

Archaeologies of Perception: Reading Wordsworth after Foucault

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This essay traces an epistemic shift occurring jointly in the late eighteenth-century sciences of sensation and in the literary aesthetics of early Romanticism. Taking as my point of departure Michel Foucault's remark that the history of modernity begins with a conception of the human being as a mutable physiological entity, my essay examines some ways in which Wordsworth's poetry registers this coeval emergence. I argue that the poet's celebrated account of the "infant babe" in Book 2 of The Prelude reflects a newly understood conception of the sensorium as subject to historical change. Attending to the human-scientific contexts of Wordsworth's narrative, I make a further case for reading in this passage an historiographical investment in the senses and their periodization that connects such densely psychologized passages of the poem with its explicit critique of French sensationalist psychology in the same book. As I argue, Wordsworth's seemingly hermetic reflection on the infant babe can be seen as a purposeful reflection on the task of representing the periods of human perception. Such passages of Wordsworth's poetry thus represent an important anticipation of our own efforts to produce archaeologies of perception or to trace transformations of literary-aesthetic sensibilities over time.

Few genres of historical research have been quite so productive these days as that genre known as affective history, and the sub-genre that often goes by the name of the history of the senses. This scholarship has been marked by an impressive diversity of interpretive framework (neo-Marxist, phenomenological, liberal-humanist, Foucauldian, feminist), disciplinary orientation (history, anthropology, art history, and literary studies), and historical object of analysis (literary and political discourse, the visual arts, optical, acoustical, and industrial technologies); consequently, perhaps only one general characteristic can be drawn from the history of the senses as a whole, so obvious as to escape much critical attention. It would, I think, be hard to deny that the

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overwhelming tendency of such work has been to explain transformations of literary or historical sensibilities by examination of the object or objects in question. In many recent instances of perceptual history, historical object X—be it a poem, a painting, a stereoscope, or a spinning jenny—is seen as illustrative of Y transformations in the organization or exercise of the senses. At the most general level, then, the history of the senses is characterized by its investment in accounting for how modes of perception change over time, and thus are subject to historical periodization in the first place.

In its foundational premise—a tacit assumption, really—that structures of perception undergo transformations over time, it is not difficult to see how much the contemporary history of the senses owes to the work of Michel Foucault. More than that of any other twentieth-century historian, Foucault's work has served as the catalyst for rigorous inquiry into the history of the body and of the regime of the senses in particular. Many of Foucault's works, especially those concerning the various disciplines of human-scientific knowledge, take as a primary concern the epistemic, discursive, and institutional conditions of perception—his “archaeology of medical perception,” as *The Birth of the Clinic* is subtitled, seems only one such example of Foucault's investment in producing an account, both within and across the rationalities of specific disciplines, of how we have come to perceive and know in the way we do. Perhaps even more enabling to this genre of historical research is Foucault's argument—repeated throughout his work but most memorably in *The Order of Things*—that the formation of the category of “Man” is the most salient feature of an emergent Western modernity. Foucault's account of the mutation from a taxonomic to a developmental *episteme* is directly related to his larger argument that the category of the human remains intelligible only under the paradigm of development over time (312). If the contours of Foucault's argument have found general favor among historians of the senses, moreover, his dating of this epistemological break has proven equally influential; citing Foucault's work as an important influence, almost all recent histories of perception date cataclysmic changes in the sensorium to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the period in which the disciplines of human-scientific knowledge, and “Man” as both a subject and an object of that knowledge, assume their modern form (e.g., Crary 70–72).

Beyond lending a sense of urgency and salience to the project of a history of perception, however, Foucault's claim that modern history begins with the human being's emergence as a physiological entity might just as significantly be understood to problematize that project in ways so far barely acknowledged by literary and cultural historians. For while the first and most fundamental assumption of a history of senses is that perception is historically mutable, and thus subject to periodization, Foucault's central claim is rather that the very category of “Man” would be unintelligible were not such an understanding already in place. For the human sciences to have emerged, that is, the *episteme* or conditions that make such knowledge possible must already have taken shape around the concept of development over time. One sees how this epistemic circularity raises a chicken-and-egg question that, I will argue, might make us reconsider the basis upon which a history of the senses for this period could be practiced. Though it is now more or less a commonplace of historical scholarship to say

that the senses have a history, what have we to learn about the *historicity* of perception? If we can say, for instance, that historical periods have modes of perception attributable to them, in what sense can we also say that models of perception bear the imprint of a periodizing cultural logic? What were the modes in which such an understanding could be represented? And how was this inquiry pursued in the period we deem so important to our own histories of perception?¹

