
Introduction

The Poetics of Vacancy

For one poor moment soothe the sense of pain,
And teach a breaking heart to throb no more?
And you, Aruna!—in the vale below,
As to the sea your limpid waves you bear
Can you one kind Lethean cup bestow,
To drink a long oblivion to my care? (5.7–12)

—Charlotte Smith, “To the South Downs,” *Elegiac Sonnets*

So shall this glowing, palpitating soul,
Welcome returning Reason’s placid beam,
While o’er my breast the waves Lethean roll,
To calm rebellious Fancy’s fev’rish dream;
Then shall my Lyre disdain love’s dread control,
And loftier passions, prompt the loftier theme! (43.9–14)

—Mary Robinson, “Her Reflections on the Leucadian
Rock before She Perishes,” *Sappho and Phaon*

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind’s imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

—Percy Shelley, “Mont Blanc”

At frequent intervals within their respective sonnet sequences, the speakers of Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* and Mary Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon* enunciate a desire for respite, a vacancy from their feverish passions. The problem, they tell us, is that the heart breaks and throbs with too absorbing a sense of pain, or the soul palpitates with Sappho’s “fev’rish

dream” of Phaon. As the body stirs with sensations, the mind is filled with the heated cares of adult life and love until it distains their “dread control.” The speakers both turn to aqueous bodies of water—the Arun River or what Sappho elsewhere calls the “Leucadian deep”—as a balm, a treatment that will, they hope, calm the intense physiological activity of the body and the mind’s frenzied speculations. Quite gone are the celebrations of Hannah More’s “Sensibility: An Epistle to the Hon. Mrs. Boscawen” (1782), which lauds the infiltration of body, spirit, and mind by nervous vibrations and thrilling sensations: “where bright imagination, reigns, / The fine-wrought spirit feels acuter pains / [. . .] / There is feeling diffus’d thro’ ev’ry part, / Thrills in each nerve, and lives in all the heart” (66–67, 71–72). Despite panegyrics like this one, poets of sensibility occasionally voiced “A Prayer for Indifference” (1750s), as Frances Greville did, asking for the fairy balm of a “juice of western flower” that could temporarily mute sensibility’s physical sensations and surging emotion (15). Yet Smith and Robinson turn away from either sensibility’s full-bodied incandescence or its dearth. Their limpid, rolling waves instead offer other movements, where intense bodily activity and mental fracas give way to alternative motions that move beyond, and differently from, them. Smith and Robinson answer the sensitive and excessive physiological response that characterizes the discourse of sensibility in the eighteenth century, not with stillness, silence, or emptiness, but with a set of figures I am calling vacancy, that stem the tide of sensibility and open a space for another sort of release—and another sort of affect altogether—into the motion of the waves.

As the speakers drink or jump into the rolling water, something altogether more complicated than simply a resistance to sensibility occurs in the encounter between poet, figure, and landscape. When Sappho and Smith’s speakers call specifically upon Lethe, the river of forgetting, as sensibility’s cure, they crucially enunciate a figurative dimension to the waves’ soothing movements. Both poets summon the mythical river of Hades that, if drunk or waded into, could purge them of woeful memories, dreams, and “sense of pain,” those sensations that create memory and consciousness in the first place. As Smith converts the Arun River into the cup of Lethe, she creates a figure for imbibing something that eviscerates the possibility of sensory stimulation, a figure for internalization without content. What the speaker asks to drink, but cannot, is not a thing at all, but Lethe, a classical figure and mythological substance: she consumes a figure. Here Smith transforms the entire bourgeois discourse of taste, so often aimed at sensitive consumers of feeling and luxury goods, into an aporia, a figure for impossible consumption. The mythical cup is hollowed

out of the tasteful draught of sensibility. In its place, Smith uncovers a figure for taking in the nonexistent balm, an ineffable, abstract motion of absorption and intermixture. In a sonnet considered to express the height of sensibility, Smith composes another, more complex poetic movement: the vacancy that turns from sensibility's famed responsiveness and its reliance on embodied sensation to unfold an alternative, figurative motion. What she arrives at is a form of affect that is not bounded by bodily sensation but rather by abstract, incorporeal movements of figuration; she jettisons sensibility for a much more complex form of affect that is released from the feeling, gendered body and that is created through the interminable motions of language.

Robinson authors the reverse strategy from Smith's when Sappho is swallowed by the Lethean waves that will eradicate her "fev'rish dream." The Sapphic poet finally takes a plunge not into death but an affective flow where "loftier passions" might roll as the waves do, calmly, without stimulating sensibility's fever. The nonhuman waves, heedless of human romances, overturn Sappho's tragic, womanly love. The poet limns death without resting in its quietude or its absence of sensation, and neither is she reborn as a new subject. In her dissolution as a floating breast amid the Lethean tide, she is released from the confines of the imprisoning body and the frenzied mind, however enlightened. The figure of the Lethean waves shapes repetitive but variable motions, which do not weigh down the sensing, lovelorn woman. Vacancy thus sketches something akin to affects that move beyond the sensate subject and human body, circulating among the Lethean waves and the artist formerly known as Sappho. Such new figural movements provide loftier passions and loftier themes.

