POETIC/RHETORICAL *ETHOS* AND THE PERFORMATIVE POWER OF WORDS IN THE "FRENCH" BOOKS OF *THE PRELUDE*

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Abstract: Wordsworth attended revolutionary debates in Paris in 1791. As a young republican he felt unskilled in public speaking. When he later sympathized with Tory principles he extolled Burke's oratorical genius. However, he never disowned his early use of ideologically loaded words like "liberty." Wordsworth's poetic *ethos* is related to collaboration with the reader. Classical argumentation is a feature of his work, but his verse rhetoric favours the performative power of words. The notion of verbal effectiveness percolates through the sensualist reflection on language from Burke to Condillac and the Idéologues. It was also sustained by the reassessment of style in eighteenth century belletrism and rhetoric of communication. Romantic appraisal of *ethos* undercuts Aristotle's ideal of the orator's control over speech, which depends on a measure of balance between *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*. Unlike Burke's Ciceronian rhetoric and neoclassical poetics in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Wordsworth's periodic syntax in Books 9-11 of *The Prelude* is energized by words geared to deliberative-cum-poetic persuasion. Verbal echoes disseminate memorializing effects through such heterodox spots of time as the "hunger-bitten girl" episode. *Ethos* permeates the poetic *persona* and his practice of language indiscriminately, infusing words with an unprecedented combination of ethical and ideological ambiguity.

Keywords: William Wordsworth, Edmund Burke, French Revolution, liberty, rhetorical *ethos*, performative language

The rhetorical notion of *energeia* pervades renovated eloquence from Burke's philippics to Ossian's fervid orality. Pre-revolutionary British oratory is not merely an ancient practice renewed under the thrust of an emerging epistemology of language. The fiery heat which can be heard in Rousseau's voice during his doctrinaire phase meets Diderot's notion of the orator-writer in French pre-

revolutionary oratory.[1] The deliberative genre was born again during the French Revolution, when political enthusiasm for terms like "liberty" could be poetically exploited. As a young republican Wordsworth denounced Burke's anti-Jacobin rhetoric. This does not contradict his acclamation of Burke's fiery eloquence in the 1850 *Prelude*, just as Coleridge in *The Watchman* censured Burke's conservative ideology while praising his "true eloquence," which unlike declamation does not "argue by metaphors" but "reason[s] in metaphors."[2] Wordsworth attended debates at the National Assembly when he was in Paris in 1791. He never disowned his former use of such ideologically loaded words as "liberty." Did he later extol Burke's oratorical genius because in his early years he had felt "little graced with the power / Of eloquence, even in [his] native speech" (*Prelude* 10:149-50),[3] never to be lauded for his speech accomplishments? His pressing need to speak up for freedom was so strong that he begged to be inspired by some universal tongue reconciling pre-Babelian myth with the Enlightenment utopia of pure reason:

> I could almost
> Have prayed that through all earth upon all men,
> By patient exercise of reason made
> Worthy of liberty […]
> The gift of tongues might fall, and power arrive
> From the four quarters of the winds to do
> For France, what without help she could not do
>
> (10:134-41).[4]

1 Peter France, "Lumières, politesse et énergie (1750-1776)," in *Histoire de la rhétorique dans l'Europe moderne, 1450-1950*, ed. Marc Fumaroli (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 994.

2 S.T. Coleridge, "Review of Burke's *Letter to a Noble Lord*," in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 30-31 (no. 1, 1 March 1796). See Alan Vardy, "To Argue by Metaphors: Coleridge, Burke, and the Political Uses of Aesthetic Figures," *Coleridge Bulletin* 14 (Autumn 1999): 9-15.

3 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979). All quotations are from the 1850 text, cited by book and line number.

4 For discussion of this and related passages, see David Duff et al., "The 'French' Books of *The Prelude*: A Virtual Round Table," in *Wordsworth and France*, ed. David Duff, Marc Porée and Martin Procházka, *Litteraria Pragensia* 27, no. 54 (2017): 114-54.

