

ROMANTIC KNOWLEDGE*

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ABSTRACT

While British Romantic literature provides ample evidence of the pleasures of knowledge, it also reveals strong counter-evidence of its power to inflict a sense of intellectual impairment and diminution. This Romantic ambivalence sprang from a complex of ideas and anxieties about the potentially corrosive effects of certain kinds of education and learning on the brain, damage that could diminish cognitive vigor and distort the inner experience of identity. The collision between the image of the individual disempowered by knowledge and Enlightenment faith in its role as the engine of collective progress was intensified by the growing quantity of information, opinions, theories, and ideas that daily inundated the British reading public and critics alike. Discussions about education and learning became entangled with fundamental and sometimes contradictory assumptions about the nature of the self and attitudes toward social and intellectual improvement, all in the context of the need to bring order into a universe of knowledge that seemed to be expanding at a breakneck pace. The result was a variety of efforts by Romantic writers to define the norms and values that should govern the organization, diffusion, and control of knowledge. Long before C. P. Snow's *The Two Cultures*, the authors discussed in this paper were engaged in a broader discussion of education and learning that illuminates the tensions among different forms of knowledge and the distance between Romantic and modern perspectives.

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British literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—the Romantic period—is rife with clashing visions of knowledge as power and knowledge as overwhelming, enervating, and potentially impoverishing. William Wordsworth aspired to “knowledge not purchased with the loss of power” in *The Prelude*; Percy Bysshe Shelley asserted that his era had no dearth of knowledge but “We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know.”¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge (along with many others) worried about the future of the British state absent a clerisy of learned men to restrain the excesses of an undereducated electorate vulnerable to political radicalism.² The founding of the Dissenting University of London in the 1820s and 1830s, dedicated to making education serve useful ends, challenged the intellectual traditions of Oxford and Cambridge even as it heralded a new day for those Britons long excluded from English universities. Education reformers of all kinds were immersed in improvement schemes for schooling the lower classes. If the motive behind many of these efforts was a desire to ensure an appropriate reverence for the ruling classes and the established church, it was a sign of social progress, as the essayist William Hazlitt observed, that in 1820s England “the meanest mechanic can read and write.”

Even when you narrow the definition of *knowledge* to education, learning, and intellectual skills, as I do here, it remains a very broad term. Romantic writers tended to talk about knowledge in similarly broad fashion, however, and one index of the period's ambivalence is the various meanings that could be attached to a commonly used expression at the time, *the progress of knowledge*. It referred in the first instance to the vistas of discovery opening in scientific fields, encapsulated in Humphry Davy's statement in an 1810 lecture: “Nothing is so fatal to the progress of the human mind as to suppose our views of science are ultimate; that there are no mysteries in nature; that our triumphs are complete; and that there are no new worlds to conquer.”³ It was also employed in a sociological sense, to indicate the diffusion of knowledge from the elite to the middle and lower classes—a source of anxiety about its potential for radicalizing them in the decades following the French Revolution.

* This essay is part of a larger study on attitudes toward knowledge in the Romantic period and our own.

There were deep divisions over whether knowledge could make “uncultivated natures” more prone to prudence or to mischief.⁴ Finally, the progress of knowledge could mean a regular and predictable unfolding of a succession of events, as in the progress of a disease. A supporter of greater access to education among the lower classes justified it on the preemptive grounds that “The time is past when the progress of knowledge *could* be prevented.”⁵

Education inevitably became a major battleground for these issues. The question of schooling and advanced learning flowed into the larger debate sparked by the French Revolution over what societal progress means and what forms of education advance it. James Chandler sees Wordsworth’s critique of contemporary pedagogical practices in *The Prelude*, for example, as centered on the overly abstract and child-controlling theories of Rousseau and French Ideologues such as Destutt de Tracy, and thus as much concerned with politics as with education.⁶ Alan Richardson’s 1994 study of schooling in the Romantic period, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism*, demonstrates how much of the school reform effort in England was entwined with ensuring social control, and the central role literary works, from poetry to political broadsides to novels, played in reflecting and shaping British education from 1790 through the mid-nineteenth century.

More recent scholarship has extended Richardson’s exploration of literature and education in a different direction: higher education and the era’s multiplying venues for intellectual work in the arts and sciences. Robin Valenza’s account of how poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge argued for poetry’s special place in the economy of knowledge in *Literature, Language, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines in Britain* elucidates how literary works became part of a “larger, culture-wide debate about the connections among disciplinarity, language, class, and audience.”⁷ Jon Klancher’s *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* takes this developing account into the realm of the arts and sciences institutions of the early 1800s, among them the Royal Institution and the Russell Scientific and Literary Institution—and shows how these organizations spurred the debate over knowledge.

At the heart of Romantic ambivalence about knowledge was a sense that perhaps the age had too much of a good thing. Changes in copyright laws and improvements in production techniques in the eighteenth century had increased the availability and stimulated the promotion of literary works of all kinds. The circle of readers steadily expanded in a trend that was marked by two groundswells, the first in the 1730s and 1740s with the proliferation of popular magazines and novels, and the second in the 1780s and 1790s with a flood of inexpensive political pamphlets and religious tracts aimed at combatting radicals like Thomas Paine.⁸ The invention of the steam press in 1810 caused another upsurge in print production. Thomas De Quincey found the deluge of new books “the presses of Europe are still disemboguing [pouring] into the ocean of literature” a cause for despair—because of the impossibility of reading even a fraction of them—and was convinced this phenomenon had contributed to the spread of a profound cognitive peril: the disproportionate attention given to the study of foreign languages, encouraged by the easy availability of elementary grammar textbooks.⁹ He compared the pernicious effects of language study to “dry rot” of the mind and, in a reversal of Immanuel Kant’s famous dictum “Dare to know,” exhorted the young to “Dare to be ignorant of many things your mind craves” because many of those things “are not favourable to the ultimate ends of knowledge.”¹⁰ The invisible hand might guide the economy of material wealth to merge the pursuit of personal interest with the common good, but what forces would control the distribution and uses of knowledge in the economy of intellect?

Literary writers of the period were largely opposed to utilitarian and mercantilist theories of knowledge as a commodity like any other, and uncertain about the societal and political implications of educational reform movements aimed at spreading new knowledge to the masses. Enthusiasm for the discoveries of experimental science was tempered by an awareness that the new scientific disciplines represented a potential encroachment on poetry’s—and by extension, literature’s—claim to be a privileged form of knowledge. The prevailing cognitive theories of associationism and phrenology raised intriguing but sometimes unsettling questions about how best to stimulate the brain and thus intellectual growth. The restructuring of philosophical knowledge underway in the Romantic period was accompanied by an equally intense interest in reconceptualizing other forms as well, motivated by the drive to organize knowledge and thus find a vantage point from which its various manifestations could be understood and controlled.

The Romantic era was not unique in its alarms and hesitations about what the exponential growth of knowledge would mean for values, social organization, and literature. But the four authors I discuss in this paper—De Quincey, Shelley, Hazlitt, and Thomas Love Peacock—are instructive examples of its struggle to articulate the psychological disequilibrium created by a new and unstable intellectual landscape. Peacock’s satirical history of the arts and sciences sets one of the terms of the Romantic debate over knowledge in its utter rejection of poetry as in any way central to the future of intellect. De Quincey’s intensely personal and quasi-paranoid vision of books and education differs strikingly from Shelley’s ecstatic sense of the unity of all knowledge, but has something in common with Hazlitt’s sense of the dangers of reading and the pain of a life spent dealing in words. All of these authors reflect the Romantic attempt to embrace an optimistic and expansive view of knowledge. But for De Quincey, Hazlitt, and Shelley, this attempt had to be reconciled with the desire to assert the intellectual and experiential value of

literature, as well as to protect emotion and feeling from the potentially corrosive effects of certain forms of education and learning.

