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Romantic Difficulty

Anahid Nersessian

Whatever the past is, however one chooses to settle it, its accumulation is undeniable.

—Renee Gladman, *Newcomer Can't Swim*¹

ROMANTIC POETRY IS DIFFICULT. It is difficult in a very peculiar way since it is also easy to understand. By easy to understand I mean syntactically neat; I mean emotionally frank; or else clear on its points. Even William Blake, once you know the basics—the nonsense anarchist baselines, pro-riot, pro-sex, against shame and any careless designation of violence as merely a metaphor—is a plain dealer. As for plain dealing at the level of the line, it would be hard to do better than this:

Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; Oh! then,
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations!²

William Wordsworth often faked concern that his poetry would be dismissed for its prosaisms, the stylistic ground of his lifelong inquiry into the impossibility of catching up to life. And yes, this reads smoothly, this sweet, pushy address. Its gender politics, or its soft-peddled survey of idealism from Plato to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, whom Wordsworth had yet to read, aren't as easy to parse. But the passage above, on its own—anchored by a chain of adverbs from “therefore” to “after” to “when” to “then” and pinned down, at last, by an exclamation point—is so lucid it is practically Quintilian.

Something about it is also familiar, rattling a substratum of allusions that give Wordsworth's counsel the air of something *déjà entendu*: those misty mountains (if not their winds) are from *Romeo and Juliet*; "sober pleasures" is a pet phrase of George Keate, whose 1764 poem "The Ruins of Netley Abbey" this poem has in its back pocket; the eighteenth-century mind is often called a mansion.³ Wild ecstasies, lovely forms, sweet sounds, healing thoughts, tender joy—there is nothing to startle or jolt us away from the gist. A command is given in the shape of a good deal; an imperative dressed as a suggestion sneaks, with practiced heartsick cunning, into the simple future tense.

Charles Bernstein teases that the difficult poem is like the difficult child: "Sometimes, if you give your full attention to [it], the provocative behavior will stop."⁴ This is a good analogy for Wordsworth, who draws on childhood's "terrors . . . [and] early miseries" to create a stressed-out prosody advertising its own resolution (and yours too) in the promise of "calm existence."⁵ I wonder if it's a good analogy for Romanticism, or for its difficulty. I like to tell my students that Romantic poems reward close reading—full attention—but I'm not sure that's true. Besides, what would the reward be? The end of difficulty, or its exponentiation? Notice that Bernstein is messing with our heads; as anyone who has ever cared for a child or a childish adult knows, you're supposed to *ignore* provocation to make it go away. Perhaps this lays bare the defects of the metaphor "close reading," which implies that meaning is somehow lodged in typography, that a poem is an eye chart you can fathom depending on how near to it you stand.

Maybe it does more than that. Maybe Romantic poetry's uneven relationship to interpretation or exegesis, its talent for being easy in a way that is hard, its habit of popping handy little life lessons—are we to take these seriously?—out of the blister pack of lyric form mean something. Maybe they mean that we don't have a language for them. Wordsworth promised "feelings of strangeness and awkwardness" and he did not disappoint.⁶

If Romantic difficulty exists, it will name a poetic mode that reliably baffles hermeneutic scrutiny even as it demands an emotional response. You could say all poetry works like that, that it makes us feel in excess of what we could identify as that feeling's prompt or goad. I don't necessarily mean that as praise. Christopher Nealon is right to observe that tropes of poetry's "unrealizability," its ability to duck the requirement to say true things about the world, can be used by critics to perform a certain slight of hand, whereby being enigmatic, ineffectual, or useless—as works of art generally are—is automatically elevated into critique.⁷ He is also right that applauding poetry on account of its difficulties, and on

account of difficulty's highly nebulous political and ethical value, is as historical a tendency as any other. This means that both the applause and the difficulty have a unique function within the catastrophe of capital.

The difficult Romantic poem deflects attention by saying more or less what it means, especially when what it means is to condemn features of the historical present. This creates something of an impasse. When Wordsworth writes about people who have lost their jobs because the money has moved from the country to the city, or when Anna Barbauld anticipates the imminent collapse of an over-extended empire, they are being absolutely upfront about the state of the world. They also (usually) describe it in clear language. And yet, this rhetorical and moral simplicity is lodged in an obvious antagonism to the disconcerting, mostly equivocal moods that saturate their poems, and is as much a part—formally, semantically, technically, thematically—of those poems as is their more perspicuous content. The result is a suite of contradictions and a strong cocktail of responsibility, self-exposure, commiseration, and very uneven commitment. Here is a difficulty, too: it's hard to argue with these poems, and it's hard to use them to make arguments.

