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(Pre-)Romantic Constructions of Nature

This essay was fostered by my reading of Stipe Grgas's book chapter "The Use of Nature: An 18th Century Case Study" in *The Constructions of Nature* (1994).¹ In that chapter, Grgas claims that "nature" acts as a kind of empty signifier, a mere "prop within a context of argumentation" (202). This essay aims to explore the ways in which "nature" could act as a construct in Romanticism taking into account Raymond Williams's contention that "nature" is "perhaps the most complex word in the language" (221). Two authors are taken as representatives of supposedly new ways of perceiving nature in the Romantic age: Rousseau, as a pre-romantic writer, important for the ideas of "inner nature" and "the state of nature," both closely connected to the idea of "a natural man," and Wordsworth, who aligns himself with Rousseau when pointing out in the famous 2nd Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that "Poetry is the image of Man and Nature" (Stillinger 454), thus putting man and nature on an equal footing and advocating a kind of psycho-natural parallelism that would be one of the Romantic *topoi* in his best poetry.

Nature as the self

In the history of Western thought, St. Augustine takes up a prominent place not only because he was the one to write the text which served as a model for Western confessional narratives (*Confessions*), but also because he was the first one to inaugurate something that Charles Taylor calls "the pivotal turn within" (129). It is true that Augustine perceives God as the final arbiter of truth and that he wants to belittle himself before him, but with Augustine the most important dichotomy in the Christian way of perceiving the world becomes that of inner and outer—our "inner nature" is distinguished from "the outer material world." On the way to Romanticism, René Descartes stands as the first philosopher who situates the moral sources within us and John Locke as the one who proposes that thought could be a property of matter instead of being of divine origin. Although the teachings of Descartes and Locke seem to leave no place for subjectivity as we know it today, they were still a vital step in redirecting the human gaze from the heavens to the man's world down here.

It was a long journey from Augustine's seeing the sources of moral good as residing in God to Rousseau's pivotal turn within, without recourse to God. This turn also meant that man's virtue resided in his own heart. As Charles Taylor explains,

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Rousseau's notion of the voice of nature within seems to be saying something much stronger. Not just that I have, thanks to God, sentiments which accord with what I see through other means to be the universal good, but that the inner voice of my true sentiments *defines* what *is* the good: since the élan of nature in me *is* the good, it is this which has to be consulted to discover it. (362; original emphasis)

In Rousseau's own words, he was alone "the portrayer of nature and the historian of the human heart," seeking the truth "with rectitude and simplicity of heart" (*Dialogues* 52) in an age when philosophy did nothing but dissimulate and destroy. The ethical component, the importance of doing universal good, becomes one of the central issues for Rousseau, as it will later permeate the writings of Wordsworth. Our inner voice, or the impulses of our own being, now tells us what nature marks as good. The Romantics believed that we find what is valuable and truthful within us—it only has to be recovered by way of reason and feelings. Rousseau's famous sentence from the beginning of *The Confessions*, "I felt before I thought" (19), sums up his insistence on the importance of feelings that would prove vital for the new kind of sensibility in Wordsworth's work.

The idea of feelings being a part of our "inner nature" is best summarized in a single sentence of Wordsworth's from the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800): "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (454). It is through our feelings that we get to the deepest moral truths. God in this new system of thought has not entirely dropped out; he is to be viewed in terms of what we see striving in nature and finding voice within ourselves. With the Wordsworthian claim that poetry is the overflow, utterance, or projection of the thoughts and feelings of the poet, poetry becomes defined in terms of the imaginative process which modifies and synthesizes these thoughts and feelings (Abrams, *The Mirror* 21). In other words, stress is shifted to the poet's genius, creative imagination, and emotional spontaneity at the expense of the opposing qualities of judgment, imitation of the Ancients, and artful restraint. Wordsworth's Preface is a significant document, published at the turn of the nineteenth century, which signals the displacement of mimetic and pragmatic theories of art by the expressive view of art in English criticism. By this shift, poetry becomes the expression of the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. The artist becomes a creator God, his expression being that of creative imagination. If Neoclassical poetics sees a work of art as a mirror that illuminates nature transparently, then Romantic poetics sees a work of art as a lamp² illuminating the world or parts of the world chosen by a poet and already bathed in an emotional light he has himself projected. A Neoclassical poet's excel-

² The lamp is Hazlitt's metaphor for Romantic poetry; M. H. Abrams uses it in juxtaposition with the mirror to describe the difference between Neoclassical and Romantic aesthetics in his well-known work accordingly entitled *The Mirror and the Lamp*.

lence is justified by the fact that he holds up the mirror to general nature,³ while a Romantic poet's excellence resides in his individual nature, his innate powers and genius. The product of the first poet is a poem resembling a painting in its mirror-like quality, while the product of the second poet is close to the music of the Aeolian lyre.⁴ Indeed, classical art has often been compared to a finite and closed plastic art such as sculpture, while romantic art has been compared to music, which was seen as infinite and open.⁵