Knowledge, literature, and language

Valenza points out that Diderot's *Encyclopedia* included a diagram, based on Bacon's *Advancement of Knowledge*, that shrank "the realm of the imagination, which takes in poetry and its sister arts, to a conspicuously small compass—barely a sixth of the space allotted to the 'reasoning' disciplines of theology, ethics, mathematics," and the sciences.¹¹ Jeremy Bentham's 1817 *Chrestomathia*—the title is derived from two Greek words meaning "conducive to useful learning"—includes a "Synoptic Table" that organizes the disciplines according to their utility in securing human happiness. From Bacon onward, the urge to classify the various branches of human knowledge in visual form rested on the conviction that it could be captured and made more visible—"seen" in a new and more coherent way. Most used the mental faculties exercised by the disciplines as the organizing principle (it was the Scottish moral philosopher Dugald Stewart who pointed out that this approach was "altogether unsatisfactory" to devising a convincingly coherent explanation of the relations among the arts and sciences, and likely to remain so).¹² Bentham's quantitatively pleasure-centered worldview upended traditional ideas of a hierarchy of knowledge crowned with theology and philosophy. In his Synoptic Table, literary studies are represented by grammar (classified as one of the "intellectual-faculty-regarding" disciplines) and rhetoric (designated as one of the "passion-exciting") and are grouped under the general heading of Nooscopic Pneumatology ("intellectual-faculty-regarding"), while aesthetics appears as one of the "mere-sensation-regarding" disciplines under Pathoscopic Pneumatology ("sensitive-faculty-regarding"). This Utilitarian table, intended primarily as a supporting framework for his proposal to establish schools with a curriculum designed to meet the practical needs of the middle classes, is generally considered as unsatisfactory as its predecessors.

The interest in new visual maps of knowledge, including Bentham's, was inspired in part by the emergence of new disciplines. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradition of grouping works on virtually any subject under the broad rubric of "literature" gradually yielded to the triumph of intellectual specialization (whose utility was celebrated, appropriately enough, by Adam Smith). As Valenza notes, the progress of scientific knowledge meant that by roughly the 1820s the use of "literature" as an umbrella term for writings devoted to general learning of all kinds was breaking down.

A parallel development was the invention of specialized vocabularies as intellectual disciplines evolved into smaller and smaller units of focus. These developing vocabularies, especially in the newer disciplines like chemistry and physics, had an influence beyond the sciences themselves. David Hume had aspired, without notable success, to write about complex philosophical questions in language any educated person could comprehend. By 1823, De Quincey was endorsing philosophy's use of technical terms as a way of introducing more precision into imperfectly realized ideas, and invoking the analogy of the physical sciences to do it. The terminology employed by Kant is not "a rebaptism of ideas already existing in the universal consciousness: it is, in part, an enlargement of the understanding by new territory" because, like chemistry's systematic naming of substances, it creates orderly categories to replace random and arbitrary terms.¹³ De Quincey's defense of specialized language and its potential analytical power was a recognition that there were ways in which science could be a model for humanistic disciplines. (Wordsworth and Coleridge responded, in essence, by arguing that while poetry does not employ a specialized vocabulary, it uses language in a specialized way.¹⁴)

The growing use of technical terms was only one of the ways in which language figured in the cultural discussion of knowledge and education. From early schooling through university, students were immersed in classical languages through the study of Greek and Latin. Reservations about the value of this practice had a pedigree in eighteenth-century critiques of education. Adam Ferguson, a major figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, expressed a version of this sentiment in his 1767 work, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. "The parade of words, and general reasonings, which sometimes carry an appearance of so much learning and knowledge, are of little avail in the conduct of life. The talents from which they proceed, terminate in mere ostentation, and are seldom connected with the superior discernment which the active apply in times of perplexity."¹⁵ The rule-books of culture, transmitted to the educated classes through an intense focus on ancient languages, had compromised the ability to exercise initiative and take decisive action.

Several decades earlier, Hume had made a distinction between the learned and the "conversible" worlds that echoes something of Ferguson's call to praxis. In Hume's view, conversation is a form of practice for living, training in self-expression disciplined by exposure to a wide range of ideas and refined by attending to the conversation of others. It is not traditional forms of education that sustain culture but the kind of social experience that puts learning in touch with life. "The Separation of the Learned from the conversible World," Hume lamented in 1742, meant that "every Thing of what we call *Belles Lettres* became totally barbarous, being cultivated by Men without any Taste of Life or Manners, and without that Liberty and Facility of Thought and Expression, which can only be acquir'd by Conversation."¹⁶ A common corollary in the period was that too much application to study isolated and rendered young men physically passive and disinclined to action, whereas the education of a

gentleman should encourage an energetic stance toward his responsibilities and a sophisticated sense of how to present himself in society.

Criticism of cloistered learning was reinforced from another direction—Utilitarians and Dissenters. Joseph Priestley described the typical university liberal-arts curriculum as sadly out of date in the 1760s, given the rapid globalization of trade. He recommended adding the systematic study of laws, government, manufacture, and commerce for gentlemen “in active life” to meet the threat to English interests from growing international competition.¹⁷ In 1808, an anonymous author in the *Edinburgh Review* fumed about the classical curricula taught by English dons and force-fed to English students:

A learned man!—A scholar!—a man of erudition! Upon whom are these epithets of approbation bestowed? Are they given to men acquainted with the science of government? Thoroughly masters of the geographical and commercial relations of Europe? To men who know the properties of bodies, and their action upon each other? No: this is not learning; it is chemistry or political economy—not learning. . . . The picture which a young Englishman, addicted to the pursuit of knowledge, draws—his *beau ideal* of human nature—his top and consummation of man’s powers—is a knowledge of the Greek language. His object is not to reason, to imagine, or to invent; but to conjugate, decline and derive.¹⁸

Although De Quincey would have made Greek an exception because of the unrivalled power of its literature, he saw the educational emphasis on foreign languages in the same negative light. Unlike the *Edinburgh Review* author, however, De Quincey’s complaint does not rest on utilitarian objections—what is all this erudition *for?*—but on cognitive grounds. Adam Smith had noted “the beauty of a systematical arrangement of different observations connected by a few common principles.”¹⁹ Language study offers no such principles, De Quincey maintains, and virtually no organization; everything about it is arbitrary and as a result “its lifeless forms kill and mortify the action of the intellect.”²⁰ The superiority of science lies in the demands it places on the brain to engage in vigorous analysis, comparison, and synthesis.

Besides its contribution to individual cognitive development, science seemed to offer practical lessons in organizing a wider discourse of knowledge. Barriers between the learned and the less educated were coming down, aided by experimental science. By the time Priestley was performing his historic experiments in chemistry and electricity in the 1760s and beyond, theory and practice were beginning to cross-germinate. Educated men and practitioners—farmers and manufacturers, weavers, potters, and other craftspeople—were having scientifically and economically productive conversations with each other. The eighteenth century saw a more than tenfold increase in invention, including the innovations of such craftspeople as weavers and instrument-makers.²¹ The percentage of lower-class men who succeeded in becoming scientists rose as well.²² Priestley found time between fundamental scientific contributions to serve as a consultant to the china manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood and to discover the carbonation process, an advance that was later successfully (and profitably) applied by a Swiss entrepreneur named Johann Jacob Schweppe. “The politeness of the times,” Priestley wrote, “has brought the learned and the unlearned into more familiar intercourse than they had before.”²³

Science’s ability to create a spontaneous community of talent in pursuit of a common goal, even across class lines, was a much harder task within literary culture. Hazlitt considered its “feuds and jealousies” impediments to progress toward liberty and equality, and “no class of persons so little calculated to act in *corps* as literary men.”²⁴ De Quincey wrote that literature reflected few of any nation’s intellectual concerns and that “literary people are, in a large proportion, as little intellectual people as any one meets with.”²⁵ The great journals of the early nineteenth century, like the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly*, attracted large middle-class audiences for writers and raised the compensation of journalists to new highs.²⁶ But the competitive demands of the market also worked against cooperation. Although, as Mary Poovey writes, poets like Wordsworth attracted willing acolytes and publicists like De Quincey, presenting a unified front was difficult to accomplish because authors and critics were more likely to regard each other as rivals than as colleagues in a larger enterprise.²⁷

In contrast, the confidence of scientists in the unlimited promise of their disciplines was spilling over into broader questions. Jon Klancher relates how Humphrey Davy’s 1802 inaugural lecture at the Royal Institution not only inspired his listeners with the potential of experimental science but excited them with an even more ambitious prospect: the eventual binding together of “*the great whole of society* . . . by means of knowledge and the useful arts.” This new and knowledge-born unity was to include humanists and poets, as long as they were willing to employ a “‘language representing simple facts,’ the better to ‘destroy the influence of terms connected only with feeling.’”²⁸ This statement was an implicit denial of literature’s claim to a universal window on the human condition and therefore its claim to a privileged place in culture. Where did this leave poetry, the emblematic imaginative art, among the emerging order of the disciplines?

Left behind

Thomas Love Peacock, a poet and novelist himself, had an answer in *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820). His breezy satire is remembered chiefly for two things: its attack upon the Lake Poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Robert Southey) and the whirlwind it provoked, Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, written in 1821. But Peacock's diatribe also sheds a searching light on the tensions surrounding the debate over knowledge and poetry and their relation to progress. He skewers the dissension of the literary world, the struggle among the disciplines, and the threats to literature's standing posed by science and Utilitarian and Dissenting advocates of instrumental education.

