Romantic Joy: A Definition and A Deployment

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> Nor less, I trust,
> To them

William Wordsworth's antecedent here is the "beauteous forms" of the Wye river valley near Tintern Abbey, which he has carried in his mind for the past five years and is now seeing again

> . . I may have owed another gift,
> Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world,
> Is lightened:–that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on,–
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things.(1)

These famous lines, widely received as beautiful and thus apparently effective in creating the peace they depict, would seem a paradigmatic demonstration of the "power" not just of a "mood" but of a representation thereof, fully bearing out Eric Gans's claim that "romantic art is generative anthropology because it teaches us

about the scene of origin."(2) This momentary mood, this corporeal suspension, this lifting of the weight of sociality and all its collectively unintelligible imperatives of mimetic desire, is surely allied to the originary moment of aesthetic contemplation, the moment of transcendence itself, that empowers *all* seeing into things.

But it is also, just as surely, a moment with properties and contexts, and it behoves us to attend to them. For example, we risk reductiveness to speak of "joy" as a generic term for the temporary release of mimetic tension. Even if it does involve that, or even causes it, it is more than that.

Schiller may have fallen into such reductiveness when he said that "all art is dedicated to joy,"(3) and this in turn may point us to some of the limitations in the German poet's practice, at least by comparison. His "Ode to Joy," for example, begins with these undoubtedly uplifting lines:

> Joy, of flame celestial fashioned,
> Daughter of Elysium,
> By that holy fire impassioned
> To thy sanctuary we come.
> Thine the spells that reunited
> Those estranged by Custom dread,
> Every man a brother plighted
> Where thy gentle wings are spread.

Alas, though, those wings, gentle or not, clearly aren't spread everywhere or over everyone, because a very few lines later, we have:

> Who has won a maid belovèd
> Join us in our jubilee.
> Whoso holds a heart in keeping,
> One–in all the world–his own–
> *Who has failed, let him with weeping*
> *From our fellowship begone!*(4)

All human beings are brothers in this joy, except those who, well, aren't, and one needn't be a deconstructionist to grasp that the joy might depend on the exclusion. Shall we even call it the scapegoating? This circle will *not* be unbroken. Here, one might say that Schiller teaches not so much about human origin as about that somewhat later stage at which resentment of a usurping human being replaces

originary resentment of the object at the centre of the scene. More prosaically, he reminds us of the persistence of an inescapable human sociality, and that not every Romantic celebrates the marginalized. Those who have experienced, however briefly, the absence of a single heart, may feel the sting of this double lash: not just that failure and its tears, but the punitive expulsion from the comforts of even so abstract a community as universal human brotherhood.

Wordsworthian joy, always more carefully delimited and situated, seems to have different properties, more productive, even generative potentialities. Mind you, there are shadows if not of *schadenfreude*, at least of a familiar Romantic posture of alienation and superior difference:

> . . . this prayer I make,
> Knowing that Nature did never betray
> The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
> Through all the years of this our life, to lead
> From joy to joy: for she can so inform
> The mind that is within us, so impress
> With quietness and beauty, and so feed
> With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
> Rash judgements, nor the sneers of selfish men,
> Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
> The dreary intercourse of daily life,
> Shall e'er prevail against us…

Earlier in the poem, Wordsworth has spoken, in an undying line, of the way joy has allowed him to hear "The still, sad music of humanity." Clearly, though, one can hear the music of other people better when, well, one can't. It's sweeter, and sadder, when it's still. But perhaps one may concede a pragmatic psychological logic here–joy, and emphatically not one's own sufferings or victimhood, creates the capacity for sympathy. Joy is that which does create the capacity to sympathize with, indeed, conceive the universe, beginning with the human other. This too reminds us of the profound achievement of the originary scene: the aesthetic moment, its capacity to release us from resentment and appropriative desire, makes possible every kind of human accommodation.

Anyway, Wordsworth is not Byron and was not received the way Byron was. Few have professed to be much affected by Wordsworth the man or by his persona. Readers have not wanted to *be* him, or much cared if he didn't want to be *them*. Wordsworth's modelling was of experiences one did not need to be Wordsworth to have, and thus are less likely to be the subject of rivalry. One may say this, despite

the frequent complaints about his more than ordinarily ineluctable presence on his own scenes of representation–what Keats rejected as the “egotistical or wordsworthian sublime”(5)–a criticism widely echoed. I say “despite” but only in the sense that *malgré* must be heard as *parce que*, as Girard tells us. It is a curious fact, in short–one worth wondering about–that so many readers have found it possible to spurn Wordsworth, but not his joy.

