unfolding events brought profound theoretical crises to Marxism, crises that proved a theoretical boon to its subsequent New Left developments. From the heterologies of Bakhtin and the Frankfurt School to the (so-called) post-Marxism of Bourdieu and Baudrillard, and de Certeau, Marxian thought developed an astonishing range of critical skills for the study of cultural phenomena.

These tools and skills have been widely appropriated in American literary studies, and not only during the past forty years or so. American critical work in the 1930s and 1940s – the great period of the New Criticism – was far from abandoning Marxist ideas and commitments. F. O. Matthieson, Kenneth Burke, Francis Cornford: these dominant figures, as well as many others, achieved eminence because of the critical power of their Marxian inheritance.

Nonetheless, in America a question persists, and never more so than in this continuing present of ours: has the implementation of Marxian critical strategies become a new kind of formalism, simply another "method" or "critical structure" in the market of literary studies?

PROF. J.: Clearly the answer must be yes. Look at the textbooks and anthologies used in "Literary Theory" classes! One finds a pluralist representation of the situation quite common now -- in the way departments display themselves to prospective students and faculty, in the organization of courses in criticism and theory, in the eclectic (one might even say balkanized, or pragmatic) conceptualization of critical activities generally. Like feminism, reader response, deconstruction, new historicism, queer and ecological studies, etc., Marxian studies represent a procedural option one may choose to identify with (as a move in one's personal goals within the educational institution), or as a set of critical strategies one may decide to employ or not, depending on the circumstances. Indeed, as modern Marxism has deliberately underprivileged itself, as it has laid itself under its own historical critique, it has been opened to liberalizing processes.

PROF. M.: But in that event, as I've said, Marxist work in America has raised a difficult problem for itself. It is a serious question now whether the pluralization of Marxist

thought is part of a self-critical investigative procedure, an opening of its own doors of perception, or whether such pluralization entails an abandonment of critical reflection altogether, a turning away from -- even a tacit acceptance of -- the real contradictions and disfigurements in American society, and a concentration upon merely formal and subjective matters (for example, the development of various technical skills and methods, or what we call literary criticism; and the pursuit of the theology of the text, or what we call literary theory).

PROF. A.: A particularly acute form of this problem emerges in the work of Professor Jerome McGann -- an American scholar whose work centers in that pivotal modernist moment, the romantic period. Unlike Fredric Jameson and or Terry Eagleton -- the one primarily a theoretician, the other primarily a critic of culture -- McGann has never been anything but a critic and scholar in the narrowest sense.

PROF. M. Given his editorial and bibliographical work, perhaps even a pedant.

PROF. A. Indeed. His interpretive work characteristically gravitates around readings of particular texts, interpretations whose models come from the period of the New Criticism. These interpretations, moreover, are grounded in sets of detailed and often highly technical matters -- scholarly, archival, not to say dryas dust materials drawn forth in order to highlight those sociohistorical aspects of a text occluded at the surface of its various illusions. Jameson and Eagleton generate literary interpretations, but they do not worry their documents with the often microscopic attention that McGann insists upon. That McGann is also a scholarly editor, an editorial theorist, and a textual scholar (in the technical sense of that technical term) is not surprising. Besides, if his work shows the marked influence of Bakhtin, Benjamin, and Habermas -- seminal figures for all current

Marxist studies -- his scholarly face is revealed in two other unusual, but probably even more important, influences. The Italian Marxists Galvano della Volpe and Sebastiano Timpanaro are invoked at crucial moments in his work, and both of these critics are themselves, like McGann, distinctly scholastic figures -- persons who used to be called, and who are still often called, philologists (at least in the traditional European university system, both Eastern and Western).

So McGann's work is often highly technical and specialized. Adorno might have scorned it as positivist. Yet because McGann unequivocally situates his work in Marxian terms, it's fair to ask in what its Marxism could consist.

This problem can be illuminated, I think, by beginning with one of his foundational ideas: his social theory of "the text." McGann's view here cuts sharply across, and against, the theory of the text that stretches from the New Criticism, on one hand, and Barthesian and deconstructive theory on the other. McGann does not move into an interpretive operation without having first analyzed "the text" into three distinct phases or aspects. As he puts it, one must distinguish "the text" (or the poem as a purely linguistic event) from the "version" (or the immediate and integral physical object "through which" the "text" is being executed), and make yet a further distinction of "text" and "version" from the "work" (this term to stand for some more global constitution of any writing activity).ⁱⁱ

These distinctions arise from his documentary microstudies. The critical and interpretive exposures that flow from his procedures are clearly marked by these (dare I say old fashioned?) philological pursuits.

Correlative with this "theory of the text" is a set of investigative methods designed to clarify the literary event even further. According to McGann, literary works are best conceived as events rather than as objects, as acts of representation rather than as representations. I shall return to this important idea later. For the moment we should observe that this eventual conception of literary works entails certain specific investigative procedures. Criticism is structured as a kind of double helix, an interconnected investigation of both the textual history of the work and its reception history. Interpretation begins as a set of extremely detailed descriptions of the literary work at every level of its structure and every phase of its development. For McGann, these would be, if they could be, exhaustive. To display the operations of this double helix -- to observe the historical interaction of its two strands (textual history and reception history) -- is to raise the literary work out of a historical amnesia.

