

ROMANTICISM AND THE POETICS OF POLITICAL DESPAIR

BY TAYLOR SCHEY

Christmas, the day after, in 2004, following the presidential re-election of George W. Bush.

I am staring out of the window in an extremely dark mood, feeling helpless. Then a friend, a fellow artist, calls to wish me happy holidays. He asks, "How are you?" And instead of "Oh, fine—and you?", I blurt out the truth: "Not well. Not only am I depressed, I can't seem to work, to write; it's as though I am paralyzed, unable to write anything more in the novel I've begun. I've never felt this way before, but the election. . . ." I am about to explain with further detail when he interrupts, shouting: "No! No, no, no! This is precisely the time when artists go to work—not when everything is fine, but in times of dread. That's our job!"

—Toni Morrison, "No Place for Self-Pity,
No Room for Fear" (2015)¹

It's early 2015. As Toni Morrison begins to compose an essay that would appear in the 150th Anniversary Issue of *The Nation*, at the front of a section dedicated to "Radical Futures" and "strategies for keeping hope alive," she recalls the despair she felt about a decade prior, after George W. Bush won a second term as president of the United States. And then she recalls her friend's timely utterance. Although his words initially made her feel "foolish"—so many artists, she goes on to note, have worked in much darker times without giving in to despair—the intervention was salutary, the message inspirational. She was able to get back to work. Proceeding, then, to offer her reflections on the "bruised and bleeding" world of 2015, Morrison returns, in conclusion, to her friend's lesson, which she reiterates and expands, merging his voice with her own: "None of this bodes well for the future. Still, I remember the shout of my friend that day after Christmas: No! This is *precisely* the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."²

Flip forward two years. Donald Trump has been elected president of the United States. In the months that follow, artists and celebrities recall and quote the concluding passage of Morrison's essay on awards shows and social media.³ Their followers re-tweet it *en masse*. Needless to say, they all find its message to be positive, a source of hope and inspiration in dark times. No one seems to notice that, in fact, the passage is rather negative. After all, it begins with an exclamatory "No!" and leads on to four more anaphoric negations that dictate how an artist should—or rather should not—respond emotionally to such times. Of course, Morrison intends to encourage artists to speak and to write, to urge them not to fall into political quietism. "In times of dread," the subtitle to her essay reads, "artists must never choose to remain silent." The piece is a call to action, and feelings of despair can be artistically debilitating, as Morrison details. But then are such feelings necessarily antithetical to working with language and literature? And what would happen if they were not so quickly resisted as soon as they began to touch upon the political realities from which they stem? What possibilities might emerge if there *were* time for despair?

Such questions are at once opened and closed by the initial shout of Morrison's friend, which, at second glance, is less therapeutic than repressive. Notably, it's only when Morrison begins to link her dark feelings to politics that this fellow artist interrupts her with a prohibitive "No!" Despair is fine, it would seem, so long as it isn't directed toward the political. The affective space in which Morrison found herself after Bush's reelection was new to her ("I've never felt this way before"), yet this male friend shuts it down before she has a chance to say anything more about its contours ("I am about to explain with further detail when he interrupts, shouting: "No! No, no, no!"). His denial is excessive; it marks the idea of political despair as morally unacceptable and suggests his own unease with its repression. He, too, we might imagine, is struggling with similar feelings. Or perhaps not: perhaps his shout is just as automatic as the broader cultural reflex that recalled Morrison's essay in the wake of the election of Trump, that reflex that would seem to meet every depressing turn in politics with an interdiction against despairing of politics, even and especially when reasons to be hopeful are few and far between.⁴

Scholars in affect theory, queer theory, and Black studies have analyzed different aspects and implications of this reflex.⁵ I would like to explore its poetics. Since I don't think that particular emotions have any necessary connections to actions or inactions, I'm interested in how political despair came to be seen on the Left as *a priori* unacceptable.

Why, in times of dread, do we command ourselves not to give in to despair, as if giving in to despair were obviously more tempting and self-defeating than giving in to rather cruel forms of hope and optimism? And how and when did this prohibition come to define the task of the artist in so-called dark times?

The French Revolution may be considered as one of those manifestations of a general state of feeling among civilized mankind, produced by a defect of correspondence between the knowledge existing in society and the improvement, or gradual abolition of political institutions. . . . Thus many of the most ardent and tender-hearted of the worshippers of public good, have been morally ruined by what a partial glimpse of the events they deplored, appeared to show as the melancholy desolation of all their cherished hopes. Hence gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age in which we live, the solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the willful exaggeration of its own despair. This influence has tainted the literature of the age with the hopelessness of the minds from which it flows.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, Preface to *Laon and Cythna* (1817)⁶

This essay explores in British Romantic poetry the historical formation and repression of what I call *left despair*. Typically, the condemnation of political hopelessness in the Romantic era is associated with the Shelley circle's response to the post-Waterloo political landscape and to the perceived quietism of the Lake poets, who, in Leigh Hunt's words, had become "as dogmatic in their despair as they used to be in their hope."⁷ The Preface to *Laon and Cythna* is the high-water mark of such condemnation. Both diagnosing and criticizing the "infectious gloom" of contemporary "works of fiction and poetry," Shelley takes particular issue (albeit implicitly) with William Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, which he sees as both symptom and cause of a broader sea change in political feeling that "has tainted the literature of the age with the hopelessness of the minds from which it flows." I would like to propose, however, that both left despair and its prohibition were practically coeval around the turn of the nineteenth century; that much early Romantic writing is already marked by this double-structure of political feeling and emotional policing; and that approaching Wordsworth's poetry with this double-structure in mind would allow us to see his so-called poetics of displacement in a rather different light: neither

as the revolution in spirit that M. H. Abrams celebrated, nor as the attempt to transcend politics that early new historicists criticized, but as a complex response to an emergent politico-emotional imperative, the pressures of which continue to shape our sense of what counts as political engagement.⁸

Recent scholarship in affect theory has examined the public and political dimensions of seemingly private emotions, especially negative feelings that tend to draw moral rebuke; what follows is an exploration of how the moralization of nascent left despair compelled its privatization and displacement into less overtly political contexts.⁹ My historical focus is on the years of the War of the Second Coalition, from approximately 1799 to 1802, that is, those “times of fear” that could be bookended by the French invasion of Switzerland and by the temporary Treaty of Amiens—or, in my readings, by a September 1799 letter from Coleridge to Wordsworth and by Wordsworth’s March 1802 draft of what would later become the first four stanzas of the “Intimations Ode”—though my discussion moves beyond these coordinates as well.¹⁰ I take Wordsworth as my primary test case in this essay not only because his works were formative in the development of Romanticism, but also because they have been and continue to be exemplary in critical definitions of Romanticism as such, particularly of its relation to the political events of the period. In his canonical polemic *The Romantic Ideology*, Jerome McGann argues with respect to Wordsworth that Romantic poems “tend to develop different sorts of artistic means with which to occlude and disguise their own involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations.”¹¹ I agree. But such occlusion is not an evasion of politics, as McGann charged; it’s an evasion of an emergent interdict against despairing of politics, the coordinates of which also structure the new-historicist critique of Wordsworth and of Romantic poetry more broadly.

Your courage only discourages me further. You think that we will experience a political revolution? We, the contemporaries of these Germans? My friend, believe what you wish—I understand! It’s very sweet to hope and very bitter to do away with all delusions. It takes more courage to despair than to hope.

