Fanny Hill in Bombay

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In one of *The Woman of Honor*’s deviations from the ready-made plotlines of romance, Mellefont launches into an attack on the practice of imprisonment for debt, whose chief misery, as Cleland knew well, is “corrosive grief for the coolness or desertion of tired-out friends” (3:117). The practice, Mellefont asserts, was unknown in ancient Britain, “to which the great bulwarks of liberty, the Trials by Juries, and other privileges of the common law, can be traced” (3:128), but was introduced by the invaders of imperial Rome. Caesar and his armies extinguished the liberties of ancient Britain and so ushered in, as Cleland writes in a text on which he worked in tandem with *The Woman of Honor*, “an universal darkness . . . which lasted till the Saxon Alfred, and other our Kings, sensible of the excellence of the Druidical plan, restored it, as far as it could be adapted to a feudal government.” In this second text, *The Way to Things by Words, and to Words by Things*—published in 1766, two years before *The Woman of Honor* appeared but more than a year after it was contracted—Cleland made public the first sketchy results of his “attempt at the retrieval of the antient Celtic or primitive Language of Europe,” a hugely ambitious task on which he worked until at least the end of the 1760s. 1 If Cleland’s “curious tracts
on the Celtic language,” as his obituarist calls the three etymological studies he eventually published, seem far removed from the world of his fictions, both strands of Cleland’s writing construct a fantasy-ideal of an original, physically vigorous, politically independent self: an ideal he grounds in the half-historical, half-mythic ancient Britain against which he measures the corruptions and debilities, both bodily and political, of the present day.2

Cleland’s own imprisonment for debt—the originary moment of his authorial career—thus takes its place in a history of oppression going back to the Roman “extirpation of the Druids and their laws” (Way, 70). In The Woman of Honor it is Mellefont’s friend Sumners who is unjustly confined for debt, while Sumners’s son Leonard is raised in the wilds of America, in something like the still uncontaminated state of pre-Roman Britain. In Leonard, physical vigor—“all the points of bodily agility, dexterity, and valor” (3:139)—is joined to intellectual acuity and contempt for the degraded political and commercial values of what he calls “the world” (3:248). The symbolic heart of that world is London’s Exchange Alley, where unrestricted financial speculation has produced “an overflow of fictitious wealth . . . not the least of [whose] mischiefs” is “that of raising, on so crazy a bottom, the prices of all the necessaries of life, to the manifest injury of the community” (3:231–232).3 That the fortune Leonard inherits from his granduncle Mr. Arnold is founded in just such financial speculation is an irony not lost on him, and this adds to the tonal dissonance of The Woman of Honor as a whole, in which the clichés of romance—here, the orphaned hero’s sudden accession to wealth, which makes him a kind of prince to Clara’s Cinderella—are interspersed with astringent essays on political economy and the degeneracy of modern manners. If The Woman of Honor’s loose plot and discursive waywardness signal its author’s impatience with the codes of commercial fiction, they infuse that fiction with the urgency and inconclusiveness of political debate, centering on what Cleland saw as the “crazy” or broken state of contemporary Britain.

Cleland’s later authorial career marks a turn away from the profession of novelist—even in his novels. In fact, he turns away from professionalism altogether: in contrast to his earlier self-presentation as a jobbing writer for bread, he adopts in his later work the persona of a man of letters or distracted gentleman-amateur. His energies in this period were focused on three main areas of enquiry: politics, physiology, and language. He addressed these in a variety of genres, from his baggy monster of a last novel to guidebooks on diet and exercise, from political letters in newspapers to collections of philological es-
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says. Disavowing all interest in praise or fame, Cleland published this work in a deliberately rough state: “rather crude beginnings of ideas, or even reveries,” as he put it in the aptly titled *Phisiological Reveries* (1765), “than proposed as clear and authenticated conceptions.” Similarly, he opens the first of his etymological texts, *The Way to Things by Words*, by acknowledging “the abruptness of the beginning of the first of the following Essays, the confusedness of the Sketch, the inaccuracies and repetitions in it, the incoherence of the whole” (i). “Why then,” he imagines a disgruntled reader asking, “obtrude on the public so confessedly a crudity?” It was only, he answers, “to sound the opinion of competent judges, on the probability of my ideas upon the subject, that I threw them together in the loose undigested manner in which they now appear.” Unable, because of “an incident, immaterial to specify here,” to carry on his research in a more methodical manner, he was persuaded by “some gentlemen, to whom I had communicated the manuscript,” and who “seemed to see in it some useful discoveries of literary lights, or at least the seeds of such discoveries,” to publish it, “even at the point it stood” (i–ii). He publishes not to please himself or make money, but at the bidding of “gentlemen.”

This echoes Cleland’s account in the letter to Stanhope of his reasons for publishing the *Woman of Pleasure*, conceived “on an occasion immaterial to mention here” and sent to the press at the urgings of “some whose opinion I unfortunately preferred to my own.” In both cases, he shifts blame for the published text onto unnamed others and alludes to undisclosed “incidents” and “occasions” that are only the more intriguing for being dismissed as “immaterial” to specify or mention. But Cleland’s apologies for his later work omit the appeal to the pressures of material distress that led him to publish the *Memoirs*. Instead, he portrays himself acting from disinterested motives, for the public good. So, in the introduction to his first physiological work, the 1761 *Institutes of Health*, he writes that he originally drew up his guidelines for better maintenance of bodily well-being “purely in the spirit of communicativeness to a few friends, whose attention to it was rather my wish for their own sake, in my firm belief of the efficacy of them, than my hope, so unsupported as they stand by any valid authority.” Imagining the wider potential benefit of his “rules” to the reading public, he writes that “I should have held myself inexcusable, if I had not offered them, at the risque of whatever treatment [readers] may choose to give them” (xxiv). Though he disclaims professional “authority” in medicine, just as he acknowledges the likely errors and incoherence of his etymological work, he asserts that his medical advice is founded on the just observation of
“Nature, that supreme standard of truth” (iv), unaffected by the “authority of names, however celebrated, however great” or by the “mere theory destitute of practice” (iii–iv) that vitiates his predecessors’ work.

The “apologies” Cleland prefixes to his late writing, then, the disclaimers of professional expertise, are characteristically double sided. Although, as an amateur, he lacks the authority that membership in the medical profession would confer, as an outsider he regards such authority with suspicion. Indeed “the eminent writers of that profession” (vi) are “lamentably deficient” (viii): “they contradict not only one another but themselves, in so many of the most essential points that they increase that medical scepticism of which themselves so justly complain, and bewilder instead of fixing the judgment” (x). The expertise of the professional is the mirror image of the prejudice of the ignorant: both are in thrall to received wisdom, whether that conferred by “the authority of names” or the groundless prejudices of the unlearned. The most “eminent writers” on medicine, moreover, “have the strange weakness of distrusting the plainer and more obvious methods of treatment, such as are the instinctive suggestions of nature . . . only because they are plain and obvious: nor will any reasonings on the cause of their disorders, satisfy them so much as those that are the most abstruse and unintelligible” (85–86). This perverse emphasis on abstruseness for its own sake, on “mere theory destitute of practice,” is a kind of professional vanitas that stands in the way of truth, and not only in the field of medicine. As Cleland writes in the second of his essays on language, Specimen of an Etimological Vocabulary, “It is, in short, with etimologists as it is with physicians, who cannot well be pronounced able and trust-worthy, till they are arrived at knowing all the fallacy and uncertainty of their art.”