These operations, according to McGann, always and inevitably reveal a Bakhtinian heteroglossia. The textual history imbeds different and often conflicting voices even at its most primitive levels (at the linguistic level and at the level of the work's originary, "authorial" constitution). These "textual" voices only multiply further as the work moves through its later developments -- through its many subsequent material constitutions, its many "versions" (as McGann calls them). A congruent and interactive situation prevails in the work's reception history, which is marked by a similar multiplicity of voices. For McGann, to expose these complex and interacting sociohistories is in itself a critical act, an act of remembering.

One last detail of this general project should be clarified. For McGann, the complex dialectic of social subjects living and dead is ideological at every point, with

"ideology" here understood in the classical Marxian sense of "false consciousness." As he puts it in a recent formulation, "the body of literature is a body of falsehood" whose function is Blakean: to "Give a Body to Falshood that it may be cast off for ever."ⁱⁱⁱ The phrase "for ever" is there understood as a process that goes on "for ever," *in perpetuum* rather than *in eternum*. Thus if he says, after Arnold, that literature embodies "the best that has been known and thought in the world," he also says, after Benjamin, that "every document of civilization is at the same time a document of barbarism."

Now, to the degree that this structure of thought confronts Kantian-based conceptions of art and literature, it clearly represents a radical departure. In this view literary work (including those specific events we call "literary works") is not disinterested, is not aesthetic, is not only subjective. Furthermore, it is not even integral and self-consistent. All such work is in every case, in all such works, marked not merely by the classic Marxian "contradiction," it also displays random elements, as well as patterns of congruence and incongruence, consequence and inconsequence. The structure is much closer to what mathematicians call "fractal," a form of "chaos" in the technical sense of that term.

This imagination of works of imagination as "chaotic" -- as eventual forms marked equally, and contradictorily, by order and randomness -- institutes a radical critique of the dominant Western and capitalist ideas about art and literature over the past two hundred years. It is a theory of literature, moreover, as we have seen, deeply in debt to the entire history of Marxian thought. But is it Marxist? The problem is not so much a theoretical one, that McGann's thought contravenes certain (apparently essential) Marxist ideas about the organic and dialectical structure of literary works, and about the

historically determinate character of every social event, including that social event we call poetry or literature. These ideas are certainly contravened by McGann, whose subjects of study display at every point both determinacy and indeterminacy, organic form and arbitrary ornament, consciousness and nonconsciousness. Rather, the problem arises as a kind of metadeterminacy that appears to govern the immediate social subject, the specific current acts of critical reflection. This is not the Hegelian determinacy of the progress of the history of consciousness, so cherished by classical Marxist thought. It is rather the determinacy of atomization and randomness -- the immobilization of the social subject in face of an indeterminacy (the multiply-voiced social text) that will never yield to consciousness. "Experience always outruns conception,"^{iv} he has observed. The thought might be Trotskyite, and Marxian to that extent, were it not that he discounts the interpretive adequacy of conceptual schemas far more than Trotsky himself ever did.

The question then arises -- why does this remark not simply translate into Yeats's decadent reprise upon Shelley: "The best lack all conviction while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity"?

McGann argues frequently against that passivist (not pacifist) theory of literature which, in Auden's famous revisionist (and inaccurate) formulation, declares that "poetry makes nothing happen." On the contrary, for McGann "Poetry is a deed of language," or in an alternative formulation: "poems are acts of communication." Consequently, critical reflection on poetry is an effort to declare not what poems mean, but "what they are doing in saying what they say."^v But such a view surely contradicts McGann's correlative ideas about "Art as Experience," for poetic acts (including the acts of criticism) cannot possibly know what they are doing in saying what they say. They cannot because "experience

always outruns conception," which is itself a condition predicated by the originary Bakhtinian insights into the multiplied voices and histories speaking through and occupying "the texts."

PROF. J.: Well if "contradiction" is to be the criterion by which we judge the adequacy of thought, then we will have to give up thinking.

PROF. A.: It's not the "contradictions" of McGann's work that present a problem, it's the atomized and indeterminate -- the "chaotic" -- situation which his kind of "contradiction" fosters. In classical Marxist thought, "contradiction" is a field of dynamic instabilities that develop linearly and progressively, in a synthetic operation. In McGann, contradiction appears as a set of unsolvable nonlinear equations, equations for which there are no integrals. McGann's theory therefore maps a field of dynamic change that exhibits determinateness but not determinability.

PROF. J.: I don't understand mathematics. Can you change your metaphor, can you speak in English?

PROF. A.: Within certain limits defined by the initial materials, literary works can mean -- can be made to mean -- anything. In more practical terms, the uses to which they are put, the tasks they perform in society, cannot be determined, for good or for ill. As they tell the truth, it is a truth that may or may not set you free.

PROF. J.: What is this, Neo-Kantianism? The work of art as "disinterested," as "the still point in the turning world"? The view that poetry and art are nonideological hardly seems to me a Marxist idea, and it's certainly not McGann's idea. To regard literary work as a praxis, a "deed of language" -- which he does -- clearly entails an ideological function.

