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Beyond Excess: Romanticism, Surplus and Trust

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Introduction

English Romantic literature has long been associated with notions of excess. In Blake's Satanic invocation of 'Too much' in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1792) (plate 10, line 10), in Wordsworth's idea of poetry as the 'overflow' of powerful feelings in his 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) (Wordsworth 1974, 1:126), and in Keats's image in the ode 'To Autumn' (1820) of an overripe autumn as 'budding more, / And still more' (lines 8-9), one finds a recurring resistance to number, containment and boundary. This tendency even has a signature trope: the sublime. Whether it is conceived through its Burkean formulation as that which threatens to overpower the viewer's senses, or through its Kantian incarnation as a supersensible power of mind that outruns the schematisms of the imagination and understanding, the sublime implies that a limit has been reached and even breached. The case of surplus, however, is slightly different. Surplus is a form of excess, but not all excess can be identified as surplus. Surplus might be described as an excess that is generated as part of a productive process. While excess implies moving beyond what is necessary, permitted or desirable, surplus is generated within an economy of production and exchange. This is reflected in the fact that, unlike the term 'excess', which generally signifies

something undesired or gratuitous, 'surplus' remains a neutral term whose value depends upon the contexts in which such superabundance might be put to use. The value of the form of excess known as surplus, then, ultimately depends upon how the social interactions and exchanges through which it emerges determine the ends to which it is directed.

Any discussion of 'surplus' in such economic terms will, more likely than not, encounter attempts to connect the Romantic elevation of ideal 'meaning' to a Marxist, labour theory of surplus value as 'social hieroglyphic' (Marx 1974, 79). This line of thinking takes the idea of the 'referential economy' to its logical conclusion: thus, as Jean-Joseph Goux neatly summarises it, '[t]he signified is the *revenue* of the signifier, the *surplus-value* of the labour of signs' (Goux 1998, 63). Viewed this way, it might be tempting to view the self-ascription of surplus meaning by Romantic texts as operating through the same alchemy of consciousness that leads surplus value to be assigned to commodities. In this way, idealism and money fetishism function according to the same ideology: the inexpressible sublimities of Romantic writing are merely another form of occult surplus value, 'the revenue of the signifier.' More subtly, some critics have argued that much Romantic literature itself exhibits an awareness of the precarious status of meaning as a currency.¹ Marjorie Levinson, for instance, argues that Keats' writing reflects upon surplus value and the money form in particular as a way of deconstructing its own hypostatisations. Viewed this way, Keats' poem 'Lamia' can be read as an allegory of a form of surplus aesthetic value that strives, like money, 'toward a structural simplicity (reunion of signified with signifier) it can never realize' (Levinson 1998, 261).²

While readings such as these are certainly useful in revealing the economic conditions through which truth and meaning circulate in society, they offer a rather limited (self-deconstructing, spiralling) vision of Romantic excess as an investment in human

possibilities. In this essay I intend to offer a more pragmatic account. I will suggest that Romantic writing exhibits more than merely the generation of idealistic excess through the offices of an inflated power of poetic imagination. Even as they floated the significance of their writings upon the power of the solitary intellect, Romantic writers invest in a language of sociability shared with Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid. On this model, the inventiveness of the individual mind is put to work in the marketplace of human intercourse. Romantic writers are more aware than has generally been appreciated of the role played by the excesses of thought (in particular, the tendency to overdetermine the world with meaning) in establishing the relationships and communication necessary for human selfhood and intelligence. More specifically, in certain circumstances interpretive excess is seen as part of the pragmatic overdetermination necessary for human communication. A more common word for such overdetermination is 'trust'. In this sense, the inflation of the Romantic ego is not simply a form of subjective *excess* (whether compensatory or speculative); at certain times it is more accurately described as a form of intellectual surplus, the role of which is the promotion of intersubjectivity through trust.

