

Thomas Pfau

"Beyond the Suburbs of the Mind":
The Political and Aesthetic
Disciplining of the Romantic Body

He disposes the world in categories, thus:
The peopled and the unpeopled. In both, he is
Alone. But in the peopled world, there is,
Besides the people, his knowledge of them. In
The unpeopled, there is his knowledge of himself.
Which is more desperate in the moments when
The will demands that what he thinks be true?
—Wallace Stevens, "Esthétique du Mal"

The formulation of a *problem* is merely the theoretical expression of the conditions which allow a *solution* already produced outside the process of knowledge because imposed by extra-theoretical instances and exigencies (by religious, ethical, political, or other "interests") to recognize itself in an artificial problem manufactured to serve it both as a theoretical mirror and as a practical justification.

—Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*

The Romantic sublime, a historically unique form of affect, is traditionally approached by literary criticism and aesthetics in the context of Wordsworth's poetry as apocalyptic self-consciousness. Two critical approaches in particular, psychoanalysis and historicism, lend themselves to inquiry into the specific ideologi-

cal motivations encrypted in Romanticism's aesthetic fascination with apocalyptic or sublime modes of self-experience.¹ Overall, the period's representations of the sublime as the symbolic effects of a more expansive historical causality—like the unconscious inscrutable except in its consistent operations of displacement—indicate a functional and dynamic relation between Romantic representations of an inward, apocalyptic consciousness-of-self and the larger social and cultural fabric whose antagonisms compromise such a self. Crystallizing the experience of modernity as that of countless antagonisms intrinsic to the logic of an emergent bourgeois culture, the sublime's appearance (and ideological efficacy) inheres in its symbolic encryption of economic, aesthetic, and sexual anxiety in a blank-verse narrative of markedly imagistic, often epic and painterly symbolic, and (in our century) exhorted by the New Criticism's faith in the autonomy of the aesthetic, generations of readers have come to embrace the dreamlike lucidity and formal concision of "high" Romantic poetry as the very essence of "literariness," even as paradigmatic of cultural value in general.

At the same time that the instability of bourgeois affect was being transposed into the sublime reflexivity of a figural, "poetic" self, such as we encounter in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, it was also assuming the disciplinary character of bourgeois professionalism, as in the institutions of political economy and the law.² Such rhetorically and disciplinarily disparate works as Malthus's expanded 1803 *Essay on the Principle of Population* and book 7 of *The Prelude*, therefore, manifest a similarly defensive ideological motivation and internally conflicted rhetoric. In fact, a homology or a functional continuum connects the figural psyche outlined in Wordsworth's narrative poetry, the formal-aesthetic contract authorizing his autobiographical project as socially valid, and the ostensibly literal preoccupation with the health of the nation's body politic displayed by the rising discipline of political economy. Each of these idioms promised a compelling redefinition not only of the individual's economic and cultural status but, at a macro-historical level, of England's economic and cultural prosperity. Both the *Essay* and *The Prelude* evince a largely preconscious, self-focused economic and cultural anxiety displaced into an "objective" and properly "disciplined" concern with the perceived erosion of national strength and imminent apocalypse. Subsequently, and precisely because it could now

be thought and symbolized as a rational-humanist concern for the middle-class community as Nation, such anxiety was once again refocused as a determinate threat posed by the individual body's capacity to reproduce and undermine the nation's economic and cultural health.

The political economy of the body and Romanticism's contiguous imagings of material and spiritual apocalypse thus converged in an unconscious motivational current at the historical moment of High Romanticism, one mediated by the idioms of both political economy and aesthetics under the auspices of an alternately sentimental or apocalyptic "feeling." Romantic sentimentalism and apocalypticism can thus be understood as inherently social effects of the period's (unconscious) mode of cultural production. Characterized, above all, by its strong allegiance to disciplinary and formalized standards of representation, this mode of production sought to shelter its productive subjects from the impending yet unbearable "knowledge" of their contingent, not to say antagonistic, historical situation. Both Malthus and Wordsworth found solutions to their constructions of political, economic, and aesthetic conflict in imaginative and elegiac, yet also intensely antiurban and gynophobic, writing. Romanticism's discursive and poetic fecundity, it turns out, constitutes a symbolic attempt to contain a specter of rampant material reproduction and rhetorical mimesis. Both Malthus's moralistic response to the economic perils of precipitous and illicit reproduction and the Wordsworthian ideal of a parthogenesis by which his authentic poetic spirits would materialize into authentic poets and their legitimate, middle-class reading audiences were equally aimed at solidifying the as-yet tenuous economic and cultural constitution of the English middle class by affording its members new disciplinary idioms for describing their purportedly noncontradictory "sensitivity."³