PROF. M.: But *whose* deed is it? Your exchange here takes me back to what Ms. A. was saying about poetry as an act moaning round with many voices. The great American scholar Milman Parry once described how he proposed to deal with that kind of situation: "I make for myself a picture of great detail." I recall that McGann has appropriated Parry's graphical metaphor several times in his work. But I also remember that he makes an interesting alteration to it: he removes the first person syntax, thereby keeping the concept of the "picture of great detail," but refusing to declare the picture to be a purely subjective creation.^{vi} This refusal seems to define for him the objective status of literary activity. The literary work thus comes to appear not merely as an object, the thing "fixed and dead," as Coleridge once described the "object as object." It's rather a complex -- a multiply-voiced subject of study interacting dialectically with immediate criticism, that other multiply-voiced subject engaged in the critical process of literary work. He makes me think of Robert Burns's "To a Louse", a favorite poem of his, as I recall. Everyone in the discourse field is seeing everyone else as others see them.

This seems to me the object of McGann's criticism: to represent, or remember, that social subject, to perpetuate its activity. His literary criticism, in particular the set-piece acts of interpretation focusing on specific works, seem to me allegories -- extended figures -- of his social subject, the social text. And I set before you here, by way of illustration, one of his classic interpretive allegories. We might call such works not "Allegories of Reading," after de Man, but "Allegories of Communicative Exchange."

Byron's "Fare Thee Well!"

by Jerome J. McGann^{vii}

As is well known, Byron addressed this notorious poem to his wife at a volatile time during the marriage separation controversies which stretched over the first five months of 1816.^{viii} It descends to us largely through one line of interpretation, where it is read as a *cri de coeur* from a heartbroken husband. This is the way the poem was read by many people in 1816. Madame de Stael, for instance, and Sir Francis Burdett, and various reviewers all read it this way and praised it extravagantly.^{ix} And Wordsworth read it this way as well, only he anticipated the common later judgment that the poem is hopelessly mawkish: "disgusting in sentiment, and in execution contemptible. ... Can worse doggerel be written ... ?"^x

But another, very different reading sprang up when the poem began circulating in 1816, like tares among the wheat of that first reading. Byron's friend Moore -- who would later endorse the sentimental theory of the poem -- was at first deeply suspicious of "the sentiment that could, at such a moment, indulge in such verses."^{xi} Moore did not elaborate on his suspicions, but others did. The reviewer of *The Prisoner of Chillon and Other Poems* in the *Critical Review* of November 1816 paused to reflect on the earlier "domestic" poem: for many who disapproved most of his lordship's ... publication of his "Farewell" address, as inflicting a parting and lasting pang upon his lady, thought that the lines were most delightfully pathetic, and wondered how a man, who shewed he had so little heart, could evince such feeling. They did not know how easy it was for a person of his lordship's skill to fabricate neatly-turned phraseology, and for a person of his lordship's ingenuity to introduce to advantage all the common-places of affection: the

very excellence of that poem in these particulars, to us and to others, was a convincing proof that its author had much more talent than tenderness.”^{xii}

As it happens, Anabella herself, the person to whom "Fare Thee Well!" was most directly addressed, read the poem in just this insidious way. It seemed to her yet another instance of Byron's "talent for equivocation . . . of [which] I have had many proofs in his letters.”^{xiii} On 13 February, a month before Byron wrote this poem, she explained this "talent" further and pointed out that she learned about it from Byron himself:

I should not have been more deceived than I was by his letters, if he had not pointed out to me in similar ones addressed to others, the deepest design in words that appeared to have none. On this he piques himself-and also on being able to write such letters as will convey different, or even opposite sentiments to the person who receives them & to a stranger." "Every day," she added, "proves deeper art" in her husband. What she most feared was "this ambiguity of Language in the Law," that it would give Byron an advantage over her in the separation proceedings.

Anabella went on to add two observations which are equally interesting and shrewd. Byron's skill in manipulating language reminded her of a passage in *Lara* (4-9) in which the deportment of that Byronic hero is exposed as a text of such ambiguity that, reading it, one cannot be certain if it signals a heart filled with "the calmness of the good" or with a "Guilt grown old in desperate hardihood." And she added that this skill with words was one "he is afraid of" himself.^{xiv}

In a good recent essay W. Paul Elledge has revived a variant of this insidious reading of "Fare Thee Well!" The poem, he argues, is "a portrait of indecision, taut with antithetical tensions"; it "charts ... the depth and configurations of the poet's ambivalence

. . . toward reconciliation with his wife."^{xv} Although Elledge is, I believe, certainly correct in this reading of the poem, he does not go nearly far enough, either substantively or methodologically. In this respect the readings of both the *Critical Review* reviewer and Lady Byron seem to me more weighty and profound.

What Anabella and the *Critical Review* call attention to are the social contexts in which the poem was executed. Anabella was peculiarly alive to such matters because they touched upon her life in the most important ways. "Fare Thee Well!" was not simply a thing of beauty spinning in the disinterested space of a Kantian (or Coleridgean) theoretical world. It was an event in the language of art, specifically located, and she registered that event in particular ways. To her the separation controversy came to involve two primary matters. There was first the matter of the law, and who, in the complex legal maneuverings, would have power over the other to influence various decisions (Lady Byron feared, for example, that Byron would seek to deprive her of custody of their daughter Ada). And second there was the (closely related) matter of public opinion, and who would enter into and finally emerge from the separation proceedings with what sort of public image.

