

# 5 DECONSTRUCTING THE TEXT

## 5.1 Barthes and Macherey

THERE is always a danger that a radical literary criticism will simply create a new canon of acceptable texts, merely reversing old value judgements rather than questioning their fundamental assumptions, as did, for instance, New Criticism (see Chapter 1). In arguing that the interrogative text enlists the reader in contradiction while classic realism does its best to efface contradiction, I do not mean to suggest that the interrogative text is therefore 'good' and classic realism ideological, misleading and therefore 'bad'. But if we are not simply to subject ourselves (in every sense) to ideology, we need a new way of approaching classic realism.

In the early stages of its development in France semiology (semiotics) concerned itself above all with the unmasking of ideology masquerading as truth. Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957, English translation 1972) is the classic exposition of the ways in which ideology is naturalized in the discourses, images and myths of twentieth-century society. But literary realism was too valuable and perhaps too powerful, to be handed to the ruling class without a struggle. It was apparent that it was no longer possible to regard the classic realist

text as a reflection of the world. As an alternative it was possible to recognize it as a *construct* and so to treat it as available for *deconstruction* (as it was later termed), that is, the analysis of the process and conditions of its construction out of the available discourses.<sup>18</sup> Ideology, masquerading as coherence and plenitude, is in reality inconsistent, limited, contradictory, and the realist text as a crystallization of ideology participates in this incompleteness even while it diverts attention from the fact in the apparent plenitude of narrative closure. The object of deconstructing the text is to examine the *process of its production* — not the private experience of the individual author, but the mode of production the materials and their arrangement in the work. The aim is to locate the point of contradiction within the text, the point at which it transgresses the limits within which it is constructed, breaks free of the constraints imposed by its own realist form. Composed of contradictions, the text is no longer restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading. Instead it becomes *plural*, open to re-reading, no longer an object for passive consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning.

Again the classic exposition is by Roland Barthes. In *S/Z*, first published in 1970 (English translation 1975), Barthes deconstructs (without using the word) a short story by Balzac. *Sarrasine* is a classic realist text concerning a castrato singer and a fortune. The narrative turns on a series of enigmas (what is the source of the fortune? who is the little old man? who is La Zambinella? what is the connection between all three?). Even in summarizing the story in this way it is necessary to 'lie': there are not 'three' but two, since the little old 'man' is 'La' Zambinella. Barthes breaks the text into fragments of varying lengths for analysis, and adds a number of 'divagations', pieces of more generalized commentary and exploration, to show *Sarrasine* as a 'limit-text', a text which uses the modes of classic realism in ways which constitute a series of 'transgressions' of classic realism itself. The sense of plenitude, of a full understanding of a coherent text which is the normal result of reading the realist

narrative, cannot here be achieved. It is not only that castration cannot be named in a text of this period. The text is compelled to transgress the conventional antithesis between the genders whenever it uses a pronoun to speak of the castrato. The story concerns the scandal of castration and the death of desire which follows its revelation; it concerns the scandalous origin of wealth; and it demonstrates the collapse of language, of antithesis (difference) as a source of meaning, which is involved in the disclosure of these scandals.

Each of these elements of the text provides a point of entry into it, none privileged, and these approaches constitute the degree of polyphony, the 'parsimonious plural' of the readable (*lisible*) text. The classic realist text moves inevitably and irreversibly to an end, to the conclusion of an ordered series of events, to the disclosure of what has been concealed. But even in the realist text certain modes of signification within the discourse — the symbolic, the codes of reference and the semes — evade the constraints of the narrative sequence. To the extent that these are 'reversible', free-floating and of indeterminate authority, the text is plural. In the writable (*scriptible*), wholly plural text all statements are of indeterminate origin, no single discourse is privileged, and no consistent and coherent plot constrains the free play of the discourses. The totally writable, plural text does not exist. At the opposite extreme, the readable text is barely plural. The readable text is merchandized to be consumed, while the plural text requires the production of meanings through the identification of its polyphony. Deconstruction in order to reconstruct the text as a newly intelligible, plural object is the work of criticism.

