Différance in Revolutionary Representations: Hazlitt's Activist Rhetoric and Wordsworth's Poetic Deferral

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Correlating coherent symbolic structures, or language, with the social inequalities of the established order, many modern thinkers have tended to take an activist stance towards language, designating it as insidiously violent in its maintenance of unjust difference and coercive deferral of action. Taking up the question of why contemporary theory so closely associates violence and language, Gans cites the modern criticism of the binary hierarchies implicated in the events leading up to the Holocaust. As an example of this tendency, he references Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*, which claims that, in the long term, the rhetoric of the voluble eighteenth-century French revolutionary Jacques Hébert prepares the way for the violence of Stalin's totalitarian rhetoric ("Ecriture" para. 8). In his assessment of Hébert, Barthes suggests that the legacy of activist rhetoric reverberates through history, contributing to an upheaval which would ultimately assist in establishing the very tyranny revolutionaries sought to depose.

In its polemical assertions regarding the appropriate aesthetic response to the late eighteenth-century's revolutionary ferment, William Hazlitt's 1825 portrait of William Wordsworth in *The Spirit of the Age* betrays an anxiety—similar to that of modern theory—that language may be misused to impede rather than hasten the radical critique needed to bring about a more equitable social order. Though he praises Wordsworth's early poetic efforts as appropriately revolutionary in tone, Hazlitt ultimately voices disdain for the Lake poet's hollow words, deriding Wordsworth's poem, *The Excursion*, as exemplifying his cowardly assent to the inequalities of the monarchal order. In the poem, instead of demanding the realization of a post-revolutionary ideal, as Hazlitt does, Wordsworth figures an interior scene of representation capable of deferring the subject's participation in

the violence accompanying revolutionary upheaval. Examined in light of Gans's elaboration of Jacques Derrida's *différance*, Hazlitt's and Wordsworth's conflicting understandings of representation and revolutionary violence take on anthropological significance. By grounding the violence that Derrida attributes to language in a hypothetical originary scene, Gans demonstrates how representation typically functions to defer the conflicts that have historically threatened human communities with deleterious violence. I will argue that the play of *différance*, as it functions to defer conflict, operates more effectively in Wordsworth's poetry than Hazlitt's advocacy of the revolutionary ideal. Ultimately, Hazlitt's activist rhetoric and Wordsworth's sympathetic poetic depictions of marginalized subjects represent distinct points upon what Gans terms "the gradient of violence," a continuum which unites extremes of action and representation (para. 7).

Reflecting on the revolutionary tenor of Wordsworth's early poetic productions as they proceed on the victim-conscious principles of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Hazlitt laments the lost promise of revolutionary action, which he perceives as emerging via the poet's radical departure from the eighteenth century's classical subjects and strictly regulated style. Hazlitt speculates that, having been "taught by political opinions to say to the vain pomp and glory of the world, 'I hate ye,'" Wordsworth contrived "to aggrandize the trivial and add charm and novelty to the familiar" (163). For Hazlitt, Wordsworth's early poetry excels because "[i]t proceeds on a principle of equality, and strives to reduce all things to the same standard" (161). His early verse, says Hazlitt, "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" (161).

Supplanting violent revolutionary ideals with subversive representations, Wordsworth's poetry, as it appears to Hazlitt, at first incites and then defers the readers' desire to enact the radical rhetoric of the age. *The Excursion*'s Wanderer and Solitary—like those in Wordsworth's early work—are socially insignificant figures, who dominate the moral centre of the poem and the reader's sympathy via the poet's depiction of the world's indifference to their abject circumstances. Wordsworth's repeated presentation of rustic subjects—first in the rural settings of *Lyrical Ballads* and then amid the florid language and philosophy of *The Excursion*—constitutes a class-subverting displacement of what Hazlitt terms common objects' "inherent truth and beauty"—a truth Hazlitt claims that "the great despise, [and] the fashionable . . . ridicule" (1992 [1825]:7: 162, 164). The poems of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* typically present the reader with a poignant incongruity, wherein a single rustic subject dominates the centre of the poem, while the poet-speaker mediates between audience and poetic subject to illustrate the possibility of valuing those who are most often marginalized by the literary, social, and political establishment. Hazlitt and many other critics read these poems, along

with their preface, as radical affronts to the oppression of the dominant order.