Trust as surplus

The modern idea of trust is beset by paradoxes. One of the most striking of these is that its very appearance in any discussion immediately suggests its absence. The implicit status of trust in relationships means that debates about trust generally arise when it is already lacking or when it has been lost entirely. In the political sphere, this point is illustrated nicely by Anthony Seldon's 2009 *Trust: How We Lost it and How to Get it Back*, whose subtitle is already implied by the single word of the main title. Nowadays it is rare to hear the word

‘trust’ used in a public context without the accompanying term, ‘crisis.’ For example, Onora O’Neill’s public lectures on trust set out from the widespread perception (albeit not one that she necessarily shares) that modern societies ‘face a deepening crisis of trust’ (O’Neill 2002, 4). Indeed, it says a great deal about the delicacy of trust that the very perception of this crisis quickly becomes self-fulfilling. As Annette Baier argues, this negative feedback effect is characteristic of certain assumptions that form part of the social background to human interaction. By vocalising such presuppositions, one can trigger the kind of performative misfires that ultimately undermine trust. ‘Healthy trust,’ she observes, ‘rarely needs to declare itself, and the mere occurrence of the injunction “Trust me!” or of the reminder “I am trusting you” is a danger signal’ (Baier 1994, 133).

This vulnerability of trust to reflection is in some ways unexpected, particularly when one considers the etymological links between the English words ‘trust’ and ‘truth’. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* documents, ‘truth’ is closely related to ‘troth,’ and thus to notions of faith, loyalty and trust. Transferring trust as loyalty between people to the relationship between the mind and world creates a secondary sense of truth as fidelity to the facts, or to reality. Viewed in this way, ‘truth’ is an abstraction of trust, just as, in Baier’s words, ‘true reason and true beliefs are abstract variants of true friends’ (Baier 1991, 287).³ This process of abstraction has its roots in the Enlightenment refashioning of the individual around a model of reason that is fundamentally private and autonomous. As Adam Seligman argues, the rise of a specialised language of trust in western societies tracks a corresponding decline in traditional ways of establishing communal values and guaranteeing social stability. In Seligman’s view, as society became more mobile and individual roles open to negotiation, social cohesion was increasingly framed within communities based upon shared beliefs rather than upon ‘bonds of primordial attachment to kith and kin, to territorial and local

habitus . . . ' (Seligman 1997, 15). Defined by consciousness and abstracted from ties of blood and kinship, the modern subject effectively *creates* the need for trust. Indeed, the preoccupation of Enlightenment thinkers with the status of contracts, promises and other formulations of fidelity highlights one of the main paradoxes of trust: that the conditions under which it emerges in the modern era are the same as those that threaten to undermine it.

While modern thought widely recognises the importance of trust, it tends to describe it as a form of excess, since trust propels thought beyond the standard game-theoretical considerations of rational deliberation based upon self-interest. This problem in turn reawakens some distinctly eighteenth-century dilemmas, in particular, that of how to determine the relationship between individual and collective rationality. During the period of the French Revolution, Jacobin moral philosophy enforced the idea of the Universal Individual as a model for both society and the individual as if the two were interchangeable. As Bernard Williams argues, however, Rousseau's error in *The Social Contract* (1762) is to create a picture of the moral world that 'did not allow the right place for his own or anyone else's weaknesses and idiosyncrasies' (Williams 2002, 199). Indeed, the Rousseauian standard of sincerity presupposes an idea of transparency that is ultimately self-defeating in that it undermines the very trust upon which social solidarity depends. As Nancy Yousef points out, Rousseau's construction of intersubjectivity around transparency and 'inescapably public forms of life' betrays his deep 'anxiety about the epistemic basis of sympathetic recognition' (Yousef 2008, 193). By predicating civic trust upon the removal of the unknowable in individuals, Rousseau attempts to 'imagine epistemic security as the basis and necessary condition for fidelity, trust and constancy [...]' (Yousef 2008, 195). However, his insistence in *The Social Contract* that the integrity of the individual rests upon

the possibility of their coincidence with others ultimately removes the very indeterminacies of human behaviour upon which the role negotiations required for trusting relationships thrive.