The framework he uses—the theory that history proceeds in cycles—dates back to classical times. But he grafts onto it aspects of eighteenth-century Scottish philosophical histories, such as those of Hume and Ferguson, which depict “an inexorable historical process, often periodized in the four great stages that culminate in commercial society.”²⁹ Peacock employs this dual perspective to mock Romantic notions of poetry as an exalted form of knowledge by placing them firmly in a Utilitarian and mercantilist scale of values, beginning at the preliterate dawn of human society:

The successful warrior becomes a chief; the successful chief becomes a king: his next want is an organ to disseminate the fame of his achievements and the extent of his possessions; and this organ he finds in a bard, who is always ready to celebrate the strength of his arm, being first duly inspired by that of his liquor. This is the origin of poetry, which, like all other trades, takes its rise in the demand for the commodity, and flourishes in proportion to the extent of the market.³⁰

At this first stage—the age of iron—poets “are as yet the only historians and chroniclers of their time, and the sole depositories of all the knowledge of their age.” In the succeeding age of organized institutions and civil societies, poetry still reigns supreme. Yet this—the age of Homer—is when its decline begins. “Pure reason and dispassionate truth” demand more rigorous and objective forms of articulation—a sentiment that recalls Davy's 1802 inaugural address. First history emancipates itself from the chains of poetic myth and legend, followed by philosophy and the early glimmerings of science. As these disciplines mature with the emerging dominance of reason, “the empire of thought is withdrawn from poetry, as the empire of facts had been before.”

Peacock finishes with an abbreviated history of the four ages of *modern* poetry (thus extending his account to eight ages of poetry, despite his title) that ends with the Romantic period, an uninspiring age of brass. He has fun with Romantic self-absorption and worship of nature, in one instance, by imagining the Lake Poets reasoning with themselves as follows: “Society is artificial, therefore we will live out of society. The mountains are natural, therefore we will live in the mountains. There we shall be shining models of purity and virtue, passing the whole day in the innocent and amiable occupation of going up and down hill, receiving poetical impressions, and communicating them in immortal verse to admiring generations.”³¹ But his account is remarkable principally for the Romantic poets' inexhaustible infatuation with themselves and their embrace of a ridiculous—because unscientific—return to nature.

Writing at a time when the Republic of Letters was devolving into a collection of smaller, intellectually autonomous states, Peacock made his (perhaps not entirely) tongue-in-cheek dissection of poetry's pretensions a history of the intellectual disciplines. His theory of the development of these disciplines starts from the assumption that poetry's role was always—and only—to serve as a primeval Gaia of intellect, a huge formless mass from which continents of knowledge detached themselves over time. The march of specialization, as the disciplines one by one asserted their independence from—indeed their superiority to—their mother continent, has reduced poets themselves to “semi-barbarian[s] in a civilized community” and poetry to “the rant of unregulated passion, the whining of exaggerated feeling, and the cant of factitious sentiment. . . . It can never make a philosopher, nor a statesman, nor in any class of life an useful or rational man.”³²

Peacock's deterministic account ultimately merges with a different and non-cyclical kind of history, the endless upward climb of knowledge and progress envisioned in Enlightenment dreams of perfectibility. Modernity shakes off poetry into the cyclical world of classical history and medieval superstition where it belongs. His argument turns to this point in one final, Herculean, massively subordinated sentence:

Now . . . when we consider that the great and permanent interests of human society become more and more the main spring of intellectual pursuit; that therefore the progress of useful art and science, and of moral and political knowledge, will continue to withdraw attention from frivolous and uncondusive, to solid and conducive studies: that therefore the poetical audience will not only continually diminish in the proportion of its number to that of the rest of the reading public, but will also sink lower and lower in the comparison of intellectual acquirement: when we consider that the poet must still please his audience, and must therefore continue to sink to their level, while the rest of the community is rising above it: we

may easily conceive that the day is not distant, when the degraded state of every species of poetry will be . . . generally recognized . . .

In contrast to Wordsworth, who argued that truly original poets must create the taste by which they are to be appreciated, Peacock sees no such elevated place or power for future poets; they will be forced to write down to the lowest taste of their times. Throughout *The Four Ages*, the standard for poetry is the size and composition of its audience; poetry falls because rising disciplines become increasingly efficient in annexing its educated patrons and ultimately the more talented of its practitioners. Its marginalization derives not just from the shattering of its early monopoly on knowledge. It is also the result of the growing number and sophistication of the audience for truly useful and “conducive” knowledge—conducive because unlike poetry it leads to something useful, something beyond itself. Thus, poetry’s final and most devastating loss will be the best minds of future generations. Science and other contemporary pursuits, in contrast, have built a “pyramid . . . into the upper air of intelligence” that will endure through the steady and collective process of amassing useful learning. *The Four Ages* is the verbal equivalent of Diderot’s diagram: poetry hangs at the precarious edge of the outermost branch of the tree of knowledge, while more solid and productive disciplines are safely anchored to the trunk.

Shelley strikes back

A Defence of Poetry, completed in 1821 but not published until 1843, long after Shelley’s death, is not so much a blow-by-blow refutation of Peacock’s arguments as an evocation of *The Four Ages* that rarely comes into direct contact with it. Shelley admitted as much: “[A]lthough devoid of the formality of a polemical reply; if the view [these pages] contain be just they will be found to involve a refutation of the doctrines of the Four Ages of Poetry.”³³ Its 1843 editor removed most of the scattered references to Peacock in Shelley’s draft. So for many modern readers it can seem to spring out of nowhere, its origins no longer a part of its meaning.

My interest in Shelley’s retaliatory polemic is limited and specific: its strategies for defending poetry’s ascendancy in the context of Peacock’s hierarchy of the disciplines.³⁴ *The Four Ages* used the historical crystallization of the disciplines and professions to explain poetry’s devolution and predict its permanent eclipse. Among other things, Utilitarian visions of newer and more dynamic disciplines displacing those devoted to imaginative experience challenged Romantic conceptions of the unity of knowledge and the unity of human experience. Shelley’s plan of attack, to adopt and adapt Plato’s definition of *poiein* as the “general name” for “the exercise of every inventive art,” allows him to absorb the other disciplines (and professions like architecture and law) into poetry, and then to subject them to its generalizing power.³⁵ He achieves this by capitalizing on what, as Valenza points out, made poetry different from other intellectual fields: it seemed to have no specific content. For that reason, it can function in Shelley’s account as the universal solvent, dissolving the differences among the disciplines and conferring order upon them.

The *Defence* presents poetry as an intellectual force potent enough to reconstruct knowledge as a single entity, unified by poetic skill and subordinated to the discipline of human nature in its most general sense. (Wordsworth had done something similar when he described poetry as “the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge” and “the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science,” but Shelley elaborates the same idea on a much larger canvas.) Only poets hear the rhythms deep in experience and bring an answering harmony themselves, Shelley says early on, which is why poetry functions as “the center and circumference of knowledge . . . the root and blossom of all other systems of thought.”

At the same time, the *Defence* posits history as Platonic, self-creating, and hidden, something that must be unveiled (as the frequent references to veils suggests)—though “unveiled” does not imply anything like a transparent and complete understanding. The words of poets “unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth,” but these poetic unveilings are only intermittently glimpsed, suggesting the fundamental resistance of history—and of poetic knowledge—to being understood. Shelley’s recasting of Peacock’s cycles of power and decline into a history marked by an “indestructible order” of beauty that poets “imagine and express” safely removes poets from the time-bound judgments of reading publics and the quantitative standard of popular esteem that dominate *The Four Ages*. The threat of the disaffected audience is nullified.

Bruce Haley suggests that in the *Defence* Shelley was engaged in writing a new kind of history, “not critical and analytic, but poetic or intuitive, inviting a special kind of reading.”³⁶ Shelley had read *The Statesman’s Manual* and might have been influenced by Coleridge’s contrast between conventional historical writing, with its retrospective investigation of chains of causation, and Biblical history, which enfolds “the Reason in Images of the Sense.” Shelley’s cycles of society rising, falling, and rising again are a counterpoint to the relentlessly upward progression of history—in many ways our view of history—that Peacock espouses at the end of *The Four Ages*. While history may appear linear, it looks very different, as M. H. Abrams explains, from a Coleridgean perspective, which conceives past, present, and future as part of one great circular journey of the

"One back to the One by way of the many."³⁷ Shelley's cyclical version of time recalls Coleridge's image of the ouroboros, the snake biting its own tail, which Coleridge saw as emblematic of the imagination:

The common end of all *narrative*, nay of *all*, Poems is to convert a *series* into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a *strait* Line, assume to our Understandings a *circular* motion—the snake with it's Tail in it's Mouth.³⁸

Poets are important creators of this unity, Shelley is saying, but—as critics have pointed out—their primary characteristic is not their agency but their uncomprehending subordination within a closed and self-perpetuating historical circle. Whether they exercise their powers as shapers of institutions or as movers of world events, poets are the instruments of invisible forces. Shelley's tendency in his poetry to identify with irresistibly potent forces that overwhelm the sense of self strikes a similar note. The best-known is the symbolic storm, the "Destroyer and Preserver," of his *Ode to the West Wind*. Like that poem, the *Defence*, especially its soaring conclusion, derives its rhetorical impact from the same building sense of union with mysterious powers, barely glimpsed, that animate human life and death. This is consistent with the mystical tone Shelley adopts in discussing the role of poetry which, he says, "compels us to . . . imagine that which we know. . . .[and] creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration."