Smith's impossible consumption and Robinson's radical immersion emerge from sensibility's concerns with responsiveness, relation, and moral reform, but they trope alternatives to its excessive entrapment within the sensing, gendered body. *Romantic Vacancy* examines how Romantic poets—Smith, Robinson, Felicia Hemans, and Maria Jane Jewsbury as well as William Wordsworth and Percy Shelley—contemplate the philosophical problems with sensibility, and in the process discover the figures of vacancy that move beyond them. These writers find other forms of what we have come to call affect and speculative thinking that revise what we know about the history of sensibility (and its feminization). They, even more importantly, reconceive our current understandings of affect and its relation to language, as well as language's ability to create new ontologies that move beyond the gender and human/nonhuman binaries seemingly endemic to Romantic-era poetry, especially women's verse. So attached

have we become to the lens of sensibility that we have been overwhelmingly unmindful of women poets' play with other forms of knowledge and being, which intently speak to the philosophical songs of the Romantic age. Women poets have generally been left behind in studies of philosophical thinking, and we have not yet perused the wide expanse of their serious, speculative poetics, nor for that matter the speculative thinking male writers undertook in response to sensibility.¹

In grappling with sensibility's translation of empiricism, as a theory about how sensation could be converted into ideas and emotions, poets of vacancy carve out other epistemologies that rewrote some of the period's core philosophies. It is the contention of this book that Romantic poets found other figures to answer the problems with sensibility as they interpreted them: first, its reliance on empirical sensation that trapped them in bodies too sensitive for finer thought, and second, the ideological narratives dictating how bodily responses gender subjects' bodies and minds. Poets of vacancy found a basis for knowledge not in bodily sensation but within the figural movements of language that create conduits among different kinds of things—waves, human bodies, Lethan cups. Responding to eighteenth-century and Enlightenment narratives about affect's genesis in the sensing and emoting human body, Romantic vacancy forms an alternative to sensibility's bodily activity, an affect that is both transcorporeal and incorporeal, material and figural. This propensity to move or be moved within and across bodies, and often before conscious awareness or articulation of these motions, occurs, seemingly impossibly in Romantic poems, through a series of figurative responses and movements.

As they devise a new figurative technique to address sensibility's philosophical problems with sensation, poets of vacancy do not simply turn to figures of absence to void sensation. They do not ask, as Ann Yearsley does in "To Indifference" (1787), for a temporary pause to the constantly sensing, emoting subjectivity: "INDIFFERENCE come! thy torpid juices shed / On my keen sense: plunge deep my wounded heart, / In thickest apathy" (1–3). Smith's plea for "oblivion" may sound as though she longs for this absence of sensation, however temporary, but she in fact calls for the eradication of the entire system of sensation that traps women within bodies that feel too much or not enough. Part of a pattern of excess and lack, the trope of indifference recapitulates the pursuit of mere escape from sensibility, a feeling of insensibility, without any real change to its terms. This dualism echoes the experience of negation, escape, or emptiness—what we might term a precursor to vacancy found in John Keats's plea in "Ode on Indolence" (1819), to "melt, and leave my sense / Unhaunted quite of

all but—nothingness” (19–20) or William Wordsworth’s remark in *The Prelude* on the “vacancy between me and those days” (2.29). This problem of sensation’s boom or bust is exactly the question raised at the end of “Mont Blanc”; however, Shelley, similar to other writers in this study, suggests that what might seem like emptiness or oblivion instead uncovers a “universe of things” flowing, at times, imperceptibly. Permeating through mind and river valley, vacancy’s ubiquitous movements offer another figurative movement that circumvents sensation’s surges and its lyrical excesses that became so feminized within the discourse of sensibility.

Although sensibility was a sociopolitical movement that ideally offered men and women a tool to equalize gender in the public sphere, it did so by privileging women’s responsiveness to sensory experiences and emotion—defined as conscious, labeled, and reified experiences of bodily pain and pleasure or bodily states such as anger, sadness, and happiness. Because women were understood to be sensitive to their environments, more liable to sensation, they were seen as naturally more beholden to their physical and emotional experiences—what Robinson condemns as “love’s dread control.” Many poets claimed sensibility as the source of women’s feminine poetic prowess: Helen Maria Williams famously exclaims in “To Sensibility,” “In Sensibility’s lov’d praise / I tune my trembling reed” (1–2), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” ends with a damsel with a dulcimer whose “sympathy and song” is called upon to revive his own song. Yet such a “fev’rish dream” of women’s poetics resists even “reason’s placid beam.” The ideological illusion of sensibility’s control over women makes it appear natural that Sappho would submit herself to Phaon. Understood as women’s purview, such an epistemology binds women to gendered knowledge that could be gleaned only from their too sensitive bodies or from emotional experiences circumscribed by domesticity, social relations, and biographies. Yet women are not the only ones who contemplate vacancy; for Shelley and Wordsworth, bodily sensation too easily genders feeling and thought, infecting everyone with its potential to inscribe inequality. Gender, therefore, as it continually informs both the concepts and realities of sensation and emotion in the period, becomes an important epistemological crux to question reigning ways of knowing and being. Vacancy employs this gender inequality as a staging ground not to eradicate difference but to figure bodies, emotions, and genders as continuously shifting. By breaking free from gendered bodies and poetics, vacancy opens a non-binary landscape of transgressive figurative motion.

Vacancy’s figuration occurs, and recurs, through figurative turns, repetitions, and paradoxes—such as catachresis, repetition with difference,

and synesthesia. When Smith's impossible consumption critiques sensory modes of consumption and taste, she does not leave us in a no-man's land of oblivion, but rather asks how it might be to move in aporia's circular style, within paradoxes that repeatedly revolve through logical and material impossibility. Vacancy, therefore, enacts topological movement not merely to eradicate the surety of our sensing bodies and to undermine gender ideology, but to refigure our relation to reality. Without leaving matter behind, vacancy offers poetry's rich attention to linguistic movement as a potent form of material fluidity and figural change.