During the last decade of the eighteenth century, with population beginning to be perceived as a threat to national fortunes rather than as their premise, sexual reproduction came to be viewed as the root cause of a supposedly impending social conflagration: the sublime specter of urban class conflict. The discourses excoriating uncontrolled reproduction and its consequences—the spread of economic misery and moral depravity—ought to be read as a parallel to the intensifying disciplinary stringency of late-eighteenth-century aesthetics, with its multiple strictures against the pervasive dissemination of "popular fiction," the "feminization" of lit-

erature, and the indiscriminate sensationalism of theatrical mimesis. Up-dating the quintessentially British fear of the "mob" inculcated during the days of Hogarth, Wilkes, and Lord Gordon, the French Revolution compounded these simultaneously material and cultural anxieties. Fueled by the extraordinary events in France since 1789, these apprehensions blossomed, often overnight, into outright paranoia during the next half dozen years as suspicions proliferated about the "true" objectives of constitutional "theorists," the plots of the Illuminati, and "corresponding societies" that actually or allegedly advocated radical democratization across class and gender lines.⁴ There was also fear that the government might imperil the nation's economic fortunes through imprudent financial innovations such as the introduction of paper currency, a change perceived as undermining the old, local economies through the insidious force of a wholly abstract paradigm of capital and its interdependent markets.

What we confront here is Romanticism's fear of its own, intrinsic "modernity," a unique psychopolitical blend of the phobias and self-floating that were endemic to the "middling" classes, trapped as they were between the stable but recalcitrant political and cultural order of the past and a future indefinitely mortgaged to the fluctuations of economic, political, and cultural values. Nowhere and never at home, this group more than any other proved vigilant against any vulgarization or dispersal of the elements of its own economic and cultural prosperity. Above all, this demographically and conceptually polymorphous middle class was characterized by the fact that its capacity for producing itself in *economic* terms continued to outpace its capacity for effectively "knowing" or "representing" itself. Hence, by the late 1790s, this group appeared to crave an increasingly conservative or, rather, "defensive" aesthetics of self-representation to counteract precisely what J. G. A. Pocock has described as the continued displacement of its economic identity into the indefinite future by urban, money-based speculation.⁵ Thus in the wake of the Two Bills of December 1795, it was with the increasing approval of the middling classes that the more radical metropolitan societies of radicals and artisans, and even some of the more moderate associations pleading the cause of social reform, were portrayed as breeding atheistic speculation and inundating an unsuspecting nation with seditious pamphlets and vulgar literature.⁶ Within the maturing, if still uneasily conservative, political unconscious of what would eventually be the British middle class, the dialectical Other of radicalism (alternately

secular and millenarian in its infection) thus became the protagonist in a drama of political, moral, and sexual terror whose climactic scene staged British self-consciousness as the terrifying recognition of its own vulgarized national "culture."

More specifically, much of the "defensive" and anxious thrust of the antiurban, antifeminine, and antitheatrical aesthetics that underwrites the creed of "High Romantic Argument" converges in the "object construct" of reproductivity, which aligns the early Romantic discourses on the economic issue of populism and on the aesthetic one concerning mimesis (in its larger sense of semiotic reproduction). In scrutinizing them jointly, we gain access to the cultural unconscious of an emergent middle class that habitually displaces economic terms in aesthetic categories, *and vice versa*, thereby ensuring that the very operation of such a displacement will never erupt into consciousness. Like that class, the unconscious "represents nothing, but it produces. It means nothing, but it works."⁷ To hazard an explicitly Hegelian figure of thought, we could say that, like any "object" of psycho/somatic anxiety, the specter of unrestricted reproductivity must have been unconsciously constructed in order to be empirically "discovered" and, in time, brought into disciplinary "knowledge." The contradictions inherent to the evolution of modern capitalism reached an intensity toward the end of the eighteenth century, obviously long in the making, that precipitated the emergence of the disciplines of political economy and modern aesthetics, together with a new *langue* or discourse of moral and aesthetic policing and self-surveillance of which Malthus's *Essay* and Wordsworth's *Prelude* constitute particularly distinctive *paroles*.