When Byron sent her a copy of "Fare Thee Well!" soon after he wrote it, Lady Byron was quick to read it as a shrewd ploy to gain power over her in the context of those two areas of interest which most concerned her. At first she emphasized the "legal" reading, for she felt, as we have already seen, that Byron's various communications were designed to construct a sympathetic self-image in order to improve his bargaining position. "He has been assuming the character of an injured & affectionate husband with great success to some," she remarked in mid-February.^{xvi} When Byron sent her a

manuscript copy of the poem late in March, she wrote ironically to her mother of its apparent tenderness, "and so he talks of me to Every one."^{xvii} But the poem did not disturb her greatly until she learned that Byron intended to print and distribute it privately in London society. This act, she feared, would turn "The Tide of feeling ... against" her,^{xviii} but she was dissuaded from her first impulse -- to publish a rejoinder -- by the counsel of Dr. Stephen Lushington.

The significance of all this becomes more clear, I think, if we recall that "Fare Thee Well!" was initially constituted as three very different texts, only two of which were manipulated by Byron, while the other fell under the co-authority of persons and powers who were hostile to him. The first of these texts is the one that originates in the manuscript poem addressed to Lady Byron, and which Byron caused to have circulated in London in late March and early April. The second is the text privately printed and distributed in fifty copies on 8 April, at Byron's insistence and over the objections of his publisher Murray. Byron's activities here are important to remember because they show that he was manipulating the poem, was literally fashioning an audience for it of a very specific kind. The original manuscript may have been addressed to his wife, but when copies of that poem began to be made and circulated, a new text started to emerge. The printed text in fifty copies represents the definitive emergence of that text, which was addressed past and through Lady Byron to a circle of people -- friends, acquaintances, and other interested parties -- whose "reading" and "interpretation" of the poem Byron wanted to generate, and of course influence.

In the most limited sense, Byron wanted his poem to be read as the effusion of an "injured and affectionate husband." Moore's later report in his *Life*, that the manuscript

text he saw was covered with Byron's tears, represents in effect such an interpretation of the poem. But the fact that Byron was also managing a certain kind of circulation for the poem set in motion other forces, and other readings, that were only latent (so to speak) in the manuscript text. The poem, that is to say, came to be widely seen -- and read -- as another event in Byron's troubled "domestic circumstances." It is this circulation of the verses that begins to change the meaning of the poem -- indeed, that begins to change the poem itself. The words of the original manuscript do not significantly differ from the privately printed text; nonetheless, that first printed text has become another poem, and one that sets in motion an urgency toward the production of yet another textual change. This new change is definitive when the privately printed text finally makes its appearance in the *Champion* on 14 April and thence throughout the periodical press. This is a new poem altogether. In the first place, it does not appear alone but alongside "A Sketch," Byron's cutting satire on Mrs. Clermont that he had also put into private circulation in fifty copies several days before he began circulating "Fare Thee Well!" The editors of the *Champion* text so print and position "A Sketch" as to make it an exponent of the "real meaning" of "Fare Thee Well!". It is used partly for the light it sheds on "Fare Thee Well!" and hence to expose Byron's hypocritical malignancy. The farewell poem is accompanied in the *Champion* by a long editorial commentary denouncing Byron's character as well as his politics, and explicitly "reading" the two poems as evidence of his wickedness.

The *Champion*'s text of "Fare Thee Well!" is, I would say, the definitive version of the hypocritical poem, just as the manuscript version sent to Lady Byron -- which, interestingly, seems not to have survived -- would be the definitive version of the

sentimental poem. The "texts" that extend between these two versions dramatize this first, crucial stage in the poem's transformations. But they do not conclude those changes. Even as the *Champion* text is completing that first stage of the poem's transformations, it has initiated a new stage, the one in which the two faces of this poem are forced to confront each other. And it is in this next stage of its textual development that "Fare Thee Well!" becomes most rich and interesting. This is the poem whose meaning focuses and culminates the controversies among the readers in Byron's day. The question is gone over again and again: is this a poem of love ("sentimental") or a poem of hate ("hypocritical")?

The final contemporary text declares that in some important sense it is both. Byron himself produced the materialized version of this culminant text when he published the poem, with the telling epigraph from "Christabel," in his *Poems* (1816). This is the text that Elledge revived, a work full of painful and even frightening tensions and contradictions. And while I salute Elledge's success in rescuing Byron's poem from its impoverished sentimental readings, I must point out Elledge's insistence -- it stems from his New Critical background -- that his is not a reading of a work of poetry so much as an exploration of a set of tense personal circumstances: "my concern is less with the poem as poem than with the dynamics of the relationship between poet-husband and audience-wife as Byron represents them."^{xix} He makes this statement because his notion is that "the poem as poem" is an abstract verbal construct, a "text" that not only can be, but must be, divorced from the social and material formations within which the work was instituted and carried out.

Such an idea commits one to a certain way of reading poetry that seems to me intolerable. And it is a way that is particularly destructive for a poet like Byron, whose

poetical language characteristically invokes and uses its available social and institutional resources. More, Byron's work insists that this is the way of all poetry, though some poets and apologists for poetry argue that it is otherwise, that poetry operates in a space of disinterestedness and autonomy. "Fare Thee Well!" is therefore, for us in particular, a kind of metapoem, a work that foregrounds Byron's ideas about what poetry actually is and how it works.^{xx}

Byron himself seems to have recognized very clearly -- that is to say, with pain and reluctance -- the full significance of his poetic practice. In writing and circulating "Fare Thee Well!" he was the author and agent of the completed work, the one who finally would be responsible for all of the texts. Yet while Byron authored those texts, he could not fully control them -- this, the fate of all poets, is sometimes called their "inspiration" -- so that in the end he found that he too, like everyone else who would involve themselves with the poem, would have to trust the tale and not the teller. His discovery of this, a bitter revelation, would soon find expression in another of the "Poems on his Domestic Circumstances": the "[Epistle to Augusta]" which he wrote in the summer of 1816. Reflecting on that "talent for equivocation" which he flaunted before his wife, Byron would expose its equivocal character.