As I have briefly touched on, affect can be a way to describe vacancy's figural turns as it tracks a set of movements amid the body, the world, and language. As I discuss below, this book intervenes into current accounts of affect—often understood as inchoate, not quite sensed physiological activity—to intertwine bodily change, the motions of nonhuman material world, *and* language's figurative turns. In doing so, these poets irrevocably alter how we understand Romantic-era affect, and how necessary Romanticism is to theorize affect more globally. The Lethean rolls transform Robinson's frenzied passion into the figures of waves that repeat with differences the motion of water over the breast, the ocean's own contingent tides, and a refiguring of the mythical river that forgets old passion for new tropes. Both Smith's Lethean waves and Robinson's Leucadian ones shape figures that are at once linguistic and material; they pose affect as a material motion that occurs through language's turns, repetitions, and frissons. While affect is usually understood as material if not physiological and thus occurring before or beyond language, vacancy uniquely combines language, speculation, materiality, and affect in novel ways. Vacancy enlarges the notion of affect as the movements and rests of human sensation, or even, as Brian Massumi following Spinoza glosses, as the capacity for bodies to affect and be affected by other bodies. It more broadly encompasses those movements of the world and of language, becoming more widely corporeal and eventually incorporeal.² When gesturing toward the motions of the nonhuman world, I am especially thinking of Jane Bennett's notion of "impersonal affect," as a materiality and responsiveness shared among groups of humans and things in relation. For Romantic writers, this version of affect includes language as relation, movement, and material. Vacancy initiates a new figurative methodology to track—and construct—material movements outside and through discrete bodies and subjects. In its most radical form vacancy is posthuman—shared among mind, body, figure, and world, beyond the circumference of a self-conscious, consolidated subjectivity.

This book, in effect, intertwines Romantic deconstruction's attention to tropology with notions of dynamic affect developed by affect theory and new materialism. Read this way, the poetics of vacancy rewrites the history of sensibility and the gendering of writing even as it challenges accounts of linguistic impossibility, absence, and contingency written through the Romanticism so imbricated with high theory. Romanticism becomes once again differently capable of reconstituting the figural's ability to create revolutionary ontologies. This book therefore attempts to speak to—and ideally intertwine—two overlapping audiences—those interested in the figural play of gender especially in women's writing and those who study Romanticism's theories about language, knowledge, and being. What have seemed to be deconstructive problems with language, history, materiality, and subjectivity turn out to be even larger problems about finding forms of movement, like affect, that are not generated by the sensing, gendered body but rather created by the playful turns of language itself.³ Poets of vacancy entangle gender and speculative thought at the heart of Romanticism, as their poems become central to the most interesting debates about how to theorize human language and the material world. By disrupting the solidly empirical, they look askance at linear histories based on clearly gendered subjects, and instead figure newly affective literary histories.

Women's Poetry, Romanticism, and the Ideology of Empirical Feeling

The immense swath of scholarship on sensibility has already duly established how a reform movement that employed the virtues of emotion to chasten male manners and their dominance in the public sphere fell prey to gender ideology. Assumptions that women had more sensitive nerves reinforced sexed and gendered dichotomies. While many writers of the period polemicized the problems of sensibility, poets in particular theorized a dilemma arising from its inheritance from empiricist philosophy that grounded its inquiry on bodily sensation. When the emphasis on sensation drew attention to knowledge drawn from women's bodies, it could likewise underwrite gender difference. We have largely ignored this gender critique of empiricism, mainly because we have inadvertently replicated the period's own gendered readings of women's writing—our assumptions that women writers in the Romantic period were, in fact, more interested in purveying the songs of sensibility and bodily response, as suffering women, mothers of the nation, or troubled denizens of the growing

British empire. For this reason, we have been slow to see women poets' speculative thinking about a variety of the period's philosophical options and bugbears, as well as their thorough contemplation about other ways of thinking and being.

Even at its inception, the embodied and gendered assumptions of the cult of high feeling established sensibility as an increasingly difficult discourse through which to forge any sense of imaginative or intellectual equity—and not simply because its conventions were already overused by the 1790s. Conceived through medical men such as George Cheyne, personal physician to Samuel Richardson, sensibility hails from early scientific understandings of the circulatory and nervous systems as well as empiricism's foundational emphasis on sensory perception as the substrate of all knowledge.⁴ G. S. Rousseau delineates how the revolution in physiology—nerves, fibers, and animal spirits—limited the seat of the soul in the brain and subsequently enabled Locke to base his theories on the processing of sensation and reflection (166). Stephen Ahern recapitulates what G. J. Barker-Benfield labels “a new psychoperceptual paradigm,” highlighting further the extent to which sensations and nerves defined character and intellectual capacity. He writes, “consciousness becomes an effect of the circulation of volatile animal spirits through the hollow fibers of the nerves, and as a consequence the intensity of a character's emotional and intellectual apperception is reduced to naturalist description of the body as a reactive mechanism” (Ahern 16). As John Mullan writes, eighteenth-century novelists “found it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the figure of the virtuous hero or, more especially the heroine, and that of the sadly distracted and isolated hysteric” (16). Empirical embodiment subjected feeling to the body's mechanical reactions—or supposedly naturalistic descriptions of them.