Taking as my point of departure Foucault's claim that the history of modernity emerges with a conception of the body as a mutable physiological entity, this essay will attend to the ways in which the poets of this period registered that coeval emergence. While focusing on this seminal moment in the history of the senses, however, I will suggest that early Romantic poetry does not so much reflect as actively produce a history of perception, thereby complicating our own efforts to do the same. Romantic narratives of the body, and particularly of the formation and cultivation of the poetic sensibility, work between and across the borders of two complementary fields of inquiry that Foucault regards as jointly central to the project of the emergent human sciences: one, a "transcendental aesthetic" attentive to the physiological conditions of knowledge; the other, a "transcendental dialectic" concerned with knowledge's "historical, social, or economic conditions" (Foucault, *Order* 319). In mediating these two analytics, Wordsworth produces a conception of poetry as, precisely, an aestheticized medium of historical representation—a "history or science of feelings," as Wordsworth puts it in his note to "The Thorn" (*Lyrical Ballads* 289). Romantic poetry thus presents a vitally aesthetic basis for representing the historical situation or "case" of the present, as James Chandler has characterized the practice of Romantic historicism (203–264). By embodying the historical situation as both a subject of physical experience and an object of psycho-physiological inquiry—a "case" in a more than accidentally medical sense—Wordsworth locates a privileged role for poetry as a medium well suited to narrate the archaeology of human perception.

In at least one passage from his "history of a Poet's mind," Wordsworth explicitly raises the question of how to trace the history of human sensibility. I refer to a well-known passage from Book 2 of *The Prelude*, in which Wordsworth discusses at some length the sensationalist paradigm of French enlightenment psychology against which he defines his own psychological method. The rhetorical questions he poses here fall in an important moment of transition in which the speaker at once distinguishes between phases of his mental development and criticizes the impulse to make such distinctions:

...who shall parcel out
 His intellect by geometric rules,
 Split like a province into round and square?
 Who knows the individual hour in which
 His habits were first sown as a seed,
 Who that shall point, as with a wand, and say,
 'This portion of the river of my mind
 Came from yon fountain?' (2.208–215)

Wordsworth's scornful account, here and in lines following, of those who would "class the cabinet / Of their sensations" is directed primarily against the taxonomical

ordering of sensations in time (2.228–289). Just as pointedly, Wordsworth criticizes the bloodless abstractions that would make such taxonomies possible. The poet distinguishes his own history from that of a hypothetical being, such as Condillac’s statue-man or Rousseau’s imaginary pupil, whose mental, emotional, and moral progress may be charted in an orderly but highly artificial series of discrete stages. Wordsworth’s rejection of this positivist endeavor, then, is based on his understanding of both the reductiveness and the fictionalizing that is involved in that task.

As decisively as Wordsworth appears to reject sensationalist psychology, however, a further look at Book 2 reveals how far the poet equivocates over what method to install in its place. Indeed, in a striking move, the poet repudiates a sensationalist epistemology only to appear to subscribe to many of its protocols. We’ll recall that Wordsworth’s principal objection to classing the cabinet of sensations is that each particular thought or feeling, far from being traceable to one coherent source, “hath no beginning” (2.233–236). At moments such as these, Wordsworth’s epistemology seems designed precisely to resist the so-called “analytic of finitude” which, in Foucault’s argument, made possible the very category of “Man” in the first place. So much, indeed, we might expect from the poet who would make his home with infinitude and only there. Yet how then do we explain the famous passage immediately following—I mean that of the “infant babe” who, by “intercourse of touch” with its mother, receives the urgings of imaginative strength that the poet associates with the “first / Poetic spirit of human life” (2.237–303)? Why would Wordsworth ridicule the possibility of periodizing perception even when, by his own admission, he would attempt that very task? What has Wordsworth denying the existence of perceptual origins that his “history of a Poet’s mind” would itself seek, and even claim to find?

