Introduction

Wordsworth's earliest conception of *The Recluse* – the overarching project that he hoped would provide a structure for all his poetry – had an art of philosophical travel as its objective. It was first announced in a letter to James Tobin on 6 March 1798:

> I have written 1300 lines of a poem in which I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed. My object is to give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society. Indeed, I know not anything which will not come within the scope of my plan . . . *If you could collect for me any books of travels you would render me an essential service, as without much of such reading my present labours cannot be brought to a conclusion*.[1] (my emphasis)

An encyclopaedic range is to be conveyed through individual pictures alone. At this stage, Wordsworth's single long poem was paradoxically composed of four self-contained vignettes: 'The Discharged Soldier', 'A Night-Piece', 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'. Descriptive poems about encounters with the poor and their rural environment, they largely eschew discursive philosophy. Yet they possess nearly the maximum of knowledge for Wordsworth.

As Alan Bewell has observed in a pioneering study,[2] Wordsworth sought to overcome a widespread eighteenth-century division of labour between the 'moral philosopher' – the writer of systematic treatises on the 'natural history of man', the philosophical and historical anthropology of a universal human nature – and the travel writer out in the field, the ethnographer of scattered observations and anecdotes ('pictures') concerning 'savage' or foreign modes of life. Across the distance of social class, and an estranged nature itself, Wordsworth's exploration of a Lakeland landscape of the working and vagrant poor was also a mode of foreign travel. But this project, centred on the 'picture' more than systematic exposition – 'spots of time' that were to remain the nodal points of his longer and more discursive later writings for *The Recluse*, as with *The Prelude*

and even *The Excursion* – was in a state of critical tension with moral philosophy.

The task was surely indebted to Coleridge who had announced almost a year earlier, in early April 1797, a long poem he would never write, for he had projected no less than 'ten years' of research into 'the *mind of man* – then the *minds of men* – in all Travels, Voyages, and Histories'.[3] It testified to the daunting challenge in reconciling an indivisible human nature with the vast archive of cultural diversity. It is instructive to compare Wordsworth's attempted solution to this problem with that of an innovative, though characteristic, 'moral philosopher'. In 1771, John Millar had argued that demonstrating the 'similarity' of anthropological 'wants', and the 'remarkable uniformity' of their world-historical development, required a comparative synthesis of travel accounts. From the 'agreement or disagreement' of descriptions, the anthropologist might arrive at a composite view, and 'ascertain the credit' to be given to the notoriously uncertain 'veracity of the relater'.[4] As Edmund Burke wrote on 9 June 1777 to William Robertson, the historian of 'savage' America: 'now the Great Map of Mankind is unrolled at once; and there is no state or Gradation of barbarism, and no mode of refinement which we have not at the same instant under our View'.[5] The spatializing effect of these hierarchical structures of knowledge had an alternative, flattening result, depicted by Millar as the unrolling of an aesthetic pluralism: 'the most wonderful variety of appearances . . . the greatest diversity of manners and customs'.[6] Surveying the map from an elevated prospect, knowledge might yield to contemplative enjoyment. The cognitive and aesthetic spheres are distinct, viewed from different angles.

Outlining 'The Design' of his *Essay on Man* (1734), the most successful and influential work of the eighteenth-century genre that would both culminate and disintegrate in *The Recluse*, the versification of philosophical anthropology in the didactic long poem, Alexander Pope had characterized it as 'a *general map* of MAN, marking out no more than the *greater parts*, their *extent*, their *limits*, and their *connection*, but leaving out the particular to be more fully delineated in the charts which are to follow'.[7] For Wordsworth, however, there is no map, only the frontal scrutiny of a series of 'pictures'. Or charts of the particular: subsequent characterizations of *The Recluse* would refer both to 'pictures' and to '*views*'[8] – the image must open up a prospect. There is no space for aesthetic wonder to detach itself from cognitive appraisal: it is the very medium of knowledge.

Yet Thomas De Quincey's 1823 antithesis of a 'literature of knowledge' and 'literature of power' was credited as stemming from 'many years'

conversations with Mr. Wordsworth'.[9] The literature of power specializes in 'emotions which ordinary life rarely or never supplies occasions for exciting' – dormant until a poet is able 'to organize' these 'inert and sleeping forms'.[10] The contrasting literature of knowledge includes even the 'higher pretensions' of 'books of voyages and travels, and generally all books in which the matter to be communicated is paramount to the manner or form of its communication'.[11] Wordsworth's 1798 poem, it seems, can offer no generally valid knowledge, only exceptions to the formal rule.

