

INTRODUCTION

Interim reports are all I have ever offered ... all, furthermore, I ever expect to offer, or would wish to offer. I try, at any rate, to be a good Romantic

—Morse Peckham.¹

We will be forgotten not just shortly after we die, but as soon as we age to the point in our mortal lives that we cease being marketable.

—Leo Daugherty²

This book has a dual purpose. It is, on the one hand, simply a study of the writings of Morse Peckham (1914–1993), a largely forgotten scholar of Victorian and Romantic literature (among other things). Peckham, whatever else he may have done with his life, wrote a lot. Although much of what he wrote was published in obscure places, and what is widely available seems not to be much read anymore, I find that his work retains an unusual currency and wide applicability. Peckham has a lot to say to us—those of us living and working in the here-and-now—and it is in part my task to show, through an exploration of his many and diverse writings, why and how this is the case.

Which brings me to my second goal: the study of human behavior. Peckham was, in a certain sense, a behaviorist: not a behaviorist in the Watson-Skinner sense but rather in the tradition of American pragmatism. Peckham sought to understand the world—particularly the conceptual world made available to us by language—by observing what people do with it. This book, then, can also be seen as a handbook for understanding from a behavioral standpoint those parts of the human experience that interested Peckham. All art, philosophy, religion, science,

¹ Peckham 1970b: 224

² Leo Daugherty, “22 September 2005,” *Journal of the Third Wolf* (<http://leodaugherty.blogspot.com/>). Daugherty (1939–2015) was a longtime friend and supporter of Peckham.

language, politics, history—all are, fundamentally, kinds of behavior, ways of relating to ourselves, to others, to the world. To best understand a work of art, a text, a theory, a speech, a story, we must first understand it as human behavior, or as the deposit of human behavior. It is behavior—the concreteness of the abstract—to which Peckham instructs us to turn, and to which we will be returning again and again over the course of this book.

A Gloomy Prophet: Why Peckham Now?

Peckham claims to have hesitated in publishing his major work of social theory, *Explanation and Power: The Control of Human Behavior*. This wide-ranging work proposed that humans control—always imperfectly—their own behavior (their relationships to each other and their world) by constructing explanations.³ It is through explanations that humans ascribe value and meaning to their world. A great deal of human energy is expended on constructing, maintaining, and modifying these explanations; since they are human constructs, and not simply given by or discoverable in the world, they are inherently unstable. Ultimately, the stability (or “truth”) of particular explanations within a community, when persuasion fails, can only be (and often is) maintained by the use of force up to the point of dealing out death. As Peckham often pointed out, the only way to truly stabilize an “ideology” (a high-level explanation) is to kill everyone who refuses to submit to it, everyone who holds a competing ideology. History—from the Catholic Inquisitions to the French “Reign of Terror” to the Soviet “Great Purge” to the Chinese “Cultural Revolution” to, more recently, ISIS ... these are but a few extreme cases—shows what a popular method this has been.

³ Or we might say that human reality and human relationships are constituted through the construction of explanations.

Even Peckham had found this a rather too “gloomy and discouraging” view of the human condition. “But then,” he wrote, “it occurred to me that gloomy prophets have very little effect.”⁴ The latter part of this statement was sadly accurate. Peckham made serious contributions to a variety of fields—philosophy of language, cultural history, epistemology—but he, along with the greater portion of his work, seems to have had thus far “very little effect.” Yet, though he can be gloomy indeed, I believe there is still much to be learned from Peckham, much that can help guide our behavior in responding to humanity’s current globally-precarious situation. For arguably this situation can best be seen as one ravaged by a “whirlwind” (as he once, perhaps too mildly, put it) of competing and conflicting meanings, valuations, explanations.

Alas, Morse Peckham does seem to have been largely forgotten. While there is always an element of the arbitrary in the canonization of some thinkers and the neglect of others, Peckham’s disappearance is perhaps not so surprising. A number of antipathetic factors come to mind. To begin with there was his longstanding interdisciplinarity or, as he sometimes preferred, “extradisciplinarity”: his reveling, for example, in dilettantism and his labeling of himself as a “cultural historian,” a label that had no disciplinary standing at the time (see chapter 7). If ever there were a professor of “things in general” it was Peckham.⁵ Ostensibly a professor of English, he wrote as much outside his discipline as within it, spanning the visual arts and music, the history of science and philosophy, political science, and so on. Even if his fellow literary critics might have tolerated his investigations into painting and architecture, few were prepared to follow his forays into semiotics or sociology. On the other hand, few sociologists or semioticians—not to mention philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and others in whose fields he occasionally grazed—were likely to take seriously the pronouncements, however

⁴ Peckham 1979a: xix

⁵ The reference is to Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1836), a favorite of Peckham.

cogent, of a professional Victorianist. He was, it seems, so interdisciplinary as to appear undisciplined.

Then there is the difficulty of his writing. While certain early works—*Beyond the Tragic Vision*, *Man's Rage for Chaos*, *Art and Pornography*⁶—gained something of a cult appeal, the later writings tended to be more alienating. The difficulty arises only in part from the subject matter (see the overview of his writings below), and only occasionally from the mechanics of the writing. There is a more serious difficulty in the presentation, particularly in the essays of the 1970s and after. Many of these essays are unannounced continuations of intellectual struggles treated more comprehensively in his books. More than he probably knew (or more than he was interested in knowing by the later stages of his career), these essays presuppose a great deal of background knowledge about his other writings. To take one stark example, the essay “An Explanation of ‘Realism,’” published in the *Denver Quarterly* in 1978, begins:

“Thinking” about “thought,” that is, the semiotic transformation of semiotic transformation itself, engaged in for the purpose of controlling semiotic transformation, throughout human history has been almost infinitely complex and various, and is ordinarily subsumed by the term “philosophy,” in itself a term of markedly high polysemy.⁷

