Wordsworth, Romantic Theory, and the Bridge to Postmodernism

Scott Levin
Fordham University, New York

William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is continuously at the center of Romantic studies, and for good reason. As Don Bialostosky wrote over a decade ago, "The principal expositors of nearly every theoretical program for criticism during the past two decades (and of some decades earlier) have found it necessary to take up Wordsworth's poetry." [1] This pseudo-autobiography, though not published during Wordsworth's own life, remains—as Bialostosky points out—a primary target of almost every literary practitioner of the postmodern and post-postmodern age. *The Prelude* is neither an epic nor a lyric, at least as far as traditional conventions constitute. Yet, *the growth of the poet's mind*, though in length similar to *The Fairy Queen* or *Paradise Lost*, is unlike any of its predecessors and the proliferation of theorists constantly returning to this text—and Romanticism in general—supports this claim. Something about *The Prelude* compels critics of almost every discipline to tackle this text. Consequently, my paper is going to address this critical desire, especially in terms of postmodernism's yearning to relate to Romanticism. I am going to look closely at *The Prelude* in an attempt to explain the retrospective tendency to not only *read*, but also to connect with Romanticism.

As Jean-Pierre Mileur pointed out over a decade ago, the rise of Theory has also led to "the return to romanticism,"[2] as most prominently seen in the fairly recent work edited by Arkady Plotnitsky and Tilottama Rajan entitled *Idealism Without Absolutes:*

Philosophy and Romantic Culture. Rajan and Plotnitsky's text is a clear example of contemporary postmodern theory and Romanticism coming together with the aim of expanding Romantic thought to include traditionally non-Romantic thinkers. Why this contemporary discourse between Romanticism and theory exists might be clarified by Philip Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's statement from <u>The Literary Absolute</u> that "…romanticism implies something entirely new, the production of something entirely new."[3] Here, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy imply that "romanticism," whatever it may be, is an obvious element that breaks with previous modes of thought or creation—a true instance of modernity. Postmodernism is very much akin to this striking trope of modernity itself; oftentimes it is concerned with subverting the old, the outdated, and the traditionally accepted in terms of both historical and literary representation. The postmodern trend of disrupting hegemony has led to a reshaping of not only Romantic studies, but also English studies as a whole. This is certainly the case in Orrin Wang's *Fantastic Modernity* where Wang utilizes "aporia" as a trope that exists both in the Romantic written text and Romantic historicity. Wang takes the Romantic to the postmodern—and vise-versa—in his lucid examination of Romantic history (from Jacobinian idealism during the French Revolution to the 1960's American counter-culture movement) and Romantic art (from Percy Shelley to Emerson, in a gesture of trans-Atlantic Romanticism) as he exposes the arc-like relationship between Romanticism and postmodernism. As Wang states, "Modernity's paradoxical yearning, then, help us to see how much Romanticism is actually postmodern and how much postmodernism is still Romantic."[4] This "paradoxical yearning" is the desire to both categorize and disrupt categories.

My goal in this examination is by no means an attempt to equate these two gigantic "isms;" yet I am going to display how the specifics of a Romantic text lend themselves to an understanding of postmodernism and vise-versa. As opposed to the contemporary trend of excessive theorizing, my focus on the particulars of the poetry will help in further displaying these connections. My close-reading of Wordsworth's poetry will hopefully elucidate the contemporary desire to bring these two "schools of

thought" together. There will not be any sense of "equating" these ideas, but a close-reading of specific moments that will help us understand these general ideas—general ideas, mind you, that truly do not exist. Due to the retrospective creation of Romanticism as a literary and historical term, Romanticism tends to defy any sort of all-encompassing definition or categorization. Similar to Existentialism—a term coined in the twentieth-century, but still applied to many nineteenth-century thinkers—most Romantic writers had never even heard the term "Romanticism" in light of their own work. As a label, it is an inherently problematic term, just as postmodernism comes to be. Lyotard himself was not shy about pointing this out:

> I imagine you are asking for my system on the arts today, and how it compares with those of my colleagues. I quake, feeling that I've been caught, since I don't have anything worthy of being called a system, and I know only a little about two or three of them, just enough to know they hardly constitute a system.[5]

Postmodernism, Existentialism, Romanticism, or whatever term the critic chooses to use, they all relate to one another in their undoing of stable systematizing. At the same time, Wang's vast "arc" that reaches both proleptically forward and retrospectively backwards between Romanticism and postmodernism is not a bridge that simply skips over the Victorian Age or Modernism. At times the Romantics are just as Modern as the Modernists are Romantic and the phrases become useful in terms of absolutes on very rare occasions.[6] The Romantic trope of the non-linear flow of time—along with narrative-time—is more than apparent in Joyce, Woolf, Proust, Bergson, and Mann while the masking of identity that we find in Yeats and Eliot is also more than apparent in the works of Keats and Coleridge. Obviously the Modernists had the advantage of Freud, Nietzsche and Marx, while the Romantics could only hint at their inevitable arrival. Yet, why the postmodern fascination with Romanticism? My paper is going to attempt to answer this question.

