

“A Dim and Undetermined Sense of Unknown Modes of Being”: Wordsworth, *The Prelude* and the Beginnings of Modernity

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i) It seems to me that one of the more significant consequences of some recent French philosophy — particularly the work of Françoise Proust, Alain Badiou and, to a lesser extent, and less explicitly, Jacques Rancière — has been the emergence of a certain theory and indeed a history of modernity. This is predicated on an understanding of the condition of modernity as *intermittent*. Modernity happens. It started happening recently, in what are historically quite recent terms. But it does not have to happen, and does not happen often. Modernity appears on the basis of the *tabula rasa*; that is, it is distinguished by its conviction of the possibility of pure, aleatory, originary historical beginnings, by interruptions of existing series and decisive inaugurations of new ones. By the same token, it is a question of the event, the unexpected, unpredictable occurrence or arrival of the new.

The event is what makes the modern modern. Badiou’s account of the logic of the event is pertinent, here, if not the only route we might follow. Being is an infinite multiplicity. It is so self-evidently and banally. However, though philosophy has often fantasized an experience of Being ‘beyond all structure’ (*L’Être*, 34), in fact, there isn’t one: we encounter Being only in situations. Being is always already situated; it has always already entered the realm of consistency. Any given situation is a structured presentation of unstructured multiplicity. The banal infinity of Being is founded on the void. In a sense, it is even another name for the void. The void underlies all things, is omnipresent but a ‘spectre’, a ghostly figure wandering through all presentation (111). Situations not only harbour the void within themselves; they are always ‘imperilled’ by it (109). There is always the possibility of a catastrophe in presentation and an actual manifestation of inconsistency. There is a wobble in Being, as it were, which may always give rise to the catastrophic sequence, the ‘explosive’ arrival of the event (‘avènement événementiel’, 90).

The void, then, is definitively in excess of any given situation. The possibility of an ‘irruption’ of inconsistency into the situation therefore always exists. An event arises as the inconsistency of Being fractures the consistencies of presentation (*Manifeste*, 89). As it does so, it breaks up any illusion that infinity has a limit. Once it occurs, the irruption can always ‘propagate itself’ (*L’Être*, 90). Hence ‘there is newness in Being, a thesis antagonistic to the maxim from *Ecclesiastes*: “*Nihil novi sub sole*”’ (231). The event is a ‘hazardous supplement’ to ‘the indifferent multiplicity of Being’ (*Manifeste*, 89, *Conditions*, 177). It is an aleatory fragment, the chance occurrence of something that had no existence beforehand, could not be predicted or foreseen and had no prior name. The event comes as close as is possible to repeating ‘the initial state of things’ (17). It is an expression of the void within the particular situation to hand. The ‘initial state’ of this situation is precisely its conjuncture with the void.

The event is the means by which the truth of newness enters the world. But, and this is cardinal: such interruptions of given situations do not happen often. In Badiou’s philosophical system, the event has only ‘a rare existence’ (*Ethics*, 60; italics mine). What of the world of repetitive series that the event arrives to interrupt, and that reasserts itself in its wake? For Badiou, the event is the rare source of truth. Furthermore, the world of events and the new series they inaugurate is the sole source of value. What, then, of the commonplace world into which the event breaks? From the point of view of those caught up in an event, the situations to which events are counterposed and into which they break constitute a negligible historical residue. Badiou does not theorize this residue as such. It is antithetical to what he resolutely maintains is, like Nietzsche’s, a purely affirmative philosophy. I call this residue ‘the remainder’. The term is my translation of ‘le reste’, a word that appears specifically in ‘Six propriétés de la vérité’, a long and difficult essay that Badiou published in two parts in 1985. In Badiou’s terms, at least, the remainder cannot strictly be characterized as a ‘dead time’ or space. But we can none the less give it an empirical identity. Indeed, we can do so with reference precisely to the events that are significant for Badiou. By implication, since events are rare, the remainder comprises and must comprise the larger part of historical experience.