The Romantic fascination with social and aesthetic dissolution and apocalypse may thus be integrated within a larger historical analysis of ideology, a project necessarily focused on the socioeconomic dimension of the psychological and aesthetic symbolization (and of its disciplinary policing) by which a culture seeks to achieve an ultimately impossible coherence. Taken in this "fundamental dimension," Slavoj Žižek notes, ideology "is not simply a 'false consciousness' . . . [but] a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence."⁸ Hence, insofar as we can ever hope to gain critical access to this ideology, we must locate within the economic and aesthetic discourse of the late eighteenth century a pattern of contradictions that entitles us to reconstruct their purported "object" of knowledge and practice

as a "symptom" at the moment when the disciplined "virtue" of the economist's and aesthetian's discourse constitutes "the only point that gives consistency to the subject," thereby revealing the deceptive symptom as "the only way we—the subjects—'avoid madness.'"⁹ An inquiry into that unique psycho/aesthetic phenomenon of the Romantic representation of apocalypse must therefore seek to elucidate the broader, extra-aesthetic, cultural or ideological "content" of such symbolizations. This effort cannot allow itself to be "disciplined" in the sense of simply administering the formal rites of textual and strictly "literary" exegesis.

In a necessarily provisional way, then, suppose we locate this ideological "symptom"—that is, the "object" that fixated and motivated the cogitate discursive productivity of the economic and the moral/aesthetic unconscious at the turn of the nineteenth century—in the *figure of feminine reproductiveity*? The apocalyptic volatility of this object mirrors its intrinsically metaphorical, displaced status over and against the anxious collective psyche of precisely those agents ostensibly concerned with coming to "know" it. "The production process of knowledge, and hence that of its 'object,' as distinct from the real object of knowledge which it is its precise aim to appropriate in the 'mode' of knowledge, has a determinate reality," Althusser notes. "This determinate reality is what defines the roles and functions of the 'thought' of particular individuals, who can only think the 'problems' already actually or potentially posed."¹⁰ Malthus and Wordsworth, for example, "think" and image this "object" as a nefariously proliferating body politic and body of writing, begotten by and spawning, in turn, the most depraved literary, moral, and economic fantasies and speculations. In stark contrast to Wordsworth's postulate of referential and spiritual stability as the prerequisites for all genuine poetry, such writing hints at the presence of a mass audience whose undeserved, illusory presumption of aesthetic and political empowerment is apprehended as coinciding with the erosion and, potentially, the very destruction of "Britishness" itself. Subjective symbolization, in both Malthus and Wordsworth, thus evolves in the "distinct but interlocking figures of the dissociated sensibility and the divided or alienated society."¹¹

First published anonymously in 1798 and then reissued in a vastly expanded and heavily revised edition in 1803, Malthus's *Essay on the Principle*

of *Population* proved startling to its first readers because of the seemingly irrefutable, syllogistic rigor of its argument, based on two premises: (1) "that food is necessary to the existence of man," and (2) "that the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state."¹² Malthus concludes that "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man. Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio."¹³ In short, too many individual bodies reproduce, thereby deflating the value of labor, inflating the price of provisions, and, as the ultimate consequence, eroding the differential stability and viability of the social organism, with its various economic classes.¹⁴ Overpopulation, in Malthus's schematic view, is thus countered by "positive checks," a catalogue of "misery" that might well have served as an alternative topical arrangement of Wordsworth's 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*: starvation, sickness, infanticide, infant mortality, economic decline, abandonment of women, war, and so on. To preempt the onslaught of such multifaceted "misery," society is likely to insist on "preventive checks," especially delayed marriage and the practice of celibacy by other groups and individuals in addition to the clergy. As Catherine Gallagher puts it, "By insisting that healthy bodies will eventually generate a feeble social organism, Malthus departed from nearly all his contemporaries."¹⁵

