
Wordsworth's Radical Aesthetics

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Abstract: This article focuses on the aesthetics of William Wordsworth's work, particularly his early poetry. The implications of this investigation are far-reaching.¹ To learn about Wordsworth's aesthetics is to learn about Romanticism, specifically what I call *radical Romanticism* and the intricate relation it forges between aesthetics and democracy.² I begin the article with a general account of radical aesthetics, addressing its nature, scope, and its relation to the normative, the political, and the everyday. Next, I turn to the radical aesthetics of Wordsworth. I then compare radical aesthetics to more traditional accounts of aesthetics, and I conclude by connecting radical Romantic aesthetics to practical power.

Keywords: democratic theory; ethics; aesthetics; Wordsworth; romanticism.

Radical Aesthetics

What makes *radical aesthetics* radical? It is radical in at least two, interrelated ways. It is radical insofar as it seeks to promote progressive, normative perspectives. And it is radical insofar as it is an aesthetics that is broad in scope (for example, its subject matter is not limited to the portraits of the museum or to the picturesque of the landscape). Its normative, progressive sensibilities include everyday justice and injustice and its aesthetic sensibilities include everyday experiences. So, the scope of radical aesthetics is as likely to pertain to the homeless population on the city streets as to the sunset over Mount Blanc. In the manner of Wordsworth (as we will soon see) radical aesthetics embraces the everyday, bringing careful, critical attention to what is in plain sight and what is hidden or concealed, and all the while offering an appropriate moral, political, and affective response to the social and natural quotidian world around us.

Radical aesthetics, I have claimed, is located in the everyday, and therefore it is also situated at the intersection of those spheres that are often named political and moral. In our everyday lives, these spheres usually intermingle in various ways. Radical aesthetics acknowledges this dynamic amalgam and does not seek to impose artificial disciplinary categories that distort our everyday experience. Art itself is often located in its own category separate from the political and the moral. Insofar as this is the case, radical aesthetics rejects these imposed boundaries. Additionally, radical aesthetics acknowledges and embraces the intricate, transactional relation between the social and natural world—between the cultural materiality of language, practices, and institutions and the dynamic

processes of land, sea, and sky. In particular, the art of the word can be understood as both a spiritual project engaged with a material universe and as a material project engaged with a spiritual universe. But rather than employ such binary terms as spiritual-material, think of the art of the word—in the context of radical aesthetics—as a profoundly human project engaged normatively with the familiar and unfamiliar world in which we find ourselves.

Radical aesthetics seeks to imagine what it would be like to *taste*—to experience morally—the world in novel ways, especially in ways that are receptive to seeing and hearing and sensing beauty and generosity, pain and injustice in the otherwise familiar (perhaps too familiar) events, places, practices, traditions, and institutions that shape our lives. In order to focus on the everyday, radical aesthetics seeks to lift “the veil of familiar”—all those patterns of thought, sight, and practice that would render invisible and voiceless those creatures, human or non-human, that lack power or agency to make their needs and desires apparent. Radical aesthetics interrogates and illuminates how the world appears to us and how it could (and *should*) appear, and focuses on the disjunction between the two. This critical, creative work requires a tutored moral imagination and the cultivation of an ethically penetrating sight, or as I will soon call, a *democratic taste*.

The *scope* of radical aesthetics is as expansive as its *engagement* is deep and demanding. In this article, I explore how the art of Wordsworth seeks to cultivate an ethical, democratic taste that entails our senses, emotions, judgment, and intellect. It seeks to nurture within us a particular kind of bodily-cognitive response to the everyday that surrounds us. So, although Wordsworth is deploying a particular form of aesthetics—the art of the written word—the intent of his art is to broaden our aesthetic response to the world and not only to his art or to that of more traditional artistic forms. The appropriate aesthetic responses to our everyday experiences require much from us in the way of moral, emotional, cognitive, and bodily sensitivity and attunement. And the cultivation of such “appropriate aesthetic responses” is the work of radical aesthetics.