Faced with this barrage of technical terms, while having expected an exposition on realism, what could the unprepared reader do? However, if the sentence is read in the light of his late-1970s intellectual development, as this is ascertainable from a broad study of his writings, his point becomes perfectly clear. But most scholars who were personally unacquainted with him would have been introduced to his ideas in decontextualized chunks such as the above, delivered at conferences or in journals. Gary Saul Morson, organizer of a 1983 conference at which Peckham spoke, provides an instructive glimpse of how “outsiders” may have reacted to him:

⁶ Peckham 1962a, 1965a, 1969a

⁷ Peckham 1977a: 135

Morse Peckham raises questions that are thoroughly contemporary, but proposes answers that seem, at least at first, largely anachronistic. . . . The conference audience was understandably perplexed by this strange combination of ideas. In short, Peckham's paper is highly idiosyncratic, and its argument cannot be easily assimilated into or readily classified among existing schools of thought. Peckham appears to be addressing, not ongoing debates, but earlier stages in his own original, erratic, and unique intellectual biography.

The framework of assumptions supporting Peckham's paper is at time hidden, and it was only after a probing series of questions and a lengthy set of answers that this framework became apparent.⁸

And then, to add to our list of demerits, there was his vexed and often aloof relationship to the academy and academic norms. Peckham allied himself with none of the major literary movements that proliferated during his time (such as New Criticism or deconstructionism, both of which he enjoyed criticizing).⁹ He rarely published in major journals and only occasionally with major book publishers. He did not edit any journals or serve as head of any professional organizations. He did not actively organize conferences. Although he maintained a small circle of academic acquaintances, he seems not to have belonged to any formal research groups. He was positively dismissive of many of the conventions of scholarly writing. And Peckham had a strong sense of injustice, coupled with a fierce wit. These seemed to grow more potent with age and experience, and were most typically directed at academic institutions, policies, and even fellow academics. His brutal, and brutally funny, tirade against academic corruption and ineptitude, as exemplified by Yale University ("one of the principal operational centers of the academic Mafia") and its collaboration at the time with the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a case in point.¹⁰

⁸ Morson 1986b: 198–99

⁹ Morson goes on to say: "Several literary theorists in the audience tried to cajole Peckham into situating his work among current theoretical schools, but Peckham refused to do so" (1986a: 201). Nevertheless, as may become apparent, his work bears certain resemblances to reader-response and reception theory (see chapter 5).

¹⁰ See Peckham 1975a. In this particular case, it would not have helped that the "Yale School" was probably the most influential group of literary critics at the time, nor that he was speaking in Washington, D.C. while suggesting "burn[ing] the NEH to the ground" (1975a: 33).

In contrast to the great French intellectuals, who sought to “win the game without playing by the rules,”¹¹ Peckham increasingly ignored both the rules and the game. Disgusted by the wasted humanity and resources which he saw as endemic to the modern American university system, and at his own powerlessness to change this system, he retired five years before required.¹² He spent his last years writing books which, I believe, he expected no one to read but a few friends.

For these or for other reasons (who can know?), Peckham has not much been taken seriously.

So why pay attention to him now? Peckham offered a number of useful, elegant, and occasionally trenchant insights into such perennial sources of debate as language, meaning, behavior, interpretation, criticism, and so forth. Many of these insights came as a result of his attempts to understand a singular historical development: Romanticism. Over the course of his researches, Peckham came to realize that something of immense importance happened in nineteenth-century Europe, something that had never happened before in recorded human history. For those of us in the Euroamerican culture area, this “something” continued to have profound consequences in the twentieth century; and it would increasingly have consequences that were thoroughly global. Touched off perhaps most saliently by the failure of the French Revolution, this “something” is what Peckham called “explanatory collapse.” What this meant was that a small, but increasing, number of people came to realize that all explanations, and particularly the high-level explanations we now commonly call “ideologies,” are fictive—or, to put it more starkly if less precisely, false. Since explanations, according to Peckham, are what enable us to control our behavior and ascribe value to ourselves and others, the collapse of

¹¹ This according to one of Michèle Lamont’s informants (Lamont 1987: 605).

¹² Peckham 1980b: 429

explanation was a very serious matter indeed. Those who comprehended this situation, whom we have largely come to call “Romantics,” devised various coping strategies (see chapter 6), but the most important outcome was what Peckham called “alienation”—a kind of thoroughgoing agnosticism or uncertainty in relation to high-level explanations (metaphysics, ideologies). Many Romantics were unable to maintain the wholly alienated condition for very long and reverted to one form of “redemptionism” or another—redemptionism being, for Peckham, subscription to a high-level explanation for the purpose of resolving the tension between subject and object. (Religion provided the most readily-available model for such explanations, hence the Romantic “religion of art.”) Nevertheless, alienation became more widely available as a strategy at this time and, more importantly, became institutionalized and transmitted into the present, most powerfully in scientific behavior. For modern science, in practice if not always in the minds of individual scientists, proceeds according to the precept that no explanation—or “theory”—is sacrosanct, that even the best explanation is only a convenience to be modified in the light of new experience (see chapter 3).

Related to this is the rise of what Peckham calls the “analytic tradition” as opposed to the “synthetic tradition.” The synthetic tradition—“overwhelmingly dominant” until the nineteenth century—is “the effort to establish and stabilize an all-subsuming ideology, one that would settle eternally the ascription of value to individuals, since that ascription is always and necessarily unstable.”¹³ The analytic tradition, with which Peckham identified, has sought to demonstrate the inevitable deficiencies of ideologies. The results of the institutionalization of the analytic tradition have included not only the advances of modern science but a great deal of what we call modernism and postmodernism in art and philosophy.