In a way the poetry I'm describing is sentimental, in the eighteenth-century drift of the term. It is interested in other people's suffering, which it represents more or less straightforwardly, and in its economic conditions, which it represents not straightforwardly at all. Alongside, over, or through such representations, it publicizes the impress of the poet's secret or private experience: of sympathy, of guilt and shame, of identification or, more often, of embarrassed disidentification with whomever or whatever is being made to hurt. It is, perhaps, an early psychoanalytic poetry, though the Romantically difficult poem would make a very bad analyst, never quite sure if it wants to withhold or seduce, and so winding itself into the unacceptable contortions of Blake's "silent love."⁸ Above all else, it realizes what John Keats imagines—once explicitly in a letter and then implicitly everywhere else—as an aesthetic program of absorption and dissolution, intake and fallout, of screaming desire for life and perpetual apology for not being better at it. Trying to turn each of these impulses into a convincingly oppositional discourse is the uphill battle that defines Romantic poetics and, for some people, also its limitations.

When I say that Romantic difficulty is a lot of things—when I say that it is sentimental, clumsy, bombastic, recessive (and sometimes regressive), diffident, and diagnostic of a certain era in the social self-description of the bourgeois subject, all along the frontier of a present organized by an ever more amped-up extraction of value from labor and the hacking out of global markets to receive it—I am saying little more than plenty

of people have already said. You may have noticed, meanwhile, that my citations (Wordsworth, Keats, Blake) are hardly off the beaten path. There is, in other words, nothing new about labeling Romanticism a critique of political economy, or (in another language) a working-through of the “trauma of industrialization.”⁹ Nor is there anything new about saying it is in elaborating this critique or this trauma that Romantic poems become hard to read, if not to comprehend. This bench is deep: from William Hazlitt to Geoffrey Hartman barely gets you started. I should add that difficulty in this sense—as an aesthetic response to a social problem—is routinely invoked by those who want to fold Romanticism into a certain lineage of avant-garde or experimental poetry. For the most part, these invocations depend heavily on an extremely canonical, fixed, and wholly unsurprising view of Romantic poetry itself.

In the remainder of this paper, I want to offer loose thoughts on some poems and writers that have proved too difficult to integrate into a view of Romanticism tendentiously (if not wrongly) yoked to contemporary work. The discussion is intended less as a referendum on the proverbial Big Six than as a gentle raising of eyebrows toward the “Bosses and Tastemakers”—to borrow Harmony Holiday’s shrewd salutation—whose opinions on Romanticism are bossy to the precise degree to which they are untested, oblivious to the range and density of the period’s own experiments as well as to most everything else that has been written about them.¹⁰

This would be the moment to name the critics I have in mind, but I’ll pass. For one thing, the conviction that one can and should traipse from, say, Wordsworth to J. H. Prynne et al. has so long been the refrain of people writing on contemporary poetry it’s not worth giving additional air time, especially not in a paper of this length. For another (and this is personal), I’m trying to wean myself off negation. For yet another (and this is important), an argument like this one, which wants to challenge the normal science of comparative analysis, has to try to avoid the maddening two-step Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as a simple reversal of margin and center, when what is needed is “to point at the irreducibility of the margin in all explanations.”¹¹ Any effort of recovery (as it is often called) or expansion tends to be forced into this kind of performance, stipulating a mainstream to which some minoritized object wins admission or else cleverly usurps. By way of an alternative, Spivak recommends keeping a close eye on how that object fits into a cultural politics that inevitably reproduces itself through exclusion, displacement, forgetting, condescension, and the many, many costumes elitism and an attachment to power can wear.

It may seem implausible that the sad skirmish over what counts as in or out, hub or rim, has much to do with the question of difficulty. So what if Prynne is forever being compared to Wordsworth and not—Walt Hunter’s sensitive report on the no-prospect poem notwithstanding—to Charlotte Smith, “to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered”?¹² We could say that there’s no good take on the difficult poem that doesn’t at least *want* to map “the entire climate of recognitions” packed into its “compact largesse,” that “the language of the poem implicates a surrounding and highly active context, a corpus, possibly an entire world of supporting, echoing, validating, or qualifying material whose compass underwrites its own concision.”¹³ Smith, as Romanticists know, is Romanticism just as much as Wordsworth is. *Beachy Head*—surely the first English poem to yank the word *bivalve* into blank verse—shares with *The White Stones* (1969) much more than *The White Stones* shares with *The Prelude* a concrete wish for a materialism capable of using natural philosophy to show that “constants and variables are not distinct classes of values” in the social world any more than they are for the earth sciences.¹⁴ Anyone who cannot find a way into the contours of that particular largesse operates under the influence of a highly ideological attenuation of instinct and judgment.