This was one of the dichotomies found in German literary theory which, in many respects, proved vital for English critics, most notably Coleridge. The Jena group of critics, including A. W. Schlegel, Friedrich Schiller, and Friedrich Schlegel, all spoke about the peculiar spirit of modern art in which a view of nature became complicated by various phases of subjectivity. The culminating point of this lively intellectual debate was Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790), in which he develops his own view of the productive genius by stating that artistic creation is a process of nature within the realm of mind. Thus, in perception, the mind is active rather than inertly receptive, and as such, it contributes to the world in the very process of perceiving the world. Likewise, Kant gives a new base to the internalization of moral sources which Rousseau inaugurates. Yet the Copernican Revolution in epistemology, as M. H. Abrams observed, should not be restricted only to Kant and German transcendental philosophy. The concept that the mind fashions its own experience was effected in England by poets and critics before it manifested itself in academic philosophy, thus giving vent to a "revolution by reaction" (Abrams, *The Mirror* 58). The concept of "inner nature" was known to and cherished by all major European Romantic writers. Furthermore, this concept served as a prop to validate the emergent authority of the self. In other words, when Rousseau counts on the inexorable value of nature within the self, he uses nature as an alibi to aggrandize his unique self. The first paragraph in his *Confessions* serves as an illustrative example of this point:

I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself.

³ In Neoclassical poetics, "nature" is used to represent a generic human type; it corresponds to those uniform aspects of the inner world—the mental surrogates of the requirements of a cultivated audience, such as wit, judgement, learning, artful restraint, etc.

⁴ The Aeolian lyre is one of the most common metaphors of the perceiving mind in Romanticism. The instrument itself consisted of a set of strings stretched across a rectangular sounding box from which the wind evoked varying tones and harmonies; it was a fashionable toy in the late eighteenth century. Wordsworth and Coleridge often used it in their poetry.

⁵ It is worth noting that Rousseau had a musical career: he wrote a very successful opera—*Le devin du village* [The village soothsayer]—and for some time earned money as a music teacher and a copier of notes. King Louis XV loved this opera so much that he offered Rousseau the great honour of a life pension, but Rousseau refused the offer. The opera was also performed at the wedding of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. In Book V of *The Confessions*, Rousseau speaks about music being his mania.

Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike anyone I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different. (17)

In the quoted paragraph, the “outside nature” serves as a way to foreground his unique selfhood. Though he claimed that he was no better than his readers, he continuously insisted on his difference and uniqueness, as he alone managed to preserve a pure, uncorrupted heart, while others had soiled theirs through their allegiance to society.

The same goes for Wordsworth, who writes an epic poem about “the growth of the poet’s mind” (subtitle to *The Prelude*) and, in the end, manages to write but a prelude and an excursion from it. More importantly, Wordsworth felt himself to be a chosen son, and as he explained in Book III of *The Prelude*, “I was not for that hour / Nor for that place” (80–81). He believed himself to be a successor of Milton and wanted to write an epic poem larger in proportion than Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Just as Milton specifies his subject and his theme, measures it against the traditional epic subjects, and justifies his fitness for his task by invoking divine inspiration,⁶ Wordsworth adapts Milton’s argument to his own poetic endeavour (Abrams, *Natural* 23). He announces the genesis of *The Recluse*⁷ with the words “On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life, Musing in solitude . . .” (Preface to *The Excursion*, 3), hoping for a poem of outstanding epic proportions and in that sense aimed at surpassing his notable predecessor. He does not explicitly set forth his version of a fall and a loss of Eden but instead wants to create an earthly paradise, transferred from a supernatural to a natural frame of reference. Thus, the mind of man becomes a central locus of poetic exploration, its heights and depths embodying heaven and hell – the battle of Milton’s religious epic is transposed into the poet’s inner self in order to achieve what Keats would brilliantly call “Wordsworthian egotistical sublime.”⁸ Wordsworth’s belief in the harmony of Man and Nature, “the fitting and the fitted” (Preface to *The Excursion*, 4), calls attention primarily to his growing self and his belief in the infallibility of his “inner nature”—the highest arbiter of truth and morality. In other words, the “psycho-natural” parallelism (M.H. Abrams’s term) which he seeks to explore in his poetry is an attempt at reconciling the “inner” and the “outer,” the world within with the world outside, where the “outer nature” serves as a prop to validate the poet’s aspiration to the truth and morality of his “inner nature.”

One could take as an example Wordsworth’s well-known poem from *Lyrical Ballads*, “Tintern Abbey,” a miniature of *The Recluse*, a long autobiographical poem he would never write. As he says in this poem, he was:

⁶ In the first, third, seventh, and ninth books of *Paradise Lost*.

⁷ *The Recluse* consists of *The Prelude*, Book I of Part I (*Home at Grasmere*), Part II (*The Excursion*), and none of Part III. All we are left with is the prelude to the main theme and an excursion from it.

⁸ See Keats’s Letter from John Keats to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818.

. . . well pleased to recognize
 In nature and the language of the sense
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being.
 (110–14)

Both the outer nature and his inner nature speak the same language, and the outer nature is there to effectuate the process of his growing up: from the moment “when like a roe, [he] bounded over the mountains” (68–69), which preceded any awareness of nature, to moments of simultaneity with the outside world when nature to him was “all in all” (Bloom and Trilling 77), to the third mature phase, when he realizes that his “inner nature” and the “outer nature” are no longer one and the same. In the overall process of maturing, Wordsworth insists on the strength of memory (five years have passed) and imagination (what the eyes and ears half create and half perceive), both of which are qualities of his “inner nature,” as the most important prerequisites for growing up. Thus, the “outer nature” remains a sort of prop for confirming the qualities of the poet’s inner self: his epistemological and ethical ventures. If the concept of “inner nature” foregrounds the ways in which romantic subjectivity is necessarily linked to the meaning of “nature,” thus showing that “nature” is by no means an empty signifier but rather a signifier with multiple signifieds (never to be exhausted), the rest of this article aims to explore the two basic signifieds subsumed under the signifier “nature,” i.e., politics and economy – the two focal points in the building up of a bourgeois subjectivity.

