Ashton Nichols
THE REVOLUTIONARY 'I': Wordsworth and the Politics of Self-Presentation

Jeffrey C. Robinson
RECEPTION AND POETICS IN KEATS: 'My Ended Poet'

Anya Taylor
BACCHUS IN ROMANTIC ENGLAND: Writers and Drink, 1780-1850

Michael Wiley
ROMANTIC GEOGRAPHY: Wordsworth and Anglo-European Spaces

Eric Wilson
EMERSON'S SUBLIME SCIENCE

1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads

Edited by
Richard Cronin
Reader in English Literature
University of Glasgow
The Year of the System

Clifford Siskin

Two hundred years ago, in Britain, one of the distinctive features of European modernity first took shape on the printed page. In fact, the year commemorated by this volume – 1798 – is a precise chronological marker for that event. While aware of the often fool-hardy nature of such claims, I opt for the goal of precision over a comfortable – but sometimes misleading – caution: blurring the date of change may invite blurry perceptions of what changed and how. The risk for this particular argument is especially high, for the ‘what’ at issue may seem, at first, irredeemably amorphous. My focus is ‘the System’ – as in that which, in its most popular form, works both too well – ‘you can’t beat the System’ – and not well enough – it always seems to ‘break down’. Its discursive and political powers are indexed by our capacity to make it both ubiquitous and blameworthy, for invoking the System has become a primary modern means of totalizing and rationalizing our experience of the social. Thus a senior advisor to President Clinton summed up the state of politics and the media in the late 1990s by stating: ‘The System no longer has a moral compass; it only has a hunch.’

Some might argue that the very notion of the System itself is little more than a hunch – an attitude trying to pass itself off as an explanation. As such, it would appear to be an unlikely, and likely unreliable, touchstone for rewriting the history both of 1798 and of the Romantic period that year is usually thought to inaugurate. That, however, is my intention here, for I see ‘blaming the System’ as a historically-specific event. More precisely, systems became the kinds of things that could be blamed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Britain, and, I argue, that activity assumed a very specific form as the latter century came to a close. To make this argument as our century does the same is to heighten the stakes: why are we seeing in the 1990s this phenomenon of the 1790s – proliferating uses of system in highly charged ways?
The answer lies in the phenomenon's mix of continuity and discontinuity. The persistent usage is the totalizing one voiced by Clinton's adviser. What's different: now is a plethora of new uses - systems theory, system professionals, self-organizing systems, loosely-coupled systems, support systems, ecosystem, operating systems - arising from, or accelerated by, our shift into electronic and digital technologies. Technological change, especially the use of computers and the ways computers use us, is clearly central to the resurgence of system. Not only is it a powerful conceptual tool in computer science, but systems can now materialize in a new way, actually assuming the form of working networks. When we speak of the 'telephone system', for example, we can be referring both abstractly to a way of organizing communications or concretely to a specific wired network that can go 'down'.

Is this the initial embodiment of a powerful but previously disembodied concept? In the 1950s, that is, was system solely an abstraction, albeit one that assumed the force of an attitude? Even our best studies of system in the eighteenth century treat it as a purely intellectual issue: as an idea that accumulates meanings rather than as an object that works in the world - or doesn't - to produce them. But if, in today's electronic age, systems materialize as networks - among other things - shouldn't there have been parallel sorts of embodiments in the past? And, if so, why haven't we attended to them?

In the eighteenth century, the newly dominant technology was writing, by which I mean, following Raymond Williams, the interrelated activities of writing, print and silent reading. As Williams, Alvin Kernan and others have shown - and English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) figures confirm - the final decades of that century saw the culmination of Britain's transformation into a print culture. The proliferation of writers and readers was matched by an increase in the forms their technology assumed: the genres of written English multiplied in kind and in number. Some of these genres have, of course, attracted considerable ongoing attention, including those, like critical reviews and lyrical ballads, that became crucial to the study of literature as a discipline. Many others, however, have slipped from view, their status as written objects obscured by what Williams calls the 'naturalization' of writing - that historical process by which socially-specific uses of technology came to be seen as simply normal human activities.

The products of those activities were similarly dematerialized - thus 'system' comes to us from the eighteenth century as a familiar idea but not as a genre. Yet in the 122 times that system and its variants appear in the first edition of Johnson's Dictionary that is one of its most telling guises. The second quotation under the term 'systematical', for example, explains system by setting up what is to us a surprising, but historically-compelling, contrast: 'Now we deal much in essays,' wrote Isaac Watts in The Improvement of the Mind (1741), 'and unreasonably despise systematical learning; whereas our fathers had a just value for regularity and systems.' "Systems" versus "essays" - this opposition turns, as suggested by Watts's subtitle - A supplement to the Art of logic: containing a variety of remarks and rules for the attainment and communication of useful knowledge, in religion, in the sciences, and in common life - on how best to produce, circulate and consume knowledge.