*****

Hence, I fittingly come to William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, a poem—as I will demonstrate—whose very form mirrors the Romantic arc of Wang's postmodern-Romanticism. The poem accomplishes this by utilizing what Rajan and Plotnitsky had termed *idealism without absolutes*, or the Romantic tendency to create a process-driven theory focused on an unattainable ideal that is steeped in a discourse of skepticism.[7] *The Prelude* is a text that literally begins with a question—"Was it for this…?"—that seemingly cannot be answered, yet strives for thirteen books to answer.[8]

Book I of *The Prelude* begins with Wordsworth juxtaposing the urban with the rural as the poet attempts to display the lack of creativity that life in the city provides in relation to country life and its aesthetic potentials. The "burthen of my own unnatural self" that "many a weary day" (1. 23-24) provides is the habitual and familiar life of the city that obfuscates the poetic ambition Wordsworth finds in the "gentle breeze" of line one that soon turns into a "creative" and "vital" breeze in lines 43 and 44. From the beginning it is obvious that the poet is in search of something, some future sign or goal that will hopefully compensate for his present frustration. The breeze is at first "gentle" because the poet peacefully waits for what is to come—poetic inspiration in its tempestuous form. This is a calm that is ephemeral for Wordsworth both in *The Prelude* and in some of his shorter poems such as both "Tintern Abbey" and "Ode: Intimations on Immortality." Frustration with thematic choice and poetic ability are tropes that are not new to Wordsworth or Romanticism in general. Yet, these are rhetorically problematic aspects of Wordsworth's poetry; even though the poet expresses frustration due to the inability to find a subject to write about, he is *still* writing and we readers are *still* reading. Hence, the subject becomes writing itself, or as Harold Bloom states, "The creative process is the hero of Romantic poetry."[9] As far as Romantic criticism has come in the past thirty years and as many changes as it has brought to the genre, the poet's ongoing struggles with creation signify that one of the goals of *The Prelude is* poetry. As Tilottama Rajan clarifies, "…it is also necessary to recognize that the text cannot simply be replaced by a subtext, and that the official content of a work does not cease to exist because it is undermined from within."[10]

Subsequently, even though we are at the beginning of *The Prelude*, the focus is a path that will lead the poet in the direction of Bloom's "creative process." Wordsworth proceeds:

> whither shall I turn,
> By road or pathway, or through open field,
> Or shall a twig or any floating thing
> Upon the river, point me out my course? (1.29-32)

The ironic effect of a displaced future desire is apparent during a present moment of contemplation and yearning for a sign that will "point out" his course. The moment is literally not the future, but even while the first-person language suggests that the poet is condensed in the present, the image of the "twig or any floating thing" infers movement and possibly temporal movement. The poet is searching for not simply subject matter, but subject matter that will project or propel the poet towards his ends, whatever they may be. Even when the poet has been so frustrated that he arrives at his "last wish," his "last and favorite aspiration" (1. 229-230)—this being the "philosophic song" that will also not compensate for what he presently strives for—there is still a proleptic bent towards a vague and ambiguous future aspiration.

Similarly, Lorne Mook labels the poem's progressive tendency "teleological" as the poem exhibits "an attitude that values some purpose to which days add up."[11] Teleology, purpose, goal, or ideal—whatever the critic or poet chooses to call it—the thirteen books of *The Prelude* are the poet's journey towards some kind of potential. This perception is nothing new in terms of Romantic criticism: Paul de Man's "proleptic' stance is also a suggestion of teleology[12] and Geoffrey Hartman's *Wordsworth's Poetry* suggests that *The Prelude* focuses on the poet's own "development by accretion."[13] All of these interpretations imply the apparent movement towards an end, and even before the poet begins to search for possible themes he is awakened under "the grove of Oaks" by a falling "acorn" (1.92-93). This juxtaposition so early in a poem of such length is too obvious an example of the Aristotelian imagery of "entelechy" that exists in the acorn.[14] There is an immediate consciousness of ends at the beginning: somewhere down the

road the acorn will eventually sprout into the oak. The subsequent image of the River Derwent is also not a simple twist of fate—every river moves towards something and opens into a larger body of water, as we will see with the progression of Book One.