Later in his career, in his production of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth carries out the same program, but expands his project by providing an analysis of how his poetic subversions of the establishment also defer violence via the voices of the rustic characters, whose dialogue makes up the majority of the poem. Hazlitt's negative reaction to *The Excursion* in his *Spirit of the Age* derives from his preference for the poignant melodramatic poems of Wordsworth's early career, which provide descriptions of social inequality. To Hazlitt, *The Excursion*'s characters' extended reflections upon the violence-deferring capacity of their own poetic presentation to negotiate perennial social and economic inequalities dampen the possibility of the reader's feeling roused to action. For Hazlitt, *The Excursion* fails because it explores the role of poetic representation in the deferral of violent revolutionary action, whereas *Lyrical Ballads*' renderings produce a more emotionally rousing (or literally moving) emotional effect. Though both *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Excursion* focus on sacralised rural subjects, *The Excursion*'s reflections on the ways its central figures may promote reflective deferral of action are less effective in inciting political activism than the stark representations of injustice presented in *Lyrical Ballads*. Hazlitt, seeking a sustained critique of the systemic violence accompanying inequality, castigates Wordsworth for abandoning the seemingly radical discourse of his early work, which he hoped would assist in enacting an equitable social order through violent revolutionary upheaval.

Reflecting upon how Derrida treats the threat of violence in *Of Grammatology*, Tobin Siebers has interpreted Derrida's notion of *différance* as a description of a violence-deferring representation, which is the same form of representational deferral that operates implicitly in *Lyrical Ballads* and that *The Excursion*'s characters explicitly discuss. Interpreting Derrida's analysis of Lévi-Strauss's rendition of the myth of metaphysical presence in his*The Ethics of Criticism* (1988), Siebers points out Derrida's tendency to focus attention away from the threat posed to human communities by internal violence, a threat which is deferred by substituting representations for competitive acts of appropriation. Siebers claims that despite Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss's assumption of innocence, which Lévi-Strauss supposes to exist prior to writing, Derrida joins with the anthropologist in diminishing the importance of the actual violence occurring within *Tristes tropiques*' "Battle of Proper Names." "That one of" the Nambikwara girls, writes Derrida, summarizing Lévi-Strauss's account, "should have 'struck' a 'comrade' is not yet true violence" (Siebers 86; Derrida 113). For both Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, the true violence appears moments later, when the girls verbally assault each other by uttering their rivals' proper names. Thus, the anthropologist and the theorist both overlook the real import of the incident between the little Nambikwaran girls. Siebers explains:

> “The Battle of Proper Names” illustrates with perfection the notion of *différance*, but only if we understand that the object of deferral is violence. Here the system of writing hinders the escalation of physical aggression. The transgression defers the blow into a representational domain. . . . The real violence of the slap is channeled into a cultural representation that subdues it. Instead of responding blow for blow and provoking a cycle of reciprocal violence, the victim retaliates through a cultural system of exchange.

Siebers’ various formulations of *différance*—not as the violent supplementation of writing for speech or speech for writing, but as a means of limiting violence to the realm of representation— establish the practicality of Derrida’s theory of language as founded upon a supplement to the violent act of appropriation.

In a *Chronicle of Love and Resentment* titled “Ecriture and the Deferral of Violence,” Gans takes up Siebers’ rereading of “The Battle of Proper Names” to demonstrate how post-WWII theory has failed to comprehend the primary adaptive advantage of the symbolic in the emergence of the human species from their proto-human index- and icon-using forbears. For Derrida, writing and violence are the same, but, says Gans, Derrida’s “critique of *the intersubjective violence* of writing . . . is focused on denouncing its myths of innocence rather than praising its capacity for creative destruction” (para. 9). Gans, by turning his attention to this lacuna in Derrida’s thought, proposes that cultural productions contain traces of the originary scene’s violence-deferring aborted gesture of appropriation (*Originary Thinking* 8-9). Taking up where Derrida’s deconstruction leaves off, Gans argues that “[t]he survival of human society depends on the gradient of violence between action and representation, beginning with the first sign that defers the potential conflict over the central object” in the originary scene (Gans, “Ecriture” para. 7). The legacy of this originary scene is complicated, since its original sign gradually evolves into collectively constructed metaphysical objects, which themselves become the embattled moral ideals determining the course of history. It is with the tensions dividing various symbolically defined cultural objects, or metaphysical ideals, that Derrida’s ethical critique of culture takes issue.

Criticizing Derrida’s focus on the relatively limited violence of representation, Siebers points out that Derrida’s indictment of writing and naming “takes for granted that language makes physical violence possible and ignores the alternative that human aggression may in fact exist in a reciprocal relation with language, generating representations that may either contain its escalation or determine the focus of more violence” (84). A difference in language, and the inequitable ethical import of this difference, Siebers suggests, can become too sharp to be deferred

through the language of politics or diplomacy. In this way, Siebers formulates in slightly different terms what Gans calls the gradient between representations that ensure the deferral of violent action and representations that tend to "determine the focus of more violence." Poetry too may serve as a mode of deferring violent action, a possibility which Wordsworth demonstrates in his early and most well received poetic productions.

