

Wordsworth's Double-Take

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"At issue . . . is history as our own unassimilable alterity, our difference from the directions in which 'history' is pushing us . . . a different conception of history—one where historical thinking is the dimension in which thought becomes responsible to what is other, lost, unconscious, or potential, yet to be."

Tilottama Rajan ("Imagining History," 428, 433).

"[T]he world is Eden enough, all the Eden there can be, and what is more, all the world there is. . . . Romanticism's work . . . [is] the task of bringing the world back, as to life."

Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (52-53)

"It was, in truth, / An ordinary sight, but . . ." So writes Wordsworth in one of *The Prelude's* more memorable segues that I have deliberately truncated. I have done so because my interest, following the poet's own intuition, is with the "ordinary . . . but"—with the ordinary as something more or extra—rather than with the sublime interiority or "visionary dreariness" to which Wordsworth immediately assigns the sight in a characteristic, if possibly erroneous, move. My truncation might well be viewed, then, as a truncation of Romanticism itself, which commentators from Coleridge to Paul de Man have variously identified as incorporating a movement of mind from the particular to the universal or, in de Man's lexicon, from the "earthly and material" to the "mental and celestial" (13). And indeed an otherwise "ordinary sight"—"A Girl who bore a pitcher on her head / And seemed with difficult steps to force her way / Against the blowing wind" (ll. 306-08)—ultimately rises in Wordsworth's description to the level of vision. But equally important is the way the ordinary irrupts here only to evanesce. For the ordinary's evanescence—in this case, into something personal and aesthetic—is not simply a foregone conclusion that the transitional conjunction ("but") anticipates and abets; it is an introjection as well in which something at once ordinary and not (again, the "ordinary . . . but") is palpably reconfigured, even counterfeited, as a Romantic and mnemonic surplus. Although decades-old and necessarily a feature of memory, the passage of the ordinary into vision is as much an anterior negotiation as an abiding and still-pressing obligation: "It was in truth, / An ordinary sight, but I should need / Colours and words that are unknown to man / To paint the visionary dreariness / Which, while I looked round for my lost guide, / Did at that time invest the naked pool, the beacon on the lonely eminence, / The woman, and her garments vexed and tossed / By the strong wind" (ll. 308-16).

Wordsworth, by his own admission, is no painter. And were he a painter, he would have encountered considerable difficulty here, since the scene before him is really a condensation of three discrete events that took place ostensibly in

sequence when Wordsworth was about five years old: his separation from his riding companion and guide; his coming upon a place where "a Murderer had been hung in former times" (ll. 288-89) and where someone had then "carved the murderer's name" on the "turf" (ll. 294, 292); and lastly, his sighting of the woman with the pitcher upon "reascending the bare common" (ll. 303). The traumatic conjunction of these events, involving an encounter with memorials of violence in the wake of what seemed like abandonment to a young boy, amply accounts for the additional freight that the "ordinary sight" is summoned to bear. But there is a sense, too, both in the image of the woman, and in the poet's backhanded and retrospective wish for painterly skills, that the peculiar excess of the only "ordinary" event of the three owes at least as much to a lived and residual actuality, to something palpable and material, that a painter might better capture. Wordsworth is no painter. Still, neither his inadequacy as a visual artist, nor his implicit critique of painting as inadequate to the scene as he recalls it, work entirely to the benefit of his present business: namely poetry. If painting does not exactly serve the interests of interiority and memory, it is the case too that "words"—Wordsworth's words—are far from the vehicle par excellence for representing the ordinary or, again, the "ordinary . . . but." By writing *his/story* rather than painting it Wordsworth allows the "real"—the historical and material real—to "perish into art" (in Walter Benjamin's strikingly apt description [47]) in the same way that the poet's *inability* to render the "ordinary sight" by visual means, or even by a combination of words and colors, provides a momentary reprieve from death by representation.

By no means am I arguing that painting rather than poetry is the answerable medium for representing the ordinary, however charged. My point is that the force of the ordinary is such, even decades later, that its internalization is chalked up to a *failure* of representation even as it remains, as both the poet warrants and as numerous commentators have shown, a triumph of mind. Thus while painting per se is deemed inadequate to the event, something akin to an impossible or "unknown" version of painting is simultaneously projected as the only the way to do justice to a sight whose transformation into vision is also something of a missed opportunity, at least in representational terms. Although the problem confronting Wordsworth appears to be art's failure in this instance to capture a particularly charged moment, the real failure here lies arguably in the misrecognition—administered by "but"'s passage from qualifier to conjunction—by which an otherwise "ordinary sight" is written out of history into Wordsworth's story.