His implication, seized upon by Johnson in defining system as the 'reduction' of 'many things' into a 'regular' and 'unified' 'combination' and 'order', is that essays entail a less regular ordering or reduction of things than systems do. In another quotation, from Boyle, that distinction is echoed in the form of a preference: 'I treat of the usefulness of writing books of essay, in comparison of that of writing systematically.' Since we know that essays rapidly became, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of the most important forms - if not the most important form - for knowledge production and circulation, we might expect to find a turn from systems in the later 1700s.

Such expectations would appear to be reinforced by David Simpson's extraordinary account of the fate of system in Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Question of Theory. Grouped with 'theory' and 'method', 'system', argues Simpson, was linked to French in opposition to English 'common sense' and 'empiricism' - and thus became a weapon in the discursive wars of English nationalism, particularly the conservative assault on radical thinking after the French Revolution. Treating system as an idea, Simpson can attend brilliantly to the twists and turns of this tale as changes of meaning, detailing how each side tried 'to capture the vocabulary' (60) of the other. The results were often paradox: the French as excessively devoted both to 'reason' and to 'sensibility' (76) and English literature as an 'orderly disorder' (134). But, asserts Simpson, the general thrust of the English 'nationalist tradition' is clear. By the 1790s it was 'firmly set against system and theory': 'As in
government, so in argument and experiment the English idiom was hostile to hypotheses, schemas, and prescriptive constitutions. So pervasive was this idiom that it affected even writers apparently on the left (52). The 'systematic' became, in literary terms, 'unmarketable' (170).

Faced with such hostility, system – as an idea – should have been in eclipse by 1798. And, even if we do address it as a genre, the competition with essay also suggests that systems and system-writing should have been on the run. But the turn to genre also provides us with ways to ascertain what did happen: we can, for example, count how many self-proclaimed systems appeared in print. The results belie these expectations in startling ways. Not only do ESTC figures show that there was no decline at the end of the century; 1798 was actually a watershed year for published systems in England. Through most of the century, the number of works that explicitly called themselves 'systems', or invoked 'system' in their titles, trailed – in a ratio of 1 to 3 (or higher) – the total of those efforts self-identified as, or with, essays. After 1798, however, production of self-described systems regularly outpaces essay output.°

These figures are one reason to call 1798 the 'year of the system', but we need to look as well for the other indicator of generic prominence: how often the genre, in whole or in part, is embedded in other genres. The power of satire in the early eighteenth century, for example, is indexed both by the number of satires published and by the incorporation of satiric features in other forms – thus Pope's 'Arbuthnot' as a satiric epistle.° To the question 'Where did systems go under the political pressures of the 1790s?' we might therefore answer 'The most vulnerable took cover within other genres.' Since such activity rarely announces itself, but must be identified by a reader, evidence accumulates only on a case-by-case basis and quantitative arguments are difficult to mount.

For 1798, I offer only three, of many, instances of this new embeddedness of system. However, each carries, as I shall demonstrate, significant historical weight: Malthus's Essay on Population, Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads and Hay's An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain.° Together with the ESTC productivity figures, they make a case for a newly empowered genre – a genre capable of performing the totalizing functions described earlier. The year 1998 is, I maintain, the bicentenary of the System.
things as they are. How do we know them? Induction used things as the means to an end: observation and experiment were expected to yield knowledge in the forms of principles or descriptive laws. Deduction, however, posed principles as the means for knowing things: that end was to be achieved through the workings of speculative reason. For Bacon, the systematical was a particularly pernicious form of deduction, for he saw putting principles before things as an ‘anticipation of nature’ (50) that prevented the proper ‘explanation’ of mind. Such ‘superinducing’ of principle on principle had led science astray, requiring, he argued, a ‘fresh start’ (instauratio) (51).

What troubled Bacon was a common usage of system, but not system itself as a written form of inquiry. In fact, he insisted that his own plan for the ‘restoration’ of things ‘must only be made by a natural history, and that of a new kind and compiled on a new system’ (24). Choosing the proper genres was crucial to his entire undertaking: History, for example, functioned for him not as a turn to the past but as a presentation of facts and events. He spelled out in detail how that presentation should be made, from its ‘size’ and ‘subtlety’ to the ways it should be ‘selected’ and ‘arranged’ (25). Together, those criteria were supposed to cohere into a system that would regularly order the new science.