Badiou’s work contains the seeds of a theory both of the beginnings of modernity and of its intermittent appearances. Take modern politics, for example. Modernity begins with the French Revolution, the first great historical experience of the void underlying established structures, and therefore of the possibility of the *tabula rasa* and radical transformation. From the Revolution onwards, modernity resolves itself into a series of major political sequences, as listed for instance in ‘Philosophie et politique’ in *Conditions*: the Montagnard convention from 1792 to 9 Thermidor (27 July 1794); 1848 to 1871 (from the *Communist Manifesto* to the defeat of the Commune); 1902-1917

(Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* to the October revolution); 1928-1949 (Mao's earliest writings to the Communist takeover in China); and 1965-1967 (the Cultural Revolution in China, 234-35). Obviously enough, such sequences do not happen often. Rancière provides a pithy summary of the point:

Politics in its specificity is rare. It is always local and occasional. Its actual eclipse is quite real, and there exists no political science capable of defining its future, any more than a political ethics exists that can make the existence of politics solely an object of will. (*La mésentente*, p. 188)

It is worth adding that, for Badiou, if modern politics subsequently emerges as a succession of rare, intermittent, discrete and finite political sequences, the aesthetic domain catches up with the political domain with the first great modern writer, Mallarmé. With the emergence of Cantor, the scientific domain catches up, too, and psychoanalysis bears witness to the emergence of modern love. Politics, art, science, love: these constitute what for Badiou are the four truth-domains. In each of them, however, rarity and intermittency are the rule. Here, precisely, it is possible to give the remainder an empirical dimension, though Badiou has no interest in doing so: it appears as the psychic destitution of lovelessness; political oppression or reaction; the victory of obscurantism over the sciences; and the failure of inspiration and the triumph of conservatism in the arts.

If Badiou's philosophy implies a theory of modernity, however, it is sketchy, because he himself has no great interest in developing it. Indeed, the price of thinking the event and writing off the remainder is in effect a decisive evacuation of history from thought. Badiou sees the event itself as founding historicity. It is the very principle of the only history that matters. History is external to the State and State representations. In this respect at least, Badiou would coincide with Walter Benjamin: history commonly lives in obscurity. Revolutions, new artistic inventions and new scientific discoveries plunge us into historicity, but history is solely a trajectory in the wake of an event. It is, not Badiou, but Françoise Proust who thinks the relationship between intermittency and the onset of modernity most cogently and effectively. For Proust as for Badiou, the French Revolution is the great historical announcement of modernity. Philosophically, however, modernity properly begins with Kant. This may seem like a surprising idea, and Proust's reading of Kant is undeniably *sui generis*. She is well aware, for example, that her case does not exactly coincide with much of what Kant actually wrote on the subject of freedom. But she suggests that an obvious gap is left in Kant's thought by the absence of any Critique of Political Reason.¹ In a sense, she seeks to make good this lack, particularly in arguing that the later, political texts written after the French Revolution, most notably 'Towards a Perpetual Peace', and parts of the later 'critical' work, especially the Analytic of the Sublime, bring to light a developing strand in Kant's thought that runs from the concept of transcendental freedom in the first Critique through a certain way of thinking reason as practice in the second.²

Kant saw the Lumières as expressing 'the chance of history beginning at last' (*Point de Passage*, 62). He is the first modern philosopher because he is the first philosopher to think the possibility of pure, absolute, originary historical beginnings. Kant's philosophy 'opens up a time we call modern' (*Kant*, p. 9). This time has by no means been and, indeed, could not conceivably be exhausted. With modernity, we also arrive at an understanding or an experience of beginnings as bearing no relation to any overarching historical narrative. Beginnings appear fitfully, 'par "intermittences"' (*La Doublure*, 12), as historical striations, like meteors in a night sky, or 'comme en pointillé', as stippings of history (*Point de passage*, 41). Historical time is not given as a whole. 'Il ne cherche aucun accomplissement': it neither anticipates nor seeks any historical fulfilment (*Kant*, 12-13). The only possible completions of time are punctual and fugitive. There is and there will be no end of history. Nor will history reveal itself in or as any awesome totality.³ The mind can no longer apprehend a historical design. The 'solar view of history', which sought to think or view history whole, from above, is definitively in ruins (*Kant*, 81). Badiou puts the point quite starkly: 'from now on, we depend on the event' ('L'Être, l'événement et la militance', p. 20).

ii) Situations, repetitive series, the void, the *tabula rasa*, rarity, intermittency, the event, the remainder: taken together, these terms provide an important structure for thinking about Wordsworth. Wordsworth seems to me to be a very great poet, probably the greatest of the nineteenth century, but for reasons that are not exactly those we are most frequently given. He is the great poet of the onset of modernity, above all, in the *Prelude* in its various versions. He belongs with the French Revolution and Kant as one of Proust's great founding modern figures; or rather, he both belongs and does not belong with them. For to say that Wordsworth is the great poet of the beginnings of modernity is not the same as to say that he is the first great modern poet. Wordsworth is the first great literary diagnostician of modernity. But, in a gesture that is foundational, classic and in a sense definitive, notably, perhaps, for

