

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89877-5 - Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity

David Simpson

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

*The ghost and the machine:
spectral modernity*

William Wordsworth had good cause to be preoccupied by death. His mother died a month before his eighth birthday and his father when he was thirteen. Later in life he suffered the devastating loss of two children, Thomas and Catherine, as well as of his beloved brother John. Such personal tragedies were less exceptional than they are now among those similarly circumstanced, but they affected him deeply, and they go some way toward explaining why his poetry is haunted by ghostly apparitions, figures of death-in-life, of life shadowed and sometimes claimed by death. In addition the early support for his promising but still uncertain career came from a legacy established by the death of his friend Raisley Calvert.

There was more, much more, that was not personal but which Wordsworth registered in deeply idiosyncratic terms. He became a poet during a period of global warfare involving massive mobilizations of armies and navies and appalling fatalities, many from military combat but many more from the sickness and disease contracted abroad and carried home by the discharged and disabled veterans of foreign wars. Death-dealing economic changes also darkened his imaginative horizon: rural depopulation and the increasing spread of mechanized labor and factory discipline that damaged human bodies just as visibly as did weapons of war. At first glance Wordsworth's poetry looks nothing like Blake's impassioned vision of dark satanic mills, but on closer inspection it registers similar and perhaps even more pervasive marks of weakness and of woe. Alongside the dancing daffodils and blooming celandines a brooding darkness makes abode, albeit one made harder to see because the poet's view of the world is so often complicated by anxieties of self-projection and self-doubt that can seem distracting or self-deceiving, but are better understood as reflecting a general condition of radically disoriented subjectivity. The chosen vales of Wordsworth's rural dwellers are haunted by spectral personifications of Britain's expanding military-industrial

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complex, tragically alienated figures like Michael, Margaret, or Leonard Ewbank, and by ghostly conjurations that, like “Lucy,” seem hardly to have subsisted at all as ordinary flesh and blood. A similarly spectral identity informs the poet’s representations of himself.

David Ferry long ago noticed the uncanniness of this poetry, pronouncing its author “not the poet of the human heart, nor of the relations between human beings” but one aspiring to an ideal communion made up of “the dead speaking to the dead.”¹ Ferry made a crucial turn away from the restorative Wordsworth celebrated by Matthew Arnold, a turn followed up in Geoffrey Hartman’s argument for a connection between the secular, creative imagination that was the poet’s best gift to posterity and the dark and liminal places where transitions between life and death seemed imminent or actually to occur.² Hartman’s Wordsworth headed off the violence of apocalypse with a turn to nature, but only at the cost of internalizing a sublime experience of the self that could be as terrifying as anything in the natural or political world. In the 1980s Wordsworth criticism took a political-historical turn, often convicting him of moral failure or escapism of the sort summed up in Jerome McGann’s memorable and influential claim that “between 1793 and 1798 Wordsworth lost the world merely to gain his own immortal soul.”³ The major energy of this criticism was devoted to pointing out the significance of Wordsworth’s displacements and silences, often interpreted as resulting from conscious decisions and ethical failures. The analytical power of his language and of the positioning of his narrators and protagonists as indicators of a crisis of ethical subjectivity itself, one not open to mere good faith solutions but articulating a profound alienation that could be stated and explored but not surpassed, was often missed. Lost too was the deep bite of Wordsworth’s self-critique, one that goes much beyond the self-deceptions of mere false consciousness, one that poses questions we have yet to come to terms with. Paul de Man gave us a Wordsworth significantly emptied of ontological consolations not by history but by the logic of language itself, while McGann reintroduced both history and the ontological consolation as the evidence for Wordsworth’s moral derelictions.⁴ What has been less commonly explored is the historical construction of Wordsworth’s ontological emptiness. By about 1800 Wordsworth’s best poetry, sensing the pressure of “a multitude of causes unknown to former times,” discovers that it may have lost not only the world but also any sure sense of the poet’s place in it, along with anything we might conventionally identify as an immortal soul.⁵ The sequence of ghostly encounters and death-in-life images that results renders this poetry prospectively

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contemporary with our own present and indeed with our foreseeable future because the conditions that generated it have not gone away.