Wordsworth's verse rhetoric favours acting out the performative power of words. The historical premises of this notion are detectable in the sensualist grounds that support reflections on language from Burke to Condillac and the Idéologues. The eighteenth-century conceptual privileging of speech-effective words also proceeded from *elocutio*, or style, being granted greater valence than *inventio* and *dispositio* in the rhetorical system.[5] By endorsing the linguistic turn, the revaluation of rhetorical *ethos* undercuts Aristotle's ideal of the orator's control over speech. Unlike Burke's Ciceronian rhetoric and neo-classical poetics in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Wordsworth's periodic syntax in Books 9-11 of *The Prelude* is energized by the deliberative impact of poetically persuasive words. Verbal echoes disseminate memorializing effects through heterodox spots of time like the "hunger-bitten girl" episode. The voicing, or *actio*, of *memoria* becomes internalized in style. Words appear to be doomed to combine ethical and ideological ambivalence in some unprecedented mode.

The Power of Words in Eighteenth-Century Rhetoric from Burke to Wordsworth

Eighteenth-century British "new rhetoric" emerged in the wake of Descartes and Locke's anti-rhetorical rational philosophy, which radicalized the issue of language while discarding Aristotle's notion of probability.[6] De Quincey's essays on rhetoric (1828) and style (1840-1841), which are the most extensive set of Romantic texts on rhetoric, meanwhile remain Aristotelian. De Quincey's extreme bellelettrism, exemplified by his idiosyncratic use of "syncopated" rhetorical periods,[7] professes to interweave style with the subtlest signs of mental activity. In his inventional *elocutio*, he claims that the grammatical interaction of words organically coheres with "ideas or feelings" in order to "brighten the *intelligibility* of a subject which is obscure to the understanding" and to "regenerate the normal *power* and impressiveness of a subject which has become dormant to the sensibilities."[8] This ideal subjective rhetoric aspires to overcome the resistance

5 In *De Inventione* Cicero synthetized the five canons of classical rhetoric: *inventio* (the art of finding appropriate arguments), *dispositio* (arrangement), *elocutio* (style), *memoria* (memory), *actio* (delivery).

6 For an overview, see Peter France, "Rhetoric," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1:496-515.

7 Eric Dayre, "Préface: idéale rhétorique," in *Thomas De Quincey: Essais sur la rhétorique, le langage, le style*, trans. Eric Dayre (Paris: José Corti, 2004), 17.

8 *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000-2003), 17:66.

inherent in the "stubborn structure of the Language" – such as is built by Los in Blake's *Jerusalem*.[9] Referring to Wordsworth, De Quincey hails Burke for not "*dress*[ing]" but "*incarnat*[ing] his thoughts in imagery."[10] His attempt to retrieve *inventio* through style suggests that rhetoric works as a return of what is repressed in the self-performing process intrinsic to Romantic language.

This originates in the failure of eighteenth-century empiricist philosophy to rationalize the function of language *vis à vis* rhetoric. Locke's censure of verbal ornament in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) makes an exception for epideictic oratory. Yet Locke's philosophical rhetoric excludes "*figurative speeches* […] in language as *an* imperfection and *abuse* of it" (III.10.34).[11] His epistemology cannot spare the ever-to-be-improved perspicuity of language striving for perfect communication between identical subjects "in a future state" (IV.17.14). Hume, who mourns the vehemence of ancient eloquence as compared with tepid modern argumentation,[12] does not theorize language per se but enrols it as an ally of imagination in the dynamics of the psychic force field, thus strengthening the grounds for what he terms the "fiction" of personal identity. The individual's private/collective reality becomes evasive even as he asserts himself. So does the speaker's eloquence when he copes with questionable language. Due to Hume's epistemological influence on Scottish rhetoricians, the new science of communication bears allegiance to the faculties of imagination and memory and to the operations of sympathy and association of ideas and feelings. George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) addresses the polite gentleman wishing to communicate his thoughts at the senate or the pulpit, in conversation or poetry – not the civic orator haranguing crowds in the forum. Rational argumentation and emotional communication are predicated on the experimental logic of sense impressions. Use of style requires perspicuity and vivacity. Vivacity encapsulates the persuasive power of aesthetics by focusing on the right choice and arrangement of words including connectives.[13]

9 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 36, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom (New York: Anchor Press, 1982).