¹³ Peckham 1977b: 815

A further outcome of explanatory collapse is the recognition that “meaning,” in every sense of the word, is not immanent in anything—it is, as critical discourse has it, a social construct—and hence is also inherently unstable. A poem, a political speech, an advertisement—all can be interpreted in an infinite variety of ways, constrained but never fully determined by conventions we have learned as members of a community. These conventions are themselves stabilized by explanations. For example, in European culture, mountains were once considered ugly—signs of the earth’s disharmony after the fall of man. Later they became objects of wonder, signs of God’s majesty.¹⁴ But neither interpretation can be said to be right or wrong, only appropriate or inappropriate given some set of explanations about the world (man is being punished for past sins, God is generous, etc.).

What is true of meaning is true of value. Ascribing value, or valuing, like ascribing meaning, is a mode of interpretation.¹⁵ It moves in two general directions, flattery and denigration, the determination of which is, like meaning, stabilized by sequences of explanations (what Peckham called “explanatory regresses”) and ultimately by such words as “God” or “nature” or “reason” or “the universe.” We decide a person is “good,” for example, *because* she is “honest,” or *because* she is a “hard worker” (the term “because” is always a clue that we are engaging in explanatory behavior). And these latter terms are stabilized by further explanations, relating perhaps to moral imperatives or capitalist ethics, and these explanations are themselves stabilized by still further explanations, until we reach some termination such as “because God wills it so.” As we value people, so we value everything else, from the food served to us in a restaurant to the government that makes and enforces our laws. And these valuations are again

¹⁴ Peckham 1962a: 64–65. In Peckham’s technical terminology, treated in chapter 1, mountains, or rather statements about mountains (“mountains are ugly,” “mountains are beautiful”), were exemplifications of two different explanations.

¹⁵ Peckham 1989: 212

supported by an intricate and unstable system of explanations, always susceptible to collapse, to be judged as ultimately incoherent, if pressure is applied in the wrong place. Beyond convention and persuasion, the only way to stabilize these systems—to assert their coherency—is naked force; beyond that there is no other option. Authoritarian regimes regularly apply the “ultimate sanctions”—economic deprivation, imprisonment, torture, death—to individuals who they suspect are guilty trying to destabilize (pointing to the incoherency of) the regimes’ own structure of value (see chapter 3). The collapse of explanation experienced by the Romantics, as Peckham construes the situation, helps us to realize just how delicate is the foundation upon which all human interaction rests; and that humans, driven by the synthetic tradition, have tended to be ferocious rather than compassionate in defending (i.e., stabilizing) that foundation. In the end, Peckham suggests, it is not beliefs, ideologies, or religious faiths in themselves that are “the root source of human murderousness” but the ineluctable human activity of valuation (which, however, is channeled by beliefs, ideologies, faiths, etc.).¹⁶

Peckham, the gloomy prophet, did not provide many solutions, for he recognized that any solution is at best only temporarily effective. Solutions derive from explanations and any explanation is always out of date and incomplete—that is, based on a construct of the past, a past which will never repeat. And yet humans cannot interact without mutually-held explanations, without some measure of predictability. Thus human society as we find it is a complex interplay between stabilizing and destabilizing forces, between maintaining predictability and responding to change. Society is a high-wire act in a windstorm, a ballet in an earthquake—a question of maintaining balance in flux. This is a skill we have not yet mastered, and which may not be masterable. Instead of solutions, Peckham left us tools for at least coming to grips with the

¹⁶ Peckham 1989: 220

complexity of the modern world: its whirlwinds of valuation, its meanings only precariously and often violently enforced. Seeing no way out of this condition, he urged compassion for a humanity “sweating to stabilize meanings and sweating just as heavily to innovate meanings when the received meanings no longer serve its interests.”¹⁷ There is much gloom, perhaps, but Peckham’s picture of the Romantic experience, with its “affinity for chaos,” also offers us glimmers of hope. As he wrote at the end of his final book, published posthumously through the efforts of his friends: “Readiness is all.”¹⁸

Who Was Peckham?

This book is a study of Peckham’s writings, not a biography, intellectual or otherwise; nevertheless, since Peckham is a somewhat obscure figure, a biographical sketch may be helpful.¹⁹ Peckham was born in 1914 in Yonkers, New York. His father, Ray Morse Peckham, was a noted optometrist, and his mother, Edith Roake Peckham, had graduated from New Paltz Normal School (later SUNY New Paltz). Peckham seems to have been brought up in a fairly “cultured” household, and he recalled being read Romantic literature, going to concerts, and visiting museums as a child. He later followed his older brother to the University of Rochester, and then, in 1935, was accepted into Princeton’s graduate program in English. His interdisciplinary tendencies were already apparent at this time: He associated with art history students and even seems to have learned a bit from the great art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968). He wrote “an interdisciplinary essay on ‘The Baroque’” which, however, was dismissed by the faculty.²⁰

¹⁷ Peckham 1969a: 139

¹⁸ Peckham 1995: 211

¹⁹ Further biographical details on Peckham can be found in essays by Daugherty (1995) and Matalene (1984a, 1995).

²⁰ Matalene 1995: 214

He took a break from Princeton around 1937 and ended up teaching for a time at the Military College of South Carolina in Charleston. Ready to return to Princeton in 1941, he instead was drafted into the army. During this period he had the opportunity to write the official history of the Air Force's Ninth Bomber Command—a project which exposed him, perhaps for the first time, to practical issues of historical interpretation. At the same time he began writing his dissertation on Philip James Bailey's *Festus*.

Finishing his degree back at Princeton after the war, Peckham began teaching at Rutgers in 1947. Two years later he was given an opportunity at the University of Pennsylvania. At Penn he undertook a range of unique projects, including a variorum text of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*²¹ and the development of a series of humanities courses for business executives, sponsored by The Bell Telephone Company of Pennsylvania.²² He had received tenure in 1952—the importance of this should not be underestimated²³—and in 1961 became the youngest person yet promoted to full professor in Penn's English department.