A robust aesthetic response, I have noted, entails cognition, bodily senses, emotion, and moral judgment or discernment. Radical aesthetics seeks to cultivate a fully *engaged* and *attuned* response to the natural and social worlds. Such engagement and attunement move people to delight in and decry the world in appropriate ways. There is nothing passive about this aesthetic response, though a high premium is placed on *receptivity*—or what Wordsworth called, “wise passivity.” The radical aesthetic re-

sponse is in part cognitive, because one needs to know something about the world to respond appropriately to the work of art or slice of life. For example, one needs to know something about poverty and farming to be appropriately *moved*—transformed—by Wordsworth's verse about unjust enclosures. But the aesthetic response entails more than the cognitive. The response is spiritual insofar as "spiritual" suggests that the whole person is called upon—that is, the integration of one's emotional life, bodily senses, moral judgment, and cognitive faculties.

For radical Romantics like Wordsworth, to be moved or transformed (however modestly) by a work of art is to experience the world differently and also to engage with the world differently. Unlike more traditional aesthetics, in which the viewer quietly gazes upon the artwork or landscape for the sake of disinterested enjoyment (akin to "the male gaze"), in radical aesthetics "the viewer" in fact becomes an active, normative *witness* to the world and in turn seeks to transform the world, working for political change and conditions congenial to a progressive democracy that honors the dignity of persons and seeks to abolish oppressive institutions and hierarchies. Radical aesthetics, then, far from separating the viewer from the everyday, seeks to fully engage its participants in the world around them, and that broad, aesthetic engagement includes a wide range of emotional, bodily, intellectual, and political responses.

Later in this article, I will contrast "traditional" to "radical" aesthetics. For now, however, it is important to underscore that radical aesthetics, unlike traditional aesthetics, embraces both "the moral" and "the practical" or "the useful." That is to say, radical aesthetics is unabashedly aligned with such normative projects as social justice. Those are practical projects. Moreover, radical aesthetics—unlike more conventional aesthetics—embraces "the useful." For example, rather than encourage the disinterested gaze on the picturesque landscape, radical aesthetics urges a useful, practical relation to the land: it endeavors to reveal the complex interactions among humans (including social and economic institutions), non-humans, and the ecosystems in which they cohabitate.

By explicitly acknowledging the moral and practical dimensions of aesthetics, radical aesthetics rejects most notions of "the disinterested gaze." The relation between aesthetics and "the disinterested gaze" has a long and complicated history. Conventional aesthetics has frequently held that the object of art, similar to that of science, should be approached with objective disinterest. This distanced, contemplative approach was deemed the ideal lest the viewer have an unduly subjective or utilitarian approach to the work of art. Kant, for example, argued that we must approach art free of personal motivation or self-interest, never utilizing art as a means to an end. How else are we to see the art for what it is as opposed to what we want it to be for our own sake and ends? And how else are we to produce impartial, universal aesthetic judgments, if not by eliminating personal preference, desire, and goals? While there are strengths to this line of argument (namely, placing a high value on our *receptiveness* to that which is outside us), conventional aesthetics has paid dearly in espousing the disinterested gaze. By separating art from *interest*—from involvement,

concern, desire, commitment, and love—art became divorced from ethics and politics. Of course, many have justifiably questioned whether aesthetics could ever in fact be disinterested. Feminists, for example, have charged that the so-called ideal disinterested viewer is in fact the interested male voyeur, gazing on the female nude with a sanctioned yet hidden desire. In contrast to the ideal of the "disinterested" in conventional aesthetics, radical aesthetics promotes an aesthetics of active engagement, attunement, and moral critique.

Wordsworthian Radical Aesthetics

Wordsworth believed in the social and political power of the well-crafted word. In a letter written in 1829, Wordsworth wrote, "Words are not a mere vehicle, but they are powers either to kill or to animate."³ This is a powerful claim, one that he took seriously. The living power of a word can palpably contribute to life or to death. Wordsworth dedicated his poetic aesthetics to life.⁴ He hoped that his radical aesthetics would contribute to the cultivation of *democratic, aesthetic taste*, employing the term *taste* in its literal meaning to refer to our capacity to experience the world normatively. When democratic taste has been suitably cultivated, one will see, feel and apprehend the drama of life in a distinctive way. One will, for example, be empathetic toward those who are crushed by social and economic oppression and work for change. The characters whom Wordsworth portrayed in his early years were often located at the periphery of society—the homeless, the impoverished, the disabled, the beggar, the wounded soldier. He portrayed them vividly so that we might see and feel their hopes and fears, their accomplishments and losses. We glimpse their humanity and in turn discover our own. This is a profound aesthetic and democratic achievement: to help citizens experience (to *taste*—to see, feel, hear, and be touched by) the dignity of fellow citizens, even those that many deemed to be lowly or dangerously "other." The aim of Wordsworth's radical aesthetics can be summed up as his various poetic efforts to make the audience see "souls that appear to have no depth at all/To vulgar eyes."⁵