If this contortion with Wordsworth reveals anything—beyond the now-obligatory practice of contorting Wordsworth's poetry to one exegetical purpose or other—it is the

necessary connection between the misrecognition that defines and characterizes poetical representation in these lines and "what" is otherwise missed or transfigured in what Michel de Certeau has termed "the writing of history." For in verging on a history of what was before it somehow wasn't, or in encountering the "ordinary" in a guise so arresting that it is immediately refigured as the work of imagination and interiority, Wordsworth makes art's failure to grasp what is close by, pitching its tents before him as he moves, a confirmation of something lived and something real. In other words, far from a problematic tic, or even a vitiation, of the "romantic ideology," it is a characteristic, and I would argue representative, feature of Wordsworth's writing here that the material opportunities it variously misses—or that variously evanesce—are both recoverable and acutely palpable in consequence of being missed (or misrepresented) in what amounts to a "history of missed opportunities." In such a history, then, the claim to historicity is advanced in a manner that the characteristic—indeed temporalized—movement of something earthly into something imagined is very much a "history . . . of departed things" (to borrow a phrase from the Prospectus to *The Recluse* [50]) in which things appear to evanesce (or appear *only* to evanesce) in a characteristically Romantic process that is intermittently readable as an illusion.

In making such "a history," which necessarily honors what it rules out of bounds, a matter of literary and cultural history, I am motivated by the same empirical legacy that drove Romantics such as Coleridge to different, more idealistic, paradigms and to more definitive versions of Romanticism, where subjectivity and imagination are the hallmarks of individuality and genius.¹ The principal goad to Romanticism in this humanistic formation remains a largely contrary, uniformitarian, view of human nature and interiority by which people are undifferentiated through various mental processes and by the hardwiring to which these mental activities point. At the same time, the bearing of empirical thinking on a real so recessive now that it amounts to what Wordsworth, again, terms a "history only of departed things"—beyond the fact that that real is no longer in doubt or a matter of skepticism—is more immediately lodged in the Prospectus's counterproposal of a "fiction of what . . . was" (51) For such a fiction not only describes the probabilistic writing with which the rise of the novel, particularly as a realistic instrument, was largely coextensive; it also describes the "fiction" that informs (or, as de Certeau argues, "haunts") the writing of history at this same moment (*Heterologies*, 219). The very protocols in fact to which history writing was being urged to conform by Hume and others in the eighteenth century, were virtually identical to those that Frances Burney articulated in urging her sister novelists to take "aid from Sober Probability" (8). To Hume, anterior "objects of which we have no experience" must be made to resemble "those of which we have [experience]" in history writing because "what we have found to be most usual is always most probable" and likely to have been that way (124). Whether this customary view of things, in which the usual is extended diachronically

as well as synchronically, was responsible in the end for a more social or general conception of history against the more traditional form, which had focused on exemplary, individual agents and the extraordinary events they either shaped or encountered, is still a matter of speculation.² But what seems especially pertinent to many literary texts of this period, Romantic and otherwise, has surprisingly less to do with the anti-humanistic bent of empirically based understanding to which Romantic voluntarism and individualism were obvious reactions. Central is a more subtle development that Wordsworth actually flags in both *The Prelude* and elsewhere: namely, the separation or growing non-equivalence of the probable, on the one hand, and the ordinary, on the other, whose implicit opposition to both probabilizing *and idealizing* initiatives marks it not just for evanescence but, paradoxically or so it seems, for return—in this case as an emergent category for which history, specifically a history of something missed and overlooked, is primarily a placeholder.

No poem in *Lyrical Ballads* is more indicative of the more-than-common force of the ordinary, particularly as a category distinct from both the probable and the marvelous, than the brief sketch "Old Man Travelling" subtitled "Animal Tranquillity and Decay, A Sketch."

