

BORDERS *of a* LIP

Romanticism, Language, History, Politics



Jan Plug

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Jan Plug

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In Memoriam
Pat Plug

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INTRODUCTION



*B*orders of a lip? How are we to understand this conjunction of the figure of an edge or boundary and a part of the body, though not just any part, admittedly, but the site of language, that which crosses our lips? Although coined from a reading of Heinrich von Kleist's *Die Hermannsschlacht*, in which the river Lippe brings together these and more senses of both border and lip, the phrase is emblematic of just such a meeting place in a number of works that either situate themselves in the Romantic tradition or comment upon it. But while speaking of a crossing of the edges or contours of the lip in figures of the movement of voice has become a critical commonplace, the articulation of the lip in terms of borders gives that figure a decidedly political valency. Among the meanings of the word *border*, after all, is the demarcation of a boundary, especially that between nations. To speak of the borders of a lip, then, is to articulate a figure or trope, perhaps even the "master trope of poetic discourse,"¹ in political terms. Better yet, it is to register the politicality of (figurative) language itself. What this phrase would suggest is not merely that language has a number of possible meanings, one of which would be political, but rather that if language can be said to have borders, then its very relation to both its own boundaries and what lies beyond them is conceptualized in terms that will always be political.

It might at this point be argued, however, that the very figure of a lip with borders is an aberration, the misguided workings of an overindulged fancy (not even imagination). After all, not only is the troping of the lip in terms of borders capricious, to say the least, but literary criticism and theory would seem to have done nothing over the last quarter of a century or so if they have not eradicated the boundaries between language and history. Still, it is by no means clear

that the absence of a delimiting figure such as the border would radically alter the historical, critical, linguistic, and literary stakes invoked by my figure. For if language has no borders, then we would seem to be left with two possibilities. On the one hand, language must succumb to reality, history, politics, or however we might like to think of this “outside,” what is conventionally considered the non-linguistic. In this case, language loses all independence and integrity as such, as language. Language is no longer language so much as it stands in for, takes the place of, something else, history, say, and is thus characterized as the sign of that something else, the sign of history, for instance. Conceived as such a sign, language could always be carried back to its determining instance, and its point of inception, its origin or cause, found, at which point it itself ultimately dissolves, sublated by and in this instance. The intentional structure of language as a *relation to* appears to be maintained, but this intentionality can always be resolved (and dissolved), if only ideally, since any resistance to complete transparency that language might maintain is still part of its historical moment. Language might very well never be fully sublated in and by history, but the very possibility of such resolution remains as the constitutive limit of a good deal of historicist and materialist criticism, including many of their “new” forms. Historicist criticism as such has a great deal, indeed its very founding presupposition, invested in its conception of language as in some way or other the sign of history.

The erasure of the boundary between language and what lies beyond it could, on the other hand, leave us with a conception of language that inversely usurps reality and history. In this case, it is not that a given (historical) reality is the (however hidden) prime cause of language, but language that ultimately subsumes that reality to itself. What this might mean, at the very least, is that not merely the unconscious, as in Lacan’s famous phrase, but reality itself is structured like (a) language, which still leaves the possibility for something like a content that is to be structured and that could ultimately be nonlinguistic. Even more radically, the erasure of any border between language and reality would mean that reality *is* language. Whether this is understood to mean that language is now the prime mover and cause of reality (“In the beginning was the word”) or that there is nothing but language, that everything is language, the end result is much the same: now it is language rather than “*reality*” that has lost its independence and identity as such.²

The attempted erasure of what I call the borders of the lip has taken place, in much literary theory, according to the logic of these two poles, through a textualization of history that, it is argued, reduces the historical to a merely linguistic status, or through a reverse movement that would have language carrying history in it as its determining cause and, often, immanent form and meaning.

Still, it is quite rare that criticism is truly committed to either of these poles. In fact, even that criticism and theory that would seem to lead us to one of these positions often stops short, sometimes out of critical prudence and pragmatics, sometimes out of simple modesty and good common sense, but also, no doubt, because of the difficulty of conceptualizing such a radical proposition as the total erasure of the borders of the lip.