In her classic study of ecstasy, Marghanita Laski cites Shelley's use of ruins in his poetry, in which images of transience invoke by contrast the feeling of underlying permanence that are frequent in ecstatic states.³⁹ Among the inventory of triggers that produce ecstasy, she includes the inner sense of discovering knowledge. Such "knowledge-contact ecstasies" are "characteristic of inspirations . . . that the new idea or purpose feels as if it had arrived independently of the creator's volition and often as if it were communicated by someone or something else."⁴⁰ This description suggests Shelley's poets, and also why the *Defence*, despite its sometimes confusing leaps and vague prose, achieves such an exciting cumulative force at its climax. Shelley's most effective answer to *The Four Ages* is not his complex argument or his sometimes elusive logic, but his strong rendering of a transcendent discovery: the ecstatic experience of knowledge. It makes a rhetorically convincing case that poetic knowledge is self-validating, the wellspring not merely of secular progress but also of a profound inner experience of unity with the world.

Woven into Peacock's and Shelley's competing arguments are three unifying versions of history—the cyclic, the linear history of progress, and the Coleridgean circular journey. Bentham also had a unifying theory about yet another kind of history, that of the course of an individual life. He conceives it as a linear account, but one grounded in "expectations," which looks to a future shaped by the economy of material success:

It is by means of [expectations] that the successive moments which form the duration of life are not like insulated and independent parts but become parts of a continuous whole. Expectation is a chain which unites our present and our future existence and passes beyond us to the generations which follow.⁴¹

Bentham's version fits within conventional history's chain of causation, except that it is not a retrospective but a *prospective* set of linkages from the present to the future. It includes no room for a past that is important to Shelley's evidence-based case for poetry and its unifying role. Yet it almost seems, like Shelley's *Defence*, to be envisioning history as a work of art that incorporates balance and order. "Expectations" take the place of the ecstatic contact with knowledge in the present and the poetic creation of futurity. They are the counterpart, for the individual, of Peacock's hopeful projection of the disciplines into a future of steady, reliable accomplishment, with a productive denouement we can be confident will occur. We gain the sense that our individual lives have meaning, that they are a "continuous whole," by contemplating the security promised by our projected accumulations. Expectations, in this sense, are not the expression of fragile hope in the face of an unpredictable world. Their function is to tame surprise by reassuring us about the strong bonds between us and our future well-being.

Thus Peacock's claim—his expectation—that the progress of the disciplines means the best minds will no longer gravitate toward poetry or imaginative literature. He receives some support from an unexpected source: Thomas De Quincey's *Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected*, written just a few years after *The Four Ages* and *A Defence of Poetry*.

De Quincey: knowledge and terror

De Quincey's remarks about technical vocabularies are from the *Letters*, a work known almost exclusively for the distinction, which De Quincey credits to "many years' conversations with Mr. Wordsworth," between what he calls the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. De Quincey's famous division of literature into two parts evinces his awareness that, even if the sciences could at times hold lessons for other kinds of intellectual work, there was also a disciplinary competition at stake:

All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge. Now, if it be asked what is meant by communicating power, I, in my turn, would ask by what name a man would designate the case in which I should be made to feel vividly, and with a vital consciousness, emotions which ordinary life rarely or never supplies occasions for exciting, and which had previously lain unawakened, and hardly within the dawn of consciousness—as myriads of modes of feeling are at this moment in every human mind for want of a poet to organize them. I say, when these inert and sleeping forms *are* organized, when these possibilities, *are* actualized, is this conscious and living possession of mine *power*, or what is it? ⁴²

The utility of these two categories, he says, lies in the way they help clear up the confusion engendered by the older definition of *literature* as anything published in a particular language. He reserves the literature of power to the narrower category of *belles lettres*, or, as he writes later in the *Letters*, “a body of creative art.” The literature of knowledge, on the other hand, “is either science or erudition”—examples of the latter include antiquities, geography, philology, philosophy, and theology. Everything that falls under this category can be translated from one language to another without “one atom of loss”—in other words, a denotative body of knowledge uncomplicated by tone, feeling, or intricately fine and therefore untranslatable connotation.

As Mary Poovey notes, this partition of literature into two opposing camps seeks to assign a superior place to imaginative over “all forms of informational writing,” including science.⁴³ As I have argued, Shelley uses a similar strategy to assert poetry’s dominance over other forms of intellectual activity in his *Defence of Poetry*. De Quincey makes his case for the primacy of imaginative literature by a significant parallel: “science or erudition”—the literature of knowledge—may help organize the mind, but poetry organizes emotions that would otherwise lie deep and unrecognized in the psyche. The “inert and sleeping forms” it awakens possess possibilities that are *actualized*, feelings that are brought to life, by the very process of being organized. In other words, the literature of power deserves its name because it causes things to happen within the mind that can be stimulated in no other way. These cognitive changes occur through the vivifying force of language when it is used with the skill only poets possess. (De Quincey is using the term *poet* to stand in for a broader class of literary practitioners.) And in a way that also recalls Shelley, he is claiming that when poets exercise their art, the conventional separation between thought and action begins to dissolve (organizing = actualizing). The literature of power, figuratively speaking, explodes off the charts when it comes to agency.

So it is significant that in the *Letters* De Quincey advises the young man of the title to embrace the literature of knowledge, not the literature of power, in building a strong educational foundation. In part this is because he wants to lead him to the study of philosophy and to an appreciation of the extraordinary originality of Kant. Nonetheless, De Quincey’s glorification of the literature of power in this passage—literature as *belles lettres*—is remarkably at odds with his assessment of its value elsewhere in the *Letters*.

This shift occurs when De Quincey turns from literature in the abstract to literature’s effect on the brain. The advantages of the literature of power become disadvantages in the realm of mental training. Pure literature inspires enthusiasm and excitement, but presents a serious challenge to the student because—unlike the sciences and mathematics—it does not proceed in a logical sequence of equally demanding steps:

The dilemma, therefore, to which a student of pure literature is constantly reduced . . . is this: . . . his understanding must find a daily want of some masculine exercise to call it out and give it play . . . [I]f (as too often it happens) he has not cultivated those studies (mathematics, *e.g.*) which present such difficulties as will bend to a resolute effort of the mind, and which have the additional recommendation that they are apt to stimulate and irritate the mind to make that effort, he is often thrown by the very cravings of an unsatisfied intellect . . . upon some vulgar excitement of business or pleasure, which becomes constantly more necessary to him. ⁴⁴

What the literature of power lacks is the innate logical order that makes consistent application to study congenial and creates an encouraging sense of progress. In fact it is so dangerous to intellectual agency—the ability to think in an orderly and purposive way—that it must be regularly offset with the study of disciplines from the literature of knowledge. Otherwise, the study of literature invites diletantism and addiction. There is a telling example, De Quincey says, of the consequences of failing to balance pure literary studies with bracing masculine disciplines. It is a brilliant and learned Englishman who followed no organized plan of study, did not understand that “mathesis must furnish the master key,”⁴⁵ and therefore never experienced the “perpetual influx of pleasure, from the constant sense of success and difficulty overcome.”⁴⁶ As a result, he ended up chronically dissatisfied with himself and his contemporaries. This eminent Englishman is, of course, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was doomed to appear in print as his generation’s favorite cautionary tale about how not to live life. He drifts in and out of

the *Letters* as its negative role model (in contrast to De Quincey himself), turning up several other times as a poor metaphysician and a worse explicator of Kant, even though (De Quincey says) he had a better grasp of Kant's system than other contemporary commentators.