The little hedge-row birds,
That peck along the road, regard him not.
He travels on, and in his face, his step,
His gait, is one expression; every limb,
His look and bending figure, all bespeak
A man who does not move with pain, but moves
With thought—He is insensibly subdued
To settled quiet: he is one by whom
All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
Long patience has such mild composure given,
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
He hath no need. He is by nature led
To peace so perfect, that the young behold
With envy, what the old man hardly feels.
—I asked him whither he was bound, and what
The object of his journey; he replied
"Sir! I am going many miles to take
"A last leave of my son, a mariner,
"Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,
And there is dying in an hospital."

The corrective that the "old man" administers to the speaker's eloquent, if extravagant, surmise would appear to represent a return to the ordinary, especially as a subset of what Wordsworth, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, terms the "more than common" (*Major Works*, 595).

But if the ordinary is ultimately *anywhere* in the poem, it is located and characteristically *missing* in the space between the two linguistic moments. The initial description, which constitutes most of the poem, is nothing less than po-

etry itself or a particular version of representation aligned with interior or imaginative projection. And the poem more or less concedes this, attesting not only to the old man's subjugation, but also to the way he moves and is thus animated "with thought." Correspondingly, the man's reply, which necessarily jolts the poem out of poetry into social and geopolitical reality, seems equally stogy and generic. Less an instance of what Wordsworth, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, terms "the very language of men" (600), particularly those whom Wordsworth would have encountered in either the Lake District or the West Country, the reply bears a normative elegance of a kind that associated with Dr. Johnson, especially reported by Boswell. This normativizing drive, which critics from Coleridge to John Barrell, have picked up on by way of disputing Wordsworth's democratizing initiative, at least in matters of diction, is probably less sinister than either Coleridge's praise or Barrell's blame suggests. Rather, the continuity of the man's diction with poetic diction projects a sociability or uniformity reflective of the peculiar leveling that empiricism performs in its generalizing view of human nature. And leveling, to be sure, is what "Animal Tranquillity and Decay" accomplishes in radically separating poetic utterance from its sub-titular trajectory.

There is one more thing that happens or that the poem can be said to project. And it takes place at the moment that the speaker shifts from projective contemplation to social interaction. That moment is marked only by a space between the lines or more immediately by the dash preceding "I asked." But the question that ensues, which is the supplement or manifestation of a curiosity *over something*, tells us a great deal. What it tells—or permits one to fathom in the pause prior to the man's reply—is the force of something more-than-common, something ordinary again, that neither imaginative projection nor recuperated speech, nor even the man's disclosure about his son can justify, much less figure. It is not that the man's reply lacks force or even a kind of sublimity. It is simply that the force of his reply is different again from whatever roused the speaker to question him in the first place, interrupting the *work* of poetry in two senses.

Another example of this kind of interruption in Wordsworth, and of the history and the ordinariness it inscribes in something analogous to invisible ink, may be found in "The Two April Mornings," which appeared in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem, like the majority of the Matthew poems in both editions of *Lyrical Ballads*, records a conversation between Matthew and his Wordsworthian interlocutor, which is quickly displaced by Matthew's recollection of "a day like this . . . Full thirty years behind" (23-24). On that day, Matthew recalls, as "The self-same crimson hew fell from the sky . . . The same which I now view" (26-28), he came upon the grave of his daughter, Emma, who had died at the age of nine and whom he remembers loving "more" at that moment "than . . . [he] e'er had loved before" (39-40):

And, turning from her grave, I met
Beside the church-yard Yew
A blooming Girl, whose hair was wet
With points of morning dew.

A basket on her head she bare,
Her brow was smooth and white,
To see a Child so very fair,
It was a pure delight! (41-48)

It may be fortuitous that it is a female carrying something on her head who is the placeholder again for what is both contingent and more-than-common. But the transfiguration that follows, where the "girl" is immediately likened to a "happy . . . wave . . . danc[ing] on the sea" (51-52), is hardly accidental and typical rather of the "intentional structures" to which the object world invariably conforms in Wordsworth. Where in *Prelude* 11 this symbolic movement to "vision" is largely unidirectional, it is limited and perpetually reversible in "The Two April Mornings." This is so thanks to a now-stubborn materiality that, to borrow from the inaugural Matthew poem, "Expostulation and Reply," operates not just "with" but ultimately "against" the subject's "will" (20):

There came from me a sigh of pain
Which I could ill confine;
I looked at her and looked again
—And did not wish her mine.