The reason for missed signals of this sort—what we might call a deactivation of context, an impoverishment of the world of echoes—is obvious. It is the same reason that ensures that the Romantic sonnet revival is so often laid at Wordsworth’s door and not at the adumbral thresholds of Smith, Mary Robinson, and Anna Seward. It is the same reason behind the longterm near-invisibility of writers like Henry Derozio, Egbert Martin, and Henry Lawson—the Brown Romantics of Manu Samriti Chander’s indispensable book of that name—in accounts of the era, writers whose “capacity to participate as poets in the cultural field is restricted . . . prior to their participation in it.”¹⁵ The consequences of these (sexist, racist, anglocentric) blockages are profound, and they have real impact on the fate of poetry and poetics in the present, whether you consider that present late- or post-Romantic or not. To borrow a thought from Joshua Clover, they render proleptically inconsequential any writing “trying to find an orientation and a meaning in the context of social mobilizations,” trying to give “rage” a home in form.¹⁶

Working against this kind of form is an institutional ethics of “formation,” composed by passionately fixed ideas around value and pleasure. And yet, an actually materialist notion of culture will have to believe that contemporaneity matters, that if you want to think about a modern and postmodern poetics “based in a set of experimentations with language

and with referentiality” you had better think, too, about how these practices—with their emphasis on erasure and annulment—enjoy their high status partly at the expense of more starkly denotative traditions.¹⁷ These would include the proletarian literature Anne Boyer has rightly identified as a casualty of anticommunist state terror: “the trajectory of [US] letters” does not just *happen* to bypass Agnes Smedley, Sanora Babb, and Meridel Le Sueur while piping arabesques around Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner, and John Ashbery; John Thelwall’s theories of prosody don’t just happen to lose out to Wordsworth’s; there’s a reason why it’s Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and William Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* that are readily available in cheap print editions, and Thomas Spence’s proto-Situationist magazine *Pig’s Meat* that has sunk behind library paywalls.¹⁸

Similarly, if you want to think about Romantic poetry as a part of this same root system of crooked lineages, you ought to think about Kenneth Johnston’s claim that Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s spasm to the right was primed by the Pitt government’s campaign against a “lost generation” of English Jacobins; of the “exclusive inclusion” Chander cites as “the racialized logic” of canon construction; of Mary Favret and Lily Gurton-Wachter’s reminders that Romantic poetry is war poetry, that the poet’s ear is a civilian ear is a technology of surveillance, and that the metaphysics of compulsory existence Romanticism so doggedly limns meets as much as it mouses over the demand to say when you see something.¹⁹ This is not a plea for historicism, not from me anyway, since I am not a historicist. It is a plea for more and better reading. In the context of difficulty, it is also a reminder that no canon is disinterested, and that what can look like a benign preference for the best that has been done and said may also be an accidental abrasion, a sanding-down of difficulty’s grain.

My emphasis in the remainder of this essay will be on the difficulties of formation, or what Dominic Johnson calls “the strict yet unstated limits” all types of scholarship “draw . . . around [their] archive of possible referents.”²⁰ The hope is to point toward a notion of difficulty that is elastic without being unconditional, that can be invoked across historical contexts but that is also made from them. It will, more polemically, be to make a case for attending to unobvious exemplars of Romantic difficulty even as the pressure to settle the difficult within the canonical—to make it no longer difficult but merely serious—is ever present. And so, while this is an essay about hard poetry, it is also an essay about pedagogy: how we come to know some things, forget others, and how this ritual of knowing and forgetting is in part what makes something difficult in the first place.

By way of stating my own limitations, I'll add that the poetry I deal with in the following paragraphs unfurls from a perspective that is white, male, and hyperbolically bourgeois. It lies on the very far side of what Fred Moten has recently characterized as "the out and rooted critical lyricism of lament and prayer and scream and curse, the radicalism of sacred, anarhythmic, sociomusical graph in a line you could trace, if you wanted to, as the insurgent, anticolonial market life and art."²¹ My idea is neither to put this poetry in competition with that tradition, nor to affirm a hierarchical view of literary history by tweaking who's on top. It is simply to argue, using a case I know well rather than one I might presume to pick up, for a richer, less lazy view of Romanticism and, by extension, a richer, less lazy view of its contemporary forms. Among other things, this means respecting the work that others have done and knowing when we haven't done it. Instead of bowing to a marketized fantasy in which research projects and genres of expertise compete for the brass ring, we can decide to learn collectively and creatively. Such learning will necessarily bring older metrics of value into conflict with new ones, and this will entail loss—of privileges, modes of authority, sacred cows, and old standbys. That is generally difficult, and it is definitely good.