Barthes's own mode of writing demonstrates his contempt for the readable: *S/Z* is itself a polyphonic critical text. It is impossible to summarize adequately, to reduce to systematic accessibility, and it is noticeable that the book contains no summarizing conclusion. Like *Sarrasine*, *S/Z* offers a number of points of entry, critical discourses which generate trains of thought in the reader, but it would be contrary

to Barthes's own (anarchist) argument to order all these into a single, coherent methodology, to constitute a new unitary way of reading, however comprehensive, and so to become the (authoritative) author of a new critical orthodoxy. As a result, the experience of reading *S/Z* is at once frustrating and exhilarating. Though it offers a model in one sense — it implies a new kind of critical practice — it would almost certainly not be possible (or useful) to attempt a wholesale imitation of its critical method(s).

It seems clear that one of the most influential precursors of *S/Z*, though Barthes does not allude to it, was Pierre Macherey's (Marxist) *A Theory of Literary Production*, first published in 1966 (English translation 1978). Despite real and important differences between them, there are similarities worth noting. For instance, Macherey anticipates Barthes in demonstrating that contradiction is a condition of narrative. The classic realist text is constructed on the basis of enigma. Information is initially withheld on condition of a 'promise' to the reader that it will finally be revealed. The disclosure of this 'truth' brings the story to an end. The movement of narrative is thus both towards disclosure — the end of the story — and towards concealment — prolonging itself by delaying the end of the story through a series of 'reticences', as Barthes calls them, snares for the reader, partial answers to the questions raised, equivocations (Macherey 1978, pp 28-9; Barthes 1975, pp 75-6). Further, narrative involves the reader in an experience of the inevitable in the form of the unforeseen (Macherey 1978, p. 43). The hero encounters an obstacle: will he attempt to overcome it or abandon the quest? The answer is already determined, though the reader, who has only to turn the page to discover it, experiences the moment as one of choice for the hero. In fact, of course, if the narrative is to continue the hero must go on (Barthes 1975, p. 135). Thus the author's autonomy is to some degree illusory. In one sense the author determines the nature of the story: he or she decides what happens. In another sense, however, this decision is itself determined by the constraints of the narra-

tive (Macherey 1978, p. 48), or by what Barthes calls the *interest* (in both the psychological and the economic senses) of the story (Barthes 1975, p. 135).

The formal constraints imposed by literary form on the project of the work in the process of literary production constitute the structural principle of Macherey's analysis. It is a mistake to reduce the text to the product of a single cause, authorial determination or the mechanics of the narrative. On the contrary, the literary work 'is composed from a real diversity of elements which give it substance' (Macherey 1978, p. 49). There may be a direct contradiction between the project and the formal constraints, and in the transgression thus created it is possible to locate an important object of the critical quest.

Fiction for Macherey (he deals mainly with classic realist narrative), is intimately related to ideology, but the two are not identical. Literature is a specific and irreducible form of discourse, but the language which constitutes the raw material of the text is the language of ideology. It is thus an inadequate language, incomplete, partial, incapable of concealing the real contradictions it is its purpose to efface. This language, normally in flux, is arrested, 'congealed' by the literary text.

The realist text is a determinate representation, an intelligible structure which claims to convey intelligible relationships between its elements. In its attempt to create a coherent and internally consistent fictive world the text, in spite of itself, exposes incoherences, omissions, absences and transgressions which in turn reveal the inability of the language of ideology to create coherence. This becomes apparent because the contradiction between the diverse elements drawn from different discourses, the ideological project and the literary form, creates an absence at the centre of the work.<sup>19</sup> The text is divided, split as the Lacanian subject is split, and Macherey compares the 'lack' in the consciousness of the work, its silence, what it cannot say, with the unconscious which Freud explored (*ibid*, p. 85).