Taking up the same theme in his third etymological study, Additional Articles to the Specimen of an Etimological Vocabulary, he writes that the truths he discovered “were so contrary to generally received notions, that with so little authority as I . . . have any right to claim, I could not expect so much as the honors of examination.” But Cleland’s contrariness to received wisdom is a function not of strangeness or difficulty but rather of simplicity: his “solutions appeared so plain, so obvious, that they could not be genuine” (xvii), his critics have objected. Yet “it was precisely that elementary simplicity,” he writes, “that tempted me to hope I was in the right career.”

As with physiology and language, so with politics: the later Cleland represents himself as an artist of disenchantment, a lone voice aiming to “undeceive” those in the grips of prejudices, whether of ignorance or of professional subservience to political party. He has no great hope of success: as he writes in a letter
to the *Public Advertiser*, “If, Sir, there is a Piece of Quixotism more than ordinarily desperate and vain, it is surely that of aspiring to the Honor of exercising that most unthankfull, most unpleasing Office of an Undeceiver of a Populace possessed by a violent Prejudice, of which it is but too often the more tenacious the less Foundation there is for it.” But the overarching project that links all his late writing, including the fiction, is that of chipping away at the “wretched enslavement” (*Articles*, xvi) of received wisdom, even if the readers he aims to free regard him as “harping on a String so discordant and so grating.” Just as the self-contradictions of the most eminent medical texts “bewilder instead of fixing the judgment,” so “the present Glut of Party-Polemics,” as he writes in the *Public Advertiser* for 26 September 1765, “is fitter to nauseate and bewilder the Reader than to give him just Ideas of the real State of Things.” Cleland, by contrast, avows “Scorn and Contempt for all Party-spirit whatever, either on the side of those who are in Power, or of those who are out of it” (*Pub. Adv.*, 19 Aug. 1765) and argues that “at a Time when there never was a more indispensable Necessity, for fixing clear Ideas of Things, it is humanly speaking impossible to attain to that Clearness without tracing Effects to their primary Causes” (*Pub. Adv.*, 12 Dec. 1765). This is the aim of all Cleland’s late work: to “fix clear Ideas of Things” by “tracing Effects to their primary Causes,” to scrape away the accretions of prejudice and habit in order to locate the foundations of bodily health, national identity, and the true meanings of words. His assault on the degeneracy of his own times takes the form of a search for lost origins.

“The Consummation of Our Own Ruin”

In a letter to his mother’s lawyer, Edward Dickinson, in February 1757, Cleland writes, “I am sick even to death of Politics,” and expresses his “real affliction” for “the wretched condition” of Britain in a period of ministerial oppression and of shifting, opportunistic alliances and wars. “No englishman who deserves to live,” he continues, “would wish to live longer in this infamous and abandoned period.” Notwithstanding his sickness unto death, over the next thirty years he would write extensively on political topics, even if the custom of pseudonymous authorship of political essays makes it impossible to know for certain what and how much he wrote. In a journal entry for 31 March 1772, James Boswell writes that he ran into Cleland when visiting David Garrick, and observes that Cleland is “now the grave and prolix *Parliamentarian* in the newspapers.” From this passing remark, William Epstein infers that the political essays in the form of letters to the *Public Advertiser* signed “Parliamentarian” between August 1770
and February 1772 must be Cleland’s. Epstein draws a similar conclusion from John Nichols’s claim in his Cleland obituary that “Mr. C. . . . was the author of the long letters given in the public prints, from time to time, signed A BRITON, MODESTUS, &c. &c.” But Nichols is not quite so reliable a source as Boswell, and “Modestus,” as Epstein notes, “was a traditional political pseudonym, affected by a variety of writers,” so it is less certain that the letters so signed in the Public Advertiser are Cleland’s. And uncertainty extends in the other direction, too: Boswell’s plural “newspapers” and Nichols’s “public prints” suggest that Cleland’s political essays may have appeared in multiple journals, not just the Public Advertiser. Similarly, Nichols’s “&c. &c.” may point to other, now untraceable, pseudonyms. All of which means it is to some degree a matter of conjecture or hunch what Cleland actually wrote for the papers, and it seems likely that much remains to be identified.

Beyond questions of attribution is the murkier question of whether Cleland’s “political pen,” as Epstein puts it, “was available for a price.” After Josiah Beckwith visited Cleland in 1781 to discuss his work on the ancient Celtic, he wrote, “The Author some Time since enjoyed a Place or Pension under Government of 200 £ a year,” which might suggest he was expected to write in support of the government on a more or less regular basis. But what does he mean by “some Time since”? And what are we to make of Beckwith’s claim that Cleland’s pension “was taken from him on Account of his Publications”? Which publications? Apparently, the works that lost Cleland his living were not those considered obscene or overtly political but rather the Celtic tracts, which, “treating Monarchical Government in so sarcastical a Manner,” Beckwith speculates, “lost [the author] his Place or Pension.”

If Beckwith is right, Cleland should have lost his pension in the later 1760s, after the Celtic tracts came out, but the vast majority of the letters signed “Parliamentarian,” “Modestus,” and “A Briton” in the Public Advertiser were written after 1770. If anything, this supports Cleland’s oft-repeated denial that he was in the pay of one or another ministry, or that he was induced to write by mercenary or partisan interests. Of course he may have been lying, or just fudging the truth of his position as a political hack. But the letters, far from selling the policies or merits of any particular ministry, are almost relentlessly negative, chronicling a political march of folly toward “the consummation of our own ruin, already too far advanced,” as he puts it in what may have been the last of his published works, a letter signed “A Briton” that appeared in the Public Advertiser on 21 July 1787. In that letter, still bristling over the outcome of the American War of Independence, which saw Britain “abandoning her own
loyal subjects, to the haggard intractability of the mock zealots for liberty in our perverted Colonies.” Cleland laments the state of the commonwealth, “debased and reduced as she is, through her own follies, nearly to insignificance and nullity.” Ending in “insignificance and nullity,” Cleland’s thirty-year public commentary on contemporary politics is less an exercise in partisan spin-doctoring than an ongoing jeremiad, in which the ideal of a robust political constitution is set against the ruinous practices of the governing classes of his own day, and of every party.