At the end of the preamble of Book One there is certainly a desired ideal that is causing the poet's dismay and dissolution in the face of production, or more fittingly, his inability to produce. Presently, Wordsworth's poet has all the necessary tools: the "vital soul" and "general truths;" he is not naked in external things,/ Forms, images; nor numerous other aids" (1. 162-166). After his brooding and melancholy musings through historical themes and potential philosophical queries, the poet arrives at the initial question of the 1799 Two-Part version of the text:

> Was it for this
> That one, the fairest of all Rivers, lov'd
> To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song,
> And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
> And from his fords and shallows sent a voice
> That flow'd along my dreams? (1. 272-277)

In a state of distress while searching for his theme or topic of poetic discourse, Wordsworth's poet arrives at this question, this question whose subject happens to be the indefinite pronoun "this." Though Geoffrey Hartman reads the image of Book One as initiation into "progress of the soul,"[15] Susan Wolfson takes a shrewder look at the open-ended potentials of the antecedent to Wordsworth's pronoun. Recognizing Wordsworth's repetitive questioning throughout *The Prelude*, Wolfson remarks that "Wordsworth gradually turns the language of inquiry into an almost incantatory rhetoric for recovering sense of mission and vocation."[16] Wolfson locates the agency of the question in the idea of inquiry itself: the search for answers, not the answers themselves. "Was it for this?" is a question that should project the poet towards an answer; it a question that implies *movement*.

It is no coincidence that following the question of "Was it for this?" that the poet immediately turns to the river Derwent, which appears to create "this," to both mirror and ignite the movement towards an answer. Yet, the movement of Wordsworth's rivers

is both proleptic and regressive, as Paul de Man points out,[17] so it is no wonder that the poem slowly digresses towards the poet's boyhood in Cockermouth where the river becomes a "Playmate" (1. 291) of the child poet. Remember, before the initial question of "Was it for this?" the poet is in a state of utter bewilderment that is caused by possibly being stagnant (both temporally and creatively) and it is *the question* that projects the poet forward. The search for the answer through—as Wolfson notes—"inquiry" comes via the metaphorical image of the Derwent: a river whose tenor provides the passage of a course towards an opening and potential ends: every river spills into a larger body of water.

Paradoxically, the end, or future in this instance, is a meandering venture backwards through a "spot of time"—to Wordsworth's youth—that in the end projects the poem forward. Though in the 1805 version of *The Prelude* it takes ten books to reach poet's definition of a "spot of time," the 1799 2-part version provides the definition almost immediately:

> There are in our existence spots of time
> Which with a distinct preeminence retain
> A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
> By trivial occupations and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds—
> Especially the imaginative power—
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired. (1. 288-294)[18]

Some critics have traditionally seen the "spots of time" as the more mystical, almost even prophetic, moments of Romantic literature.[19] Hartman, however, points out in more practical terms that:

> Wordsworth called the episode a "spot of time," to indicate that it
> stood out, spotlike, in his consciousness of time, that it merged
> sensation of place and sensation of time (so that time was placed),
> even that it allowed him to physically perceive or 'spot' time.[20]

These are "micro-moments" of perception that lend a particular moment to a larger, "macro" sense of purpose.[21] Similar to the Derwent itself, the "spot" is utilized—

metaphorically speaking—for movement. In the case of Book One, the "spot of time" is designed to fill the gap of a question, specifically: "Was it for this?" The "spot" may not answer the question, but it projects the text towards an answer; it represents a particular micro-ideal in a movement towards an ultimate, macro-ideal: the possible completion of the text or the answer to the question.

This "spot of time" that the Derwent leads the poet to encounter—or reveal— points out another issue, especially in terms of Romanticism and Romantic postmodernism. Though the spots have been read in numerous ways, whether it be the purging of repressed anxiety or patriarchal displacement, what is important here is that they continue with the trope of inquiry and the desire to resolve an uncertainty, no matter what the uncertainty may be. As Wolfson notes, "…certainties dissolve under the pressure of inquiry, but inquiry may be undertaken to secure a more comprehensible certainty, which renewed inquiry may in turn stabalize."[22] The "spot of time" is an echo of the ideal end itself: the text in its incomplete completion, the answer to the unanswerable. He is trying to solve the problem through the problem as means: answering questions with further questions. Poetry becomes this ideal because it is the ambiguous nature of poetry that prolongs the search through its own meta-poetic uncertainty. The poet of Wordsworth does not go up in arms against the unknowable, but he strives in the face of ambiguity, both for and against it, in the most postmodern of ways. As we will see in Book Five, just like Sisyphus, the poet knows that the end ideal may not ever be achievable, but he attempts to find it nonetheless. And it is *this* that matters.