The *Letters*'s most compelling moments are those that reveal how, for De Quincey, the acquisition of knowledge is laced with the threat of losing control to some intense craving. The dangers of devotion to foreign languages, for example, can be dealt with only by strictly limiting such studies to the level necessary to grapple with a worthy foreign literature or philosophy, such as the German. The most formidable—because unavoidable—threat that knowledge poses, however, is presented by books themselves. Although De Quincey states early on in the *Letters* that the best possible plan of study is the possession of a good library, his later discussion of the allure of books is one of the great monuments to the terrors of bibliomania.

The rise in readership during the early nineteenth century coincided with a wave of popular fears about the obsession for collecting books, both antiquary and modern. In more extreme cases, bibliomania was considered a medical disease.⁴⁷ De Quincey was a prime example of this compulsion.⁴⁸ In the *Letters*, the otherworldly fecundity of books becomes entangled with his warnings about languages, because he sees them as related addictions. He begins by calculating the number of books it is possible to read in one lifetime, beginning at around age twenty, and concludes that even with intense application it would take thirty years to read ten thousand. If this industrious reader were unfortunate enough to live to be eighty, he could raise that figure to perhaps twenty thousand, De Quincey goes on—but estimates that this is barely five percent of the mass of books Europe alone would produce during those same thirty years. It is ironic that he uses the mentally stimulating tool of mathematics to elucidate exactly how wretched a love of books can make you: "All this arithmetical statement you must not conceive to relate to any fanciful case of misery. No; I protest to you that I speak of as real a case of suffering as ever can have existed."⁴⁹ This suffering might be more bearable to a man who lives in a small town, where books are few; but it becomes traumatic if you take the same man to London, with its "wagon-loads of unused stores which he is at liberty to work up." No longer the master of books, "he is degraded into their slave."⁵⁰

From here, De Quincey extrapolates from his insatiable lust for books to a bottomless craving for art, music, and finally people, who after all can be read like books if you have the skill. But then he recalls that if books are available in the hundreds of thousands, people exist in the millions. Even the living will not suffice. What good would it do him to meet the great thinkers of the seventeenth century, he wonders, if he cannot meet the giants of the twentieth century as well? He envisions himself trapped on a narrow isthmus between past and future, isolated from both.

He explains away this plunge into a "midsummer madness" as a warning to the young about the dangers of intellectual life, which can be avoided only by consistent self-control and adherence to a strict plan of mental hygiene. There is an extraordinary disproportion, however, between the prescription and the disease. If there is one thing this cautionary tale has made clear, it is that books are the agents of a terrible addiction—much like the opium habit De Quincey battled unsuccessfully throughout his life. The plan of study, which largely involves logic, the arts of memory (not much discussed), and minimal contact with languages—i.e., words—is pathetically unequal to the threat intrinsic in the act of reading. It is impossible to know when to stop because it is impossible ever to know enough. The *Letters* begin as a pedagogical treatise on needful knowledge and morph into a nightmare of drowning in it.

De Quincey tells us that his leading claim to instruct the young about learning rests on his lifelong success in mastering solitude, which he believed was indispensable to intellectual development. This qualification is nonetheless undermined by his urge to reveal his own sense of frantic helplessness in the face of the perils of reading. The eager young student, whom we are to imagine reading these advice-laden missives, exists only in De Quincey's mind. We are left with his inner monologue about an impossible dilemma: education can only be achieved through study, yet study awakens dangerous hungers, which solitude and loneliness can only reinforce. In the world of the *Letters*, solitude is the last thing to recommend for a mind confronted with the temptations inherent in reading.

The epistolary structure of the *Letters* as a primer for inducting the younger generation into the secrets of learning allows De Quincey a distancing framework for articulating his approach-avoidance attitude toward Coleridge. His criticisms of his talented but underachieving mentor and friend perform another function besides score-settling, however, which weaves them into his case for the pathology of reading: the futility of self-assertion and self-control. Coleridge is the model of a mind that has not been well-armed for its encounter with books, which function as metonymy for the exponentially expanding universe of knowledge. De Quincey opposes the mind's healthful pleasure in scientific and mathematical "difficulties overcome" to the lure and menace of language and other intellectual domains of power. Which will the virtuous student choose? For all De Quincey's self-reassuring pedagogical advice, the *Letters* suggest that it is useless to resist.

Hazlitt: the consequences of reading and writing

While De Quincey's ambivalence about books is embodied in nightmarish fantasies, Hazlitt's is analytic and discursive. There is, for example, his contrast between the role of reading as a force for general human progress and its role in the lives of individuals. James Chandler shows us one side of this dichotomy when he quotes Hazlitt's oft-stated argument that the spread of reading and writing at the end of the feudal period was indispensable to the spread of liberty: "Books alone teach us to judge of truth and good in the abstract. . . . Our impressions . . . united in public opinion, and expressed by the public voice, are like the congregated roar of many waters, and quail the hearts of princes."⁵¹ This process ultimately creates a common awareness and sense of what constitutes justice and impartiality, Chandler writes, and concludes that books, because they teach us to be "fully human," are Hazlitt's "paradigm for education and culture."⁵²

Yet the same Hazlitt quotes approvingly Thomas Hobbes's statement that, had he read as much as other men, he would be as ignorant as they. Hazlitt goes even further:

It is better neither to be able to read nor write than to be able to do nothing else. Such a one . . . is afraid of venturing on any train of reasoning, or of striking out an observation that is not mechanically suggested to him by parsing his eyes over certain legible characters; shrinks from the fatigue of thought, which, for want of practice, becomes insupportable to him; and sits down contented with an endless, wearisome succession of words and half-formed images, which fill the void of the mind, and continually efface one another."⁵³

Here he associates reading with Ferguson's complaints about the passivity-inducing quality of much that goes by the name of education, as well as with the kind of mental disarray De Quincey sees inflicted by the study of literature undisciplined by mathematical or scientific disciplines. In this essay, "On the Ignorance of the Learned," Hazlitt is referring to the trained incapacity of scholars, whose learning has hobbled the springs of action and self-motivation. They have failed to master the cognitive skills that bring order and movement into "the void of the mind" (Hazlitt often speaks of cognition as movement through space). Classical education's emphasis on language and memorization bred the mental laziness of the conventionally learned: nothing they had been taught involved an active or thought-organizing process or the acquisition of intellectual skill.

We would expect books, because they enable the free flow of knowledge from mind to mind, to enrich the intellectual capacity of individuals, just as we would expect the literature of power's arousal of unconscious senses to stimulate more complex and nuanced thinking than the literature of knowledge alone could afford. In neither instance is this the case. Hazlitt could imagine illiteracy as a better fate than intellectual lassitude for the same reason De Quincey could envision catastrophic consequences flowing from an unsound plan of study—because the prevailing psychology encouraged an image of the brain as a system of faculties vulnerable to damaging over- or underdevelopment. This psychology encouraged the idea that a carefully balanced cultivation of mental dispositions and abilities was essential to right thinking and right living. The *Letters* use this set of cognitive assumptions first to establish, but then to undermine, the superiority of creative literature over other forms of knowledge. Like a selective virus, the literature of power is disempowering to all intellectual life outside its own domain. The *Letters* testify to the period's cultural unease about what happens when an inexperienced student is allowed unregulated access to learning.

But there is, in addition, a more directly psychological—as opposed to cognitive—dimension to both De Quincey's and Hazlitt's ambivalence about knowledge. Rae Terada, in writing about De Quincey's shocked reaction to his sister's death, his emotional state "after one declares hope dead," quotes Freud:

One of Freud's main ways of discussing trauma is to remark that excitations brought on by catastrophe are "unbound" (he does not say they are uncomprehended). Freud's notion of "binding" is notoriously abstract and metaphoric. But if "binding" organizes energy to shape and limit it, psychological pathologies reflect "unbound" energies by the fact that one has not been able to catch the energy before it has seeped through and through, so to speak. To put it another way, unbound energy metastasizes, and so structures the self by affecting each part of it.⁵⁴

Behind De Quincey's and Hazlitt's portrayal of books and reading is a sense of trauma—of the impossibility of managing their transformative cognitive and psychological effects. For Hazlitt, and for the De Quincey of the *Letters*, knowledge is a form of "unbound" energy that can escape control by the self. Hazlitt's description of the scholar who is too frightened to risk an original thought, too exhausted to grasp an argument, whose anxiety is relieved only by "a wearisome succession of words and half-formed images, which fill the void of the mind and continually efface one another" represents a mind that has been traumatized. Or one that has regressed almost to the mental state of an infant at birth, as John Locke saw it: "void of all characters, without any ideas."

Hazlitt's analysis of books and educations that impose a paralyzing dominance over the brain, in the process disabling its critical and synthesizing faculties, takes the Dissenting critique of conventional classical education a long step further, into a darker and more pessimistic emotional register. Miseducation forces open the gates of the mind to more information, learning, or knowledge than it can take in, organize, and, use, an experience that resembles an unwilling and violent nullification of the self.