This problem of trust in Rousseau highlights two competing eighteenth-century conceptions of the social virtues. In the first, the relationship between the individual and his or her community is conceived as being direct and unmediated. As Seligman argues, the classical understanding of 'civic virtue' was echoed in revolutionary France by the identification of the individual and the people in the form of the *volunté general* (Seligman 1997, 106). According to Seligman, however, an alternative account is presented by the 'civil society' theories of the Scottish Enlightenment. Hume and Smith in particular were responsible for replacing both the classical view of the individual 'as human only within the polis' and Rousseau's *volunté général* with a conception of the social other as 'internalized in the self' (Seligman 1997, 111).

The roots of this idea lie in Hume's epistemology. Against the Lockean model of truth as consisting in the correspondence between mind and world, Hume's analysis of causation suggested that the currency of our mental representations could never be cashed out against a putative gold standard of reality. Indeed, given that '[o]bjects have no discoverable connexion together; nor is it from any other principle but custom operating upon the imagination, that we can draw any inference from the appearance of one to the existence of another,' reasoning for Hume ultimately rests upon sentiment and social habit (Hume 1978, 103). After Hume, the language of subject-centred reason gives way to the discourse of friendship, sociability and intersubjectivity. As Annette Baier argues, the latter 'takes human nature as the nature closest to hand, and takes our nature to be social and passionate, before it is cognitive' (Baier 1991, 28-29). Hume describes this approach clearly in his

Introduction to the *Treatise*, when he cautions philosophers that they must ‘glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men’s behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures’ (Hume 1978, xix). As this idea was incorporated into the thought of the Scottish Enlightenment, subjectivity itself came to be seen as based upon triangulation between persons rather than the interior space of private consciousness. Indeed, this ‘socialisation’ of epistemology meant reversing the roles of sociability and science: rather than building public trust upon private certainty, Hume and others suggest that without trust, social intercourse, and thus coherent experience, would be inconceivable.

Accordingly, and against the outwardly-oriented, socially-constituted self adumbrated by Rousseau, the Scottish Enlightenment proposed a self that is reflexively determined according to the virtues of sympathy, social sentiment and trust. For example, in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, sociability does not presuppose the dissolution of the self, but the constitution of the latter through an internalised, impartial spectator:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct. . . . I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view. The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character of a spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion. The first is the judge; the second the person judged of.

(Smith 1976, 113)

For Smith, rather than being an inner light, conscience is ineluctably bound up with social relationships in which we are actively involved as spectators and agents, both in a social space and in a psychological one. The net result is a theory in which the sociology of the imagination is allowed to determine the norms of moral behaviour. This implies a dialectical, even playful relationship between the individual and society that accommodates the kind of unknowability and negotiability between others necessary for all trusting relationships. In this way, while on Rousseau's 'civic virtue' model trust is figured as superfluous excess, on the 'civil society' model of the Scottish Enlightenment, trust is depicted as a generous surplus of interpretation, an imaginative placing of oneself into the situation of another, that sustains the economies of interaction upon which sociability and, consequently, subjectivity depend.

Romantic excess

Viewed from one perspective, the visionary imagination celebrated in many great works of Romantic literature would appear to reject the social harmonies and mutual accommodations presupposed by the Scottish Enlightenment. Indeed, some Romantic writers, such as Byron, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Lamb, were apt to treat their intellectual neighbours north of the border with disdain. In his 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' (1815), for instance, Wordsworth dismissed Adam Smith as 'the worst critic, David Hume not excepted, that Scotland, a soil to which this sort of weed seems natural, has produced.' (Wordsworth 1974, 3:71). More playful, but no less critical, is Lamb's characterisation of 'the brain of a true Caledonian' in his essay 'Imperfect Sympathies':

You are never admitted to see his ideas in their growth—if, indeed, they do grow, and are not rather put together upon principles of clock-work. . . . He has no falterings of self-suspicion. Surmises, guesses, misgivings, half-intuitions, semi-consciousnesses, partial illuminations, dim instincts, embryo conceptions, have no place in his brain, or vocabulary. The twilight of dubiety never falls upon him.

(Lamb 1903, 59-60)

While the ironies of Lamb's essay are too subtle and complex to unpick here, his characterisations nonetheless highlight how well-established certain intellectual stereotypes had become. Thus, while the Scottish, common-sense intellect is seen as naturalist and foundationalist, the English, Romantic mind is supernaturalist, ironic and dialectical; while the former deals with quotidian certainties, the latter explores sublime indeterminacies.