Our own specters come en masse. We are seemingly obsessed with theorizing refugees, nomads and displaced (and sometimes resurgent) multitudes as the governing figures of a global postmodern condition.⁶ Wordsworth's wanderers tend to come singly, so that one might see in his fear (and avoidance) of crowds a resistance to modern massification, a displacement or mystification of what was before his eyes. The oppressive and frightening crowds of London and Paris indeed typify a historical condition whose emergent realities Wordsworth was consistently anxious to avoid. His preferred communities depend upon a political economy founded in small groups. Nonetheless, the very singularity of his nomads and refugees stands for many others, and the common forms of their alienation bespeak a general condition that is implicitly multitudinous. In this respect they might be seen as conforming to another of the major types of our contemporary social imagination, the *Muselmann* or figure of bare life, of death-in-life, historically generated by reports on conditions in the concentration camps by Primo Levi and others and subsequently theorized by Giorgio Agamben as the prescient denomination of a coming common fate.⁷ Like the *Muselmann*, Wordsworth's solitaries often seem to be on the point of leaving life behind, staring blankly at a future not describable or imaginable by the rest of us, verging upon a condition of sheer animality. Some of them, like the old Cumberland beggar, maintain complete silence and do nothing to alleviate the uncertainties in those who behold them about the nature and extent of their obligations to respond. Others – the majority – talk back, but thereby proliferate rather than resolve these uncertainties; at the most one might say that they open a question and generate a discomfort which we have yet to find a way of appeasing. Eric Santner has discovered the same openness to an as yet undecidable ethics in modern literature between Rilke and Sebald; and one could indeed propose the long narrative of Jacques Austerlitz in Sebald's last novel as a protracted response to the question Wordsworth poses to the leech-gatherer: why are you here and what is it that you do?⁸ Wordsworth's minimalist examples are perhaps even more recalcitrant than those of his successors in offering solutions, for there is next to nothing of a conventionally restorative humanism about his determination to represent persons in a state of exigent singularity.

This book argues that the ghost-ridden dark and twilight zones of Wordsworth's poetry not only embody a metaphysical intuition about

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the death-directedness of all life, making him the precursor of a (late) Freud, a Heidegger or a Sartre, but that they also and most profoundly explore the processes and consequences of modernization experienced at one of its most critical transitions. These processes impose figures of death on Wordsworth's life; they are critical to the formation of his sense of hauntedness. Wordsworth, I claim, had a profound poetic understanding of the condition of England around 1800, specifically of its evolution into a culture governed by industrial time, machine-driven labor and commodity form: the culture whose profile would eventually be theorized much later by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*. A full understanding of the power and persistence of these conjunctions may be still to come: this is the argument of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, a book that woke me up to a remarkable confluence of interests between Wordsworth and Marx on the matter of ghosts, and that made me see how Debord's theory of the spectacle also requires a recognition of spectrality. Derrida turned to Marx as a corrective response to the turn away from *Marxism* after 1989; he confronted the triumphalism of the neoliberal "West" with a demand for reading Marx again (or for the first time) and issued a warning that what was deemed historically redundant could be conjured up instead as yet to happen. Reading Marx again after Derrida, and Wordsworth again after both, opens up a new way of understanding the historical affiliations between and determinations among spectral figures, commodities, factory time, machine labor, global war and poetic imagery. It sets us thinking again about the death-in-life aura that resides at the heart of so many Wordsworthian encounters. This seems especially to be the case where the poems address matters of social concern and has made me ask whether we might find in their historically prescient imaging of the ghostliness of the commodity form some clues about those still unresolved meanings and directions that make many of Wordsworth's poems still urgently undecidable. If so, then Wordsworth in turn can tell us something about how Marx handled the task of writing and how Marx himself experienced and represented the figurative imagination – his own and that of others – working within a culture of mature commodity capitalism.

I claim this as a poetics of modernity, although I do not mean to say that everything about the modern world or its poetry is packed into Wordsworth's work. But I do think that certain core components of modernity, those now associated with what is often called postmodernity (better conceived in the context of this argument as late modernity) are staged in Wordsworth's poems with a remarkable and specific intensity.