At the beginning of Book Five, while musing over the lengthy work that comes with "study and hard thought" (5. 8) Wordsworth's poet makes a rather complex claim as he states that, "there,/ My sadness finds its fuel" (5. 9-10). At this point it is still unclear what exactly the poet is referring to that "fuel[s]" his sadness; the simple hard work of man seems a little trite for Wordsworth, even with the knowledge from "The Preface" to Lyrical Ballads that tells us that in picking the subject matter for his poetry, Wordsworth desires to "choose incidents and situations from common life."[23] Similar to

his treatment of time is Wordsworth's treatment of the common and the ordinary—nothing is truly ever *common* just as each singular moment is unequivocally never singular. Yet, the lines that follow hint at the possible clarification of this ambiguity through the prescience of the odd dream to come. The poet goes on:

> Hitherto
> In progress through this Verse, my mind hath look'd
> Upon the speaking face of earth and heaven
> As her prime Teacher, intercourse with man
> Established by sovereign intellect,
> Who through that bodily Image hath diffus'd
> A soul divine which we participate,
> A deathless spirit. Thou also, Man, hast wrought,
> For commerce of thy nature with itself;
> Things worthy of unconquerable life;
> And yet we feel, we cannot chuse but feel
> That these must perish. (5. 10-21)

These lines signify the apparent juxtaposition of the eternal and temporal. Wordsworth presents the possible ascetic relationship between body and spirit in the first eight lines of this excerpt—a potential god-like reference to that which is truly our "prime Teacher" (5. 14). Yet, the proceeding lines exhibit man's desire to create things in the temporal world that are "worthy" of eternity but "must perish" nonetheless. Wordsworth does not immediately clarify this, but instead refers to the ephemeral quality that these "objects' possess and the dejection that follows their loss. Just as we saw in Book One, here we have more general questions similar to "Was it for this…?" Wolfson also notes this continuation of the theme concerning inquiry as she states, "Not only are these questions [at the beginning of Book Five] never answered and never dispelled, but their implications threaten the very methods and intent of the poetic project in which they appear."[24] The movement driven by inquiry continues, though I think Wolfson, in finding these questions unanswerable, possibly overlooks the importance of the necessity of these questions *to be* unanswerable—postmodernism at its finest. The possibility of what man can create for "commerce of thy nature with itself" (5.19) in establishing a discourse from man-to-man is found in the dream sequence that follows.

Subsequently, the vision of the Arabian-Quixote on a "maniac's" mission helps clarify the questions from the opening lines of Book Five. The ethereal tale relayed to Wordsworth's poet-as-listener contains this paradoxical figure on a quest to bury two books—that are, mind you, actually a stone and a sea-shell—before the apocalyptic deluge commences. In going back to the opening lines, the question still stands as to what exactly fuels the poet's sadness. What is it that is relayed to the poet-as-audience through the story of the dream?

Obviously there is nothing unequivocal about this dream except that there is a figure who is both quixotic and Arabic at the same time; he is an Eastern and Western figure coming together, but also not East and West at all as the narrator states, "Of these [Quixote and Arab] was neither, and was both at once" (5. 126). So, the image in the dream represents both a binary and the dissolution of this binary. The primary image is two very specific entities (Don Quixote and an Arab) and also something completely unspecified, mirroring the "twofold treasure to his side" (5. 120) that are two books that, at the same time, are not books at all. The image becomes a blending and a disruption all at once; there is no either/or scenario. Here is the paradox that Wang attributes to Romantic postmodernism. At the same time, the dream of Book Five is a significant instance as Wordsworth creates a potentially Nietzschean text through his acceptance of both the relevancy of the binary existing together and the fact that it does not exist at all. Tilottama Rajan recognizes Nietzsche's "Romantic consciousness" as "one in which the text has moved beyond the state of contradiction in which it must exist either as a structure of sublimation or as a self-consuming artifact, and has come to terms with its own complicity in the darkness of existence."[25] Nietzsche is the fitting bond between the Romantic and the postmodern because it is through him that we can retrospectively further our understanding of Romanticism and proleptically envision the influence he was to certainly have on later postmodern thinkers.[26] Consequently, anachronism becomes a critical tool. Nietzsche, as well as Book Five's dream, recognize signification without end; the poetic and the dream represent the ultimate metaphor that can be read without conclusion—a true instance of Romantic-postmodernism.