Anyway, it might seem that this attention to scope, context, canonicity, citation, and allusion might be ducking difficulty's more formal aspects. But, as Jennifer Doyle makes clear, how a text is made and what a text can say are confederate if not conjoined. In *Hold It Against Me*, her 2013 book on performance art, Doyle offers an endlessly generative introduction to the idea of difficulty as something that takes shape "off the disciplinary grid" of scholarly precedent.²² This is another way of describing how a work of art that is genuinely fractious or disconcerting is those things because it slips through the cracks of theory's main street. In some ways, Doyle's difficulty is distinct from that which is entrenched in the gap between Wordsworth's unpretentious words and themes and the rollercoasting mystery of his meaning. In others, it is very much the same, since what Doyle is asking us to consider is what we are trained to ignore, and that includes our resistance to discovering something we don't really understand seething inside something we thought we knew.

Hold It Against Me begins with the case of Ron Athey, who ceremonially mutilates his own body and the bodies of others in performances that combine elements of death rock, disco, punk, BDSM, and Pentecostal Christian ritual even as they evoke Pier Pasolini, Jean Genet, Pierre Molinier, Francis Bacon, and other highbrow barometers of art-historical literacy. If the average art critic seldom notices Athey's work, that is because her own formation—what she's heard in school—shrugs off these vocabularies and exalts others. For all that it draws from the tropes and ethics of vernacular scenes, an Athey performance is profoundly

rebarbative, less because it isn't easy to watch than because it isn't easy to locate. We are disturbed by the sight of blood and pain; we are also disturbed by significance passing right over our heads.

For Doyle, the feeling of being incompetent to the aesthetic event opens onto another, more strenuously political realization: that we live in a world of calculated vulnerability where our basic needs are met only insofar as we are needed to stay alive and work. This realization is so disquieting that it produces what she identifies as the backfire of "controversy" and that she claims convincingly as difficulty's other. Controversy "draws us away from the [difficult] work, away from [a] community and its politics" and forces us into a defensive position on whichever side of some question we fall.²³ This position has met Athey time and again, most notably in 1994 when a show at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis became a lightning rod for debate over public funding for experimental, often sexually explicit, and often queer work. It has also come to have a fascinating dual-pronged function: if controversy can bury art that is trying to be critical, it can also fan interest in art that is luridly unprincipled. For a Damien Hirst or a Vanessa Beecroft, being in bad taste is just more money in the bank.

Difficult art is hard to understand and it is hard to tolerate. It is hard to understand because it is often embedded in obscure or minoritarian idioms, at a remove from better-established habits of aesthetic judgment. It is hard to tolerate because it leaves us intellectually exposed, less triggered than tripped up. This is what Doyle experiences herself when, in her book's opening paragraphs, she recounts her own abreaction to a performance of Adrian Howells's *Held* (2007), in which she had signed up to participate. Unconsciously unwilling to do what she was supposed to do—go to Howells's flat, have tea, then sit on his couch and hold hands, and then lie on his bed and spoon—she double-books Howells and an appointment at a hair salon, missing her chance to be a part of this household experiment in breakneck intimacy.

When Doyle arrives it is too late for *Held*, but the artist is kind and makes her tea anyway. By way of deciphering her own behavior, Doyle first suggests that she was suspicious of a "temporary architecture" of closeness; *Held's* conceit activated her academic skepticism. She then proceeds, however, with an extraordinary self-analysis, a therapeutic mea culpa that claims her avoidance as a roundabout strategy of getting what she wanted after all: to betray Howells, thus preempting the betrayal she expected from him, and then to engulf him in her grief and regret, thus "extract[ing] the caretaking [he] offered . . . outside the boundaries of the event" as he had so carefully set them out.²⁴ In being forgiven for being bad, Doyle explains, she got held after all, but on her terms.

This account is persuasive and likely close to home. Maybe you identify with Doyle's demand for special treatment, especially as payback for some past neglect. Maybe you identify with Howells's willingness to waive the prerequisites of his desire in order to be a nice person, and perhaps also to learn something new about *Held* by opening its edges. I'm not sure, though, that Doyle has said all that could be said about what makes *Held* so difficult. I also wonder if her emphasis on the interpersonal dimension of the work at the expense of its material frame—its props—doesn't abrogate some of that difficulty by reducing it to a game of *fort/da*. What happens around this semi-abortive performance is the partial failure of two vocabularies: the art historical and the psychoanalytic. Both can only clarify some of the story of what makes *Held* as agonizing as it is. This isn't a strike against Doyle; by her own account, *Held* is bound to solicit and then short-circuit all prescripts, to show art history and psychoanalysis that they cannot master this object that seems so well-suited to their interpretive models. Just as Athey's rituals are not just sadomasochistic, sitting on the couch with Howells is not just a test of personal boundaries. It's not even just about intimacy, for in this movement from table to couch to bed, aren't we meant to think, too, about *furniture*, about the store-bought, mass-produced, globalized object as a place where love happens, and about everything about this situation that is vertiginously wrong? Isn't this also a piece about urban space and isolation, about rooms and rents, about what happens to the body that moves about this kind of environment under the weight and as a consequence of shared but often incommunicable misery?