The common sense (and often implicit) commitment to these borders, however, should not necessarily lead us to an acquiescing acceptance of their inevitability. If, as my title suggests, I maintain these borders, it is neither for these reasons nor to maintain an absolute and infrangible limit. Rather, Kant and Lyotard, Wordsworth, Kleist, Shelley, and Yeats will demand a rethinking of the figure of the border, now not as limit but as the very figure for the possibility of movement between, as a figure for crossing, even transgression, that allows for a certain rethinking of language, history, the political, and their relation.

As I hinted above, it is not by chance that I have selected the title *Borders of a Lip*. There was, and is, a very specific lip, and one with borders no less, that was central to at least one Romantic text, however marginal. The action of much of Kleist's little-read play *Die Hermannsschlacht* is situated precisely along the borders of the river Lippe, which also happens to be the German word for *lip*. It may seem a mere historical coincidence that this word, which in Kleist, if it does not signify the site of language in the first instance, always borders on the linguistic, should mark the coincidence of language, nature (a river), and the political (the river as border between one principality and another). And it will no doubt appear a sign of critical opportunism to take this coincidence as the figure for the elaboration of a theory of a political criticism and the politicality of literature in the pages that follow. Still, coincidence, however happy or unhappy, is precisely what is at stake in an investigation of history: if we speak of a historical coincidence, it is not only to imply that something else *could* have happened, but that something else *did not* happen, and that history sometimes has an unsettlingly ironic way of making things coincidental. This taking place at the same time, or in the same place, I want to argue, is not merely something that takes place in history, but, at least in the texts I read here, is what takes place *as* history. The historical coincidence Kleist makes clear for us along the borders of the Lippe is the coincidence of language, nature, and politics, and the crossing of the borders of that lip will forever serve to mark that coincidence and render any borders between each of the terms it circumscribes indeterminate.

A determination of the historical and political context of literature or a rereading of literary texts with an eye to their ideological repression of history and politics, to the history they refuse to speak of directly, a reading that makes

history the determining instance for the literary work, does not respond to the kind of coincidence with which Kleist's *Lippe* presents us. In Kleist's figure, as in similar figures in Kant and Lyotard, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Yeats, we are much closer to what one prominent scholar of Romanticism has termed the "historical element in language": "an integral part of the medium, and an inescapable part of its meaning."³ It is not just that language always bears the historical weight of the moment and circumstances (the coincidents) of its production. It is the coincidence of language and history or the crossing between them that actually (re)defines history and politics in the works I will read, such that they can no longer be thought of in terms of a simple opposition, not even those oppositions still at work in historicist and materialist readings intent on restoring the political meaning to a text.⁴

In one of the most sophisticated and influential elaborations of a materialist model of interpretation, Fredric Jameson still speaks of the exteriority of history and the necessity of a movement of internalization:

Rightly or wrongly, a totalizing criticism has been felt to be transcendent in the bad sense, or in other words to make appeal, for its interpretive content, to spheres and levels outside the text proper. We have seen that such apparently extrinsic operations are then drawn back into the dialectical framework as the latter expands and is systematically totalized. Thus, it can be argued that this type of interpretation, while containing a transcendent moment, foresees that moment as merely provisionally extrinsic, and requires for its completion a movement to the point at which that apparently external content (political attitudes, ideological materials, juridical categories, the raw materials of history, the economic processes) is then at length drawn back within the process of reading.⁵

How are we to understand this movement from the exterior to the interior, from outside to inside, from a "transcendent moment" back into "the process of reading"? The very description of a materialist reading in terms of internalization signals that history is distinct from and external to literature and language, even if only provisionally. Here we have history, and there language, and if the twain are to meet, then it will be in the process of reading. In fact, what Jameson describes is not how history is to be recuperated for literature but for the very Marxian "process of reading" he describes. A Marxian reading as it is elaborated here would not recover history to reinscribe it in the text, where it could be read as part of the historicity of that text, but rather restores the transcendent moment that is history to the critical encounter with the text. While the process described does in fact trace a dialectic in which the process of reading, now conscious of the "outside" of the work, can mark its own difference from the historical, political, and ideological engagements of the work, no real mediation

between language and its outside (history, politics) has taken place. The process of reading described here, Marxian reading, would appear to undertake that task, but it has only mediated between history and reading, history and itself, and not between history and literature.