10 Thomas De Quincey, "Elements of Rhetoric," in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, 6:177.

11 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). References to book, chapter and paragraph are in parentheses in the text. Italics added.

12 David Hume, "Of Eloquence," in David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp and Mark A. Box, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2021), 1:92-100.

13 George Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, ed. Lloyd L. Bitzer (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), 215, 384-415.

In his grammatical reduction of discourse to parts of speech in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1748), Adam Smith's remarks on proper cadence and his rejection of figures of speech are a plea for an "inventional" style that should prove apt to convey the speaker's thoughts by means of pure transparency ("the perfection of stile consists in Expressing in the most concise, proper and precise manner the thought of the author"[14]). Communication "*by sympathy*" infuses in expression "all the force and beauty language can give it,"[15] like some unmediated vivacity or *energeia*. Joseph Priestley's oratory makes the function of style as essential to aesthetic persuasion as it is inessential to rational conviction. He plans to establish "a *philosophical and universal language*, which shall be the most natural and perfect expression of human ideas and sentiments."[16] By contrast, Hugh Blair in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) relies on Locke's definition of language under Quintilian's authority and develops a syncretic view of style balancing perspicuity with ornament.[17]

In 1792 Burke admitted that "a very great part of the mischiefs that vex the world arise from words."[18] In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) he had appeared more optimistic about the power of words. Words in poetry, eloquence and conversation wield power "sometimes more strongly [than the things they represent]" because they "affect the mind by raising in it ideas of those things for which custom has appointed them to stand."[19] Burke revamps Locke's taxonomy of aggregate, simple abstract, compound abstract words. The sound of words affects hearers more than "*picture*" and "*affection* of his soul." An anti-mimetic bias prevails as Burke maximizes the sensuousness of abstract words like "honour, justice, liberty."[20] This is not Cicero's self-inflaming to inflame others,[21] but a sublime version of Smith's cool style

14 Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J.C. Bryce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 55.

15 Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, 25.

16 Joseph Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar* (1762), ed. Roy Harris (London: Routledge, 1996), 8.

17 Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. Harold P. Harding, 2 vols. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 1:387-407.

18 Edmund Burke, "Letter to Richard Burke *post* 19 February 1792," in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, gen. ed. Paul Langford, 9 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-2015), 9:647.

19 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 149.

20 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 152.

21 See Cicero, *On the Orator. Books 1-2*, trans. E.W. Sutton, H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 348 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 355 (II.XLV).

reflecting the mirror-like process of sympathy between linguistic agents. Port-Royal grammarians had contended that the meaning enclosed in words is intuited only by understanding how our thoughts work.[22] The notion runs through universal grammar from Locke and Condillac to the Idéologues. Condillac's artificial signs gain strength from the primitive "language of action"[23] made of natural cries and gestures. In Turgot's historicized system original metaphors are invented in response to sensations, giving birth to ideas, energizing the things words try to express.[24] In his wake the moderate idealism of Destutt de Tracy, who defines "Idéologie" as the "science of ideas," ascribes active force to signs. Artificial signs intensify the power of ideas to impress. Memory develops through use of words.[25]

Whether Wordsworth, who castigated "the pestilential philosophism of France" in *The Convention of Cintra* (1809),[26] had heard of the Idéologues in 1797 remains a conjecture.[27] But the Idéologues cast intriguing light upon Wilhelm von Humboldt, whom Coleridge met in Rome in 1806. Humboldt's discussion with de Tracy and Laromiguière in 1798 may have influenced his later work infusing unmediated subjectivity into Condillac's symbolic approach of the linguistic system.[28] To Humboldt the word synthetizes the relative arbitrariness of sound, the motivation of the sign and the material unifying of image and concept. It is a semiotic product of active imagination that frames thought along a historical process.[29] Coleridge's definition of the Word/*logos* as the "profoundest and most

22 See André Robinet, *Le Langage à l'âge classique* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1978), 21-28.

23 Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines*, ed. Aliénor Bertrand (Paris: Vrin, 2002), 100-104.

24 See Daniel Droixhe, *La Linguistique et l'appel de l'histoire (1600-1800)* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1978), 304-306.