What is joy? Perhaps John Locke is an appropriate authority here, given Gans’s recent characterization of him not only as “the primary theorizer of history’s most successful model of large-scale human interaction” but as an optimist “more concerned with the outcome of the originary scene than with the crisis it resolves.”(6) Locke gives us this: “Joy is a delight of the mind, from the consideration of present or assured approaching possession of a Good.” One of his examples: “A father, in whom the very well-being of his children causes delight, is always, as long as his children are in such a state, in the possession of that good; for he needs but to reflect on it to have that pleasure.”(7) From an originary perspective, of course, the “Good” is much less interesting here than the “consideration,” the “reflecting.” Gans, in defining resentment, notes that it is not strictly an emotion, unlike “sadness, joy and anger” which are “roughly equivalent” to emotions “found in other mammals.” Resentment, though it leads to passions, “has at its core a scenic representation,” an “*idea,*” namely “injustice.”(8) But by Locke’s account, and I would say by Wordsworth’s as well, joy requires such an idea too–an imagining, a reflecting, a representation. Joy is a thing of the mind, the mind reflecting on the possession of something desired, or as Wordsworth clearly suggests, the mind transforming objects through desire, through their joyfully anticipated or imagined possession, by representing them upon the internal scene, then externally, as in poetry. Might Locke’s joyfully anticipated or imagined possession, indeed, stand as another definition of originary representation? Or perhaps of one phase in the oscillation thereof. At the very least, albeit in a more fundamental way than Schiller probably intended, joy and aesthetic experience would seem to have much in common. Although Locke does not say so, one may assume that when the considering or reflecting ends and possession of the Good itself takes place, joy is no longer the word to be used. Sparagmatic satisfaction or discharge, we might say in originary terms. (Political peace through private property, in a larger-scale human context.) Once joy migrates from the mind, it is no longer joy, exactly. In Wordsworth’s version, perhaps we would say the “mood” passes, and with it the “seeing into the life of things.”

Equipped with this preliminary, indeed tentative, originary understanding of joy, perhaps we can turn to joy in history, including Wordsworth’s and our own moment. There is a generally helpful account by Adam Potkay (who also cites Locke), which holds Romantic joy as something that “breaks down the boundaries that separate

self and other, humanity and nature." It is thus, and readers of Wordsworth's equally famous "Intimations" ode will instantly see the point, "the original passion of infancy, reconnecting us, blissfully, to a stage in life before we were born."(9) (From this stage, we recall, the Wordsworthian babe comes "trailing clouds of glory."(10)) The Romantic quest for the unmediated, for transcendence of human sociality, has no more fitting and pervasively imagined goal than this, the most unattainable. But Wordsworth, in the Ode, faces this, and offers us joy in surprisingly Lockean terms. The mature man may still find it, albeit in "our embers," but through "the philosophic mind" and "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."(11)

Potkay notes that Romantic Joy is unstable–unlike happiness, which is merely vulnerable–transitory, endlessly capable of modification, and much less subject to intention. This is common sense, and we probably don't need to again unlimber the heavier term "oscillation." But the contrast is perhaps useful. "Happiness is a technology of the self, a fashioning and indemnification that elevates inner integrity, constancy and wisdom over external mutability, loss and death. Joy, by contrast, is an expansion and at least partial loss of the self."(12)

Happiness is a full economy, that is, a whole system of exchanges, which, as long as it is in good operating order, and for all its profits and losses, is able to keep the wolf of desire from the door. It is sustained by rather than identical with technologies of self-creation in a market of differences which has *not* overwhelmed the happy woman or man. To distinguish joy, the episodic, the self-submerging, is again to distinguish a phase in the originary experience. Happiness is surely a product of the *sparagmos*, of that grateful release of resentment. An adequate identity is one product of the division of the spoils. But Joy cannot quite be the moment of stasis either, of mere contemplation, as that has too much of the prohibition in it still. In joy, contemplation, the moment of virtual gratification, begins to incline, one might guess, to tilt, to slope, towards literal appropriation: towards the fulfilment of all promises. Joy is perhaps the mind's *awareness* of its own potential energy, its own incipient if unwilled motion.