One of Wordsworth's most striking experiments in this mode comes in "Resolution and Independence," which appeared in his 1802 *Poems, in Two Volumes* after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 and 1800. In this poem, Wordsworth continues to explore the common subjects he centralizes in the Preface, by asserting that "[h]umble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language" ("Preface" para. 6). The revolutionary gesture, not only of using common language, but of choosing low and rustic subject-matter corresponds, as Hazlitt notes, to the idealized vision and attempted institution of an egalitarian society, which convulsed Europe during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. At the beginning of "Resolution and Independence," Wordsworth figures the alternately ebullient and downcast emotions of a moor-wandering poet as he contemplates the vicissitudes of his life in the modern literary marketplace (1904 [1802]: 48-49). As he begins to lament the travails of market life's *agon*, he happens upon the leech gather, who, in his religiosity and age, represents an increasingly rare centre of ritual attention, which the poet's description of the man's speech indicates:

Choice word and measured phrase, above the reach
Of ordinary men; a stately speech;
Such as grave Livers do in Scotland use,
Religious men, who give to God and man their dues. (95-98)The speech of the leech-gatherer perfectly reflects that celebrated in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, but it also looks backward nostalgically to a period—and place in the form of the much idealized, but still premodern, Scotland—where the authority of religious representation constituted the ostensibly immovable, unifying foundation of traditional society. On first seeing the man, the poet turns the focus of the poem away from the speaker, who is in the grip of anxiety over the whirling changeableness of market society, instead centering upon the leech-gatherer, whom he describes "[a]s a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie / Couched on the bald top of an eminence; / Wonder to all who do the same espy" (57-59). The poet imagines the leech-gatherer's common, abject solidity as the basis of his centrality in the aesthetic configuration of the poem, which his metaphor urges the reader—or "all who do the same espy"—to recognize. Wordsworth's representation of this rustic figure assuages the angst of the poet, who, at first worried over the difficulty

of the man's way of life, takes him as an idealized image, whom the poet might find peace in reflecting upon. As the leech-gatherer finishes his speech, which shows him to be cheerful and of sound mind, the poet states:

> I could have laughed myself to scorn to find
> In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.
> 'God,' said I, 'be my help and stay secure;
> I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!' (138-40)

Among the many readings this poem could produce, Wordsworth's vision of the leech-gatherer accomplishes two things that reflect an anthropological understanding of the scenicity of representation. First, it undertakes a revolutionary act, which is carried out by placing a low figure at the centre of poetry's aesthetic scene—a scene which is traditionally viewed as the provenance of society's elite and reserved for the depiction of rarified classical subjects. Second, the speaker hails the representation of the once marginal, now centralized, figure as an object of contemplation capable of deferring resentment in a subject engaged in the tumultuous changes that characterize the rise of modern market society. By centralizing the leech-gatherer, Wordsworth's speaker does not urge the reader to action, suggesting the necessity of immediately enacting a revolutionary inversion of hierarchy, but represents the aesthetic differences in the social hierarchy as subject to the play of *différance* in substituting a rustic figure for the usual foci of the traditional highbrow poetic scene. Twelve years later, Wordsworth's *Excursion* carries on the same revolutionary project, while further attempting to minimize his audience's resentment through the device of dramatic dialogue.

The Excursion's format as a dramatic dialogue departs from Wordsworth typical lyric form, wherein a lone poetic voice reflects on a scene or subject, to depict a community of subjects collectively focused on natural, common objects, which are mediated through the representations of the conversing subjects' imaginary visions. By deploying this novel form, Wordsworth attempts to move beyond the usual structure of romantic poetry, in which, as Gans demonstrates in terms of the scenicity of the aesthetic centre and periphery, "[t]he guarantee of first-generation romanticism is that of the peripheral user-creator of the sign" (*Originary Thinking* 169). The early Wordsworth and his contemporaries seemed to say: "Before you can resent my use of representation, you cannot avoid attending to it" (169). However, as Gans points out, "it is naïve to suppose that the emanation of language from the periphery can take place without the conversion of its place of emission into a new center" (169). Aware of his position as an especially voluble, and therefore resented, member of the periphery, Wordsworth, in *The Excursion*, contrives to

explicitly accept responsibility for creating a scene focused upon his poet-persona's emission of a sign, while simultaneously attempting to evade the necessary resentment his pre-eminence guaranteed him by allowing other, non-poet voices to take precedence. As Sally Bushell observes, the conservative critic and founder of *The Edinburg Review* Francis Jeffrey's negative responses to *The Excursion* reflect his lack of sympathy for Wordsworth's general poetic strategy of aggrandizing the low and marginal—a strategy Jeffrey saw as inimical to the stability of England's social hierarchy (Bushell 31-32). Projecting his poetic vision into the social centre of England's literary life, Wordsworth, throughout the early part of his career, speaks for the marginal from the margins and suffers the censure of critics, who are, ultimately, his fellow peripheral and resentful subjects.