Moreover, before the dream itself, the individual providing the tale reveals to the listening-poet that he was reading "of the Errant Knight/ Recorded by Cervantes" (5. 59-60)) and that his thoughts turned "On Poetry and geometric Truth" (5. 64). Yet, in thinking back to the beginning of Book Five and the questions concerning temporality and man's ability to possibly create something that transcends the ephemeral nature of existence, it is necessary to look at the goal of this paradoxical figure in the dream. After having listened to the "blast of harmony" (5. 96) that tells of the destruction at hand, the dreamer states;

> No sooner ceas'd
> The song, but with calm look, the Arab said
> That all was true; that it was even so
> As had been spoken; and that he himself
> Was going then to bury those two Books (5. 99-103)

The quest of the Arab-Quixote becomes an attempt to save human creation from the inescapable consequences of temporality. What is important here is that the poet is a listener during the dream. The Arab buries both books prior to the destruction and the second book, the one containing the "Ode," provides "A joy, a consolation, and a hope" (5. 109). Hence, what may potentially fuel the poet's sadness from the beginning of Book Five is the understanding that all things must perish, humanity and humanity's works of art, though through art there is still potential and "a hope." The answer to the question is—as we saw in Book One—further possibility through the telling of the tale. This possibility finds itself in the meta-poetics of inquiry and it is a lesson that *the telling* of the dream teaches to the listening-poet.

Wordsworth's poet, after having heard the tale in Book Five, not only feels pity and reverence for the "Semi-Quixote" (5. 142) but he desires to take part in that "Maniac's anxiousness" (5. 160) and literally be him. The poet/listener of the tale also becomes the one questing to sustain the life of the text and beyond the reader, the only one who can possibly sustain the life of art is the artist himself. The dream of Book Five produces a rhetorical fusion of artist and listener, along with the work of art itself.

Subsequently, Nietzsche favors Greek tragedy because it not only includes the spirits of Dionysus and Apollo but also because it includes the binary of speaker and audience through the effect of the images on the chorus. Poetry is only an echo of tragedy, according to Nietzsche, but for poetry to succeed, "the poet is poet only insofar as he sees himself surrounded by the living, acting shapes into whose innermost being he penetrates."[27] Reality does not exist through the work of art or the stage, but in its ability to affect an audience, or in this case the chorus. Will becomes the change that occurs by those who witness the interplay between the horrors and joys of life.

What is important for Nietzsche is not death and horror in Aeschylus or Sophocles, but how to live with death and horror, how those who recognize the "disenchantment"[28] of life choose to go on. The same can be said of Wordsworth's poet in Book Five: he is the listener, the chorus in the presence of an art form that—like music and tragedy—contains the potential binaries of both Dionysus and Apollo as can be found in the two books. As Hartman states, the two books are "…identified as the two principal branches of humane learning, mathematics and literature."[29] The stone represents "Euclid's Elements," (5. 88) a reference to geometry, an empirically-driven theory that potentially mirrors the illusory, plastic world of Apollo; the sea-shell represents "'something of more worth'" (5. 90) and when the storyteller says that he put the shell up to his ear he hears "A loud prophetic blast of harmony/ An Ode in passion utter'd" (5. 96-97). An "Ode" coupled with "harmony" may very well suggest music, and a poetic music at that. The seashell represents a possible Dionysian spirit: that is fluid, ethereal, and impossible to capture through plastic representation. Yet, according to Nietzsche, it is only through the exchange of both deities in a work of art that change can take place. Romantic-Nietzschean knowledge is the desire to capture the spirit of music through outward representation: to prolong the search, whether or not it is in vain. Fittingly, the one on a quest to prolong the knowledge of this art form in Book of *The Prelude* is the absurd Quixote, the one who can never achieve his goal, but strives nonetheless.