Notwithstanding his critique of all political factions, it is of course possible that Cleland was at one time (or at different times) writing for hire at the behest of one or more political masters. Epstein maintains that in 1762–1763 Cleland worked for the then–prime minister Lord Bute, writing pamphlets in support of Bute’s “north British” administration for reasons of “profit, not principle.” And while the documentary evidence for this seems to be nil, there is a curious passage in Boswell’s journal for 26 April 1778 in which, calling on Cleland six years after meeting him at Garrick’s, he writes that Cleland “talked of Lord Bute having by the medium of Lord Melcombe proposed to have him as a Cabinet of himself to suggest for Government, and that he should have £1,200 a year.” It is hard to know what to make of this story, and Boswell says “I thought he raved” when Cleland told it to him. Why Bute, appointed prime minister in May 1762, or his ally George Bubb Dodington, created first Baron Melcombe by George III in 1761, would have approached Cleland with such a proposal—given his literary notoriety, professional obscurity, and political insignificance—is difficult to say, and since Cleland makes no mention of the offer anywhere else, it remains a wild and unlikely claim. Perhaps Bute or Melcombe made some vague, extravagant promises in order to coax Cleland to write, like his colleague Smollett, in support of the government. But by the next year Melcombe was dead, and Bute, who lasted less than a year as prime minister, had “shamefully disappointed [Cleland’s] hopes,” Boswell writes. It may be this disappointment that led to Cleland’s scathing treatment of Bute ever after: in a letter to the Public Advertiser on 8 August 1765, Cleland as “A Briton” rails at Bute’s “portentously stupid Inconsistence,” which is “aggravated by a supercilious Gloom, and a kind of mean, low, frigid Cunning, the Triumph of which constantly was to deceive himself, and such as had been unfortunately led to trust him.” If the last phrase may allude to a private sense of injury, however, the general tenor of Cleland’s remarks is not far from what he wrote in his letters to Dickinson the decade before, of another government and another king: “The present men of power seem to the full as self-centered as their predecessors, only with more ar-
rogance and bravado,” he writes in one; in another, he says that the government is “without principles, without rules, without theory, and, above all, without the least spirit of dignity.” All in all, while the letters signed “Modestus” that Epstein attributes to Cleland do smack of writing for hire—in their defense of the king and his government against the “invectives” of such critics as the fiercely polemical “Junius”—they are quite unlike the work Cleland produced in his other political voices, especially in the authorial persona of “A Briton,” whose pugnacious, impassioned, even overwrought responses to contemporary events is closest to the voice of Cleland’s private letters and fiction.

Unlike “Modestus” (9 letters from 1769 and 1770) and “A Parliamentarian” (33 letters from 1770 to 1772), “A Briton” published more than 150 letters in the *Public Advertiser* over a thirty-year period, writing on a vast range of topics. Nothing is so “ephemeral,” to adopt Cleland’s own word, as political commentary on current affairs, in which “the Impression of one Essay” is “instantly cancelled by that of another, beget[ting], at length,” sheer “Indifference” (*Pub. Adv.*, 26 Sept. 1765). Yet while it would likely “nauseate and bewilder the Reader” to rehash Cleland’s views on all the issues of the day, and while his sometimes “grave and prolix” style, as Boswell puts it, can be heavy going, Nichols’s assessment—that when Cleland “touched politics, he touched it like a torpedo, he was cold, benumbing, and soporific”—is unduly dismissive. The *torpedo*, otherwise known as a crampfish or electric ray, stuns its enemies or prey into immobility with an electric shock, but Cleland’s political writing is neither benumbing nor cold. Rather, it alternates between two registers: one feisty, scrappy, and cutting; the other ardent, idealizing, and lofty.

The first is reserved for the meanness of the present, as when he condemns Bute for his “private Ambition, in his hurry to grasp the ministerial Scepter, with a Lust for Power, surely not less ridiculous and vain in him, than the Rage of Eunuchs for the Fair Sex, without the least Ability to enjoy or do Justice to it” (*Pub. Adv.*, 8 Aug. 1765). In this passage the fairly conventional tactic of accusing a political enemy of unmanliness is given an extra twist, so that Bute’s “Lust” for power is equated with the sexually impotent and so ridiculous “Rage of Eunuchs,” the figuratively castrated Bute unable to “enjoy” the rewards of the phallic “Scepter” he uselessly “grasps”—a neat inversion of the mock-political rhetoric of “that peculiar scepter-member, which commands us all” (183) in the *Woman of Pleasure*. The second, more high-flown register in the letters of “A Briton” signals the declaration of his political ideals, which properly belong not to the present but to a conditional realm: a possible, if unlikely, future or a projected, if unreal, past. So, in the letter just quoted, after he has made a mockery
of Bute, Cleland shifts into panegyric, extolling “the tutelary Authority of that great national Council . . . a free, uncorrupt Parliament,” as a counterweight to the “private Ambition” of unmanly ministers. Only Parliament, “properly put into Motion,” can “restore Lustre to the Crown, Confidence to our natural Allies, Tranquillity to this Country, Vigor to the Laws, and Stability to the Public-Good.” Such a free and uncorrupt Parliament will not be found, however, in the Westminster of 1765, and never was to be found there. Nor, for all the rhetoric of restoration, was there ever a historical time when the crown was perfectly lustrous or the country perfectly tranquil. The time of luster, tranquility, and vigor is just beyond the horizon of historical time, in that ancient Britain Cleland sought to reconstruct through his etymological recuperation of the lost original Celtic.

Despite the sometimes exhortatory language of his political letters, Cleland as “A Briton” does not write as an advocate but as a kind of prophet, radically alienated from the political culture of his time, and articulating his political ideal in the face of its irreversible demise. So, for example, when he writes in February 1766 on the recent “Disturbances in America”—the rebellious reaction of the Sons of Liberty and others to the Stamp Act of 1765—he refers to the colonists as “American Britons” and offers this ideal vision of the Commonwealth:

> All the British Dominions however divided, by Situation, form nevertheless one great and indivisible political Body, of which what Hippocrates says of the human Body holds strictly true, that it has neither Beginning nor End, every Part being a Center to the rest and no Part an Extremity . . . Britons will be Britons in whatever Part of the Globe Chance may have decided their Birth; they will still be free, and consequently generous and grateful. (Pub. Adv., 10 Feb. 1766)

Yet Cleland knew well that this “political Body” was divided by irreconcilable interests, that the government had been ungenerous and the colonists ungrateful, and that British North America had not only a determinate historical “Beginning” but a likely historical “End”: the discourse of bodily indivisibility and integrity, or of what we might call “Briton-ness,” is itself a product of the very “Disturbances” against which it offers itself as a bulwark. Similarly, when Cleland writes, in a letter from July 1764, “It is now more than half a Century, since the divided Names of English and Scots have justly given Place to the more glorious Appellation of Britons” (Pub. Adv., 13 July 1764), he does so precisely because “the more glorious Appellation” has not prevailed, and because the English continue to disparage Scots, Scottish laws, and Scottish representation...
in Parliament.\textsuperscript{22} The ideals of \textit{Britain} and \textit{Britons} are ideal insofar as they have never existed in reality, and all the more ideal as they recede ever further from reach.