"Towards the fulfilment of promises," of course, which every Romantic knows or says he knows, will indeed *not* be fulfilled by appropriation. Hence the melancholy of Romantic joy. Hence also the "gratuitousness" as Potkay puts it, of all joy.(13) Surprising, unforeseen–an unforeseen foreseeing as it were, of an unexpected Good–maybe above all *unearned*. Happiness may be *pursued* as one notable pre-romantic triumphantly proclaimed to an awakening world,(14) but to the Romantic joys themselves awaken something more of a feeling of humility, even loss.

"Says he knows," because the payoffs are there, we hardly need list them–see the

early, unjoyful Byron, the celebrity Byron–this is the “constitutive hypocrisy” of Romanticism, as Gans calls it.(15) But is the melancholy-joyful poet modelling such a payoff? In Wordsworth’s case, at least, if he is doing so, he hides it better than does Byron.

Wordsworth explicitly represents, though, models, a joy with “power,” the “deep power of joy.” But if it is not power to appropriate, power to do what? Here we may begin to inquire into at least one deployment of the representation of Romantic joy, its modelling for its market.

It must be, in some manner, the power to be free of desire but to know of, intimately anticipate, the fulfilment of desire. One more specific answer Wordsworth’s poetry certainly gives us, is that it is the poet-model’s paradoxical power to be “lord of that he does not possess,” in the phrase of the later Romantic Edward Thomas.(16)

“Tintern Abbey” begins, but only begins, with a representation of a natural scene and of an experience of it.

> . . . again I hear
> These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
> With a soft inland murmur–Once again
> Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
> That on a wild secluded scene impress
> Thoughts of a more deep seclusion; and connect
> The landscape with the quiet of the sky.(17)

But unlike Rousseau the solitary walker, Wordsworth is here neither the unanimous victim of other people, nor in full possession either of the place *or* of his experience of it. These “beauteous forms,” are subject to “something of a sad perplexity” because they are both remembered and more or less simultaneously experienced, both self-consciously *re*presented . . and elusively and evanescently *present*. The true subject of the poem, as many have noted, is time, and the incipient alienation occasioned by the fundamental, indeed ontological distinction between the virtual and the appropriable. The poem’s joy is shaded and heightened by the instability and melancholy attendant upon this recognition. “Even if this be but a vain belief,” says Wordsworth of those stirring words about seeing into the life of things, sounding a note of uncertainty that recurs several times in the poem. Even if I have misunderstood, even if I lose this very receptiveness to joy . . still, still, “I *would* believe” in what I *have* experienced and what others, beginning with my sister at my side, *will* experience.

It *is* a natural scene, of course, and nature, as Wordsworth also says, “never did betray the heart that loves her.”(18) (The red in tooth and claw stuff is more Byron’s line–see the cannibalism scene in *Don Juan*.) But if Nature may not be possessed, even in the heights of joy, if its resistance to possession is even somehow crucial to that joy, this is not true in any simple sense of interdiction. That, for example, one may not build a cottage on it, or put a fence around it, or trust your free-ranging chickens to it, if one is truly to enjoy it. Rather, it is more the “implicit interdiction” of the originary experience recreated in beauty, as Gans phrases it in a recent “Chronicle,” making reference to Kant’s linking of beauty to a “reaction to autonomy.” Even when alone in a landscape we find beautiful, Gans speculates, “we fear . . the implicit force of mimetic rivalry.”(19)

This seems the moment to digress to Byron, that master scorner-and-manipulator of mimetic desires. Byron and Nature–something about which this most social of poets wrote comparatively little, and when he did, was accused and is still accused of having an atypical and rather ungainly Wordsworthian moment.(20) Of not quite being himself. This is not entirely fair, though.