Nature as politics

The Romantic concept of nature does not only embrace private events because in many ways it embraces social others. Thus, the personal also becomes social and political. In “Romanticism and Its Ideologies,” Jerome McGann argued that, “in the case of Romantic poems, we shall find that the works tend to develop different sorts of artistic means with which to occlude and disguise their own involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations” (108). In that sense, “nature” can be seen as an ideal illusion to obfuscate the social reality. The notable example of “Tintern Abbey” is worth taking into account. New historicist readings of the poem have tried to show that Wordsworth strategically suppresses awareness of salient parts of the scene on the Wye—the beggars lurking in the Abbey ruins, the furnaces of the iron forges nearby that burned night and day, the busy river traffic that passed the Abbey, etc. How could Wordsworth talk about the “pastoral farms” and “the vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,” knowing that the ruined abbey had been in the 1790s a favourite haunt of displaced persons? On the following pages, I aim to question his “democratic principle” supposedly issuing from his depiction of solitary rural figures and their “natural language.”

Wordsworth's fascination with solitary figures or "figures of deprivation" (as Paul de Man would call them) has long been connected to his humanitarian principles. Thus, David Bromwich wants to show that the Blind Beggar episode in *The Prelude* is a confirmation of Wordsworth's being of a Rousseauist politics, that he believed property, status, function—the whole train of social and moral relations—do not define human identity. In other words, a beggar is not a prompter of charity, nor is he a pointless moral entity – he belongs to general humanity, regardless of his social status, because his feelings are as intense as anyone's (Bromwich 30). When Wordsworth encounters a solitary leech gatherer ("Resolution and Independence"), he becomes an emblem of perseverance and teaches Wordsworth about the right course to take in the future (Trilling's interpretation). Here Wordsworth introduces us to the world of what Harold Bloom called the "natural man" (*The Visionary* 156). The leech gatherer, just like an array of similar characters including the old Cumberland beggar or the shepherd Michael, is a man reduced to naked desolation but still natural. Wordsworth himself owes strength and hope in what the future would bring to these natural men. The natural man lives according to the dictates of Rousseau's "state of nature," as he described it in his *Second Discourse*. In firm opposition to Thomas Hobbes and his idea that the state of nature is nothing but the state of vicious individualism, Rousseau affirms "that the greater part of our ills are of our own making, and that we might have avoided them nearly all by adhering to that simple, uniform and solitary manner of life which nature prescribed" (*Second Discourse* 50). Rousseau continues by posing the central question about whether natural life is inferior to social life, or vice versa:

I would also ask, whether a social or a natural life is most likely to become insupportable to those who enjoy it. We see around us hardly a creature in civil society, who does not lament his existence: we even see many deprive themselves of as much of it as they can, and laws human and divine together can hardly put a stop to the disorder. ... Let us therefore judge, with less vanity, on which side the real misery is found. (*A Dissertation* 64)

In the state of nature, the savage man is left solely to the direction of instinct, and he lives a uniform and simple life, eating the same kind of food as everybody else, living in exactly the same manner and doing exactly the same things. Natural inequality arising from difference in age, health, and bodily strength is nothing compared to the inequalities created by social institutions. At the core of such an assumption lies Rousseau's belief that human beings are innately and naturally drawn to virtue; the question of ethics is the main impulse throughout his oeuvre.

This trait makes him similar to Wordsworth's own writing, and having read Rousseau's early work, Wordsworth espoused the savage man ideal. In *The Prelude*, he compares his own young self with the noble savage who "had been born on Indian plains, and from (his) mother's hut / Had run abroad in wantonness to sport / A naked savage, in the thunder-shower" (Book I, l. 302–304). Furthermore, in "Salisbury Plain,"

Wordsworth clearly echoes Rousseau in arguing against the Hobbesian position that any state of civil society is preferable to the state of savage nature (Chandler 131):

Hard is the life when naked and unhoused
 And wasted by the long day's fruitless pains,
 The hungry savage, 'mid deep forests, roused
 By storms, lies down at night on unknown plains
 And lifts his head in fear, while famished trains
 Of boars along the crashing forests prow, l,
 And heard in darkness, as the rushing rains
 Put out his watch-fire, bears contending growl
 And round his fenceless bed gaunt wolves in armies howl.

Yet is he strong to suffer, and his mind
 Encounters all his evils unsubdued;
 For happier days since at the breast he pined
 He never knew . . . (1–13)

Rousseau's *le bon sauvage* is not only tied to the past ideal; it persists in his idea of the "natural man." Rousseau's contention that a natural man can still exist within our corrupted society (being a supreme example of such a natural man himself) involves the actual return to nature (natural surroundings) but also the return to the healthiest impulses within the human mind. His nostalgia for the lost natural state manifests itself in the constant longing for a unified life in which man is in complete harmony with himself and with other men. However, Rousseau's thought is not primitivist: he does not preach a return to the state of nature (Todorov 16). This notion is largely a construct, a fiction designed to facilitate the understanding of our present state. In a passage in the *Second Discourse* (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*), Rousseau himself suggests that the state of nature perhaps did not exist (11). In that sense, he suggests that the time of innocence and transparency might have been our own invention, a "hypothetical history" (Starobinski 14).