One of the more striking features of Cleland’s political orientation is that it never really changes, despite his ongoing, often heated investment in issues and events as they unfold. The time is always out of joint for him. The last lines of the last letter of “A Briton” look forward, prophetically, to “the consummation of our own ruin,” and the letter’s final words condemn the nation, as we have seen, to “insignificance and nullity.” But thirty years earlier he had made the same point: “No englishman who deserves to live, would wish to live longer in this infamous and abandoned period.” In that letter he wrote of his horror at the impending execution of Admiral Byng—victim, as Cleland believed, of a political show trial: “I almost envy poor Byng’s state, if he is to be murthered as they say he is, and as I firmly believe from an infallible rule with me of predicting what is to be, from what ought not to be.”\textsuperscript{23} Reflecting on his critical-prophetic role—“predicting what is to be, from what ought not to be”—he writes, “Nor am I in the least comforted by my vanity at having seen the purport of all I repeat it all of my predictions verified by time and events, for my real affliction at the wretched condition of that country at whose expense they have been verified.” There is no comfort in being right when all he foresees is the ruin of an abandoned political ideal, that of the British constitution. In another commentary on the disturbances in America—this one from 13 July 1776, after the onset of war—Cleland urges his own countrymen to “RESTORE, RESTORE the Constitution FIRST here; and then think of extending its benignant Influence to America!” (\textit{Pub. Adv.}, 13 July 1776). But as the fervor and the rather histrionic typesetting of the passage suggest, it was already too late—not just too late to avert war, but too late to restore the constitution to a Britain that had long since lost the use of it.

A sense of too-lateness pervades Cleland’s political writing, and in this respect, too, his work exhibits the spirit of Edward Said’s “late style,” indeed underlines an idea Said got from Adorno, that late style is “socially resistant.”\textsuperscript{24} Boswell’s “old Cleland”—raving, grumbling, “a fine sly malcontent,” who “keep[s] harping on a String so discordant and so grating,” to the manifest displeasure of his audience—might be characterized, as Said characterizes Adorno, as “a figure of lateness itself, an untimely, scandalous, even catastrophic commentator on the present” (14).\textsuperscript{25} Especially in the persona of “A Briton,” Cleland prefigures Said’s reading of Adorno as “very much a late figure because so much of what he does militated ferociously against his own time . . . It is the \textit{Zeitgeist}
that Adorno really loathed and that all his writing struggles mightily to insult” (22–23). For all the important and obvious differences between the two writers, they are alike to the degree that their common irascibility expresses not just a loathing of the spirit (or dispiritedness) of the times they lived in but a rigorous relegation of their own cultural ideal to an irrecoverable, heavily nostalgic but not really historical past: a kind of phantom nineteenth century for Adorno, pre-Roman Britain for Cleland. In a way, Cleland’s lost world, though further removed in time, is actually less remote than Adorno’s, since even the debased language of the present still carries some of its original poetic force, conveying a cultural ideal that, if not fully attainable in the present, expresses an imaginable alternative to it.

The Original Sense of Words

The intimations of catastrophe that Said locates in late style loom over Cleland’s writing on language as much as they do his political screeds. He ends the “Advertisement” to the last of his linguistic studies by anticipating its likely failure in the face of “the amazing general futility of these wretched times; in which this nation, once the sanctuary of reason, and the head-seat of philosophy, appears on the eve of sinking into all the horrors of barbarism, of ignorance, and consequently of anarchy and confusion” (Articles, xv). Yet if he represents himself as lacking the power to “check the general impulse to perdition, or towards stopping or retarding this impetuous spirit of our downfall,” he does at least intermittently express the hope that “the retrieval of the antient Celtic or primitive language of Europe” might lead in turn to the revival of “the primitive spirit of our British ancestors in the earliest ages,” when those ancestors lived “under the most admirable of all human governments” (Specimen, 12, 33). The stakes of Cleland’s etymological researches or speculations are not narrowly linguistic but emphatically political: the retrieval of the original language of Britain “would shew us in the remotest ages the foundations of our present constitution and laws” and “would throw a light on the establishment of our Juries, our Parliaments, and the legal limitations of the power and office of Kings” (Way, 66). In part, then, his work is an expression of “national spirit,” not only as it sheds light on the origins of British institutions and cultural identity, but also as it places Britain in the vanguard of scholarly inquiry. Having observed “that some French writers”—in particular one Le Brigant—“were going round and round the truth” of linguistic origins, “and so near it, that, humanly speaking, they can hardly fail, at the long run, of striking into it,” Cleland writes, “this has
made me wish to leave this humble monument, this inkling of a Briton having

got the start of them” (*Way*, 23–24). Yet if he rather chauvinistically offers his
texts as a contribution to a kind of ongoing knowledge race with the French, it
is a double-edged gesture, for Cleland’s recovery of “the primitive spirit of our
British ancestors” only throws into sharper relief the barbarism, ignorance,
and confusion of the present, just as his account of the “most admirable of all
human governments” stands as a none-too-subtle indictment of the one cur-
rently in power.

As Carolyn D. Williams has shown, Cleland was not unique in his eagerness
to discover the origins of language, or in his “Celtomania.” From the self-taught
etymologist Eugene Aram (1704–1759), who left behind a “manuscript speci-
men for a Celtic Dictionary” when he was hanged for a long-secret murder, to
such scholars or “speculators” as Rowland Jones, L. D. Nelme, and James Par-
sons, who traced the origins of ancient Celtic back to Gomer and Magog, the
sons of Japhet son of Noah, numerous amateur linguists of the period were
searching for the “primitive language of Europe,” as Cleland called it; and for
British speculators, the desire to identify this with the origins of the British
nation was almost irresistible. Cleland’s French rival Le Brigant also made
the “Japhetic” argument in the projected work he advertised in the *Journal des
Scavan* in 1767–1768. Using the words “Celts,” “Gomerites,” and “Britons”
interchangeably, Le Brigant promised that his two-volume work would fully
recount the history of “the primitive language . . . given to Adam; by him trans-
mitted to Noah, through one only intermediary man; from Noah to Gomer his
grandson, and by him to the Gomerites or Britons, who still preserve it with
the name of him from whom they are descended.” But if Cleland is affiliated
with these other philologists in claiming that the ancient Celtic was the original
or “universal elementary language of Europe” (*Way*, ii), he breaks from them
in eliminating every trace of biblical ancestry or authority for this language he
sought to retrieve. Gomer, Magog, and Japhet have no place in his reconstruc-
tion of linguistic origins; nor does Noah, or Adam, or God. His Celtic is a purely
human language.

Accordingly, while Cleland states in the first sentence of *The Way to Things
by Words* that “the Language which I flatter myself with the idea of having in
a great measure recovered, is precisely that language alluded to by Homer,
which he calls the language of the *Gods*” (1), he soon clarifies that “*Gods*” is
just another way of writing *Goths* (9). Indeed, Homer turns out to be a bit of a
fiction himself: “The name of *Homer,*” Cleland writes, “is not a proper name,
but a general one, for Bard or *man of song*” (22), and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*
are not truly Greek poems at all but translations of “Celto-Etruscan” originals (20–22, 71). Not only does Greek not merit the cultural primacy it has come to assume, but the whole Greek pantheon on which “Homer” drew is nothing but an “abuse” (10) or “corruption” (118) of originally Celtic or Druidic fictions: allegorical embodiments of natural and moral truths that the Greeks took literally and thus “prophan[ed]” by “erecting those impersonations into objects of religious worship” (10). There are no such gods. “The whole of the Greek and Roman mythology,” Cleland later wrote in the *Specimen of an Etimological Vocabulary*, is “a chaos of nonsense,” because those later peoples lost sight of the purpose of the Druids’ “stile of metaphor and allegory,” which was to give, “in favor of the memory, to very solid truths and precepts the passport of instructive amusement” (152). It is no accident that Cleland here uses the same words with which he had defended the genre of the novel twenty years earlier, in his review of *Peregrine Pickle*—“calculated to convey instruction, under the passport of amusement”—for the contemporary novelist is the Druids’ worthy successor. The ancient Britons invented literature, but the Greeks and Romans “prophaned” it by turning its metaphors into gods.