In *The Excursion*, Wordsworth tries a slightly different strategy. Instead of dominating the scene with his well known lyricist's voice, Wordsworth endeavors to cast The Poet's voice as one of several other voices—those of The Solitary, The Wanderer, and The Pastor—who all participate as equals in a conversation. In *Re-reading* The Excursion: *Narrative, Response and the Wordsworthian Dramatic Voice* (2002), Bushell suggests that, though there are "limitations in the extent to which we [readers may] accept those voices [in the poem] to be fully dramatized," the work "is . . . a series of exchanges and debates" (3); at certain moments, the substance of these exchanges reflects how best to avoid resentment via the contemplation of shared signs instead of attempting to appropriate the mimetically desired centre. Such gesturing towards an object without attempting to master it is what his early poems achieve by, as Matthew Schneider argues, deploying "a radically simplified poetic diction and rhetorical style that can only be described as *ostensive* in order to depict what [Wordsworth] called 'the primary laws of our nature'" (250). Wordsworth's 1814 effort to discuss this effect of his poetry in *The Excursion* was poorly received, largely because, as Hazlitt would latter reflect:

> It affects a system without having any intelligible clue to one; and instead of unfolding a principle in various and striking lights, repeats the same conclusions till they become flat and insipid. Mr. Wordsworth's mind is obtuse, except as it is the organ and the receptacle of accumulated feelings: it is not analytic, but synthetic; it is reflecting, rather than theoretical. (*The Spirit of the Age* 1854 [1825]: 129)

In this passage, Hazlitt suggests that Wordsworth should continue to do what he is good at, which consists of reflecting upon emotional states rather than attempting to present a theoretical system, for which he has no skill. Wordsworth's *Excursion* shows the author—a celebrator of children, flowers, and fine views—overreaching

his talents, dabbling in prolix attempts at philosophy, and thereby boring and disappointing his audiences' expectations. Thus, Wordsworth's attempt to create a more inclusive, dialogic aesthetic scene—one where Wordsworth invites his readers to understand the principle of deferral he perceives in his works—fails to capture the attention of his critical audience, who reject his didacticism, preferring his usual mode of representing rustic subjects as catalysts for empathetic emotional experience, which mediate between themselves and the necessarily resented poet.

Bushell identifies Wordsworth's attempt, as the poet figure of *The Excursion*, to speak for others as another of the sources of Hazlitt's displeasure with the dramatized dialogue of the poem. "[F]or Hazlitt," writes Bushell, "Wordsworth speaking in his own voice promotes admiration and sympathy. Wordsworth speaking for, or on behalf of, others does not" (29). According to Hazlitt, writes Bushell, "[t]he Romantic mind is interested in processes of understanding, governed by 'a bias to abstraction' . . . and as such unsuited to dramatic representation" (30). It is upon the basis of this aesthetic judgment, Bushell claims, that Hazlitt criticizes Wordsworth's *Excursion*. In Hazlitt's assessment of the practices of good dramatists—who are able to present "[e]ach character . . . [as] a centre of repulsion to the rest; and [show that] it is [the characters'] hostile interests brought into collision, that must tug at their heart-strings" (qtd. in Bushell 30)—Wordsworth and Romantic poets in general are deficient (29):

> [F]or Hazlitt, *The Excursion*, placed alongside such a model [of drama], exhibits all the weaknesses of the period as a non-dramatic age, presenting a tendency to debate and speculate rather than to act, a circle of characters who largely 'look the same way' and exploring difference only in order to affirm human sympathies more strongly. (30)

Thus, Hazlitt's disparagement arises in part from his distaste for the relatively static aesthetization of character rivalry in Wordsworth's first extended, multi-character dramatic dialogue. Hazlitt's sense of this inadequacy is compounded by the critic's impatience with Wordsworth's deficiencies in propounding a system and his consequent didacticism. Despite failing to attain to Hazlitt's standards for philosophically persuasive works and excellent dramatic action, the dialogues of *The Excursion* represent the sympathetic ostensive gesture, which Schneider deems characteristic of Wordsworth's poetry.

The lines in which Wordsworth undertakes to provide a system that explains the resentment-ameliorating possibilities of the aesthetic come in the form of a dialogue, particularly in Book III and Book IV, which are respectively titled "Despondency" and "Despondency Corrected." Wordsworth's poem succeeds in

articulating an awareness of its modest capacity to defer the enactment of violence, accompanying the revolutionaries' feverish pursuit of idealized presence, which appears in their utopic visions of a leveled social order. Wordsworth suggests that aesthetic representation may defer the resentment that often propels the violent action of revolutionary projects. In "Despondency," the figure of the Solitary laments his pursuit of an equitable present through revolutionary fanaticism, an obsession which takes him dangerously close to committing violent outrages. Admonishing the Solitary against succumbing to feelings of disappointment at the failure of the Revolution and enduring dissatisfaction with England's social order, the sagacious Wanderer states that resentment may be allayed by attending to the idealized peacefulness of animals in their rural setting. "If," the Wanderer states, "with the forward will and groveling soul / Of man, offended, liberty is here": in an aesthetization of nature (4.375-76). He begins to elaborate this vision by asserting that an