The fault was mine nor do I seek to screen

My errors with defensive paradox

I have been cunning in mine overthrow

The careful pilot of my proper woe. (21-24)

Which is as much to say of that most "cunning" of his poems to date, "Fare Thee Well!", that it tells more than one would have imagined possible, tells more than its own author wanted told.

I shall return to indicate what I believe this kind of analysis signifies for any concrete "reading" of "Fare Thee Well!" But first I would ask you to reflect upon certain matters of general relevance for Byron's poetry. When we say that Byron's is a highly rhetorical poetry we mean -- we should mean -- not that it is loud or overblown, but that it is always, at whatever register, elaborating reciprocities with its audiences. These reciprocities, like all social relations, accumulate their own histories as time passes and more interchanges occur -- and we then call these, as Donald Reiman has called them, "the cumulative effect" of the work. .)^{xxi} New poetry is written -- and read -- within the context of those accumulations. The development of the various texts of "Fare Thee Well!" between March and November 1816 is a miniature example of how these reciprocities can get played out.

I want to emphasize that Byron wrote this way throughout his life. The masterpiece of *Don Juan* is a work of, quite literally, consummate skill, because the whole of his life and career is gathered into it. Without an awareness of, an involvement in, that poem's "cumulative effect" one will be reduced simply to reading its words: as Eliot in this connection might have said, not to have the experience and to miss the meaning.

Related to this rhetorical framework of the poetry is Byron's habit of manipulating his texts. To present a work through a "cumulative" context is to open it to changes and modifications, in fact, to new opportunities of meaning: not so much, as Coleridge would

have had it, the "reconciliation" of "opposite and discordant qualities" as their artistic and cultural exploitation. "Fare Thee Well!" did not bring about any reconciliations, poetic or otherwise, it raised a tumult of new discords and conflicts. Yet it is those very tumults, and their artistic significance, which turned the period of Byron's separation -- from his wife, from England -- to a watershed in his career, and in his understanding of what was involved, for him, in his methods of poetic production.

To understand this better we have to retreat in time, to Byron's years at Harrow and especially Cambridge, when he took his first lessons in the art of literary equivocation. Byron told his wife that he had a talent for that sort of thing, and Louis Crompton's study of *Byron and Greek Love* has shown that it was a mode of writing practiced by Byron's circle of Cambridge friends -- a deliberate and methodical set of procedures for saying one thing and meaning something else. Briefly, they cultivated a mode of homosexual double-talk.

One of Byron's first epistolary exercises in this equivocal style was in his letter to Charles Skinner Matthews of 22 June 1809. Matthews's answer to this letter is important because of its explicit discussion:

In transmitting my dispatches to Hobhouse, my carissime Buron I cannot refrain from addressing a few lines to yourself: chiefly to congratulate you on the splendid success of your first efforts in the mysterious, that style in which more is meant than meets the eye. . . . [B]ut I must recommend that [Hobhouse] do not in future put a dash under his mysterious significances, such a practise would go near to letting the cat out of the bag.... And I positively decree that every one who professes ma methode do spell the

term wch designates his calling with an e at the end of it-methodiste, not methodist, and pronounce the word in the french fashion. Every one's taste must revolt at confounding ourselves with that sect of ... fanatics.^{xxii}

Byron's letter may in fact have been his "first effort" at writing in Matthews's particular dialect of "the mysterious," but it was a language he was already practiced in, and one which would receive its apotheosis in the incredible display of puns and coded talk that constitutes *Don Juan*.

Matthews's letter is also interesting because it suggests that the use of this kind of style is a game that can be played with, and that its practitioners should think of themselves as a kind of elite group with special gifts and powers. But it was also a style that ran grave risks for the user. Byron told his wife that he was afraid of his own skill with this method of writing. And well he might be, for it entailed the conscious deployment of duplicitous and hypocritical postures.

All of Byron's early tales are written in this equivocal style -- which has become, in Byron's hands, a vehicle of immensely greater range and complexity than Charles Skinner Matthews would have imagined possible, had he lived to see Byron's displays. But the more Byron developed his talent for equivocation, the more he built a store of explosive and dangerous contradictions into his work. Those contradictions came to a head during the separation controversy, and in "Fare Thee Well!" they finally reached their flash point.

That the poem is not what the commonplace "sentimental" reading has taken it to be is exposed unmistakably for us in the initial period of its production and reception.

Many readers were alive to its duplicities. The opening four lines signal the poem's method by installing a grammatical pun of fundamental importance:

Fare thee well! and if for ever

Still for ever, fare thee well

Even though unforgiving, never

'Gainst thee shall my heart rebel.