Elsewhere, Jameson rethinks the relation between language and “external reality” in terms that would seem not only to provide the mediating moment but to theorize the historicity of language.

The type of interpretation here proposed is more satisfactorily grasped as the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that that “subtext” is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. The literary or aesthetic act therefore always entertains some active relationship with the Real; yet in order to do so, it cannot simply allow “reality” to persevere inertly in its own being, outside the text and at a distance. It must rather draw the Real into its own texture, and the ultimate paradoxes and false problems of linguistics, and most notably of semantics, are to be traced back to this process, whereby language manages to carry the Real within itself as its own intrinsic or immanent subtext. (81)

Again, what is described here is a kind of internalization. And for that very reason, we are left with a narrative that, no matter how much it tries to incorporate history into language, to make language historical in a way that would not be merely referential, maintains the priority (“a *prior* historical or ideological *subtext*”) of history over language. In effect, then, Jameson describes a history in which language becomes more than mere language, in which language enters into an intimate relation with history. But his history supposes that language once had an existence independent of the “Real” and that it once offered (almost) no “paradoxes” or linguistic problems. According to this history, a prior historical or ideological subtext is rewritten by literature in such a way that not only is history restructured but the “Real” is made the intrinsic or immanent subtext of language.

Jameson’s language could be played with for some time before its own ultimate paradoxes and problems, false or otherwise, would be exhausted. We need only note, for instance, that despite his most ardent wish to free history from the textualization that it has suffered in some (no doubt poststructuralist) criticism, history *subsists* as a *subtext* in his own description of it. In order for history, ideology, the “Real” to maintain their priority over literature and language, as Jameson will have it, he must describe the encounter of language and literature in terms of

a history. And the very necessity of this history means that history, ideology, and the “Real” cannot constitute any intrinsic or immanent part of language if language does something like “draw the real into its own texture.” I might be accused of dwelling on “false problems of linguistics, and most notably of semantics,” here. But it is the question of the “world” as the “content” of literature (81), after all, the question, then, of a certain semantics, that Jameson is concerned with. The very fact that Jameson’s language runs into these paradoxes and problems in its attempt to articulate a history in which such problems could be traced back to history and the “Real” might just as well suggest that no history will ever be able to resolve these problems, that history, in other words, cannot free itself of linguistic and semantic problems that must remain irreducible to it.

What leads Jameson to the articulation of such histories is his positing of the ultimate priority of Marxian interpretation and of history, class struggle, and so forth, as the “untranscendable horizon” (10) of literature and its interpretation. His desire to provide that first (and final) instance itself needs to be read precisely as desire and thus as part of the ideological struggle he describes. Much the way his own rhetoric is open to the most unsettling of readings, a deconstruction of Jameson’s interpretive assumptions, including the assumption that all interpretations find their ultimate resting place and meaning in the fold of a Marxian understanding of literature, is no doubt possible and perhaps even necessary.⁶ To proceed in this way, however, might be misunderstood as merely reversing his position and positing its openness to deconstruction as proving deconstruction’s priority over all forms of historical and materialist readings. (A rigorous deconstruction could never make such a claim for itself, of course, but that it would be charged with doing so seems inevitable.) The ideological commitments of this deconstruction might then be pointed out, effectively returning the crown of critical priority to materialist criticism. And the process could continue *ad infinitum*. What needs to be read, however, is the very positing and presupposition of the historicist and Marxist imperative (“Always historicize!”), which must be put into question if something like a rigorous political criticism is to be thought. It is the very elaboration of a hermeneutic model from the willed “ground” of such a positing, which as such always remains self-justifying and circular, that must be questioned if any adequate notion of the political is to emerge. Rather than merely following this historical and political imperative, however justified and intuitively satisfying it may seem, what is necessary is a determination of the necessity and conditions of possibility of a political criticism.