In *The Prelude*, a schooling in travel as the literature of knowledge would epitomize the indifferent learning of the precocious child: 'He knows the policies of foreign Lands; / Can string you names of districts, cities, towns, / The whole world over' (*Pr.* v.334–6). Opposed to this was the education of travel as experience, the child's exploration of his native environment, a genuine

> knowledge, rightly honor'd with that name,
> Knowledge not purchas'd with the loss of power!
> (448–9)

In Book II, childhood is a time when 'all knowledge is delight' (306). It is to experience

> that universal power
> And fitness in the latent qualities
> And essences of things
> (343–5)

Here 'power' has usurped the attribute of knowledge: it is 'universal'. As with secular theodicies of the 'chain of being' or progress, the great map is one of global 'fitness'. Yet this is not quite to say with the *Essay on Man* that 'Whatever is, is right.' Things are as they should be – at a level that is only 'latent'. Or in De Quincey's words, 'inert and sleeping'. Descriptive knowledge is haunted by a power of prescription for what has yet to become fully manifest. A traditional distinction of essence and appearance has become slippery and ungraspable.

We are both near and far from the 'wonderful variety' of appearances for Millar, a panorama of variegated and curious data, organized and hierarchized into the progressive stages of universal history. The literature of manifest quantities, it seems, would be the cognition of things in their exile from fitness. The aesthetic *is* moving towards its autonomy – through a refusal to countenance it as an insulated sphere. In Kojin Karatani's phrase, the aesthetic has opened up a 'parallax view', a radical change in the

object when seen from a different position – as a physiognomic reading of latent qualities, a head-on picture rather than a mapped co-ordinate.

For Karatani, it is the 'parallax view' of travel that necessitates the task of philosophy, the 'transcritique' by which it traverses and negotiates rival positions.[12] Karatani gives three examples: Descartes, who stated explicitly that the *cogito* was an attempt to locate a secure ground of knowledge following the shock that travel had given him, its relativizing of custom and tradition as a reliable authority; Kant, who refused to travel beyond the commercial seaport of Königsberg in order to maintain his anthropology from a cosmopolitan point of view; and Marx, whose residences in Germany, France and Britain were to inform a critical transposition of idealism, rationalism and empiricism within a new materialist dialectic. Travel was notoriously destabilizing in its threat to received opinion and the *sensus communis*. Jonathan Lamb has cited Samuel Johnson's disorientation in *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland*: 'He who has not made the experiment . . . will scarcely believe how much a few hours take from the certainty of knowledge, and distinctness of imagery.'[13] Lamb accounts for the enormous popularity of travel literature in the eighteenth century in terms of its dramatization of individual 'self-preservation' as it struggled to survive amidst the foreign.[14]

The most serious cruxes of philosophy were at stake. In a picture of 'Nature, Man, and Society' in South-East America, William Bartram described a mysterious incident in which an Indian on horseback, a noted thief, murderer and renegade from his tribe, pursued Bartram and fixed him with his rifle, only to draw it away and take Bartram's extended hand in friendship. Bartram is led to remark: 'Can it be denied, but that the moral principle which directs the savages to virtuous and praiseworthy actions, is natural and innate?'[15] Bartram had been schooled at the Philadelphia Academy, whose curriculum was modelled on Francis Hutcheson's theory of the benevolent 'moral sense'.[16] By contrast for Locke, as Ann Talbot has shown,[17] travel literature abundantly vindicated his conviction that there were no innate ideas or moral principles, while confirming the prejudices of a literate European superiority: 'But alas, amongst *children*, *idiots*, and *savages*, and the grossly *illiterate*, what general maxims are to be found?'[18] The so-called 'savage', it seems, was all too empiricist. In their polar contrast, Locke and Bartram were equally trapped in a hermeneutic circle.

Soon after Wordsworth's announcement of *The Recluse*, Novalis would famously diagnose philosophy as a 'homesickness', a drive (*Trieb*) to be everywhere at home.[19] The Enlightenment system, with its staking out of the first principles from which all of world history and its ethnic diversity

could be gathered together and reclaimed, brought back home to the philosopher's fireside, was an unwitting testament to this pathos of distance. With youthful confidence, Wordsworth could state in 1798, 'I know not anything which will not come within the scope of my plan.' For Rousseau, the philosopher's laborious homecoming merely converted the world into their own mirror-image. European philosophy displayed a fundamental inability to travel:

> Although the inhabitants of Europe have for the past three or four hundred years overrun the other parts of the world and are constantly publishing new collections of travels and reports, I am convinced that the only men we know are the Europeans; what is more, it would seem that, judging by the ridiculous prejudices that have not died out even among Men of Letters, very nearly all anyone does under the pompous heading of the study of man is to study the men of his country. Regardless of how much individuals may come and go, it would seem that Philosophy does not travel.[20]

But it is tempting to respond at this point with Stephen Greenblatt (on Columbus' first contact with the inhabitants of the Americas):

> We can demonstrate that, in the face of the unknown, Europeans used their conventional intellectual and organizational structures, fashioned over centuries of mediated contact with other cultures, and that these structures greatly impeded a clear grasp of the radical otherness of the American lands and peoples. What else would we expect?[21]

Greenblatt's important argument is that we must not 'efface the incommensurability, the astonishing singularity' of 12 October 1492.[22] Even in the universal context of European effacements of the singular in favour of the global structure, we have an utterly singular instance of such an effacement – and one that we must not efface ourselves through systematic and global interpretation. But while that truly epochal singularity is obviously not in dispute, nor the strangeness and imaginary quality of Columbus' routine and ritual gestures of land possession in such an 'unprecedented situation' (as Greenblatt observes eloquently and acutely), do not the paradoxes here suggest that the 'otherness', on every side of the encounter, might not be quite so radically absolute? Yet there is a crucial awareness here that such episodes have their own unique differences as well as similarities, that it is necessary to assemble, as Wordsworth indicated to Tobin, a wide range of 'pictures'.

The period in which Wordsworth was writing had started to experiment formally with new ways to think through the singular and the global. Clifford Siskin has observed that in 1798, 'the Year of the System', a troubled

relationship between the particular and the universal was to characterize its intellectual production: 'embedding systems as parts within adventurously incomplete wholes' or 'unsystematic' genres (the short poem, for example).[23] It is because Wordsworth was unable fully to make the transition from the picture to the system – *The Recluse* was eventually abandoned – yet also unable to settle for a nominalistic and absolute metaphysics of the singular, that his travels in *terra incognita*, his willingness to articulate the strange and foreign even among 'the men of his country', were perhaps the first adventure in philosophical travel ever to be angled at a genuine 'parallax'.

The Rights of Nature

The great shortcoming of Wordsworth's 'pictures', the absence of an overarching and structural analysis of 'Nature, Man, and Society', is also their greatest asset: an ability to uncover the most minute points of resistance in the face of such a totality. But this search for an individual autonomy in the 'essences of things' – all the way down to the minuscule detail or latent quality – took its initial rise from another universalizing discourse of the Enlightenment: the deduction of principles of natural law and the 'rights of man'. It was the quest for individual pictures of the universal heart of rights, voiced through impoverished suffering, which drove sentimental journeys in verse like that of John Thelwall's *The Peripatetic, or Sketches of the Heart, Nature and Society* (1793), which points to a strong influence on *The Recluse* through its title alone. Kenneth Johnston has argued that the early *Recluse* was conceived not as a 'vast nebulous scheme', but within the conventions of 'loco-descriptive-meditative poetry'.[24] But the peripatetic philosophy of *The Recluse* went off in search of 'pictures of Man', an infinitely more vast and nebulous prospect than sketches of the heart alone.

Sentimental literature left home to explore a *topos* that Wordsworth was radically to reclaim as his own. The state of nature, the primordial condition before social classes and culture, in which 'liberty, equality and fraternity' were transparently evident as humanity's natural birthright, was now located through its anguished expression in the contemporary world. Travel was bound up with politics and the question of rights as it searched for a philosophical anthropology. Wordsworth's earliest critics quite clearly perceived his poetry's indebtedness to the discourse of natural rights, as proclaimed by the American and French Revolutions and inspired by thinkers such as Tom Paine and Rousseau.[25] As Mary Jacobus has recently

observed, this was drastically extended by Wordsworth to include even the 'rights of nature' itself.[26]

But there is a major problem here, one that points to this verse's status as art and its difficult relation to that *sine qua non* of philosophy, the concept. Such 'rights' are almost never explicitly mentioned at all.[27] For Maureen McLane, Wordsworth rejects the historiographies of the primitive, the fountain of natural rights, in favour of the uniquely situated and historically particular. Wordsworth's versions of 'natural man', his rustics and so-called primitives, are 'No longer objects of representation in conjectural histories . . . [but] emerge, however problematical, as subjects with voices, situations, histories.'[28] Alan Bewell has likewise proposed that in Wordsworth's 1798 poem 'The Discharged Soldier', the truly 'human status' of its vagrant subject emerges only when Wordsworth realizes the falsehood of 'divesting the man of cultural attributes in order to increase his conformity with an anthropological idea of primitive man'.[29] Such a definition of the human would seem to preclude absolute rights, shifting to positive rather than natural law, for if they are purely cultural and historical – rather than 'primitive' to the embodied condition – then they have been posited rather than universally grounded. How can Wordsworth seem to gesture not only to the human rights of the somatic and affective self, to its personal independence and equality, but also even to the 'rights of nature', the rights of matter itself?