The important issue of morality in Rousseau's writing is again readily linked to his line of thought in the *Confessions*: "My ideas had been broadened by the study of the history of morals. I had come to believe that everything is rooted in politics" (362). In the sense of politics Rousseau thought that the remedy to where we stand now is not to be found in the past: once we have passed through the state of culture we cannot renounce civilization, but, with the understanding of our original state, we could make it better. Yet it would be wrong to assume that this was his protest against the existing class system. As Marshall Berman explained, "indeed, he was reinforcing that system by insisting on its inherent equity and fairness for all" (93). It is only through reciprocal esteem that all classes could be brought together, as friendship ignores all class distinctions. The acts of generosity on the part of those of higher rank would be out of the question in Rousseau's case: the crippled boy incident from

the sixth walk in the *Reveries* is indicative of this point. As Rousseau keeps picking up the same way on his walks he realizes the reason for it: a woman set up a stall in summer to sell fruit, rolls, and tisane. She had a little boy who hobbled about on his crutches, begging passers-by for money. Every time Rousseau would pass by, the boy would pay him a little compliment and would be given some money, but as soon as Rousseau's benevolence turned into habit, he no longer felt the same way about the boy:

This pleasure gradually became a habit, and thus was somehow transformed into a sort of duty which I soon began to find irksome, particularly on account of the preamble I was obliged to listen to, in which he never failed to address me as Monsieur Rousseau so as to show that he knew me well, thus making it quite clear to me on the contrary that he knew no more of me than those who had taught him. (93)

In the end, Rousseau starts avoiding this boulevard. Whenever obligation concurs with his desires, this is enough to transform them into reluctance and aversion. He regards the habit of virtue as a trap to lure him into something bad (according to Rousseau, when virtue becomes duty, it brings enslavement upon people).

When one thinks of the best of Wordsworth's poems, the poet always remains a detached observer, and the scene observed is as important as it acts as an epiphany upon his own mind. It is true that he called himself "a democrat," willing to spend 12 hours of thinking about politics for each hour of thinking about poetry, to paraphrase Wordsworth himself, but his own involvement in "the nexus of historical relations" (McGann's term) largely remains a sort of blind spot that has puzzled critics for several decades. Though he was one of the members of the London Corresponding Society and he travelled to France four times in the aftermath of the French Revolution, registering his experiences in the famous Books IX, X, and XI of *The Prelude*, we still know very little about his active involvement in the revolution.

In addition, in March 1793, Wordsworth returned from France and wrote a pamphlet against Richard Watson, the Bishop of Llandaff as a response to Watson's published protest deploring the execution of Louis XVI. In this important, unfinished letter,⁹ Wordsworth reveals himself as a fervent republican, finding sympathy and excuses for the outburst of violence:

⁹ This letter is in fact Wordsworth's first full-fledged exposition of his intellectual, moral, and political views and his most explicit statement about public affairs until *The Convention of Cintra* (1809). It is important because it shows that Wordsworth's political views changed. However, it was written too late to have any significant influence on the political debate of his contemporaries. Thus, it remains nothing but a late reaction to the events taking place in France and England (Chandler 12). Wordsworth chose not to publish the letter, which turned out to be fortunate, since another man who wrote his own *Reply to the Bishop of Llandaff*, Gilbert Wakefield, went to prison for two years for seditious libel after having published it (Gravil 63).

You say, "I fly with terror and abhorrence even from the altar of liberty when I see it stained with the blood of the aged, of the innocent, of the defenceless sex, of the ministers of religion, and of the faithful adherents of a fallen monarch." What! Have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant, that a time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty? Alas! The obstinacy and perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence. She deploras such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation. (Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, 142)

It is clear that Wordsworth puts the revolution in the Franco-British context and treats it as an extension of the French conflict. He attacks both Richard Watson and his political father, Edmund Burke, for the status quo they want to preserve in England. They both wanted to deprive people of the ability to act and react, and this "discussion of the relation of the free intellectual inquiry and social progress lies at the ideological centre of the Letter to Llandaff" (Chandler 23). Yet, Wordsworth is never explicit about his revolutionary allegiances and this letter, which remained unpublished, questions rather than asserts Wordsworth's involvement in the French Revolution. Furthermore, we know that he was finally disillusioned with its outcome. His radical youthful enthusiasm soon turned into a conservative nationalism.¹⁰ The "politics" of Wordsworth was supported by the most brilliant critic of the age, William Hazlitt, who writes in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825):

It is one of the innovations of the time. It partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments. His muse (it cannot be denied and without this we cannot explain its character at all) is a levelling one. It proceeds on a principle of equality, and strives to reduce all things to the same standard. (249)¹¹

However, my contention is that Wordsworth's "principle of equality" was largely based on the espousal of the idea of "natural man" and "the state of nature," both embodiments of romantic illusions that McGann addressed in his pivotally important *Romantic Ideology* (1984). To go back to Grgas's concept of "constructions of nature," this means that Wordsworth's idea of nature was again used as a construct to reinforce the existing class system rather than to question it. There was no active involvement

¹⁰ See, for instance, his poem "View from the Top of Black Comb," in which he glorifies England and the ground that the British crown commands. In the final lines, his native landscape is "A revelation infinite it seems;/ Display august of man's inheritance,/ Of Britain's calm felicity and power!" (ll. 32–34).