In his Celtic studies, Cleland uncouples his reconstructed ancient Britain from religion—both the “pagan” mythology of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans and the Adamic-Japhetic mythology of his contemporaries, who sought to identify the Druidic culture of ancient Britain with “Patriarchal Christianity,” as in the texts of the antiquary and archeologist William Stukeley. Stukeley’s pioneering studies of the stone circles of Stonehenge and Avebury, *Stonehenge: A Temple Restor’d to the British Druids* (1740) and *Abury: A Temple of the British Druids* (1743) were published as the first two parts of the projected four-volume *Patriarchal Christianity; or, A chronological history of the origin and progress of true religion, and of idolatry*, whose title announces its author’s aim of reconciling Druidism and Christian orthodoxy. Druidism, far from being a heathen embarrassment, was, according to one of Stukeley’s acolytes, William Cooke, “the true Patriarchal Religion,” and Cooke’s linguistic and iconographic research aimed to complement Stukeley’s archeological work to establish that “the Principles of the patriarchs and druids are laid open and shewn to correspond entirely with each other, and both with the Doctrines of Christianity.”

For Cleland, by contrast, despite his occasional nod of “veneration for religion, and of reverence for its ministers” (*Articles*, xii), Christianity arrived in Britain as an opportunistic latecomer whose success is owing to its canny syncretism—that is, its appropriation and redeployment of originally Druidic practices. After the Roman conquest, Druidism, “being under every disgrace and persecution
imaginable, was, if not annulled, so greatly weakened, that it gave a fair opening for Christianity to enter at the breach . . . It was here then, that, without too much violence to externals at least, Christianity got footing . . . The Cross took place of the May-pole or Holy-rood, in the fairs and market-places, with very little alteration of form” (Way, 14). Scrabbling for a footing, entering at the breach, wrenching sacred symbols to new uses, the Christians who came to Britain in the Romans’ wake were no less invasive than the imperial armies; and if they conveyed “a saving and superior light,” Cleland places far more emphasis on their persecution of those who “adher[ed] to the antient system of worship” (Way, 116), likening this to the “judicial murder” of “innocent persons” at the Salem witch trials.31

No wonder, then, that Cleland’s reimagining of ancient Britain and the Druids met with hostility from some clergymen, if we are to believe a story he later told Beckwith about “a Right Reverend Prelate now living, with whom he had formerly been well acquainted, who was or pretended to be so disgusted at his Account of the Celtic Origin of the Word Pentecost . . . that on Publication of it he accused the Author of Atheism [or] Deism, and shunned his Acquaintance ever after.”32 Cleland never argues outright against Christian faith, but he gives it a secondary role as a posthumous or parasitic successor to the Druidism of ancient Britain, “the primitive Christians having, in a great measure, and surely with the best intentions imaginable, adopted and sanctified the Druidical discipline and practices . . . No wonder that we find in the Christian church so many vestiges of their conformity with our so ancient customs, that Christianity itself is comparatively but a matter of yesterday” (Specimen, 108). Christianity is neither original nor outside of history but contingent and imitative, and Cleland tellingly keeps it at a grammatical arm’s length, distinguishing “their conformity” from “our so ancient customs,” and so aligning “us” with the Druids persecuted by Romans and Christians alike.

The word Druid itself Cleland “derives . . . from D-er-eud, the Man of God, or what we now currently understand by the appellation of a Divine” (Way, 44–45). In this respect he adopts the same sense the invading Caesar gave the word, when he wrote (in Golding’s English), “The Druides are occupied about holy things: they haue the doing of publicke and priuate sacrifices, and do interprete and discusse matters of Religion.”33 Yet terms such as religion, holy, and priest take on unfamiliar meanings in Cleland’s reconstruction of the Druidic origins of Britain. “The words Ecclesiastical, Diocese, Dean, Cardinal, Bishop, Priest, and even Religion itself,” he writes, “do not originally mean any thing purely spiritual: being, in fact, in their origin, all terms of judiciary import” (Specimen, vii).
While he goes on to state that “in those times . . . the law of the country was also its religion,” his etymology for “religion” derives it from “Ray, which was the circle drawn round persons arrested or arraigned in the name of Justice . . . Out of this ray or circle it was the highest of all crimes to escape, or to transgress it till delivered by justice. This was called, Ray-ligio. The being bound by the Ray” (Way, 6). The word holy, too, originates in a political or legal context: “holy, that is to say, the general sense of the whole people, collectively and conclusively taken, reported, and ordered to be passed into a Law” (Articles, 20). Similarly, the word “Priest, or Prêtre, did not so much as mean any divine office” but derived from par (judge), reich (region), and est (agent or administrator), yielding pareichest and thence priest (Specimen, 14, 6–9). These etymologies may not win any adherents today, and even when they were published, Cleland’s Celtic essays provoked some skeptical responses, as when the writer for the Critical Review ventured that they “adopt a language which actually does not exist except in imagination.” It may be true, as Carolyn Williams wryly puts it, that “Cleland reconstructed ancient European languages and customs with the aid of a wide acquaintance with living languages, a smattering of historical knowledge, a flair for free association, and unbounded agility at leaping to conclusions.” Still, his work had its advocates: Beckwith went to visit him specifically to discuss some of the details of his Celtic texts, of which he gave “very copious, and to me Satisfactory Explanations,” and the clergyman-schoolmaster George William Lemon, author of the 1783 English Etymology; or, a Derivative Dictionary of the English Language, wrote that Cleland was “one of the greatest etymologists on our language, and a gentleman very well known in the literary world for his Vocabulary on the Celtic tongue; who has discovered in that work a great depth of knowledge in British antiquity; and of which work he has been pleased to grant me full permission, which I have accordingly made great use of.” Cleland himself, who usually took the part of the critically vilified renegade, wrote in the “Advertisement” to the Additional Articles that “the reception of the specimens has been, in general, favorable to me greatly beyond my expectation” (iv), referring in particular to the approval of the Society of Antiquaries (viii–ix). But whatever the critical fortunes of Cleland’s “curious tracts,” they are less notable for their role in the development of comparative historical linguistics than for the imaginative latitude with which Cleland explores the relations among language, the nation, his own authorship, and the body.