25 Antoine Destutt de Tracy, *Elémens d'Idéologie*, Part 1: *Idéologie proprement dite* (Paris: Vrin, 1970), 324-26.

26 *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 1:332.

27 James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 226.

28 See Hans Aarsleff, "Humboldt and the Idéologues," in *La Grammaire générale: Des Modistes aux Idéologues*, ed. André Joly et Jean Stéfanini (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1977), 225-33.

29 See Jürgen Trabant, "La critique de l'arbitraire du signe chez Condillac et Humboldt," in *Les Idéologues: Sémiotique, théories et politiques linguistiques pendant la Révolution française*, ed. Winfried Busse and Jürgen Trabant (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 73-96.

comprehensive Energy of the human mind"[30] transcendentalizes Humboldt's *energeia*, postulating a subjective language whose words will be transmuted into "living Things"[31] by some absolute performative power. Wordsworth never endorsed such a linguistic ideal. He mourns the "sad incompetence of human speech" (*Prelude* 6:593). Words, which are "too awful an instrument of good and evil to be trifled with" because they at least portend *ethos*, must achieve "an incarnation of thought." Language, being the trope of nature's vital harmony, must "uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravity or the air we breathe."[32]

Placing Ethos in (Proto-)Romantic Rhetoric

Aristotle's rhetorical *ethos* is the most powerful persuasive tool. It is more than the *ethos* of animals affected by passions that can acquire habits of the soul,[33] less than ethical virtues implying the ability to make ethical choices. Yet it is connected to them, especially through the civic passions which the prudent, benevolent orator who is no mystifier but does manipulate in order to arouse pain and pleasure in the audience.[34] *Ethos* partakes of reason. It makes hearers amenable to the argumentative force of *logos*. Cicero's *ethos* of sympathy[35] and Quintilian's quiet emotions of *ethos* set against the violence of *pathos*[36] weakened the ontological aspect of *ethos* that manifests itself in the orator's repute and assures his credibility. Augustine initiated the Christian tradition of *ethos* based on divine calling and meditation on the Holy Scriptures.[37] After the Renaissance revival of Cicero's ideal of active oratory, an *ethos* of evidence gained ground in the seventeenth-century discourses of Protestant faith, of Cartesian rationality and of

30 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols. (London: Routledge, 2002), 2:2445.

31 *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1:626.

32 William Wordsworth, "Essay Upon Epitaphs III," *Prose Works*, 2:85.

33 See Frédérique Woerther, *L'*èthos *aristotélicien: Genèse d'une notion rhétorique* (Paris: Vrin, 2007), 138.

34 See Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 110-12 (1377b-1378a).

35 See Jakob Wisse, *'Èthos' and 'Pathos' from Aristotle to Cicero* (Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert, 1989), 72-74.

36 Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, trans. H.E. Butler, 4 vols, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985-1993), 2:209-10 (VI.2.9).

37 George Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Traditions from Ancient to Modern Times* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 157.

empiricist sensibility.[38] In eighteenth-century Britain only John Ward, in *A System of Oratory* (1759), maintains the *vir bonus dicendi peritus* (good man skilled in the art of speaking) tenet. Priestley ignores *ethos*. To Campbell character should be ingrained in the preacher more than in "the senator, or the speaker at the bar."[39] Blair values "solid argument" and "clear method" above "a character of probity."[40] In line with Locke, Condillac, de Tracy and Humboldt's belief that "each individual has his own language,"[41] *ethos* to Smith is what a man's style makes him appear – from Swift's "hardness" to Shaftesbury's "laboured regularity."[42] The Idéologues' anti-rhetoric condemned the abuse of words in revolutionary eloquence at the Assembly, where universal language was expected to abolish the oratorical privileges of courtiers over peasants who spoke *patois*.[43] But Burke's character of sound judgement and good will in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) appeals to the spirit of the gentleman in the tradition of Cato the Censor.[44]

In the 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth places poetry under Aristotle's *aegis*. The poetic speaker's *ethos* ("a man speaking to men"[45]) is defined in philosophically democratic terms. His superior genius makes him a natural guide. His ethical proof lies, as Wordsworth explains elsewhere, in his ability to exert "a co-operating *power* in the mind of the Reader," who is either a slave to animal stupor or a despot ("Can he make progress […] like an Indian prince […] stretched on his palanquin?"[46]).