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Wordsworth appealed to Mill and Arnold because of his premodern inclinations; they saw him as the poet of nature and elementary feeling who was capable of offering an antidote to the modern world. But these doctrinal and experiential positions are underpinned and shadowed by darker intuitions which do not lend themselves to ready consolation. In using the word *concern* in my subtitle, I intend to capture the unresolved nature of the questions Wordsworth raises about suffering and sympathy. To be concerned usually means not having an answer, not having finished with an issue, being in a state of suspended attention that may produce a resolution but has not done so yet. The word also usefully signals the reflexive component of Wordsworth's poetry, which is so often about itself and its own making. When one is concerned about something or someone, then one is speaking not only about a condition or situation in the world but also and always about one's attitude to it. Heidegger's *Besorgen* (concern) and its attendant terms "circumspection" [*Umsicht*] and "solicitude" [*Fürsorge*] capture some of this indecisiveness, which in Wordsworth often veers into bad faith.⁹ Concern means being involved and attentive and aware of oneself being so; aware also that concern is not of itself enough, that it does not solve anything. Concern is not the stuff of science, nor a support system for a utopian scheme to come. It is outside the law, even when the law appears to cover some elements of its challenge. And it is never enough. It is generated by the coexistence of radical subjectivity (acute awareness of how and what one feels) with radical injustice or suffering, and it cannot bridge the gap. I call its role in Wordsworth's writing a *poetics* because I think that what is at issue is not just a contingent overlap between a few interesting poems but a paradigm that recurs across many of the best-known works. The poems I discuss in detail are few, but they stand for and point to others and represent, I think, an important structuring energy for much of Wordsworth's poetry. Much of that energy comes from insights into the operations of commodity form, itself the ghostly heart of all sorts of communications and exchanges in the modern world.

Commodification, by which I here mean to reference the extended development of commodity form (Marx's *Warenform*) by around 1800, is the hardest of my terms to explain up front; it is the one that requires lengthy exposition and an accumulation of instances to be made apparent, for the commodity cannot itself be either seen or felt: its form is ghostly. Marx's declaration is famous and is to be taken very seriously: "a commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in

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metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.” As such it carries with it a “secret” that we must try to decipher.¹⁰ It seems easy enough to think about consumption and consumerism: we can track them through items, things in the world, and connect them readily enough with familiar moral discourses about luxury and expense, as many eighteenth-century writers did. The debate about consumption invokes human bodies and human desires, wants and needs, visible causes and urgent effects. We know, more or less, what Wordsworth and others thought and felt about these matters, and we have a number of histories of such responses.¹¹ The commodity form is harder to understand. We have indeed come a long way since W. J. T. Mitchell remarked, in 1986, that with some notable exceptions analysis of the commodity had “played a relatively minor role in the study of culture.”¹² But despite a now widespread invocation of the importance of commodification in all walks of life, what it is and how it works are hardly common knowledge. It is particularly hard to understand the unseen operation of commodity *form*, which does not depend upon the desires or intentions of human subjects.¹³ Alienation and reification can be all too comfortably discussed in relation to individual subjects and individual things, but only by ignoring the intricacies of a commodity form that puts them into complex, abstract relations and can even seem to make them dance.

Commodities can and do appear as things, but *as* commodities they are abstractions and lead a virtual life conducted according to the constantly shifting protocols of commodity form which significantly determine modern social relations. The commodity is created by an abstraction from both production and use value, and it has a historical existence: Lefebvre calls this “concrete abstraction.”¹⁴ Insofar as the individual commodity is a thing, it can be seen, but what is not visible is its embeddedness in the value form and in the system of equivalences that makes all things transposable into other things, most obviously into money. A thing leaves the visible world when it becomes a commodity (in which human labor has only a “phantom-like objectivity”) and only briefly returns to earth at the moment when its use value is accessed and consumed by a purchaser.¹⁵ Lukács thought that all problems in the modern world (which he too thought had come into being at the turn of the nineteenth century) could be traced back to these “invisible forces” of commodity form [*Warenstruktur*] – invisible but all-powerful and rendering the human subject a helpless onlooker.¹⁶ Helplessness in the face of powers that are sensed as phantom forces but never fully embodied (while never settling into the consoling forms of approved religiosity) generates radical

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concern; we see by glimpses and sometimes not at all, and we are never sure that what we can see is what matters most.