> invitation every hour [is] renewed,
> To mark 'their' placid state, who never heard
> Of a command which they have power to break,
> Or rule which they are tempted to transgress:
> These, with a soothed or elevated heart,
> May we behold; their knowledge register;
> Observe their ways; and, free from envy, find
> Complacence there . . . (4.375-84)

The Wanderer suggests that idealized representations of animals function to sublimate the antagonism roused in the Solitary by the envy-producing rivalry inherent in the prevailing social order. The mollification of the Solitary's agonistic desire, accomplished through his internal reflections upon animals' pacific relationship to nature, recalls the aesthetic deferral effected by Wordsworth's humble rustic characters in *Lyrical Ballads*. By situating such lowly figures—animals and the rural poor—at the centre of his poetry's aesthetic and ethical scenes, Wordsworth attempts to orient his audience's attention away from France's dramatic enactment of ritual violence, which dominated his and all of Europe's notice at the outbreak of the Terror.

The impact of the French Revolution upon English poets, and especially Wordsworth, is well known. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, which was begun in 1798 appeared only after Wordsworth's death, is an account not only of a poet's coming of age, but also of his disillusionment with the radical political causes that propelled the unexpected violence following from the first revolutionary acts that culminated

in the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Writing *The Prelude* in 1798, Wordsworth expresses the elation he and his contemporaries felt “When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights / . . . / A prime enchanter to assist the work / Which then was going forward in her name” (*Prelude* [1805] 10:697-700). These hopes were dashed, when, as Wordsworth writes, revolutionaries “now, become oppressors in their turn, / Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defense / For one of conquest, losing sight of all / Which they had struggled for” (11:206-09). A year after Wordsworth began to write *The Prelude*, notes Simon Bainbridge:

> Coleridge [wrote] to his friend and fellow poet Wordsworth identifying the Revolution as the theme for the era’s definitive poem, writing . . . that “I wish you would write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind. . . . It would do great good” (Bainbridge 192).

It was, Bainbridge further notes, Coleridge’s urgings that “informed Wordsworth’s examination of the Revolution’s impact in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* . . . but poems on the events in France had begun to appear very quickly” (192). The early period of the Revolution appeared to the English poets as the realization of a poetic ideal. When reflecting in *The Prelude* on his visit to France in 1790, Wordsworth famously writes that the period was “a time when Europe was rejoiced, / France standing on top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again” (*Prelude* [1850] 6.352-4). “It was in such millennial terms,” writes Bainbridge, “that many poets responded to events in the early years of the decade, understanding these events through biblical [eyes] . . . as the second coming of Christ, bringing about the end to the old world and the creation of a new one” (200). Referencing M. H. Abrams influential essay, “English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age” (1984), Bainbridge acknowledges that the increasingly violent disasters overtaking the revolutionary movement caused poets such as Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth to recast the notion of revolution, not as a political project to be enacted in reality, but as a personally transformative endeavor undertaken within the individual imagination (201). For the English poets writing at the turn of the century, Abrams states, “[h]ope is shifted from the history of mankind to the mind of a single individual, from militant external action to an imaginative act” (66). Beyond accomplishing an interior revolution particular to the poet’s mind, the advent of print culture allowed for the wide and contagious dissemination of this representational revolution throughout England, communicating the revolution’s values to the next generation of poets, who, though they scorned their predecessors’ inconstancy, maintained similar positions regarding the imaginary’s

role in the epochal process of social change (Bainbridge 204).

Reconsidering some of these interpretations, in an essay entitled “Wordsworth’s Revolutions, 1793-1798,” Kenneth R. Johnston retraces Wordsworth’s transformation from a supporter of a violent enactment of revolutionary ideals to a promulgator of a pacific poetry of a revolutionary imaginary. Attempting to refine the simple assertion, derived from Abrams, that Wordsworth’s cooled revolutionary ambitions led him to the innovations of *Lyrical Ballads* and the Romantic movement generally, Johnston challenges new historicist Margorie Levinson’s influential attack on “Wordsworth for (as she puts it) achieving poetical ‘insight’ at the cost of socio-political ‘oversight’” by examining the “larger arc of Wordsworth’s career” (170). Proposing that, within this arc, “Wordsworth ‘revolves’ from an initially conventional poetry and conventional politics, through a stage of radical politics and conventional but unstable poetry, into a period of radical poetics and unstable but increasingly conventional liberal to conservative . . . politics” (171), Johnston argues that it was largely Wordsworth’s concern over the fate of his child, Catherine, and her mother, Annette Vallon, that led him to reconsider his initial enthusiasm for the violent enactment of the revolution, which—in an unpublished letter to Bishop Llandaff (an erstwhile supporter of the revolution who balked at regicide)—went so far as to justify the execution of Louis XVI (170-71). Johnston goes on to tentatively suggest that the news of “the bloody repression of the counter-revolution in the Vendée,” where Annette’s royalist family lived, impacted Wordsworth’s opinion of the Revolution’s violent course. As he composed and revised works that grappled with themes of liberal optimism and royalist oppression between1790 and 1798 (specifically *Descriptive Sketches* [1791-2] *An Evening Walk* [1793], and *The Borderers* [1796-7]), he labored under the knowledge that his French family remained under continued threat due to the discord on the continent (177-8). The anxiety over Annette’s and Catherine’s well-being in the face of the counter-revolution’s violence, Johnston suggests, eventually influenced Wordsworth’s choice to present the pathetically distracted mother, who is abandoned in a time of war, as the central sympathetic figure in “The Ruined Cottage,” a poem which was composed in the period of his anxiety over Annette and Catherine. “The Ruined Cottage” would later appear in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and, in 1814, a version of “The Ruined Cottage” would become the first book of *The Excursion*. In Johnston’s reading of Wordsworth’s shift in priorities, far from representing a political ideal to which—under the Tory pressure of Pitt’s 1795 “Gagging Acts”—the poet is too cowardly to aggrandize an activist position, Wordsworth’s aesthetic turn towards the pathos of the menaced marginal subject arises from his immediately personal understanding of its consequences for those most vulnerable to the effects of violence.