Though it developed into a discursive, figural practice, sensibility evolved from embodied, gendered epistemologies in which supposedly feminine, and so more sensitive, bodies would become more susceptible to experience apprehended through sense organs, nerves, and blood. Rousseau states quite baldly: “the scientific doctrine of sensibility was soon called upon to legitimate class distinction and gender difference. . . . Sensibility was in this approximate sense a type of eighteenth-century sociobiology” (231).⁵ While sensibility granted women both a privileged position from which to profess their feelings and also a subject for their poetry, it also made them seem liable to all the hysterical weaknesses that their supposedly fragile frames might contract. In other words, sensibility both entitled women and made them prey to a gender ideology built on the back of

embodiment and difference. As Barker-Benfield delineates in her history of sensibility, the empirical self was thought to be created through processing new sensations, therefore,

it is not surprising that the fundamental issue for gender would be that of consciousness, of “mind” inevitably associated with feeling. . . . The revolutionary possibilities for women’s consciousness were countered in the same terms, women’s subordination naturalized on the basis of their finer sensibility. (3)

Even sympathy, defined by the imagination of another’s feelings, nevertheless naturalized women’s sensitive bodies. Those with greater sensibility, Adam Smith alleged, were more likely to carry the burden of sympathy.⁶ Enlightenment ideas of feeling tended to reiterate this particular strain of embodied, empirical epistemology that put women at risk of becoming both trapped within excessively sensitive bodies too readily gendered, and then corseted within the roles of the suffering mother, consuming wife, and domestic drudge.

Although novels of sentiment, poetry of feeling, and philosophical tracts often employed sensibility as a tool of social reform and although, as Miranda Burgess has argued, sensibility gave voice to the ideas and language of mobility, from its inception the discourse had troubling implications for the ideological construction of women as primarily feeling subjects. While, as Chris Jones attests in *Radical Sensibility*, sensibility pledged to refine men’s sympathies, manners, and attitudes toward women in the public sphere, it did so by valorizing women’s privileged status as arbiters of feeling. As its role in the Revolutionary debates attests, it promised another avenue for women to assert their social worth.⁷ Yet, as Claudia Johnson famously argues, it was notoriously coopted by conservatives such as Edmund Burke, who theatrically depicted how vital were the true feelings of real women to England’s social and political inheritance. Women were left without a clear gender site except the hyperfeminine, at least as far as public discourse went.⁸

While historians have been quick to see sensibility as a medical discourse solidifying bodily difference, they have not entirely reckoned with its other foundational discourse, empiricism. When dealing with women or with “the passions,” as Hume termed them, certain empiricist lines of thinking had the potential to become shaped by gender. Although for some time scholars opposed sensibility to Enlightenment rationality, more recent discussions of the cult of high feeling have revealed it to be an integral part of

British and Scottish empiricist thought that threads throughout Romanticism as well.⁹ Thinkers such as John Locke, David Hume, and Edmund Burke begin with observations about experiential sensation that might lead either to the sensible passions or to rational associations. Romantic poetry has long been understood as growing from—and out of—an empiricist inheritance, when writers work through its ideas about sensation, the categorization of ideas, cause and effect, memory, identity, association, and the passions. Yet when we consider the gendered implications of sensation, Romantic poetry presents some of the most interesting thought experiments with the boons and banes of empiricism. Robinson is quick to remind us, for example, of Hume's dictum that reason holds no quarter against impassioned emotion and of his idea that speculation's dependence on habits of mind can lead to detrimental prejudice. While, as I hope to show, women writers reject passion and sensation, neither do they easily turn to rationality, whether empiricist notions of perfectibility, association, and common sense, or to those forms of reason based on *a priori* concepts, which supplied alternatives to empiricism. Smith and Hemans most intently consider idealism's problems for women, as the rights discourse and legal rules that partook of *a priori* reasoning like Kant's so often excluded them from becoming equal minds and bodies under the crown.

Jerome McGann long ago established sensibility as an extension of empiricism, "a reflection of its thought, and an effort to express that thought in direct ways" (134). Although he lauds sensibility's tendency to erase the difference between matter and spirit, he does not consider how such a seemingly androgynous fusion, as it churned through the eighteenth-century ideological machine, could create problems for women. Although Locke did not gender sensation, because its source of knowledge comes from bodily reaction, it could easily link knowledge to a sexed body, increasingly seen as a second sex.¹⁰ Shelley, in "Alastor" for example, first describes the veiled maiden's effusive song as "woven sounds of streams and breezes," a pervasive and pointedly not gendered metaphor taken from sensibility's troping of vibrations (155). All too soon, however, both the maid and the poet are "stifled in tremulous sobs," and she is "subdued by its own pathos" (164, 165), gendered by the sensation that ties her to her quivering body.

Moreover, when sensation is reflected upon—or in Hume's terminology, when impressions become ideas through habit and custom—sensation again becomes liable to social and political influences that could easily gender acts of perception and reflection. Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon* is a case in point of a poem that begins with a diversity of sensation in the

poem entitled “Bower of Pleasure” where “rival flow’rets bloom” (3.12), which all too soon turn into the gendered passion of romance that creates a “fever’d dream” of Phaon (43.12). Such an ideological illusion translates all sensation into women’s monomaniacal love. In an attempt to avoid such translation, Felicia Hemans is quick to exclaim that the Widow of Crescentius, paralyzed by her husband’s murder, “is no sculptured form of woe” (266). Hemans’s line anticipates the ideology her readers would bring to the text, the assumption that the widow’s frenzied body and mind would leave her paralyzed by overwhelming emotion. As a figure of both liminal thought and gender when she cross-dresses later in the poem, the widow, Hemans tells readers, should not be easily read as a figure for excessive sensibility.