the history of modern English culture, he both affirms and resists what he diagnoses. He is both drawn to and repelled by or in flight from modernity. Indeed, rather than describing him as the first great poet of modernity, it might be better to call him the first great writer to live out modernity in some of its most significant contradictions. These would include a fierce will to oppose modernity, a kind of horror of modernity which, (*pace* Badiou and Proust), may finally be inextricable from modernity itself, and is therefore also modern. This essay both faithfully follows Badiou's and Proust's understanding of modernity, and seeks to bend it to include its opposite. What follows will be a brief and elementary account of an intricate, complex mesh of subtle differentiations the full scope of which would take a book to unravel. That they properly require that kind of attention, however, is testimony to Wordsworth's extraordinary faculty for registering the implications of a seismic cultural shift. In certain important respects, the extreme difficulty of the intellectual, aesthetic, historical, political, and cultural predicament with which Wordsworth struggles so profoundly and at such length remains very much with us today.

For Wordsworth, as for Kant in Proust's account of him, the prime instance of modernity and stimulus to modern thought is of course the French Revolution. I would accept the argument of New Historicists like Marjorie Levinson and Alan Liu that the question of the Revolution is a principal driving force in *The Prelude*, if not exactly their suggestion that other features of the poem are often mystifications of historical and political circumstance. On the one hand, *The Prelude* has an obvious, linear logic, its meditation on the growth of the poet's soul. But there is a secondary logic to it, too, a logic which, as is evident in the political content of Wordsworth's revisions between 1805 and 1850, like the account of Chartreuse (1850, VI, 418-88), or the paean to Burke (1850, VII, 512-43), was important to him, and remained so. This is the logic of the poem's autobiographical narrative as a meditation on or set of responses to the promise and subsequent failure of the Revolution. Here, of course, the key initial passage is Wordsworth's account of his tour through France in 1790 (1805, VI, 338-425). As 'mighty forms' seize the young poet's 'youthful fancy', the experience of a historical event (in my sense) becomes an event in itself (1805, VI, 347). Revolutionary exultation — the sheerly new experience whereby 'joy of one/Is joy of tens of millions' — is presented precisely as a matter of the *tabula rasa*, with 'human nature seeming born again' (1805, VI, 354, 359-60).

Rancière has commented on this very passage at some length. He notes that it supplies what is effectively a specific 'organization of the visible', 'the invention of a political landscape' (*Courts voyages*, 18-19). The countryside itself seems literally different:

Among sequestered villages we walked
And found benevolence and blessedness
Spread like a fragrance everywhere, like spring
That leaves no corner of the land untouched.
(1805, VI, 367-70)

But the month is July. The explosion of the political event requires an aesthetic event commensurate with it. In effect, it provokes a revolutionary mode of imagination and perception. Here the aesthetic sphere promises renewal in keeping with and as a consequence of transformations in the political realm. France now stands 'upon the top of golden hours' (1805, VI, 353). As for both Badiou and Proust, the event promotes new dispositions, not only of space, but of time. It ushers in a radical break with a mundane temporality. In doing so, it appears to transform the natural order itself.

This transformation of Nature might seem so unWordsworthian as to prompt the suspicion that the lines are a comparatively early sign of the revolutionary perversion of Nature. But such an argument would be quite false to the tone of the passage. In any case, Wordsworth is quite explicit: as far as his own response is concerned, it is precisely the power of Nature that makes it possible for the 'mighty forms' to seize his fancy at all (1805, VI, 347). Nature and the Revolution are at one in this, as is borne out by a specific echo of Book I in Book VI that I shall return to in a moment. The association of Nature with the Revolution might appear bizarrely to equate its workings with its own unnatural reversal. But this is surely the case only if we assume that Nature is a single, unitary whole. There are extremely good reasons for that assumption, since Wordsworth says it himself, and commentators have often underlined it. Though Jonathan Bate grants at least a limited weight to Alan Liu's historicist claim that 'there is no nature except as it is constituted by acts of political definition', the ecological turn in Wordsworth criticism nonetheless tends to return to the view of Nature as unified (Bate, 18-19, Liu, 104). But what exactly does it mean to assert this view? Or, perhaps better: what force can any assertion of the unity of Nature have, other than a transcendent, in effect religious one? It is finally nothing more than an archaic insistence. Whilst Wordsworth's assertion of the unity of Nature is

certainly crucial to him, and I shall come back to it at the end of this essay, it is much less interesting than the account of Nature in *The Prelude* that we liberate once we set the idea of unity to one side.