—Arnold Ruge, Letter to Karl Marx (March 1843)¹²

Your letter, my dear friend, is a good elegy, a choking funeral lay. But it is not political at all. No nation despairs. And if it should hope for a long time out of mere stupidity, it will at some time, perhaps after many years, realize its pleasant wishes out of insight.

—Karl Marx, Letter to Arnold Ruge (May 1843)¹³

My dear friend, do not lose faith. . . . This is no time for folding your arms in cowardly despair.

—Mikhail Bakunin, Letter to Arnold Ruge (May 1843)¹⁴

A few words about left despair. The term may bring to mind the concept of “left melancholy” that Wendy Brown borrowed from Walter Benjamin in order to name a two-pronged affective disposition that she saw as definitive of the late-twentieth-century Left: a “backward-looking attachment” to the lost “promise that left analysis and left commitment would supply its adherents a clear and certain path toward the good, the right, and the true,” and a displaced aggression toward other left-leaning projects—namely, identity politics and poststructuralism—that works to “preserve the idealization of that romantic left promise.”¹⁵ But left despair is different than left melancholy: it entails the perception that certain political ideals are indeed lost, absent, or impossible, and names the structure of feeling that accompanies this perception. Although *mourning* may seem a likely term with which to describe such an emotional structure, left despair is distinct from the working-through that mourning invariably entails. Whereas melancholy is thought to sustain a subject through an introjected, backward-looking attachment to a person or an ideal, the loss of which has been disavowed, and the work of mourning is thought to lead a subject toward reinvesting in new objects, despair involves a state of hopelessness—what Wordsworth describes in *The Prelude* as the “utter loss of hope itself / And things to hope for” (*P*, 11.6–7)—that is oriented toward an inescapable present and that is not, therefore, so operative within the Freudian account of object loss that has come to guide many analyses of the emotional dimensions of politics and of the political dimensions of emotion.¹⁶

Indeed, insofar as left despair can be located within Brown’s Freud-Marxist schema, it registers primarily as a target of the left-melancholic aggression she describes. The well-known “murder charges” against poststructuralism—that its “theories of the subject, truth, and social

processes undermine the possibility of a theoretically coherent and factually true account of the world, and also challenge the putatively objective grounds of left norms"—are quite often accompanied by the charge that there's a more or less hidden despair at the heart of these theories and that such despair is inherently conservative.¹⁷ So, for example, when in his 1983 *Criticism and Social Change* Frank Lentricchia seeks to disprove the idea that Paul de Man's work is politically radical, he does not examine de Man's published writings on political texts such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Second Discourse* and *Social Contract* (nor does he or could he cite de Man's wartime journalism, which would be discovered four years later), but rather homes in on de Man's claim in "Literary History and Literary Modernity" that the "distinctive character of literature . . . becomes manifest as an inability to escape from a condition that is felt to be unbearable."¹⁸ For Lentricchia, the notion that a condition might be seen as inescapable has inevitable political implications: it "constitutes for the literary mind a matrix of despair, resignation, futility, frustration, fatalism, cynicism, and hopelessness—all good feelings for underwriting, whether or not by intention, the status quo."¹⁹ Since a leftist politics is thought to require hope and optimism, in other words, even and especially under the most unbearable of conditions, the emphasis de Man places on "all those paralytic feelings of the literary" can only have "disastrous political consequences," according to Lentricchia.²⁰ "Politically," he concludes, "deconstruction translates into that passive kind of conservatism called quietism; it thereby plays into the hands of established power. Deconstruction is conservatism by default—in Paul de Man it teaches the many ways to say that there is nothing to be done."²¹

Quietism, conservatism by default, apostasy, an accommodation to the status quo—these are the terms through which apparent or imagined left despair is most often translated and made politically legible, all in order to reject it as an unacceptable disposition toward politics. And yet the very need for such translation points up its illegibility within the space of the political and highlights the limits within which the Left continues to circumscribe its own possibilities. "Certainly there is no end to left despair," writes James Martel in his consideration of the "unpalatable choices" that leftists face in the early twenty-first century, "but this is, by definition, a dead-end and an accommodation to capitalism. Despair in and of itself is not resistance and it is not political."²² The logic is again circular and moralistic: left despair is politically conservative because it's not political, and it's not political because it supports the status quo and is therefore politically

conservative. Why? Because it's not political. Indeed, even Brown, who adopts the non-moralizing stance of the analyst, concludes that we "ought" to examine negative "feelings and sentiments" on the Left, but only "for what they create in the way of potentially conservative and even self-destructive undersides of putatively progressive political aims."²³ That such feelings might rather create something in the way of potential leftist actions is apparently unthinkable—an eclipsed possibility that Brown's essay opens only to foreclose. For "in the end," as Heather Love notes, Brown "returns to what is invariably invoked as the only viable political affect: hope for a better future."²⁴

Let me be clear. I am not proposing that the widespread embrace of left despair would lead to radical change: in certain circumstances perhaps it might, but then perhaps it might not. Nor am I claiming, along with Arnold Ruge, that "it takes more courage to despair than to hope." Slavoj Žižek does just that in his recent book *The Courage of Hopelessness*, the central argument of which inverts the traditional associations of hope with bravery and of despair with cowardice:

The true courage is not to imagine an alternative, but to accept the consequences of the fact that there is no clearly discernible alternative: the dream of an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice, functioning as a fetish that prevents us from thinking through to the end the deadlock of our predicament. In short, the true courage is to admit that the light at the end of the tunnel is probably the headlight of another train approaching us from the opposite direction.²⁵

But Žižek is interested less in considering despair as a political emotion (in fact the analyses of contemporary politics that follow his introduction take a largely traditional, hostile attitude toward left despair) than in claiming the most heroic attitude toward given conditions—and in exhorting "that we have to gather the strength to fully assume the hopelessness."²⁶ What's more, however provocative, his dismissive characterization of hope as the true cowardice simply reinscribes the moralizing gesture that this essay seeks to put into question. I have no truck with the concepts of courage and cowardice. I have no problem with "the dream of an alternative." What I want to challenge is the logic behind the Left's perennial compulsion to disown an entire range of political feelings as though the future of the Revolution depended on it.

"Away despair!"²⁷ My basic working assumption is that the repressive limits within which the Left continues to regulate its own emotional possibilities are the function of a highly moralized oppositional structure (call it the hope/despair polarity) that was transposed from the

realm of theology to the realm of the political, where hope found its most prominent secular destination.²⁸ No doubt, Ruge's March 1843 letter to Marx and Marx's May 1843 response to Ruge in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* are classic documents in the history of left despair and its repression, having provided something of a template with which leftists have managed their political feelings ever since. But the basic pattern that plays out in their exchange had, in the British context, already been established in the wake of the events that were initiated in 1789. What we call Romanticism is a function of this pattern.

Anti-optimism. Praised be our maker, & to the honor of our nature is it, that we may truly call this an *inhuman* opinion. Man strives after Good.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks* (February/March 1801)²⁹

While, in this strain, the venerable Sage
 Poured forth his aspirations [. . .]
 He, whose fixed despondency had given
 Impulse and motive to that strong discourse,
 Was less upraised in spirit than abashed;
 Shrinking from admonition, like a man
 Who feels, that to exhort, is to reproach.