It is at this point that his own writing began in earnest, and an overview of this is more appropriately saved for its own section. The only remaining points of biographical interest worth noting here are his move to the University of South Carolina in 1967, from which he retired in 1980; and his suffering of a series of strokes beginning in 1990, which eventuated in his death in 1993. We shall have cause to return to some of the events and circumstances of his life over the course of the book, especially in chapter 7.

²¹ Darwin 1959

²² See Peckham 1955 and 1960a.

²³ Specifically, because of this Peckham was likely spared the academic fate of other “radical” scholars like Ernest Becker (1924–1974), Peckham's one-time colleague Philip M. Zeltner (1947–1984), and Rick Roderick (1949–2002)—any number of other examples could be given.

Overview of Peckham's Writings

The scope of Peckham's published work is daunting: a variety of teaching materials, including textbooks and a reader; editions of works by Darwin, Browning, and Swinburne; seven monographs which cover aspects of Romanticism, Victorianism, and aesthetic and social theory; three books collecting most, not all, of his essays on diverse topics; numerous book reviews. The range of topics considered is enough to bedevil the most catholic reader. These include: Romantic and Victorian writers (poets, historians, novelists, philosophers, anthropologists), architects, painters, and composers; theories of Romanticism and Victorianism; twentieth-century American writers; the history of science; semiotics; literary theory; textual editing; pedagogy; pornography; aesthetic theory; modern art; the counterculture; gossip; the university; politics and government; the corporation; religion. To find comparable diversity and quality one would have to turn to writers like John Dewey, Georg Simmel, or Theodor Adorno (and he shares with those writers an acute social conscience). Truly, as he once said of Thomas Carlyle, Peckham "demands heroic readers."²⁴ My relative levels of (dis)comfort with the various areas of his work may become apparent in the course of this book.

As a starting point Peckham's work can roughly be divided into two periods, according to general attitude and direction. The turning point occurs around 1970. Prior to the late 1960s, and excepting his work on Darwin and general education in the late 1950s, he was almost exclusively concerned with aesthetic matters, and particularly matters of art (including literary) history. 1969, however, saw the publication of his first extended treatment of non-artistic behavior, *Art and Pornography* (though the word "art" appears in the title, the topic is rather less prominent in the book than one might expect). By 1971 a decisive break had taken place. Although he was

²⁴ Peckham 1970d: 45

still likely to write on matters of art history and criticism, he was as likely to consider such diverse topics as the university, the corporation, science, and philosophy—in the contemporary moment and in history. Furthermore, in 1971 his theory of semiotics, which had been developing throughout the 1960s, was settled in its fundamental principles. This theory informs virtually everything he wrote after; in some ways the last twenty years of his writing present the testing and refinement of this theory in a variety of different contexts.

Peckham's writing began innocuously enough, with some studies of Philip James Bailey in the mid to late 1940s. His scope had broadened by 1950 with general writings on the nineteenth century and Romanticism, on literature and education. In 1959 he published a variorum text of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, a project instigated by the confusions he perceived, as a Victorianist, in the book's reception.²⁵ His scope again broadened in the 1960s to consider issues of perception, cultural history, aesthetics, and semiotics. His first major work of original writing, *Beyond the Tragic Vision*, a wide-ranging book which situates Romanticism within the history of Western culture, was published in 1962. The popularity of the book prompted its publisher, George Braziller, to commission two others.²⁶ The first of these was a volume in Braziller's *Culture of Mankind* series. Entitled *Romanticism: The Culture of the Nineteenth Century*, the book was a Romanticism reader in an expanded sense, for, in addition to its theoretical introduction, excerpts from literature and philosophy, and explanatory notes, it contained reproductions of paintings and architectural photographs. I am sure that, had cassettes, CDs, or websites been available at the time, he would have pushed for the inclusion of musical examples as well.²⁷

²⁵ Peckham 1959b: 9

²⁶ Matalene 1995: 218

²⁷ His later contributions to the Houghton Mifflin Literature Series of textbooks did in fact include discussions of music (see Elliott et al. 1970 and McFarland et al. 1972a–f).

A third book never materialized to Braziller's satisfaction. Instead, Peckham's provocative *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior, and the Arts* (1965a) was published by Chilton Company, then known for automobile manuals (Braziller would, however, later publish his *Victorian Revolutionaries*). Ironically, the book was probably his most popular and remains, as far as I can tell, his most cited.²⁸ Peckham's interest in perception theory, semiotics, and aesthetics, which was nascent in *Beyond the Tragic Vision*, became full-blown in *Man's Rage for Chaos*. The book presents an evolutionary justification of art, drawing on "New Look" perception theory, Charles Morris's semiotics, and his own rich knowledge of painting, architecture, poetry, and music. He provocatively argued that art is characterized not by "unity" but by discontinuity, and developed his early theory of semiotics and language.²⁹

Following *Man's Rage for Chaos*, Peckham delved more deeply into literary theory, writing a string of essays on literature and criticism from 1966 to 1969. During this time, moreover, he was requested by John H. Gagnon, a sociologist at the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University (the famed "Kinsey Institute"), to consider a project on pornography. With full access to the Institute's materials, he completed *Art and Pornography* in 1969. This was his first work to extensively consider non-aesthetic issues and can be considered a full-fledged work of contemporary social criticism. Aside from dealing with sexual behavior, the book presents a

²⁸ With the help of Philip Rieff (Matalene 1995: 219), it was reprinted by Schocken Books in 1967; and more recently (2003), with the help of Peckham's former student Patrick Wilkinson, by Mazonneuve Press.