Wordsworth’s newfound non-violent commitment receives paradoxical reactions

from both ends of literary criticism's political spectrum. The immediacy of his own anxiety via the specter of a potential personal tragedy opens the imaginative poetic capacities for pacifist melodrama, which even Jeffrey, in his excoriating review of *The Excursion*, felt obliged to point out as exemplary of Wordsworth's skill (Jeffrey 7). Though the conservative Jeffrey finds Wordsworth's elevation of common subjects to be disruptive to the traditional hierarchy, he must still acknowledge that the classical effect of pathos is achieved regardless of the gaucherie of Wordsworth's innovations. On the pro-revolutionary end of the spectrum, Hazlitt derides Wordsworth's efforts as diluted manifestations of his former zeal. In his equivocal treatment of Wordsworth in *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt reflects nostalgically on Wordsworth's and the Lake School's former radicalism, while denigrating the movement's more recent efforts as indicative of a lapsed revolutionary faith.

In *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt reserves many of his most cutting remarks for those poets whose revolutionary posture, which he attributes to their defiant choice of common subject matter, appears to wane later in their careers. In the opening line of his portrait of Coleridge, Hazlitt states: "The present age is an age of talkers, and not of doers" (1992 [1825]:7: 98). Coleridge, Hazlitt goes on to argue, is among the age's most inactive talkers. After referring to his inconstancy to the cause of the French Revolution; his failure to bring to fruition his pantisocracy scheme; and his increasing conservatism after the treason trials of 1794, Hazlitt concludes the Paris edition of his portrait with a general reflection on the cowardly lack of political commitment displayed by the period's poets and typified in Coleridge's behavior:

> the poets, creatures of sympathy, could not stand the frowns both of king and people. They did not like to be shut out when places and pensions . . . were about to be distributed. They did not stomach being *sent to Coventry*, and Mr Coleridge sounded a retreat for them by the help of casuistry and a musical voice. . . . (238)

Hazlitt attributes this tendency to retreat from action into empty representations to both Coleridge and his closest associate, Wordsworth. Coleridge's "'words were hollow,'" Hazlitt continues, "'but they pleased the ear' of his friends of the Lake School, who turned back disgusted and panic-struck from the dry desert of unpopularity" (283). The opening sentence of the portrait of Wordsworth continues this attack on the Lake School, when it asserts that "Mr Wordsworth's genius is a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age" (161). Read as an extension of Coleridge's portrait, Hazlitt's conception of Wordsworth implies that he only produces un-actualized representations, which aspire—but ultimately fail—to enact the

Revolution’s principles.

The political radicalism advocated in the portraits comprising Hazlitt’s *Spirit of the Age* demands a direct translation of subversive representations into radical acts, which Hazlitt supposes will instantiate the revolutionary ideal in the form of the French Republic. According to Jonathan Bate, Hazlitt was “one of the few English Romantics to remain loyal to the ideals of the French Revolution throughout his life” (para. 7). His commitment went so far as to support the French conquest of Europe: “Hazlitt always believed that Napoleon was the sword-arm, not the extinguisher, of the ideals of the French Revolution; the battle of Waterloo brought him near to distraction” (para. 25); previously, when the Emperor abdicated in 1814, Hazlitt “took it almost as a personal blow” (para. 24). In his last work, *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* (1828), Hazlitt argues for the legitimacy of Louis XVI’s execution, writing: “[t]he condemnation of Louis XVI. stands on the same . . . foundation as that of Charles I . . . and the object of both was . . . to remove the most dangerous enemy of the state, and also to set an example . . . that if kings presume on being placed above the law . . . there is a *justice above the law*” (158).