In fact, what repeatedly emerges in the *Prelude*, above all when considered in its entirety, is not a unified concept of Nature, but a representation of 'the diverse manner in which nature works' (*Five-Book Prelude*, 'The Analogy Passage', 10). Like France, as Alan Bewell has argued, Nature in *The Prelude* is an unstable entity. Nature, its operations and effects are all disparate, rich and manifold. They include a principle of self-transformation, a self-transformative work. This work is made possible by what Wordsworth repeatedly tells us is the unpredictability of Nature, the revelation of Nature as in fact a groundless ground. By the same token, the multiplicity of Nature is also the multiplicity of the mind responding to it. Attempts to flatten out that multiplicity will not bear much examination, and actually just appear as single aspects or instances of it. Thus, when, in Book XI, Wordsworth asks whether his young self 'could take part in anything but admiration' of Nature, 'or be pleased/ With any thing but humbleness and love', the answer is that, as a careful reading of the earlier books amply demonstrates, he could, and was (*1805*, XI, 234-36). Similarly, in the *Five-Book Prelude*, the claim that the young Wordsworth was habitually accustomed 'to walk with Nature/magisterially' will not pass muster (*Five-Book Prelude*, III, 380-81, italics mine). Indeed, it is precisely the *Five-Book Prelude* that most strikingly exposes the real thinness of the claim, since it does not fit the assertion into a developed argument and places it right alongside the very material that contradicts it.

It should therefore not surprise us to find, as Ranci re notes, that, in Book VI at least, the sovereignty of Nature and the sovereignty of the French people in the Revolution are fused. There is a degree to which the natural principle is identified, not with the principle of stability and recurrence, but with the revolutionary principle. Indeed, Wordsworth will later make this quite clear: 'the [revolutionary] events/Seemed nothing out of nature's certain course' (*1805*, IX, 252-53). Nature affords, not only the comfort of the return, but also the surprise of the unexpected emergence. Indeed, this has been evident since the very first book of the *Prelude*, above all, in what is perhaps the greatest of the epiphanies or 'spots of time', the episode with the shepherd's boat (*1799*, I, 81-129). Wordsworth's claim, immediately after it, that the passage demonstrates the purifying effects of 'eternal things' even from the 'first dawn of childhood' (*1799*, I, 133-36) is patently a *post facto* gloss. The passage itself conveys a quite different impression. The cliff 'uprears' its head and comes 'striding after' the boy. The Nature at stake here is extremely volatile. It appears to have no given or established foundations, and therefore to be likely to assume radically different aspects. The 'modes of being' of this Nature are neither predictable nor finally knowable. Here, again, as in *1805*, VI, 346-48, Nature might appear to correspond to modernity, rather than resisting it:

And after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
There was a darkness—call it solitude,
Or blank desertion—no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
But huge and mighty forms that do not live
Like living men moved slowly through my mind
By day, and were the trouble of my dreams.
(*1799*, I, 119-29)

This extraordinary passage needs to be read in the context of each of the different versions of *The Prelude* in turn. In particular, what Wordsworth means by 'a dim and undetermined sense/Of unknown modes of being' takes on shifting implications. On the one hand, there might seem to be a parenthetical 'as yet' before 'unknown' and 'undetermined'. The experience belongs among what Wordsworth will later refer to as the 'things...yet not shaped' (*1805*, VII, 515). The 'modes of being' are 'unknown' and the poet's sense of them 'undetermined' at the time of the episode, and even in 1799, as they will not be in 1804, 1805 and 1850, when he will have come to understand their true significance. 'Undetermined' is a word that Wordsworth will later specifically apply to his youth (*1805*, VII, 63). Yet the 'darkness' of which the poet tells us, the experience of 'solitude' or 'desertion', of the falling away of the familiar: all these suggest an experience of a void, the *tabula rasa*, an event which is not to be interpreted, understood or reasoned away. If the passage has a 'primary' content, it is surely this event. To 'shape' this experience would also conceivably be to retreat from it. At any rate, the passage Book VI that I quoted from earlier actually echoes the one from Book I that I have just quoted. In both

cases, the poet's imagination is seized by 'mighty forms' that seem initially obscure to him, that can only be determined in an 'unknown' future (1805, VI, 347).

iii) Given the concerns of this essay, we might go on to look at the relation between a 'primary' and a 'secondary' content in a variety of the epiphanies or 'spots of time' in *The Prelude*. We might ask how far what is at stake in them is a kind of residual modernity, in Proust's, Badiou's and my sense; how far that modernity is expressed in, extended into, resisted or disguised or complicated by other features, and by the second thought involved in its representation 'after the event'. Here, however, I want rather to consider Wordsworth's understanding of modernity as Janus-faced, and his own relationship to the ambivalences in question. So far, it may seem as though I have adopted the tiresomely familiar strategy of covert radicalisation. This involves unearthing a supposedly latent radical content in a work that, on the surface, very clearly defies such a reading. However, that is not my purpose. Certainly, I want partly to understand Wordsworth as a modern. But that is only within an expanded definition of modernity of which we are only now beginning to glimpse the need, and which recognizes and thinks through the relationship between modernity as promise, modernity as catastrophe, and the anti-modernity that modernity itself incessantly produces. It is in this context that Wordsworth is instructive; indeed, there are few if any great cases more instructive than his.