An example of this effort to lend us sight to see the depth of "the other" is his 1802 sonnet, "The Banished Negroes."⁶ In the summer of 1802, Napoleon had reintroduced slavery and instituted an ordinance that effectively expelled all people of color from France ("aucun noir, mulâtre, ou autres gens de couleur, de l'un et de l'autre sexe").⁷ At the end of that summer, William and Dorothy Wordsworth traveled from Calais to Dover. A "Fellow-passenger" on their ship was a black woman who had been banished from France. As the headnote (added to the 1827 version of the sonnet) stated, "Among the capricious acts of tyranny that disgraced those times, was the chasing of all Negroes from France by decree of the government: we had a Fellow-passenger who was one of the expelled."⁸

The sonnet was important to Wordsworth. He returned to the poem, pondering and revising it, seven times throughout his career (in 1820, 1827, 1836, 1838, 1840, 1843, and 1845). It was one of his most significant at-

tempts to present the dignity and humanity of one who, for various reasons, is invisible to those with power, privilege, and membership in the majority culture. In this case, Wordsworth presented a black woman—a newly displaced refugee—to his fellow travelers. Much of the democratic and normative work of the sonnet is done within the first three lines: “*We had a fellow-Passenger that came/From Calais with us.../A negro woman.*” Here two subjects are placed in a complex relation. On one side there is the *we*—we, William and Dorothy; we, the other passengers; we, the white majority culture of the British nation; we, the readers of the sonnet. On the other side is the solitary black woman. These two sides appear asymmetrical and perhaps unequal: one black woman up against multiple spheres of whiteness. Yet within the sonnet’s first four words, such asymmetry and potential inequality are troubled by the mediating term, *fellow-Passenger*. Wordsworth places the woman among the *we*. She belongs to us, and we to her. Wordsworth’s inclusion, however, has not erased difference. He acknowledges both the diversity that the woman embodies as well as her status as fellow traveler—as fellow human. This democratic move is accomplished by the employment of one of Wordsworth’s more powerful aesthetic strategies: to reveal the unfamiliar in the familiar and the familiar in the unfamiliar. In this familiar event, the crossing from Calais to Dover, we are given sight to see the unfamiliar—this black displaced woman. At the same time, however, “careless eyes” are helped to perceive the familiar in this unfamiliar event—a fellow human being with depth of soul. In the face of her tangible presence, we experience both otherness and commonality.

After several attempts to convey the presence of this woman as both a familiar and unfamiliar fellow traveler—“like a Lady gay/Yet silent,” “from notice turning not away” yet “motionless in eyes and face”—Wordsworth concludes the sonnet with explicit social criticism:

She was a Negro Woman driv’n from France
Rejected like all others of that race,
Not one of whom may now find footing there;
What is the meaning of this ordinance?
Dishonour’d Despots, tell us if you dare.⁹

When the poem was published in 1802, abolitionists in Britain were putting pressure on Parliament to end the Transatlantic Slave Trade. That same year, Napoleon had reintroduced slavery to Haiti, having captured and imprisoned Toussaint L’Ouverture, the former slave and the leader of the Haitian independence movement. With “The Banished Negroes” (and other sonnets written in 1802), Wordsworth allied himself with the abolitionists. His headnote and concluding lines express a clear political statement. I want to argue, however, that the political and democratic work is not done only in these direct statements. Indeed, most of the work is accomplished in the sonnet’s earlier lines in which the black woman is presented. We look into her eyes and her humanity, and we witness our own. Through an act of the moral imagination, we see what was once invisible to us. Our eyes are no longer as careless as they once were. We have new sight. And to the extent that our recognition of humans has grown, so has our humanity.