In acknowledging that the return on labor was bound up with the cost and maintenance of laboring bodies and that these factors were determined by the semi-independent logic of the market, Malthus reversed, in uncompromising terms, one of the central premises of nationhood, according to which national strength was to be equated with populousness. Thus he redefined "poverty as a definite condition of individuals and groups as opposed to a conception of the Poor."¹⁶ The arguably surprising proto-Marxist character of Malthus's analyses has to do with his recognition that the psychology of poverty is conditioned by a market whose fluctuating assessments of the value of labor and the cost of provisions have themselves been dictated by the extent to which the population's reproductive instincts supplied that market with bodies either capable of labor or in need of maintenance by the state.¹⁷ Indeed, as both Malthus and Wordsworth were to realize, the body once conceptualized as a synecdoche for the providential organization of all material Nature is never quite one's own property. In fact, at the very moment when an embodied consciousness

turns reflexive, it recognizes its body not as personal asset but as social debt. What once seemed the most literal, inalienable, and "natural" locus of subjective self-awareness, the body, turns out to be under the dominion of neither its literal parents nor its figural owner, the mind, but instead to be increasingly subject to the paternalistic strictures of political economy, itself the most influential disciplinary and institutional progeny of eighteenth-century moral philosophy. At the nodal intersection of diverse though inseparable functions—the commodification of labor, the capacity for reproduction, and the potential for a consciousness-of-culture (and of pleasure)—the body simultaneously constitutes the pivotal figure in a cultural/economic order as well as the emergent cause of that culture's continued instability and potential apocalypse.

Malthus's *Essay*, then, dismantled the traditional postulate of an eternal alliance between the reproductive drive of the individual and the economic prosperity of the nation. With it went the overarching premise of a "natural" or providential alliance of economic and moral imagination, as well as the axiomatic belief in the individual's ability to govern the body's reproductive instincts. "Politicians, observing that states which were powerful and prosperous were almost invariably populous," Malthus notes, "have mistaken an effect for a cause, and concluded that their population was the cause of their prosperity, instead of their prosperity being the cause of their population."¹⁸ Palpably inspired by the scarcities of 1795–96 and 1800, Malthus's *Essay* confounds the traditional equation of national strength with prosperity by means of a decidedly bleak portrait of a nation where "perpetual anxiety about corporeal support" has severely strained the resources of middle-class consciousness, effectively preventing that class from realizing its potential to "expatiate[] in the field of thought".

This beautiful fabric of the imagination vanishes at the severe touch of truth. The spirit of benevolence, cherished and invigorated by plenty, is repressed by the chilling breath of want. The hateful passions that had vanished reappear. The mighty law of self-preservation expels all the softer and more exalted emotions of the soul. The temptations to evil are too strong for human nature to resist. The corn is plucked before it is ripe, or secreted in unfair proportions; and the whole black train of vices that belong to falsehood are immediately generated. Provisions no longer flow in support of a mother with a large

family. The children are sickly from insufficient food. The rosy flush of health gives place to the pallid cheek and hollow eye of misery. Benevolence, yet lingering in a few bosoms, makes some faint expiring struggles, till at length self-love resumes his wonted empire and lords it triumphant over the world.¹⁹

Any reevaluation of the discourse on the poor and on population, according to Malthus, implicates us in the much larger question of whether to remedy the condition of poverty through acts of state "maintenance" (e.g., Poor Laws) or, alternatively, to leave the regulation of the body's reproductive instincts to the vagaries of the market forces that determine the costs of labor and provisions, and, ultimately, the tax base for "reversionary payments," or annuities to the nonproductive elderly (this being the concern which had first alerted Richard Price to the issue of population). The gloom that pervades the passage above, however, suggests that the literal, material, and physiological implications of either response to the population/reproduction question bear vitally upon an implicit, secondary, and preponderantly moral order. It is precisely this increasingly unstable and contradictory relation between the syllogistic, factual, literal discourse of political economy and the hortatory, ideational, figurative language of morality that allows us to read Malthus's 1803 *Essay* as anticipating Wordsworth's similarly hyperbolic and elegiac depiction of London. For as the logical contradictions exposed by Malthus's socioeconomic analysis begin to outpace and confound his moral/aesthetic projection of the Real, an increasingly "literary" mode of representation is activated. A series of concise antitheses—"rosy flush of health" versus "pallid cheek," "faint . . . struggles" of "benevolence" versus "self-love"—are deployed to counteract the unresolvable contradictions produced by the *Essay*'s own syllogistic argumentation. This passage shows Malthus not merely refuting the "Romance" of poor-relief efforts by means of a "literal" and inexorable calculus that sums up to a total "Crisis of Population,"²⁰ for in tracing all affect to a contingent material base that withers at the barest contact with the inscrutable movements of capital, Malthus's "literary" rhetoric also reveals all economic knowledge to be just as unreal as those naive schemes for poor relief by which society tries to stave off its contingent effects. Hence the same ideology that shapes Malthus's and Wordsworth's rhetoric of social description also drives the disciplinary policing of descriptive