David Bromwich, by sharp contrast, proposes that Wordsworth's figures of a 'radical humanity' tear apart 'a social context with intelligible meanings'. Bromwich, like McLane and Bewell, discerns a new particularism in this verse, only now this is directly opposed to the historical and cultural: Wordsworth's 'particulars are natural . . . merely everything that culture is not'.[30] Wordsworth is somehow locatable on both sides of an either/or proposition. The 'human' is either purely cultural or exclusively natural. How might Wordsworth's pictures of 'Man' in the contexts of both 'Nature' *and* 'Society' appear in the light of Walter Benjamin's 'axiom of the way to avoid mythic thinking': 'No historical category without natural substance; no natural substance without its historical filter'?[31] Can poems like 'The Discharged Soldier' show a way to avoid both cultural idealism *and* a dogmatic naturalism?

James Chandler has argued that such a dense entanglement of nature and history was to register a change in Wordsworth's conception of rights. For Chandler, Wordsworth's 1798 poems move away from Rousseau, abandon the notion of a state of nature,[32] and turn to an exploration of what Edmund Burke deemed a 'second nature'. In Burke's version of positive

law, the 'natural rights' affirmed by the French Revolution were no longer relevant amid the complexity of a stratified society, its welter of unequal and inherited rights. For Burke, on 'entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium', all 'primitive rights' get 'refracted from their straight line'.[33] The opposition between culture and nature has been resolved by history into the second-order necessity (the 'second nature') of habits and social conventions.

In the year of the 1832 Reform Bill, Wordsworth wrote an encomium to the 'Genius of Burke' for *The Prelude* that celebrated his denunciation of 'all systems built on abstract rights' (*14BkPr.* VII.524). But in 1798, Wordsworth's odyssey of the 1790s across political theory had not quite found a secure resting-place.[34] He seems to have read Paine's *The Rights of Man* soon after it appeared in 1791,[35] while an unfinished essay of the same year, his 'Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff', had affirmed the Rousseauan principle of a 'social contract' founded in the 'general will'. Following the Terror, this youthful enthusiasm for 'abstract rights' was mitigated not by Burke but by the radically progressive and anarchic, if not revolutionary, thought of William Godwin, whose *Enquiry into Political Justice* (1793) had opened with a polemic against natural rights as subversive of social duty. In 1826, Godwin recalled that in the mid-1790s he had 'had the honour, in the talk of one evening to convert Wordsworth, from the doctrine of self-love to that of benevolence – ask him . . . that is perhaps my powerful topic'.[36] Godwinian benevolence was rational, not a natural instinct elevated to a law as with Rousseau's *amour de soi-même*. Faced with an impossible choice between rival first principles, it is understandable that Wordsworth's Godwinian phase would end, as he recounts in *The Prelude*, in a state of aporetic exhaustion: 'wearied out with contrarieties', he 'Yielded up moral questions in despair' (*Pr.* X.899–900).

Wordsworth came to view Godwin's rejection of nature as a pseudo-rationality in which 'passions had the privilege to work' unconsciously (*Pr.* X.812). Godwin's alternative to abstract right was what Wordsworth would call 'the immediate law' in his 1795–6 play *The Borderers* (*B* III.4.31). In words partly transferred later to his Godwinian phase in *The Prelude*, that law was said to emerge from 'the light of circumstances, flashed / Upon an independent intellect' (*ibid.*, 32–3; *Pr.* X.828–9). In terms indeed reminiscent of Burke, this was no less abstract for Wordsworth than the rights tradition in its 'shaking off . . . The accidents of nature, time, and place' in local and historical development (*Pr.* X.821–3). The corrupted Godwinianism of Rivers, the central figure in *The Borderers*, laid claim to the 'immediate law' in order to justify a gratuitous murder. Godwin's

law of unique circumstances was readily convertible into an arbitrary decisionism. Rivers, however, makes appeal to the natural as well as immediate law: according to the 'institutes of nature', humans have a right to 'destroy' each other with 'licence', just as they do with the animal kingdom (*B* III.5.95–102). The natural law of 'whatever is, is right', collapsing the moral into the given, was also a licence to kill. But the positive law was equally violent as an arbitrary, though historically sanctified, imposition – and its difference from an immediate law that flashed out from a singular context, to strike with its own violence, risked falling into undecidability.