Faithful to his pursuit of the Revolution’s ideals, Hazlitt’s criticism of Wordsworth’s latter-day work derives from his sense that the poet, having abandoned his revolutionary principles for aristocratic patronage, no longer wills an equitable social order, in which the marginal subjects of his early poetry enjoy privilege. Referring to Wordsworth’s “later philosophic productions,” Hazlitt laments that these poems “seem to have been composed not in a cottage at Grasmere, but among the half-inspired groves and stately recollections of Cole-Orton,” which was the country seat of one of Wordsworth’s patrons, Sir George Howland Beaumont (1992 [1825]: 7: 164, 299). *The Excursion*’s depictions of rustic characters, who speak in philosophical terms and polished language, appear to Hazlitt as “a departure from and dereliction of [Wordsworth’s] first principles” (164). In his assessment of the poem, Hazlitt reads the hypocrisy of Wordsworth’s lapsed radicalism into the poet’s choice of subjects, suggesting that *The Excursion*’s aggrandizement of common folk strikes a ridiculous juxtaposition against Wordsworth’s elevated style and attempts at philosophy:

> The EXCURSION, we believe, fell stillborn from the press. There was something abortive, and clumsy, and ill-judged in the attempt. It was long and laboured. The personages, for the most part, were low, the fare rustic: the plan raised expectations which were not fulfilled, and the effect was like being ushered into a stately hall and invited to sit down to a splendid banquet in the company of clowns, and with nothing but successive courses of apple-dumplings served up. It was not

> even *toujours perdrix*! (*The Spirit of the Age* 1854 [1825]: 129)

The jarring, incongruous aesthetic effect Hazlitt decries in this critique is a species of the radical choice of language and subject matter he lauds in Wordsworth's earlier work. When Wordsworth, in "Michael, A Pastoral" from *Lyrical Ballads*, presents his readers with the expectation of a lyric idyll—replacing the attic swains with rude Lake District shepherds, who, instead of singing odes to nymphs, lament the insidious lure and deleterious effects of modern market society upon their idealized rural paradise—he shocks his readers by making rude subject matter the centre of his moral vision and inviting the reader to contemplate this vision's humble pathos. Hazlitt's acerbically ironic metaphor of country house clowns itself constitutes a parody of Wordsworth's recurring technique, as it relies upon supplementing the traditional neo-classical centres of mimetic attention with his idiosyncratic elevation of peripheral subjects.

By deploying irony, Hazlitt intends to shame Wordsworth for having abandoned his radical denunciations of the established poetic order, which is linked to the oppression caused by the dominant social and political system. However, the vestiges of Hazlitt's refined sensibilities regarding the appropriate matching of speaker and discourse lead him to lapse into the very error that he accuses Wordsworth of succumbing to. Hazlitt wishes to uphold a standard of literary excellence manifest in realistic consistency, but he does not wish to abide these subjects' crude attempts to represent their own position vis-à-vis the status quo. To Hazlitt's mind, the ethical lessons of Wordsworth's selection of rustic subjects—that the poor masses should take precedence over the wealthy and powerful few—are implicit in his decision to foreground them. The unlikely possibility that virtually illiterate people could give an involved description of the class critique that they represent in the poem constitutes, for Hazlitt, and unbalanced composition. Hazlitt wants less philosophy and more poignant melodrama in order to highlight the abhorrent and tragic incongruity of the rustics in relation to their indifferent masters. Wistful for the initial radical impact of *Lyrical Ballads*, Hazlitt suggests that Wordsworth can no longer effectively serve to incite the type of physically active political engagement Hazlitt believes in.

When, in the struggle over political ideals, language users are inspired by rhetoric to abandon the symbolic and attempt to physically dominate the centre of the scene of representation, real violence often ensues. For example, melodramatic works—which present the audience with an oppressed subject and oppressing villain, who both resemble figures in the social world—may function to incite revolutionary action. The representational seeds of the actual violence resulting from revolutionary action appear in Peter Brooks's description of melodrama, as an