The treachery of audiences

Hazlitt sometimes expresses a revulsion towards words that seems odd for a professional writer, as if a mathematician were to take a deep dislike to numbers. He does not relish the life of an essayist, he says; re-reading something he has written for the sake of ensuring cogency or reassuring the printer dulls the sense of achievement, of problems resolved. The only way to enjoy something you have written is to have forgotten that you ever wrote it. And this is not so hard to do, thanks to the evanescent nature of words. "After I have once written on a subject," Hazlitt tells us, "it goes out of my mind: my feelings about it have been melted down into words, and *them* I forget. I have, as it were, discharged my memory of its old habitual reckoning, and rubbed out the score of real sentiment. In future, it exists only for others."

Putting pen to paper involves a strange alchemy of loss. Feelings are melted down into words, like gold into bullion, only the wealth thus created is not available to the one who writes but only to the one who reads. All that remains to the writer is a psychic debt discharged, a memory scoured clean, and a persistent sense of anhedonia. The act of writing is a gift to the future that involves no pleasure or sense of sharing in the present; what is real—i.e., directly felt and experienced—accrues to the reader because it is now unreal to the person who felt it. Reading, so vital to public life, has predatory overtones when it becomes a transaction between author and reader.

Mark Schoenfield connects the working conditions of nineteenth-century journalism to Hazlitt's sense of self-alienation, and specifically to his theory of a continually shifting self. "The repetitions of periodical production constitute Hazlitt's identity," he writes, "rendering him unfit for everything else, yet also estranging him from himself." The constant demands to feed the journals and the press "entailed the production and reproduction of one's names—until, as Hazlitt points out, the writer's identity becomes an extension of his textual productions." As a result:

Once, Hazlitt argues in the *Examiner*, this situation directed the writer toward posterity and future fame, one could imagine becoming coextensive with one's works and living through them. But, he argues, the periodical industry—in which his own writing thrived, and in opposition to which he produced much successful work—has co-opted the function of the future: 'The spirit of universal criticism has superseded the anticipation of posthumous fame, and instead of waiting for the reward of distant ages, the poet and prose-writer receives his final doom from the next number of the 'Edinburgh' or 'Quarterly Review.'⁵⁵

In a way that also suggests Hazlitt's theory of an identity strictly bounded by the past and the present, Schoenfield refers to the reiterative character of periodical culture as representing "a continual present, in which history and futurity are lost."⁵⁶

Hazlitt's bifurcated view of the public power of reading and writing and the private pain they inflict is a mirror image of his sometimes hopeful, sometimes bleak view of the audiences for whom he wrote. In the last year of his life, he published a review of William Godwin's recently published novel, *Cloudesley*, in the *Edinburgh Review*. He did not like the novel very much, but it leads him to ponder the plight of the professional author. The writer in the early nineteenth century, he says, faces an impossible task: to produce constantly at a high level of quality. Only one contemporary author—unnamed, but almost certainly the poet and novelist Walter Scott—had achieved this extraordinary combination. The average writer is forgotten by the public if he falters in his publication rate and ridiculed if he fails by attempting to write beyond what his talent allows.

Godwin, Hazlitt writes, is a particularly apt example of this untenable position. He represents one of two categories of genius: the author who writes primarily out of his own inner experience. (The other category includes writers like Scott, who draw the materials of their art from nature and the external world.) An introvert author like Godwin, simply as a result of his "constitution of mind and operation of [his] faculties," cannot create original works indefinitely because, in effect, he cannot go on reproducing himself indefinitely. Godwin's great achievement, given the kind of thinker he was, consisted of writing two strikingly different but equally remarkable works, the treatise *Political Justice* and the novel *Caleb Williams*. It is unfair for such an author to be evaluated in light of his latest work, Hazlitt argues; he deserves to be judged by his best. This, however, is exactly what the public will not do. "Had Mr. Godwin been bred a monk, and lived in the good old times, he would assuredly either have been burnt as a free-thinker, or have been rewarded with a mitre, for a tenth part of the learning and talent he has displayed. He might have reposed on a rich benefice, and the reputation he had earned." But Godwin and every other author writing for the market lives in a harsher reality. "[T]hough condemned to daily drudgery for a precarious subsistence, [he] is

expected to produce none but works of first-rate genius. No; learning unconsecrated, unincorporated, unendowed, is no match for the importunate demands and thoughtless ingratitude of the reading public.”⁵⁷ (Writing sixteen years later, De Quincey was equally negative, declaring that the reading public had grown in size but not in “intellect and manners and taste.”⁵⁸)

The surprise in this passage is that the terms *consecrated*, *corporate*, and *endowed* all carry deeply negative overtones for Hazlitt in that they describe the kind of clerical and upper-class monopolies on knowledge that the invention of printing did so much to shatter. The Hazlitt optimistic about social progress can observe that “The reading public—laugh at it as we will, abuse it as we will—is, after all (depend upon it), a very rational animal, compared with a feudal lord and his horde of vassals.”⁵⁹ Hazlitt the practicing writer reverses the image: in the Godwin review, learning *unconsecrated*, *unincorporated*, *unendowed* is at the mercy of its contemporary audience, stripped of its protection from the heedless ignorance of the modern reading public.

Hazlitt’s inner conflict over writing and audiences, De Quincey’s existential fears about books, connect with their culture’s attempt to absorb the new and sometimes threatening possibilities of the upsurge in reading, writing, and literary production in light of its assumptions about how the mind works. Clifford Siskin compares this phenomenon to the task of adjusting to a novel technology. In *The Work of Writing*, he employs the term *writing* as “shorthand for the entire configuration of writing, print, and silent reading . . . not only something people do, more or less often and more or less well; by calling it a *technology* I am acknowledging it as something other, something to which people must adapt, something that can, in a sense, be done to them.”⁶⁰ In De Quincey and Hazlitt, we see this process close up.

The Organization of Knowledge

Hazlitt was well aware of the issues of “disciplinarity, language, class, and audience” looming in the British discourse about knowledge. The narrow Benthamite influence in this environment is one—but only one—of the reasons he took a generally skeptical stance toward the period’s unproductive enthusiasm, as he saw it, for organizing and systematizing knowledge.

He claims, for example, that a fault of German writers is their mania for intellectual systems. “They are universal undertakers, and complete encyclopedists, in all moral and critical science. No question can come before them but they have a large apparatus of logical and metaphysical principles ready to play off upon it; and the less they know of the subject, the more formidable is the use they make of their apparatus. . . . Truth, in their view of it, is never what *is*, but what, according to their system, *ought to be*. Though they have dug deeply in the mine of knowledge, they have too often confounded the dross and the ore, and counted their gains rather by their weight than their quality.”⁶¹

Unlike the creators of grand generalized systems, poets must organize the knowledge they offer on the basis of “the aggregate of well-founded particulars; to embody an abstract theory, as if it were an actual part of nature, is an impertinence and indecorum.”⁶² Poetry, in contrast, represents “nature moralizing and *idealizing* for us; inasmuch as, by shewing us things as they are, it implicitly teaches us what they ought to be; and the grosser feelings, by passing through the strainers of the imaginary, wide-extended experience, acquire an involuntary tendency to higher objects.”⁶³ The ideal emerges from the real through the apprehension of beauty; it is only when we allow the aesthetic perception of things to fill our minds that we can begin to grasp the ideal potential of objects, experiences, or ideas. It is not the content of poetry, the literal or metaphorical significance of what it says, that matters, but the cognitive strategy poetry employs. Poetry is not prescriptive and, like the other fine arts, “does not undertake to unfold mysteries and inculcate dogma.” This seemingly passive process effects an inner and empowering shift in perception marked by three stages: first perception, then understanding, and finally conceptualization of an implicit ideal form. We do not teach nature by imposing our deductive intellectual systems or moral theories on reality. Nature teaches us through the example of poetic induction.

But—and this is the second thrust of his attack on system-building—coiled in his argument is a direct question about motive. It is systematizing German philosophers and so-called people of sense who “darken knowledge,” he says, by “setting up their own blindness and frailty as the measure of abstract truth, and the standard of universal propriety.” The portrait of Bentham in *The Spirit of the Age* is directed at just this kind of error. Hazlitt criticized Bentham’s reformist drive to inventory intellectual and moral ideas, like so many pieces of furniture in a warehouse, as the sign of a weak reasoning power, most clearly revealed in the peculiar opacity of his style: “He writes a language of his own, that *darkens knowledge*” (emphasis in original).⁶⁴ Bentham’s determined pursuit of an ideal result—of what “ought to be”—endowed his speculations with a premature and artificial coherence.