In this light, the Rousseauian motto that Wordsworth uses as the title of the eighth Book of *The Prelude* (1805), 'Retrospect: Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind', might be seen as an indirect riposte to the 'Caledonian' idea that an individual's ability to have a meaningful encounter with nature itself presupposes the existence of an intellect that is already fully socialised. In Wordsworth, the topography of knowledge is not an Edinburgh drawing-room but a sublime landscape, the peaks and abysses of which can only be traversed by a dynamic and creative imagination. For example, in one of the culminating visions of *The Prelude*, in which Wordsworth recollects his ascent of Snowdon, the poet's epiphany is described in terms that grant the solitary consciousness a privileged access to 'The perfect image of a mighty mind, / Of one that feeds upon infinity . . .' (Wordsworth 1979, 460). It is this very image of power in nature that can awaken the human mind to an awareness of its own creativity:

The power which these

Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus
 Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express
 Resemblance—in the fullness of its strength
 Made visible—a genuine counterpart
 And brother of the glorious faculty
 Which higher minds bear with them as their own.
 This is the very spirit in which they deal
 With all the objects of the universe:
 They from their native selves can send abroad
 Like transformation, for themselves create
 A like existence, and, when'er it is
 Created for them, catch it by an instinct.

(Wordsworth 1979, 462)

The epistemological strategy behind this passage, indeed throughout Wordsworth's poem, does not so much to refute the arguments of Hume and his successors in Scotland as ignore them entirely. Having been deconstructed and socialised by Hume, the punctual subjectivity of Locke is here restored, but on different terms. Where Locke's seventeenth-century mind is largely passive and receptive, Wordsworth's has the capacity to rival nature through the creative and transformative power afforded to it by the 'glorious faculty' of imagination. Thus, while *The Prelude* does little to unsettle the Lockean view of the individual consciousness as unified and undifferentiated, it reverses the direction of determination by insisting that, in addition to mind corresponding to nature, nature must conform to its 'brother' and 'genuine counterpart,' mind.

Viewed more generally as a strategy for sustaining the economy of knowledge in the wake of both Hume's scepticism and the increasingly discredited rationalism of the French *philosophes*, Romantic idealism might be seen an attempt to grow the mind out of its debt to nature and the external world through an epistemological form of quantitative easing, through an increase in the supply of ideas. Indeed, a philosophical model for Wordsworth's reorientation, albeit largely unknown to him, had already been provided by Kant's account of the sublime as the product of the human impulse to exceed the boundaries of form and present the unrepresentable. On this picture, the excessive productiveness of the Romantic imagination overcompensates for the mind's failure to represent the *Ding an sich*, thereby testifying to the 'supersensible' status of human consciousness (Kant 2000, 138). Thus, by thinking beyond what is comprehensible, an excess of intuition and feeling is generated that reimburses the human mind for the disappointments of mere empirical reason, or

that false secondary power by which
In weakness we create distinctions, then
Deem that our puny boundaries are things
Which we perceive, and not which we have made.
(Wordsworth 1979, 76)

In this way, nature's awful and sublime power licenses the mind itself to exceed the bounds of sense. However, just as augmenting the money supply runs the danger of stoking inflation, so the overproduction of consciousness risks devaluing the idealised currency of Romantic literature. In the economics of Romantic sensibility, the epistemological counterpart of inflation is a kind of overdetermination that Paul de Man once memorably described as a system of imagery that is 'able to posit regardless of presence but, by the same token, unable to give a foundation to what it posits except as an intent of

consciousness' (de Man 1984, 6). Viewed as a kind of sublime 'excess' then, Romantic intentionality raises the stakes in the language game to an unsustainable level. By inflating the significance of consciousness beyond what could possibly be rendered through natural language, it flirts with the possibility that any move to redeem such language (by paraphrase, for instance, into plain, literal prose) might trigger an epistemological crisis, a 'run' on its own idealism.⁴