¹¹ In "My First Acquaintance with Poets," Hazlitt speaks of Wordsworth and Coleridge after having visited them in 1798.

on the part of Rousseau and Wordsworth to change the existing condition, and their processes of “democratization” through embracing the concepts of “the natural man” and “the state of nature” were simply not enough to reverse the course of history—the progress of industrialization and the advent of a new economic force embodied in the bourgeoisie.

Furthermore, Wordsworth’s democratic potential supposedly lay in his celebration of the language of the common people. Wordsworth thought that the healthiest impulses of our nature were best preserved in their language (*Preface* 1800). Indeed, the question of language remains a significant issue in Wordsworth’s poetry. In the 1800 Preface, he already says that he would avoid using “poetic diction,” and later on, in the Appendix he added to the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, he launches a severe attack on such adornment of language and falsehood of description. In the Appendix, Wordsworth distinguishes between the language of the earliest Poets, who “wrote from passion excited by real events,” and later Poets who, in wanting to emulate their predecessors, “set themselves to a mechanical adoption of those figures of speech, and made use of them, sometimes with propriety, but much more frequently applied them to feelings and thoughts with which they had no natural connection whatsoever” (465). The first Poets spoke the natural language of men, while the later Poets spoke a perverted version of that language, gradually acquired from books (for Wordsworth, only Shakespeare and Milton stand apart). Furthermore, the readers, themselves perverted by books, could no longer distinguish true language from false language.

In the *Dialogues*, Rousseau also extols the language of the earliest poets because they knew how to evoke and describe true passions:

True passions, which are rarer than one might think among men, become even more so day by day. Interest erodes them, diminishes them, swallows them all up, and vanity, which is only a folly of amour-propre, helps to stifle them more. The motto of Baron de Feneste can be read in big letters in all the actions of the men of today: *it is for appearances*. These habitual dispositions are hardly suited to allowing the true movement of the heart to act. . . . Plutarch’s famous men were his first reading at an age when children rarely know how to read. The outline of these men of antiquity made impressions on him that have never been effaced. (*Dialogues*, Second Dialogue 122)

Both Rousseau and Wordsworth are worried about the corruption of human minds and hearts. Language plays an important role in the process of corruption: for Rousseau, the corrupting influence of human institutions is best visible in the books that foster the language of appearances not proceeding from the human heart, while for Wordsworth the corruption of literary tastes is a vital prerequisite for the general corruption of society. The poets who indulge in arbitrary habits of expression which are not based on human passions are detrimental to people’s minds. They furnish

food for “fickle tastes, and fickle appetites” (Preface to the Second Edition to *Lyrical Ballads*, 447). Gradually, the readers’ taste for poetry becomes the same as a “taste for rope-dancing, or Frontinac or Sherry” (447).

In many of his poems, Wordsworth speaks about the necessity of preserving the oral culture as the most authentic one. Here Wordsworth echoes Rousseau’s position in the *Discourse on the Origins of Language* and the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, where he laments:

O man, of whatever country you are, and whatever your opinions may be, behold your history, such as I have thought to read it, not in books written by your fellow-creatures, who are liars, but in nature, which never lies. . . . There is, I feel, an age at which the individual man would wish to stop: you are about to inquire about the age at which you would have liked your whole species to stand still. (46)

The desire to stop and think about the human condition is closely connected to the desire to look towards the past and seek models in the lives of our ancestors—here “nature” becomes a trope for “the works of the ancient poets,” a well-known neo-classical *topos*.¹² A simple, uniform, and solitary manner of life does not involve an abundance of words. It is detrimental to the human mind to have more words than ideas, and one should say no more things than he can think (Rousseau, *Emile* 74).

In “The Ruined Cottage,” for instance, the Pedlar is said to have little need for books, “for many a tale / Traditionary . . . / Nourished Imagination in her growth” (164–67). There is a similar passage in “Michael”: “this Tale, while I was yet a boy / Careless of books . . . / . . . Led me on to feel/ for passions that were not my own” (27–31). More famously, in “The Tables Turned,” William assumes that hearing the voices of nature is more important and valuable than the exercise of reason through the reading of books:

Quit your books, . . .
Books! ‘tis a dull and endless strife,
Come, hear the woodland linnnet,
How sweet his music; on my life
There’s more of wisdom in it.
(9–12)

William assumes that the power of natural sweetness will impress the mind “of itself,” the pleasure of the scene is more important than its educational value. As James K. Chandler claims, these two poems present a literary debate of the epoch (the strife of the “meddling intellect” is identified with books; books were to be equated with “endless strife”; 154). The speakers of all three poems indicate that decisive moral de-

¹² See, for instance, Alexander Pope’s “Essay on Criticism”: “to copy Nature is to copy them” (140).

velopment occurs in the absence of book learning.¹³ There has always been in Wordsworth a natural alliance between oral record and the silent heart—together they build up and preserve the human spirit (Chandler 141).

That said, it seems to me that the idea of “natural language”—in the sense of “language that aspires to the condition of speech” (Rousseau) and in the sense of the “common language for common people” (Wordsworth)—partakes of ideology in its office of masking socio-historical reality with a linguistic one (Grgas 205). In other words, it is an attempt at preserving things as they used to be in the fast-progressing industrial age. Thus, the concept of “natural language” also hides the fear of change and of the rising capitalist economy.