—Wordsworth, *The Excursion* (1814)³⁰

“The case of Mr. Wordsworth, we perceive, is now manifestly hopeless; and we give him up as altogether incurable.”³¹ So writes Francis Jeffrey in his scathing 1814 review of *The Excursion*. While the comment is a judgment on the trajectory of Wordsworth's poetic career, it also identifies Wordsworth with that work's central character, the Solitary, who himself is hopeless and incurable (though this doesn't stop the rest of the cast from trying to correct his despondency). The case of Wordsworth is now hopeless, Jeffrey implies, because Wordsworth is now hopeless, like the Solitary, who, following the failure of the French Revolution, withdrew selfishly from the world to wallow in his despair. Or rather: Wordsworth is now *manifestly* hopeless. Jeffrey may see *The Excursion* as a “history of the author's mind,” but he also suggests that Wordsworth's despondency is really no new development, that it had long been a latent but nevertheless legible aspect of his

poetics.³² Hunt may seem to take a different view when he criticizes Wordsworth and the Lake School for having become “as dogmatic in their despair as they used to be in their hope,” but the reversal of the hope/despair polarity is less important here than the word *dogmatic*: the point is that Wordsworth now wears his political despair on his sleeve, whereas previously he would have articulated such feelings in a much more equivocal fashion.

In Raymond Williams’s well-known definition, structures of feeling “are often more recognizable at a later stage when they have been (as often happens) formalized, classified,” though “they do not have to wait definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action.”³³ What’s more, although social in nature, such pressures are frequently registered and negotiated in highly personal terms: a structure of feeling, writes Williams, is “a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating.”³⁴

If *The Excursion* is a dismally anticlimactic work, as many readers have felt, then this is in part because its central pattern of “Despondency” and “Despondency Corrected” formalizes a structure of feeling that had been exerting pressures on Wordsworth’s poetry for more than a decade.³⁵ The efforts of the Wanderer and the Pastor and the Poet to correct the Solitary’s “fixed despondency” are significant not because they succeed—they do not—but because they demystify the process of imaginative restoration putatively celebrated in the later books of the 1805 *Prelude*. Such self-restoration, *The Excursion* suggests, was really a product of internalized social control; rather than the gift of Nature or the mind, “recovery” was the effect of a coercive pressure that Wordsworth explicitly personifies through a cast of characters who ceaselessly admonish the Solitary for his despair. What was once figured as a private turn of feeling is, in *The Excursion*, recognized and represented as a thoroughly social experience.

The 1805 *Prelude*, by contrast, largely obscures this social pressure, though its traces remain legible. Take, for example, the close of book 11 (“Imagination, How Impaired and Restored”), where the speaker proudly addresses Coleridge:

Behold me then
Once more in Nature’s presence thus restored,
Or otherwise, and strengthened once again
(With memory left of what had been escaped)
(*P*, 11.393–96)

While Wordsworth's speaker appears to credit "Nature" for his self-proclaimed restoration, he also indicates "otherwise"—that is, either that his restoration was compelled by forces other than Nature or that he is really other than restored. The syntax is ambiguous, but both readings point toward a scenario alternative to the speaker's manifest account of his restoration, one that lingers in the form of a memory placed between parentheses, mentioned but not described. *Or otherwise*: the caesura itself, meanwhile, seems at once to register and to repress a desire for this alternative: perhaps the desire to dwell with the "utter loss of hope itself," which can only appear in *The Prelude* insofar as it prompts the narrative's recuperation of things for which to hope; or perhaps a wish to feel simply "less upraised in spirit," like the Solitary, when optimism is what others demand of the poet.

Wordsworth sought to prove his restoration to Coleridge because, for him, Coleridge, like the Wanderer, personified the emergent politico-emotional imperative of "Despondency Corrected." This was not without reason. Coleridge's well-known letter of September of 1799, written two months before Napoleon would return from Egypt and launch the Coup of 18 Brumaire, lays out a set of dictates that would guide the development of Wordsworth's subsequent poetry:

I am anxiously eager to have you steadily employed on "The Recluse". . . . My dear friend, I do entreat you go on with "The Recluse;" and 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 for the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary *philosophes*. It would do great good, and might form a part of "The Recluse."³⁶

Coleridge wants Wordsworth to get working on "The Recluse," that projected masterwork that will never be completed, lest he waste his poetic talents; he also wishes that Wordsworth would write a blank-verse poem addressed to their hopeless compatriots because it would "do great good." These two desires are presented as though they're separate, but really they're one and the same: the letter posits various obligations—artistic, social, political, personal—all of which converge at an imaginary point named "The Recluse," which, Coleridge urges, should address the failure of the French Revolution and be addressed to those who have abandoned their revolutionary hopes. Such is the task of the poet in what Shelley would later term "an age of despair" (*LC*, 42).

But just what are the politically hopeless to be told? Coleridge's directives are remarkably lacking in content. If the moralizing language to which his letter bends indicates that they're to be reproached for giving up hope, or perhaps more gently encouraged to reinvest in the political ideals they've abandoned, it also registers the weight of a social pressure (the "good") that's greater than just one poet's "wish" for another. Coleridge provides no reason for why those despairing should be reproached, or for how doing so in a poem would "do great good," because there is none—the passage indexes an altogether moral scenario. He doesn't need to detail what he wishes Wordsworth would say because such despair permits only one professed response: censure. The failure of the French Revolution may be "complete," yet the commensurate response to such failure—the abandonment of "all" hope—is no sooner acknowledged than rejected as unacceptable, as "an *inhuman* opinion." "For who could sink and settle to that point / Of selfishness," exhorts the Wanderer,

if he could fix
A satisfying view upon that state
Of pure, imperishable blessedness
Which Reason promises and holy write
Ensures to all believers?³⁷

Good question. A few months later, on the day after the New Year of 1800, following the Coup of 18 Brumaire, Coleridge writes to his benefactor Thomas Wedgwood:

I am sitting by a fire in a rug great Coat . . . O for Peace & the South of France. — I could almost too wish for a Bourbon King if it were only that Sieyes & Buonaparte might finish their career in the old orthodox way of Hanging. — Thank God, I have *my Health perfectly* & I am working hard — yet the present state of human affairs presses on me for days together, so as to deprive me of all my cheerfulness. It is probable, that a man's private & personal connections & interests ought to be uppermost in his daily & hourly Thoughts, & that the dedication of much hope & fear to subjects which are perhaps disproportionate to our faculties & powers, is a disease. But I have had this disease so long, & my early Education was so undomestic, that I know not how to get rid of it; or even to wish to get rid of it. Life were so flat a thing without Enthusiasm — that if for a moment it leave me, I have a sort of stomach-sensation attached to all my Thoughts, like those which succeed to the pleasurable operation of a dose of Opium. *Now* I make up my mind to a sort of heroism in believing the progressiveness of all nature, during the present melancholy state of Humanity — & on this

subject I am now writing / and no work, on which I ever employed myself, makes me so happy while I am writing.³⁸

Clearly, Coleridge was no stranger to the political despair he ostensibly condemned. Depressed by politics, he wonders here whether he rather ought to occupy himself more with the sort of “domestic attachment” he had disparaged in his letter to Wordsworth. His hope feels like a disease, though one so long-standing that he not only doesn’t know how to cure it, but doesn’t even know how to want to cure it: “I know not how to get rid of it; or even to wish to get rid of it.” In short, Coleridge has an addiction, or so his letter suggests. Political optimism, or “Enthusiasm,” is likened to opium; its absence is likened to withdrawal, an experience to which he would prefer “the pleasurable operation of a dose.” And so, despite or rather because of “the present melancholy state of Humanity,” Coleridge does what one might expect him to do: he takes another hit, altering his “mind to a sort of heroism in believing the progressiveness of all nature.” No matter if this be but a vain belief. Now he is happily employed writing an “Essay on the possible Progressiveness of Man & on the principles of Population.” His despondency has been corrected, at least temporarily. What’s the idea of progress? The opiate of the politically depressed intellectual.