In a move that at first seems odd, Hazlitt includes Shelley among systemizing writers like Bentham. Citing Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* as an example, Hazlitt says that he “is not a poet, but a sophist, a theorist, a controversial writer in verse. . . .[who] . . . paints gaudy, flimsy, allegorical pictures on gauze, on the cobwebs of his own brain. . . . He assumes certain doubtful speculative notions, and proceeds to prove their truth by describing them in detail as matters of fact.”⁶⁵ Although

Hazlitt would not have read Shelley's *Defence*, he recognizes the affinity between Utilitarian abstraction and Shelley's idealizing intellect.⁶⁶

Hazlitt uses the phrase *to darken knowledge* in several different contexts. Its appearance in "On People of Sense" is relevant to a whole school of thinking, of which Bentham is just one representative. P. P. Howe suggests⁶⁷ that it is a variation on the lines from the Book of Job:

Who is this who darkens counsel
By words without knowledge?
Now prepare yourself like a man;
I will question you, and you shall answer Me.
Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? (*Job*, 38, 2-7)

God's response to Job's questioning of his wisdom is to point out how small Job is in relation to the enormous reality he confronts. Hazlitt's substitution of *darkens knowledge* for *darkens counsel* retains this implication, but also underscores the message of the last two lines: the mistaken arrogation of authority by people who presume to make grand and experientially unfounded pronouncements. As a result, they deprive knowledge of the light of truth and empty words of meaning by subordinating both to the pursuit of self-aggrandizement or political gain. This is Hazlitt's point in "On People of Sense": some of humanity's most retrograde fallacies and errors, from the Divine Right of Kings to the dogmatic quarrels of religious sects, have sprung from the self-regarding instincts of the powerful and the theorizing brains of the learned.

The third dimension of Hazlitt's skepticism about intellectual systems helps explain his sense of the "burden" of knowledge. The long accumulation of knowledge from the past to the present, in Hazlitt's view, can overwhelm perspective and sap the vigor of the intellectual faculties. This is, for him, an inescapable part of its legacy. Our knowledge of the past involves a balance of rewards and penalties:

History, as well as religion, has contributed to enlarge the bounds of imagination: and both together, by showing past and future objects at an interminable distance, have accustomed the mind to contemplate and take an interest in the obscure and shadowy. The ancients . . . spoke only their own language—were conversant only with their own customs,—were acquainted only with the events of their own history. The mere lapse of time, then, aided by the art of printing, has served to accumulate for us an endless mass of mixed and contradictory materials; and, by extending our knowledge to a greater number of things, has made our particular ideas less perfect and distinct.

The paradox is that our historically expanded imaginations, while giving the mind a greater refinement and aptitude for generalization, also undermine our ability to organize knowledge into some coherent order. This historical process, in which the invention of printing plays a role, has rendered "our particular ideas less perfect and distinct." It is not only the sheer mass of knowledge in the aggregate that inhibits ambition. We are less able integrate it, a specifically cognitive loss inflicted by the immense distance between ourselves and all past knowledge:

The constant reference to a former state of manners and literature, is a marked feature in modern poetry. We are always talking of the Greeks and Romans—*they* never said anything of us. This circumstance has tended to give a certain abstract elevation, and ethereal refinement to the mind, without strengthening it. We are lost in wonder at what has been done, and dare not think of emulating it.⁶⁸

This psychic gulf between us and knowledge enervates the mental faculties, and it is this cognitive depletion that creates our hesitations about daring to scale the mountain of knowledge or compete with the giants of the past. The Greeks and Romans were fortunate in knowing nothing of us. Their smaller world was one in which intellectual mastery was still possible, unencumbered by "a mass of mixed and contradictory materials." Living in the modern context imposes mental disabilities that argue for a keen sense of our limits and the vanity of building elaborately formal yet empty intellectual structures.

But are these structures really empty? Hazlitt's argument on behalf of poetic induction and against deductive theorizing is consistent with his conception of knowledge as largely tacit, personal, and dependent on skillfully applied intuition. It is not a particularly convincing case against organizing knowledge or disciplines around a set of principles, however. Poetic induction could conceivably generate its own version of unifying ideas and taxonomies of knowledge, although this process does not seem to be easily transferable to the construction of grand intellectual visions. Poetic induction, being dependent on individual aesthetic experience, risks yielding a system that might not be meaningful to anyone except the person who produced it.

Poetic thinking, in his account of it, substitutes for abstract intellectual ordering because it offers a way of metabolizing knowledge within the individual, not projecting it outward into generalized paradigms.

In a culture divided by conflicting views on knowledge, Hazlitt played the familiar role of critic and lover of contradictions. Like De Quincey, he is certain that knowledge plays a progressive role in society but equally convinced that it can represent a threat to individual development, given the architecture of the human brain and its limited capacities for organization and control. This dual perspective points to an unsettling ambiguity in the nature of knowledge, one that is unaddressed in either Peacock's extraverted optimism about intellectual progress or Shelley's conversion of knowledge into ecstasy.

Yet in one sense, at least, Peacock's argument has prevailed. "Pure" literature is no longer as central in our intellectual world as it was in theirs. This sense of impending displacement is evident in some of the writings discussed here. A central reaction, I have suggested, was a constellation of fears, anxieties, hopes, and ambitions centered on finding a rationale for knowledge that gave due weight to literature's place and contributions. By the 1880s, Matthew Arnold, responding in his Rede Lecture to Thomas Huxley's critique of humanistic education, was still defending the unique educational power of the Greek language, and the discourse about knowledge had narrowed to the all too familiar clash of the humanities versus the sciences. The earlier discussion of the arts and sciences was broader than its successors and, despite the fact that the cognitive psychology on which it was based has been superseded, more sensitive to the complex tensions inherent in knowledge—and thus still relevant today.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," *Shelley and Peacock: A Defence of Poetry and The Four Ages of Poetry*, ed. John E. Jordan (Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 68-69.
- ² Francis Jeffrey wrote in 1819 that "We take the most alarming signs of the times to be, that separation of the upper and middle classes of the community from the lower, which is now daily and visibly increasing. The conduct of all parties, and of every branch of society, has contributed more or less to produce this unhappy estrangement between the two grand divisions of which the population consists." [Jeffrey, "State of the Country," *Edinburgh Review* 32 (1819): 294.]; quoted in Jon Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 49.
- ³ Quoted in Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), xiii.
- ⁴ *Edinburgh Review* 43, no. 11 (November 1826).
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 93-119 and 216-234. Although both Rousseau and Wordsworth claim to champion an education premised on an appeal to "nature," Chandler argues, Wordsworth's definition of the term was "closer to Burke's sense of (second) nature," (119) i.e., use, custom, and habit.
- ⁷ Robin Valenza, *Literature, Language, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines in Britain, 1680-1820* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 146.
- ⁸ Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Pacific Books, 1961), 55-56.
- ⁹ Thomas De Quincey, "Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected," in *Letters to a Young Man and Other Papers*, (James Hogg and Sons, 1860), 43-44. In addition to the proliferation of foreign-language grammar books, De Quincey attributes the enthusiasm for foreign-language study to four other causes. First, vanity—"commonplace minds" are impressed by skill in speaking a foreign language; second, national fashion, as evidenced in the popularity of French, even though France was England's "eternal enemy" (he also notes that at the outset of the 1808-9 Peninsular War "the provinces teemed with editions of Spanish books, dictionaries, and grammars"); third, levity—"liability to casual impulses" resulting from the failure to have a sound purpose or plan of study; and fourth, the close relationship between addiction to books and addiction to foreign languages—"Many of those who give themselves up to the study of languages do so under the same disease [i.e., bibliomania] which I have described." 40-46.
- ¹⁰ De Quincey, 52.
- ¹¹ Valenza, 139.
- ¹² Valenza, 11-12.
- ¹³ De Quincey, 88-89. Coleridge defined *pedantry* as "the use of words unsuitable to the time, place, and company," meaning that specialized language is appropriate in some contexts but not in others: "The mere man of the world, who insists that no other terms but such as occur in common conversation should be employed in a scientific disquisition, and with no great precision, is as truly a *pedant* as the man of letters, who either overrating the acquirements of his auditors, or misled by his own familiarity with technical or scholastic terms, converses at the wine-table with his mind fixed on his museum or laboratory . . ." *Biographia Literaria*, edited by Nigel Leask (J. M. Dent, 1997), 97.
- ¹⁴ "The real language of men' enacts the very process Wordsworth describes: it selects from the English lexicon but configures these choices in such a way that they take on a new signification, apart from conversational or representational uses of language. Thus, what Wordsworth describes is not a separate language, but it is a specialized use of language." Valenza, 156.