Bacon recognized, however, that even such a desirable system—precisely because it was the product of desire—could reproduce the problem of anticipating nature; it defined what science could be, rather than what, at that time, it actually was. In the early stages of restoration, Bacon realized, the system might easily be deployed as ‘method’, with rhetoric—rather than knowledge of things—filling out the initially ‘empty’ spaces. His solution was again generic: claiming to follow the ‘least and earliest received after truth’, he wrote ‘short’ and ‘scattered’ aphorisms, a form that conveyed, he argued, the sense of knowledge in growth’ (96, xii). Another formal solution was the ‘essay’, for that genre was not then understood as a finished piece of knowledge but as an irregular attempt; over a century later Johnson still termed it a ‘loose sally’. The writing of systems could thus establish contexts calling for their generic competition; systems vs essays did not necessarily mean that one was used at the expense of the other.

For Godwin, the question of things as they are was also, importantly, a question of genre. He conducted his Enquiry Concerning Political Justice in a then standard form of written system: a list of ‘principles’ followed by expository prose. Since this system’s purpose was also, like Bacon’s, a fresh start—in Godwin’s words, ‘reformation and change’—presentation of the system was not an end in itself; it provided, instead, an enabling context for other genres, specifically those that could best facilitate the desired change. With explicitly political—rather than scientific—change as his goal, Godwin wrote a ‘narrative’ that he hoped would appeal ‘to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach’ (3).

Both Godwin, the ‘humble novelist’, and Bacon, the aphoristic essayist, demonstrated that systems interrelate with other genres in historically-specific ways. Only when science appeared to be new could the ‘scattered’ efforts and effects of aphorisms and essays (in his sense, not ours) serve Bacon’s systematic purpose. Only when literacy and population rose and the novel became, in Mrs Berbauld’s words, ‘a species of books which every body reads’, could Godwin share her sense of that form’s political power: ‘Let me make the novels of a country,’ she wrote, ‘and let who will make the systems.’ As with ‘systems vs essays’, this apparent rivalry could and actually did work in mutually productive ways: more systems and more novels.

The question of ‘who’ gets to ‘make’ what does point, however, to a central rivalry in the history of system. Speculative systems of the kind condemned by Bacon played an important role in ongoing political debates about access to knowledge. Features intended to reduce complexity to simplicity, such as summary lists of principles, cast the genre as a democratizing vehicle. Even typographical conventions played a role. Innovations in the printing of the early Romantic systems, as David Simpson points out, helped to open writing and knowledge to the ‘common people’ by dispersing the univocal authority of earlier texts: commas and italics set off illustrative materials as coming from a variety of sources, and tables of contents framed the entire text as something not given but made (24–5).

Systems could, of course, be written to dampen this leveling effect. When skills (and not just ideas) became systemic principles—as in Bacon’s turn to observation and experiment—older hierarchies of authority were transformed into new hierarchies of expertise: not who has access to knowledge, but who knows best how to access it. System making and learning thus took on
increasing social consequence: 'I have made a beginning', wrote Bacon:

that, I hope, is not to be despised: the fortune of mankind will give the outcome, such as men in the present state of things and of minds may perhaps be unable to grasp or measure. For the matter in hand is not just a pleasant speculation, but in truth concerns the affairs and fortunes of mankind and all the power of its works. (29)

Godwin claimed similarly high stakes when shifting the systemic focus from nature to 'things passing in the moral world': 'it is but of late', he insisted, 'that the inestimable importance of political principles has been adequately comprehended' (3).

Other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century estimates of the efficacy of 'principles' were less sanguine, but even the more doubtful tended to place some value on familiarity with systems. John Locke, for example, devoted roughly four sections of his Thoughts on Education (1692) to the role of systems of natural philosophy, recurring again and again to the same two-part formulation. On the one hand, natural philosophy, as a systematic attempt to know 'the principles, properties, and operations of things, as they are in themselves', was unlikely to succeed:

Though the world be full of systems of it, yet I cannot say, I know any one which can be taught a young man as a science, wherein he may be sure to find truth and certainty, which is what all sciences give an expectation of.14