Eloquence to Wordsworth, as to Burke, depends on the speaker's *ethos*. Both resort to classical *elocutio*. In the *Reflections* the "*chorographic*" description of the country of France under the *ancien régime* is developed along the sweeping rhythm of an irregular periodic sentence:[47]

38 Roland Barthes, "L'ancienne rhétorique," *Communications* 16 (1970): 192.

39 Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 99.

40 Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1784), ed. Harold F. Harding, 2 vols. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 2:5.

41 Hans Aarsleff, "Wordsworth, Language, and Romanticism," *Essays in Criticism* 30, no. 3 (1980): 219.

42 Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, 38.

43 Aurelio Principato, "L'éloquence révolutionnaire: idéologie et légende," in *Histoire de la rhétorique dans l'Europe moderne, 1450-1950*, ed. Marc Fumaroli (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 1022.

44 F.P. Lock, *Burke's* Reflections on the Revolution in France (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 130-31.

45 William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," *Prose Works*, 1:138.

46 William Wordsworth, "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface," *Prose Works*, 3:81-82.

47 See F.P. Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, 2006), 2:327-28.

> When I consider the face of the kingdom of France, the multitude and opulence of her cities, the useful magnificence of her spacious high-roads and bridges […] when I recollect how very small a part of that extensive region is without cultivation […] when I reflect on the excellence of her manufactures and fabrics […] when I reckon the men she has bred for extending her fame in war, her able statesmen, the multitude of her profound lawyers and theologians, her philosophers, her critics, her historians and antiquaries, her poets, and her orators sacred and profane, I behold in all this something which awes and commands the imagination, which checks the mind on the brink of precipitate and indiscriminate censure, and which demands that we should very seriously examine, what and how great are the latent vices that should authorize us at once to level so spacious a fabric to the ground.[48]

Protracted *protasis* and *antapodosis* depend on the overwhelming use of *isocola* energized by the speaker's gradual apprehension of the frieze, from perception to memory and meditation, up to an acme of sublime vision in the *apodosis*.[49] The ethical irony of the *clausula* mimics the danger of tearing down such beautiful order.

Similarly, in his *ethopoeic* praise of the "Genius of Burke!" (*Prelude* 7:512),[50] the Wordsworthian speaker's ethical self-reflexiveness becomes intense. The poet trained in ancient eloquence who as a youth vilified the Old Whig orator[51] is now heroized. The prose-like style of the *protasis*, whose *pathos* arises from the parallel with the second apostrophe including the present speaker ("Rapt auditors!" 7:517), is perfectly balanced by the *apodosis*, which pays tribute to Burke's philosophy of social contract based on custom and liberty constrained by obedience and duty. The surprise effect of the *clausula* stems from setting the youth against mythic times. In the *ekphrasis* of Burke as an oak, *evidentia* legitimates the organic naturalness of English political principles hallowed by time. An *ethos* of authority to future generations arises from his voice's legendary power to silence murmurs of protests from false rationalists, just as Æolos chained contrary winds; or from the virtue of his words, as effulgent as bright-shielded Athena, or

48 *Writings and Speeches of Burke*, 8:179-80.

49 *Protasis*, *antapodosis* and *apodosis* are the names of the first three members of a rhetorical period. *Isocolon* refers to use of members ('*cola*') of equal length.

50 This passage was added to *The Prelude* in 1832. In his unpublished "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff" (1793), Wordsworth supported republican freedom and castigated Burke's counterrevolutionary stance. The poet's mature admiration for Burke's oratorical genius coheres with his own conservative turn.