Poets of vacancy certainly build on these empirical formulations of mental and physical ways of processing self and world. Smith laments sensation’s overwhelming tax on her sense of self, and her longing for “oblivion” replays empiricism’s inherent skepticism about our ability to know the external world or to compose a consistent identity. Robinson, Hemans, and Maria Jane Jewsbury cite empirical figures for sensory voids such as Locke’s “dark room,” sleep, forgetting, and the loss of consciousness, while Shelley works through, among other things, David Hartley’s notions of vibration. Their figures of vacancy, however, complicate these ideas in the attempt to vitiate empiricism’s tendency to understand the passive mind as subject to overwhelming sensation or to the emptiness of oblivion. Instead, they favor proactive movements of language and the material world. The poetic act of making tropes is a kind of constructive, agential movement, a poetic impulse that speaks not simply to the idea of Romantic genius but to a joint posthuman force created by the machinations of language and by its materiality in concert with that of the world and the poet. For this reason, vacancy seeks other forms of mental and bodily movement outside empirical sensation and the subject’s gendered sways.

Our neglect of such figures arises from the nature of some twentieth-century feminist efforts to recover Romantic-era women’s writing, which, in the attempt to historicize women’s verse, replicated the view of women poets as irrevocably embodied beings whose sensitivities dominated their thoughts, feelings, and writing. Many recovery projects used sensibility, sentiment, and sympathy to characterize the appraisal of their verse in ways that have inadvertently but injuriously overfeminized women’s poetics.¹¹ Today, even after nearly forty years of scholarship on women’s writers, overviews of Romanticism still persist in this narrow vision of women’s poetry. As Michael Ferber writes in *The Cambridge Introduction*

to *British Romantic Poetry*, “Many if not all of the women poets of the Romantic period seem better described as poets of Sensibility than as Romantics, though there is room for debate” (6).¹² Michael O’Neill summarizes a similar received history of women poets: “A major reason for the neglect of Romantic women poets in the twentieth century may be attributed to a radical shift of sensibility in the arts toward a more elitist, Modernist aesthetic. A female sensibility which centered on extended professions of grief became over time associated with over-indulgence in unearned emotion” (561).¹³ If an antagonism to undue emotion characterized Modernist canon-makers, then the natural association of women’s writing with sensibility has, even in that poetry’s recent resurrection, become a Romantic ideology all its own.

Current critical understandings of women’s poetry, from both theorists and new historicists, have replicated and validated this Romantic gender ideology when they assume Romantic women poets to be empirical beings writing about embodied sentiment. The context of sensibility has become the default aesthetic and philosophical subtext for many women poets, so inextricably bound have text and context become for women’s poetry, which has, in turn, narrowed and skewed our historical and theoretical perspective of Romanticism. Although McGann once argued that we could not understand the culture of sensibility as women’s aesthetic achievement because of our tendency to “pre-read” it through a Modernist lens (4), we are now guilty of the other extreme—prereading it under the guise of sensibility and sentiment. Even now, women poets are habitually excluded as if by a theoretical glass ceiling from vital arenas of Romantic criticism—namely, Romantic thinking about the nature of thought, feeling, and being.¹⁴

The unfortunate legacy of Anne K. Mellor’s seminal distinction between masculine and feminine Romanticisms—even if built as a spectrum and not a binary—has bequeathed the construction of women writers as separate but equal to Romanticism, at the very least when it engages in speculative, philosophical thinking and poetics. Although more than two decades have passed since *Romanticism and Gender* (1992) was published, too many Romantics still assume women writers to be interested more in the concerns of domesticity and the social subject than “masculine” Romanticism’s attention to philosophy and language as the main source of revolutionary political and ideological critique.¹⁵ Recent work on sensibility tends to replicate Mellor’s divisions when it seeks to sketch a separate female tradition through sentiment, such as Claire Knowles’s *Sensibility and the Female Poetic Tradition*, or to valorize sensibility’s power to import

sexuality and feminine feeling into public discourse, such as Christopher Nagle's *Sexuality and the Culture of Sensibility in the British Romantic Era*. Kari Lokke, Stephen Behrendt, Diego Saglia, and Jason Rudy have each taken the opposite tack of tracing how women adopt a masculine sublime or the transcendent in Charlotte Smith and Felicia Hemans's poems, most often as a dialectical, spiritual critique of the vicissitudes of suffering that they cannot fully escape. There are certainly some agitations of affect beyond binary gender in McGann's pioneering work on the culture of sensibility, for example, when he suggestively offers sensibility as an aesthetics that blends affect and epistemology—"how language as affective thought functions" (6), a constellation Adela Pinch deepens in her seminal work on Romantic-era affect. Yet with the notable exception of studies on millenarian or religious poetry, we have not been able to imagine that Romantic-era women might have conceived of a place and a language for themselves well beyond a supposedly ineluctable empirical standpoint and its historically gendered context.¹⁶ Readers of Romantic women's poetry would do well to return to Hélène Cixous's famous statements about history in "The Laugh of Medusa": the future of our interpretations of women's writing must no longer be determined by the past (857).

While vacancy may have arisen from the problems of excessive sensation and feeling, poets eventually produce an affect that is qualitatively different from empiricism's tendency to dwell on states like indifference or oblivion. Sensibility, like empiricism itself, was certainly a discourse riddled from the start not only with self-critique but also with its antithesis—insensibility, moments of indifference, lack of feeling, or the loss of consciousness. Yet the varieties of empirical escapes from feeling, thinking, or consciousness still very much depend on sensation or its periodic absence, rather than poetry's figural movements, which form the basis of vacancy's epistemology. There have been a variety of attempts to account for these negative responses and critiques to sensibility, and it seems helpful to rehearse them here, to differentiate them from vacancy.