²⁹ Although the neglect of Peckham has been, in some sense I suppose, justified, it has also had scholarly costs. James R. Kincaid, in one of the many debates over interpretation to occur in the 1970s—and one, indeed, in which Peckham was himself a participant—proposed that "reading is, or would like to be, coherent, but that the text [or other artwork] presents itself as finally incoherent" (1977: 783); and he hinted at an evolutionary basis for the perceptual resolution of incoherency into coherency. He was apparently unaware that Peckham had presented in fuller and more rigorous form just this argument ten years earlier in *Man's Rage for Chaos* and its related essays. Similarly, a few years later, Steven Paul Scher lamented the lack thus far of useful semiotic investigations into the arts and their interrelationships (1981: 169–71). Despite his citations of a diverse group of theorists, he too seems to have been unaware of the highly pragmatic and still very useful approach developed by Peckham in *Man's Rage for Chaos*. Peckham's work still appears to be largely unknown to recent "interart" theorists.

more general social theory based on the further development of his theory of semiotics, meaning, and language. Gagnon later called it “probably the best theoretical treatment of erotica to date.”³⁰

He had by no means abandoned art and in 1970 published *Victorian Revolutionaries*, a collection of essays on various Victorian-era figures: Tennyson, Carlyle, Browning, the Pre-Raphaelites, Edward Tylor, de Sade, Swinburne. It is also his first extended treatment of his Hegelian notion of “cultural transcendence” (see chapters 2 and 6).

By 1971, as noted above, an important shift had occurred in Peckham’s thinking. External factors no doubt had some role in this. Peckham, for example, could hardly have failed to take note of the social and political tumult of the late 1960s; indeed, *Art and Pornography* had been dedicated to the activist Robert M. Ockene (1934–1969). More personally, in 1970 he was offered the position of head of the University of South Carolina’s English Department. He circulated a proposal of new policies, seen as too radical by enough people who mattered, and the offer was withdrawn (see chapter 7). To judge by the essays that immediately followed,³¹ this event caused Peckham to think deeply about the workings of institutions. At the same time this shift in his thinking can also be seen as a consequence of the “profoundly disturbing”³² theory of meaning he had been developing—or rather, had been gradually backed into—since the mid-1960s. For if, as he argued, meaning is not immanent within words or objects or other kinds of signs, if it is something that humans do (*meaning*), then the stabilization of meaning that is necessary for society to function at all smoothly can only be brought about through social and political control; and these types of control work on individuals through their participation in various social institutions (the family, the corporation, the church, etc.).

³⁰ Gagnon 1990: 230

³¹ Peckham 1971a–d

³² Peckham 1969a: 138

In the early 1970s his friend, the sociologist Robert L. Stewart, who saw the broader implications of Peckham's work, asked Peckham to expand his ideas into "a general theory of human behavior." Since, as Peckham wrote, "like everyone else I usually do what I am told," he undertook the project.³³ It proved difficult, taking six years of work;³⁴ the first draft was completed in 1976, and it was finally published in 1979 as *Explanation and Power: The Control of Human Behavior*. In the intervening years, however, he produced a great variety of essays—very often developing ideas related to *Explanation and Power*—on social theory, education, visual art, history, politics, and, of course, literature.

For the few who know of it, *Explanation and Power* is often said to be Peckham's most difficult book.³⁵ This is undoubtedly true. Matalene also suggests that "it may be someday regarded as his most important work."³⁶ I would go further, asserting that not only is it his most important single publication, but that it is likely the most important unread twentieth-century work of sociocultural theory. It should have had a substantial impact within all those disciplines which were instead infatuated with the French (Bourdieu, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, etc.).³⁷ For Peckham—and I hope the present book will go some way in satisfactorily demonstrating this—often seems to have grasped more precisely what the French theorists and their American followers were up to than they themselves did. To the extent that his project overlapped with theirs, he argued the case more lucidly and saw its implications more clearly.³⁸

³³ Peckham 1979a: xi

³⁴ Matalene 1995: 223

³⁵ Child 1984: 9; Daugherty 1995: xi; Matalene 1995: 223

³⁶ Matalene 1995: 223

³⁷ The main influence of the book seems to have been on Peckham's colleagues at the University of South Carolina at the time (particularly political scientist Peter C. Sederberg and sociologist Robert L. Stewart) and a few other acquaintances. The specific engagement of others with this work is noted elsewhere in the present book, especially chapters 1 and 2 and the conclusion.

³⁸ This is my judgment, of course, as someone steeped in English-language critical and scholarly discourse; how Peckham might be received in France or elsewhere is an open question. It is unsurprising but still worth noting that both Peckham and a number of the French theorists were greatly indebted to Nietzsche. However—to simplify

The difficulty of *Explanation and Power* lies principally in its subject matter. The book seeks no less than to propose and explicate a general semiotic theory of human behavior, working its way through the relationships between verbal and nonverbal signs and between individuals and social institutions. Doing this necessitated the use of a specialized vocabulary, which, however, seems to me far less abstruse than the vocabularies employed by other semioticians and social theorists.

Explanation and Power is not a flawless work, but neither is it Peckham's final word on such matters; he continued to develop and refine its basic ideas over the next decade. This is true even of his final two major works, which returned to the history of Romanticism. In the early 1980s he proposed writing a five-volume study of Romanticism, from its beginnings in the late eighteenth century through the advent of the styles we call "modernist" in the early twentieth century. The first volume was published in 1986 as *The Birth of Romanticism, 1790–1815*. More than a history of Romanticism the book integrates a lifetime of scholarship, in a sense rewriting *Beyond the Tragic Vision* in light of his later intellectual development (as he had also hoped to rewrite *Man's Rage for Chaos*³⁹). Peckham revisits the writers, painters, architects, composers, and philosophers of Romanticism, explaining their efforts with the help of the sociological and semiotic tools he had developed over the 1970s—particularly the notion of "cultural transcendence." However, like *Explanation and Power*, the work was mostly ignored.

Work on the Romanticism project continued, but by 1990 Peckham had tired of it. He pulled together a book-length manuscript of the material he had completed and sent off copies to some friends, including Leo Daugherty. Soon after, Peckham began to suffer the strokes which

matters a bit—while the French poststructuralists or continental philosophers arrived at their critical insights via phenomenology, Peckham arrived as his through Hegel and American pragmatism.