Wordsworth, meanwhile, responds to the dictates of Coleridge’s September letter by tacking on a conclusion to the two-part 1799 *Prelude* in which he more or less copies its language verbatim:

if in these times of fear,
This melancholy waste of hopes o’erthrown,
If, ’mid indifference and apathy
And wicked exultation, when good men,
On every side fall off we know not how,
To selfishness, disguised in gentle names
Of peace, and quiet, and domestic love,
Yet mingled, not unwillingly, with sneers
On visionary minds—if in this time
Of dereliction and dismay, I yet
Despair not of our nature, but retain
A more than Roman confidence, a faith
That fails not, in all sorrow my support,
The blessing of my life, the gift is yours
Ye Mountains! thine, O Nature!

(P, 2.448–462)

Readers almost universally gloss this passage as a declaration of resilient optimism. According to Abrams, who has the expanded 1805 *Prelude*

in mind, Wordsworth reports here that he “had been restored in imagination and had succeeded in reconstituting the grounds for hope.”³⁹ E. P. Thompson goes even further, citing these lines as evidence of Wordsworth’s remarkable retention of his millenarian hopes circa 1805: “one must look far in European literature,” he writes, “to find any affirmation as proud as that with which he concluded the second book of *The Prelude*.”⁴⁰ “In this affirmation,” says Stephen Gill,

the private life of William Wordsworth and the public world of Britain at war in the 1790s intermingle. Coleridge would have had no difficulty in understanding the link between them or why it was that as they both watched the ‘hopes expire / Of a low dishonest decade’ Wordsworth, like Auden in ‘September 1, 1939,’ felt able to ‘Show an affirming flame.’⁴¹

“Wordsworth,” Kenneth Johnston concurs, “directly paraphrases the letter at the end of the 1798–99 *Prelude* to emphasize his own ‘Roman confidence . . . in these times of fear.’”⁴²

But does direct paraphrase evince confidence, or does it measure the weight of obligation? And how affirmative is a litotes? How proud is a conditional statement? To what extent were these features of Wordsworth’s poetics shaped by the nascent interdict against left despair? What is perhaps most striking about this rather subtle passage is that Wordsworth discusses his *own* feelings. Clearly, he took Coleridge’s letter personally, as a more or less politely veiled charge that goes something like: *You had better not despair*; hence he doesn’t address the “good men” at all, as Coleridge had seemed to request, but rather sets out to clear his own name. And yet, instead of capitulating entirely to Coleridge’s commands, he uses the conditional to introduce a distance between himself and the terms to which he feels he was asked to respond: *If I do not despair*. . . . His response is cagey. If Wordsworth toes the line, acknowledging the normative scenario wherein he is expected to repress feelings of hopelessness and to reassert his political optimism, he also resists its coercive pull. Here, restoration is neither affirmed nor denied but rendered into what de Man would term a “permanent hypothesis.”⁴³ The apostrophic turn in the apodosis, meanwhile, does not so much project hope as position the rhetoric of Nature as a release valve through which to displace political emotions that would otherwise be constricted. If, in these times of fear, Wordsworth is yet able to articulate his despair, then the gift will indeed be that of a rhetoric that allows him to register thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears, and too oblique for immediate legibility.

Ah, what an age it is
When to speak of trees is almost a crime
For it is a kind of silence about injustice!

—Bertolt Brecht, “To Posterity” (1939)⁴⁴

But there’s a Tree, of many one,
A single Field which I have look’d upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone.

—Wordsworth, Ode (1802)⁴⁵

Dark times narrow the field of what one should write about, according to Bertolt Brecht, who figures trees as *the* figure of poetic escapism. Since trees are removed from the injustices of fascism in the late 1930s, Brecht suggests, to speak of them is to remain silent about those injustices; in times of dread, to write nature poetry is to evade the political. Following Brecht, early new-historicist critics of Romantic poetry such as Marjorie Levinson and McGann construed Wordsworth’s investment in the natural world as a “repudiation of politics,” often characterizing this investment as though it were indeed almost a crime.⁴⁶ Many of his seemingly “most innocent affirmations,” they argued, were not so innocent after all, but “signified within the universe of contemporary social discourse as negations,” much like nature poetry within Brecht’s world seemed to signify as an evasion of the horrors of fascism.⁴⁷ And yet, in the end, to follow Brecht as well as these critics is to realize that such an evasion is an impossibility, that there’s really no escaping politics. As the rest of Brecht’s poem demonstrates, dark times shade everything, including the most basic of animal functions (“I ate my food between massacres / The shadow of murder lay on my sleep”).⁴⁸ Indeed, even the trees speak of the political environment from which they would seem to stand apart, reminding the speaker of the injustices of everyday fascism. The more one focuses on what’s not apparently political, it turns out, the more politics comes to the fore, saturating one’s field of perception.⁴⁹

What, then, does the poem that McGann singles out as the “notorious and brilliant apogee” of the Romantic “elision” of politics have to say about politics?⁵⁰ Both William Hazlitt and Levinson have construed Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode” as an allegory about the failure of the

French Revolution; Levinson even identifies specific referents behind some of the ode's most obscure figures (the mysterious "Tree" is the Tree of Liberty, she claims, and the "single field" is the Champ de Mars), though what Geoffrey Hartman calls the poem's "problem of reference" clearly involves the manner in which its decidedly abstract language is merely suggestive of such a reading.⁵¹ As McGann notes, "[p]erhaps we glimpse a metaphoric afterimage of the Bastille in 'Shades of the prison-house'—but perhaps not. The poem generalizes—we now like to say mythologizes—all its conflicts, or rather resituates those conflicts out of a sociohistorical context and into an ideological one."⁵² Of course, for McGann and for Levinson, such generalization is a prime example of Wordsworth's displacement of politics, of his attempt to escape politics altogether through an ideological process of which he himself is largely unaware; hence, in Levinson's reading, Wordsworth only realizes the political connotations of his own imagery "as a return of the repressed," when "[h]is attempted escapes into poetic pastoral . . . repeatedly fail, and he is compelled to confront the form and meaning of his despair."⁵³ But there are reasons other than ideological escapism and psychological repression why one might obscure the form and meaning of their feelings about politics, most obviously because social pressures compel such indirection.