Although the pain that Matthew experienced owes presumably to the recognition that the blooming girl before him is *not* his daughter, it issues, at least by recollection, from a subject not exactly or continuously self-identical with the grieving father. This is even truer of the double-take that follows, where Matthew is also divided: first, between looking and looking, and then, between wishing and not wishing. It would appear that it is the second look, rather than the first, that creates division leading to divestiture, where the prerogative of ownership or appropriation is relinquished along with the subject's self-possession, making any reassertion of the will a largely negative way ("I did not wish"), where desire and lack are (quoting the Matthew poem that precedes this one in the 1800 edition) "all that must remain of [Matthew]."

But the real point of the anecdote, along with the doubling of the two mornings—specifically those of the poem's past and of Matthew's past—devolves upon the double-take again, the look and the look. Like the pain within that comes seemingly from elsewhere, the looking and looking is not just an endless loop or circuit. It represents a new or different mode of seeing—a distension or splitting of the "look" over time (marked here, as in "Old Man Traveling," by a dash)—in which something lost or missed, specifically the blooming girl, is recovered despite the equally palpable and wrenching loss that had threatened to subsume her. This recovery is also painful since it involves (as Mat-

thew's sigh alerts the reader) a letting go of the pain and love that are properly constitutive of the subject in mourning. But what emerges at the end "The Two April Mornings," especially in the final stanza, is a dynamic if still evanescent sense of the ordinary, where the movement or oscillation between one look and another leads nowhere but to the blooming girl or, in the speaker's version of this same experience, to Matthew in a "now" different and defamiliarized formation:

Matthew is in his grave, yet now
Methinks I see him stand,
As at that moment, with his bough
Of wilding in his hand. (57-60).

The act of seeing Matthew so long after the fact is no doubt an act of imagination. Still, it is typical of the trajectory of this poem that, far from disappearing in a moment of vision, the ordinary emerges from the welter of both memory and thought in the recollection of Matthew attached to a very particular *thing*. There may be some ambiguity as to which moment is actually "that moment" and it is arguably the case that, like Matthew's double-take, the moment of Matthew standing condenses the speaker's recollection of him at the "moment" of interlocution and the reported moment of encounter and letting go.

Nevertheless, the effect of the poem overall, along with the history the poem inscribes (however fleeting), is to ironize and subvert the titular pun by introducing a mode of remembrance—a temporalization of perception itself where exterior or real time supersedes interior time—in opposition to the work of mourning or grieving. Thus while the concluding image of Matthew standing is necessarily an imaginative representation or recovery, this illusion ("Methinks I see him stand") is not a bravura or sublime dilation on the order, say, of the first part of "Old Man Travelling," or the visionary dreariness of *Prelude* 11. Rather it is an image whose forcefulness is tied to the way the speaker's remembrance actually narrows to a very particular materiality shorn of virtually all affect. Like the letting-go administered by Matthew's double take, the emergence of the ordinary at the poem's close, where something previously overlooked in the poem or missed irrupts to bear the freight of closure, is a telling divestiture: a submission to the world where, in a reversal of Benjamin's axiom (quoted earlier), art and subjectivity disappear into the real.

All of which brings me to perhaps the most striking such encounter in the Wordsworthian oeuvre: the encounter with the Blind Beggar in Book 7 of *The Prelude*. As I've written elsewhere, this encounter, which comes toward the end of the section recounting the Poet's residence in London and the spectacle to which London is generally tantamount in the Poet's view, follows upon Wordsworth's experience there generally in struggling, with very little success, to enlarge a largely sensory experience into a moment of vision akin to the poem's other "spots of time" (*The Return of the Visible*, 99-

128). Here, however, I want to change direction somewhat by focusing on the way the encounter with the beggar opens, like the "spot of time" with which I began, onto a category of experience distinct, once again, from either the probable or the marvelous. In Book 11 that opening comes in the stutter or hesitation marked by "but," where the traumatic memory on which the visionary is based, gives way, just briefly, to something equally anterior and distinct from the dreary condensation that words alone can barely describe. In Book 7, however, that same process is ultimately reversed and distended as the people of London and, finally, the beggar effectively wrest themselves—this time with the Poet's cooperation—from the visionary formations to which *The Prelude* generally inclines and from the uniformity as well into which the city simultaneously dissolves.