If you think this sounds crazy, you should read Cowper's *The Task*.

Don't get me wrong. I don't think Howells came up with *Held* after reading William Cowper's 1785 blank-verse poem, which famously begins "I sing the Sofa"; we're not likely, anyway, to find out if he did.²⁵ Still, it's worth considering what it would mean if one of the obscure, minoritarian idioms behind the experimental art forms of the twenty-first century was a) Romanticism and b) a Romanticism not many people know about or know that they know. Patrick Keiller and Lisa Robertson working through the Wordsworths is only the tip of the iceberg, since—and this is exactly my point—the whole contest over what counts as experimental in the present tends to produce heavily edited and astonishingly monotonous archives of a thing we call the past. This is why Romantic aftershocks on the contemporary (*soi-disant*) fringe seem like they can only be traced back to the most mainstream version of Romanticism proper. Amnesia of this kind is political and finds its stylish undersong in *no one has ever*. The trouble, of course, is someone always has.

The Task advertises its difficulty, which it understands much as Prynne does when he describes difficulty as “the subjective counterpart to resistance,” specifically resistance as the drag and rasp of a world discontinuous with each of our bodies:

Resistance . . . comes nearer than any other differentiable quality to being completely inherent in the object, in the core of the other person’s distinctness from myself: the stone’s hard palpable weight is the closest I can come to the fact of its existence, the reserve or disagreement of my neighbour is my primary evidence for his really being there. Inertia is probably a more accurate term, and is the one suggested for this purpose by Destutt de Tracy as early as 1801. “*Sans elle*,” he observed of the inertial force, “*nous n’aurions pas connu les corps étrangers à nous, ni même le nôtre*.” Difficulty, however, is clearly a function of process, perhaps even—with contrast—the main criterion of its intelligibility.²⁶

As far as the lived experience of physical laws goes, Prynne’s meaning is quite clear—as clear, you might say, as the passage from *Tintern Abbey* with which I began: “I experience difficulty when I encounter resistance.”²⁷ It gets murkier when Prynne abruptly throws out some ideas about poetry’s moral law and specific justice. “If we view the mind’s exertions as constitutive of the world’s reality,” he writes, “then all we meet with is difficulty,” minus the resistance needed to make difficulty matter. This view is attended by “viciousness,” not narcissism but genuine depravity.²⁸ Think Wordsworth at his worst, crowing over the submissive “fit” of the world to the individual mind. And now think of Blake’s sublimely irritated: “You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting & fitted I know better & Please your Lordship.”²⁹

The extent to which Prynne’s own poetry is characterized, not to say directed, by an exacting orchestration of opportunities to refuse this vicious position is a topic for another time. For now, let’s test Cowper by the standards of inertial force and its burden of phenomenological decency. What does *The Task* have to say on the subject of “contingent facts or other beings”?³⁰ Is it straining against, trying to burrow into the hard palpable weight of historical life, or is the poem just the spontaneous overflow of powerful neurosis, showing little care for anything outside the poet’s anxious orbit?

In Kevis Goodman’s indelible assessment, the loophole in Cowper’s “loophole’ in the retreat” isn’t an escape from history but a channel or passageway, an aperture onto human emergencies even in the thick of personal safety and satisfaction.³¹ That said, the poem never uses contradiction to devise a concept or a pitch an explanation. Its high-wire tripping over the abyss of the world economy skews rather toward what Cowper, in the introduction to the poem’s fourth book, calls a

“brown study”: a melancholic throe upon objects whose perimeter is tormentingly ill-defined.³² Despite the cool, meditative intimations of “study,” the word as Cowper uses it suggests a state that can be dialed up or down depending on the modifier. A study can mark inwardness or amazement, focus or abstraction, and when a study is brown—brown as in blue, as in *feeling blue*—the suggestion is one of rapt paralytic sadness, a monochrome of personality dip-dyeing the world. *The Task* is rinsed with private despair, and, most of the time, private despair stands between the poem and whatever it describes, even when whatever it describes launches Cowper out of himself. Sometimes, however, gloom flares into umbrage, and the next thing you know a painfully graphic, poetically graceless digression on the Atlantic slave trade grabs the wheel, peeling away from the verse like a split thread.