51 William Wordsworth, "A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff," *Prose Works* 1:35-36, 49.

Abdiel "armd in Adamant and Gold" claiming Truth against Satan's "Reason […] / Unsound and false":[52]

> I – see him, – old, but vigorous in age, –
> Stand like an oak whose stag-horn branches start
> Out of its leafy brow, the more to awe
> The younger brethren of the grove. But some
> While he forewarns, denounces, launches forth,
> Against all systems built on abstract rights,
> Keen ridicule; […]
> Declares the vital power of social ties
> Endeared by Custom; […]
> Some – say at once a froward multitude –
> Murmur (for truth is hated, where not loved)
> As the winds fret within the Æolian cave,
> Galled by their monarch's chain. The times were big
> With ominous change, […]
> But memorable moments intervened,
> When Wisdom, like the Goddess from Jove's brain,
> Broke forth in armour of resplendent words,
> Startling the Synod. Could a youth, and one
> In ancient story versed, whose breast had heaved
> Under the weight of classic eloquence,
> Sit, see, and hear, unthankful, uninspired?
>
> (*Prelude* 7:519-43)

By imitating Burke's eloquent periodic style, the poetic speaker achieves his own transmutation from ideological bewilderment to inspirited speech, exalting his energized voice above visionary power.

Poetical Oratory as Ethical Style: Ideological Integration of Memory within Discourse and the "Sublime" Performativity of Words

Throughout *The Prelude memoria* fuels the "sublime" performativity of words, making poetic oratory equal to ethical style. Books 9-11 might be deemed most rhetorical because of their political issues, yet the deliberative genre is interlaced

[52] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2020), 133 (6:110-22).

with self-judicial verse. Thematized rhetoric underpins narrative strategy. During his first crisis of moral despair the speaker in a dreamlike scene personifies a befuddled defendant who stands up for hundreds of victims of the Terror sent to their death in the sacred name of liberty ("the unbroken dream entangled me / In long orations, which I strove to plead / Before unjust tribunals," 10:410-12). In the post-Godwin crisis he embodies a vengeful prosecutor questioning social philosophy, "Dragging all precepts, judgement, maxims, creeds, / Like culprits to the bar […] demanding formal *proof*" (11:296-303). Because of this relentless intellectual foraging he loses "all feeling of conviction" (11:304), but the solution to the crisis has been pre-empted by the optative statement just before: "I wished that Man / Should […] spread abroad the wings of Liberty, / Lord of himself" (11:250-54).

One major issue at stake in the books on France consists in overturning the ideological meaning of the word "liberty." Ambivalent notes on eloquence are scattered throughout *The Prelude*. The casuistic rapture of preachers (7:544-72) and soporific "words [that] follow words" of senators (7:508) are set in contrast to the "bewitching words" (14:400) of Coleridge's "gorgeous eloquence" (6:295). The poet is not deceived by the "wond'rous power of words, by simple faith / Licensed to take the meaning that we love!" (7:119-20), nor by the "syllogistic words" he uses in rationalistic self-dispute (12:84). Some words of poesy once "sweet / For their own *sakes*, a passion, a power" (5:555-56) have lost their charm. Still "Mighty Poets" retain "the Visionary power […] / Embodied in the mystery of words" (5:595-97). "Forms and substance" flash through their verse "with glory not their own" (5:605), evidencing divine truth. Such spiritual embodiments achieve the "noble employment [of] fitting words to things."[53] The inadequacy of language may also be reversed, as Wordsworth states in a note to "The Thorn" ("Repetition and apparent tautology are frequent beauties of the highest kind [because they testify to] the interest which the mind attaches to words as *things*, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion"[54]): such is the case with Martha Ray's "'Woe is me!'" The power of repetition imaginatively halts the passing of discursive time. It points to the memorializing efficacy of poetic language when it combines ethical and pathetic proofs to reveal higher logical sense.

The energy of Coleridge's "radical ideal of performativity"[55] seeks to coalesce words and spirit since it is inspired by the biblical Logos and by Christ's speech-acts.

53 William Wordsworth, "Essay on Morals," *Prose Works*, 1:103.

54 *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Routledge, 2005), 333.

55 Angela Esterhammer, *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romantic Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 156. See also 155-69.