Let us begin by acknowledging the obvious. Byron and the other Romantics made a major contribution–however motivated–to the representation of the natural world as desirable to the maturing market. Later defenders often disavow Romantic nature-love, and they are probably wise to do so, their game necessarily being not to betray naive desires, especially as they skirmish with those from whose lips drop terms like “tree-huggers.” Nonetheless, where would they be without the Romantic ideology? Deplorable as Western environmental depredations have been, one might look at the still worse records of countries, like China, which have yet to have their “Romantic period,” or, like Russia, had only a weak version of it followed by a ferocious repudiation in favor of an anti-transcendental materialism. Acid rain has threatened North American lakes, but the Aral Sea is almost gone. At any rate, if the minerals and materials extracted from the earth are certainly in circulation in the global market, so also are more shareable experiences of the earth’s beauty. The latter, too, are recognized as not necessarily renewable resources. Those wanting to preserve nature want *their* market value to rise, want to encourage greed for *them*. Byron certainly did.

The peace so many Romantics claimed to have experienced in nature was the peace of apparent “external mediation,” (Girard’s term) which is to say, the suppression or evasion of those reciprocal and rivalrous effects of desire they associated with cities–the burgeoning world of “internal mediation.” In the simplest terms, the natural scene acts in much Romantic poetry as an ally against these other people–the prototypical and now familiar alliance, really, between the alienated solitary and the unspoiled, or spoiled natural world, alike menaced by

sociality, by the Other. Such a Romantic first and always experiences *human* pollution; the first complained-of besmirchment of the natural world is not material, but social, in particular by the rebel's own society–not chemicals and chainsaws but the poisonous presence of overly familiar people and their rivalrous desires. The language of protest remains much the same after the products of industrial economic activity are added to the score. This is not, or at least was not initially an attribution of victimhood to nature–rather, of course, to the sensitive Romantic himself.

Gradually, though, in Byron and others, there is some eroding of this posture. I must omit my demonstrations–they are in print elsewhere.(21) Nature, to summarize, begins to have on *him* the kinds of effects he was hoping he and it together would have on *others*. Nature really allies itself to no one–the scientific form of this cruel recognition will need another half-century to find full expression, but it is emergent in Byron's day. There is no cessation or even reduction of the competitive processes of the natural world. Or, as we might also say, nature is not scenic. The reward of symbiosis, or of the instinct to protect similar genetic material, is not centrality or identity, but only soulless survival and re-production. Human beings may profess their love and respect for nature, to each other. But nature will not echo such professions, or listen to them. The solitary Byronic hero on his Alp succeeds in the market in the sense that he attracts considerable imitation, and experiences the exaltation of his difference. But in his later poetry, Byron is coming to recognize the concession of his own autonomy implied by his strategy.

It is the old pathetic fallacy, really, this aspiration to an alliance with nature. To arguments for something like a "natural contract," in Michel Serres' phrase, Byron's better poetry might ask: What can it possibly mean to establish a contract with a mediator–or even a "subject"–who by definition cannot participate in any kind of reciprocity? If one were to say, "I will try not to act on my desires to your detriment if you try not to inspire so many of those desires in me," what possible answer could one expect to receive? And if there is no answer? Eventually our sun will go nova, and go out–as Byron himself describes it in a great, short poem entitled "Darkness." A particle of dust in the immensity will drift out of the light.

The problem of preserving the tiny fragment of the natural universe we inhabit is finally a social problem, the division of a limited feast. It is doubtless *not* best thought of in terms of a one-to-one relationship between man and some equality or partner called Nature. The feast will best be preserved for everyone not through some once-and-forever renunciation of our (natural) desires or imperious re-conception of our relationship to them–some kind of re-sacralization of our social existence–but through the *development* of culture, which is to say, through the ongoing management and refinement of desire through representation, the

continued leaving-behind of the zero-sum game of sacrificial society.

What, then, can the still-beautiful, still-effective evocation of joy in Wordsworth–to return to him–contribute to this process? The question I am opening up might be designated that of "the pragmatics of non-appropriative desire."

Let me quote Eric Gans again, writing of "a universal characteristic of consumer society: its paradoxical affirmation by means of the market of values inaccessible to market exchange."(22)

This sounds a bit like marketing transient, priceless joy over obtainable and sustainable happiness. Gans notes also that even if "the exchange of goods and services takes place in private . . the exchange of signs of consumption is in principle public; people can see what each other are consuming"(23) and that this is crucial to the successful recycling of resentment.

Wordsworth consumes experiences in nature, represents himself doing so, represents the joy of such experiences, and represents such experiences as inherently fragile and contingent, impossible to own. Coleridge and others on the right were alarmed: this looked a lot like a kind of pantheism, making the earth, in effect, paradise. And clearly, joy is a word very often associated with religious experience of one sort or another.