But first, the sofa, which Cowper says he’ll sing.

The motive for Cowper’s poem is laid out in its accompanying advertisement: “The history of the following production is this:—A lady, fond of blank verse, demanded a poem of that kind from the author, and gave him the SOFA for a subject” (*T* 128). This was no arbitrary assignment. The lady in question was trying to bootstrap Cowper out of a depressive episode, the sort that would come upon him throughout his life and immobilize him with “misapprehension of things and persons.”³³ His poem’s title records both a sense of debt and a sense of shame, since *task* comes from *tax* and collates a history of usages from mere charge to open censure, even punishment. And so *The Task* begins with liabilities and deficits that are, at first, merely personal. No sooner does the attempt to pay the bills begin, however, than it erupts into the chaos of wrong life circa 1780, a “blooming, buzzing confusion” that, as in William James’s oft-quoted account of infant consciousness, follows this ironclad law: “All things fuse that *can* fuse, and nothing separates except what must.”³⁴

To sing the sofa is to give its biography as a consumer object, to produce a “historical deduction of seats” that flickers rapidly across prehistoric and imperial vistas (*T* 129). In a handful of lines, rocks give way to stools, which give way to chairs of “cane from India,” “smooth and bright / With Nature’s varnish; sever’d into stripes / That interlace’d each other” before ending on the sofa as the summit of “luxury” (*T* 1.39–41, 1.88). This windfall is certainly a satire on roughly contemporary cultural histories that tie the refinement of the arts to the commercial transcendence of needs-must. Here’s David Hume: “The increase and consumption of all the commodities, which serve to the ornament and pleasure of life, are advantages to society; because, at the same time that they multiply those innocent gratifications to individuals, they are a kind

of storehouse of labour, which, in the exigencies of state, may be turned to public service."³⁵ A storehouse of labor—exactly. It is exactly this for Cowper, whose sofa settles inside a paradigm of exchange that governs political economy in the eighteenth century, when commodities thicken into agents like the persons with whom they are also interchangeable. The poet sings not of arms and a man but of the products of men's hands, loosed from the social body of which they are the remnants. Not for nothing does the history of seats proceed in the passive voice—"joint-stools were then created," "the frame was form'd"—or by tagging their manufacture to abstract or speculative causes: fancy, necessity, convenience (*T* 1.19, 1.56).

Cowper has a nasty little asterisk to ink into the side of innocent gratification, which is, of course, never innocent insofar as it depends, as Hume says, on stockpiles of bodies in pain. That supplement is the slave trade, and when Cowper turns to it in book two, the effect is that of a stun-gun crossed with a primal scream, a violent abruption that lands, paradoxically, with all the moral force of someone choking on a chicken bone at dinner:

Oh for a lodge in some vast wilderness,
 Some boundless contiguity of shade,
 Where rumour of oppression and deceit,
 Of unsuccessful or successful war,
 Might never reach me more. My ear is pain'd,
 My soul is sick, with ev'ry day's report
 Of wrong and outrage with which earth is filled.
 There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,
 It does not feel for man; the natural bond
 Of brotherhood is sever'd as the flax
 That falls asunder at the touch of fire.
 He finds his fellow guilty of a skin
 Not colour'd like his own, and having pow'r
 To enforce the wrong, for such a worthy cause
 Dooms and devotes him as his lawful prey.

 And, worse than all, and most to be deplor'd,
 As human nature's broadest, foulest blot,
 Chains him, and tasks him, and exacts his sweat
 With stripes, that mercy, with a bleeding heart,
 Weeps when she sees inflicted on a beast.

(*T* 2.1–5, 2.21–25)

The sofa never went away; it simply dispersed into the poem's hidden correspondences, consubstantial with the moving parts that launch it

into the world. The modern chair, made of cane severed into stripes, surfaces now on the striped back of the person present only obliquely, in dim counterpoint to an animal anyone would cringe to see so used. Nameable or, if you like, versifiable only as an adjunct to a white generic pronoun, whose “fellow” and direct object is the sum total of what he can be, that person is ontologically thinner even than Moten’s Olaudah Equiano, who “not only . . . occup[ies] the place where the theory of value intersects with the theory of the subject and with the theory of the state” but also “operates such that he can never be rendered as the privileged example of the emptiness of equality or universality in general.”³⁶