The interplay goes beyond Apollo and Dionysus in Book Five to—as previously mentioned—speaker and audience, creator and created. What is it that changes in the listener? The answer to this question can be found in the recognition of the power of art on man, the rhetorical interplay between ethos and pathos. Thinking back to the dream and the quest of the Arab-Quixote, the poet states:

> Oftentimes at least,
> Me hath such deep entrancement half-possess'd
> When I have held a volume in my hand,
> Poor earthly casket of immortal Verse!
> Skakespeare, or Milton, Labourers divine. (5. 161-165)

Remembering the opening lines of Book Five, it is not the common or ordinary that fuels Wordsworth's sadness, but the labor of the poet—in this case the great canonical poet—to create something that will transcend mortality. This is what comes to Wordsworth's poet's mind and soon he regrets those days not spent in contemplation of such high themes. Poetry, even in its equivocal state, may be the answer because it represents the journey of inquiry towards an answer, not an answer itself. Wolfson's concern about these questions being unanswerable is alleviated because the answer signifies the search: the end becomes the journey; the answer becomes *the text*, in its vast equivocity. Yet, the desire to search is still there even with the "earthly" knowledge of the impossibility of achievement, echoing the continuation of *pursuit* from Book One.

Consequently, the effect of the story on the listener leads to the reason why Nietzsche believes we must live life aesthetically: we can either change or be changed depending on whether we are artists or listeners. Through the effect of art on him in Book 5, Wordsworth's poet decides the following:

> Mighty, indeed supreme must be the power
> Of living Nature which could thus so long
> Detain me from the best of other thoughts!
> Even in the lisping time of Infancy
> And later down, in prattling Childhood, even
> While I was traveling back among those days,
> How could I ever play an ingrate's part?
> Once more should I have made those bowers resound,

> And intermingled strains of thankfulness
> With their own thoughtless melodies; at least
> It might have well beseem'd me to repeat
> Some simply-fashion'd tale; to tell again,
> In slender accents of sweet Verse, some tale
> That did bewitch me then, and soothes me now. (5. 166-179)

Echoing the "hour of thoughtless youth" of "Tintern Abbey," these lines also signify the recognition of maturity and knowledge over innocence and play. Again, it is Milton and Shakespeare—along with the tale of the dream—that have made him recognize this, and in understanding the power of art to lend meaning to life that life alone cannot provide, the poet decides to retell through "sweet verse some tale/ That did bewitch me then, and soothes me now" (5. 178-179). What Wordsworth's poet decides to do after having mused over the potential effects of the great poets is to also become a creator—to create his own days and his own tales in the shadow of the masters who came before, striving to also outlast a life that is destined to end. The questions are again answered with the illimitable signification of poetry as an *answer*. As a listener he is limited to being changed while as a creator he too can change others as those before him—Cervantes included—changed him. The cycle goes on.

<div align="center">*****</div>

There is something skeptical in Nietzsche's depiction of lyrical poetry just as there is something skeptical in Wordsworth's own idealization of poetry in Book Five. Understanding in terms of aesthetics can never be complete, for it is "at bottom illusory"[30] while even though the spirit of art is certainly idealized by Nietzsche, our grasp of it is fragmented and never whole. Similarly, by using a Quixote figure, Wordsworth's poet acknowledges the impossibility of ever achieving the ideal end, though he accepts the challenge. The same is true of Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* as he states, "…lyric poetry is presented as an art never completely realized, indeed a hybrid whose essence is made to consist in an uneasy mixture of will and contemplation."[31] In this case, the Romantic knowledge of both thinkers reflects and idealism that is certainly not absolute. Yet, to paraphrase Arkady Plotnitsky from the

conclusion to *Idealism Without Absolutes*, to be "Romantic" is to know how to live this uncertainty.[32] Still, even with the uncertainty, Wordsworth desires "some tale/ That did bewitch me then, and soothes me now," (5. 178-179) echoing how art can potentially both fuel sadness and—as Nietzsche states—"release us from the tedium of absurdity."[33]

Finally, critics have been defining and redefining "Romanticism" for over a century. As Ira Livingston puts it:

> Ever since it gained academic currency, then, Romanticism has been a contested category. Even when the term is used to denote a period reasonably discrete in time and place, it is ambiguated by questions of where, when, and how it begins and ends; whether it can best be studied as the Spirit of an Age, a historically contingent superstructure, or a maximally embedded episteme.[34]

These lines are a fitting bookend to Lyotard's contention of postmodernity's de-systematizing system. Hopefully, my reading of the particulars of a Romantic text has displayed just "how much Romanticism is actually postmodern and how much postmodernism is still Romantic."[35] These are terms that are much more useful in their specific contexts as adjectives, as opposed to their totalizing effects as nouns. The particular meta-poetics of Wordsworth, read in concert with Nietzsche's skeptical idealism, brings these discourses together through their similar particulars, though vast differences still remain. As the Derwent flows towards its idealized end, we know it will empty out somewhere, but who can possible find—or name—the singular end of an ocean? An ocean, mind you, that reverses its flow and provides the waters of its tributaries with their means.