A turn to Kant at this point might well seem inevitable, especially given the necessity of a sounding out of these conditions of possibility. But this apparent

inevitability, if it is not to fall back into the status of an uncritical presupposition, must itself be legitimated. This is precisely the opportunity offered by a reading of Kant for the elaboration of a political criticism that would take neither its critical nor its political status for granted as a presupposed ground. In order to legitimate its political status in this way, criticism must in the first place mark its own limits. In order to determine its political status and whether or not this status has any kind of apriority, criticism would at once have to determine precisely what constitutes the political and think its relation to that conception of the political.

If Kant allows for such a determination of the political and of a political criticism, it is in his thinking of critical philosophy, of criticism itself. As Lyotard points out, to legitimate its own political status, criticism cannot assume that it knows itself to be political, nor can it assume it knows what is and is not political. This self-limitation is at once what marks the limits of criticism, severing it in the first instance from history and politics in the most common sense, and what will allow it to legitimate itself as political. In fact, it turns out that philosophy will have to be political as well in order to legitimate itself. In order to account for its own critical status, critical philosophy must submit its very Idea to an act of critical judgment. This means judging that Idea against an intuitive presentation of it. But even as an Idea, the Idea of critical philosophy cannot have an intuitable referent. For the entire founding legitimation of critical philosophy to be saved from running aground upon this limitation, another referent must be supplied. A referent that would be that of the Idea of critical philosophy if it had an intuitable referent, a symbol or as if referent, is substituted for that absent referent. Thus, critical philosophy can be legitimated as if it had a referent through a symbolic substitution. And what permits this act of legitimation that allows criticism to call itself critical, what serves as the symbol for critical philosophy, is nothing less than the political.

For something to function as the symbol or analogy for the critical, permitting its (self-)legitimation, it must share the form of the critical, must itself be critical in that it questions its own conditions of possibility. Thus, the political must be conceived as the system of political knowledge and like the critical cannot have an intuitable referent. What this means is that the critical legitimates itself by taking the political as its symbol in a structure that reciprocally demands that the political have critical status. In this way, criticism can legitimate its own politicality rigorously, but in so doing must renounce all claims upon history and politics in the most common intuitive and intuitable senses. A political criticism that seeks to legitimate itself as such will always act as if political. Unlike much of what we currently call political and historical criticism, its

engagement in history and politics must remain suspended. But unlike the political criticism enabled by a reading of Kant's and Lyotard's thought, that criticism wins its political and historical knowledge at the price of never knowing its own political status. To think its own politicality, criticism must remain in the realm of the "as if," symbolizing itself as if political, which means being irreducible to any determinate politics.

This does not mean, however, that such a criticism would remain ineffectual if faced with political or historical phenomena, be they literary texts or what they "represent." Rather, one of the effects of this determination of the limits of a criticism of the political would be to reconceptualize and rephrase the historical imperative. To follow a critical reading of Kant, it is no longer the imperative "Always historicize!" that we must follow, nor even Kant's own categorical imperative as it has traditionally been understood. In fact, the historical and political imperative is hardly an imperative at all, for it is no longer articulated in the (implicit or explicit) form of a *must*, the form in which even an "ethics of reading" is still elaborated,⁷ but in that of the "as if."

If what is presented in the following pages can be understood as political criticism in these terms, then, it is not because an investigation of Kleist's or Yeats's nationalism, of the relation between naming and history in Wordsworth, of Mary Shelley's tale of the ends of community, or even the conception of the political in Kant and Lyotard is self-evidently political. Rather, it is because the political and historical claims of these works, no matter how manifest or suppressed, are read along with and against their very claim to being political, their conception of the political as such. What emerges is a group of works that, at the very moment they make their most forceful statements about a determinate historical condition, and even, as is most obvious in the cases of Kleist and Yeats, at the moment of their attempted intervention in history, also reflect on precisely what such intervention signifies, what it means for literature to draw history into itself or to be drawn into history—what it means, then, to cross the borders of the lip. This reflection on the historicity of literature and language by no means asserts the impossibility of such a crossing. Rather, it shows it to take place as an interruption of those claims, one that renders them and their (intentional) effects radically indeterminate, a double-crossing of sorts.