³⁹ Matalene 1995: 220

ended his ability to write. After Peckham's death in 1993, Daugherty, realizing he possessed the only known copy of the manuscript, decided to have it published (it appeared in 1995).⁴⁰ This book, *The Romantic Virtuoso*, takes off where *The Birth of Romanticism* stopped, in 1815, and continues in a similar manner up to 1825. The last section of the book, however, is a "coda," appropriately titled "Meditations on the Consequences of Romanticism." These thirty-four brief "meditations" present his final thoughts on Western cultural history from the 1820s into the twentieth century. They are often moving, dealing as many of them do with late works and legacies. When Peckham writes that the greatness of van Gogh is "the greatness of a man who mastered both the manner of his perception and the manner of transforming that perception into a painting," or that Goya's "search for value . . . led him to the most uncompromising and unconsoling vision of human life,"⁴¹ one is tempted to read in epitaphs for Peckham himself: a man who mastered the manner of his own cognition and the manner of transforming that cognition into writing, who revealed to his readers a most uncompromising vision of human life.

Peckham's Style and His Major Ideas

Some words should be said, then, about Peckham's manner of thinking (or writing, as to a writer these amount to the same thing) and his specific contributions. It is perhaps appropriate to discuss these together as they are very much interrelated. But first to remark on something certain academically-inclined readers might find disconcerting. Peckham's friend and former student H. W. Matalene noted that Peckham was generally unwilling to "take the pains prescribed by the rhetoric of scholarship to defend his ideas in the academic marketplace.

⁴⁰ I, for one, am grateful to Daugherty for this. The book, however, should be approached with some caution as, having not been fully revised by Peckham, the writing in some places is lacking in the sharpness and rigor of his mature work.

⁴¹ Peckham 1995: 202, 170

Though he devoured historical and biographical scholarship, he never took reading notes and seldom cited his sources of fact or argued specifically with rival interpreters.”⁴² He seems to have read, cogitated, and then spilled his thoughts onto paper, without taking the time to note sources or transcribe quotations (there are some exceptions to this). His writing is rich in its erudite allusiveness, but often frustrating for those who wish to understand the genesis of an idea or consult the original of a referred-to passage. This is, however, more than sloppiness, impatience, or personal idiosyncrasy; it derives from, or at least was rationalized in terms of, his theoretical interest in interpretation and his critique of what he sometimes called “intellectual technologies.” I hope I will be forgiven the irony of inserting the following quotation:

[If it is true that] authors are best understood in their own words ... what is the point of writing scholarly books? A quotation proves nothing. It merely exemplifies an interpretation already given or provides the occasion for an interpretation. A terrible amount of scholarly and critical writing, however, uses the quotation to avoid the commitment to an interpretation. Thus the greater frequency of quotations the less the scholar has been willing to engage forthrightly with the hermeneutic problem.⁴³

For Peckham certain academic conventions amounted to a dereliction of scholarly duty. He could be a ruthless critic when he perceived such a dereliction in others,⁴⁴ but he was equally ruthless with himself. I often imagine Peckham with a mini-Socrates on his shoulder who, when Peckham came across or regurgitated a bit of unexamined discourse, would whisper in his ear, “Well, what does that really *mean* anyway?” To take but one example, he begins an essay entitled “Humanism, Politics, and Government in the Nineteenth Century”:

⁴² Matalene 1995: 218

⁴³ Peckham 1974c: 364–65. Cf. Stewart: “Providing documentation in the form of quotations is an exercise in copying. Providing interpretations is an exercise in creating” (1998: 8). Also consider Searle: “As for references: The books I read in my philosophical childhood ... contain few or no references to other authors. I think unconsciously I have come to believe that philosophical quality varies inversely with the number of bibliographical references, and that no great work of philosophy ever contained a lot of footnotes” (1992: xiv).

⁴⁴ His book reviews could be particularly brutal in this regard. John R. Reed’s *Victorian Conventions*, for example, which in Peckham’s view consisted mainly of plot summaries, “is not literary history, nor literary criticism, nor cultural history, nor social history, or anything at all. It is merely humanistic technology, hardly on a cultural level with tinkering with carburetors, which is certainly a socially more useful activity” (1976b: 172).

When I began this paper I thought I knew what I was going to discuss, but the more I thought about it the more puzzled I became. What is a “humanist”? What is “humanism”? I have, like most of us, been used to the terms most of my life, and of course I have been perfectly aware of the vagueness in the ordinary use of the words. Still, I had the impression that, though others were a little uncertain about the meaning of “humanism,” I, at least, had a clear idea. However, the more I meditated the less certain I became that any stable meaning was involved at all.⁴⁵

A typical gambit, since he did not believe that meaning is immanent in words, and furthermore did not believe that just because a word exists there must necessarily be a “something” that the word refers to, was to ask, “What does this term direct us to observe (or respond to)?”⁴⁶ A favorite example—and one that has bedeviled whole branches of philosophy and psychology—was the word “mind.” According to Peckham, to attempt to determine the true meaning of the word or the supposed nature of the entity “mind” is “necessarily inconclusive and even hopeless.”⁴⁷ It is much more productive to analyze the character of people’s responses to the word “mind,” in which case we can discern that “mind” is almost always a highly explanatory term subsuming various observations (for more on this, see chapter 1): It subsumes the observation that we can covertly manipulate verbal and nonverbal signs; it subsumes the observation that, when an individual is placed in two situations which an observer judges to be the same, the individual might behave the same way each time, or she might behave differently; it subsumes the observation that something occurs between stimulus and response but we don’t really know what.⁴⁸

Thus Peckham refined his thinking through semantic-behavioral analysis and regression (or, roughly, induction): he considered a term, analyzed conventional responses to it, and subsumed them under a more general proposition (we might say “axiom” as defined by Richard

⁴⁵ Peckham 1973c: 351

⁴⁶ Or more correctly, “How do we conventionally use this word to direct our attention?”