The unconscious of the work (*not*, it must be insisted, of

the author) is constructed in the moment of its entry into literary form, in the gap between the ideological project and the specifically literary form. Thus the text is no more a transcendent unity than the human subject. The texts of Jules Verne, for instance, whose work Macherey analyses in some detail, indicate that 'if Jules Verne chose to be the spokesman of a certain ideological condition, he could not choose to be what he in fact became' (*ibid.*, p. 94). What Macherey reveals in Verne's *The Secret of the Island* is an unpredicted and contradictory element, disrupting the colonialist ideology which informs the conscious project of the work. Within the narrative, which concerns the willing surrender of nature to improvement by a team of civilized and civilizing colonizers, there *insists* an older and contrary myth which the consciousness of the text rejects. Unexplained events imply another mysterious presence on what is apparently a desert island. Captain Nemo's secret presence, and his influence on the fate of the castaways from a subterranean cave, is the source of the series of enigmas and the final disclosure which constitute the narrative. But his existence in the text has no part in the overt ideological project. On the contrary, it represents the return of the repressed in the form of a re-enacting of the myth of Robinson Crusoe. This myth evokes both a literary ancestor — Defoe's story — on which all subsequent castaway stories are to some degree conditional, and an ancestral relationship to nature — the creation of an economy by Crusoe's solitary struggle to appropriate and transform the island — on which subsequent bourgeois society is also conditional. The Robinson Crusoe story, the antithesis of the conscious project of the narrative, is also the condition of its existence. It returns, as the repressed experience returns to the consciousness of the patient in dreams and slips of the tongue, and in doing so it unconsciously draws attention to an origin and a history from which both desert island stories and triumphant bourgeois ideology are unable to cut themselves off, and with which they must settle their account. *The Secret of the Island* thus reveals, through the discord within it between

the conscious project and the insistence of the disruptive unconscious, the *limits* of the coherence of nineteenth-century ideology.

The object of the critic, then, is to seek not the unity of the work, but the multiplicity and diversity of its possible meanings, its incompleteness, the omissions which it displays but cannot describe, and above all its contradictions. In its absences, and in the collisions between its divergent meanings, the text implicitly criticizes its own ideology; it contains within itself the critique of its own values, in the sense that it is available for a new process of production of meaning by the reader, and in this process it can provide a real knowledge of the limits of ideological representation.

Macherey's way of reading is precisely contrary to traditional Anglo-American critical practice, where the quest is for the unity of the work, its coherence, a way of repairing any deficiencies in consistency by reference to the author's philosophy or the contemporary world picture. In thus smoothing out contradiction, closing the text, criticism becomes the accomplice of ideology. Having created a canon of acceptable texts, criticism then provides them with acceptable interpretations, thus effectively censoring any elements in them which come into collision with the dominant ideology. To deconstruct the text, on the other hand, is to open it, to release the possible positions of its intelligibility, including those which reveal the partiality (in both senses) of the ideology inscribed in the text.

Such a way of reading would ultimately have the consequence of redrawing the map of 'Eng. Lit.'. In order to explore the usefulness of extending the existing canon, and at the same time of deconstructing other forms besides realist fiction, I propose to consider aspects first of the Sherlock Holmes stories and then of Matthew Arnold's 'The Scholar-Gipsy'.<sup>20</sup>

## 5.2 Sherlock Holmes

In locating the transitions and uncertainties of the text it is

important to remember, Macherey insists, sustaining the parallel with psychoanalysis, that the problem of the work is not the same as its *consciousness* of a problem (Macherey 1978, p. 93). In 'Charles Augustus Milverton', one of the short stories from *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, Conan Doyle presents the reader with an ethical problem. Milverton is a blackmailer; blackmail is a crime not easily brought to justice since the victims are inevitably unwilling to make the matter public; the text therefore proposes for the reader's consideration that in such a case illegal action may be ethical. Holmes plans to burgle Milverton's house to recover the letters which are at stake, and both Watson and the text appear to conclude, after due consideration, that the action is morally justifiable. The structure of the narrative is symmetrical: one victim initiates the plot, another concludes it. While Holmes and Watson hide in Milverton's study a woman shoots him, protesting that he has ruined her life. Inspector Lestrade asks Holmes to help catch the murderer. Holmes replies that certain crimes justify private revenge, that his sympathies are with the criminal and that he will not handle the case. The reader is left to ponder the ethical implications of his position.

Meanwhile, on the fringes of the text, another narrative is sketched. It too contains problems but these are not foregrounded. Holmes's client is the Lady Eva Blackwell, a beautiful debutante who is to be married to the Earl of Dovercourt. Milverton has secured letters she has written 'to an impecunious young squire in the country'. Lady Eva does not appear in the narrative in person. The content of the letters is not specified, but they are 'imprudent, Watson, nothing worse'. Milverton describes them as 'sprightly'. Holmes's sympathies, and ours, are with the Lady Eva. Nonetheless we, and Holmes, accept without question on the one hand that the marriage with the Earl of Dovercourt is a desirable one and on the other that were he to see the letters he would certainly break off the match. The text's elusiveness on the content of the letters, and the absence of the Lady Eva herself, deflects the reader's attention from

the potentially contradictory ideology of marriage which the narrative takes for granted.