On the other hand, however, they were not to be dismissed: 'I do not hence conclude, that none of them are to be read.' For Locke, even flawed systems carried social value: 'It is necessary for a gentleman in this learned age to look into some of them to fit himself for conversation.' Locke's 'book', as with Bacon's and Godwin's less sceptical encounters, engaged system as a genre interrelated with other genres. In his case, however, those others were not forms of implementation, but pedagogical alternatives. To teach about 'spirit', for example, Locke suggested writing a 'history' of the Bible complemented by what was then a sister genre of system, the 'epitome', 'containing the chief and most material heads' (183). Only when

he turned to Newton did Locke even entertain the possibility that knowledge could assume and maintain a truly systematic form. The feature that distinguished the work of the 'incomparable Mr. Newton' from other 'systems of physics' was the use of 'mathematics', a procedure productive of 'principles that matter of fact justify' (186).

The notion that 'mathematics' could function as a newly legitimating 'language' of system spread with Newton's popularity both in England and on the continent. The descriptive laws he formulated with, and in, that language confirmed to many that the entire universe was a system, and that, in the words of the Abbé de Condillac:

Each part of it having the least complexity is a system: man himself is a system. If, then, we renounce systems, how can we explore anything deeply? I agree that in general philosophers are wrong. They invent systems, but systems should not be invented. We should discover those which the author of nature has made.15

Writers of systems, that is, needed to be good readers – both of the divine author and of the deductive 'errors that the craze for systems led to'.16 The former told of man's place in nature as part of things as they are, while the latter detailed his departures from it when pressed to explain these things.

This mixed message of affirmation and critique – Newtonian optimism regarding what could be known and the record of efforts that fell short – is a characteristic feature of mid and late eighteenth-century systems. In generic terms, it was a feature enacted formally through the embedding of systems within systems. Here, for example, is Benjamin Martin in 1747: a)

Having read and consider'd the Design of the several Books hitherto published for the Explanation of the NEWTONIAN PHILOSOPHY, under the titles of Commentaries, Courses, Essays, Elements, Systems, &c. I observed not one of them all could be justly esteemed a TRUE SYSTEM, or COMPLETE BODY of this science.17

Martin's response demonstrated the renewed power of system, for the above is from a Preface to Philosophia Britannica or A New and Comprehensive SYSTEM of the Newtonian PHILOSOPHY,
ASTRONOMY and GEOGRAPHY. The solution to failed systems, and other forms of generic inadequacy, was system itself—a SYSTEM ambitious enough to comprehend the embedded remains of its predecessors.

Systemic ambition was also evident in 1759, when Adam Smith took as the task of his very first book an explanation of the principles of human behaviour. Of the seven parts of The Theory of the Moral Sentiments ("theory", according to Johnson, being a "system yet subsisting only in the mind"), the longest is the final one; there we find embedded the 'particular system[s] formed out of the different theories' of his predecessors. My point is not that earlier writers neglected to review their competition, nor that other genres did not turn upon themselves, but that the genre of system was the specific historical site for a particularly powerful mixture—a mixture of extraordinary intellectual aspirations and, through the self-reflexivity of embeddiedness, sustained attention paid to the very genre that articulated them.

"Powerful" is, perhaps, an understatement when applied to another of Smith's books, The Wealth of Nations (1776), according to Joseph Schumpeter, was "the most successful not only of all books on economics, but...of all scientific books that have appeared to this day"; its authority, points out Richard Olson, "remains almost as great in the United States in the 1980s as it was in Scotland in the 1760s." Smith himself described it as "an account of the general principles of law and government", adding an apparently sincere apology for not adding a 'theory of jurisprudence' due to 'very advanced age'. Following his own formula for system—in which one principle is "found to be sufficient to bind together all the discordant phenomena that occur as a whole of species of things"—Smith foregrounded the 'division of labour'. And, within that overarching system, he embedded an entire book (one of five) on the various 'Systems of political economy' in 'different ages and nations'. The power and unrelenting optimism of The Wealth of Nations—the sense that those systems have been productively reconciled in this age and in this nation—are in large part effects of that embedding.

Less successful in the long term, but, in its own way, equally ambitious, was William Belcher's Intellectual electricity, newrun organum of vision, and grand mystic secret (1798). Described in the subtitle as 'an experimental and practical system of the passions, metaphysics and religion, really genuine', Belcher's claim to the real was grounded in the same generic procedure that served Smith so well: he embedded extracts of other systems by, in order, 'Sir Isaac Newton, Dr. Hartley, Beddoes, and others'. Although not explicitly critiqued, but rather cited positively, those systems are all generically subordinated within the 'grand' scope of Belcher's own 'secret'.