As an index of a despair that is not corrected (at least not until 1804), the 1802 draft of the Ode (which I'll refer to as the 1802 Ode) responds to such pressures precisely by adopting the abstract armature of the pastoral. While the fourth and final stanza of the draft ends with the famously elliptical questions, "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it gone, the glory and the dream?" (*O*, 56–57), the first two stanzas dilate on the absence of this dream through an elegiac description of a natural world not only depleted of referential specificity but divested of a promise it once seemed to hold for the speaker:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
 To me did seem
 Apparell'd in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it has been of yore;—
 Turn wheresoe'er I may,
 By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

The Rainbow comes and goes,
 And lovely is the Rose,
 The Moon doth with delight
 Look round her when the heavens are bare;
 Waters on a starry night
 Are beautiful and fair;
 The sunshine is a glorious birth;
 But yet I know, where'er I go,
 That there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth.
 (O, 1–18)

Wordsworth's language is so abstract here that the passage verges on the nonsensical, at least for some readers. In his 1807 review of *Poems, in Two Volumes*, Jeffrey complains that the "Ode" is "beyond all doubt, the most illegible and unintelligible part of the publication," and admits that he "can pretend to give no explanation of it."⁵⁴ More assiduous readers, however, have been able to discern the import of Wordsworth's cryptic rhetoric. Levinson, for instance, demonstrates that *glory* was "something of a code word during the Revolutionary era" and one with which Wordsworth was quite familiar: after all, she notes, both *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* use the word in passages that explicitly recall Wordsworth's political enthusiasm in the early 1790s.⁵⁵ But this shrewd observation not only undermines Levinson's claim that the allusions to the Revolution in the poem's first four stanzas are not part of a conscious rhetorical strategy; it also suggests that Wordsworth voiced his despair through an allegorical code that would sufficiently disguise its political referent. True, any reader could in theory crack the code and understand the latent subject, and some, such as Hazlitt, clearly did.⁵⁶ But the manifest content of the 1802 Ode could always provide Wordsworth a screen of plausible deniability—or, come 1804, a foundation on which to build an entirely different poem about growing up or growing old.⁵⁷

While the nascent interdict against left despair conditions the poetics of Wordsworth's 1802 Ode, the third stanza dramatizes this interdict as well as its psychological implications:

Now, while the Birds thus sing a joyous song,
 And while the young Lambs bound
 As to the tabor's sound,
 To me alone there came a thought of grief:
 A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
 And I again am strong.
 The Cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep,
 No more shall grief of mine the season wrong.
 (O, 19–26)

Here, the pattern of “Despondency” and “Despondency Corrected” is compressed into two lines that move rapidly from “grief” to “relief.” In *The Excursion*, the Wanderer’s moralizing judgments leave the Solitary

less upraised in spirit than abashed;
Shrinking from admonition, like a man
Who feels, that to exhort, is to reproach.

In the 1802 Ode, the speaker shrinks from the admonition that he anticipates, at once articulating and contracting his despair to the point of illegibility: his “thought of grief” is not only modified by an indefinite article and left unspecified, but also claimed as wholly personal: “To me *alone* there came a thought of grief.” Levinson suggests that, with this line, “[t]he failure of the French Revolution is represented as exclusively the poet’s loss,” but what’s represented as exclusively his own is the feeling that this failure produced.⁵⁸ The drama is social-psychological. Both the speaker’s reticence and his isolation are due to how his political despair is perceived as non-normative and antisocial; hence he’s positioned in opposition to the noisy, “joyous” pastoral community by way of a repeated conjunction (*while*) that is as much adversative as temporal. What’s more, his ability to voice his thought of grief seems possible only because it’s not actually voiced but kept inside, so to speak, at the level of a thought that comes silently to him and to him alone.

And yet thought only provides so much privacy from social pressures that are themselves internalized. As soon as the speaker thinks of his despair, a corrective “utterance” meets this thought in turn. The vexed question of to which intertext this utterance might refer is less important than the formal difference between the “utterance” and the “thought” to which this utterance responds. As Hartman notes, this difference “suggests that someone else has made a wish for the poet. . . . Even if the utterance took place within the poet, it was not his but some other voice.”⁵⁹ And indeed, the two lines that allow us to infer the content of the utterance—“And I again am strong”; “No more shall grief of mine the season wrong”—read as a response to a superego’s exhortation to stop grieving. Like Morrison’s rearticulation of her friend’s interdiction, Wordsworth’s speaker’s “No more” is directed to both self and other and marks the internalization of the timely utterance. Now the speaker perceives his private thought of grief as a moral offense that could somehow “wrong” the external world from which he tried to withdraw (never mind that there are surely no less judgmental friends with whom to grieve than the pastoral

creatures that populate the third stanza). Now his despondency is not only corrected but self-corrected.

Or rather it would be if “the need to reconstitute the grounds of hope” that critics since Abrams have identified with Wordsworth’s “major achievements” were really a need of Wordsworth’s, rather than a coercive social imperative with which he was in constant negotiation and resistance.⁶⁰ For if Wordsworth’s “poetic response to the age’s severe political and social dislocations was to reach for solutions in the realm of ideas,” and if, by the turn of the century, he did indeed “arrive at what he believed was their solution,” then the 1802 Ode either would have ended in the third stanza or would have continued past the fourth and final stanza.⁶¹ But it does neither of those things. Instead, Wordsworth’s speaker, still feeling distant and “sullen” (*O*, 42), finally turns away from the self-enclosed scene of communal “bliss” (*O*, 41) and back to the landscape of loss with which the poem began, and from which it never really departed:

—But there’s a Tree, of many one,
A single Field which I have look’d upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it gone, the glory and the dream?
(*O*, 51–57)

If Wordsworth looks to Nature as a “last resort” when he despairs of politics, he does not seek hope or restoration.⁶² What he seeks is a rhetorical refuge in which to despair of politics.

In times like these
to have you listen at all, it’s necessary
to talk about trees.

—Adrienne Rich, “What Kind of Times are These” (1991)⁶³

Displacement marks a flight from emotional coercion; more positively, it opens a rhetorical space in which to dwell with the “utter loss of hope itself / And things to hope for.” In the 1802 Ode, this loss is measured in the first two stanzas as total, complete: “wheresoe’er” the

speaker turns, or tropes, the static landscape repeats the same tale of despair, offering no prospect whatsoever. “In this version of being cut off from ‘the progress of life,’ writes Laura Quinney, “the world of sights does not offer an antithesis to the speaker’s frozen solitude, but rather reiterates its own emptiness; it stutters instead of advancing.”⁶⁴ Indeed, this pastoral scene might come as close as Wordsworth gets in his major lyrics to representing the “[a]nti-optimism” that Coleridge characterizes as inhuman. There is no sense of possibility located in meadow, grove, or stream. Nor does the speaker find recompense in considering the Rainbow or the Rose or the Moon or the heavens or the Waters or the sunshine. In the words of the Solitary, “‘Hope is none for him.’”⁶⁵

Yet, as the fourth stanza illustrates as well, such despair is not simply privative. Just as Brecht’s trees in fact speak of the political environment from which they would seem to stand apart, reminding his speaker of the injustices of fascism, so Wordsworth’s Tree and Field and Pansy speak of what Coleridge called the “complete failure of the French Revolution,” a failure so complete that it shades “every common sight.” It may seem escapist or quietist for Wordsworth to write about a tree rather than about the Tree of Liberty, but it’s actually the exact opposite: showing that this failure has affected everything in the phenomenal world is precisely how he represents the political present as inescapable. Nothing in the 1802 Ode that the speaker perceives—not even the moon or the joyous sounds of stanza three—ultimately offers a way out.

The opening lines of Shelley’s *Laon and Cythna* provide an instructive point of comparison. Acknowledging the complete failure of the French Revolution (which, for Shelley and other radicals of his generation, was marked by Napoleon’s defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815), the poem immediately seeks out a new prospect:

When the last hope of trampled France had failed
Like a brief dream of unremaining glory,
From visions of despair I rose, and scaled
The peak of an aërial promontory.