Against the aporias of law, political failure and moral despair, Wordsworth had only 'the accidents of nature, time, and place' as a bulwark. As opposed to a univocal light of circumstances, immediately self-evident, what were both historical *and* natural particulars or 'accidents' had to be painstakingly *read* within an individual configuration. In a 1798–9 prose fragment now titled the 'Essay on Morals', Wordsworth would indeed, like Burke, call upon the force of habit or 'second nature' within the dense medium of moral-political law. Here he rails indiscriminately against the 'whole tribe' of moral philosophers (naming Godwin) for being 'impotent over our habits' in their merely abstract prescriptions.[37] Wordsworth was writing under circumstances that are perhaps not unfamiliar: a failed revolution coinciding with a proliferation of normative 'theory' (largely identified with a French predilection for the abstract). In 1832, Wordsworth commended Burke for 'exploding upstart Theory' (*14BkPr.* VII.529). As David Simpson observes, figures like Burke, and the traveller and rural surveyor Arthur Young – who had scorned the 'ideal and visionary rights of nature' on a journey through France just a month before the fall of the Bastille[38] – had appealed to a British national character identified with empiricism, custom and practical common sense as their mainstay against 'French' theory.[39] Simpson argues that Wordsworth attempted 'a synthesis of the otherwise antagonist principles of Burke and Paine' by endorsing the 'habitual conventions' of rural manners as 'an image of democratic social life'.[40] Wordsworth's 'democratic universalism' of the countryside was one of 'feeling, or thought-in-feeling', not the 'rationalist radicalism' of 'setting forth the rights of man in propositional form'.[41]

The 'Essay on Morals' argued that poetry's 'thought-in-feeling' must reach into the whole inner body of the reader in order to engage its habitual responses. It must go deeper than sentiment to 'incorporate itself with the blood and vital juices of our minds' and 'melt into our affection'.[42] What moral-political theories lacked were precisely 'pictures of Nature, Man, and Society' capable of mimetically laying hold of the reader. Philosophy's

'lifeless words, & abstract propositions . . . contain no picture of human life; they describe nothing'.[43] Though Wordsworth's critics have been right to insist on the centrality of habit in his verse, the explicit aim here is not to reaffirm habits – not even the 'second nature' of rural custom – but to *change* them. For Wordsworth, it was folly to expect that 'an old habit will be foregone, or a new one formed, by a series of propositions, which, presenting no image to the [?mind] can convey no feeling which has any connection with the supposed archetype or fountain of the proposition existing in human life'.[44] Normative thought is empty unless it can describe the contexts from which it arises with its own necessity. Wordsworth does not tell us that such a moment of 'human life' is identical with the abstract proposition – only that there is a 'connection'. The archetype contains, but the fountain overflows.

Travel was the search for such pictures. Wordsworth's argument can be traced back to the rhetorical tradition of Renaissance and Classical Humanism. Ernesto Grassi characterized the role of the poetic in this tradition as a demonstration of the *archai* – archetypal images that cannot be obtained rationally, for they are the givens from which deduction unfolds: 'Such speech is immediately a "showing" – and for this reason "figurative" or "imaginative," and thus in the original sense theoretical [*theorein* – i.e., to see].'[45] But like Thelwall, Wordsworth also inherited a more recent search for the *archai*. Lynn Hunt has argued that the mid-eighteenth-century novel of 'sensibility' was a key source for the nascent discourse of human rights.[46] As the reader sympathized with the agonies of the marginalized, so the equal rights to bodily integrity and the human universality of feeling were established as 'self-evident'. Hunt points out that Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui's (1747) *The Principles of Natural Law* (a major influence on his fellow Genevan, Rousseau), which revived and synthesized seventeenth-century theories of natural law, had 'updated the concept' by linking it to Francis Hutcheson's notion of an 'internal moral sense'.[47] In his *Elements of Criticism* (1762), Lord Kames had famously argued for such an immediately moral aesthetic by way of literature's 'ideal presence' for the reader.

Wordsworth's attack on the 'lifeless words' of moral philosophy was by implication a call for vitally engaging and persuasive speech. But this could take a markedly subdued, rather than exhortatory form. Wordsworth's emphasis on words rather than propositions lent a 'peculiar force' to 'the most inconspicuous words',[48] as Simon Jarvis has put it, so that they become 'fundamental words'[49] – a language of implication that cannot be easily assimilated either to an 'ideal presence' of the archetype or to a transparent