No one takes kindly to being deemed a helpless onlooker; such a condition seems to diminish or deny the power of human agency, denying us options for intervention or even rational theorization because the forces that move the world are not visible and cannot thus be formulated as a politics. Political protest did occur, of course, as it still does, with fairly obvious empirical causes and desired effects: the machine-breakers knew what they were doing and they knew many of the reasons why they were doing it. Wordsworth's narrative persona, in its very efforts at ontological security, stages an indeterminate social identity that registers the presence of something sinister and invisible governing everyday life, something whose considerable powers cannot be readily apprehended or controlled: the dynamics of commodity form. We mistake Wordsworth's distinctive historical intelligence by attributing his condition of arrested concern – his awareness of problems he seems to be unable to handle – to some sort of moral inadequacy. We can learn more, I think, from regarding his stagings of narrative incapacity and detachment in the face of the needs or sufferings of others as materials for deciphering the secrets of commodity form. A major figure of its presence (or half-life) is the specter, the permanent-impermanent shape that comes and goes without obeying the ordinary categories of space and time. Commodities are hard to figure, especially when commodity form seems to threaten or even govern figuration itself. Marx, as we shall see, comes up with some fantastic and even indecipherable personifications (coats talking to linen, tables standing on their heads) in order to represent their bizarre ghostliness: Wordsworth has his daffodils, and ghosts of his own. His poetry hardly ever describes the exchange of commodities, which we might take as the index of his preference for residual subsistence and barter subcultures untouched by modern commercial society. But that same poetry is suffused with representations of commodity form.

Commodification is then not just about the status of particular objects and our particular attitudes to them; it is a process in time and a structured complex in space that is always more than the particular transaction before our eyes. Marx explains commodity form as that which governs the circulation of capital and its transformations from money to goods and back to money.¹⁷ Commodity form was not new around 1800: "it makes its appearance at an early date, though not in the same predominant and therefore characteristic manner as nowadays."¹⁸ As production increases more and more capital must take form as commodity; everything that is

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not being produced or consumed at any point in time exists as “stock” within the commodity form.¹⁹ As such it is both hidden and labile; it will grow when raw materials cannot be rapidly conveyed to production sites, and shrink when there is a steady and reliable supply. It may linger in storage or be sold off quickly according to market trends. The bigger and more complex markets become, the more capital will be tied up in the form of commodity stock, where it is subject to decay and maintenance costs as well as to the ups and downs of the market. In other words commodity form is always economically kinetic, always on the move, even when it is standing still, for example when it languishes in a warehouse. It is the key to commodity circulation even when it seems not to be moving from its place of rest: it is in fact only “normal” when “apparent stagnation is a form of the flow itself.” Even producers can be deceived by this hidden-away operation, fooling themselves, for example, that their stock is moving when it is actually stagnating in the hands of merchants. Similarly, stockpiling can take on the appearance of an increase in production, even if actual production is falling, “particularly if the real movement is mystified by the development of the credit system” (p. 225). Its potential as consumable goods is inseparable from its abstract mobility as money.

The power and paradigmatic status of commodity form expanded hugely because of other transitions occurring at the same time, each enabling the others. Chief among them were automation and machine labor, which is a broader category than “factory” labor and which radically refigured space–time coordinates, and mass warfare, which brutally emphasized the general equivalence of everyone to everyone else. One of Marx’s key insights was that historical developments in the modern economy gathered up inherited paradigms, intensifying and combining them in quite new ways, imposing acceleration and crisis, and secrecy and substitutability, as normative and thereby refiguring the habits of daily life for an ever-increasing proportion of the population. Thus it was not only those directly engaged in factory work (relatively few by 1800) who felt the changes. Take the cotton industry. By the end of the eighteenth century it was expanding rapidly. For this it required capitalization and the relocation of working populations to the regional centers (in Lancashire especially). It also relied upon imported raw material, largely from the West Indies but also from North America and elsewhere. This in turn required a large merchant marine and British naval supremacy. There were probably many more engaged in “machine” labor in building and manning ships than there were in the cotton factories, even though they

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were not so much operating machines as playing out their lives as if they were themselves *parts* of machines. Without the movement of money and capital enabled by commodity form, none of this could have happened; and without the movement of raw materials on a global scale, commodity form would not have become as central to economic and social life as it did.