The sense here urges us to take Lady Byron's as the "unforgiving" heart, but the grammar tells us that heart is Byron's own. The poem will operate under this sign of contradiction to the end. Noteworthy too is Byron's assertion that, though his heart is unforgiving, it will never "rebel" against hers: as if he were imagining their separation and mutual antagonisms succeeding to a second, darker marriage which would "never" be dissolved or put asunder. In fact, the poem is replete with this kind of complex doublespeaking. Ponder, for example, these four lines:

Would that breast by thee glanc'd over,

Every inmost thought could show!

Then thou would'st at last discover

'Twas not well to spurn it so (9-12)

It is a nice question what the inmost thoughts of an unforgiving and yet unrebelling heart would look like. Blake wrote a great deal of poetry about just such a heart, and he always

imagined it as dangerous and fearful. And if we merely "glance over" Byron's lines here we may easily fail to "discover" their full truth: that the passage does not merely tell about the dark truths of unforgiving hearts, it is itself executing them. "'Twas not well to spurn it so" is a warning of possible danger, but as coming from this speaker it carries as well a threatening message and rhetoric.

Of course the poem delivers these kinds of messages obliquely, but in doing so it only increases the volatile character of the text. Because more is meant here than meets the eye directly, the censored materials exert enormous pressure for their freedom of complete expression. The parallel text in canto 3 of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (stanza 97) meditates the situation by comparing it to the fury of a storm breaking over the Alps:

Could I embody and unbosom now

That which is most within me, could I wreak

My thoughts upon expression.

And so forth: he longs for "one word [of] Lightning," one word of comfort that would "lighten" his heart of its weight of sorrow, one word of insight that would "enlighten" his understanding of his situation, and one word of power that would, like a bolt of lightning, "blast" and purify those places "where desolation lurk[s]."

Like Manfred -- another creature of separation -- who begs from Astarte "one word for mercy," Childe Harold's longings remain incompletely satisfied. In all these cases the very effort to achieve some kind of completion, to reconcile the various contradictions, only seems to install them more deeply and more firmly.

Charles Skinner Matthews wrote gaily of his "mysterious" style of discourse, but it was a style that Byron, its supreme master, came to fear as he developed it through his years of fame. And well he might have feared it since it was a style that forced into the open the hypocrisies of those who read and write poetry as if it were a beauty or a truth, as if it were something that could be controlled -- enlisted to the purposes of either those who produce it or those who receive it. "Fare Thee Well!" is Byron's farewell to the illusion that he could be the master of the artistic powers that were given to him. Written in hopes that it would allow him to control the dangerous crosscurrents of his circumstances in 1816, the poem's bad faith -- which is its genius -- worked to undermine the actual despair latent in such petty hopes.

This interpretation of Byron's "Fare Thee Well!" involves an implicit critique of intrinsic, thematic, and text-centered hermeneutic methods that I want to make explicit. In the first place, important deficiencies follow when circumstances of production are not factored into the interpretive operation. At the most elementary level -- at what Blake called "the doors of perception" -- readers will be inclined to see, and hence to deal with, only the linguistic text. But the poetic event always comprehends a larger scriptural territory, one that is bibliographically (as well as linguistically) encoded." The physical forms within which poetry is incarnated are abstracted from an interpretive activity only at the price of a serious critical blindness, and a blindness that brings with it little corresponding insight.

The problem emerges dramatically in the work of Blake, whose illuminated texts do not lend themselves to the kind of physical variabilities which are common in the case of typographical texts. I am speaking here of the variabilities which develop when texts

are transmitted over time to later readers. That transmission history tends to erase not merely the bibliographical terms in which the texts -- the meanings of the texts -- were initially encoded, it tends to make us unaware of the presence and significance of bibliographical coding in general. People tend not to realize that a certain way of reading is privileged when "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is read in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, and that it is a way of reading which differs sharply from what is privileged in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* or in the *Oxford Book of Romantic Verse*; and when the poem is (or was) read in other kinds of formats -- for example, in its first printing in the *Annals of the Fine Arts* -- an entirely different field of reading is once again deployed. Furthermore, the work that descends to us descends through particular forms of transmission, and the work does not pass through those incarnations without having its meaning affected by them. We are able to discern patterns in a work's reception history because those historical influences have inscribed themselves in the works we receive.

The example from Byron, however, underscores yet another important matter. Poetic works are not autonomous in either of the senses that the academy has come, mistakenly, to believe. That is to say, poems are neither linguistically self-contained, nor are they simply the expressed forms of a single -- an authorizing and integral -- imagination. The actual production of poems is one part of that social dialectic by which they live and move and have their being, one part of the communicative interchange which they always solicit.

The Byron example is especially instructive, I think, because it shows how those interchanges can never be brought under the control of the author. Poems are produced, used, and read in heterogeneous ways; unlike informational forms of discourse, they

require -- they thrive upon -- those diverse forms of life. Crucial parts of those interchanges are encoded in the bibliographical, productive, and reception histories of the poems we read. When we neglect those histories we simply condemn our readings to a culpable -- because an unnecessary -- ignorance.

PROF. A.: Surely whatever residual "Marxism" one may discover in that document has been so academicized as to have become a pure formality. An "Allegory of Communicative Exchange" indeed! What pretentiousness! The problem with that lecture of McGann's is the same problem with all his published critical works -- they don't change anything essential in the way the academy goes about its business.