The experience of London or of the mathematical sublime that *is* London thwarts all aspirations to a "Romantic sublime"³ in which the imagination might hold sway: a blockage that comes to both crisis and exegesis in the moment preceding the encounter with the beggar where Wordsworth describes a recurrent experience in the city.

How often in the overflowing Streets
Have I gone forwards with the Crowd, and said
Unto myself. The face of every one
That passes by me is a mystery.
Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed
By thoughts of what, and whither, when and how,
Until the shapes before my eyes became
A second-sight procession, such as glides
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams.
And all the ballast of familiar life—
The present, and the past, hope, fear, all stays,
All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man—
Went from me, neither knowing me, nor known. (595-607)

The mystery that the faces of London variously evoke resembles the mystery onto which the speaker of "Old Man Travelling" earlier stumbles and that his eventual question to the old man is intended to clarify and to illuminate. Here, however, the mystery is protracted by a mode of perception that, in the description at least, resembles a double-take ("Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look"), which ultimately involves a splitting of the subject into two: one who looks and looks again, submitting in effect to what he cannot comprehend, and another whose double-take eventually dissolves into its near-cousin, second sight, the effects of which, no matter how phantasmal, manage to bracket "familiar" or phenomenological "life" from everyday urban life. It is at this point, then—with this distinction of the "familiar" and the "everyday" at the fore—that the speaker segues to the blind beggar:

Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
Abruptly to be smitten with the view
Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
Stood propped against a Wall, upon his Chest

Wearing a written paper, to explain
 The story of the Man, and who he was.
 My mind did at this spectacle turn round
 As with the might of waters, and it seemed
 To me that in this Label was a type
 Or emblem of the utmost that we know
 Both of ourselves and of the universe,
 And on the shape of this unmoving man,
 His fixed face and sightless eye, I looked,
 As if admonished from another world. (610-23)

The final line in this passage makes more sense if we regard the analogy as bearing not just on the speaker's sense of being warned or cautioned or, even better, "put in mind of a thing forgotten, overlooked or unknown" (OED, definition 5), but on the "world" as well from which the reminder emanates. For this latter sense (admonished "as if . . . from another world") captures perfectly a sense of something close at hand and of *this world* the remoteness or mystery of which—driving its emergence as an admonishment—turns out to be more a matter of perspective than a matter of either fact or imagination.

It is particularly fitting, then, that this culminating *aperçu* is immediately preceded by "I looked," which in the context of the description overall references a second look in contrast to a "view" of the beggar that is alternately spectacular and rife with meaning. For this second look or doubletake, which runs arguably through the entire description, beginning with the contingent sighting, juxtaposes materiality and deductive dilation in such a way that any synthesis that the "mind" might be inclined perform is forestalled. Such impedance is especially evident in the speaker's struggle to move figuratively, in effect, from the figure propped before him, where the effort to find the *mot* or *figure juste*, beginning with the highly metaphorical description of the mind's movement, is impeded by something not unlike the "second-sight procession" described in the passage preceding this one. The difference is that where such a procession is truly phantasmagoric on the order, say, of Poor Susan's pastoralization of London in the poem named for her, where "bright volumes of vapour through Lothbury glide, / And a river flows on through the vale of Cheapside" (7-8), it is an after-image now of something stationary, abiding and "unmoving." More akin, in other words, to what Henri Lefebvre, in later describing everydayness, has called a "residual deposit," the beggar introduces something both here and there, both beyond and close at hand, both past and present, that, Wordsworth, in anticipation of that other apostle of everydayness—Martin Heidegger—calls the "world" (91-148): not "another world" or the one to which Wordsworth frequently recurs both in this poem and elsewhere, but "as if . . . another world." A world, in short, that is not Wordsworth's in the usual sense—

or what Herbert Dreyfus, echoing Heidegger's critique, calls "my world" (90)—but Wordsworth's in a sense that is clearly unusual or uncanny even as the term itself is, as the Poet makes clear, particularly apposite.

NOTES

¹This is the central theme of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. The modern analog of this account is of course Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp*.

²See especially Phillips.

³For discussion of the Romantic sublime, see Weiskel, Ferguson, and, with particular relevance to this passage in Book 7, Hertz.

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