To get the point straight, it is important to take account, not only of Wordsworthian exhilaration, but of Wordsworthian disappointment. Wordsworth ends up disappointed by modernity. The forms of this disappointment have been pervasively and repeatedly evident since Wordsworth, and are still all around us. Wordsworth is disappointed by the fact that the event has a remainder, that event and remainder are indissociable from one another. The disappointment has several aspects. The most obviously relevant one is disappointment in the Revolution. This hangs over when it is not the explicit theme of much of Books VII-XI of *The Prelude*. Rancière thinks that Wordsworth's experiences in France, though richly productive, always take place on the basis of a literary form of middle-class tourism. This would make the meaning of his disappointment rather shallow, because his enthusiasm would then seem to have been rather shallow in the first place. But what this argument ignores is the Wordsworth who meditates on the stone plucked from the debris of the Bastille (1805, VIII, 63-71), not idly, but in genuine perplexity at how complicated the political issue appears to have become since the Revolution. As the Bastille scene shows, Wordsworth's political disappointment is by no means either sudden or unequivocal. Rancière ignores just how protracted and how winding is the thought to which the progress of the Revolution gives rise.

As X, 209-21 makes clear, even in the 1850 version of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth did not doubt that the Revolution had been right. The problems it had generated were not intrinsic to the Revolution in itself. They appeared because 'revolutionary power' is by definition unstable, and can always therefore be sent off course (1805, VIII, 48-49). The Revolution had two aspects: on the one hand, modern renewal, on the other hand, modern violence, or what Wordsworth calls 'violence abrupt' (1805, IX, 472). The trouble with modern violence is that, when it explodes, it does not exhaust itself in the explosion. Wordsworth's great modern insight — his before it is anyone else's — is that 'The earthquake is not satisfied at once' (1805, X, 74). The 'concussions' of modernity are repeated 'day by day/and felt through every nook of town and field' (1805, IX, 182-83). Modernity does not move forward at a measured and deliberate pace. Nor is it 'content to barter short-lived pangs/For a paradise of ages' (1805, X, 320-21). It proceeds erratically, shock by shock, as Walter Benjamin will later say of modern Second Empire Paris, borrowing from Baudelaire.

'Shock' is a Wordsworthian term before it is a Baudelairean or a Benjaminian one. It appears repeatedly in *The Prelude*. The Revolution develops as a series of shocks. With the Terror, the cleansers of the Augean stable are themselves cleansed. Modernity becomes a mad cyclonic force, a hectic dervishes' rout, like a child with a toy windmill who 'runs amain/To make it whirl the faster' (1805, X, 337-45). There is an irreducible agony in this: Wordsworth dismisses any facile, reactionary scorn. It is worth recalling that, laudably, even the 1850 *Prelude* is still excoriating Pitt and his like, who themselves 'make the guardian crook of law/A tool of murder', only more secretly and perfidiously than does Robespierre (1850, XI, 52-73). So, too, the poet challenges 'the scoffers in their pride' who urge us to "Behold the harvest which we reap/From popular government and equality" (1805, X, 430-32): if the harvest was disastrous, look first to the seed-bed. If modernity insidiously strips us of its very gifts, it also continues to give as it takes away. Thus the poet finds himself swaying between celebrating the triumph of the 'herculean Commonwealth' and denouncing those happy to commit 'enormities' in the name of liberty (1805, X, 346-64). The promise of the Revolution does not simply lead to inevitable disaster. The trouble is that, with the Revolution, modernity decisively breaks with all foundations, but the destruction of foundations itself gives rise to an accelerating series of

breaks. The break, or the production of the break, becomes a good in itself. Thus the Moebius-strip logic of the new modernity binds promise and disaster together, inseparably.