(LC, 1.1–4)

One could say the speaker begins in a despair that the poem then corrects through the figure of the Woman who admonishes him twenty stanzas later: “To grieve is wise, but the despair / Was weak and vain which led thee here from sleep” (LC, 1.185–86). But really the poem begins in the past tense and only gets off the ground by foreclosing

on the possibility of dwelling with despair, particularly with its visual index. Like the speaker of Wordsworth's Ode, Shelley's speaker turns his attention to the natural world:

I could not choose but gaze; a fascination
Dwelt in that moon, and sky, and clouds, which drew
My fancy thither, and in expectation
Of what I knew not, I remained.

(*LC*, 1.46–49).

Yet, unlike Wordsworth's speaker, he looks to find some portent of change on the horizon, a mode of perception that the poem implicitly contrasts with the sort of panoramic "visions of despair" figured in the 1802 Ode.⁶⁶ A static world in which everything "[d]oth the same tale repeat" is one without promise or progress; it has no place in an epic revolutionary romance designed "to awaken hope" through "a succession of pictures illustrating the growth and progress of individual mind aspiring after excellence" (*LC*, 41). *Laon and Cythna* is like a motion picture of the "*beau idéal*" of the French Revolution, whereas the 1802 Ode is like a doleful slideshow presentation of still images:

The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare;
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair.⁶⁷

Where Shelley sees a "slow, gradual, silent change" (*LC*, 44) in things as they are, Wordsworth sees nothing but limitations in the given world. And yet, for Wordsworth's speaker, this perception is not a goad to the development of new horizons. At least in March of 1802, it still seems possible to wonder whether taking full measure of the hopelessness of the political present might press against existing conditions in a way that a program of "resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long-believing courage," might not (*LC*, 43).⁶⁸

Europe is yet in bonds; but let that pass,
Thought for another moment. Thou art free
My country! And 'tis joy enough and pride
For one hour's perfect bliss, to tread the grass

Of England once again, and hear and see,
With such a dear companion at my side.

—Wordsworth, “Composed in the Valley,
near Dover, On the Day of landing” (1802)⁶⁹

Is it necessary for me to write obliquely
About the situation? Is that what
You would have me do?

—Rich, “Then or Now” (1995)⁷⁰

Things would soon change. A few months later, in the summer of 1802, following the Treaty of Amiens, Wordsworth begins to write more directly about politics. Having adopted the sonnet form, he returns to Calais and reflects openly on the difference between then and now—between his time there in 1790 and the present—only to project his hopes back across the Channel toward his “dear Country,” England.⁷¹ The “sole register” left of the dream of Revolution becomes a greeting (“*Good morrow, citizen!*”) that resonates as a “hollow word,” but no matter:

Yet despair
I feel not: happy am I as a Bird:
Fair seasons yet will come, and hopes as fair.⁷²

And, as a thing with feathers, Wordsworth then travels back to England, where he finds “perfect bliss” in the sights and sounds of Kent’s vales and rivers. Yes, “Europe is yet in bonds” (as is Toussaint L’Ouverture, “the most unhappy Man of Men!”), but England is “free.”⁷³ Having abandoned his landscape of inescapability and adopted a rhetoric of slavery and imprisonment that he would again deploy when revising the Ode in 1804, Wordsworth escapes and discovers liberty “Here,” on his “native soil,” where he can “breathe once more.”⁷⁴ To be sure, he eventually makes his way to London and bemoans a society dominated by the pursuit of wealth, but even the “rich men” who “taint the air / With words of apprehension and despair” lead him to “gather hence but firmer faith” in “Hope’s perpetual breath.”⁷⁵ For, all told, the political sonnets of 1802 and 1803 work programmatically to project despair and bondage onto a diversity of other persons and places, all of which dialectically position England as a bastion of freedom and political hope. In the case of Wordsworth, writing directly about the political situation is just what allows him to escape imaginatively from that situation in all its dread and intolerability.

Of course, not everyone is Wordsworth, and not every political situation resembles that of early nineteenth-century Europe. Hope needn't lead to conservatism, and for countless poets, many of whom have not shared Wordsworth's privileged subject position, addressing political situations explicitly has been an essential and in any case unavoidable task. Yet, even for many such writers, it can still be necessary to talk about trees. Responding explicitly to Brecht as well as implicitly to Wordsworth, Rich reflects on the relationship between poetry and revolutionary politics in the opening poem of her 1995 collection *Dark Fields of the Republic*, "What Kind of Times are These":

There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass
grows uphill
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows
near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted
who disappeared into those shadows.

I've walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but
don't be fooled
this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here,
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,
its own ways of making people disappear.

I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods
meeting the unmarked strip of light—
ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:
I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you
anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these
to have you listen at all, it's necessary
to talk about trees.⁷⁶

In the final quatrain, Rich might seem to lament that she has to resort to nature poetry in order to trick her readers into thinking about political atrocities and the failures of the Left, since no one would listen if she were to talk directly about such matters. Accordingly, the poem might be read as a critical commentary on the turn to nature that characterizes Wordsworth's major lyrics, as well as an index of Rich's frustration with the lasting hold of Romantic ideology, with how much late-twentieth-century poetry is itself "marked by extreme forms of displacement and poetic conceptualization whereby the actual human issues with which the poetry is concerned are resituated in a variety of idealized localities."⁷⁷ Such a reading would cohere with "the long

struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction” that concerns Rich in so much of her poetry and prose.⁷⁸

But “obscurity has its tale to tell,” and the speaker’s refusal to denote “where the place is” suggests that Rich is rather critical here of what can happen when poets become too direct about the actual human issues with which their poetry is concerned.⁷⁹ Indeed, what the poem reveals is that it’s necessary to talk about trees precisely in order to avoid escaping politics, since a language of direct reference might fool us into thinking that “the edge of dread” is somewhere other than “here.” As Rich implies, any particularization of place offers the possibility of escape: if the “here” were filled in with referential details, then there would have to be a “somewhere else” to which one might escape, if only imaginatively. Hence she pretends to withhold such details so as to enable the “place between two stands of trees” to be everywhere. And while Rich’s biography might seem to locate this place in the United States—and while there’s certainly good reason to implicate many American readers in their own country’s interminable history of violence—her use of both the second person and the first-person plural ensures that the place could be anywhere for any reader who resides in a country that has “ways of making people disappear.”⁸⁰ Such is how Rich brings home the inescapability of left despair, wherever that home might be.

In a largely dismissive review of *The Dark Fields of the Republic*, Denis Donoghue opines that “Ms. Rich has had difficulty coping with the fact that it is no longer 1968” and that her poetry has suffered as a result.⁸¹ “As in previous books,” he writes, “she is determined to be glum, but the engaged poems of the new book haven’t found enough to be engaged by; they are abstracted from detail no longer there in the old way.”⁸² The suggestion here is that the loss of specificity in Rich’s political poetry is a symptom of the loss of the possibility of radical change and of the absence of revolutionary referents with which she might engage. But if such is the case, then mourning the Rich of “gone occasions” appears to be a displaced symptom of a political predicament with no discernible solution.⁸³ Since Donoghue “can’t reconcile [him]self to the loss,” he implies that the poet should reconcile herself to the fact that revolution is no longer possible, as though doing so would somehow restore things “in the old way.”⁸⁴ But such reconciliation would not, of course, change the fact of the matter; it would only make it more palatable.