SYSTEMS-IN-ESSAYS

Intellectual electricity is still a secret to most of us 200 years later, but, we can add with hindsight, it faced stiff competition. The three other texts from 1798 that I will now address are not only better known to us today, but they differed from Belcher back then as well—differed in an apparently minor but historically crucial matter of genre. These texts share with his the feature of embedded systems, but they are not themselves systems; they are, in their own words, an 'essay', 'poems', and an 'appeal'. Forgive my own experiments with typography here, but one way to clarify the mechanics of this change is to indicate that lower-case 'systems', instead of becoming parts of upper-case 'SYSTEMS', were embedded instead in other forms; the result, as I suggested earlier and will now argue, is the effect we know as 'the System'.

How strong was the effect and how quickly was it felt? Here is Godwin again, but writing after 1798: 'Mr. Malthus is the most daring and gigantic of all innovators.' 'It has not been enough attended to', he asserts, 'how complete a revolution the Essay on Population proposes to effect in human affairs.' Godwin's own essay "Of Avarice and Profusion" (1797) was, of course, the immediate occasion of Malthus's effort, and Godwin is in part trying to keep up his end of the debate. But it's now 22 years later and he is not so much arguing as bearing witness:

Man, in the most dejected condition in which a human being can be placed, has still something within him which whispers him, 'I belong to a world that is worth living in.'

Such was, and was admitted to be the state of the human species, previously to the appearance of the Essay on Population. Now let us see how, under the ascendancy of Mr. Malthus's theory, all this is completely reversed. (143)
Godwin's analysis of 'how foresight on ideas, and one could argue that they were what Malthus's 'revolution' was all about. But my argument is that 'gigantic' revolutions in a print culture are in some way generic ones, and that is what links Malthus's text to 1798 and the short- and long-term impact of Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads and Huxley's Appeal - works featuring, in fact, very different ideas.

Despite his focus on content, Godwin does help us to identify that generic link, for his account of the ideas of the Essay attends to how they are grouped. In Malthus's voice and then his own, he proclaims to mankind:

The evils of which you complain, do not lie within your reach to remove: they come from the laws of nature, and the unalterable impulse of human kind.

But Mr. Malthus does not stop here. He presents us with a code of morality conformable to his creed. (144)

The 'but' is the key to understanding the generic configuration outlined in Malthus's full title: An Essay on the Principle of Population. Embedded in the text is the principle that systematically figures man's fate as a 'lottery' (74): 'Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio' (20). This is the phenomenon of population reduced to the regular ordering of system, and if it had become part - through critique or affirmation - of an encompassing SYSTEM, then the whole work might have had the same kind of ongoing power as The Wealth of Nations. 'Yet text speaks - whether we agree with it or not - with an authority derived from a seemingly seamless link between the embedded principle of division of labour and the encompassing concern with wealth and nation.

To what is the principle of population linked? As Godwin tells us, 'morality and the future improvement of society'. But as his paragraphing and dictation also tell us, this link is not seamless in Malthus; the very word 'conformable' raises the issue of differences in form. Systems within larger systems - as in Condillac's description of human systems within the SYSTEM of the universe - become principles/parts of the new whole. Systems within essays, however, may not exhibit such self-similarity: not only are they different in kind, but essays in particular, as we have seen, were understood formally as not aspiring to the wholeness of systems - as deliberately incomplete attempts.

Malthus's first and second paragraphs both begin by emphasizing that the work is an 'essay', and, as such, 'might undoubtedly have been rendered much more complete' (15). An essay's incompleteness may assume the guise of an apology or an excuse, as in Malthus's claim that his work was 'interrupted', or of strategy, as in Bacon's argument about 'growth'; in more modern essays, the sense of being part of a larger whole predominates, such that incompleteness might convey originality (breaking off from a field) or collegiality (contributing to it). The work of essays, then, is in some way preliminary or partial and thus gestures outside of itself, while the logic of systems is self-contained: 'a thermostat system', points out Kevin Kelly, 'has endless internal bickering' about whether to turn the furnace on or off.24 Can the commands of an embedded system carry their authority into the adventures of essay?

In Malthus, this question poses the particular problem of whether the population principle can and should dictate human behaviour - specifically, the moral issue of whether men who find themselves naturally turned on - 'the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state' (19) - should, with the misery of overpopulation in mind, turn themselves off. The answer is that the commands travelled, but not all that well: Malthus had to revise the Essay's morality substantially between 1798 and the next edition in 1803. Constructing the link between system and essay required ongoing work. To 'miserly and vile' as effects of the needed checks on population, Malthus added 'moral restraint',25 leading Godwin to conclude that his code of morality 'consists principally of negatives (144).