As Franco Moretti explains in his *The Bourgeois*, it was in the late eighteenth century that the bourgeois emerged as a new rank in society which then “consisted mostly of ‘the self-employed small businesspeople (artisans, retail merchants, innkeepers, and small proprietors)’ of early urban Europe, but a hundred years later it consisted of a completely different population made of ‘middle- and lower-ranking white-collar employees and civil servants’” (3). In other words, both Rousseau and Wordsworth aspire to educated audiences (those who could read), and the “natural language” could only find fertile ground in such audiences. When Rousseau reads his *Confessions* out loud in a circle of educated friends or leaves his *Dialogues* on a Church altar for future generations, he believes that only “elevated minds” would understand him. Business people are not really what he had in mind when thinking about “elevated minds,” but by praising landscape beauties and by showing respect for the traditions and history of Switzerland, this severe critic of the newly emerging consumerist society would unknowingly attract those he detested.

As far as Wordsworth is concerned, the intended audience and the novelty of ideas as expressed in the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* is also worth taking into account. As this volume of poetry was printed in no more than 500 copies, it is clear that it was not destined for the poor who were illiterate but for the middle- and upper-classes and also the in-between category of the bourgeois, who, having the means to travel and free time to spend, would want to go to the Lake District to see and experience the simplicity of life Wordsworth extolled. Paradoxically, by trying to influence and to elevate the tastes of this newly emerging class, Wordsworth would equally attract hordes of tourists with “fickle appetites” into the very heart of the English countryside. Furthermore, from the middle of the eighteenth century there appeared a dearth of names such as Goldsmith, Cowper, and

¹³ Oral and written language are also compared in “The Brothers” (1800), a poem composed in the period between “The Ruined Cottage” and “Michael.” A country priest responds to the charge that the absence of written records from his graveyard shows him to be “heedless of the past”: We have no need of names and epitaphs, / We talk about the dead by our fire-sides. / And then for our immortal part, we want / No symbols, Sir, to tell us that plain tale: The thought of death sits easy on the man / Who has been born and dies among the mountains. (ll. 178–84) See also *The Excursion*, where the speaker pays a similar compliment to the unlettered people of his neighbourhood (see book 6, lines 610–14).

later, Crabbe, who were already beginning to show a shift in the focus of their subject matter that to some extent prefigures the line Wordsworth was to take. Wordsworth also owed much to Robert Burns, who taught him how to use a style of perfect plainness, an influence Wordsworth recognized and acknowledged. Robert Burns could be considered the first champion of the poetry that Wordsworth would praise in his 1800 Preface. In fact, it was Burns, and not Wordsworth, who used the “natural language” of the common people: deploying an energetic folk stanza brimming with unfamiliar usages drawn from idiomatic lowland Scots and writing down poems about working people in taverns, observations made at the plough, things as trivial as daisies, mice, or lice (“To A Mouse,” “To a Louse, On Seeing one on a Lady’s Bonnet at Church,” etc.)

Nature as economy

Wordsworth’s programme for poetry, with his attack on “poetic diction” and the changing tastes of the reading public, pinpoints to another important issue of his age. He wanted to protect the rural men against the oppressive commercial urban society, where the bourgeois is seen as a newly emerging anomaly.

In Rousseauian terms, the bourgeois is not only a middle-class man but a non-citizen who is very dependent upon society but does not live for it. The best description Rousseau gives of a bourgeois features prominently at the beginning of *Emile*: “Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties, he will never be either man or citizen” (Book I, 40). The bourgeois is accused of having extensive and tormenting desires which make him into a disunified individual—one who has lost his dignity of soul in cherishing nature as a kind of commodity.

When Wordsworth speaks in the 1800 Preface about the hegemony of trivial plays, he recognizes the same problem Rousseau identified in his *Letter to D’Alembert* (a famous case against the introduction of theatres in Geneva): the theatre removes people from authentic experience, and as such, it is related to the urban division of labour. In the condition of undivided labour and open-air sociability, typical of the ancients whom Rousseau admires, pleasure and labour were not separated. Wordsworth does not seek the general condemnation of theatres as Rousseau does, but he is acutely aware that the established repertoires foster artificial pleasure for the sake of pleasure itself and not for the sake of social bonding and authentic experience.

Lacking the unity of soul based on the non-existence of such desires, the bourgeois cannot be happy. The bourgeois is an inhabitant of the city, while the inhabitant of rural areas leads a different life entirely dedicated to his land. By building up a social network, he has no tormenting desires—he is unified in his lack of restless desires, his devotion to his family and neighbours, his hunger for life as it is. Both Rousseau and Wordsworth recognize this ultimate good in existing, and they both seek to indulge in authentic pleasure—the primary bonding agent in any healthy society. It is constituted by strenuous effort, rather than by passive leisure, and thus belongs within a community governed by undivided labour in a pre-commercial phase (Simpson

64). Self-love, as Rousseau identifies it, guarantees such fullness of existence because it is nothing but a desire to exist. Rousseau's "savage" and Wordsworth's "peasant" are therefore ideals that need preservation at whatever cost.

Therefore, Rousseau's and Wordsworth's renunciation of capitalist society is linked to the appraisal of small, primitive, isolated communities such as Swiss communities in the Alps or Corsica (in Rousseau's case), and the Vale of Grasmere in the Lake District area (in Wordsworth's case).