Romantic trust

The perils of pursuing the sublime objects of an 'inflationary' imagination raise the question of whether this strategy fully accounts for the way in Romantic writers depict the relationship between objectivity and intersubjectivity, or, to put it another way, the relationship between understanding the world and understanding other people. The brief account presented above suggests that, for Wordsworth at least, individual consciousness, and perhaps even sapience, precedes sociability. And yet, despite this apparent reversion to a subject-centred epistemology, Wordsworth's Romanticism shares with Scottish naturalism at least one important intellectual thread: the replacement of a rhetoric of pure reason with one of trust and friendship.⁵ The reasons for this are complex, but broadly speaking British thought in the late eighteenth century loses its interest in epistemology as a first philosophy; it becomes less concerned with rational foundations and more preoccupied with social cohesion and with what Richard Rorty calls questions of 'solidarity.'⁶ This brings me back to my main argument, which is that the Scottish conception of sociability as trusting intersubjectivity forms part of the same intellectual current as the Romantic idea of creativity as intellectual surplus. Both suggest that at the private as well as the social level, our concept of truth depends upon the truthfulness, the trustworthiness, of others. In short,

what links the broadly naturalist ideas of David Hume and Thomas Reid to writers like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Lamb is the idea of intersubjectivity. In place of intellectual foundations, both Scottish naturalism and English Romanticism increasingly locate truth within a socialised epistemology whose *sine qua non* is the social surplus of trust.

Few illustrate this new direction better than Reid, whose rejection of the epistemology of ideas ultimately leads him to develop a social and holistic view of human knowledge. In his 1764 *Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense*, Reid argues that knowledge is based upon the active interpretation of signs, not the passive reception of ideas. He divides signs into those which are artificial, in which the connection between sign and the thing signified is arbitrary or man-made, and those which are natural, in which the same connection is established by nature through the mind's 'original constitution', a connection that we realise intuitively as common sense. For Reid, this intuition is as basic as human knowledge gets; no reasoning can trump it. Consequently, any attempt to interrogate the most basic common-sense beliefs is unwarranted, a kind of category error. Since the ultimate ground of human knowledge is a mystery, we are compelled to base our perception of the world and of other minds on *trust*; as Reid observes, 'is not every man, in his wits, as much determined to take his existence upon trust as his consciousness?' (Reid 1785, 15). In attempting to explain the natural source of this trust, Reid develops the idea of a predisposition in human nature that he terms 'prescience.' In the *Inquiry*, he describes this as

an early anticipation, neither derived from experience, nor from reason, nor from any compact or promise, that our fellow-creatures will use the same signs in language, when they have the same sentiments.

This is, in reality, a kind of prescience of human actions; and it seems to me to be an original principle of the human constitution, without which we should be incapable of language, and consequently incapable of instruction.

(Reid 1785, 427-28)

The very *predisposition* to interpret other people and the world through signs, he maintains, is the basis of our knowledge. In Reid's hermeneutics of experience, then, the excessive intentionality produced by our trusting overdetermination of the world and other people becomes a pragmatic precondition of understanding, producing a surplus of interpretation that in turn makes language and communication possible.⁷

Despite their aversion to common-sense philosophy in general, many Romantic writers display a similar concern with such 'prescience' as a constitutive part of human interaction with the world and with other persons. Indeed, the literature of this period abounds with instances of dialogue that is self-consciously sustained by little more than the surplus intentionality of the poetic voice. In particular, the ode in Romantic literature acknowledges, explores, and tests the leap of trust entailed by its own apostrophe (itself a form of intentional surplus). One of the best examples of the constitutive nature of trust in Romantic period verse is Coleridge's 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison.' Apparently strategically subject-centred in its depiction of the dynamics of the poet's imagination, the inner logic of 'Lime-Tree Bower' is nonetheless dispersed into the social space that forms the concrete precondition of the speaker's consciousness. Confined to the bower by an accident involving his wife and a skillet of boiling milk, the poet is compelled to construct his own vision of the walk taken by his friends, including Lamb, through the Quantock Hills in Somerset:

I have lost

Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
 Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
 Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile,
 Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
 On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
 Wander in gladness . . .