This second narrative is also symmetrical. The murderer too is a woman with a past. She is not identified. Milverton has sent her letters to her husband who in consequence 'broke his gallant heart and died'. Again the text is unable to be precise about the content of the letters since to do so would be to risk losing the sympathy of the reader for either the woman or her husband.

In the mean time Holmes has become engaged. By offering to marry Milverton's housemaid he has secured information about the lay-out of the house he is to burgle. Watson remonstrates about the subsequent fate of the girl, but Holmes replies:

You can't help it, my dear Watson. You must play your cards as best you can when such a stake is on the table. However, I rejoice to say that I have a hated rival who will certainly cut me out the instant that my back is turned. What a splendid night it is.

The housemaid is not further discussed in the story.

The sexuality of these three shadowy women motivates the narrative and yet is barely present in it. The disclosure which ends the story is thus scarcely a disclosure at all. Symbolically Holmes has burnt the letters, records of women's sexuality. Watson's opening paragraph constitutes an apology for the 'reticence' of the narrative: '. . . with *due suppression* the story may be told. . . .'; 'The reader will excuse me if I conceal the date *or any other fact*. . . .' (my italics).

The project of the Sherlock Holmes stories is to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis. The phrase most familiar to all readers — 'Elementary, my dear Watson' — is in fact a misquotation, but its familiarity is no accident since it precisely captures the central concern of the stories. Holmes and Watson are both men of science. Holmes, the 'genius', is a scientific conjuror who insists on disclosing how the trick is

done. The stories begin in enigma, mystery, the impossible, and conclude with an explanation which makes it clear that logical deduction and scientific method render all mysteries accountable to reason:

I am afraid that my explanation may disillusionize you, but it has always been my habit to hide none of my methods, either from my friend Watson or from anyone who might take an intelligent interest in them. ('The Reigate Squires', *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*)

The stories are a plea for science not only in the spheres conventionally associated with detection (footprints, traces of hair or cloth, cigarette ends), where they have been deservedly influential on forensic practice, but in all areas. They reflect the widespread optimism characteristic of their period concerning the comprehensive power of positivist science. Holmes's ability to deduce Watson's train of thought, for instance, is repeatedly displayed, and it owes nothing to the supernatural. Once explained, the reasoning process always appears 'absurdly simple', open to the commonest of common sense.

The project of the stories themselves, enigma followed by disclosure, echoes precisely the structure of the classic realist text. The narrator himself draws attention to the parallel between them:

'Excellent!' I cried.

'Elementary,' said he. 'It is one of those instances where the reasoner can produce an effect which seems remarkable to his neighbour because the latter has missed the one little point which is the basis of the deduction. The same may be said, my dear fellow, for the effect of some of these little sketches of yours, which is entirely meretricious, depending as it does upon your retaining in your own hands some factors in the problem which are never imparted to the reader. Now, at present I am in the position of these same readers, for I hold in this hand several threads of one of the strangest cases which ever perplexed a man's brain, and yet I lack the one or two

which are needful to complete my theory. But I'll have them, Watson, I'll have them!' ('The Crooked Man', *Memoirs*)

(The passage is quoted by Macherey in his discussion of the characteristic structure of narrative, 1978, p. 35.)

The project also requires the maximum degree of 'realism' — verisimilitude, plausibility. In the interest of science no hint of the fantastic or the implausible is permitted to remain once the disclosure is complete. This is why even their own existence as writing is so frequently discussed within the texts. The stories are alluded to as Watson's 'little sketches', his 'memoirs'. They resemble fictions because of Watson's unscientific weakness for story-telling:

I must admit, Watson, that you have some power of selection which atones for much which I deplore in your narratives. Your fatal habit of looking at everything from the point of view of a story instead of as a scientific exercise has ruined what might have been an instructive and even classical series of demonstrations. ('The Abbey Grange', *Return*)

In other words, the fiction itself accounts even for its own fictionality, and the text thus appears wholly transparent. The success with which the Sherlock Holmes stories achieve an illusion of reality is repeatedly demonstrated. In their foreword to *The Sherlock Holmes Companion* (1962) Michael and Mollie Hardwick comment on their own recurrent illusion 'that we were dealing with a figure of real life rather than of fiction. How vital Holmes appears, compared with many people of one's own acquaintance.'