These works therefore enact the collision of determinate political and historical claims with their indetermination by the work's own conception of politics and history. As a result, they also demand a rethinking of the very concept and possibility of a more or less consequential, linear, causal movement between literature and the historical world that is presupposed by some recent criticism and that also often characterizes this criticism's attempted historical interven-

tions. A criticism that would follow this movement and that in so doing might be deemed political, then, would take this understanding of history as its symbol. Reading the political (in the most common sense) terms of the works at the same time that this very conception of the political is put into question, and in fact disrupted, the readings that follow will always be as if political, will always be interrupted precisely at the point at which they would try to assert their claim on history.

The reader will also be confronted with another kind of disruption of a unified notion of history in the very trajectory of the chapters that follow. For the works I discuss here are drawn from various national literary and critical traditions (German, French, English, Irish), as from different periods, ranging from the roots of Romanticism in Enlightenment thought (Kant) to Romanticism proper (Wordsworth) to the barely Romantic (Kleist, Shelley) and later reflections on these traditions (Yeats, Lyotard). A kind of history might still be discerned did the pages that follow take the form of reflections on relatively unrelated “major” authors or works or on a given genre or mode of discourse.⁸ Even that, alas, is nowhere to be found. But there is a history told here, at least if one is willing to think history differently. In fact, the very crossing of genres, discourses, periods, and national literatures speaks to a notion of history that would no longer be the thinking of a more or less unified or consequential movement through time, space, and language, but rather emerges from their crossing. At the very least, this would mean that a similar conception of history emerges from disparate works loosely adhering to the Romantic tradition or commenting upon it. Even more importantly, though, it suggests a history that literally traverses these differences and forms itself precisely as that crossing, that difference.

While the first part of this study, “The Sign of History,” moves from Kant and Lyotard to the poetry and poetics of naming in Wordsworth, and more specifically his “Poems on the Naming of Places,” it is nonetheless by no means obvious how Wordsworth could be accommodated to such a notion of history. Not only does the retrospective nature of much of his poetry apparently imply a recording and thus representation, no matter how complex, of history and social relations, but his poetics, as it is articulated throughout his prose works, would have language and poetry the expression of consciousness, maintaining a conventional historical scheme grounded upon a subject and its (historical) experience. Wordsworth’s description of the origin of the “Poems on the Naming of Places” in fact begins with the conventional narrative that would make language and poetry the recording of events. No one is more aware of what is at stake here than Wordsworth, who insists that the events that are said

to have occasioned first the giving of names to places and then their poetic commemoration *must* have occurred.

This is indeed a, perhaps *the*, historical imperative. If language is to maintain its traditional historical structure, and if, moreover, history is to maintain its traditional status as the ultimate ground of all linguistic and poetic acts, then for every poem, for every speech act, for every occurrence of language, there must be a prior determining instance. This is so in the relatively straightforward case of commemorative verse, of course, but also every time language is understood in terms of the intentionality of consciousness. Yet Wordsworth's constant shifting of the place of the "Poems on the Naming of Places" in his classifications of his poems refuses to subsume them under any function of consciousness. What is more, that very historical imperative describes the desire to have history ground language as much as it does a historical precedence, not least because in the poems themselves the logic guaranteeing the movement from event to language, naming, is by no means evident. Far from being revealed, any potential motivation for the naming of a place and the writing of poetry to commemorate that naming is lost in an interruption such as death, or in the interruption of the poem's narrative itself. The "Poems on the Naming of Places" thus reconceptualize the passage between history and language and at the same time rethink the status of intentionality, in particular the intentional structure of the image. What is more, the historical sequence or "consequence," as the Advertisement to the poems would have it, traced in the poems is that of the interruption that takes place in the passage from the determining historical event to its representation in language. The place of poems on the naming of places in history, then, would be that of describing a nonintentional structure that rethinks not only the relationship between language and consciousness but of historical consequence as such.