Cowper has maybe learned something from Phyllis Wheatley’s “On being brought from Africa to America,” with its mirthless play on the biblical Cain and the husking, peeling, grinding, boiling, and drying of sugarcane until its blackness is diabolically “refin’d.”³⁷ A correlative logic drives these lines and drives them into the ground. Cowper’s stammering free association between the “boundless contiguity of shade” for which he longs and a phantasmagoria of bonds and chains, of the awful, isolate adjacencies of bodies with “skin / not coloured like his own”—skin that is like shade and skin that belongs to shades, that is to the dead—dithers into a poetic embarrassment that is a much weaker but more intelligible shame than the shame that prompts it. Like *Mansfield Park*’s Fanny Price, who checks her questions about slavery in deference to her cousins, who couldn’t care less, *The Task* is called to politeness; politeness is its predicament. It is the brown study of a white man on a big chair made from stolen life. When it suddenly decides to levy some kind of judgment on the form of existence that makes it possible, what it produces is a “nice incision” “ploughed [into] a brazen field” (*T* 1.708–09). This is imperial art, this “mutilated structure” in search of revolt and finding, on a good day, only the genteel dissent of a self-described, rhetorically manageable complicity. The poem knows it, too (*T* 1.774).

It is strange, you have to admit, that in Cowper’s short list of actions that cull labor out of people—chaining, tasking, exacting—the middle one just so happens to share a name with his poem. The progress of thought throughout *The Task* is arrhythmic, paratactical, cumulative in a way thoroughly unlike the storehouse of labor, snowballing to no purpose or end. Is this therefore an exercise in subliminality? Maybe in its politicization but probably not. Rather, the poem almost makes you think that raising what everyone knows but cannot say to salience and calling that a political poetics borders on obscene. Whenever *The Task* gestures toward a historically particular conclusion about causality, it then swiftly dissipates into tone, solubilizing contradiction as affect: “What solid was, by transformation strange / Grows fluid.” All that is solid melts into air. This goes, too, for everything the poem knows about what

it is saying and what it means merely to say it (*T* 2.99–100). And yet—
 —And yet back, for a trice, to Prynne and to difficulty as the subjective imprint of a resistance interposed by the world. I've said that the title "The Task" locates the poem in a psychic order of debt and compunction. By book two, this order is differently scaled: now, "task" names a guilt that is genuinely obstinate, a labor that is tragically transitive. The slave is tasked to work, the poet is tasked to write, and in the nonidentity of these kinds of doing a terrible friction is born. Charging over and over again into the real human misery indurated in commodities, the poem begins to mineralize, to harden. We find its difficulty in the gracelessness of Cowper's attempt to express it. We find it, at a greater distance, in his incompatibility with a more canonical Romanticism that makes the bang-crash of the subject against historical existence the occasion for intrepidly elegaic achievement. In *The Task*, there is no desire for, let alone a confidence in, the fit of mind to world, no faith in fearless love. *The Task* is the grind. Through it we know there are bodies estranged from us; we know estrangement as a reality that seems given even though it is not inevitable. It is worse than given, a kind of law. A hard poem for a hard world.

We got here from the sofa—not Cowper's, but Howells's. It's the same sofa, I think, the same metonym. To play on Howells's title, it cannot hold the history inside of it unless it gets shrink-wrapped by a certain genre of lyric performance, from Cowper's dejected studies to the confessional drama into which *Held* draws its participants. We could get here from elsewhere, from other performances and poems, other household objects, other hypotheses about intimacy and politics and their mutual irreducibility. My goal in placing difficulty within a genealogical frame, as a Romantic mode carried over into contemporary addresses to the ordeal of capital, hasn't been to draw up a new canon in order to enhance old or extant ones. It has been to step back from the resistance to learning that dogs so many versions of poetics and look for tics, for patterns, for emphases and feints, collective compulsions and well-practiced defenses that shake out from particular stretches of time and make themselves inconvenient. Why should it be so painful to sit on Howells's sofa? Why should it take such effort to remember Cowper's? Whatever else it may be or want, difficulty plays for time. It is against fluency, against the banal momentum of any authority for which less is more.