We might ask why this fact should be made palatable. Rich, to her credit, sees no reason to feel good about the loss of revolutionary

possibility. She may describe the place “between two stands of trees” as a “paradise” of sorts, but her point is that there is no Eden, no great outdoors, no place that exists outside the ravages of commodification: after all, this “dark mesh of woods” will soon be bought, sold, and made to disappear. The bottom line is that the dread is already present there, which is to say *here*, and that this will be apparent to anyone who might still listen. Yet if artists can never remain silent in times such as these, it will always remain an open question whether anyone will hear what their trees have to say.

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NOTES

My thanks to Sumita Chakraborty for her astute feedback on an earlier draft of this essay, her thoughts and insights on political despair, and our conversations in and about times of dread.

¹ Toni Morrison, “No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear,” *The Nation* (April 2015): 184.

² Morrison, 185.

³ Most prominently, Jennifer Lopez paraphrased and cited Morrison’s conclusion during her speech at the 2017 Grammy Awards, where she presented the award for Best New Artist.

⁴ A more comprehensive treatment of the complex relation between hope and despair in Morrison’s writings is beyond my purview and would have to address not only her novels but also many of her other nonfiction writings, from the 1976 *New York Times* article “A Slow Walk of Trees (as Grandmother Would Say), Hopeless (as Grandfather Would Say),” to a 2017 interview with *Granta* magazine in which she was asked whether raising her children during the Civil Rights Movement had given her hope that America would hold a brighter future for them, to which she responded: “No. No. No” (Morrison, “In Conversation,” interview by Mario Kaiser and Sarah Ladipo Manyika, *Granta* [29 June 2017], <https://granta.com/toni-morrison-conversation/>). My interest here is specifically in how Morrison discusses political despair in the context of defining the task of the artist in times of dread.

⁵ See, for example, Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2010); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2011); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2007); Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten, “Planning and Policy,” in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 70–82; and Calvin L. Warren, “Black Nihilism and The Politics of Hope,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15.1 (2015): 215–248.

⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City*, ed. Anahid Nersessian (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2016), 42, 43; hereafter abbreviated *LC* and cited parenthetically by page number for the preface, and by canto and line numbers for the poem.

⁷ Leigh Hunt, Review of *The Revolt of Islam*, *The Examiner* (22 February 1818), 122.

⁸ See M. H. Abrams, “English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age,” in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton,

1970), 91–119. For foundational early new-historicist studies of Wordsworth and Romantic poetry, all of which are broadly Marxist in orientation, see Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983); Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986); Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1989); and Marilyn Butler, "Plotting the Revolution: The Political Narratives of Romantic Poetry and Criticism," in *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, ed. Kenneth R. Johnston, Gilbert Chaitin, Karen Hanson, and Herbert Marks (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990), 133–157. For another influential treatment of early Romanticism in relation to the French Revolution, see E. P. Thompson, "Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon," in *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

⁹ See, for example, Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2012); Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004); and Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2007).

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 194; hereafter abbreviated *P* and cited parenthetically by book and line numbers. My interest, then, lies neither with the moral crisis that Wordsworth claims in *The Prelude* to have experienced circa 1796, when the charms of political philosophy wore off and he "[y]ielded up moral questions in despair" (10.900), only then to have been restored and reincarnated as a poet, nor with the nationalistic political sonnets that he began to compose in the summer of 1802, when he returned to France during the Peace of Amiens. Rather, I'm interested in the years following his self-purported recovery and preceding his embrace of England as the sole political space of hope and liberty, a stretch during which he wrote some of his most lasting poetry.

¹¹ McGann, 82.

¹² Arnold Ruge, Letter to Karl Marx (March 1843), *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, ed. Arnold Ruge and Marx (Paris: Bureau der Jahrbücher, 1844), 18; translation mine.

¹³ Marx, Letter to Ruge (May 1843), in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Goddat (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1967), 205.

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakunin, Letter to Ruge (May 1843), *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, 28; translation mine.

¹⁵ Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *boundary 2* 26.3 (1999): 22.

¹⁶ The number of works that use Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" to analyze social and political dynamics is staggering. In addition to Berlant (2011) and Brown (1999), see, for a few notable examples, Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," in *Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997), 132–150; Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 19–49; Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001); the essays in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003); and Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Brown, 23.

¹⁸ Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), 162.

¹⁹ Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 49.

²⁰ Lentricchia, 50, 51.

²¹ Lentricchia, 51. For my purposes, the rather complex question of whether the despair that Lentricchia identifies in de Man's writings is actually an instance of left despair is beside the point; what's significant is that Lentricchia thinks it is and treats it accordingly—as politically conservative "against apparent intention" (40). Lentricchia's polemic thus illustrates how left melancholy also frequently entails displaced aggression toward apparent left despair, a dynamic of which he himself seems aware when he concludes, "There is a de Man in us all" (51).

²² James Martel, *Textual Conspiracies: Walter Benjamin, Idolatry, and Political Theory* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2011), xi.

²³ Brown, 27.

²⁴ Love, 150.

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness: Chronicles of a Year of Acting Dangerously* (London: Penguin, 2017), xi–xii. Though predominantly a function of how the opposition between hope and despair was constructed in medieval and Renaissance theology, these associations go back at least to Aristotle: "The coward, then, is a despairing sort of person; for he fears everything. The brave man, on the other hand, has the opposite disposition; for confidence is the mark of a hopeful disposition" (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Lesley Brown, trans. David Ross [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009], 51). Intriguingly, while echoing Ruge, Žižek cites as his inspiration Giorgio Agamben's comment that "thought is the courage of hopelessness"—which comment Agamben makes in an interview by way of citing Guy Debord's frequent citation of Marx's response to Ruge: "Debord often cited a letter of Marx's, saying that 'the hopeless conditions of the society in which I live fill me with hope'. . . . Thought, for me, is just that: the courage of hopelessness. And is that not the height of optimism?" ("Thought is the Courage of Hopelessness: An Interview with the Philosopher Giorgio Agamben," *Verso Blog* [17 June 2014]). The actual passage in Marx's letter reads: "You will not say that I value the present time too highly. And if I do not despair, it is only the desperate situation of the present that fills me with hope [*Sie werden nicht sagen, ich hielte die Gegenwart zu hoch, und wenn ich dennoch nicht an ihr verzweifelte, so ist es nur ihre eigene verzweifelte Lage, die mich mit Hoffnung erfüllt*]" (Marx, 210; *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, 27).

²⁶ Žižek, xi. This becomes even more evident when one compares Žižek's dismissive criticism of the alleged despair of those who rioted in England in the wake of the 2011 police killing of Mark Duggan. For Žižek, "it is difficult to conceive of the UK rioters in Marxist terms, as an instance of the emergence of the revolutionary subject; they fit much better the Hegelian notion of the 'rabble'. . . . From a revolutionary point of view, the problem with the riots is not the violence as such, but the fact that the violence is not truly self-assertive. It is impotent rage and despair masked as a display of force; it is envy masked as triumphant carnival" ("Shoplifters of the World Unite," *London Review of Books* [19 August 2011]). Of course, it's little secret that in Žižek's political imaginary "the revolutionary subject" generally takes the form of a white male European. For a recent study within the tradition of Left Hegelianism that more seriously considers despair as a potential resource, see Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory After Hegel* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2015).

²⁷ So opens George Herbert's devotional poem "The Bag," in *The Complete English Poems* (London: Penguin, 1991), 142. A treatment of the prehistory of the poetics of political despair would examine the concept and the personification of despair in sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century verse, both in its theological and in its increasingly secular contexts.