Rousseau establishes such an ideal society in another self-enclosed paradise, that of Clarens in the *New Heloise*. The centre of this community is Julie, whose soul is open to all around her. Each individual member must conform to the general will, the unanimous consent, as in the *Social Contract*. Money¹⁴ is not necessary in the society at Clarens: people consume immediately what they produce and feed on the products of their labour. It is clear, however, that this community cannot live entirely on its own resources. This community seems to be an organism, all of whose parts complement one another, but Julie remains its central pillar. Rousseau himself admits that Julie is a very peculiar character, exerting her benevolent influence and moral principles on everyone around her. She is a dominant individual, an expansive soul capable of influencing others in a positive way (he also speaks about it in his Ninth Reverie, he is the centre and originator of a feast, his goodness is mirrored in the joy of others: at La Muette he offers wafers to a group of girls, and later he buys apples for little boys). Thus, morality depends on the virtue of a demiurge who must set the standard by his own example, and Julie renounces passion for the sake of community. Yet virtue can never regress in order to become innocence because virtue presupposes a knowledge of good and evil that innocence does not. Thus, the virtuous people of Clarens can always easily relapse into sin; they are constantly on the verge of opacity while trying to maintain their transparency, as Jean Starobinski would say.

The country feast in *La Nouvelle Heloise* simulates the return to an original state of innocence. The whole spectacle is reminiscent of another scene from *Reveries*, where Rousseau evokes the same idyllic innocence of popular rejoicings:

. . . for I have always been very attracted by the pleasure of seeing cheerful faces in popular rejoicings. This expectation has often been thwarted in France, for this nation which claims to be so cheerful shows little of this cheerfulness in its recreations. . . . but in Geneva and Switzerland, where

¹⁴ Rousseau's attitude towards money is very peculiar: in the scene where he gives apples to little boys and pays some money for them, he is so happy because he finds a disproportion between the small cost of his action and the intensity of the pleasure it gives him. The true feast is one that costs nothing. Money is some sort of impure means of achieving pleasure, while country feasts are great because they cost nothing. In the *Confessions*, he would say that money poisons everything. A pleasure that money can buy loses the purity of immediacy and becomes poisoned. One must remember that Rousseau committed many petty thefts in his life. He explains that he hated the idea of an intermediary between oneself and the thing one wants to enjoy, and that money plays the part of an intermediary.

laughter is not continually dissipated in malicious fooling, holidays have an air of contentment and cheerfulness, poverty does not show its hideous face, nor does pomp flaunt its insolence; well-being, fraternity, and concord open all hearts to one another and often in the transports of innocent joy strangers accost one another, embrace and invite one another to join together in enjoying the day's pleasures. (Book IX, 147)

However, the community at Clarens is far from the democratic ideal Rousseau praised in the *Social Contract*. Inequality is in fact dissimulated in the rapture of the festival and Rousseau is willing to accept pseudo-equality based on feelings. Illusory equality achieved during festivals will always remain nothing but consolation to one group of people but they will cherish it for the sake of feelings, the ability to feel equal though knowing that the feeling is illusory. The enemy of masks and veils¹⁵ is willing to overlook the master's methods of establishing domestic order and harmony (Starobinski 101). The servants think they want what they have been forced to do (Emile is also treated like that by his teacher). In fact, he advocates the illusion of free will. His own self-sufficient ego spreads into a myth of the self-sufficient community (Starobinski 109).

In the same manner, Wordsworth praised an enclosed community life in his poems "Home at Grasmere" and *The Excursion*. Furthermore, he wrote two letters to the editor of the *Morning Post* on the subject of the Kendal and Windermere Railway. These two letters were crucial in stopping the project of extending the railway from Kendal to Low Wood, near the head of Windermere in the Lake District. Fearing that the railway would run through the vales of Ambleside and Grasmere, he praised the beauty and seclusion of the district, assuring the editor of the *Morning Post* that the lakes were already within easy reach for everybody (as one of the chief arguments in carrying the line forward to Keswick through the aforementioned vales had been that the beauties of the Lake District must be brought within easier reach of those who

¹⁵ I am referring here to Rousseau's condemnation of theatrical performance in his *Letter to d'Alembert*, in which he speaks about an ideal form of spectacle that he witnessed in his early childhood (that of Genevan soldiers feasting in universal joy during a grape harvest) and draws a contrast between "false" prestige enjoyed by comedy and tragedy and the genuine, communal joy where there are no masked actors and everyone is both actor and spectator). *Letter to d'Alembert*: "I remember being struck in my childhood by a rather simple spectacle, an impression of which has stayed with me despite the passage of time and the variety of things seen since. The regiment of Saint-Gervais had completed its manoeuvres and, as was customary, broke into companies for supper. . . . Yet the unity of five or six hundred men in uniform, holding one another by the hand and forming a long band that snaked about in rhythm and without confusion, with a thousand twists and turns . . . all of this combined to create a very vivid sensation, so that one could not remain unmoved. . . . The result of all this was a general emotion that I cannot describe, the same feeling of universal joy that we feel fairly naturally whenever we are surrounded by what we hold dear. My father hugged me, as he did tremble in a way that I can still feel and share. 'Jean-Jacques', he said, 'love your country. Do you see these good Genevans? They are all friends, all brothers. Joy and harmony prevail among them.'" (Qtd. in Starobinski 93)

cannot afford to pay for ordinary conveyances.) Assuming that the railway would bring a crowd of all but appreciative tourists, Wordsworth offered alternative pleasures:

Go to a pantomime, a farce, or a puppet-show, if you want noisy pleasure—the crowd of spectators who partake your enjoyment will, by their presence and acclamations, enhance it; but may those who have given proof that they prefer other gratifications continue to be safe from the molestation of cheap trains pouring out their hundreds at a time along the margin of Windermere. (*Guide to the Lakes*, 140)

Wordsworth contends that “a vivid perception of romantic scenery is neither inherent in mankind, nor a necessary consequence of even a comprehensive education” (138). It is a taste depending on “processes of culture or opportunities of observation” that must be gradually developed in nations and individuals until it becomes habitual. One such “process of culture” is the ability to appreciate poetry, and the above quotation is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s lament from *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface* (1815) about the majority of mankind who neglect the reading of poetry in order to devote themselves to domestic cares or business:

Poetry then becomes only an occasional recreation; while to those whose existence passes away in a course of a fashionable pleasure, it is a species of luxurious amusement. In middle and declining age, a scattered number of serious persons resort to poetry, as to religion, for a protection against the pressure of trivial employments, and as a consolation for the afflictions of life. (471)

Likewise, Wordsworth believes that a large majority of mankind does not know how to appreciate natural beauty.¹⁶ The manufacturers of Yorkshire and Lancashire who want to send large groups of their workmen, by railway, to the banks of Windermere are heralds of the new capitalist, consumer society. People are sent off like children for holiday entertainment at the will of their master, and must return at the same, or they will be dealt with as transgressors, Wordsworth observes. Natural beauties are sold to them as if they were household commodities.¹⁷ Curiously enough,

¹⁶ He tells an anecdote of a Manchester tradesman who spotted a small piece of pleasure-ground with a detached rock rising in the middle of it just below Wordsworth’s house. The tradesman said that it would be a nice place “if that ugly lump (rock) were out of the way”. He never thought of the beauty of the rock’s form, the ancient oaks growing out of it, the flowers and shrubs adorning it. Wordsworth is surprised at his reaction and therefore comments, “Men as little advanced in the pleasure which such objects give to others are so far from being rare, that they may be said to represent a large majority of mankind” (See Letter I – Kendal and Windermere Railway, To the Editor of the Morning Post, Appendix II to *Guide to the Lakes*, 138-9)

¹⁷ Here he anticipates neo-Marxist denunciation of twentieth-century bourgeois society shaping the tastes of the majority. According to Roland Barthes, an average traveller does not seek pleasure in the contemplation

Wordsworth's Lake District today receives 12 million visitors each year and abounds in gift-shops, restaurants, and hotels bearing Wordsworth's name or the names of his famous poems and images from the poems that have become emblematic of this part of England. In other words, by denouncing the "fickle tastes" of the newly emerging bourgeoisie, he attracted the very people he wanted to keep away from the secluded natural beauties of England. Rousseau's enthusiasm for nature in the presence of Mme de Warens and his passion for botany and rowing on the island of St. Pierre also managed to create a place of pilgrimage for future generations—not to mention Vevey and Lac Léman (Lake Geneva), where *La Nouvelle Heloise* had been conceived. True, among the visitors were such "delicate minds" as P. B. Shelley, Mary Shelley and Lord Byron,¹⁸ but the majority of people coming to see Genevan surroundings were the urban bourgeoisie, for whom nature was nothing but a commodity.

This fact obviously complicates the "democratic" potential both writers expressed in their writings. The idea of "nature as politics and economy" in the concepts of "the natural man" and "the state of nature" is obscured by the fact that Wordsworth's observation of isolated figures in a dreary landscape never leads to a gesture of generosity (the poetic "I" always remains a detached observer), the celebration of common people and their natural language of passion is nothing new in the history of British Romanticism (as it was earlier propounded and used in practice with greater success by Robert Burns) and Wordsworth's only radical pamphlet in which he openly supports the French Revolution (*Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, 1793) remains unpublished. Furthermore, Rousseau's "state of nature" and "natural man" remain ideals which are hardly achievable in the quickly advancing industrial world. Thus, the celebration of isolated rural communities, governed by undivided labour in a pre-commercial phase (i.e., their nostalgia for past times) seems to be a conservative illusion rather than a radical trait in their works.

Thus, to go back to Grgas's book chapter "The Use of Nature: An 18th Century Case Study," nature in the pre-Romantic and Romantic eras functions as a kind of construct, a prop to validate romantic illusions such as inner nature, natural man, natural language, and the state of nature against the rising capitalist society.

of beautiful landscapes but follows blindly those sights recommended by travel books written in order to popularize what should be contemplated in utter privacy. The *Blue Guide* thus prescribes the admiration of the picturesque and the massive sightseeing of churches. He critiques the fact that monuments in a country become an essential thing to see, while people, usually depicted as types, are given far less importance. He is also annoyed by the fact that *The Blue Guide* promotes the seeing and climbing of mountains as civic virtue that regenerates through clean air. "This old Alpine myth" is nothing but a manufactured creation of those who control the forces of production, Barthes concludes (*Mythologies*, chapter "The Blue Guide").

¹⁸ Their goal was to experience what Shelley called "the divine beauty" of Rousseau's imagination. Byron wrote Canto III of "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" with Rousseau in mind, and Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "The Triumph of Life" were both acts of homage to Rousseau.

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