By way of approach to these questions, let us review Wordsworth’s celebrated account of the infant babe. In that passage, Wordsworth records how, “day by day / Subjected to the discipline of love, / His organs and recipient faculties / Are quickened,” and the “infant sensibility” is given a nurturing environment in which to develop (2.250–253, 285). As the poet declares, this first prolonged period of sensuous “intercourse” establishes a crucial ground from which higher thoughts will grow:

In that most apprehensive habitude
And those sensations which have been derived
From this beloved presence—there exists
A virtue which irradiates and exalts
All objects through all intercourse of sense. (2.256–260)

What interests me through the whole of this well-known passage is how pointedly Wordsworth’s account of the infant babe returns to and repeats the enlightenment program that the poet had so forcefully criticized in Book 2. We may note, for instance, that Wordsworth’s critique of the presumption to specify “the individual hour in which / His habits were first sown” is closely followed by the poet’s declaration that the infant’s close physical contact with its mother fosters, “in the *first* trial of its powers,” “the *first* / Poetic spirit of our human life” (2.246, 275–276; additional emphasis). Even

within his critique of enlightenment method, Wordsworth openly calls to his aid perhaps the signature cognitive disposition of the enlightenment, namely rational skepticism. When Wordsworth appeals to Coleridge to “doubt with me” (a transitive verb significantly deprived of its object), or claims to speak “in the words of reason deeply weighed” (2.227, 235), it is clear that he is applying the tools of enlightenment thought against the *philosophes* themselves.

In light of the poet’s simultaneous criticism and reappropriation of sensationalist psychology, we might fairly ask what in fact distinguishes Wordsworth’s understanding of mental development from the Frenchified method that he derides. Wordsworth’s understanding of habit as the ultimate ground of moral feeling has been described as deriving most significantly from Humean, and more specifically Burkean, reflections on how custom affects the way that we feel, think, and behave as moral agents, that is in Burke’s terms as living bearers of the traditional relations of the past.² As the illustration of this principle, Wordsworth’s account of the infant babe represents both a continuation of and a practical companion to the methodological critique that immediately precedes it. The poet’s evident purpose in providing this account immediately following his critique of sensationalist psychology is to supplant the abstract system of French thought with an account more richly sensitive to the influences of habit and feeling.

Through its references to French experiments in narrating the history of the self, and to a Burkean traditionalism meant to offer a corrective to these endeavors, Wordsworth’s passage looks implicitly backward to a period of the poet’s life (and forward to a later, as yet unwritten chapter in his autobiography) in which abstract reason did temporarily gain an ascendancy over the steadying influence of habit founded in deep and powerful feeling. Marking a transition from a corrupt French psychology to a sturdily British philosophy built on the bedrock of habit, Book 2 anticipates the poet’s experience of deepest estrangement from his feelings in the French books of *The Prelude* and in the subsequent narrative of how the poet’s imagination was “impaired and restored.” By preceding his account of the infant babe with a critique of abstract rational analysis, Wordsworth suggests that these are habits of mind that in some ways threaten the infant—“No outcast he, bewildered and depressed” (2.261)—as indeed they will return to threaten the youth who later falls under the sway of “the Philosophy / That promised to abstract the hopes of man / Out of his feelings” (10.806–808). Wordsworth thus describes the threat of this lapse as present even in the very origins of the “infant sensibility.”³

To read Wordsworth’s account of the infant babe as both a rejoinder and a more complicated return to a degraded French rationalism is obviously to complicate a familiar interpretation of this passage as a portrait of an unsullied natural state prior to the subject’s fall into history (see, e.g., Onorato 62–63). In Book 1, Wordsworth describes the infant’s sensuous interaction with its mother as chief among those “first-born affinities that fit / Our new existence to existing things” (1.582–583). While suggesting Wordsworth’s better-known claim to have perceived a harmonious “fit” between “the individual Mind” and “the external World,” this episode of *The Prelude* rather foregrounds the status of the self as having its origins in history, shaped by a past

that cannot, in conventional terms, be considered part of its own experience. By narrating the origins of the “infant sensibility” against the specter of its desecration, Wordsworth demonstrates how, in the poet’s punning phrase, our “existence” derives from and accommodates itself within an “existing” context that precedes and shapes it.⁴

In his critique of the enlightenment psychology that would inhibit such conclusions, Wordsworth declares himself to be profoundly skeptical of what he calls the “false secondary power” of scientific reason (2.221). It might be more accurate, however, to say that the poet’s critique of one scientific paradigm is a position articulated from the standpoint of another. In fact, Wordsworth’s reflections on how habit shapes (and mis-shapes) our feelings have significant points of overlap with the forms of theoretical physiology being undertaken within the eighteenth-century Scottish medical establishment.⁵ Authors trained in the medical schools of Edinburgh and Glasgow frequently engaged in a similar kind of speculative historical practice as was being carried out in other branches of the Scottish universities at this time. In popular medical treatises such as George Cheyne’s *The English Malady* (1733) and John Millar’s *Observations on the Prevailing Diseases in Great Britain* (1770; rev. ed. 1798), the genres of sociological observation and clinical case history were hybridized in a type of scientific writing that examined the transformations of the body and of specific diseases throughout the course of human history, paying closest attention—as did Adam Ferguson, John Millar, Adam Smith, and others—to those “diseases of civilization” that arose with the progress of political, economic, and military development.