As critics, we know we are not going to find the answers to the unanswerable, but we strive nonetheless. Our profession, nevertheless, is similar to Wordsworth's poet, Nietzsche's elusive ideal, and Romantic-postmodernism—it is in vain. We do not have the answers that are absolute, but we have potentials and possibilities. In the end, *this* is exactly what makes each and every one of us, also Romantic.

WORKS CITED

Bialostosky, Don H. *Wordsworth, dialogics, and the practice of criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Bloom, Harold. *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*.   Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.

Bowie, Andrew. *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.

De Man, Paul. "Time and History in Wordsworth." In E. S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, Andrzej Warminski, eds. *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Hartman, Geoffrey. *Wordsworth's Poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.

---. *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

---. *The Geoffrey Hartman Reader*. Geoffrey Hartman and Daniel T. O'Hara, eds. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004.

Kelley, Theresa. "Romantic Histories: Charlotte Smith and Beachy Head." *Nineteenth Century Literature*. August, 2004.

Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe and Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, trans. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.

Livingston, Ira. *Arrow of Chaos: Romanticism and Postmodernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Lyortard, Jean-Francois. "Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity." *The Lyotard Reader*. Andrew Benjamin, ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989.

Mileur, Jean-Pierre. *The Critical Romance: The Critic as Reader, Writer, Hero*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.

---."The Return of the Romantic." In David L. Clark and Tilottama Rajan eds.

Intersections: Nineteenth-Century Philosophy and Contemporary Theory. Albany: State

University of New York Press, 1995.

Mook, Lorne. "The Everyday and the Teleological: Time-Conflict, Progression, and

Affect in Books 1 and 2 of *The Prelude*," *European Romantic Review*, Vol. 17, No. 5

December 2006, pp. 593-605

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Francis Golfing. New York: Doubleday,

1956.

Plotnitsky, Arkady. "Conclusion: Without Absolutes." In Arkady Plotnitsky and

Tilottoma Rajan eds. *Idealism without Absolutes: Philosophy and Romantic Culture*. Albany:

State University of New York Press, 2004.

Plug, Jan. "Romanticism and the Invention of Literature." In Arkady Plotnitsky and

Tilottama Rajan eds. *Idealism without Absolutes: Philosophy and Romantic Culture*. Albany:

State University of New York Press, 2004.

Rajan, Tilottama. The *Dark Interpretor: The Discourse of Romanticism*. Ithaca: Cornell

University Press, 1980.

Richey, William and Daniel Robinson eds. *William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor

Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2002.

Wang, Orrin. *Fantastic Modernity: Dialiectic Readings in Romanticism and Theory*.

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Wolfson, Susan. *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the InterrogativeMode in

Romantic Poetry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*. MH Abrams, Stephen Gill,

Jonathan Wordsworth eds. New York: WW Norton & Co, 1979.

---. The Thirteen-Book *Prelude* Vol. I Ed. Mark L. Reed. Ithaca and New York: Cornell

University Press, 1991.

NOTES

[1] See *Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. xiii.

[2] See "The Return of the Romantic" from *Intersections: Nineteenth Century Philosophy and Contemporary Theory*. David L. Clark and Tilottama Rajan, eds. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

[3] See *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, trans. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 11.

[4] See *Fantastic Modernity: Dialectical Readings in Romanticism and Theory*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996 p. 15.

[5] See "Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity" in *The Lyotard Reader*. Andrew Benjamin, ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989 p. 181.

[6] Even Romanticism as a history is a highly contested discussion. Traditionally, the Romantic period is placed between the years of 1798 (the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*) and 1832 (the year of the Reform Bill). Yet, the French Revolution, the work of Rousseau, German Romanticism, and the expanse of post-Enlightenment thought problematizes this assumption. See Ira Livingston's *Arrow of Chaos: Romanticism and Postmodernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 9-11.

[7] See *Idealism Without Absolutes: Philosophy and Romantic Culture*. Arkady Plotnitsky and Tilottama Rajan, eds. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.

[8] In the original 2-part 1799 version of the text, "Was it for this…" is the first line. In subsequent versions, the question is still in Book One, but 270 lines into the text.