⁴⁷ Peckham 1979a: 59

⁴⁸ See Peckham 1979a: 57–60, 105.

von Mises, an early influence on Peckham).⁴⁹ The advantage of this position is that one need not seek the essence or essential reference of abstract terms like “mind,” “meaning,” or “humanism”; one need simply observe the variety of behaviors exhibited by people in using and responding to those words and formulate a new proposition capable of subsuming that variety. To those not aware of the subtleties of the proper use of this method in scholarship, it can appear reductive, and it is probably for this reason that M. H. Abrams once described Peckham as an *esprit simpliste* (borrowing a term from A. O. Lovejoy).⁵⁰ Peckham, Abrams wrote, “is impatient with the clutter and tangle of our experience in using language and is convinced that a few simple principles underlie the seeming disorder and complexities.”⁵¹ The clue to Abrams’s mistake, however, lies in the term “underlies.” Abrams would have been better advised to use the word “explain,” for Peckham did not attempt to drive downward into a core of truth but rather to ascend up into the ethereal and transitory realm of explanation. Explanations, at least for a pragmatist like Peckham, are neither true nor false but more or less useful in channeling our behavior in response to, as Abrams put it, “seeming disorder and complexity,” in accordance with our interests.⁵²

This is, in fact, a basic method of science—and indeed human behavior generally—as analyzed by, for example, Ernst Mach, with his principle of the “economy of thought.” For Mach, increases in knowledge and understanding necessitate, because of the limits of human

⁴⁹ Von Mises (1951) 1968. Von Mises is cited in *Man’s Rage for Chaos*; also see Matalene 1995: 217.

⁵⁰ Lovejoy, it may be recalled, suggested that there is “a practically very important difference between (we have not English term for them) *esprits simplistes*—minds which habitually tend to assume that simple solutions can be found for the problems they deal with—and those habitually sensible of the general complexity of things, or, in the extreme case, the Hamlet-like natures who are oppressed and terrified by the multiplicity of considerations probably pertinent to any situation with which they are confronted, and the probable intricacy of their interrelations” (1936: 7).

⁵¹ Abrams 1977a: 185

⁵² Peckham (1974b: 253): “I do not believe that any explanations are true; or, more precisely, a ‘true’ explanatory proposition is one that has heuristic value only.”

memory and individual experience, general constructs that subsume greater amounts of data.⁵³

As Richard von Mises explained it, “The theoretical comprehension of greater areas of experience is possible only by the development of means which allow a summarization in thought over great complexes of phenomena. Any scientific concept is such a tool.”⁵⁴ Abrams, in the passage cited, appears to be unaware of the irony that he is engaging in precisely this type of behavior when he describes Peckham as an “*esprit simpliste*,” and furthermore as “tough-minded” rather than “tender-minded”:⁵⁵ that is, he is explaining Peckham’s behavior by means of (or subsuming Peckham’s behavior under) more general explanatory propositions. The difference between Peckham and Abrams is that Abrams did this unreflexively, and, in this case, with the aid of very dubious distinctions (of the sort “there are two kinds of people in the world...”).

Despite their “simplistic” form, Peckham’s propositions were not arrived at easily. They were the result of great intellectual struggle that involved taking into account a vast range of behavioral observation and literary and scholarly writing.⁵⁶ This struggle can be glimpsed through a chronological reading of his writings and is occasionally referenced explicitly.⁵⁷ These propositions also form the basic coordinates that will, so to speak, guide us through the various topics that Peckham felt compelled (or anyway was asked) to write about. Although properly

⁵³ Mach 1919: 490

⁵⁴ Von Mises (1951) 1968: 139. What Mach and others had noticed is no doubt related to what later became known as the psychological theory of “chunking” (see, e.g., Miller 1956).

⁵⁵ This is a distinction William James makes at the beginning of *Pragmatism* (1907), distinguishing generally between “tender-minded” rationalists and “tough-minded” empiricists.

⁵⁶ His intellectual influences are too numerous to list here, but many will be dealt with in the following chapters. From the below list of propositions, however, the influence of Hegel, Thomas Carlyle, Nietzsche, Vaihinger, George Herbert Mead, Charles W. Morris, Richard von Mises, and the later Wittgenstein may be apparent.

⁵⁷ He describes himself being “backed into” his theory of meaning, for example, “because a search of twentieth century theories of meaning developed by philosophers and linguists revealed nothing that could withstand analysis” (1978c: 318).

explaining these propositions will occupy much of the remaining book, they are, in my estimation, few and for the most part easily grasped. A decent catalog should at least include:

- The brain produces randomness which allows for behavioral instability; humans are “condemned” to innovate; nobody ever gets anything right (a.k.a. “Peckham’s law”).
- Behavior is channeled through (or stabilized by) cultural redundancy (the repetition of instructions).
- We live in an interpreted world.
- The meaning of an utterance is the response to that utterance (or in semiotic terms: The meaning of a sign is the response to that sign).
- Language does not correspond to the world; it controls behavior.
- Language moves in two directions: explanation and exemplification.
- Explanation is the defining attribute of human behavior.
- All utterances (or all signs) are both fictive and normative.
- The same word may be used predictively or subsumptively; much intellectual confusion results from ignoring this distinction.
- Culture consists of (or is a term subsuming) instructions for action or performance; society consists of (or is a term subsuming) the actions or performances in response to those instructions.
- Literature is discourse *announced* as fictive.
- The basic task of the Romantics was cultural transcendence.⁵⁸

These, it seems to me (another reader might compile a slightly different list), are the basic propositions or axioms that Peckham found defensible (i.e., effective) over long periods for dealing with certain difficult problems, and productive in terms of directing attention to new problems. They are not to be regarded as “true” or “proven,” since such words are merely instructions to terminate analysis. Instead, in his theories Peckham aimed for “parsimony and fruitfulness.”⁵⁹ Believing in the “inherent instability of theory construction,” he always assumed he would, eventually, turn out to be wrong.⁶⁰ In many important respects, however, as I argue in this book, that time has not yet arrived.