Bodies are brought to the fore in one apparently digressive passage in the Specimen, in which Cleland, investigating the origins of the word “god-father,” notes a surprising Celtic law, “one of the ancientest . . . which imposed a fine
on those whose corpulence should exceed the statutable standard” (182). Using this law “to show how much those exercises were held a duty, which gave agility to the limbs, and vigor to the body,” Cleland writes that “it is hard to say, whether it was the most conducive to the good of a country in preserving the powers of the subject to serve it, or to the subject himself, in defending him against his own idleness, and keeping him from burying himself alive in his own fat.” The vigor of the subject’s physical body is directly tied to the good of the body politic, and as Cleland pursues this idea, he makes a “favorable comparison” between “the state of this island in those ages” and “the actual present one” on the basis of “the simplicity of life in those early ages” (182–183). We have reached a higher “pitch of refinement,” but have passed “that point of improvement, at which it would be salutary for [nations] to stop, before that art, abusing its advantages, ceases to be subordinate to nature, and commences false refinement. The amiable simplicity and youthful vigor of taste is then degenerated into the loathsome affectation and silly dotage of a luxury verging to its own death in that of the state itself, which it will have brought on under a thousand diseases” (183). The focus of Cleland’s denunciation slips between the body and the nation as he envisions the simultaneous “verging to death” of the once amiable, youthful body, wallowing in luxury, and of “the state itself,” ravaged by “a thousand diseases” brought on by its subjects’ “false refinement” and “loathsome affectation.” By a more circuitous route, Cleland arrives at the same prognosis in his etymological work that he “harp[ed] on” in his political essays: Britain is dying.

The linkage Cleland insists on here, between cultural decline and loss of bodily vigor, is also put forward by Fanny Hill in her description of Mr. H——, the most obviously “manly” of her lovers. Having observed, “while he was strip-ping,” his “brawny structure, strong made limbs, and rough shaggy breast” (63), Fanny goes on to enumerate

the virtues of his firm texture of limbs, his square shoulders, broad chest, compact hard muscles, in short a system of manliness, that might pass for no bad image of our antient sturdy barons, when they weilded the battle-ax, whose race is now so thoroughly refin’d and fritter’d away into the more delicate modern-built frame of our pap-nerv’d softlings, who are as pale, as pretty, and almost as masculine as their sisters. (64)

The Specimen’s “false refinement,” “loathsome affectation,” and “silly dotage” are just variations on Fanny’s “thoroughly refin’d and fritter’d away” race of “pap-nerv’d softlings,” undone by excess of luxury. In Fanny’s Memoirs, of
course, bodily vigor is explicitly sexualized in a way it is not in the Celtic essays: vigor is virility, and the loss through overrefinement of ancient manliness yields a generation of effeminate and by implication “unsex’d male-misses.” But the connection between physical vigor and phallic authority is still a significant theme in the Celtic works, if in sometimes surprising ways. Carolyn Williams has argued that Cleland’s idealized Druidic realm is itself “a system of manliness” underpinned by “the potent patriarchal forces” most visibly embodied in a symbol he returns to again and again: the maypole, or “standing May of Justice” (Way, 33). It is true that the maypole was for Cleland “eminently the great sign of Druidism, as the Cross was of Christianity” (Way, 121)—indeed the latter was just an adaptation of the former—and he had made a joke of the maypole’s obvious phallic associations in Fanny’s account of her first view of Will undressed: “I saw with wonder and surprize, what? not the play-thing of a boy, not the weapon of a man, but a may-pole of so enormous a standard, that had proportions been observ’d, it must have belong’d to a young giant” (72).

Further, as Williams has noted, such symbols of political or judicial authority as the scepter, bough, or mace are derived in Cleland’s Druidical system from the phallic “standing May.” As he writes in the Specimen, “the bough or wand of the Judge . . . was figuratively taken from the great standard of Justice, the column of the May, which it represents, under various forms, as the staff of authority, both in the civil and in the military. It was the rod (radt) of Justice, or of Council. It was the truncheon of the Field officers” (43). The brawny Mr. H——, then, with his “stiff staring truncheon, red-topt” (63), embodies, in Williams’s words, “the manly splendours of ancient Britain.”

Yet as Cleland writes elsewhere in the Specimen, the Druids’ “lawful authorit[ies]” were by preference often female: “nothing is, in history, more clearly attested than this employ and capacity in the Celtic women for judiciary offices” (82). We have tended to forget this because “as Christianity prevailed, there was nothing against which it set its face more strenuously than this, among other relicks of the Druidical system” (83). But in pre-Christian Britain “a Druidess, in virtue of her wand, or staff of Office, might execute an arrest. In Gaul,” Cleland adds, “that sex was pre-eminently chosen for this office” (82). Wielding the staff, wand, or “rod . . . of Justice,” the Druidess is emphatically a phallic woman: a figure that undoes sexual difference, and another of Cleland’s unsexed bodies. This malleability, or instability, of sex is also integral to the Celtic allegories from which all later literature and religion derive. As he puts it in The Way to Things, the Druids “appropriated no distinction of sex to their spirits, or allegorical impersonations . . . thus they made of Pallas, just as it
suited their purpose of fiction, a male or a female Deity” (62). To assign “no distinction of sex” is to undo sex itself as a system of distinction or differentiation, whether between spirits, bodies, or words. Cleland’s ancient Celtic contradicts Samuel Johnson’s claim that there is “a sex in words”; rather, it unfixes words from a single sexual identity. Even the hypermanly Mr. H——, “no bad image of our antient sturdy barons,” becomes a more ambiguous figure in light of Cleland’s etymological retracing of “baron” to the original Celtic “Bar, in the sense of Judge or Judgment” (Specimen, 28), with the suffix -on meaning principal or head. Rather than defining him as the heir to an exclusively male, patrilineal title, the word baron affiliates Mr. H—— to the Druidical female justices, wielding their own “truncheons” or other phallic insignia of office.

“The manly splendours of ancient Britain,” then, are less monolithically patriarchal than at first appears. Even Will’s phallic “maypole” is curiously indeterminate, neither “the play-thing of a boy” nor “the weapon of a man”—so not properly, or narrowly, masculine at all. Indeed, as I noted in chapter 3, Fanny writes, of the skin of Will’s maypole, that its “smooth polish, and velvet-softness, might vye with that of the most delicate of our sex” (72). Searching for a figure to do it justice, Fanny declares that “it must have belong’d to a young giant,” which is like nothing so much as one of those “spirits, or allegorical impersonations” without “distinction of sex” that populate the Druid imaginary: a metaphorical embodiment of the phallic sublime. Not only that: Will’s maypole belongs not to him but to Fanny herself, who calls Will “as pretty a piece of woman’s meat as you should see” (80). It is she who “wields” his “wand, or staff of Office,” “taking pleasure,” as she puts it, “by its right handle.” If Fanny, like Cleland’s Druids, unsettles a strictly masculinist sense of phallic power, she also anticipates the critique of inherited political authority or rank Cleland makes in the Celtic tracts. “The talent of pleasing, with which nature has endow’d a handsome person,” she writes with regard to Will, “form’d to me the greatest of all merits; compared to which the vulgar prejudices in favour of titles, dignities, honours, and the like, held a very low rank indeed!” (80). Nature trumps rank, or constitutes a superior form of rank. So it was, too, in pre-Roman Britain, when there were no hereditary titles or honors, but kings and barons alike were subject to the will of the commons.