According to Ann Jessie van Sant, women were seen to be most plagued by the physical and emotional excesses of sensibility. Consequently, as Patricia Spacks suggests, eighteenth-century women novelists mount "a critique [of the discourse] occurring at the very moment of the convention's dominance" (506). They depicted a dark side of sensibility, illustrating how responsiveness easily turned into ambivalence, sternness, and ferocity. Women writers established their own critique well before male writers such as Samuel Coleridge and William Gifford protested its feminization and Della Cruscan prostitution of poetry. Sensibility sustains a second vein

of critique when it establishes a dialectical relation between feeling and anhedonia, as much as it purveys both sincere emotions and empty, artificial performances of feeling. As McGann declares, “Nothing is more characteristic of the poetry of sensibility than its dialectical relation to ‘Indifference’” (50). Ildiko Csengei likewise describes those states of syncope, the fainting or hysterical fits so endemic to eighteenth-century novels, where female characters lose consciousness in protest against feeling too much without the agency to alter their circumstances. Christopher Stokes’s notion of “ascesis” suggests that Smith intimates a troubled sense of self that involves dissolution and lack. He develops what Sarah Zimmerman calls “solitude that may lead to a loss of the self,” drawing us toward fissures within already lost or incomplete subjectivities (Stokes 144).

These moments of dark excess, indifference, syncope, and asceticism approach sensibility from the point of view of the stable Enlightenment subject disrupted or temporarily lost. The flickering nature of sensations and impressions as well as blockages to their perception that undermine our ready ability to know our own emotions or those of others lead Nancy Yousef to claim, “Skepticism and sympathy are thus bound in a strangely complementary structure in eighteenth-century philosophical discourse” (7). Locke’s epistemology certainly gestures toward those interruptions to consciousness, such as sleep, or the mind too slow or confused that it produces obscurity in its ideas— notions that Smith’s “unthinking hind” and Robinson’s depictions of idiocy certainly work from before attempting to think beyond. Antagonistic to Enlightenment forms of sensation and embodied selfhood, vacancy cannot be absorbed by terms such as psychoanalytic silences, swoons, repressions, abjections, and other subjective voids.¹⁷ Vacancy seeks to replace sensibility (or the sentimental) with more than a negative form of affect, interiority, or subjectivity, as it ultimately proposes a tropic disintegration of the feeling, self-reflexive Romantic subject.¹⁸ Accounts of lack and loss tend, once again, to return us to an analysis of subjectivity and feeling, even when feeling becomes a form of thought.¹⁹

Because the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel is generally concerned with forms of subjectivity, vacancy often doesn’t quite manifest in prose. Instead, during moments of difficulty, such as Fanny Price’s refuge in the lonely den of Portsmouth, the sensible subject pauses only to resume once again. The novel all too often constructed women as “consuming subjects,” to use Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace’s coinage, with bodies sensitive to all the sensations new commodity markets and shopping venues might furnish. To look beyond subjectivities real or performed, women

poets needed to find a linguistic substrate that would not lead directly to bourgeois interiority, feeling bodies, and narratives of the gendered self.²⁰

It would be easy to mistake the sublime, perhaps the most famous term identifying the cessation of feeling and thought, for vacancy. However, the Romantic sublime is only an initial and less successful technique to suspend Enlightenment thought. Vacancy does not so much marshal mental cessation as it waylays the sensation that could lead to empirical thought and emotion in order to plot other linguistic movements that might form an alternative basis of knowledge. The sublime, however, ultimately consolidates the Enlightenment subject, either through extreme sensory experience that enlivens the speaker or through rationality that can comprehend, if not apprehend, pleasurable moments of stunning infinitude. At first glance, vacancy might seem to be a version of Burke's aesthetic astonishment, which suspends all motions of the mind. According to Burke the sublime is "productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (36). Similarly, Alan Richardson's recent formulation of the neural sublime as the brain's "breakdown" and a "conceptual overload" eventually signals the mind's limits, acquiescing to the "acceptance of rather than wishful freedom from human material embodiment" (29, 31, 35). Feminist accounts of the sublime similarly tend to emphasize the sublime's experiential, ecstatic qualities, as Barbara Claire Freeman glosses it: "neither a rhetorical mode nor an aesthetic category but a domain of experience that resists categorization . . . that is excessive and unrepresentable" (2). By contrast, vacancy distances women poets from embodied experience—representable or not—as well as Burke's emotional surge. Even the accounts of the neural sublime and Romantic brain science similarly revolve around the constitution of the cognitive subject, although their investigation of cognitive activity could lead to other accounts of affect. Vacancy does not amount to "the strongest emotion" (Burke 36) within the human spectrum, nor does it embrace embodied sensation or material embodiment.

Neither does it duplicate Kantian versions of cognitive difficulty, which arguably invigorate the triumphal narrative of the rational human subject in the Romantic period. The third *Critique's* sublime recuperates man's understanding and his subjectivity when he dynamically judges himself intellectually superior to a sublime object. As Sianne Ngai notes, the sublime plots the triumph of tranquility over fear, one emotion over another, and in doing so "frees" the subject for other mental activities and thus finds an ally in reason" (269). Kant's critique of the transcendental subject can likewise account for defining vacancy in opposition to melancholy, as the period often invoked a hermetic, secretive form of rational contemplation.²¹

Poets actively elicit figures of sensory cessation as a pointed critique of the gendered body rather than being subject to it, and more importantly, these figures do not end in insensibility or an eternal dark night of skepticism but rather find other models to live on.