⁵⁸ As will be duly noted in the following chapters, Peckham was not the first to propose many of these, though he appears to have arrived at most of them independently—as independently, that is, as anyone is capable of arriving at anything. In any case, what is of primary interest is not the genesis of these ideas but the uses to which they were, and might yet be, put.

⁵⁹ Peckham 1980a: 364

⁶⁰ Peckham 1981: 33

Overview of the Book

The main chapters of this book are formed in the following way. The first part of each chapter presents Peckham's views on the topic of consideration. Something of the history of the development of his thought is given, but on the whole I concentrate on the most developed stage of his theory construction. My aim is to present the most cogent versions of Peckham's arguments, with modifications suggested where I felt it necessary.

The latter part of each chapter consists of a "commentary" that contextualizes Peckham's views by looking at his sources of inspiration, at related theories by mostly fellow twentieth-century scholars, and at the work (admittedly small in quantity) that he influenced. I have from time to time noted competing or antithetical theories, mainly to draw attention to the strengths of those of Peckham and his cohorts. Given the diversity of terrain covered by this book, I have not taken it upon myself to exhaustively position Peckham's theories within the intellectual marketplace.

This book begins, in chapter 1, with the most general area of Peckham's researches, namely his semiotic theory of human behavior. This includes his theories of meaning, interpretation, and language. This is the most important and potentially difficult chapter of the book as it introduces the specialized concepts and terminology that will reappear throughout. Chapter 2 moves onto his theory of culture, society, and the individual. It looks at the broader implications of Peckham's semiotic theory of behavior for understanding such issues as cultural redundancy, the functions of social institutions, and the individual "persona." It also looks at the reasons for cultural change and the formation of countercultures. Importantly, this chapter considers Peckham's theory of value.

Chapter 3 moves into some specific domains of culture or social behavior that concerned Peckham: art, philosophy, religion, and science. These terms can be seen more precisely as subsuming particular social roles and social institutions. The functions of these domains are explained and their affinities and divergences are explored. Art is given greatest prominence, as it is the area of behavior that Peckham was most interested in and expended the most energy in theorizing.

As a scholar of Romanticism, history was a topic of obvious importance to Peckham. It was also in large part through considering how we can know about history that he developed his theory of interpretation. Chapter 4 presents Peckham's thoughts on history, including history as science and the possibility of cultural history.

Peckham privileged the historical interpretation of literature. Chapter 5 presents his vigorous defense of this position and his views on the alternatives. This chapter includes discussion of his definition of literature, his interest in textual editing, and his comments on New Criticism and deconstructionism.

In chapter 6 we finally arrive at Peckham's central academic concerns, or at least those with which he began and continually returned: Victorianism and Romanticism. I have already indicated that, for Peckham, Romanticism is one of the most important events in human cultural history. This assertion will need to be defended. His theories of Romanticism changed greatly over the course of his career, so this chapter takes a more developmental approach than previous chapters. Furthermore, it is largely through his study of Romanticism that Peckham's broader theories were developed; this chapter will allow us to see how elements of his theories as explored in the previous chapters are related to particular problems of Romanticism.

Peckham often reflected on behavior in the type of institution he himself belonged to, and the final topic-oriented chapter, chapter 7, turns to Peckham's concern with teaching and with the world of academia. Particularly important for us will be a group of essays that Peckham wrote in the early to mid-1970s. These essays consider effective teaching practices, explore the relation of the university to government and corporations, and provide a trenchant critique of contemporary academic culture—a critique that is largely, and sadly, still relevant today.

The conclusion is in many ways an extension of the “commentary” sections of the foregoing chapters, surveying more broadly Peckham's place in the Western, and particularly the Romantic, intellectual tradition. I also sketch some further applications of his ideas in three general areas of inquiry: the humanities, the social sciences (anthropology, sociology), and certain of the natural sciences (physics, biology). In all of these areas, as in our society generally, there remains much vacillation between Enlightenment (and often enough pre-Enlightenment) and Romantic ideologies. I make here a final case for taking Romanticism seriously.

One wonders—at least I wonder—what Peckham would have made of the present book—a book which, at the very least, offends by kowtowing to conventions Peckham himself derided. My basic justification for the project is that Peckham said a great many things in a great many places. He constantly restated ideas with new nuances while applying them to new cases; his terminology continually shifted. I believe there is some value in attempting to draw together his many formulations of, say, a “theory of interpretation” and fitting them together in order to give the broadest and most nuanced version. And, if Peckham is to become useful, there is some benefit to indicating where, in different writings, different terms have the same meaning or the same terms have different meanings. Obviously what I present here—though I quote more

copiously than Peckham would have been comfortable with—is my own construct of Peckham. But I believe—I hope—I have captured Peckham’s indomitable intellectual spirit and demonstrated his continuing relevance. If not, may the reader follow the notes, read the originals, and decide for him- or herself.

Notes on Style

Contrary to Peckham’s preferred method, this book is filled with citations. As already noted, Peckham stated his basic ideas with more or less variation across many different writings. When such an idea is discussed here, I have attempted to provide in a footnote chronological references to most, if not all, substantial treatments of that idea in his various publications.

It should also be pointed out, at least for younger readers, that Peckham wrote at a time when the use of universal male pronouns was taken for granted. I have not altered his use of “men” or “man” or “mankind” or “he” in quotations, although I have sought to avoid lopsided generalizations in my own writing. In this connection I cannot resist mentioning that, though Peckham had his biases, masculinist language notwithstanding, gender bias was not an especially strong one. While he was not typically given to citing contemporary scholars by name, many of those he mentions approvingly are women.

Italics in quotations are by the original authors unless otherwise noted.

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