[9] See Harold Bloom's *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*. New York: Norton and Co, 1970 p. 9. This was a text that was to ignite the deconstructionist movement in Romantic studies and soon enough it would be impossible to call anything the hero or subject of Romanticism without a carefully qualified argument. I am not about to take up this longstanding debate, however, I think it is important to note that at the beginning of <u>The Prelude</u> the poet *is* concerned with how to create and what to create.

[10] See *The Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 21.

[11] See "The Everyday and the Teleological: Time-Conflict, Progression, and Affect in Books 1 and 2 of *The Prelude*," *European Romantic Review*, Vol. 17, No. 5 December 2006, pp. 593-605.

[12] See Paul de Man's "Time and History in Wordsworth." *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*. E.S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, Andrzej Warminski, eds. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

[13] See *Wordsworth's Poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964 p. 211.

[14] "Entelechy" comes from Aristotle's *Physica*, a text in which the philosopher examines motion, history, and causality. In relation to Wordsworth, Aristotle is quite significant because he believes that to pinpoint the position of any living thing means to understand its position in relation to what came before and what is to come. Every "now" is a designated spot between two fixed extremes: past and future. That said, every living thing contains an "Entelechy," or potential, for what it might grow into. Hence, the beginning of *The Prelude* is saturated with images of entelechy and the possibility of what is to come. See Aristotle's *Physica,* E. Capps, TE

Page, WHD Rouse, eds. Francis Cornford and Philip Wicksteed, trans. London: William Heinmann LTD, 1949.

[15] See *Wordsworth's Poetry*, p. 219.

[16] See Susan Wolfson's *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986 p. 148.

[17] See "Time and History in Wordsworth."

[18] All references to *The Prelude* come from the 1805 13 Book Cornell Volume 1 version besides this quote, which was taken from the 2-part 1799 version.

[19] See Harold Bloom *The Visionary Company* and MH Abrams *Natural/ Supernaturalism and The Mirror and the Lamp*.

[20] *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, p. 169.

[21] My use of "micro" and "macro" comes from Theresa Kelley's "Romantic Histories: Charlotte Smith and Beachy Head." *Nineteenth Century Literature*, August 2004. In the article Kelley uses these terms, which she borrows from Siegfried Kracauer, in a lucid analysis of specific and general Romantic historicity.

[22] *The Questioning Presence*, p. 20.

[23] *William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*. William Richey and Daniel Robinson, eds. New York: Haughton & Mifflin, 2002, p. 111.

[24] *The Questioning Presence*, p. 144.

[25] See *The Dark Interpreter*, p. 52.

[26] Rajan clearly points out this connection between Nietzsche and Romanticism in *The Dark Interpreter*. Yet, as opposed to Rajan, who tends to subordinate the poetry to the theory, I am attempting to do the opposite by showing how the theory stems from the poetry.

[27] *The Birth of Tragedy*. Francis Golffing, trans. New York: Doubleday, 1956, p. 55.

[28] See Andrew Bowie's *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 282-283 for an analysis of Nietzsche and "disenchantment" in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

[29] *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* p. 166.

[30] In his discussion of the lyrical poet and the chorus Nietzsche states the following: "Thus our knowledge of art is at bottom illusory, seeing that as mere knowers we can never be fused with that essential spirit, at the same time creator and spectator, who has prepared the comedy of art for his own edification. Only as the genius in the act of creation merges with the primal architect of the cosmos ca he truly know something of the eternal essence of art. For in that condition he resembles the uncanny fairy tale image which is able to see itself by turning its eyes. He is at once subject and object, poet, actor, and audience."
See *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 42.

[31] Ibid, p. 41.

[32] See *Idealism Without Absolutes*, p. 250, where Plotnitsky states, "This is the nature of Romantic knowledge or, one might say, of Romantic Enlightenment, which must live without absolutes and *knows* how to do it."

[33] See *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 52.

[34] See *The Arrow of Chaos: Romanticism and Postmodernity* p. 9.

[35] See *Fantastic Modernity*, p. 15.

I Created the line by picking the points and specifying the. Â ACTION ALERT: Autodesk Identity Services will move to TLS 1.2 on August 3. Check the list of affected product versions to find out if you should update your software. All community This category This board Knowledge base Users. cancel. Turn on suggestions. Auto-suggest helps you quickly narrow down your search results by suggesting possible matches as you type. Showing results for. Â â€Ž08-20-2010 07:22 AM. Mark as New. Bookmark.