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### PROJECT

## Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem)

This project addresses the intersection between everyday life and a mere two hundred lines of poetry: Felicia Hemans' "Casabianca" (1826), Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751) and Charles Wolfe's "Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna" (1817). All three poems, thanks to their presence in school textbooks, were memorized and recited, whether willingly or unwillingly, in whole or in part, by significant proportions of the population in English-speaking countries for substantial stretches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In consequence, these fifty quatrains carried the potential to touch and alter the worlds of the huge numbers of people who took them to heart. The book's three chapters are constituted as case studies of vital connections between my chosen poems and individuals, communities, discourses, beliefs and behaviors - primarily in Great Britain, but also, at certain junctures, in the United States. The project as a whole aims to make a strong argument for the social and executive powers of the individual literary work.

### Recommended Reading

Robson, Catherine. "Standing on the Burning Deck: Poetry, Performance, History." *PMLA* 120 (2005): 148-162.

- . "Where Heaves the Turf: Thomas Hardy and the Boundaries of the Earth." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32 (2004): 495-503.

- . *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001 (hardback); 2003 (paperback).

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### COLLOQUIUM, 02.12.2008

## Memorization and Memorialization: 'The Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna'

The core of my project addresses the intersection between everyday life and a mere two hundred lines of poetry: Felicia Hemans' "Casabianca" (1826), Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751) and Charles Wolfe's "Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna" (1817). All three works, widely read in schools and continuously reprinted in anthologies, were memorized and recited, whether willingly or unwillingly, in whole or in part, by significant proportions of the population in English-speaking countries for substantial stretches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In consequence, these verses carried the potential to touch and alter the worlds of the huge numbers of people who took them to heart. This book, provisionally entitled "Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem," examines the vital connections that were formed between my chosen poems and

individuals, communities, discourses, beliefs and behaviors - primarily in Great Britain, but also, at specific junctures, in the United States of America. In all three case-studies, the themes of the given poem and the peculiarities of its movement through time and space determine the stories told and the histories explored. At the same time, each chapter contributes to the book's general examination of the phenomenon of mass poetry memorization in two national cultures, and focuses on a different phase in what could be thought of as the life-cycle of the memorized poem. The first chapter concentrates upon recitation as a physical experience for relatively young children; the second addresses some of the later psychological dimensions inherent within adolescents' and adults' internalization of a poem; and the third considers adults only, asking under what circumstances a work long held within the self could come to deliver new and urgent meaning.

This presentation draws upon the third chapter, and seeks to connect that sudden vivification of a memorized poem to a study of how works of literature inside individual minds might have contributed to material changes in the world at large. Today "The Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna" is all but forgotten, but it was once a schoolroom standard on two sides of the Atlantic, rising to prominence in American elementary education in the 1840s. I examine the various ways in which lines and phrases from these verses were explicitly or implicitly cited by people caught up in the bloody turmoil of the American Civil War, the conflict which first witnessed the widespread development of state-sponsored practices to commemorate the corpses of common soldiers. I argue that the presence of Wolfe's poem within the hearts and heads of ordinary people played its part in creating the social expectations that led to the establishment of the National Cemeteries in the United States, and thus, in due course, the mass memorialization of World War I.