By contrast, Wordsworth's performatives pertain to human language. But they differ from Austin's utterances performing action, or from Habermas's sociological performativity aiming at felicitous communication, because all Romantic performatives are predicated on a self-performative language projected as a creative ideal. The stone/Euclid's elements and shell/ode in the Arab-Quixote dream (5:86-98) do not exemplify Coleridge's symbolic translucence, yet they dramatize a case of Lockian semantic disjunction redeemed by poetic *evidentia*. The power of words does not derive from social overdetermination. The democratic simplicity of "low and rustic life [whose] essential passions of the heart [make them] speak a plainer and more emphatic language"[56] ultimately refers to some universal natural style. Sublime performativity belongs to "Men […] / Expressing liveliest thoughts in lively words / As nature passion dictates" more than to "minds whose faculties are […] / Most active when they are most eloquent, / And elevated most when most admired," although less than to silent men to whom "Words are but underagents in their souls" (13:258-73).

Burke's description of the American colony in his *Speech on American Taxation* (1774) pertains to the first category of such orators. The speech illustrates the performative power of his ideology of liberty grounded in order, virtue, peace and propriety. The incantatory use of anaphora fuses the notion of moral-*cum*-physical propriety with the mystique of political freedom pervading the ancient British constitution, which America, being England's daughter, is entitled to:

> She had, except the commercial restraint, every characteristic mark of a free people in all her internal concerns. She had the image of the British constitution. She had the substance […]. She had in effect the sole disposal of her own internal government. This whole state of commercial servitude and civil liberty taken together, is certainly not perfect freedom; but comparing it with the ordinary circumstances of human nature, it was an happy and a liberal condition.[57]

According to Burke's *Reflections* English liberties are an "*entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers," the substratum of some "eternal society" setting up a "primeval contract" between the dead, the living and the unborn.[58] This is echoed in Wordsworth's statement about "One great society alone on earth, / The noble living and the noble dead" (11:393-94). Here Burke's words are haloed in

[56] Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," 124.
[57] *Writings and Speeches of Burke*, 2:429.
[58] *Writings and Speeches of Burke*, 8:83, 147.

a poetic aura that makes them almost persuasive *per se*. Yet his prose relies on a solid syntactical architectonics that frustrates the aesthetic. By contrast, Wordsworth's claim in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that poetic numbers are akin to good prose blurs the classical distinction between *soluta oratio* or conversational prose[59] and *oratio vincta* or rhythmical prose.[60] It favours the free-floating efficacy of words. The semantic depth of discourse disrupted by memorializing effects works against the syntactic surface structure. In *The Prelude* the reduplication of such loaded terms as "liberty" both achieves linguistic performativity and reflects the poet's ambivalent deliberative *ethos*.

Wordsworth's oratory reaches beyond de Tracy's linguistic subjectivity, which calls upon Rousseau's idea of language as a social institution.[61] This type of ideology dissociated from the enunciator and infused in speech to legitimize the political valence of language emerged along eighteenth-century modes of liberation from linguistic arbitrariness.[62] The classical *energeia* of words internalizes *ethos* and wields mnemonic power. Meaning shifts between individual and collective frames of reference. Personal freedom inscribes history, politics and ethics within nature *qua* ideology. *The Prelude* opens with "Dear Liberty" (1:32) as the speaker's body feels invigorated by the heavenly breeze. Book 14 reaches an apex when the "genuine liberty" (14:132) of his creative conscience is revealed. The political books first portray his youthful animal freedom ("Free as a colt," 11:22), a primal energy inspiriting his move to France. This "magisterial liberty to rove" (3:372) is sweetly socialized when he attends the twilight "Dances of liberty" (6:371) in pastoral France in 1790. The poet becomes a patriot who associates the Republic with natural piety and "mountain liberty" (9:237). As late as September 1792 he names the victorious battlefield of Valmy "the plains of Liberty" (10:15) clearing the Earth from slaughter forever. Physical freedom is displaced to politics when he "freely live[s] / With […] defenders of the Crown" (9:194-95). Beaupuy's martyrdom "fighting in supreme command […] / For liberty" (9:424-26) is a misprision: the noble Christian officer who discussed Enlightenment abstractions ("rational liberty," 9:395) died in revolutionary conquest wars. "Liberty" with a capital 'L' is then used in self-defence against politicians like Robespierre who adorn it with "triumphal pomp" (10:496) but commit atrocities

59 Cicero, *Brutus*, 32, in *Brutus*. *Orator*, trans. G.L. Hendrickson and H.M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939), 40.