Wordsworth’s indebtedness to Scottish medical writing is not primarily evident in the explicitly sociological dimension of that work, however, but in the way in which its investigation into the organs and activities of perception provides a model for the formal arrangement of his poetic reflections on those very subjects.⁶ The poet’s understanding of the habitual basis of feeling thus bears a closer resemblance to contemporary writing in physiology and the science of mind, in which sense perceptions were associated with the deduction of temporal states in the mind or body.⁷ David Hume’s account of perception as an intrinsically temporal phenomenon informed a number of efforts in the medical literature of this period to define the work of sensation as the marking of time. As the late eighteenth-century medical student would have learned in lectures at Edinburgh, sensation was principally characterized as involving the individual’s consciousness of change, defined by one medical lecturer, the Scottish physician William Cullen, as “the Mind’s being conscious of any changes in the State of the body, or more nearly of the nervous system” (“Lectures on the institutes of medicine by Dr. Cullen, 1770–71,” quoted in Wright 294). For the encyclopedist Alexander Rees, who published in 1819 his revised edition of Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia*, sensation was further generalizable to the point of signifying “the consciousness of a new mode of existence, the modification which the sentient being experiences” (s.v. “sensation.”).

For one sustained meditation on the power of habit to determine and modify the organs of perception—one that anticipates and complements Wordsworth’s account—we can turn to an important document in manuscript entitled “An Essay on

In sketching this scientific context for Wordsworth's interest in the customary basis of feeling, I am clearly not suggesting that his account of the infant babe is directly indebted to Cullen's work in conjectural physiology. Nor do I quite wish to identify the "best conjectures" of Wordsworth's account with the practice of conjectural history with which Cullen, in common with other Scottish medical professors, was closely familiar, and within the context of which his *Theory of Physic* operated.¹¹ By reading Wordsworth's history of infantile perception in relation to the exploration of similar subjects from within the sciences of sensation, however, I think that we are in a better position to see the purpose to which Wordsworth connects such densely psychologized passages of *The Prelude* with his explicit critique of sensationalist psychology in the same book. To read Wordsworth's account of the infant babe in relation to the forms of physiological conjecture pioneered by the Scots, we may also understand the extent to which Wordsworth's passage returns to and partly reproduces the French enlightenment method he criticizes. For while Wordsworth obviously means to distinguish his history of the mind from that of the sensationalists whose epistemological and political principles he finds so deeply suspect, the poet is fully aware that to do so would be to "parcel out / His intellect" in precisely the same manner. Wordsworth's dilemma, in short, is that to affirm his distance from the *Idéologues* is to become one. In a later book of *The Prelude*, of course, Wordsworth will represent such ambitions to divorce the present from the past as deeply symptomatic of his imaginative impairment. The impulse to draw a stark dividing line between the present and the past would thus invariably suggest to the poet's mind an earlier period in which, as he records in the 1805 *Prelude*, "I had hope to see... / The man to come parted as by a gulph / From him who had been" (11.57–60). In a paradoxical move, then, Wordsworth's critique of sensationalist psychology asserts the affinity of his own method with it. Enacting a conversation between French and Scottish systems of psychological conjecture, the poet registers at once the necessity, and impossibility, of effecting a thorough break from the past—as well the necessity and impossibility of asserting a continuous relationship to it.