The negatives certainly concerned Godwin, but as the products of revision that we may or may not accept - 'if we embrace his creed, we must have a new religion, and a new God' (emphasis mine, 145) - they cannot account fully for his notion that Malthus was the marker for extraordinary historical change. That judgement was not dependent on changed content, but on the change in form that established the need for revision in the first place. The combination of systems-in-essays produced a specific formal effect: the certainty of systems extended into essay resulted in a sense of expansive but attenuated authority. It now worked both too well - the answer venturing into all kinds of questions - and not well
parts are called principles, and the fewer principles a system has the more perfect it is. It is even desirable to reduce all principles to a single one.26

What systems want, in other words, is the highest ratio of parts to principles. The most desirable and most common method, as recommended here, had been fewer principles; in the 1790s, however, with more – and more specialized – systems, ratios were raised by increasing the number of parts.

Malthus, Wordsworth and Hays all followed that pattern – that is to say, their embedded systems did, and thus claimed for that genre new explanatory power at the very moment it was supposedly in retreat. The principle of population, according to Malthus, had evaded even ‘the most penetrating mind’, because of what had been left out of systematic consideration: ‘the histories of mankind that we possess are histories only of the higher classes’ (25). With the lower classes included, the regular oscillations of population could be detected. Translated from history into system, their regularity became a ‘law of nature’ (71), turning time itself into a part in the ratio, and making the future – the coterpiece of the debate with Godwin – known.

This same kind of inclusiveness was what made Wordsworth infamous, and then famous. Embedded within Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems are the basic components of a system: explanatory principles and ‘things’ to be known. All of the reviewers of the 1798 edition read the poems through the frame of the Advertisement,27

and, in critiques of subsequent editions and other volumes, Wordsworth was explicitly portrayed as writing ‘upon’ system.28 What concerned readers most, however, was not the genre but its inclusiveness. The Advertisement opens by switching abruptly from the ‘subject’ of poetry to its proper ‘language’, without even, attempting a transition between the two paragraphs. All that ‘fits’ them is the sense of possibility – that ‘every’ subject and even the language of the ‘lower and middle classes’ are potentially poetic (7). Many early critics denied one aspect or another of that potential, but kept the possibility of system open: ‘The “experiment”, we think, has failed,’ wrote Robert Southey, ‘not because the language of conversation is little adapted to “the purposes of poetic pleasure”, but because it has been tried upon uninteresting subjects.’29

The Advertisement’s inclusiveness was, paradoxically, reductive, for the discarding of traditional standards left a particular kind of ‘pleasure’ as the sole criterion for differentiating poetry from other
types of discourse. The systematic result of such reduction can, as in Malthus, be thought of as a kind of thermostat—literary thermostat in this case, turning on and off in reaction not to the misery that shut down population but to pleasure's presence. Embedded within an Advertisement—like an essay, a loose sally likely to promise more than it delivers—it posed the problem of fit: of how well such a system carries its authority. That problem was even more pressing here than in Malthus, since the very first step was the poem: theory and practice coincide?

The answer for most readers was, at best, 'maybe'. For Wordsworth, as for Malthus, it was revision. The Advertisement became a Preface—also, like the essay, promising but incomplete. Its very suggestiveness only raised the stakes, challenging the system to explain 'the revolutions not of literature alone but likewise of society itself' (243). It induced, that is, more revision, leading, finally, out of the Preface itself into another form of incompletion: an appendix.

The concluding sentence of the Appendix unencapsulately enacts the phenomenon of embedding it describes: Wordsworth writes that he is tempted

here to add a sentiment which ought to be the pervading spirit of a system, detached parts of which have been imperfectly explained in the Preface—namely, that in proportion as ideas and feelings are valuable, whether the composition be in prose or in verse, they require and exact one and the same language. (318)

As with the content of Malthus's morality, the ideas after the dash have garnered much attention, and the bicentenary of 1798 will surely bring more. But there is another story to be told about that year—and about Romanticism—that has remained buried before the dash: the ongoing centrality ('ought') of system. Through procedures such as the embedding of 'parts', it came to pervade everything, but at the cost of only imperfectly explaining itself and those things. The result was a historically-specific 'spirit' of that genre: the formal effect that I have been calling 'the System'.