Accounts of sensibility that have, finally, broached something like affect do not theorize its potential to travel through both figuration and matter—nor in ways that pointedly exceed binary gender, as vacancy does. McGann's book underlines how sensibility "typically develops through the ethics of loss and suffering" (46), a loss or absence that leads not to abundant recompense but to what he only barely sketches as an epistemology of affect, energy, and passion. James Noggle similarly describes insensibility "not a state of affective lack but a positive process in which affects are added to, built up, or altered without itself being felt," a process that is pointedly "[n]ot theorized" by writers who depict it (125, 126). Both McGann and Noggle lead us to the precipice of affects not yet felt as emotions or feelings, what Brian Massumi calls the "intensity" of embodied movements and rests that occur before language or conscious perception. An important counterclaim comes from Rei Terada, who argues that even a lack of feeling, such as Kant's *apatheia*, dons its own mental sensation, felt through emotions, those physiological states captured through language. Vacancy synthesizes and alters both these views. It pointedly theorizes an *avant garde*, iterative turning of figuration, where rather than sensibility's periodic blackouts, writers find ways to enact and figure new material affects traveling both through and outside the brain, mind, subject, and body.

From Vacant Sensibility to Vacancy's Tropological Affects

Many Romantic poets used the word *vacancy*, often to explore minds and spaces merely emptied of sensation, emotion, and thought, or only to hint at a more nuanced version of the trope that more radically attempts to figure other affective movements. Romanticists have repeatedly been drawn to these moments of absence and the negative, without entirely recognizing their complex linguistic, ontological, and affective work. For instance, Mary Favret, following Kevis Goodman's reading of William Cowper's *The Task*, notes the mental vacuity that occurs in wartime during domestic doldrums.²² These moments are then filled with conflicting hopes and fears, a welter of information, emotion, and sensation, however inchoate. Wordsworth adjusts this flatter notion of vacancy in "Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew Tree" to intimate what soft movements might come to enter into such

emptiness: “Yet, if the wind breathe soft, the curling waves, / That break against the shore, shall lull thy mind / By one soft impulse saved from vacancy” (5–7). For Wordsworth, the imagination always lurks to fill in these gaps with memories bearing sensation, as the daffodils do in “I wandered lonely as a cloud”: “In vacant or in pensive mood / They flash upon that inward eye” (20–21). This thread, from Cowper to Wordsworth, although it evokes vacancy, still largely tracks sensation, and sensation’s formulation of memory, whether in fullness or absence. Keats perhaps gets closer to vacancy with the mental voids in the odes, writing of “a drowsy numbness pains / My sense” that acts as an opiate in “Ode to a Nightingale” (1–2). Yet he repeatedly resolves, unlike Smith and Robinson, “No, no, go not to Lethe” (1). In Keats, the loss of consciousness parlays a different type of subjectivity, whether Psyche, Melancholy, or Hyperion’s newly embodied states. Lord Byron and Mary Shelley’s notions of “peopling vacancy” in *Manfred* and *Frankenstein* likewise recapitulate a feeling subject (however nihilistic) after such affective lack ensues, however doubled or heteroglossic their Byronic personae.

Percy Shelley begins to articulate vacancy’s topological movements when he pointedly uses the term in his late essay “On Life” (1819) to consider acts of linguistic creation that follow from necessary linguistic destruction:²³

Philosophy, impatient as it may be to build, has much work yet remaining as pioneer for the overgrowth of ages. It makes one step toward this object, however; it destroys error, and the roots of error. It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation. (507)

Words and signs, hardened into cliché by their habituated use, must be razed by Philosophy, the pioneer. This impersonal allegory of a metaphorical ground clearing is initiated jointly by the nonhuman force of Philosophy and by human minds that apprehend and create it. Shelley only intimates here how language play might alter the materiality of subject and world in ways that become more complex within his poems.

Poets explicitly do not develop “vacancy” as an official aesthetic term, like the ones that Enlightenment thought sought to codify rigorously. Because the Enlightenment and empiricist philosophers so often atomized nature and philosophical language through distinctive definitions (e.g., the sublime and the beautiful, passion and reason), vacancy operates by

lurking below the surface of discursive argumentation in disruptive tropes. Mary Robinson's "Caves of Ice," as a repetitive mimicry of Coleridge's phrase from "Kubla Khan" in her poem "To the Poet Coleridge," broaches this issue of labeling. Her paradise disrupts the causality of influence or terminology, and she constructs vacancy as something other than an empiricist void, vacuum, or empty space through which merely new sensations might flow:

With thee I'll trace the circling bounds
Of thy NEW PARADISE extended;
And listen to the varying sounds
Of winds, and foamy torrents blended. (5–9)