60 Quintilian, *Orator's Education*, 3:516 (IX.4.19).

61 Aarsleff, "Wordsworth, Language, and Romanticism," 219.

62 See William Keach, *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), especially 1-22 (Chapter 1) and 23-45 (Chapter 2).

in its name, "[f]org[etting] that such a sound was ever heard / As Liberty upon earth" (10:377-78).

Ideological reversibility – congruent with the unethical valence of political language – culminates in the nationalistic issue setting France against Britain as alternative champions of freedom, from February 1793 when "with open war / Britain opposed the liberties of France" (11:174-75) to 1804 when Britain at war with Napoleon was "this last spot of Earth / Where Freedom […] / St[ood] single in her one sanctuary" (11:399-400). What of the speaker's semantic arbitrariness while he wishes "that Man / Should start out of his earthly, worm-like state, / And spread abroad the wings of Liberty, / Lord of himself" (11:251-54)? In these lines he shapes a sublime character for himself – quite a self-complacent ethical mask fitting the rhetorical theatricality of allegorical personification as well as the axiological ambivalence of "Nature" ("I pursued what seemed / A more exalted nature," 11:250-51). *A contrario*, the hypotyposis of the hunger-bitten girl episode ambiguously dramatizes apolitical oppression, while interiorizing the persuasive memorial echoes of the speaker's ethical voice into the imaginative performative power of syntactical disruption. The "hunger-bitten girl" stands against "the painted Magdelene of Le Brun, / A beauty exquisitely wrought, with hair / Dishevelled; gleaming eyes […] bedropped with overflowing tears" (9:78-81), whom the speaker relishes in indulgent aesthetic contemplation. Here visual experience produces an anti-*ekphrasis* humbly ennobled by a Homeric epithet anticipating the seminal spot of time of "the girl, who bore a pitcher on her head" (12:251). It promotes a visionary sketch soon reset in political context by Beaupuy:

> And when we chanced
> One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl,
> Who crept along fitting her languid gait
> Unto a heifer's motion, by a cord
> Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
> Its sustenance, while the girl with pallid hands
> Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
> Of solitude, and at the sight my friend
> In agitation said, "'Tis against that
> That we are fighting"
>
> (9:509-18).

Yet portraiture partly belies revolutionary inference, although her "pallid hands […] busy knitting in a heartless mood of solitude" denote utter mental and physical misery. For through the zeugma effect of the rejet-*cum*-enjambment

blurring the relation of dependency between girl and heifer, the starving female seems to be bound to the better-fed animal. Could the girl passively "fitting her languid gait / Unto [the] heifer's motion" be construed, in double irony, as a personal figure of liberty along Burkean tenets of natural freedom, a pathetic counterpart to the paradigmatic "freeman" extolled in the semi-abstract shepherd of Book 8 (253)? The self-reflexive control of poetic *ethos* concurs with the "fabulous retroactivity"[63] of the performative in such heterodox spots of time as the hunger-bitten girl episode, inscribing the process analysed in Freud's essay "Recollection, Repetition and Working Through" (1914) within language.[64] Political ideology may be aestheticized through some novel performative rhetoricity, however tentative the speaker's desire to ethicize the power of his words.

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63 Esterhammer, *Romantic Performative*, 16. The phrase "rétroactivité fabuleuse" is borrowed from Jacques Derrida in *Otobiographies: L'enseignement de Nietzsche et la politique du nom propre* (Paris: Galilée, 1984), 22.

64 Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psychoanalysis II)," trans. Joan Riviere, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 12, ed. James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1958), 147-56. In this essay Freud contends that the acting out of past events by means of an ideational repetition of memories, if properly worked through along the analytical cure, may overcome the pathological resistance that patients elaborate in defence of suppressed traumas. One could suggest that in *The Prelude* the retroactivity of performative words like "liberty" contributes to the acting out of the memorializing process – although whether such verbal repetitions achieve anything more than some poetical *catharsis* of past traumas remains a moot point.

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