PROF. M.: But they make change possible. They postulate, and deploy, a communicative system where the terms of the communicative dialectic reflect each other in distorting, differential mirrors.

PROF. A.: That's simply what you *say*! Such a view would begin to be meaningful only if you could show that McGann's criticism is both true and false. In rhetorical terms, it would have to be a criticism we would want to accept and dismiss at the same time.

PROF. J.: Well then, consider this piece from his unpublished criticism. McGann has headed it "A Commentary on the Opening Passage of 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.'" It seems a finished piece of work, though of course it has to be regarded as in some sense fragmentary, given the arbitrary limit it sets to its "commentary." There can be no question, I think, that the piece is authentic. The computer disk is clearly labeled and has many of his other works coded on it, some in draft forms. Furthermore, though the piece may appear in certain respects incongruent with his published work, its

bibliographical preoccupations have a distinctively McGannian quality. Whatever, it seems pretty scandalous for a scholar to be writing this way.

"A Commentary on the Opening Passage of
'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'"

What comes to us as the title, the prefatory "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," is a set of words which, even if we regard them as a single word string, are by no means self-identical. An initial reading may legitimately ask, for example, whether the third word is a common or a proper noun, and hence whether the "stopping" referred to is a casual "stopping by" at the Woods's house, or whether it is a "stopping alongside" a stand of trees. To say that the former reading is eliminated by the first line of the poem is merely to say that one has assented to the traditional formatting imposed upon the words of the poem. As we shall see in a moment, those words carry -- fatally, as it were -- many more signifying possibilities than the narrow range of significations so cunningly, and deceptively, specified by the received format.

But to return for a moment to the "title," or prefatory material. If we put a period after "Stopping by" the title changes; if we put "Stopping" on a line by itself, then place immediately below it, centered, "by Woods," and then on a third line, centered, put "On a Snowy Evening" another set of possible signifiers opens up for us (one much closer, perhaps, to what one could find in verse published in certain periodical formats).

Finally, of course, the words may be imagined to have been so arranged as to set all these (and perhaps other) signifying chains in motion, along with the corresponding

diversity of signifiers as well as the contextual referents that they evoke. A multiplied text is latently present in these words, a text that reaches out to the equally multiplied textual codes that are socially dispersed in the audience of readers.

But let us move into the body of the poem's text, specifically, into what the traditional poem sets down as the first two lines, which thus appear thus:

Whose woods these are I think I know,
His house is in the village, though.

If we ask, once again, whether the final word of this couplet is a common or a proper noun, we begin to see how arbitrary is the traditional text of these words. Furthermore, if we take "though" to be the name of the village where "His house" is located, we may find ourselves inclined to construct a wholly different poem here, a wholly different set of signifiers. If a village may be called "though" we may have found ourselves pitched into a world where "concrete realities" are to be imagined as parts or operations of language. If "though" is imagined as a village in that "world," that fact may be taken to signify that subordinate clauses are to stand metaphorically for certain types of subordinate political entities, like villages (with the corresponding analogy to be understood as operative -- that sentences are "cities," and so on up (and down) the grammatical hierarchy).

This metaphorical structure will incline one to "read" the text very differently from the reading under which the couplet has traditionally functioned as a couplet. These other readings emerge if, following the lead of the work's traditional arbitrary formulae, we arbitrarily shift the punctuation -- for instance:

Whose woods? These are, I think. "I know! His house is in the village Though!"

or:

Who's woods? These are "I think," "I know,"

"His house" is in the village Though.

In the latter case, the text calls attention to the fact that certain words that are arbitrarily arranged to act as points of reference to an extralinguistic field (the place of forests and villages, the place where a man named Woods may be imagined to be living) may equally and at the same time function as parts of a system of pure signifiers. In such a case, what has been set in motion is an allegorical work entirely analogous, for example, to the opening of Charles Olson's "In Cold Hell, In Thicket," or to the opening of Olson's more famous precursor text, the *Inferno*:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

mi ritrovai per una selva oscura

This resonant text calls out to the "woods" in Frost's work, an equally "dark and deep" woods of a self obscured from itself. (And how appropriate it now seems that the text of "Stopping by Woods" should be attached to an author named Frost!) We may name the woods of the modern poem "I think" and "I know" on the Dantean allegorical analogy,

and we add the distinctively postmodern touch by noting that this woods exists in purely linguistic space, near a village here named "Though."

But the power hovering most immediately over Frost's work, it seems to me, is probably not Dante. It is the late Romantic Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose great and nightmarish work *The House of Life* seems to be glanced at in Frost's word "house." The house of Frost's text is partly Rossetti's poetical house, where one frequently encounters a discourse analogous to one that could name a stand of trees "I think" and, alternatively, "I know." One recalls, for instance, Rossetti's sonnet "Superscription":

Look on my face; my name is Might-have-been;
I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell.

The Rossetti text, where the "house of life" is at all points the house of language, a house of pure (and impure) signifiers, allows us at last to appreciate fully the signifying labyrinth into which the Frost text has led us. So bound are we to positivist structures of reading that we initially overlook entirely the strength of the wordplay being carried, and carried out, in those key terms in the poem's title and first line, "Woods" and "woods." The words are metaphors, but they are metaphors imbedded in a metonymic wordplay that conceals the correspondent (and purely linguistic) signifier, "Woulds" and "woulds." "Stopping by Woulds" is a poem about subjunctive states of desire, and of the darkness and cold with which they seduce and threaten us. To stop by this "selva oscura" is to confront the promise and the threat of all that we "would" or "would not" encounter and understand.