form by the institutions of political economy and aesthetics. Consequently, the aesthetic cannot be viewed either as just one "ideology" among diverse others or as a calculated evasion of a historical problematic that we might still expect to bring to an objective, critical formulation. More sensibly, we can conceive of the aesthetic (with Žižek) as "a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself: an 'illusion' which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel. . . . The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel."²¹

As with any other syllogism, the ideological dimension of Malthus's argument inheres in its premises rather than its conclusion; among those premises, his equation of nature with instinct and his identification of sexual instincts as "laws of nature" figure prominently. Thus he speaks of "the constant tendency of all animated life to increase" and of "the dictate of nature" as quasi-Newtonian principles:

It accords with the most liberal spirit of philosophy to believe that no stone can fall, or plant rise, without the immediate agency of divine power. But we know from experience that these operations of what we call nature have been conducted almost according to fixed laws. And since the world began, the causes of population and depopulation have been probably as constant as any of the laws of nature with which we are acquainted.²²

Contrary to Condorcet's and Godwin's thesis that social and economic distress is the effect of institutional failure or abuse and that our natural spontaneity (the "master-spring of benevolence") will eventually remedy all material distress, Malthus views society as altogether determined by a fundamentally arational instinct: "Violence, oppression, falsehood, misery, every hateful vice and every form of distress. . . seem to have been generated by the most imperious circumstances, by laws inherent in the nature of man, and absolutely independent of all human regulations." This biological determinism is compounded by a historical one, since not only do we enter the world as bodies determined by an inexorable, instinctual agency, but we also find that world to be historically entailed by the "two fundamental laws of society, the security of property and the institution of marriage. . . . Those who were born after the division of property would

come into a world already possessed. If their parents, from having too large a family, were unable to give them sufficient for their support, what could they do in a world where everything was appropriated?"²³

What the sexual and/or reproductive instincts of the body threaten, therefore, is not so much starvation as poverty; hence Malthus turns out to be ultimately far less concerned with the analysis of a problem than with the justification of a solution (cf. the epigraph from Althusser). The body does not so much imperil the totality of a nation's culture as it threatens the currently prevailing cultural order, the disposition of which accords with the hierarchy of economic classes or ranks. The apocalypse conjured up by Malthus's vision of unchecked reproduction inheres in the prospective redistribution of national wealth (e.g., taxation for the Poor Laws) rather than the specter of global starvation: "Poverty, and not absolute famine, is the specific effect of the principle of population."²⁴ With characteristic hyperbole, Malthus paints the picture of a body politic consumed with the task of supporting an ever-increasing number of paupers; insofar as these measures erode the spirit of industry and self-preservation, they reveal the body politic itself as diseased, "our laws [being] in opposition to the laws of nature." The rapid rise in the rates for poor relief thus "presents us . . . with the prospect of a monstrous deformity in society," a steadily worsening condition that reveals how "society itself, its body politic is the unnatural character, for framing laws that thus counteract the laws of nature."²⁵ The individual, reproductive body thus functions as a catalyst in an economic system that Malthus, his rudimentary grasp of the market-driven logic of supply and demand notwithstanding, still regards as a zero-sum game of material commodities, while maintaining a conspicuous reserve toward urban, open-ended financial speculation and the circulation of capital (stocks) or tokens of debt (bonds).²⁶ Contrasting the "neatness, cleanliness, and comfort" of rural laborers with the "filth, rags, and poverty" of workers in urban manufacture, Malthus identifies himself with the anturban stance that pervades Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* and sections of *The Prelude*.²⁷ In Malthus's zero-sum game of material resources, at least "while the present proportion between population and food continues, a part of society must necessarily find it difficult to support a family, and this difficulty will naturally fall on the least fortunate members."²⁸ Proceeding alternately by implication and peremptory declaration, Malthus's *Essay* consigns the poor to a state of inevitable, indeed irremediable, "misery."