To put the point in the most general terms: modernity appears in an acutely paradoxical form, as both event and remainder, as transformation and the virtually endless, repetitive series that Walter Benjamin called 'catastrophe in permanence' ('Central Park', *passim*). The paradigm for this may indeed be the French Revolution and the Terror. But the same paradox is evident in Wordsworth's treatment of all the central themes of *The Prelude*. Significantly, the word 'desertion' appears in the accounts both of the boat episode and the Terror (1805, X, 379). Both exemplify the modern rule of intermittency: 'the desert hath green spots, the sea/Small islands in the midst of stormy waves' (1805, X, 440-42). Above all, perhaps, the workings of the modern imagination turn out to be intermittent. Modern poetry reveals itself to be a transitory gift, a 'deep/But short-lived uproar', breaking forth, flowing, then drying up (1805, VII, 4-12). The recognition involved, here, is inseparable from Wordsworth's experience of the Revolution. Inspiration may occasionally overtake the poet, and indeed humanity. But it is also ineluctably subject to various forms of declension: failure, loss, betrayal, travesty, mockery and so on. Since he is a poet, Wordsworth chiefly engages with this problem in poetic and not political terms, nor in other terms that he might have chosen, like the experience of love. The question of the appropriate response to the modern onset of intermittency becomes what is perhaps the great theme of *The Prelude*, one that, whilst principally aesthetic, never stops being relevant to other spheres of human life.

Hence the power and fascination of the *Five-Book Prelude* of 1804, that intermediate point between the two-part *Prelude* of 1799 and the thirteen-book *Prelude* of 1805. For the *Five-Book Prelude* offers a uniquely succinct testimony to the new, anxious insecurity of the modern poet as no other version exactly does. The condition of modern poetry is intermittency:

gleams of light
Flash often from the east, then disappear
And mock me with a sky that ripens not
Into a steady morning.
(*Five-Book Prelude*, I, 132-35)

Dampier's fleeting glimpses of sunlight serve as a metaphor for the poet's perception of the unreliability of his gift: 'the hiding-places of my powers/Seem open; I approach, and then they close' (*Five-Book Prelude* V, 339-40).⁴ In poetry as in love and politics, a promise seems inextricable from the experience of '[a] melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown' (*Five-Book Prelude*, II, 446). The predicament is central to the *Five-Book Prelude*. Wordsworth responds to it energetically, notably with a cluster of epiphanies. The trouble is that the evocation of the 'spots of time' and the promotion of the theory that accompanies them confirm the rule of intermittency even as they seek to counter it. Intermittency haunts the very act of recollection, since to recall 'spots of time' is also to recall the shock of their emergence (and their disappearance). Wordsworth would like to assert that the 'steady cadence' of nature underpins the moods of the *Five-Book Prelude* (I, 278). The poem repeatedly makes abstract claims to that effect. But the logic it actually tends to assert, and from which it cannot escape, is that crisis, uncertainty and intermittency are the pre-condition of any local, discoverable stabilities.

In its most sobering form, Wordsworth's vision of modern intermittency bleakly counts the human cost of 'catastrophe in permanence'. The theme of modern loss is conveyed, if (as a specifically modern theme) somewhat obliquely, in the story of Vaudracour and Julia. This story is an important instance, because it shows that what is true of politics and poetry is also the case with love. Once again, the lovers initially experience the world as if it had been reborn. Again, too, this experience finds expression in a transformation of natural time: 'Earth lived in one great presence of the spring' (1805, IX, 586). Vaudracour dreams of a paradise swarming 'with enchantment' (IX, 594). But paradise fades, not because it has always been an illusion in any case, but according to the modern logic of interruption. Vaudracour cannot brook this. He and Julia are destroyed by the uprootings, breaks and ruptures that are part of the logic of modern love. Vaudracour himself is wasted away by modernity, and finally become a mute ghost of his modern self.

But the great image of this spiritual devastation, this ghostliness, the admonitory form *par excellence* who casts so long a shadow over *The Prelude*, and indeed over modernity at its very outset, is the discharged soldier (1805, IV, 400-504). The discharged soldier is one of Wordsworth's great bequests to modernity, and that in spite of the fact that the poet himself finally retreats from the awesome portentousness of his own figure. With the soldier, he inaugurates a major tradition that turns the ex-serviceman into the paradigm of an experience of modernity as 'catastrophe in permanence'. As a result of Peter Barham's extraordinary work, for example, we now know how, during the Great War,

this figure came to loom so large in the British popular imagination that a whole culture was forced to transform its institutions. We know of the effect of the figure on American institutions (not least, Hollywood) after Vietnam. By a poignant and relevant irony, in the period which sees the continuation of the British military presence in Iraq, on the one hand, and the closing of the last military hospital in Britain on the other, the very same haunting figure is appearing yet again, notably in the contemporary British media.