Marx thus understands commodity form as a singular plurality and a dynamic principle, not a simple mechanical component of a social whole but a circulatory structuring energy that changes the shape of everything it touches. It is a governing but not a transcendental agency and it includes within its operations an indefinite sequence of conflicts that are sensed but not always seen. Like the formal unity of capital itself to which it is the key, it disguises the conflicts generated by its own energies. We are dealing with what Wordsworth called “a multitude of causes unknown to former times” coming together into a new formation some of whose operative principles can be fully apparent only to theory even as others can be visually and empirically located.²⁰ The speeding up of change can be sensed and sometimes seen, but the increasing dominance of commodity form over labor, productivity and value has no single, visible form; it is apprehended as uncanny and thereafter can be accessed only by thought. It is not the only kind of secret ministry around 1800 – memory, sexuality, winds and waters are all sensed as operating in hidden ways – but it is a critical secret agent within and among those other secrecies, a force that makes them take shape and form as – to a historically unprecedented degree – deeply unknowable and mysterious. Content itself can be evacuated, as it is, for example, in “The Ancient Mariner,” where no motive for the voyage is given, no cargo specified, and finally no crew remains on board a ship driven by occult forces beyond human knowledge in a passage retold as one of endless circulation. The slave trade may well be the primarily repressed referent of Coleridge’s poem, but it is as such representative of the generically impersonal and global dispersal of commodification itself. Commodity form impinges on but is not limited to or the same as class conflict, divided labor and alienation, mass militarization, surplus value, machine labor, finance capital, fetishism (the investing of inert things with living powers) and reification (the figuring of living things as dead forms). Even today, when we somewhat take for granted that commodity form is everywhere and explains everything, its constitutively abstract operations remain enough of a mystery that very able economic historians, some of whom I will draw upon, must still work hard to describe it.

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Partly for these reasons I have decided not to try to offer a lengthy free-standing account of commodity form as it took shape around 1800, but to take up the task a bit at a time (especially in chapters 1, 4, 5 and 6) and in the light of interpretive questions argued through particular poems. Only at the end will the reader gain a sense of the larger pattern. More than a century of writing about Marx has not settled either the formal intricacy of his arguments or their precise application to contemporary conditions, so it is no false modesty that makes me declare myself incapable of demystifying the functions of the commodity once and for all. If anything we are even more deeply implicated in its operations than Wordsworth was, and in chapter 5 I will hope to show that Marx himself, like Wordsworth, was very much aware of the rhetorical complexities generated by writing from within the very paradigm he was trying to describe. His own response often took the form of comic personification or of critical parasitism, an enormous laboring of the negative through the writings of his precursors (Smith, Ricardo, Say, Stirner, Bauer, Feuerbach, Proudhon, Hegel and others) whose mistakes and half-truths served to help him articulate his own ideas. It was never easy, and it still isn't, to follow him into the mysteries and secrets of commodity form.

Marx often reduces himself to parody as a way of dramatizing the unavailability of cool objectivism. So too does Wordsworth, and I hope that the juxtaposition of these two writers may restore some sense of surprise to Wordsworth's remarkable poetry, which was not yet attuned to the normality of commodity form as a general principle governing human culture and the human mind. He was able to register the shock of something newly intense and to explore its workings with a complexity that no one before him had managed because there had been no need for such exploration. Marjorie Levinson's pathbreaking study argued the case for Keats's poetry as an analysis of money and commodity form, an analysis which, she claimed, "does not stamp itself upon the face of the other Romantic canons."²¹ She attributed Keats's distinction in this respect to his "unusually stressed, self-conscious, and fragile ideological image" (p. 293). But at around the same time Alan Liu published a major study of Wordsworth which, as we will see, began to work out a very similar reading of Wordsworth as responding to the pressures of commodity culture; his approach was taken up and further developed by Celeste Langan.²² All of these studies have been formative for my argument, and indeed one might speculate that Keats himself sensed Wordsworth's