Wordsworth’s radical aesthetics, while often motivated by explicit democratic commitments and reasoned principles, engages with proper nouns that make claims on our lives—particular communities, people, places, and things. This is not a sign of anti-intellectualism. But as the 1790s progressed, Wordsworth became increasingly suspicious of the abstract—of things and ideas not rooted in the concreteness of time and space. This accounts for his eventual frustration with the abstract and impersonal nature of William Godwin’s political philosophy. Godwin had argued that people would inevitably become illuminated by the ways of reason, and that the reformer’s job was to help that enlightenment along, promoting impersonal truth and justice over private attachments and whim. Godwin offered the promised outcomes of the French Revolution without its violence. Godwin’s alternative was timely and attractive for Wordsworth. Nonetheless, as the *Prelude* movingly documents, Wordsworth’s faith in Godwin’s philosophy was short-lived. Godwin’s sanguine confidence in abstract reason, his strict impersonalism, and perhaps even his atheism, became obstacles to a Wordsworth who had put so much stock in the importance of concrete relations among people and place—in “a motion and a spirit, that...rolls through all things.”¹⁰

An example of Wordsworth’s expressed doubts about abstract “systems” of thought (as compared to concrete, aesthetic ones) is found in his 1798 “Essay on Morals”:

I know no book or system of moral philosophy written with sufficient power to melt into our affections, to incorporate itself with the blood and vital juices of our minds...Bald and naked reasonings are impotent over our habits; they cannot form them; from the same cause they are equally powerless in regulating our judgments concerning the value of men and things. They contain no picture of human life.¹¹

This passage reveals what Wordsworth took to be the purpose and the high stakes of a radical aesthetics. It was to be practical. It was to move and change people. It was to reach deep into the hearts and minds of citizens and produce new habits, new political emotions, new ways of being. It was to present a robust “picture of human life.”

Wordsworth’s suspicion of the abstract suggests not only his distance from Godwin but also his proximity to Burke. In his 1789 “Letter to Charles-Jean-François Depont” Burke wrote, “You have *theories* enough concerning the rights of men... It is with man in the *concrete*, it is with common human life and human actions you are to be concerned.”¹² Wordsworth’s complaint about Godwin’s abstract rationalism resembled Burke’s critique of the French Revolution’s faith in the Temple of Reason. Unlike Godwin, and like Burke, Wordsworth did not disdain the inevitable role of social traditions, habits, practices, and institutions. He did not spurn the idea of communities and individuals being rooted concretely in time and place. Not surprisingly, then, in Wordsworth’s verse and in Burke’s prose we find much reference to experience and history, to tradition and lived practice. In this regard, Wordsworth stood opposed to Godwin and alongside Burke. Wordsworth shared with Burke the conviction that places inexorably shape communities and their members. Unlike Burke, however, Wordsworth also held that the reverse is true: that *the people* shape a place. True, Burke

did believe that *some* of the people, namely the elite, have or should have the power to shape and guide their communities. But Burke would not ascribe such agency to the common people—to the “unthinking public.”¹³ In contrast, the early Wordsworth believed in and conveyed the agency of the people and their capacity to engage wisely with their environments.

In Wordsworth’s poetry, certainly in the *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Prelude*, we see attempts to bring together Burke’s emphasis on tradition and custom with Godwin’s emphasis on reason and principles. Wordsworth was suspicious of both reason divorced from experience and experience detached from reason (critical, reflective thought). Like Burke, Wordsworth came to distrust abstract theories that hovered free of history or experience. Yet like Godwin, Wordsworth valued critical reflection and reasoned principles.

In the *Prelude*, for example, Wordsworth mocked the idea of reason severed from time and place:

How Glorious!—in self-knowledge and self-rule
To look through all the frailties of the world,
And, with a resolute mastery shaking off
The accidents of nature, time, and place,
That make up the weak being of the past,
Build social freedom on its only basis:
The freedom of the individual mind,
Which, to the blind restraint of general laws
Superior, magisterially adopts
One guide—the light of circumstances, flashed
Upon an independent intellect.¹⁴

This passage, surely taking aim at Godwin’s rationalism, lampoons the idea that public well-being and freedom can be achieved by means of a rationality detached from experience—from tradition, history, and local practices and conditions (“accidents of nature, time, and place”). Yet, wanting to be charitable toward Godwin and others who put their hope in “human reason’s naked self,” Wordsworth went on to claim that many have come, for good reason, to distrust tradition and practice because of the way these have been conceived by conservatives who refuse to reform customs and laws even when circumstances (such as unjust practices and policies) clearly dictate that change is needed. He noted that the French Revolution, in spite of its flaws, had nonetheless lifted “a veil” and “a shock had then been given/ To old opinions...” Yet many, in the name of “ancient institutions,” refused to acknowledge what the Revolution had revealed: the sight of human suffering and need for change.¹⁵ Here Wordsworth was no longer taking aim at Godwin but rather at Burke and all other traditionalists who had given “tradition” and “second nature” a bad name. The challenge for Wordsworth, ultimately, was to employ a Burkean language of traditions, habits, and virtues in service of a Godwinian democratic vision.