More than that, however, the text is about how texts signify in the first place. Poetry is the discourse which lays bare, which makes it possible to understand, how all texts -- including the text we call "the world" -- function. Thematizing the work's textual operations (for example, saying that the poem is about desire and subjunctive states) tends to conceal the more important and powerful communicative exchange executed through the poem. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a display of the heteronomy that Bakhtin, for example, postulated of fictional discourse. That heteronomy is itself a tool, a signifier, by means of which human beings, as individuals and as groups, define the possibilities of their lives.

And do we not also hear in Frost's "woods", besides "woulds", "words" -- at the meta-level called out by the language games? Whose words are these anyway?

PROF. M.: This cannot be an authentic text. It's a travesty of criticism, a travesty of scholarly criticism.

PROF. A.: Perhaps it's authentic. The absurd frivolity unmask the hidden face of McGann's spurious Marxism. The whole thing is a game -- a game of academic scholarship whose correspondent breeze is this shameless personal *jeu*.

PROF. J.: Perhaps it's a serious travesty, or even a travesty of seriousness, or both. The piece reminds me that McGann extolled, in *The Romantic Ideology*, the deconstructive ironies of Heinrich Heine. In fact, that book seems to me plainly set on a strange series of selfcontradictions. Most apparent, I suppose, is the collision between the book's

authoritative -- not to say imperious -- prose style, and its commitment to the program (dare one say the ideology?) of the romantic ironist.

PROF. A.: I recall that several reviewers have associated McGann's middle-age work with postmodern and even de Manian positions. Of course he did produce a studied critique of de Man, but it seems to me a critique carried out from a position of sympathy. How could it be otherwise? McGann is after all an open supporter of weird experimentalist writing.

PROF. M.: But his allegiances emphasize the socially activist orientation of that writing. He repeatedly discusses not "texts" but what he calls "textual events" involving multiple agents. This is why Experimental writing seems to him nothing more or less than a contemporary instance of Marxian expression.

PROF. A.: Does it really matter what he *says*? The point is that these kinds of contradiction undermine the seriousness of the work -- as if it were all finally inconsequential.

PROF. J.: Contradictions seem of great consequence, as all Marxists think and have always thought. Only when they're not real contradictions, even shameful ones, are they inconsequential. Isn't that one of the implicit points of the discussion of Byron's "Fare Thee Well!"? Perhaps the short piece on Frost comes to underscore the point, perhaps its meaning rests in the way it scandalizes the ground of meaning -- as if meaning had to seek its renewal through paths of falsification. If there is pretentiousness and shamelessness within....

[Here the document breaks off, leaving readers with various problems, and with what seems one overriding question: is this a case of multiple personality disorder, or is it a social text? If so, is it a "Marxist" text? And what is "this" anyway?]

ⁱ See Marjorie Levinson, Introduction to *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989),

ⁱⁱ Jerome J. McGann, "Theory of Texts," *London Review of Books*, 18 February 1988, 21.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jerome J. McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), ix. (See also above, chapter 2.)

^{iv} 4 Ibid. The book *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* comprises McGann's Clark Lectures, delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge, in February 1988.

^v Jerome J. McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987), viii.

^{vi} *Social Values*, 122.

^{vii} This piece is excerpted from a longer essay, originally given as a lecture in London in 1987, titled "Lord Byron and the Truth in Masquerade." It has been collected in McGann's *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001),

^{viii} The essential critical discussions of the poem are the following: *The Works of Lord Byron: Poetry*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1898-1904), 3: 531-35; David V. Erdman, "'Fare Thee Well!'-Byron's Last Days in England," in *Shelley and His Circle: 1773-1832*, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970), 4: 63865; W. Paul Elledge, "Talented Equivocation: Byron's 'Fare Thee Well!'" *Keats-Shelley*

Journal 35 (1986): 42-61; *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J.

McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-1993), 3 493-94.

^{ix} See Ethyl Colburn Mayne, *Byron* (London: Methuen, 1924), 256; and Erdman, "'Fair Thee Well!'" 642 and n.

^x See *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 3: 2.304. Wordsworth's reading is given in a letter to John Scott, who put out the unauthorized printing of Byron's poem.

^{xi} Quoted in Mayne, *Byron*, 256.

^{xii} *Critical Review* (December 1816): 577-78.

^{xiii} Quoted in Malcolm Elwin, *Lord Byron's Wife* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1962), 394.

^{xiv} *Ibid.* 400.

^{xv} Elledge, "Talented Equivocation," 43.

^{xvi} Elwin, *Lord Byron's Wife*, 409.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 448.

^{xviii} Doris Langley Moore, *The Late Lord Byron* (London; John Murray, 1961), 164.

^{xix} Elledge, "Talented Equivocation," 44n.

^{xx} It is in many ways a rehearsal for what seems to me its clear companion piece, *Manfred*. See McGann, "Byron and Wordsworth", in *Byron and Romanticism* op. cit.,

^{xxi} *The Romantics Reviewed, 1793-1830: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, ed. Donald Reiman (New York: Garland, 1972), Part B, 4:1779.

^{xxii} Quoted in Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1985), 128-29.