In the standard political histories of the 1790s, systemic ambition is linked to radicalism, so that the supposed rejection of system signals a turn to the conservative. But I have been arguing not only that systems became, in fact, newly popular, but that they also became newly ambitious. The result was the System—the politics of which we can now begin to pin down by rethinking the radical (Republican)/conservative (Tory) binary. This can be particularly helpful in regard to Wordsworth, who, as David Simpson points out, has been bounced around within that binary—most recently from the liberal side of the Atlantic to a vocation as a consistent conservative that, I agree, have gone 'too far' (154). To do so, I will both break the binary with an additional term and try to bring genre into the question of agency.

The term is 'liberalism', which, at the turn into the nineteenth century, emerged as a label for those in favour of reform. As its current association with big government, particularly in the States, suggests, its history on both sides of the Atlantic is tied to totalizing conceptions of the social—that is, of the relationship between society and government. In 1798 in particular, Britain experienced an extraordinary tension between the warts and large-scale change and a need for it—a need fuelled at that moment by both war with France and what David Fischer calls the 'great wave' of inflation that brought the gap between prices and wages to a breaking point. The response was a distinctly modern one, setting the stage for the final displacement of the Whig/Tory configuration by the Liberal/Conservative one; in addition to governmental intervention in labour relations through the Combination Acts, 1798 saw the institution of the income tax.

In retrospect, we see that these efforts at what was understood to be safe change required that 'things as they are' be configured in a very particular way: as needing change, as capable of being changed, as providing the means of effecting that change, and, crucially, as always falling enough to maintain an ongoing need for it. This cannot simply be understood as a complex of ideas thought up by individuals beforehand and then put into practice—insisting on ongoing failure, for example, would have been an unlikely strategy. This is, rather, a description of what 'things' came to appear to be, and thus, in part, the result of the written transformations of the genre of system that I have been describing.

To see that genre not as disappearing but as becoming newly ambitious and increasingly embedded is to see how the System became the object that defined liberalism. Its inclusiveness brought new objects into view—such as the lower classes surfacing in
Malthus and Wordsworth; its pervasiveness positioned it to attract blame and thus induce reform of itself and those objects; and its attenuated authority delimited both the scope and success of all such efforts. By 1798, this mutual reconfiguration was altering the political landscape for all individuals. Both the tales of consistent conservatism and the conversion scenarios that assume a stable and fixed binary fail to map Wordsworth — and Romantic writing — onto this new terrain.

I conclude now by attending to the ways that Mary Hays did her own mapping, both of herself and of the first-person pronoun that became one of Romanticism’s major landmarks. The Appeal begins, in fact, with an Advertisement that maps work to date. We are told that she began it ‘some years ago’, when the subject had ‘some degree of novelty to recommend it’, but was interrupted twice by the appearance of works on that same subject. As with Malthus, interruption points to incompleteness; not only was the project delayed, but Hays repeatedly refers to the final result as an “attempt” and a “sketch”.

By specifying the nature of the interruptions, she also provides a timeline that makes publication in 1798 make personal and — to us — political and historical sense. The first delay occurred exactly a decade earlier with the publication of Alexander Jardine’s Letters from Barbary, France, Spain, Portugal, &c. Worried that her work would have ‘little claim to notice’ in the shadow of his comments on women, she did not resume her pursuit for three years. But “just at that period” — 1791 — another piece appeared with a ‘pointed title, and declared purpose’ just like her own: Wollstonecraft’s Rights of Woman.

A ‘greater interval than the last elapsed’, Hays tells us, for, with all hope of ‘novelty’ lost, ‘resumption required a new rationale. The argument that she finally constructs is generic in that it insists on matching kinds of books to kinds of people. Her Appeal would not duplicate the Vindication, she reasons, since different readers need to be addressed in different ways ‘before the public opinion is influenced to any degree’. Generalizing from the competition ‘to which I have alluded’, Hays argues that what ‘raises’ some works ‘in the eyes of the few, either sets them beyond the reach of the multitude; or, what is infinitely worse, renders them obnoxious to its hatred and persecution’. The vicious reception accorded the Vindication during the 1790s thus provides Hays with a historically-specific purpose for her work as that decade ends: 1798 becomes the moment to find new ways to ‘manage’ the ‘prejudices of mankind, to make new and unexpected truths palatable to common minds’.

This strategy of inclusion seeks to improve upon the past — whether by finding a better population principle, writing proper poetry or convincing more readers. And, as with Malthus and Wordsworth, Hays gestures toward the ‘commr’. by embedding systems as parts within adventurously incomplete wholes. In ‘that slight, hasty, and unfinished manner, of which in some degree every part of this little work must necessarily partake’ (90), Hays does not dwell on the ‘education of females’ (Wollstonecraft’s focus), but attempts to be newly comprehensive. Not only does she ‘write for all classes’ (239), but she also addresses systematic behaviours by men (47) as well as by women (90).