The poet's tracing of new spaces uncovers a form of movement that is only momentarily captured in a series of bodily boundaries or extensions—winds, torrents, and later fountains, including the poet herself in motion. In this stanza, which becomes a refrain throughout the poem, the poet is ever about to trace those motions that only temporarily solidify into bounds and sounds. The movements proliferate through fluctuations of speed, duration, and rhythm, and become so varied as to be both actual, aural sounds and virtual, nonsonic movements. Robinson repeatedly stacks paratactic descriptions of the scene: amplified by the refrain "Mid forest gloom, shall slow meander," the moving matter speeds up as "foamy torrents," then becomes completely imaginary as "The mystic fountain, bubbling, panting" (10, 11). She accumulates quickly revolving tonal patterns within the line and through a supply of couplets with different, irregular rhymes. Together, they initiate the swift movements that cannot quite be captured by the language of sensation. The rapid shift from one description to the next eradicates any one reference or physical source (stream, fountain, wind, poetic voice) but evinces an underlying motion actuated by the series of metonymies and slant sounds. To "trace Imagination's boundless space" is to intimate a poetic space housing a plenitude of affect's movements always on the make beyond perception or even bodily movement (26). The poem evokes the "spirit divine" as something much more than the voice of Coleridge or Robinson, or the gendered poetics that his damsel or her nymph might reify, or even the echolalia of nature. Robinson's repetitions with difference trace affect's movements, real and virtual, within an ever-moving, ungendered "boundless space."

Vacancy uses language's peculiar figural movements to approach affect that occurs beyond or before bodily sensation. It therefore departs from

Romanticists who are still fairly dependent on two pieces of the empirical model when they describe affect: the reliance on somatic sensation, however amorphous, and the reliance on the dichotomy between sensation and reflection. In *War at a Distance*, Favret briefly interprets Hume's definition of passion as preceding perception, noting its similarity to Massumi's notion of affect. In this moment, she argues that affect "comprises a welter of unsorted feelings and sensations, often contradictory and contending" (80). Distinct from Hume's passion and Favret's affect, vacancy moves beyond physical sensation and arousal, which must be perceptible in some sense, however "unsorted." All of the poets of vacancy seek to reimagine sensation or move past it without veering directly into Kantian transcendence based on *a priori* concepts. As with Robinson's varying sounds that move between poet and scene as well as within the "mystical foundation," such affect, at times, figures a materiality moving imperceptibly among and between bodies; at others, it includes an incorporeal materiality—an abstraction of all the moves bodies, matter, or—for Romantic poets—figures might make.

Locke and Hume's empirical process, where knowledge is gained by turning sensations into reflections, has tended to influence Romanticist understandings of the similarly dialogic relation between affect and emotion. As sensation would be perceived and categorized into reflection, so affect's physiological movement is often thought to be translated into emotion, or perceptions of physiological states, then articulated through semantic categories such as anger, sadness, and happiness. *Romanticism and the Emotions* has most recently attempted to adjudicate this tension between affect and emotion.²⁴ Bringing these strands together, the introduction to the volume argues that "[e]motion bears the force of tropes and is in fact . . . constituted by them. Emotion tropes experience, just as language turns, directs, alters emotion, a transfer that is transferential" (6). *Romanticism and the Emotions* negotiates the feedback loop between precognitive affect and emotion's linguistic expression by positing a transfer between the physiological or material force of affect and the linguistic expression of emotion (7). These dialogic processes retain traces of empiricism's movement from sensation to reflection, through a language of translation or transfer that retains a separation between materiality and figuration. Even Yousef, who describes her own aesthetic approach to affect as "a dynamic interplay that alternately defines and dissolves the conceptual boundaries between feeling and knowing," retains an attention to psychological and emotional structures, such as interest and withdrawal, that reify relations between human subjects, however intersubjective (17). Both studies emphasize language as the realm of emotion.

Romantic vacancy, by contrast, is concerned not with emotion so much as affect, those physiological, material, and figural movements through and beyond a variety of human and nonhuman bodies, including language, that arrive before semantic expression or sensation itself. Current theories of affect, such as Brian Massumi's "intensity," Jane Bennett's "impersonal affect" in *Vibrant Matter*, and the traveling rhythms, vibrations, hormones, and chemical matter in Teresa Brennan's *Transmission of Affect*, have helped to shape how I see Romantic-era affect as moving in the world regardless of human sensation and through multiple kinds of matter. Yet, unlike these theorists who are largely interested in the material world and view affect as occurring before language's translations, Romantic poets figure affect—and not emotion—as arising through language. Vacancy finds affective movements in aporia, refrains, synesthesia, caesura, and repetitive tropic substitution that evince linguistic movement without solidifying into emotions such as love, fear, or even the sensory perception of agitation. This study aims to open up the relationship between affect and language, not as a series of transfers but as one in the same movement—the affect that resides in language's figural play and its dynamic material motions.

Vacancy's mechanics of language, what Paul de Man would call language's automaticity and its materiality, evokes language's affects and asks us to reconsider these two in tandem with much more precision and granularity than de Man's notoriously difficult and nebulous notion of materiality. If some Romanticists regularly read Shelley's final lines of "Mont Blanc" as hinging on the de Manian, deconstructive idea of linguistic impossibility that makes inaccessible the real universe of things that flow through the mind, vacancy's tropic turning at once empties our usual perceptions of things and makes a space for the affects of both the mountain's ecology and the mind. As I develop below, vacancy takes up the nascent posthumanism and materiality inherent in de Man, better describing it as affect that occurs within both the nonhuman aspects of language as well as the sinuous, real materialities of the world that transgress bodies, things, and figures. Figures of vacancy turn from the material-figurative, gendered, and human-posthuman binaries inherent to both deconstruction and new materialism to imagine a mutating form of affect that is at once the trace, the entanglement, and the movement of all of these.

One of the most important consequences of such materiality occurs when poets of vacancy move beyond and underneath gender categories, as they are created through both the sensing body and the reflecting mind. Vacancy is akin to affect without binary gender, or aside from gender tied to the binary sexed body, in women and men writers. Although most