It is in this way that Cullen's understanding of how the body, through custom, is "subjected to certain laws"—whose operation the student of these motions can at the same time comprehend and whose termination, or "period," he can learn to predict—provides an analogue to Wordsworth's methodological critique and subsequent re-enactment of French enlightenment thought. When Wordsworth strongly criticizes but does not altogether abandon the task that French philosophers (and British disciples such as Godwin) had set for the history of perception, this gesture seems designed to illustrate the poet's conviction that present thoughts, and indeed interpretive models for understanding the genesis of those thoughts, continue to reflect the influence of past structures of perception. The issue of how habit gives shape to our moral feelings (the subject of the later passage) is thus directly related to the question of how, consciously or not, Wordsworth's own attempt to work through an alternative paradigm for the history of perception reflects the continuing influence of previous attempts to do so. On this account, the poet's seemingly hermetic portrait of the infant babe might rather be seen as a purposeful reflection on the task of determining the

periods of human perception. In terms both historical and historiographical, Wordsworth's account of the blessed babe represents an effort to determine how the mature mind of the poet reflects the structuring conditions of a past that it would otherwise seek to move beyond.

In seeking to offer one critical history for the kinds of questions we ask about the sensory organization of the past, and in locating the origins of these inquiries in the early Romantic period, I do not mean to overlook the ways in which such a genealogy may be insupportable. At base, the critical history that I offer here is meant to raise the question of how we can revisit without reifying a quintessentially Romantic investigation into the nature of consciousness, of all subjects the most tirelessly invoked in and in reference to this period. Notwithstanding the obvious limitations of Wordsworthian history, with its frequent equation of psychic terrain and social totality, we might at least be receptive to the possibility that such investigations may consist in more than the single-minded effort to consolidate the authority of the subject. Rather, by attending to the historical conditions that define and circumscribe individual sensibilities, these narratives furnish a broader context for—and in some cases significantly problematize—the very category of individuality that would make such histories possible. We can therefore find in this literature a “sense of history” neither premised solely on the legitimation of the present nor on the evasion or erasure of historical context, but rather offered as an account of how we have come to feel and to know in the way we do, and how—with the aid of poetry itself—these states too might change.¹²

Notes

- [1] For the first study to raise these questions, and to consider their relevance to British eighteenth-century and Romantic poetry in particular, see Goodman.
- [2] See, for instance, Burke's praise in “A Letter to a Noble Lord” (1796) for the “feelings and habitudes, which are the support of the moral world” (576).
- [3] Ann Rowland similarly reads this passage in relation to the French books of *The Prelude*.
- [4] For a reading that sensitively examines this passage as a self-reflexive “crossing between past and present relations”—between the “mute dialogues” of the child and the “conjectures” of the adult poet—see Caruth 44–57, quotation from 50. See also de Man's “Wordsworth and the Victorians,” an essay with which Caruth's is in dialogue, which reads the passage as exemplifying “the dependence of any perception or ‘eye’ on the totalizing power of language” (91).
- [5] Alan Richardson has pointed to the infant babe passage as evidence of Wordsworth's investment in “the new naturalistic and biological approach to mind then prominent in scientific and radical circles” (67). More generally, Paul Youngquist has claimed that Wordsworth's “poetry and poetics are both indebted to Scottish medicine” (30).
- [6] I am verging here on the argument of the longer forthcoming project (*Science and Sensation in British Romantic Poetry*) from which this essay derives. I am grateful to Cambridge University Press for permission to reprint a portion of its argument here.
- [7] On Hume's “historical epistemology,” in which perceptions are never tenseless and remain intelligible only in the temporal frame in which they were first perceived, see Livingston.
- [8] W. F. Bynum, “Cullen and the Nervous System,” in Doig et al., 152–162.
- [9] For Darwin on the psycho-physiological effects of repetition, see, for instance, “Of Repeated Stimulus” 1: 80–86; on “associate ideas,” or ideas of suggestion, see 1: 133.

- [10] Mary Shelley similarly refers to the “period” as the term of tyrannical power. See the creature’s admonition to Frankenstein: “The hour of my weakness is past, and the period of your power is arrived” (140).
- [11] While Foucault generally refers to Cullen as an inhabitant of a fundamentally classical, taxonomic episteme (*The Birth of the Clinic* 5–6), more recent studies have shown that Cullen’s medical teaching was deeply indebted to the stadialist historiography of the Scottish enlightenment. See, e.g., Michael Barfoot, “Philosophy and Method in Cullen’s Medical Teaching,” in Doig et al., 118–119.
- [12] Though my immediate reference here is to the subtitle of Alan Liu’s magisterial study, I refer more generally to the Hegelian philosophy of history on which his and many other accounts of the historical consciousness of British Romanticism are largely based. For a summary of the Sartre–Lévi-Strauss exchange in part over the commitment of the former to the idea of a “sense of history,” and an account of that debate’s profound consequences for current thinking about such topics in literary historicism, see Chandler, esp. 51–74.

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