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NOTES

- 1 Renee Gladman, *Newcomer Can't Swim* (Berkeley, CA: Kelsey Street Press, 2007), 73.
- 2 William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798," in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York: Norton, 2013), 69–70 (lines 135–47).
- 3 See the chapter on "Rooms" in Brad Pasanek, *Metaphors of Mind: An Eighteenth-Century Dictionary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2015), 205–26.
- 4 Charles Bernstein, "The Difficult Poem," in *Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays and Inventions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011), 5. Bernstein makes the connection between poem and child explicit in an interview with Adam Fitzgerald published in the Brooklyn Rail, "In Conversation: Charles Bernstein with Adam Fitzgerald," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 3, 2011, <https://brooklynrail.org/2011/06/books/in-conversation-charles-bernstein-with-adam-fitzgerald>.
- 5 Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose* 176 (lines 359, 363).
- 6 Wordsworth, Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, 8.
- 7 Christopher Nealon, "The Poetic Case," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 869–71.
- 8 William Blake, *Europe, a Prophecy*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 65, plate 14, line 9. Cf. the lamentations of Oothoon and her compassionate condemnation of self-denial in Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 49, plate 6, lines 10–13.
- 9 Geoffrey Hartman, "Retrospect 1971," in *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814*, 4th printing (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1971), xvi.
- 10 Harmony Holiday, "On Amiri Baraka," *Chicago Review* 59, no. 3 (2015): 174. This is not to say that "the Big Six" isn't an edifice in need of close examination, simply that this paper doesn't undertake that work. For some of the excellent and enlivening work that does, see note 15 and note 19, below, as well as the Twitter account Bigger 6 Romanticism (@Bigger6Romantix), which collates and is a hub for contributions along these lines and others.
- 11 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Explanation and Culture: Marginalia," in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (London: Routledge, 1996), 35. Consider also, as Maureen McLane reminds me to do, Gertrude Stein's "Act so that there is no use in a center," of which Juliana Spahr writes, "It might require noticing that Europe is no longer the center because the cultures of the peripheries have remade and decentered it." See Stein, *Tender Buttons: The Corrected Centennial Edition* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2014), 63, and Spahr's afterward, 120.
- 12 Wordsworth, note to "Stanzas suggested in a Steamboat off Saint Bees' Heads, on the Coast of Cumberland," *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), 4:403. See also Walt Hunter, "The No-Prospect Poem: Lyric Finality in Prynne, Awoonor, and Trethewey," *minnesota review* 85 (2015): 145.
- 13 George Steiner, "On Difficulty," in *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 22.
- 14 Richard Levins and Richard C. Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985), 276.
- 15 Manu Samriti Chander, *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2017), 3.
- 16 Joshua Clover and Kristina Marie Darling, "'An Archive of Confessions': A Conversation with Joshua Clover," curated by Kristina Marie Darling, "Tupelo Quarterly," June 14, 2017. <http://www.tupeloquarterly.com/an-archive-of-confessions-a-conversation-with-joshua-clover-curated-by-kristina-marie-darling/>.

- 17 Clover and Darling, “An Archive of Confessions.”
- 18 “If u think historical cia involvement & red baiting in lit infrastructure is a thing of the past, what it did was change the trajectory of us letters irreparably. Proletarian writers & lit existed. Then were silenced or sold out. Agnes Smedley, Sanora Babb, Meridel leSeuer [sic].” Anne Boyer (@anne_boyer), *Twitter*, December 7, 2017, 7:04 a.m.
- 19 Kenneth Johnston, *Unusual Suspects: Pitt’s Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013); Chander, *Brown Romantics*, 91; Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009); Lily Gurton-Wachter, *Watchwords: Romanticism and the Poetics of Attention* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2016).
- 20 Ron Athey and Dominic Johnson, “Perverse Martyrologies,” in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Chicago: Intellect, 2012), 531.
- 21 Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, vol. 2, *consent not to be a single being* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2018), 59.
- 22 Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2013), 16.
- 23 Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 13.
- 24 Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 3.
- 25 William Cowper, *The Task*, in *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H. S. Milford (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 129 (1.1). Adrian Howells died in March 2014.
- 26 J. H. Prynne, “Resistance and Difficulty,” *Prospect* 5 (Winter 1961): 28.
- 27 Prynne, “Resistance and Difficulty,” 28.
- 28 Prynne, “Resistance and Difficulty,” 29.
- 29 Blake, annotation to Wordsworth’s preface to *The Excursion, being a portion of The Recluse, A Poem*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 667.
- 30 Prynne, “Resistance and Difficulty,” 29.
- 31 Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 69.
- 32 Cowper, “Argument of the Fourth Book” of *The Task*, in *Poetical Works*, 182 (hereafter cited as *T*). Favret notes that Cowper’s account of his brown study is the most excerpted portion of *The Task* and the one whose tropes are consistently revived in other poems troubled by their “own mediation of distant violence.” See Favret, *War at a Distance*, 70–72.
- 33 Cowper, letter to Lady Hesketh, Jan. 16, 1786, in *The Works of William Cowper, Esq., Comprising his Poems, Correspondence, and Translations*, ed. Robert Southey (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1836), 5:232.
- 34 William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), 1:488. Emphasis in original.
- 35 David Hume, “Of Refinement in the Arts,” in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (New York: Cosimo, 2006), 279.
- 36 Moten, *Stolen Life*, 60.
- 37 Phyllis Wheatley, “On Being Brought to America from Africa,” in *Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 2001), 13 (lines 6–7).