Still, as Gans tells us, "the sacred, in the most general sense of the term, is the *process* whereby mimetic desire is transcended in representation."(24) Wordsworth does not sacralize nature–thus risking various kinds of resentment–rather, he describes a process, at whose brief but repeatable apogee, one may experience freedom from desire, and thus joy. He *aestheticizes* the natural scene–it is "beautiful" on the model of representations, because it is only obtainable virtually. Many before have done this, of course, but there is a more explicit, a more self-conscious registration of the point in this poet, whose sustained pertinence is reflected in his literary-historical stature. One of his most beloved utterances, after all, longingly contrasts a lost sacrality in Nature with the "getting and spending" of the market world, but does so with unforgettable representations of the absent: "Proteus rising from the sea" and "old Triton" blowing "his wreathèd horn."(25) Everywhere in his poetry may be read Wordsworth's version of originary revelation, of the ubiquity of lost immediacy in the ineluctable human scene of desire, of the resentments that must but can be calmed (and by which means), of the fragility as well as irreplaceableness of the mind's delights. You can know joy but you cannot *have* nature, or at least, that is what Wordsworth tells us and what most of us in the still-Romantic West pay lip service to. And lip service is better than no service at all, one might say. Isn't all representation lip service paid, (deferring awhile the biting,

rending, and swallowing) ?

Surely–to bring these pragmatics down finally to policy–originary analysis need not commit us to the “Cornucopian” position on the environment.(26) We may quickly concede that the production of material goods, of Locke’s private property, the expansion of GDP, has been a crucial and effective way of deferring violence, and we abandon it at our considerable peril. Even the slightest recession of the great tide of such goods causes long-established open societies to teeter on the edge of political abysses. Resentment will not be satisfied with less–only something *more* than such goods can do this, and a return to the sacrificial order of restraints upon appropriative desire is not available–despite the longings of authoritarians of the left, right and green–and always was more violent than the market solution anyway. Still, there are good and goods, and it is not as though a limitation on one kind of them is unprecedented. It was and is a practical problem, caused by us. That is how and why humanity came into existence–to solve, however temporarily, the practical problem that it also caused. Desire always makes goods limited–if there is one dilemma humanity has lived with, it is this. Those concerned about the practical problem of the earth’s carrying capacity ought to use GA as an analytical tool for understanding the variety and evolution of the means of deferring resentment, and for making the case for the next stage of that *fuite en avant* that our heuristic discerns as human history. Because the virtual deferral of appropriative desire is hardly a foreign concept when thinking about managing scarce resources in the name of human community–it was the first solution to the first problem, and in some form or other it will doubtless be the last . . . to the last.

Notes

1. “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798” lines 35-49. (back)

2. *Originary Thinking* 170. (back)

3. http://www.schillerinstitute.org/educ/reviews/reviews_main.html (back)

4. *Friedrich Schiller: An Anthology for Our Time* 42-43. Emphasis added. (back)

5. Keats (27 October 1818) 157. (back)

6. *The Scenic Imagination* 35, 31. (back)

7. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 231. (back)

8. “Resentment, or the Sense of Injustice” (back)

9. *The Story of Joy* 1, 2. (back)

10. “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” line 64. (back)

11. “Ode. .” lines 186, 203. (back)

12. *The Story of Joy* 3. (back)

13. *The Story of Joy* 12. (back)

14. Along, of course, with “life, liberty. .” (back)

15. *Originary Thinking* 166. (back)

16. Thomas 230. Cited in Bate 100. (back)

17. “Lines. .” lines 2-8. (back)

18. “Lines . .” lines 122-23. (back)

19. “GA and the Lyric Scene.” (back)

20. Parts of Canto III of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and the scenes with the chamois-hunter in *Manfred* has been particularly suspect in this regard. (back)

21. *Lord Byron and the History of Desire* . (back)

22. “The Market and Resentment (II).” (back)

23. Ibid. (back)

24. “The Market and Resentment (I)” Emphasis in original. (back)

25. “The world is too much with us” lines 2, 13, 14. (back)

26. For a succinct definition, see Garrard, 16-18. Essentially, as its name suggests, this position is that dangers are exaggerated and “the dynamism of capitalist economies will generate solutions” (16).(back)

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