The early Wordsworth understood democracy not only as a set of formal political institutions but rather as a progressive culture or spiritual ethos that included the thought, skills, practices, dispositions, and emotions of diverse citizens. Wordsworth was committed to advancing an *embodied democracy* that emphasized the cultural dimensions of a democracy, including its religious and

aesthetic ones. To achieve this goal, he sought to educate the *whole* person, rather than discursively addressing only the disembodied mind.

Wordsworth maintained that progressive political principles, such as those of Godwin, require more than abstract assent; they require the cultivation of humane taste, politically robust emotions, and a truly democratic second nature. Wordsworthian radical aesthetics, then, should be understood as a powerful way to *touch*—to move, engage, and transform—individuals for the sake of social progress. The Romantic poem, in this view, is an institution, potentially as powerful as the church, capable of shaping and training individuals and communities in the ways of justice. The well-crafted poem is the Fourth Estate: felicitous power outside official state, clerical, and economic forces. The well-crafted poem participates in what Ralph Waldo Emerson called “the true romance which the world exists to realize...the transformation of genius into practical power.”¹⁶

Radical Aesthetics in Light of Traditional Aesthetics

Radical aesthetics departs in notable ways from what is commonly associated with aesthetics. Radical aesthetics does not insist on the traditional, Kantian divide between aesthetics and ethics. While Kant did argue that the moral subject requires suitable training in order to appropriately grasp the sublime, thereby suggesting a relation between aesthetics and ethics, it is, nevertheless, a one-way relation. For Kant, aesthetics (the sublime) does not *shape* the moral subject but rather it *requires* a (certain kind of) moral subject. Radical aesthetics, in contrast, maintains that art can indeed morally cultivate the subject—even as it maintains that the subject’s moral formation contributes to the apprehension of art. There is, then, a two-way relation—a dynamic dialectic—between aesthetics and ethics in radical aesthetics.

This close connection between art and ethics informs an account of pleasure that signals another departure from more traditional aesthetics. Art and beauty may, as Kant would have it, bring pleasure. But in radical aesthetics the object of such pleasure is not the unsullied form of beauty but rather an affecting, integrated depiction of a poignant slice of our social and natural world—for example, an apt, moving depiction of a beggar, a mournful mother, or a fallow garden. Such skillful artistic depictions wake us up, helping us to see more fully and to feel more keenly the reality of the social and natural world around us. In this process of waking up, of becoming more human and humane, we do experience pleasure. Such aesthetic pleasure, however, is a consequence of moral cultivation, not “a judgment of beauty.” Radical aesthetics endeavors to empower its readers to become *witnesses*: to attest to the pain and injustice in our communities, institutions, and lands. Whereas Plato banned the poets from the republic, radical aesthetics would enlist the poets and encourage aesthetic projects and events for the sake of ameliorating the republic. And participation in that work of amelioration is a source of pleasure.

Although radical aesthetics participates in what Emerson calls “practical power,” it may still be understood as

disinterested, capturing at least in part what Kant had in mind in the *Critique of Judgment* by the term *disinterest*. Radical aesthetics is disinterested insofar as it is, in an important sense, non-utilitarian. Art is not manipulated or produced for the sake of advancing narrow ends. The artist respects that which is before her by listening to it, by treating it with fidelity. Radical aesthetics does not impose. It does not distort, willfully. It seeks to witness gracefully and accurately—dare I say, objectively. Even that creative Romantic faculty, the *imagination*, is understood not as projection of fantasy but as a creative lens by which to bring clear-eyed attention to such experiences as war, famine, displacement, urbanization, over- and under-employment, water and air pollution, and oppressive political and religious authorities and institutions. The radical Romantic imagination exhibits a realism of the everyday as it engages in social criticism, bringing new (accurate, objective) sight to the social and natural worlds and the human approaches to them. Hence while reading Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth scrawled in the book's margin: "The real excellence of Imagination consists in the capacity of exploring *the world really existing*."¹⁷