De Waal's bibliography of Sherlock Holmes lists 25 'Sherlockian' periodicals apparently largely devoted to conjectures, based on the 'evidence' of the stories, concerning matters only hinted at in the texts — Holmes's education, his income and his romantic and sexual adventures. According to the *Times* in December 1967, letters to Sherlock Holmes were then still commonly addressed to 221B Baker Street, many of them asking for the detective's help.

Nonetheless these stories, whose overt project is total explicitness, total verisimilitude in the interests of a plea for scientificity, are haunted by shadowy, mysterious and often silent women. Their silence repeatedly conceals their sexuality, investing it with a dark and magical quality which is beyond the reach of scientific knowledge. In 'The Greek Interpreter' (*Memoirs*) Sophie Kratides has run away with a man. Though she is the pivot of the plot she appears only briefly: 'I could not see her clearly enough to know more than that she was tall and graceful, with black hair, and clad in some sort of loose white gown.' Connotatively the white gown marks her as still virginal and her flight as the result of romance rather than desire. At the same time the dim light surrounds her with shadow, the unknown. 'The Crooked Man' concerns Mrs Barclay, whose husband is found dead on the day of her meeting with her lover of many years before. Mrs Barclay is now insensible, 'temporarily insane' since the night of the murder and therefore unable to speak. In 'The Dancing Men' (*Return*) Mrs Elsie Cubitt, once engaged to a criminal, longs to speak but cannot bring herself to break her silence. By the time Holmes arrives she is unconscious, and she remains so for the rest of the story. Ironically the narrative concerns the breaking of the code which enables her former lover to communicate with her. Elsie's only contribution to the correspondence is the word, 'Never'. The precise nature of their relationship is left mysterious, constructed of contrary suggestions. Holmes says she feared and hated him; the lover claims, 'She had been engaged to me, and she would have married me, I believe, if I had taken over another profession.' When her husband moves to shoot the man whose coded messages are the source of a 'terror' which is 'wearing her away', Elsie restrains him with compulsive strength. On the question of her motives the text is characteristically elusive. Her husband recounts the story:

I was angry with my wife that night for having held me back when I might have caught the skulking rascal. She

said that she feared that I might come to harm. For an instant it had crossed my mind that what she really feared was that *he* might come to harm, for I could not doubt that she knew who this man was and what he meant by those strange signals. But there is a tone in my wife's voice, Mr Holmes, and a look in her eyes which forbid doubt, and I am sure that it was indeed my own safety that was in her mind.

After her husband's death Elsie remains a widow, faithful to his memory and devoting her life to the care of the poor, apparently expiating something unspecified, perhaps an act or a state of feeling, remote or recent.

'The Dancing Men' is 'about' Holmes's method of breaking the cipher. Its project is to dispel any magic from the deciphering process. Elsie's silence is in the interest of the story since she knows the code. But she also 'knows' her feelings towards her former lover. Contained in the completed and fully disclosed story of the decipherment is another uncompleted and undisclosed narrative which is more than merely peripheral to the text as a whole. Elsie's past is central and causal. As a result, the text with its project of dispelling mystery is haunted by the mysterious state of mind of a woman who is unable to speak.

The classic realist text had not yet developed a way of signifying women's sexuality except in a metaphoric or symbolic mode whose presence disrupts the realist surface. Joyce and Lawrence were beginning to experiment at this time with modes of sexual signification but in order to do so they largely abandoned the codes of realism. So much is readily apparent. What is more significant, however, is that the presentation of so many women in the Sherlock Holmes stories as shadowy, mysterious and magical figures precisely contradicts the project of explicitness, transgresses the values of the texts, and in doing so throws into relief the poverty of the contemporary concept of science. These stories, pleas for a total explicitness about the world, are unable to explain an area which nonetheless they cannot

ignore. The version of science which the texts present would constitute a clear challenge to ideology: the interpretation of all areas of life, physical, social and psychological, is to be subject to rational scrutiny and the requirements of coherent theorization. Confronted, however, by an area in which ideology itself is uncertain, the Sherlock Holmes stories display the limits of their own project and are compelled to manifest the inadequacy of a bourgeois scientificity which, working within the constraints of ideology, is thus unable to challenge it.