Cleland’s speculative retrieval of the political system of the ancient Britons is most fully set out in the Specimen of an Etimological Vocabulary, which was rightly the most controversial of his linguistic studies. In it, Cleland argues that “the most admirable of all human governments” (33), native to preinvasion Britain, was democratic, antimilitarist, radically antimonarchical. The Druids,
of course, had special powers, and “the Druidical Judiciary class was superior to the *Laity*” (12)—which at first glance seems not democratic but oligarchic. Yet “though the Barons,” as Cleland calls them, “were invested with the supremacy, in their respective Jurisdictions, or Baronies, they were nevertheless subordinate to the *Par-ley-mots*, or general assemblies of the People . . . It was in those Par-ley-mots, the Sovereign authority inviolably resided” (31–32). These assemblies, held in March and May “in the *Mallum* or field consecrated to that purpose” (36), entailed “the personal assembling of the whole body of the people.” Just as Druidesses were often chosen for judicial office, so there was no restriction of sex at the Par-ley-mot. Judges or barons were elected and served at the people’s will: “In these *Ey-commons* [law-meetings] or *Fields of May*, the People, if they saw cause, deposed or punished their Popes, their Bishops, their Barons, and their Kings” (37). “Bishop” and “Pope” are in Cleland’s etymology synonyms for “Baron” or head justice, but “King” named a lesser office, that of military strongman or warlord, appointed only in cases of urgent and temporary need. Cleland insists that such “kings” were always subject to the commons, and he rails against “the falsest of all conclusions, that Britain was antiently under kingly government, or legislation.” Instead, “it was purely democratical, with the support of barons or judges, and never under kings, whose service was only occasional, and always subordinate; that is to say, accountable to the people, and to the civil power” (148–149).

It is this devaluation of the office and name of “King” that, according to Beckwith, led to the outcry against Cleland and his “oppression” at the hands of “some Men in Power.” His sarcastic treatment of monarchical government lost him his “Place or Pension,” led to the public “Censure of being a Sodomite,” and meant that, in consequence, “his valuable MSS. are condemn’d to be buried in Oblivion.” It is difficult to reconcile Cleland’s scathing history of the demise of the democratic or populist constitution of his idealized ancient Britain with his usual characterization as “a conservative thinker in Bolingbroke’s mold” or a social reactionary “obviously imbued with a Tory distrust of the ‘mob.’” Not that these assessments of Cleland’s political views are wrong: they are well supported by many passages in his work, from his 1749 review of Bolingbroke’s *Letters on the Spirit of Patriotism* to his essays for the *Public Advertiser*. But in the Celtic tracts, where he gave freest rein to his political imagination, he is vitriolic in his attacks on the very principle of monarchism. After the Romans’ expulsion of the Druids and their abolition of popular sovereignty, the military strongmen or kings, once subordinate to the commons, seized power. “Having the forces in their hand,” Cleland writes, they “sought, with the usual selfish-
ness of mankind, to render the Generalship hereditary in their families; and consequently, together with the title of King, which antiently meant General or leader and nothing more, and which they left to their children, they must necessarily leave withal the territorial acquisitions that were to support that dignity” (Articles, 5, 7). To the crime of territorial expropriation these kings joined the folly of hereditary transmission, producing “the hazard of a post requiring great talents, activity, and personal merit, descending to a tyrant, an ideot, or a minor,” and indeed “the law of Chances, authenticated by historical experience, furnishes, at least, ten bad Kings for one good, or but tolerable one.” Every monarchical state is a kleptocracy, founded on theft and ruled by violence. And once kings came to power, even the office of baron was corrupted:

The Peers or Barons, instead of the having been publickly examined by Judges, and elected by the voice of a free people . . . [now] came into possession of Baronies by fraud, by violence, or by the private favor of some ignorant general, under the once inferior name of king. The procedure of these new kind of Barons was worthy of this new kind of title. The causes of Justice were decided by combats, by duels, and by force of arms. The Barons theirselves . . . turned absolutely highwaymen, having built castles and strong holds to secure their plunder, and their power of plundering. This was the pure reign of the sword, in the true spirit of the lawless military. (Specimen, 34–35)

Finally, to put the seal on their degradation, the Barons “fell at last so low as to be the implicit followers of a king, the supports of arbitrary power, and the tools of a Court” (40). Such is the fallen political order we have inherited in “this infamous and abandoned period.”

Cleland’s account of the losses of democratic sovereignty and of native British justice, as embodied in the changing meanings of words, thus leads back to the “insignificance and nullity” of the present. In that respect, the aims of his philological essays are congruent with those of his letters on the latest political news: his uncovering, as he thought, of “the foundations of our present constitution and laws,” the ancient root of “our Juries, our Parliaments, and the legal limitations of the power and office of Kings” (Way, 66) gives historical weight to his call for “that great national Council . . . a free, uncorrupt Parliament” to be “properly put into Motion” and so “restore . . . Vigor to the Laws” (Pub. Adv., 8 Aug. 1765). Pessimism of the intellect, however, outweighs optimism of the will in Cleland’s work, and his idealizing retrieval of “the most admirable of all human governments” (Specimen, 33) serves mainly as a desolate reminder of “the
amazing general futility of these wretched times” (Articles, xv). Yet despite his rage against the present and his prophetic vision of Britain “sinking into all the horrors of barbarism,” there is nothing dolorous in Cleland’s late writing—not just because rage lifts his spirits, but because language, retraced to its origins, has a restorative power.

In the preface to the last of his Celtic tracts, Cleland writes that “not a few of my readers” have told him of their surprise that, “anticipating nothing but dry, grammatical discussions, they had found an entertainment, the more pleasing for its being so little expected” (Articles, vi–vii).46 This attests not only to his authorial skill but to the nature of the inquiry itself: the effect of etymology is “to give a soul to every word” and to “substitute the spirit of picturesc definition to the dead letter of acceptance by rote” (vii–viii). Unlike the Dictionary of Love, in which he exposed the gap between the “just value” (viii) and “apparent significance” (ix) of words in the denatured milieu of “modern gallantry” (x), Cleland’s goal in the etymological essays is to see past the apparent arbitrariness or conventionality of words as signifiers and so reclaim their “souls”—which are not supernatural but poetic. In The Way to Things by Words he writes that “the words we at present make use of, and understand only by common agreement, assume a new air and life in the understanding, when you trace them to their radicals, where you find every word strongly stamped with nature; full of energy, meaning, character, painting, and Poetry” (23). Cleland’s theory of language runs counter to the axiom that language is a system of difference (between signifier and signified, between one signifier and another); it is, rather, a system of likenesses: words lead to things, things to words. “Where the derivation is known,” he asserts, “a word strikes immediately the imagination: otherwise it needs for its apprehension the remembrance of the public agreement to understand it in a certain sense” (Articles, viii). The social agreement to understand words in a conventional or habitual sense blinds us to their inherent plenitude of “energy, meaning, character, painting, and Poetry”—qualities “stamped” in them by nature. Words, he writes in another version of this theoretical claim, “are not merely arbitrary signs, but are, in their original formation, big with meaning, emphatic and picturesque” (Way, 24). To return to this “original formation,” or what he calls elsewhere the “primordial signification” of words (Articles, 40), is to unveil the thing in the word, in the very shape of the word: there is not, he asserts, “a single word in any language on the globe, that is purely arbitrary; no, nor so much as a single letter, or form of a letter” (Way, 87). This is why the word retraced to its origins “strikes immediately the imagination” and why,
amid the squalor of late eighteenth-century Britain, words are the only source of hope left: however tarnished by misuse and the corruption of manners, they still preserve some trace of their lost original “energy [and] meaning.”