Wordsworth grasps that the soldier returning from service abroad is a modern archetype in that he is constituted through a series of shocks — deracination, subsequent displacement, extreme conditions, modern warfare, a return to a world grown strange — that also virtually erase what he might once have taken to be his identity. He is a peculiarly vivid image of catastrophe in permanence. Indeed, he is so striking as such that the poet himself is acutely shocked on first sight of him, and recoils or ‘slips back’ into hiding. Wordsworth’s soldier is a supremely uncanny figure. Here, if not for the first time in *The Prelude* — recalling, not only Douglas Wilson’s work on Wordsworth and the unconscious, but Nicholas Royle’s brilliant analysis of the historical coincidence of modernity and the idea of the uncanny — a distinctively modern uncanny appears. The soldier’s uncanniness, however, is only distantly related to, say, that of the ‘huge cliff’ uprearing its head in the boat episode. There is no trace of sublimity in it. Wordsworth makes the distinction quite explicit:

Solemn and sublime

He might have seemed, but that in all he said
There was a strange half-absence, and a tone
Of weakness and indifference, as of one
Remembering the importance of his theme
But feeling it no longer.

(1805, IV, 473-78)

The poet will finally hug to himself the soldier’s closing declaration of his ‘trust...in the God of Heaven’. It will allow him (the poet) to depart undisturbed, with ‘quiet heart’ (1805, IV, 494, 504). But of course the soldier’s persuasion of the insignificance of *all* his statements as I have just quoted it must logically apply equally to his closing declaration. This is as it should be: nowhere would *The Prelude* offer a more empty and unconvincing consolation. So patently hollow does it sound that it sends shock-waves right through the poem’s Christian *dispositif*. The discharged soldier is beyond all facile rescue. His modern experience has far outstripped his ability to bring it to terms. He is the first great representation of the authentically modern casualty. If there can be, ever, some slim hope of his redemption, it lies with Benjamin’s Angel of History, as so famously evoked in the ninth of the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’.

(iv) In the end, for all the poet’s and the commentators’ protestations to the contrary, Nature in *The Prelude* is a modern Nature, and constitutionally ambivalent. Nature is beneficent. It is what sustains and ennoble us in the teeth of this world. It confers a unity apart from the banality of infinite difference. But it is also a source of ‘dismal’ and ‘terrifying’ experience whose ‘awful powers and forms’ do not appear to be clearly distinct from those that make men suffer (1805, VIII, 213, 355-56). There are times when ‘the storms and elements’ and ‘human life’ come together to breed ‘an indefinite terror and dismay’ (1805, VIII, 659-61). The coincidence of ‘wild blasts’ of inspirational music with ‘terrible events’ is evident in Nature as it is in the Revolution (1805, X, 419-20). Indeed, the powers at work in the boat episode seem ambivalent in exactly this way. In any case, Wordsworth may tell us that what enables him to ‘join things’, to sustain his conception of a single and unitary Nature, is ‘the light of knowledge’ (1805, VIII, 609-10). But he also tells us that we know no more, either of ourselves or the universe, than is emblemized in the blind beggar propped against the wall in London, ‘Wearing a written paper, to explain/The story of the man, and who he was’ (1805, VII, 610-23).

Wordsworth’s ambivalence about knowledge is of a piece with the ambivalence of his treatment of the relationship between child and adult. Of course, one of his cardinal principles is that the child is father to the man (note the temporal warping, again; child fathers man as revolutionary summer becomes spring). The poet repeatedly insists on setting ‘The budding rose above the rose full-blown’ (1805, X, 705). Yet the consequences of doing this are acutely problematic for him, not least, politically. Hence the opposite theme also appears: the man, too, fathers the child. In ‘shaping’ childhood, he creates a version of himself as child that resembles and is connected to but not identical with the first one. The implication of this is that nature cannot be unequivocally valued at the expense of culture. Not surprisingly, therefore, faith in the already given (God, Nature) is not the only faith expressed in the poem. Even in the text of 1850, what continues to resist the almost overpowering

weight of human 'debasement' and 'misery' is trust 'in what we *may* become' (1850, VIII, 645-50). But that possibility remains an unknown mode of being that is also undetermined by what is already given as and in Nature. It is a matter of 'the forward chaos of futurity' (1850, V, 349). Hence the importance of the poet is to some extent prophetic: poets 'Have each for his peculiar dower a sense/by which he is enabled to perceive/Something unseen before' (1805, XII, 303-5).