In fact, Malthus is predominantly concerned here with the middle class, a steadily growing and ceaselessly productive segment of the population that has tended to react strongly (then as now) to any increase in taxation, especially to fund the administration of poor relief. Such taxation is hyperbolically depicted as the economic martyrdom of the middle class. Malthus also invokes the more traditional iconography of poverty-induced rioting and mob rule by the lower classes, precisely the kind of unrest that could induce the state to suspend those civil liberties on which the middle class understands its own prosperity to depend. Once again evoking the specter of scarcity, Malthus remarks that "the greatest sufferers . . . were undoubtedly the classes immediately above the poor; and these were in the most marked manner depressed by the excessive bounties given to those below them." Elsewhere in the *Essay*, he elaborates this image of middle-class melancholy induced by an economic adversity for which the body politic's unhealthy inclination toward poor relief is ultimately to blame:

In the higher and middle classes of society it is a melancholy and distressing sight to observe, not unfrequently, a man of noble and ingenious disposition, once feelingly alive to a sense of honour and integrity, gradually sinking under the pressure of circumstances, making his excuses at first with a blush of conscious shame, afraid of seeing the faces of his friends from whom he may have borrowed money, reduced to the meanest tricks and subterfuges to delay or avoid the payment of his just debts; till ultimately grown familiar with falsehood, and at enmity with the world, he loses all the grace and dignity of man.²⁹

Initially, Malthus here casts the specter of middle-class economic decline as a gradual erosion of the aesthetics of conduct. Thus, at the beginning of his decline, the man of "honour and integrity" can still produce "a blush of conscious shame" that momentarily overcomes the pallor of melancholy; as his condition deteriorates, however, his once-authentic sensibility yields to dissimulation, deceit, and a pathetic fear of detection. Woven into this familiar, time-lapse image sequence of economic and aesthetic decline is a slightly more oblique trajectory of progressive emasculation. Virtuous, economically productive, and legitimately proactive man has become a "nothing," the negative sum of his losses. We can now see him only in the alienating form of rhetorical deceit, dissimulation, falsehood: in short, as

the bearer of generic "fictions" and the agent of theatrical make-believe who will shun no device to convince us of the veracity of his spectacular disasters. Like the blind beggar in book 7 of *The Prelude*, "who, with upright face,"

Stood propp'd against a Wall; upon his Chest
Wearing a paper, to explain
The story of the Man, and who he was,

this figure unsettles the middle-class beholder less with his professed (and possibly true) narrative of economic decline than with his infringement of aesthetic and social propriety.³⁰ Malthus's oblique aesthetic strictures thus serve his overall project of policing economic conduct by scrutinizing *cultural appearances*, which here involves educating the poor to recognize the desperate need for proper surveillance of their bodies and instincts. Itself "the growth of a redundant population goaded by resentment," the mob, according to Malthus, remains "totally ignorant of the quarter from which [its sufferings] originate." Convinced of the need to rein in the bodies of the poor rather than indulging in wild-eyed theories of political reform, Malthus lambastes (very much in the spirit of the day) the "dissatisfied man of talents" and the "turbulent and disoriented men in the middle classes of society" for inciting civil unrest among the poor, who, if left to themselves, "are by no means inclined to be visionary."³¹