- ¹⁵ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 31-33.
- ¹⁶ David Hume, "Of Essay-Writing," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, Edited and with a Foreword, Notes, and Glossary by Eugene F. Miller, Revised Edition (LibertyClassics, Indianapolis, 1785), 534-535.
- ¹⁷ Joseph Priestley, *Lectures on History, and General Policy: to which is prefixed, An Essay on a Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1803), 3-5, 10.
- ¹⁸ "Review of *Essays on Professional Education*, by R. L. Edgeworth, esq.," F. R. S. &c., *Edinburgh Review*, 15:29 (1809: Oct.), 46.
- ¹⁹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, abridged with an introduction by Richard F. Teichgraber (The Modern Library, 1985), 434.
- ²⁰ De Quincey, 40.
- ²¹ Michael Hans, *New Trends in Education in the Eighteenth Century* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 12-13.
- ²² Hans, 35. Dissenting scientists like Priestley were also active in promoting adult education in the second half of the eighteenth century (59).
- ²³ Quoted in Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain 1700-1850* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 57.
- ²⁴ *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, edited by P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930-34), 21 vols., VII, 146.
- ²⁵ De Quincey, 75.
- ²⁶ Lewis A. Coser, *Men of Ideas: A Sociologist's View* (The Free Press, 1970), 78.
- ²⁷ Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 293.
- ²⁸ Jon Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 82.
- ²⁹ Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences*, 190.
- ³⁰ Thomas Love Peacock, *The Four Ages of Poetry*, in *A Defence of Poetry and The Four Ages of Poetry*, ed. John E. Jordan (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), 4.
- ³¹ Peacock, 14.
- ³² Walter Scott expressed a somewhat similar sentiment in his letters: "A taste for poetry . . . is apt if too much indulged, to engender, a fastidious contempt for the ordinary business of the world, and gradually to unfit us for the exercise of the useful and domestic virtues. . . . Cultivate, then, sir, your taste for poetry and the belles lettres, as an elegant and most interesting amusement, but combine it with studies of a more serious and studious cast." *Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, Vol II, edited by H. J. C. Grierson (London: Constable and Co., Ltd., 1932), 278. Quoted in Lowenthal, 36.
- ³³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *A Defence of Poetry and The Four Ages of Poetry*, 77-78. Shelley planned on a second part that would complement his discussion of poetry's elements and principles with a discussion of "an application of these principles to the present state of the cultivation of Poetry, and a defence of the attempt to idealize the modern forms of manners and opinions, and compel them into a subordination to the imaginative and creative faculty." The second part was never written, however.
- ³⁴ For some scholarly views on Shelley, see Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); Paul De Man's "Shelley Disfigured," in Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1979); William Keach, *Shelley's Style* (New York: Methuen, 1984); Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of his Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Bruce Haley, "Shelley, Peacock, and the Reading of History," *Studies in Romanticism*. Vol. 29, No. 3 (Fall, 1990); Jean Hall, "The Divine and the Dispassionate Selves: Shelley's 'Defence' and Peacock's 'The Four Ages of Poetry,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 41 (1992); and Robert Kaufman, "Legislators of the Post-Everything World: Shelley's 'Defence of Adorno,'" *ELH*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Fall, 1996).
- ³⁵ Shelley's translation, *Plato's Banquet: a discourse on the manners of the antient Greeks relative to the subject of love*, edited by Roger Ingpen (Curwen Press, 1931), 80.
- ³⁶ Bruce Haley, "Shelley, Peacock, and the Reading of History," *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Fall, 1990), 457.
- ³⁷ Abrams, 271-2.
- ³⁸ To Joseph Cottle. 7 Mar. 1815; *Collected Letters*, IV, 545. Quoted in M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (W. W. Norton and Company, 1971), 271.
- ³⁹ Marghanita Laski, *Ecstasy* (The Cresset Press, 1961), 237.
- ⁴⁰ Laski, 305.
- ⁴¹ Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of the Civil Code*, vol. i., Quoted in Lionel Robbins, *The Theory of Economic Policy in English Classical Political Economy* (London, MacMillan, 1952), 63.
- ⁴² De Quincey, 55-56.
- ⁴³ Poovey, 321.
- ⁴⁴ De Quincey, 15-16.
- ⁴⁵ *Mathesis* is a Latinized version of a somewhat vague Greek expression that implies two different meanings: 1) learning/knowledge/science, with mathematical overtones—hence *universal science*; and 2) *universal mathematical science*, a narrower definition that, despite the implications of the term "universal," refers to the discipline of mathematics. Gerald Bechtle, "How to Apply Modern Concepts of *Mathesis Universalis* and *Scientia Universalis* to Ancient Philosophy," in *Ancient Mediterranean and Medieval Texts and Contexts*, Vol. 4: *Platonisms: Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern* edited by Kevin Corrigan and John D. Turner (Brill, 2007), 129-130. The fifteenth-century philosopher Marsilio Ficino believed "that the perfect divine order of the universe gets mirrored in the human mind due to mind's mathematical insights; thus mathematics proves capable of the role of an universal key to . . . knowledge; hence the denomination *mathesis universalis*." Witold Marciszewski, "The Principle of Comprehension as a Present-Day Contribution to *Mathesis Universalis*,"

Philosophia Naturalis 21: 523-537 (1984), 525-526. De Quincey appears to have aspects of both meanings in mind in the *Letters*: mathematics as a key entry-point to knowledge and the study of mathematics as a stimulus to rigorous analytical thought.

⁴⁶ De Quincey, 18.

⁴⁷ Josephine McDonagh, "De Quincey and the Secret Life of Books," in *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical and Critical Directions*, edited by Robert Morrison and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2008), 125-129.

⁴⁸ McDonagh writes that De Quincey's preoccupation with the image of books multiplying uncontrollably began early. In *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), De Quincey relates a story about ordering a history of navigation when he was seven years old and being told by a teasing bookseller that the work might run to four or five hundred volumes. He was too young to understand the joke, which brought on a guilt-fueled fantasy of (among other disturbing images) a huge mountain of books being deposited in front of his family's home (McDonagh, 123-4). De Quincey's compulsive book-buying was lifelong and contributed to his chronic indebtedness.

⁴⁹ De Quincey, 44.

⁵⁰ De Quincey, 47.

⁵¹ Chandler, 146.

⁵² Chandler, 147.

⁵³ VIII, 70.

⁵⁴ Rae Terada (2009) "Living a Ruined Life: De Quincey beyond the Worst," *European Romantic Review*, 20:2, 177-186. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509580902840459>.

⁵⁵ Mark Schoenfield, *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), pp. 119, 122-3.

⁵⁶ Schoenfield, 15.

⁵⁷ XVI, 395-6.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Morrison, 348.

⁵⁹ XVII, 326.

⁶⁰ Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1998), 31.

⁶¹ XVI, 58.

⁶² XII, 246.

⁶³ XII, 245.

⁶⁴ Tim Milnes challenges Hazlitt's criticism that Bentham's language "darkens knowledge" by arguing that Bentham's efforts to create a "new 'phraseology'—based on the sound ontology of a hedonic register that would translate abstract statements into the lexicon of pleasure and pain" signaled "a critical shift in Western thought towards prioritizing the 'conceptual' over the 'doctrinal' in philosophy and recasting the 'problem' of truth as a sub-category of the question of meaning" [in contrast to Hazlitt's realist position that truth requires a correspondence between what exists in the mind and in the world]. Tim Milnes, "Darkening Knowledge: Hazlitt and Bentham on the Limits of Empiricism" in *Metaphysical Hazlitt: Bicentenary Essays*, edited by Uttara Natarajan, Tom Paulin, and Duncan Wu (Routledge, 2005), 131-132.

⁶⁵ XII, 246.

⁶⁶ Philip Connell cites several connections between Shelley and Bentham as political reformers, pointing out Shelley's praise of Bentham's philosophy in *A Philosophical View of Reform* for offering "an important corrective to economic inequality and the spirit of commerce." *Romanticism, Economics, and the Question of 'Culture'* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 219. More generally, Connell argues that in terms of the political context of early nineteenth-century Britain, both the philosophical chasm between Bentham and the Hunt circle and the opposition between poetry and science in the period have been overstated. He sees Shelley's anti-Utilitarian stance in the *Defence* as a shift away from an earlier, more sympathetic view of Bentham, and notes that Hunt "responded coolly to Hazlitt's attack on the 'eminent and venerable' Bentham, and persevered in his belief that the apparent estrangement of 'literature' and 'science' was a temporary by-product of the ongoing reform crisis." 231-2.

⁶⁷ XII, 414.

⁶⁸ XVI, 66.