In the end, we know that, unlike Baudelaire, Wordsworth could not live with modernity. It was too paradoxical a mixture. The well-known, key passage comes around 1805, X, 878-903. Book X has been fraught with an extraordinary if conflicted, meditative intensity. The poet struggles repeatedly with his memories of a brief period when 'the whole earth' wore the beauty of promise (1805, X, 701). He even struggles with a sense that that beauty is still not dead for him ('yet I feel the aspiration', 1805, X, 839-40). At the same time, he is also progressively denouncing the abstraction of reason and Frenchmen 'become oppressors in their turn' (1805, X, 791-92). At 878-903, however, he finds himself 'wearied out' by the magnificent if arduous struggle with 'contrarities' that Book X has so intently charted, and declares the end of that struggle in spiritual despair and moral crisis. Nature in one of its aspects must lead Wordsworth out of the labyrinth (though it is not certain that, in another of its aspects, Nature did not get him into the labyrinth in the first place). At all events, by the beginning of Book XII, he is (rather unconvincingly) asserting that 'now/On all sides day began to reappear' (1805, XII, 20-22).

We know what increasingly followed: conservatism, Christianity, humanism, patriotism. The declension has been well documented by John Jones, among others. Philosophically, the poet falls back on assumptions of transcendence, unity, consistency, harmony, centredness, stasis, fullness, completeness, continuity, and, of course, a detestation of 'upstart theory' (1850, VII, 529). It is tempting to apply the poet's lines to himself:

...the sun
That rose in splendour, was alive, and moved
In exultation among living clouds
Hath put his function and his glory off
And, turned into a gewgaw, a machine,
Sets like an opera phantom.
(1805, 935-40)

This, of course, is Wordsworth's response to the triumph of Napoleon. Here, certainly, a modern promise is displaced by a hollow, mimic form. The poet recognizes an almost Flaubertian bathos in the process that is specifically, wearisomely, repetitively modern. It is a bathos, however, to which he will not himself prove to be immune.

The difficulty, however, is that, as the image of the mechanism makes clear, the 'gewgaw' or mimic form is also modern. It would take a second essay to show what I take to be the case, that, in Wordsworth, for the first time, we also grasp the distinctive if sometimes liminal modernity of certain kinds of anti-modernism; and their sadness, too. It would be a mistake, however, to let the final emphasis fall on Wordsworth's slide into conventionality. He makes it very clear that he could not live with 'indecisive judgments' alone, with a life grown indeterminate and 'spongy' (*Five-Book Prelude* III, 217; 340-32). It was therefore imperative that he work to build what would become his own truths on the basis of his own particular, modern encounters with events. This required labour, an admirable and unremitting discipline, a settled sense of purpose, 'the firm, habitual quest' (*Five-Book Prelude* IV, 98). In the first instance, it is in this respect, and not philosophically, that *The Prelude* displays 'a spirit thoroughly faithful to itself' (1805, X, 147). Its descriptions of encounters with events were bound frequently to seem more riveting than the truths that appeared on their basis. That is part of the Wordsworthian risk, and does not categorically invalidate his exemplary status.

v) Yet the final emphasis should not fall on the unremitting discipline of poetic construction, either. Certainly, Wordsworth learnt that he would have to forego 'the radiant joy' of someone, like his friend Michael Beaupuy, who is caught up in and becomes the subject of a modern event (1805, IX, 322). Yet, in terms of the internal chronology of *The Prelude*, at least, that subject never quite dies. The grandeur of the magnificent account of the ascent of Snowdon in the last book in one sense 'clinches' the poet's case. But its power has less to do with the assertion of universality tacked on to the end of it than its evocation of the extreme singularity of the modern ecstasy (the shock, the event that happens 'like a flash', 1805, XIII, 40). The actual stuff of the passage points less to the grave, dignified conclusion of the poem than its epiphanic wellsprings. In this respect, if Wordsworth progressively organizes *The Prelude* in the service of an anti-modern position, he can never altogether smother the

modernity that position seeks to resist, which produced that position, and of which that position must ultimately be thought as forming a part.

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¹ See *Point de Passage*, 33-34.

² For relevant accounts of the French Revolution, see Kant, 'Réflexions', in *Théorie et pratique*, 127-74, 141-42; and *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 2.6, 153-56. For the concept of transcendental freedom, see *Critique of Pure Reason*, 484-90, 535-37. For a connection between this concept and the Idea of reason in the third Critique, see *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, no. 91, 331-36. For Proust's account of practical reason as an experimental production of the real that discovers its principles with each specific new case, see for example 'Introduction', *Théorie et pratique*, 5-40, 5-8. The Analytic of the Sublime does not develop a conception of a historical sublime along with the sublime in nature. For Proust's argument for extrapolating from the one to the other, see *Point de Passage*, 41-42.

³ History is 'non-unifiable' as is nature: this is the logic of the third *Critique*. See 'Introduction', *Théorie et pratique*, 10.

⁴ For the argument in detail, see Duncan Wu, 'Introduction', *Five-Book Prelude*, 1-26, 12.