The "disinterestedness" of radical aesthetics, then, seeks to present the world faithfully, and the imagination is essential to this *creative, prophetic* task. It is a *creative* task insofar as perceptive discovery requires the imagination just as much as skillful creation. Creation requires receptivity even as receptivity requires creative attention (what Wordsworth calls "wise passiveness").¹⁸ For this reason, radical aesthetics does not privilege the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, but rather calls our attention to the contrast between the authentic and the inauthentic, or between the honest and the dishonest. And presenting the world faithfully is a *prophetic* task insofar as it palpably brings into relief the normative gap between how the world is and how it ought to be. Once one becomes a witness and sees the world anew, one then *longs* for the world to become a different place—a place more just, less cruel. The term *longing* is important here, for it captures both the cognitive and affective aspects of radical aesthetics' prophetic task.¹⁹

The "disinterestedness" of radical aesthetics, then, does not entail moral indifference. Radical aesthetics is disinterested in narrow utilitarian aims, not critical, life-enhancing normative ones. Furthermore, it is not engrossed with that traditional aesthetic triad: the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque. This triad frequently removes art from the everyday and renders the spectator distant and detached—a far cry from the *engaged* witness. It has been customary to think of Wordsworth as the poet of the glorious landscape. And indeed, in his verse we find some of the most moving, detailed, and powerful descriptions of landscapes ever crafted in the English language. But these poetic descriptions neither convey a static landscape nor encourage a detached spectator. More to the point, however, Wordsworth's poetry was not principally centered on "the natural world" divorced from the presence of humans. Wordsworth found most of his inspiration in the life, labor, and struggle of commoners, and he presented, for all to see and feel, their worth and dignity. His poetry was above all about *people*—about people and the land, and about people and those public and

private circumstances that comforted and confronted their lives.

Reading Wordsworth in this fashion, as a democratic poet, many not *prima facie* seem to cohere with what he is perhaps most famous for, namely the "spots of time" in the *Prelude*. Wordsworth himself used the expression, "spots of time," only once to refer to events in his childhood: "There are in our existence spots of time, / That with distinct pre-eminence retain/A renovating virtue, whence...our minds/Are nourished and invisibly repaired."²⁰ Commentators, however, commonly employ the term to refer to a number of powerful, often revelatory incidents in Wordsworth's past. These incidents—vividly described memories—typically entail a solitary or isolated Wordsworth (even if he is in the company of others) encountering an evocative landscape (e.g., Snowden). It is not clear, however, why "spots of time" cannot apply to transformative incidents that entail people and that had profound political implications for Wordsworth. Nicholas Roe, in fact, comes close to making this move. He interprets as "*almost...a spot of time*" a scene in the *Prelude* that depicts a powerful political event in Wordsworth's life in Revolutionary France.²¹ When Wordsworth and Beauvuy—his friend and radical political mentor—encountered on the road "a hunger-bitten girl":

...and at the sight my friend
In agitation said, 'Tis against *that*
Which we are fighting', I with him believed
Devoutly that a spirit was abroad
Which would not be withstood, that poverty,
At least like this, would in a little time
Be found no more...²²

In this spot of time, Wordsworth gained a sudden clarity on the goals of the Revolution and his commitment to it. The impoverished girl became a palpable symbol of the Revolution and all that it stood for, and the symbol charged Wordsworth's life with a profound sense of purpose and meaning. Other such transformative moments that entail people and community could be plausibly cited as spots of time with compelling, explicit sociopolitical import (scenes, for example, from "The Female Vagrant," "The Old Cumberland Beggar," or "The Ruined Cottage"). All this is to say that radical aesthetics is not preoccupied with the distant, sublime, uninhabited landscape.

Radical aesthetics, in contrast to traditional aesthetics, is more closely aligned with the way John Dewey placed art at the center of an everyday realism.²³ Similarly, when Wordsworth offered his revolutionary description of *who* the poet is and *what* poetry is for, he highlighted the poet as a fellow human addressing fellow citizens and employing their *everyday language*. And although that language was, of course, suitably transformed into poetic form (though not "ornately"), Wordsworth maintained that there is no fundamental difference between prose and verse (still another gesture toward the everyday). And not only was the language of Wordsworth's poetry "everyday," but as we've seen, so were the characters, events, and places about which he wrote. In this regard, he revolutionized the scope or range of poetic topics. An urgent concern for the everyday was placed at the center of art.