Perhaps the most interesting case, since it introduces an additional area of shadow, is 'The Second Stain' (*Return*), which concerns two letters. Lady Hilda Trelawney Hope does speak. She has written before her marriage 'an indiscreet letter . . . a foolish letter, a letter of an impulsive, loving girl.' Had her husband read the letter his confidence in her would have been for ever destroyed. Her husband is nonetheless presented as entirely sympathetic, and here again we encounter the familiar contradiction between a husband's supposed reaction, accepted as just, and the reaction offered to the reader by the text. In return for her original letter Lady Hilda gives her blackmailer a letter from 'a certain foreign potentate' stolen from the dispatch box of her husband, the European Secretary of State. This political letter is symbolically parallel to the first sexual one. Its contents are equally elusive but it too is 'indiscreet', 'hot-headed'; certain phrases in it are 'provocative'. Its publication would produce 'a most dangerous state of feeling' in the nation. Lady Hilda's innocent folly is the cause of the theft: she knows nothing of politics and was not in a position to understand the consequences of her action. Holmes ensures the restoration of the political letter and both secrets are preserved.

Here the text is symmetrically elusive concerning both sexuality and politics. Watson, as is so often the case where these areas are concerned, begins the story by apologizing for his own reticence and vagueness. In the political instance what becomes clear as a result of the uncertainty of the text

is the contradictory nature of the requirements of verisimilitude in fiction. The potentate's identity and the nature of his indiscretion cannot be named without involving on the part of the reader either disbelief (the introduction of a patently fictional country would be dangerous to the project of verisimilitude) or belief (dangerous to the text's status as fiction, entertainment; also quite possibly politically dangerous). The scientific project of the texts require that they deal in 'facts', but their nature as fiction forbids the introduction of facts.

The classic realist text installs itself in the space between fact and illusion through the presentation of a simulated reality which is plausible but *not real*. In this lies its power as myth. It is because fiction does not normally deal with 'politics' directly, except in the form of history or satire, that it is ostensibly innocent and therefore ideologically effective. But in its evasion of the real also lies its weakness as 'realism'. Through their transgression of their own values of explicitness and verisimilitude, the Sherlock Holmes stories contain within themselves an implicit critique of their limited nature as characteristic examples of classic realism. They thus offer the reader through the process of deconstruction a form of knowledge, not about 'life' or 'the world', but about the nature of fiction itself.

Thus, in adopting the form of classic realism, the only appropriate literary mode, positivism is compelled to display its own limitations. Offered as science, it reveals itself to a deconstructive reading as ideology at the very moment that classic realism, offered as verisimilitude, reveals itself as fiction. In claiming to make explicit and *understandable* what appears mysterious, these texts offer evidence of the tendency of positivism to push to the margins of experience whatever it cannot explain or understand. In the Sherlock Holmes stories classic realism ironically tells a truth, though not the truth about the world which is the project of classic realism. The truth the stories tell is the truth about ideology, the truth which ideology represses, its own existence as ideology itself.



### 5.3 'The Scholar-Gipsy'

If the central project of the Sherlock Holmes stories is to *dispel* mystery in the name of science, the project of the Romantic ode is the quite antithetical one of *revealing* the mystery at the heart of things, the intense and visionary core of subjective experience which makes possible escape from the drab routine of everyday externality. Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality', Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' all to varying degrees attempt to isolate the moment of vision which is itself the source of poetry, and to meditate on the meaning and value of the vision-as-poem. In 'Kubla Khan', the 'Nightingale' and the 'Grecian Urn' the source of the vision — and its symbol in the poem — is itself a form of art (song, the urn), and the poet, in re-producing the visionary experience, produces poetry.

Arnold's 'Scholar-Gipsy' is in many senses the culmination of this tradition. The poem is an appeal to a shepherd (reader?) to leave when night falls the everyday world of work, and join the poet in his quest for the elusive scholar who, 'tired of knocking at preferment's door', has rejected the 'real conditions' of Victorian England, evoked in images of illness:

... this strange disease of modern life,  
With its sick hurry, its divided aims,  
Its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts . . .

'The Scholar-Gipsy' alludes most directly to the 'Ode to a Nightingale': the stanza form is similar; lines and images echo Keats ('our feverish contact'; 'But thou possessest an immortal lot'); and above all the descriptions of natural plenitude evoke the celebrated fifth stanza of Keats's poem. But 'The Scholar-Gipsy' shares the common Romantic rejection of the world created by industrial capitalism, the drab, mechanical and competitive life of the dim city, deadly to its inhabitants both morally and physically.