While Wordsworth's topography of history and language never takes up the figure of the border in a literal way, his location of history in a determinate space lends itself easily to a thinking of a more politically charged space, even a national one. This was also already the case in Kant's thinking of the political, where the French Revolution is on center stage. Turning to Kleist, Shelley, and Yeats, I engage works in which bordering the historical will turn to the question of borders, national and other. Even in the case of *Der zerbrochne Krug*, the point of departure for the second part of my study, "Bordering the Political," it will be a question of how a simple pitcher renders the fragmenting of these and other borders.

The play takes up this problematic by repeatedly marking the boundary between aesthetics and something external to it (the law, history), and by then

breaking or disrupting this very boundary. It follows the story of Frau Marthe, a peasant woman who comes to Judge Adam's court seeking restitution for her pitcher, broken the previous evening by her daughter's suitor, Ruprecht, or so she believes. Marthe insists that it is the beauty of her pitcher that is crucial to the case, making it clear that this is not least a case about aesthetics. It is not so much the aesthetic itself that is in question here, however, as it is what happens when the aesthetic object is fragmented. Occasioning the case of the broken pitcher, the break in the aesthetic object marks the movement from aesthetics to the law, opening up a relationship between two apparently independent forms of judgement (*Urteil*)—legal and aesthetic—both of which will be thoroughly fragmented.

The play thus traces the law's inability to mark itself off as independent from some "outside-the-law." And the break in the pitcher does not stop at bringing the law into relation with the beautiful. For the beauty of the pitcher is determined in large part by the image represented on it, that of a scene derived from a historical text, Schiller's *Geschichte des Abfalls der vereinigten Niederlande*. The break introducing the pitcher into the formalized social relations of the law, then, represents nothing less than the break *into* history. The pitcher enters history through the breaking of the image, the text of history, and the aesthetic. And the coincidence of the breaking of the aesthetic and a political act (the fall of the Dutch from the Spanish empire, also a kind of break) would seem to suggest that only in its fragmentation does the pitcher give history its due. Yet since the break in the pitcher is equally the break in the image and in the text of history, it also marks the disruption of any attempt to reduce history to an image or a simple linear narrative, such as Schiller's history of the Dutch. It is not only that history remains irreducible to its aesthetic representation, though, but that the fall from empire cannot be represented by a traditional aesthetics of the finished, perfected work of art. Whether or not this can still be called an aesthetics is by no means certain, for it would involve a disruption at the very heart of the aesthetic, the fracturing of not only the work of art but its theorization.

Nowhere are the political stakes of literature clearer than in Kleist's *Die Hermannsschlacht*. Nor are these stakes limited to what happens at the borders of the lip and of the river Lippe. Kleist's attempts to have the play produced in his day speak of the attempt to realize a literature that would not remain "merely literary." Referring to the famous Battle of Arminius in which the Romans were defeated in their attempt to invade Germany, Kleist describes the French occupation of Prussia as a repetition of the Roman occupation of Germany. Making this historical repetition clear by bringing it not to the political but the theatrical stage, Kleist brings the two stages together in the hopes of stirring the German people to resist French occupation. His metaphor,

however, does not assert a simple continuity between the political, historical stage and the stage of literature. Rather, the staging of *Die Hermannsschlacht* is intended as the disruption of what is about to take place on the political stage. The goal of Kleist's staging is to interrupt any possible continuity between past and present, so that theatre would banish any recurrence or coming to the stage once again of the foreign occupation of Germany, which would reassume its proper place, its place in history.