The three Celtic studies Cleland eventually published were only “sketches” or “specimens” of the magnum opus he originally envisioned. Both the Specimen and the Additional Articles end with a sales pitch for their readers to subscribe to that work in progress and thus support its completion. It was the only subscription scheme Cleland ever undertook, and it was unsuccessful—or at any rate “The Celtic Retrieved, by the Analitic Method, or Reduction to Radicals” was never published. That work—to be “printed in two volumes quarto, on a very good paper and type, at the price of two guineas” (Specimen, 231)—would have comprised

First. A Vocabulary of the Celtic radicals, on the analytic and synthetic plan of the Bramins Sanscort; authenticating every word, by a competent number of examples drawn from various languages.

Second. A Grammar, containing general rules of the synthetic method, explaining the manner of formation or growth of various languages, antient and modern, out of these roots; the whole mechanism of language, and especially of our own.

Third. An etymological Glossary of such words and proper names in the Greek, Latin, and other languages, particularly the English, as may . . . lead to some interesting discovery, or corroborate some doubtful point. (Way, 88–89)

As the three works Cleland did publish, amounting to some four hundred pages, were only fragments of the imagined whole, the project was heroically or madly ambitious. In addition to mapping, in the first and second parts, “the whole mechanism of language” in all its evolutionary profusion, he aimed in the third (of which the specimens he did publish would have formed but part) to provide “curious explanations of certain obscure points of mythology, of history, of geography, with the genuine reason of names of countries, of men, of things, so as to extirpate a multitude of popular mistakes, and substitute truth to false opinion” (Specimen, 230). The effect of these discoveries would be to set our understanding of our own history, culture, and political institutions on a new footing. To know what “the legal limitations of the power and office of Kings” once were, or how the “Sovereign authority” of the commons was embodied “purely democratic[ally]” in the ancient Par-ley-mots, is a step toward the possibility of radically—from the roots—remaking the present social order. This is the prophetic burden of “A Briton.”

Yet even though he was soliciting subscriptions to “The Celtic Retrieved” as
late as 1769, Cleland had been signaling for some time that he knew he would never complete it. The advertisement to *The Way to Things* begins by acknowledging that he has “interrupted my application to this study, with little or no probability of my ever resuming it” (i–ii), and ends with the figure of a dying tree, in which he condenses both his own failing health and the “general neglect and state of languor” of literature in his day. It will not have been “quite a labor in vain,” he writes, “this attempt to procure a useful produce from a hitherto-barren part of a tree, the whole of which, root and branch, is itself perishing with the cold of the season,” if “the few in whom a love of literature” persists “do justice to my intention” (vi–vii). His health was not so failing that he didn’t live twenty-three more years, and the relative success of *The Way to Things* encouraged him to ready two further volumes for publication, including the dense and substantial *Specimen*. But he was well aware of the likelihood, verging on certainty, that he would never reach the end of his project.

A sense of Cleland’s own mortality runs through *The Way to Things by Words*, most strikingly in passages where he likens his authorial project to a journey. In one he writes, “Nor is it without some regret that I see myself cruelly compelled, instead of the torch I proposed to carry usefully into the darkest depths of the remotest antiquity, to offer only this poor rush-light, whose feeble glimpses serve less to remove the obscurity than to make it remarkable” (24). Here the journey is subterranean, a kind of spelunking, and while he falls short of his ambitious end of taking away the darkness, the “feeble glimpses” of his “poor rush-light” attest to not only his frailty but his bravery in facing the historical abyss. He is an explorer, a pioneer pointing the way for others to follow—a conceit he returns to at the end of the work. There, he compares his progress to that of a solitary walker searching for secure “footing on this perfidious ground that was at every step sinking under me” (88). “A few truths,” he writes,

> encouraged me to believe I was got on the right road; the satisfaction at which, made me some amends for the frequency of my falls; and thus I stumbled on, till I got upon what I have imagined safer ground, though still far, far short . . . of the end I had proposed to myself . . . I offer here a summary view, in order to point out, according to the best of my conception, the way in which I was stopped short, so that in this indication I merely make the figure of a finger-post, sticking where I am set fast, and pointing out the road, in which I have no more the power to stir a step. (88)

The figural shift in this passage from stumbling, struggling pioneer to mute fingerpost is jarring, even comic, turning him from a heroic figure into a thing
that mocks the human form. Powerless to carry on, fated to point to the promised land he can never reach, he is like Moses on Pisgah, to whom the last words his god speaks are “I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither” —whereupon Moses dies. This tragic intimation haunts the essay’s final image, which adopts Fanny Hill’s pet metaphor, of life as a ship’s voyage. But whereas Fanny is herself the ship, and by the end is happily, even smugly “snug into port” (187), Cleland is a solitary mariner, “out of sight of a looked-out for land” (90). Of his “port of destination,” he writes that “were I even as near to it as I presume I am, I never now expect to reach [it]; but leaving these lights, in the good faith of their not being false ones, I sincerely wish a better voyage to more fortunate adventurers.” His only consolation, in keeping with his Mosaic unfulfillment, is also prophetic, reckoning his own failure as the condition of another adventurer’s success. But even this is uncertain, for those who come after him will also be “embark[ing] on a sea, so infamous for innumerable wrecks” (Articles, viii).

In Cleland’s late work, the “wretched condition” of Britain is figurally associated with the weariness and fragility of his own body: both are hurtling toward “the consummation of our own ruin, already too far advanced” (Pub. Adv., 21 July 1787). Similarly, both his own authorial career and literature in general are in a “state of languor . . . perishing with the cold of the season” (Way, vi–vii). The most he can show for his life’s efforts are the feeble glimpses of a “poor rush-light,” which only make the surrounding darkness more visible. It is telling that in his last major works Cleland returns to the figural landscape of Fanny Hill’s Memoirs, with their phallic maypoles and “antient sturdy barons,” and their governing metaphor of the perilous voyage: it is as if his authorial career has come full circle, returned to its point of origin. Not Moses, then, but the sailor Odysseus. Cleland himself had of course reached the “port[s] of destination” of his actual voyages, to Bombay, Lisbon, Carolina, but had returned from each of them disillusioned, having to start again from zero. So while he deploys the figure of the voyage, he also, in other passages, calls the efficacy of voyages, literal and metaphorical, into question. At the end of the Specimen, for example, he writes, “if it be true, that, to know things rightly and solidly, they must be traced to their origin, we have, surely, hitherto, not taken the best road, in seeking that origin, every where but where it was to be found, precisely at home, in Britain itself” (219). Hence his adoption of “A Briton” as his own authorial name and his identification of the British Druids as the inventors of law, literature, language. The Druids have died out, but something of their original spirit survives, especially here, “at home, in Britain”; and as “A Briton,” Cleland
lays claim to it. In that light, it’s intriguing that on the Specimen’s last page he writes, apropos of nothing, “It is not even impossible, that a long-destroyed Abby (I mean in the Druidical manner of abbies) might, in remote ages, have stood where the Savoy now stands, which may be a corruption of S’Abby or Z’Abby, the habitation of a Druid Soph or Head” (218). As it happens, Cleland himself had lived in the Savoy for years, and was almost certainly living there when he wrote those words.48 There he waits, the last scion of the Druids. The search for origins has led him to this room where he begins to write his discoveries down.