(Coleridge 1912, 178-79)

Despite the context of enforced solitude, the entire fabric of the poet's vision is woven through *supposition*, through the conditional 'as if,' so that the conjectural pastness of 'as would have been' in the opening of the first stanza is answered by the equally conjectural presentness of 'As I myself were there!' at the beginning of the third stanza:

A delight

Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
 As I myself were there!

(Coleridge 1912, 180)

This provisionality in Coleridge's epiphany is the product of the poem's rhetoric of intersubjectivity. Instead of the projection of a solitary ego, Coleridge's poem offers a meditation on friendship as a *precondition* of intelligent awareness. Insight is possible, the poem implies, but only on credit, through trusting communication with other persons. Of course, the 'Friends' on whom the poem pins so much of its hope remain mute, and by the 1800 version they have been reduced to the single figure of Lamb. And yet, the poem acknowledges that the poet's experiences, whether imagined, recollected, or felt immediately 'in this bower', can have no meaning beyond that which he can communicate to his addressees: in other words, they carry no meaning beyond that which he can *assume*

they can understand and appreciate. This assumption, though gratuitous, is depicted as absolutely necessary, a basic precondition of the poet's vision and the poem's insights. Thus, what one witnesses in 'This Lime-Tree Bower' is the poetic enactment of a typically Romantic, excessive intentionality, a form of interpretive surplus.

Lamb himself exhibits a similar fascination with the excess of sentiment that drives human communication. Nowhere is this more evident than in his 1822 essay, 'Distant Correspondents,' in which 'Elia' ponders the perils of corresponding by letter with someone on the other side of the globe. He observes that news, sentiment and puns all suffer a kind of decay during the voyage. Indeed, he reflects, 'what security can I have that what I now send you for truth shall not before you get it unaccountably turn into a lie? [...] Not only does truth, in these long intervals, un-essence herself, but (what is harder) one cannot venture a crude fiction for the fear that it may ripen into a truth upon the voyage.' It is, Elia concludes,

no easy effort to set about a correspondence at our distance. The weary world of waters between us oppresses the imagination. It is difficult to conceive how a scrawl of mine should ever stretch across it. It is a sort of presumption to expect that one's thoughts should live so far. It is like writing for posterity . . .

(Lamb 1903, 104-05)

Epistemologically, Elia's predicament is similar to that of the speaker in the Romantic ode: apostrophising a figure who is absent or unresponsive, he is compelled to reflect on the 'presumption' that underlies all acts of communication. 'Distant Correspondents' reveals that without human interaction, language has no 'essence'. Despite the surface tone of helplessness in Elia's complaint, on a performative level the essay achieves what it supposes to be impossible. We *do* send letters, it implies, and we continue to write for posterity,

thanks to our groundless belief, our ‘presumption,’ that others understand us. From a strictly rational standpoint, this presumption goes beyond what can be justified; it is excessive. However, within the economy of intersubjective communication, such excess functions as a characteristically Romantic surplus of intentionality, one that sustains all our communicative endeavours, including that which exists between ‘Elia’ and his reader. For Lamb, all knowledge rests upon communicative action underwritten by the profitable surplus of human trust.

Returning to Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* with this perspective in mind brings new aspects of the text into the foreground. There are passages in this poem that depict the growth of the poet’s mind not as the product of a dyadic relationship between self and nature, but as emerging through, and dependent upon, triangular, social relationships that situate the subject within a network of intersubjectivity. This concern is particularly evident in Book 7, in which the poet recounts his experiences as a young man in London. Walking through the city, he registers with regret the fragmentation of urban language and its dislocation from genuine communicative contexts, describing the shop-fronts of houses as made up ‘like a title-page / With letters huge inscribed from top to toe’ (Wordsworth 1979, 234), while the demobbed sailor and beggar Samuel Horsey is depicted lying ‘beside a range / Of written characters, with chalk inscribed / Upon the smooth flat stones’ (Wordsworth 1979, 238). Severed from ‘all the ballast of familiar life’—the recognition and acknowledgement of others, the communicative acts that form the basis of relationships—the poet, too, loses his bearings, his sense of self, feeling that he is ‘beyond / The reach of common indications’ (Wordsworth 1979, 260).