Clearly, it is a question of a certain concept of the nation, nationalism, national literature, and their relation to language. Of course, the implications of Kleist's deployment of the multiple significations of the Lippe, that unsettling site at which nature, the nation, and language come together in their mutual crossing, already suggested as much. Yet such crossings cannot be contained by the play itself. In a prose text on the state of German theatre, Kleist speaks of a national theatre as the inheritor of the duties of the church he sees as losing its social status. In this text, as in *Die Hermannsschlacht*, the nation is what grounds the crossing of borders. Such a steadfast instance is necessary not only for the particular political goals of Kleist's theatre, but for any conception of literature as political intervention. For the intervention of literature into history depends upon an understanding of a meaningful unit that is subject to a controlled movement into history to achieve its aims there, much the way troops can cross a river named Lippe, or language can be subject to the control of its speakers. Kleist, however, speaks (of) a language that escapes intentional control and the break between aesthetic perception and what is viewed, a sort of rupture that would not render literature ineffectual, but that would put into question a meaning or intervention that would be undisturbed and controllable, rendering the effects of such a movement indeterminate. This interruption of the movement of meaning rethinks not only the nation but political literature as well.

The final part of my study, "The Debts of History," undertakes a reading of two writers from decidedly different historical periods and situations, both of whom nonetheless try to come to terms with their debt to Romanticism. If both Mary Shelley and William Butler Yeats remain indebted to Romanticism, it is because that period has yet to be paid off, finished, put in the past, made history.

Shelley's encounter with a Romantic heritage is all the more charged as it is not least her debt to her father that is at stake in *The Last Man*. The novel takes up the central question of the status of the (Romantic) subject and its political implications, the history of its narrator, in many ways the heir to Godwin's *St. Leon*, tracing nothing less than the birth of consciousness, which simultaneously marks the subject's introduction into English culture. *The Last Man* is the story

of the battle to maintain that culture, or rather Western culture in general, as it traces a war between the Greeks and the Turks whose bizarre end will put not only war but the idea of nationalism into question. And it is the story of the end of that culture, the story of the movement toward the end of culture itself, for it traces the destruction of all of mankind by a plague.

All of mankind except the last man, of course. The political stakes of the novel cannot be limited to its portrayal of culture wars, therefore, but rather extend to the unsettling repercussions of the coming into subjectivity. After all, Lionel, the novel's narrator and the radical realization of the Romantic solitary, is the one character in the novel to contract the plague and survive it. Does the acquirement of subjectivity and a certain culture therefore constitute a kind of immunity that allows one to survive the plague? Lionel will, at any rate, find himself alone, the last man, but even this does not put an end to history or the historical stakes of the novel. For Lionel will write, will write the story of his life, which is also the story of an entire culture. And he will write this story, at the end of humanity, but for an audience, for us, no doubt.

Where are we then? What kind of history does the reading of *The Last Man* describe? If there is to be a reading of the last man and *The Last Man*, if that reading describes a certain survival of the last man, is it merely by chance that this (Romantic) subject's gender is by no means simple, that Lionel is clearly Shelley's rendering of herself, is, then, at once man and woman? Shelley's novel apparently engages a thinking of the end of the human, but its invocation of a human readership can never follow that thinking to its logical ends. The narrative's engagement with history folds the exposure of the limits of a Romantic humanism back upon itself, creating a temporal structure in which the end (of Romanticism) will be radically inverted and transvalued. At the end of Romanticism, a history will be written, but that history might not be the end of Romanticism.

His famous self-characterization as among the "last of the Romantics" clearly locates Yeats in this same history. Yet his early prose works, especially his collections of Irish folk and faery tales and his own additions to these, would seem quite removed from such reflections on language and its relation to the political. The very fact of collecting these tales in the effort to raise the consciousness of an Irish tradition and culture, to bring the Irish to self-consciousness as a people, already suggests a certain meeting between literature and politics. From the beginning, however, such a recuperative project is at odds with the tales comprising it, for in them the Irish are linked not to memory but to forgetting. Moreover, the moments of spiritual insight that befall the Irish, especially Irish women, entail the fragmentation of the self. If the goal of *The*