Poetry is seen by contrast as the source of 'intimations of

immortality'. The scholar-gipsy is himself a poet-figure, seeking the immortal poetic vision, 'Rapt, twirling in thy hand a withered spray,/And waiting for the spark from heaven to fall'. He seeks from the gipsies the secret of their art, a power to bind through discourse 'the workings of men's brains'.

The Romantic project necessitates not realist prose, of course, but poetry, in which connotative and symbolic meanings conventionally prevail over denotation and in which, therefore, the mysterious and the magical are appropriately suggested. In the Romantic ode poetry enshrines the record of its own birth. The account of the vision is the poem itself and therefore it is the poem which constitutes the proof of the validity of the vision, the truth of the intimations of immortality which the text records. The poem then generates in the reader a participation in these intimations, and this is the source of its power to transcend and transform the world, to redeem it from death. In Shelley's version the West Wind symbolizes both the poetic vision which is to bring life to the poet and the 'incantation' of the poem itself which will 'quicken a new birth' in the dying world. The poem is thus a perfect circle, autonomous and self-contained, emblem and evidence of its own values, immortalizing the ephemeral vision and so offering the gift of life to its readers.

'The Scholar-Gipsy' takes this project to an extreme. The scholar-gipsy, the poem's central symbol for the poet, is himself immortalized in a 'tale', Glanvil's book, which lies beside the poet-speaker in his pastoral retreat. The scholar-gipsy, literally long-dead, lives on Glanvil's page, and re-lives in Arnold's poem, immortal emblem of the values he represents.

At this point, however, an uneasiness appears in the poem's logic (Wilkenfeld 1969, p. 126). That characters in books cannot die is unexceptionable, but the Romantic project requires a stronger claim, that the scholar-gipsy as poet lives not only in the pages of another writer but in his own right, for only in this way does he constitute an emblem of

the power of poetry to give life to the world. And here the poem becomes more uncertain as it becomes more argumentative, less 'poetic'. Stanzas 14-17 first assert that Glanvil's story is two hundred years old, that the scholar-gipsy is dead: 'And thou from earth art gone/Long since, and in some quiet churchyard laid'. But then follows an immediate reversal: 'No, no, thou hast not felt the lapse of hours'. The tenses in the following stanza shift uneasily in describing this figure who is dead and not dead: 'Thou hast not lived, why should'st thou perish so?/Thou had'st *one* aim. . . .' 'Hast', 'had'st': the scholar-gipsy belongs only uncertainly to the present. At last it appears that his claim to live depends not merely on Glanvil's book but on his own withdrawal from the world: 'For early did'st thou leave the world, with powers/Fresh, undiverted to the world without. . . .' His pursuit of the poetic vision depends on evasion of the world of distraction and doubt. That he has not yet learned to rule the workings of men's brains, become an unacknowledged legislator of the world, as Shelley puts it, this same distraction and doubt which is the disease of society conclusively demonstrates. But in these circumstances the scholar-gipsy, waiting for the 'spark from heaven', cannot constitute an emblem of the power of poetry to immortalize in art the moment of poetic vision and so to transform the world.

The dissatisfaction of the text with the logic of its own argument in this central section is everywhere apparent. The main symbol of the poem, the scholar-gipsy himself, is insubstantial, elusive and finally absent. The quest so eagerly begun is unfulfilled: the scholar-gipsy is only fleetingly glimpsed by others, not seen at all by the speaker. The poet ends by urging him, 'fly our paths, our feverish contact fly'. Finally the scholar-gipsy indeed disappears from the poem. The concluding image substitutes the heroic figure of the Tyrian trader, untainted by the uncertainties revealed earlier in the poem, but drawn from the remote past, neither a poet nor immortal, and thus largely irrelevant to the initial project of the text.

The imagery of the poem seeks uneasily for modes of signification which will do justice to the nature of the poetic vision. The poem begins in the pastoral mode, then abandons this and moves through a series of images of natural plenitude which are the setting for the elusive scholar-gipsy, and which have the paradoxical effect of emphasizing through their richness his virtual absence from the text. Finally the image of the Tyrian trader produces an illusion of closure, an *ad hoc* optimism only tenuously related to the total organization of the poem. Because it confronts them with integrity, the text therefore contradicts its own claims on behalf of poetry. Unable to show the scholar-gipsy or his immortal vision, it is not able to provide the evidence it seeks of the power of poetry to give life to the world.