My point is that radical aesthetics is often a quotidian aesthetics: it emerges from the everyday and it largely remains there. A premium is placed on presenting the ordinary and commonplace in such a way as to move and touch citizens for the sake of promoting social justice and environmental practice. Ultimately, then, the aesthetics of radical Romanticism seeks to participate in “the true romance of the world,” namely, the transformation of genius—the transformation of minds and hearts, of cognition and affect—into practical power.

Notes

¹ By “the early Wordsworth,” I refer to his work in the 1790s and up to approximately 1805. There is a well-entrenched account of the trajectory of Wordsworth’s poetry and political persuasion. When he was young, his poetry was original and vibrant and his political beliefs were democratic and progressive. As he aged, his poetry became staid and his politics conservative. There is much debate about exactly when his apostasy occurred, though most agree it took place sometime between 1798 and 1806. Some, like Jerome McGann, push the date so far back that it is unclear whether Wordsworth ever had progressive political beliefs (Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983]). Others, such as William White, doubt if there ever was a change of heart (William Hale White, *An Examination of the Charge of Apostasy Against Wordsworth* [London: Longmans, Green, and Co: 1898]). If one is, like me, mostly interested in his early poetry and its political, religious, and environmental dimensions, then the relevance of when or whether Wordsworth committed apostasy is not entirely clear. I will say, however, that eventually Wordsworth did become more conservative in his political and religious beliefs and practices. This transition is a long, complicated path.

² By Romanticism, I refer retroactively to the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century artistic, literary, philosophical, religious, and political trend; I also refer to a current, implicit, and pervasive cultural framework that has its roots in the Romantic era. The manners and interpretations of Romanticism, of course, are legion. I have interrogated a selection of Romantic materials and constructed my own portrait of Romanticism for the sake of advancing progressive democratic aims. I call this portrait *radical Romanticism*. I acknowledge that my selection of material is itself a constructive exercise, yet I also believe that I maintain fidelity to my sources. *Radical Romanticism*, then, refers to my critical, constructive engagement with Romantic sources.

³ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: the Later Years* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), Vol. 5, p. 185.

⁴ Although my main focus in this section is on Wordsworth and his aesthetic medium, poetry, this should not suggest that I privilege poetry over other artistic forms. My arguments about Wordsworth’s poetry and radical aesthetics can be extended to apply to various forms of art, for example, animation, music videos, calligraphy, hip-hop, plays, tapestry, graffiti, and performative aesthetics.

⁵ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, (New York: Norton, 1979), 12: 167-68.

⁶ “The Banished Negroes,” in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807* by William Wordsworth, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 161-62. For helpful discussions of the sonnet, see Debbie Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 203-07; Judith Page, *Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 67-76; and Jonathan Bate, *Song of the Earth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 215.

⁷ “Any black, mulatto, or other persons of color, of either sex,” *Collection complète des lois*, ed. J. B. Duvergier (Paris: Guyot et Scribe, 1836) Volume 13, p. 242.

⁸ Wordsworth, *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Hertfordshire: The Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994) p. 305.

⁹ “The Banished Negroes,” in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807* by William Wordsworth, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 62.

¹⁰ Wordsworth, “Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” *William Wordsworth: the Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 134.

¹¹ *William Wordsworth: Selected Prose*, ed. John O. Hayden (New York: Penguin, 1988), p. 105.

¹² Edmund Burke, “Letter to Charles-Jean-François Depont,” *On Empire, Liberty, and Reform: Speeches and Letters*, ed. David Bromwich (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 410. Emphasis added.

¹³ Burke, “Letter to Charles-Jean-François Depont,” p. 414.

¹⁴ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, (New York: Norton, 1979), 10: 819-29.

¹⁵ Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), see 10: 849-63.

¹⁶ Emerson, “Experience,” *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Poems*, eds. Harold Bloom, Paul Kane, and Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 492.

¹⁷ Cited in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. xiv. Italics added.

¹⁸ Wordsworth, “Expostulation and Reply,” *William Wordsworth: the Major Works*, p. 130.

¹⁹ On the dialectical relation between affect and cognition and its social-critical power, see Sharon Krause, *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation* (Kindle Locations 927-942); and Melvin Roger’s manuscript, *The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy and Freedom in African American Political Thought*, Chapter Two, “The Demandingness Of Freedom: David Walker And Racial Domination,” p. 23.

²⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), 12: 208-216.

²¹ Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) p. 59. Emphasis added.

²² William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), 9: 518-24.

²³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 1-19.