aesthetic form coming “into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern” (15). His definition of melodrama characterizes Hazlitt and other political radicals’ revolutionary rhetoric, which often depicts “an intense emotional and ethical drama based on the manichaeistic struggle of good and evil. . . . The polarization of good and evil works toward revealing their presence and operation as real forces in the world” (12-13). In melodrama language contains an increased potential to incite resentment up to the point where words cannot be found to express—and thereby defer—the inchoate violence exploding out from resentment. While acknowledging this possibility, Gans’s originary hypothesis suggests that, more often than not, language succeeds in deferring physical conflict, claiming that so long as the language users contemplate the representation (for instance, imaginatively indulging their revolutionary sentiments instead of enacting them) conflict in the social world is deferred.(1) In this way, Derrida’s *différance*¸ as it operates on Gans’s gradient between violent action and representation, aptly characterizes the roles Romantic rhetoric and poetry play in the revolutionary ferment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The arc of Wordsworth’s career in relation to his changing attitude regarding the necessity of revolutionary violence—in which the threat to his family, as Johnston suggests, played an important role—illuminates the internalization of revolutionary principles to the imaginary scene shared between Wordsworth and his readers. Unwilling to engage in rhetoric that could potentially inflame his readers to violent action, Wordsworth pioneers a poetics that imagines the appropriation of the centre by the periphery. As the Nambikwaran antagonist defers physical violence against her rival by betraying the rival’s proper name, Wordsworth’s later works, like those of his early career, perform *différance* by privileging idealized, but common, characters, whose occupation of the aesthetic scene’s centre constitutes an affront to the established order’s tendency to focus on conventionally noble subjects. Violating the accepted neoclassical conventions, which take idealized Attic figures as their speakers, Wordsworth’s poetics undertake a double displacement, or supplementation, of the established order. First, like the young Nambikwarans using forbidden proper names to pursue their mimetic antagonism, he violates a taboo by replacing the shepherd and nymph of the conventional idyll with the gross figures of the contemporary English lake country. Second, also similar to the *Tristes tropiques* girls’ substitution of word for deed, Wordsworth distances himself from the prospect of undertaking physical action in response to the social inequalities he describes. Like the children whispering their rivals’ sacred and taboo proper names to the anthropologist instead of continuing to exchange blows, Wordsworth defers potentially violent action by eschewing activist rhetoric and aggrandizing those subjects who the literati of his period deemed unworthy of serious poetic attention.

The violence-deferring capacity of Wordsworth's poetry is present in both *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Excursions*, but it is implicit in the *Lyrical Ballads* and explicit in the discourse of *The Excursion*'s characters.

Rejecting Wordsworth's modest efforts to reorient popular aesthetic and ethical values, Hazlitt justifies the bloodshed of the Revolution, indicating that his rhetoric gravitates to the activist extreme on the continuum uniting violent action and representation. In his declining years, writing *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, Hazlitt emphasizes the symbolic, violence-deferring quality of Louis XVI's execution—a gesture indicative of Hazlitt's enduring revolutionary radicalism. "In fine," he writes, "the end and object of this act [the execution], 'which was not done in a corner,' was to let the world see that there was a majesty of the people as well as of kings, which might be too long insulted and trifled with" (1: 159). Hazlitt's account of the Revolution, while regularly condemning common acts of brutality, figures the tyranny of monarchy as the ultimate violence (158-59). Through the killing of the King, Hazlitt argues, potential tyrannical violence against the people may be deferred. In the long term, the example of the French Republic provides an alternative model to monarchal rule, with its attendant structural violence. However, the immediate outbreak of the Terror, along with the mobilization of the Allies in response to Louis XVI's death, brought about total war, which, according to Hazlitt, the symbolic and real violence of the execution was designed to prevent.(2) Ultimately, on the continuum between action and representation, Hazlitt's defense of a symbolic execution stands closer to the extreme of violent action than Wordsworth's subversive representation of marginalized subjects.

Hazlitt's faith in the violence-deferring capacity of symbolic execution differs widely from the pacifism of Wordsworth's rustic Wanderer, who presents the individual's contemplative naturalism as a means to avoiding violent action. Nevertheless, Hazlitt's reading of revolutionary themes into Wordsworth's early poetry demonstrates how representations of society's victims may incite violent activism. Language that defers action and language that indexes the threat of violence both protect the community from escalating conflict. As Gans points out, these two modes of language use stand relative to each other on a continuum between extremes of action and representation. The representation of a threat inspires the language using community to act by ritually and symbolically expelling the offending object. Simultaneously, the aporia of representation (or *différance*) delays the subject's active engagement with the object he or she contemplates. Thus, the continuous relationship between Hazlitt's revolutionary rhetoric and Wordsworth's hierarchy-inverting poetics effectively illustrates the gradient of violence separating extremes of action and representation.

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Notes

1. In their recent *Anthropoetics* contribution titled “‘Revolution!’—The Rhetoric of Exclamation,” Chris Fleming and John O’Carroll summarize their reflection on the paradoxical statements that serve as revolutionary slogans, stating that such “paradoxes … supplied [their study with] a clue to seeking the anthropoetic paradoxes that signal the appropriative nature of revolutionary rhetoric, and enabled the tracing of whether (as we suspected) at present most revolutionary discourse operates to defer violence, but has always the potential for its incitations to take hold” (para. 42). Attempting to appropriate the centre and redistribute the central objects, users of paradoxical revolutionary rhetoric are most often pleased to exclaim—that is, represent—their revolutionary vision, but such paradoxes, when sufficiently incoherent, may give way to real, potentially violent, action. (back)

2. Enumerating the practical reasons for Louis XVI’s execution, Hazlitt suggests that leaving the King alive would only lead to more violence: “Would his banishment,”

Hazlitt asks, “prevent his return at the head of his hordes of foreigners and bands of emigrants?” (1: 157-58). (back)