²⁸ As Abrams writes: "To Europe at the end of the eighteenth century the French Revolution brought what St. Augustine said Christianity had brought to the ancient world: hope" ("English Romanticism," 108). For a survey of how despair was conceptualized in Medieval and Renaissance theology, see Susan Snyder, "The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition," *Studies in the Renaissance* 12 (1965): 18–59.

²⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 21.

³⁰ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, Michael C. Jaye, and David Garcia (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), 137.

³¹ *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, 9 vol., ed. Donald Reiman (New York: Routledge, 1972), 2:439.

³² *The Romantics Reviewed*, 2:439.

³³ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 132.

³⁴ Williams, 132.

³⁵ H. W. Garrod, for example, famously declared that the last four decades of Wordsworth's life are "the most dismal anti-climax of which the history of literature holds record" (*Wordsworth: Lectures and Essays* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927], 138).

³⁶ Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vol., ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), 1:527.

³⁷ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, 135.

³⁸ Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, 1:558.

³⁹ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (W. W. Norton, 1971), 327–328.

⁴⁰ Thompson, 62.

⁴¹ Stephen Gill, "Introduction," in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), xiv.

⁴² Kenneth Johnston, "Wordsworth and *The Recluse*: The University of Imagination," *PMLA* 97.1 (1982): 64.

⁴³ de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), 150.

⁴⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Selected Poems*, trans. H. R. Hays (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1947), 173. In German, these lines from "An Die Nachgeborenen" read as follows: "Was sind das für Zeiten, wo / Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist / Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!" (172).

⁴⁵ Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), 272. All quotations of the "Ode" are from this edition and are hereafter abbreviated *O* and cited parenthetically by line number.

⁴⁶ Levinson, 81.

⁴⁷ Levinson, 2.

⁴⁸ Brecht, 175.

⁴⁹ See Rei Terada, "Repletion: Masao Adachi's Totality," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 24.2 (2016): 15–43, esp. 35–37, for a discussion that compares Brecht's poem to Adachi's theory of landscape film, particularly the latter's notion that "all the landscapes which one faces in one's daily life . . . are essentially related to the figure of a ruling power."

⁵⁰ McGann, 88.

⁵¹ See William Hazlitt, "Observations on Mr. Wordsworth's Poem *The Excursion*," in *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, 12 vol., ed. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover (London: J. M. Dent, 1902–1904), 1:111–120; and Levinson, 80–100. Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 152.

⁵² McGann, 88–89.

⁵³ Levinson, 94, 93.

⁵⁴ *The Romantics Reviewed*, 2:436. Among twentieth-century readers, Cleanth Brooks was the first to comment on the poem's "outright confusion." *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1947), 125.

⁵⁵ Levinson, 91.

⁵⁶ Hazlitt explicitly connects the Ode and its rhetoric of "glory" to the French Revolution not only in his review of *The Excursion* but also in his posthumous essay "The Letter-Bell": "I should notice, that at this time the light of the French Revolution circled my head like a glory, though dabbled with drops of crimson gore: I walked comfortable and cheerful by its side—'And by the vision splendid / Was on my way attended'" (12:236).

⁵⁷ As Lionel Trilling memorably put it: "[The Ode] is a poem about growing; some say it is a poem about growing old, but I say it is about growing up." *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent: Selected Essays*, ed. Leon Wieseltier (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 35.

⁵⁸ Levinson, 83.

⁵⁹ Hartman, 161.

⁶⁰ Abrams, "English Romanticism," 111.

⁶¹ McGann, 71, 91.

⁶² "In moments of crisis the Romantic will turn to Nature or the creative Imagination as his places of last resort" (McGann, 67).

⁶³ Adrienne Rich, *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991–1995* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 3.

⁶⁴ Laura Quinney, *The Poetics of Disappointment: From Wordsworth to Ashbery* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1999), 49.

⁶⁵ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, 268.

⁶⁶ See, also, the passage in canto two that follows Laon's introduction of himself and of his political enthusiasm:

One summer night, in commune with the hope
Thus deeply fed, amid those ruins grey
I watched, beneath the dark sky's starry cope;
And ever from that hour upon me lay
The burthen of this hope, and night or day,
In vision or in dream, clove to my breast

(*LC*, 2.127–132).

For a discussion of Keats's rather different mode of looking at the post-Waterloo landscape, one that performs an impasse as a response to the absence of any horizon and the totalization of political space, see Terada, "Looking at the Stars Forever," *Studies in Romanticism* 50.2 (2011): 275–309.

⁶⁷ In an 1817 letter to an unknown publisher (most likely of Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown), Shelley famously describes his poem as "the *beau idéal* as it were of the French Revolution" (*LC*, 238).

⁶⁸ The case of Shelley in the broader project of which this essay is a first step is of course more complex and would require its own treatment. One thinks, for two quick examples of this complexity, of “The Mask of Anarchy” and its figure of a “Hope” who “looked more like Despair,” as well as of *The Cenci* and its critique of cruel optimism, most aptly captured in Beatrice’s “Worse than despair, / Worse than the bitterness of death, is hope.” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 319, 200.

⁶⁹ Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 163. The following paragraph is an all too rapid summary of the political sonnets Wordsworth wrote in 1802 and 1803.

⁷⁰ Rich, *Dark Fields of the Republic*, 25.

⁷¹ Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 155.

⁷² Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 157.

⁷³ Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 160.

⁷⁴ Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 162. Following the 1772 Somerset Case, in which Lord Mansfield judged that slavery was not supported by English common law, the notion that “the air of England was too pure for slavery” (often misattributed to Lord Mansfield, but first articulated by James Somerset’s lawyer James Hargrave) took on a rhetorical afterlife of its own and was perhaps most notably memorialized in the following lines from William Cowper’s *The Task*, which quietly frame Wordsworth’s “Composed in the Valley, near Dover, On the Day of landing” and his implicit figuration of its speaker (and by extension himself) as a freedman:

Slaves cannot breathe in England; if their lungs
Receive our air, that moment they are free,
They touch our country and their shackles fall.

(Cowper, *The Task and Selected Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook [New York: Routledge, 2013], 85). Although beyond the scope of this essay, Wordsworth’s 1802–3 sonnets provide a rich index of how inseparable in the liberal political imagination notions of freedom and liberty are from slavery and its figurative capacities, as well as of how these capacities, in the words of Saidiya Hartman, “enable white flights of fancy” that efface the horrors of slavery and the lives and conditions of actual slaves (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press: 1997], 22).

⁷⁵ Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 169.

⁷⁶ Rich, *Dark Fields of the Republic*, 3.

⁷⁷ McGann, 1.

⁷⁸ Rich, “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 213.

⁷⁹ Rich, *Collected Early Poems: 1950–1970* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 247.

⁸⁰ See Rich, “Credo of a Passionate Skeptic,” *Monthly Review* 53.2 (2001), for Rich’s reflection on how she “began as an American optimist” who believed that her “country’s historical aquifers were flowing in the direction of democratic change,” only to become “an American skeptic” regarding the possibility of such change. For Rich, “[p]erhaps just such a passionate skepticism, neither cynical nor nihilistic, is the ground for continuing” (31).

⁸¹ Denis Donoghue, “Poetic Anger,” *New York Times Book Review* (21 April 1996), 32.

⁸² Donoghue, 32.

⁸³ Donoghue, 32.

⁸⁴ Donoghue, 32.