In an effort to counteract the dismal and inexorable consequences that appeared to follow from the syllogistic reasoning with which he had opened his 1798 *Essay*, Malthus decided to elaborate his conception of "moral restraint" in the vastly expanded 1803 edition. As a strategy to head off the blunt materiality of "positive checks" (i.e., starvation and disease), to which, once they intervene, "we must submit . . . as an inevitable law of nature," Malthus outlines a delicate calculus that casts the "desire of marriage" as a stimulus to industriousness, even as he insists that "it is clearly the duty of each individual not to marry till he has a prospect of supporting his children." The exhortation to exercise "moral restraint" and defer biological reproduction is effectively legitimated by economic considerations or, as Malthus puts it, "Our obligation to practise [moral restraint] will evidently rest exactly upon the same foundation as our obligation to practise

any of the other virtues, the foundation of utility."²² While his 1806 edition conveys even stronger utilitarian overtones, it is also here that Malthus comes to recognize a fundamental contradiction between his number-based syllogistic thesis and the notion of "moral restraint" designed to head off the apocalyptic results of that calculus. Speaking of "vice"—that is, alternative (heterodox) channels for accommodating the sexual instinct—Malthus finds himself suddenly overtaken by an apparent redundancy in his terminology:

As the general consequence of vice is misery, and as this consequence is the precise reason why an action is termed vicious, it may appear that the term misery alone would be here sufficient, and that it is superfluous to use both. But the rejection of the term vice would introduce a considerable confusion into our language and ideas. We want it particularly to distinguish that class of actions, the general tendency of which is to produce misery, *but which, in their immediate or individual effects, may produce perhaps exactly the contrary.*²³

Malthus's perplexity intrigues, and it merits closer scrutiny: how, we must ask, could moral "vice" produce "perhaps exactly the contrary" of the social misery that, ordinarily, it is believed to cause? Quite inadvertently, it turns out, Malthus has happened upon the central contradiction of the *Essay*, for when his "preventive checks" collide with his second axiom ("the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state")—indispensable for Malthus's syllogistic prediction of an inevitable and imminent crisis of population—such "checks" must result in "vice." As Gallagher stresses, "The vindication of sexual passion is made within the assumption that any practice severing sexual pleasure from reproduction would be classed as vice."²⁴ Even so, Malthus cannot but acknowledge that his proposed (moral) solution of temporary celibacy may be rivaled in terms of efficiency or "utility" by the (material) solution of heterodox, nonreproductive sexual intercourse. Such rivalry appears inevitable once we begin to argue, as Malthus just has, that the ideal of deferred marriage is grounded in social utility and that (at best) it may produce moral effects without being intrinsically "moral" itself. Thus his axioms (food is necessary, and sexual desire is a constant) and their syllogistic extension ("too many bodies reproduce too rapidly"), which together set the parameters for the crisis of population, prove fundamentally incompatible with the

moral arguments designed to head off that crisis. What seems "virtuous" in a mathematical sense appears the very embodiment of "vice" in Malthus's moral universe.

In his continued struggle to realign these mathematical and moral implications, Malthus expanded considerably on his original definition of "vice" in the 1798 *Essay*. Whereas "vice" there had principally stood for prostitution, the term came to cover the whole range of heterodox sexual practices, including sodomy, plus "child-exposure" (i.e., infanticide) and birth control.²⁵ After defining "moral restraint" (in a footnote to the 1806 edition) as "restraint from marriage from prudent motives, with a conduct strictly moral during the period of restraint," Malthus admits that the sexual instinct is not easily curbed:

A promiscuous intercourse to such a degree as to prevent the birth of children, seems to lower in the most marked manner the dignity of human nature. It cannot be without its effect on men, and nothing can be more obvious than its tendency to degrade the female character, and to destroy all its most amiable and distinguishing characteristics. Add to which . . . those unfortunate females with which all great towns abound. . . .

Promiscuous intercourse, unnatural passions, violations of the marriage bed, and improper arts to conceal the consequences of irregular connexions, clearly come under the head of vice.²⁶

As Malthus fills his canvases with broad strokes, imaging the social body as languishing under the onslaught of compromised female delicacy and imperiled male virility, he once again raises the specter that haunts Wordsworth throughout book 7 of *The Prelude*. That is, the reproduction of (literal) bodies is found to imperil the aesthetics of (figural) reproduction, of proper representation, by eroding the inherited—and morally sanctioned—separate roles of men and women, of genuine poetry and derivative spectacles, of authentic "spirit" and fallen consciousness.

While the effects of the principle of population might materially extend to the province of political economy, that discipline could not effectively chart the full impact of the body's nefarious potential without recourse to a set of figural conceptions from the realm of aesthetics and of literature in particular. Given its origination in competing and contradictory moral and economic reasoning, the concept of "vice" in the *Essay* and *The Prelude*