

'Or else she were alone':  
Infinity Discourse and the Ethics of Counting

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Through a new interpretation of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), a Romantic work self-styled as the first book of experimental poetry, my current book project, *Counting Nowhere: Romanticism and the Failure of Futurity*, demonstrates that infinity is the lost category of Romantic aesthetics and asks how that realization might help us understand the environmental humanities as neo-Romantic.

Infinity, now widely regarded as a stable mathematical concept (with a few dissenters), had no concrete definition until the end of the nineteenth century. Enlightenment- and Romantic-era infinity discourse, which flourished across the fields of mathematics, philosophy, and theology, took up the question of whether one could know, use, or talk about infinity at all. Was calculus a breakthrough, or heresy, or just bad math? In an era before strict disciplinary boundaries, debates about infinity, and the related concepts of counting and zero, percolated in the writings of minor theologians as in the treatises of major Enlightenment minds.

My contribution to the workshop took up the problem of how to discuss Malthus within this frame. Triangulating readings of his seminal *An Essay on the Principle of Population* by Maureen McLane, Frances Ferguson, and Mary Poovey, the paper trained its eye on the lyrical ballad "The Mad Mother." What might it mean to find Malthus's mad mother in a Wordsworth poem that is also about numerical addition? Can we understand the lyrical ballad as intervening in a discussion about biosocial reproduction among resource scarcity? I drew on fictions by both Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley to make this case.