The system of the sexes that Hays embeds in her Appeal is thus distinguished by this breadth from all earlier versions: even men, despite their privileged position, are in it. The more men try to make women into the things they want, the more women become the things they are; something that can only be described ‘by negatives’ and certainly ‘not what men would have them to be’ (68). Her essayist attempt to extend the authority of systematic analysis into other things thus meets the same unsavory fate of Malthus’s and Wordsworth’s efforts. Tentatively venturing into ‘what women ought to be’, Hays toys with revising the whole structure of her work:

Though I have not certainly, the vanity to believe myself equal to the task of fulfilling the title of this chapter, to the entire satisfaction of my readers; nor what is perhaps in the first instance still more discouraging, even to that of my own; yet having once adopted I shall retain it, as it expresses exactly what I wish to accomplish, however I may fail in the execution (123)

The result, she admits, using generic terms, may not be a ‘regular system’, but it will at least be a ‘bold ... outline’. This slippage between ‘system’ and ‘outline’ produces very specific effects — effects that became characteristic features of the writing we call Romantic. As I explained earlier, the Romantic ‘T’ is one of those features: when systems are extended so that they can no longer talk to themselves, another kind of self must do the talking. In this case, Hays herself tells us what expressively fills the gap
between the authority of system and her 'free' outline. She concludes her appeal with six pages of apology for a fault which is perhaps too obvious to escape notice."

It must be confessed, that, the 'moneysupply' alleged to be 'dear to authors' — that the proscribed little personage — I — unfortunately occurs, remarkably often, in the following pages. (299)

What is most remarkable to us today — after so many 'Es in so much writing — is that such an extended apology would have seemed necessary. Haynes speculates that vanity might be at work — and adds, in one last satiric jab, that men may be less susceptible — but I blame the System. 56

Notes
5. Isaac Watts, The improvement of the mind: or, A supplement to the Art of Logic: containing a variety of remarks and rules for the attainment and communication of useful knowledge, in religion, in the sciences, and in common life (London: J. Brackstone, 1741).
7. These counts, of course, are not by themselves conclusive evidence of the importance of system at the turn into the nineteenth century. I offer them as numerical readings that signal the need for other kinds of readings of other kinds of evidence. By calling them 'readings', I wish to emphasize that — even with the ESTC — counts of this kind are a very imprecise science. As I've indicated, they are limited by self-definition: the keywords 'system' and 'essay' must be in the title or subtitle. In addition, ESTC contains and finds more than one copy or edition of the same title, which should be treated as extra, and cut out of the counts, or kept as evidence of the pervasiveness of influence of particular texts. Since this problem occurred with both systems and essays, and my concern is with establishing a shift in the relative importance over a number of years, I have not altered the counts.

The Year of the System

Since that shift appears to have taken place only toward the very end of the eighteenth century, the overall figures for 1750 to 1800 in England conform to the 1 to 5 ratio of systems to essays: 1192 to 3802. (Figures for publication in Scotland (105) to (370) and Ireland (115 to 442) are similar.) Samplings from the start of the century (1700–3 to 9) and the middle (1750 – 14 to 59) confirm the significantly higher frequency of essays. The counts only begin to close in the 1780s, moving above 2 to 3 (60 to 57) by 1798, and, in 1799, actually tilting toward system (54 to 53).

ESTC, then, points to the rise of system to parity (and better) with essay by the century's close. To get a rough idea of the trend after 1800, I turned to counts from the Harvard University Catalogue through the Hollis system. The listings there, of course, are not only less complete, but separating out publication in England from other countries is more difficult in Hollis than in ESTC. Thus I first checked to see if the ratios for eighteenth-century dates were roughly the same, and found that they were: 1700 – 10 to 26, 1750 – 5 to 26, 1798 – 46 to 40. I then turned to the nineteenth century; after rough parity, with small spikes in both directions for the first few years, a continuing trend toward system clearly establishes itself, reaching a 2 to 1 ratio in the second half of the century (1850 – 92 to 46, 1890 – 173 to 86). I am currently attempting to confirm these figures using other sources.

11. See definition 3 of 'history' in Johnson's Dictionary.
12. See the explanation of 'method' as 'rhetoric' in Bacon, p. 96, note 81.