'The Scholar-Gipsy' is not an isolated case: affirmation is repeatedly qualified or undermined in Romantic verse. In Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' a related contradiction makes doubt the source of knowledge. Here the vision, origin of the power truly to 'see', is not, when we finally reach it, an experience of radiant light as the imagery of the poem has led us to expect. On the contrary, it is a radical uncertainty, evoked primarily in negatives, a series of encounters with the unknown and unidentifiable which becomes the source of deathless truths:

Not for these I raise  
The song of thanks and praise;  
But for those obstinate questionings  
Of sense and outward things,  
Fallings from us, vanishings;  
Blank misgivings of a Creature  
Moving about in worlds not realised,  
High instincts, before which our mortal Nature  
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:  
But for those first affections,  
Those shadowy recollections,  
Which, be they what they may,  
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,

Are yet a master light of all our seeing;  
 Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make  
 Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
 Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,  
 To perish never.

In Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' the escape from mortality is to a world of mutability. The nightingale's 'happy' song becomes a 'requiem' and finally a 'plaintive anthem', and the transcendent vision succeeds only in recalling the world of loss which was its antithesis. Here the text is explicit. The nightingale's song evokes 'fairy lands forlorn'.

Forlorn. The very word is like a bell  
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self.

One of the main thrusts of Romanticism is the rejection of an alien world of industrial capitalism, recurrently signified in images of death, disease and decay. Poetry claims to create a living world, fostered by nature but springing essentially from the subjectivity of the poet, from what Coleridge calls the Imagination, a mode of perception which endows the phenomenal world with a vitality and an intensity issuing ultimately from the soul itself: 'Oh Lady! we receive but what we give,/And in our life alone does Nature live' ('Dejection: an Ode'). The Romantic vision, though it needs the phenomenal world for its realization, transcends and transforms the material and the mortal.

The Romantic rejection of the 'real conditions' is based on a belief in the autonomy of the subject. The 'man possessed of more than usual organic sensibility' greets in solitude the experiences he himself generates. But the escape, the transcendence, is rapidly seen to double back on itself: the higher knowledge proves to be a dream or a reversion to the very reality whose antithesis it was to represent. In the absence of an adequate theory of the subject as the individual in society, a meeting-place of the network of linguistic relationships which articulate experience, the Romantics were unable to account for this doubling back, experiencing it only as loss

or betrayal of the vision. Much of the poetry of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constitutes a record of increasing despair as the contradictions in the Romantic rejection of the world became increasingly manifest. Unable to theorize the inadequacy of its concept of subjectivity (and committed, indeed, to experience as against theory), the poetry can ultimately only present the subject as trapped between intolerable alternatives, the mortality of the material world and what Yeats calls the 'cold snows of a dream'. Romanticism in poetry, like the positivism of classic realism, provides, precisely through the determination and integrity with which it pursues its project, evidence of the uncertainty of its own undertaking. The Romantic ode, celebration of the presence of subjectivity, moves towards a formal centre which is to be the emblem of its own theme, the embodiment of the vision which is its source. What it finds there is a central absence, a radical inconsistency which leads either to elegy or to interrogation in the place of the awaited triumph at the moment of closure: 'Fled is that music. . . . Do I wake or sleep?'

The Lacanian subject is constructed on the basis of a splitting which is irreversible. The jubilation of the mirror-phase is also an alienation, the moment of division between the *I* which perceives and the perceived (imaged) *I*. Much of Romantic poetry records a quest for the lost wholeness and transcendence of the imaginary, an attempt to find in nature a mirror which will reflect an image of the subject at one with itself and its context, a unity which precedes differences. But subjectivity is predicated on difference and the imaginary unity is for ever elusive. The scholar-gipsy, mirror-image of the poet, is whole, untainted, transcendent, immortal, long-lost, dead, never to be found. His substitute in the economy of the poem is the Tyrian trader, heroic parallel and contrast to the traders of Victorian England. In refusing the real conditions created by the industrial revolution, 'The Scholar-Gipsy' paradoxically takes as its project an affirmation of the transcendent subject of liberal humanism which is the ideological ally of industrial capitalism. The

formal absence at the centre of the poem offers the reader a knowledge of the lack which is the condition of precisely that subjectivity.