In one important and celebrated passage, Wordsworth recalls an encounter with a blind beggar, who ‘Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest / Wearing a written paper,

to explain / The story of the man, and who he was' (Wordsworth 1979, 260). By focusing upon this image, Wordsworth is propelled into the insight that the beggar's label is fundamentally a 'type / Or emblem' of all we can know

Both of ourselves and of the universe,
And on the shape of this unmoving man,
His fixèd face and sightless eyes, I looked,
As if admonished from another world.
(Wordsworth 1979, 260)

Wordsworth's meditations introduce the idea of a self that is defined socially, through intersubjective acts of communication. The blinding vision of the beggar reveals the interdependence of self and other—of looking and being looked at, of knowing and being known—and the fact that in order to make sense of ourselves, we blindly depend on others to interpret us. This process in turn requires mutual recognition, the acknowledgement of others, and trust. Abstracted from society in the very heart of the city, the young poet is deprived of the intersubjective relationships—acts of communication and 'all the ballast of familiar life'—that form the basic preconditions of selfhood. Above all, however, it is trust that Wordsworth finds missing from the streets of London. In the absence of trust and the intersubjective relationships that make reciprocity possible, language is experienced primarily as the alienating condition of having another's written words stand in for one's own. Indeed, without trusting communication, the self unravels into merely the 'shape' of a 'fixèd face and sightless eyes.'

Conclusion

I have offered a reading of Romantic excess as a kind of surplus, which is another way of saying that the superabundance of consciousness found in much Romantic literature has an economic and pragmatic (as distinct from merely auratic) function. The overproduction of consciousness implied by the inflationary figure of the egotistical sublime is a familiar trope, but it is not the only way in which an excess of intentionality is manifested in Romantic literature. This is not to deny the attraction of such idealism for some Romantic writers, a lure which is abundantly evident in the 'Snowdon' passages of *The Prelude* discussed above. However, at certain times, writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Lamb exceed even idealism in their willingness to surmount containment and limitation. At such moments, leaping beyond what is rational through an act of imagination becomes an investment in future possibilities of communication. It involves a recognition that our very identities depend upon the risky assumptions that we are compelled to make about ourselves and others in the face of dwindling certainties. It is this simple but profound idea that is enacted in Coleridge's 'Lime-Tree Bower,' in Lamb's 'Distant Correspondents,' and in Book 7 of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. Each of these works reveals the dependence of the voice of the poet or narrator upon dialogical interactions with other individuals. At such moments, Romantic epistemology offers neither a retreat into a private world of imagination nor a celebration of an aesthetic order that derives its normative power from the negation of reason. Instead, and like the naturalist philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment before them, they confirm the surplus of trust as an investment, through pragmatic over-interpretation, in the possibility of communication.

Notes

¹ For a recent and thorough discussion of this issue, see Dick 2013.

² See also D. E. White 2000, 8. For White, Romantic writing attests to a reflexivity that ‘can never be entirely (self-)reflexive; it always contains the surplus of difference that enables it to re-fer (or bear back) towards itself.’

³ As Baier points out, ‘[t]he English word “truth” shares its roots with those of “troth” and “trust,” and Hume’s use of it, in a moral context, exploits this ancestry. [...] Whatever is true is trustworthy, whether it be a friend, a belief or a version of reason’ (286).

⁴ I borrow this idea from Hamilton 2013, 5: Hamilton argues that Keats’ aesthetics threatens to instigate ‘a “run” on art. The more convincing its promises, the more we desire to call in the tabs, to redeem these extraordinary poetic riches which turn out [...] to exist only as paper, as credit [...]’.

⁵ For further discussion of this connection, see Milnes 2010, 41-65.

⁶ See also Rorty 1991, 21: Rorty argues that ‘[b]y telling a (historical) story of their community and of their contributions to it, human beings exemplify their desire for “solidarity,” and by describing themselves as “standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality” they exemplify the desire for “objectivity”.’

⁷ See Wolterstorff 2001, 213: Wolterstorff argues that trust is *the* most important category for Reid, making him not just antirationalist who contends that fundamental principles aren’t rational, but also an antifoundationalist who maintains that truth consists not in the correspondence of ideas to reality, but in interpretation based on trust.

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