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## WORDSWORTH, KANT, FANATICISM AND HUMANITY

Simon Swift

I stood, and leaning o'er the Garden wall,  
Reviewed that Woman's sufferings; and it seemed  
To comfort me while with a Brother's love  
I bless'd her – in the impotence of grief.  
At length towards the cottage I returned  
Fondly, - and traced, with interest more mild,  
That secret spirit of humanity  
Which, mid the calm oblivious tendencies  
Of Nature, mid her plants, and weeds, and flowers,  
And silent overgrowings, still survived.<sup>1</sup>

Superstitious religion bases itself on a principle of subjecting reason to the delusion of perceptions.

In exaltation [*Schwärmerey*] human beings raise themselves above humanity.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Critique of Judgement* Kant defines Humanity [*Humanität*] as 'both the universal *feeling of sympathy*, and the ability to engage universally in very intimate *communication*.' The universalism of human feeling and communicative capacity that characterise humanity, he further argues, distinguishes mankind [*Menscheit*] from 'the limitation [characteristic] of animals.'<sup>3</sup> Humanity suggests mankind's predisposition to transform itself into a moral whole. It produces in the individual 'signs' of a predisposition towards the morally good; thus 'to take a *direct interest* in the beauty of *nature*...is always a mark of a good soul.'<sup>4</sup> Humanity, for Kant, marks a middle path between the subjection of reason to delusive perceptions in superstitious religion and the raising up of individual human beings in flights of exaltation. Yet despite, or perhaps because of Kant's commitment to the universal, morally progressive tendencies of humanity, some of his earliest readers felt justified in claiming that his critical philosophy contained symptoms of its own tendency toward exaltation or fanaticism.<sup>5</sup> And certainly, in Kant's response to the French Revolution, the universal communicative power of humanity that he celebrates in the *Critique of Judgement* became a means for him to exercise a 'sympathy bordering on enthusiasm' with the events in France.

The critical literature on fanaticism and exaltation, both common translations for *Schwärmerei*, and their near-cognate ‘enthusiasm’ (which J.G.A. Pocock has described as the ‘anti-self of Enlightenment’) is now so rich that it should begin to be possible for us to make sense of how the set of threats or fears and argumentative possibilities that circulate around these terms coloured and shaped the writing both of Kant and Wordsworth.<sup>6</sup> Like Kant, Wordsworth was faced with the accusation that, his own sturdy discourse on virtue, duty and rational faith notwithstanding, his poetic thinking remained coloured by both the enthusiasm of Methodism and the traces of a radical enlightenment commonly associated with exaltation, especially Spinozism.<sup>7</sup> And like Kant, he needed to distinguish between these traces, with their dangerous leaning towards atheism, and what he wanted to think of as the virtue-bound tendency of his own moments of poetic exaltation.

Fanaticism and enthusiasm are politically and culturally mobile terms, encompassing both ‘high’ and ‘low’ claims to inspiration and illumination, claims that are associated at different times with the genius and with the crowd, with superstition or mysticism and with political radicalism. Their mobility points towards their strong association with cognitive and affective disorder, and with ideas of contagion. Since Luther’s discourse against Thomas Muentzer and the peasants’ rebellion, the term *Schwärmerei* had captured a strong, animal sense of the chaos of the swarming crowd and its contagious emotions. Edmund Burke had made the link between early modern and contemporary forms of enthusiasm by associating the ‘epidemic fanaticism’ of sixteenth century Anabaptism with the philosophical fanaticism of revolutionary attacks on organized religion in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.<sup>8</sup> But for Kant in the 1790s, fanaticism had come to be associated both with what he took to be pseudo-philosophical claims to a mystical illumination, an unmediated insight into the causality of nature through intuition found in philosophers such as Herder and Jacobi, and with a politically worrying cult of the individual genius that follows inevitably from such mysticism. Claims to privileged illumination seemed, to Kant, reactionary in their exclusion of the public use of reason from philosophy. They typically fail the test of universal communicability that defines Kant’s sense of humanity, since they are strictly, from a Kantian view, incommunicable. Fanaticism, then, appears in the 1790s both as a revolutionary epidemic, and as a counter-revolutionary gesture of aesthetic, mystical withdrawal from the public sphere. For Kant, the example of the revolution especially goes to show that if humanity requires its own moment of

philosophical lyricism in order to articulate the universalism of its claims on us, then it becomes difficult, in practice, to distinguish between a raving with reason and a judicious enthusiasm for humanity. Many of Kant's essays of the 1790s were preoccupied with formulating precisely this distinction.

This essay will examine both Kant's enthusiastic response to the French Revolution, and his attack on the counter-revolutionary 'Plato enthusiasm' of the German 1790s. My claim will be that examining Kant in this light offers new purchase on Wordsworth's own, more muted but no less subtle response to the radical enlightenment and the revolution, principally in the opening passage of 'The Ruined Cottage,' a poem that was first written in 1798-9 and which was subsequently reworked as the first book of his long poem of 1814, *The Excursion*. My somewhat counter-intuitive claim will be that fanaticism, for all its busy, chaotic swarming motion and its dynamic exaltation of the individual genius, figures for Wordsworth and for Kant as a risk of idleness and repose. Such an alignment between fanaticism and ease can be glimpsed in Wordsworth's effort to distinguish, in *The Prelude*, between the framing of the claim that each human thought 'hath no beginning' 'in the words of reason deeply weighed' and 'in a mystical and idle sense.'<sup>9</sup> Enthusiasm and idleness troublingly shadow the genuine insights of reason into its own lack. For Kant, neo-Platonic fanaticism signifies a refusal to engage in the active, progressive work of conceptual thinking that links the critical philosophy to Aristotle, and such a refusal manifests itself in lyrical, 'exalted' and quasi-philosophical pronouncements. For Wordsworth, idleness and its connection to fanaticism becomes something of a testing-ground for his conception of poetry. 'The Ruined Cottage' registers a number of measured, even nervous claims for the work that poetry does, that testify both to a fear that poetry might be figured as idle and that it might succumb to the temptations of ease. The poem seeks to fend off such a fear in various ways: for example with the claim that poetic forms such as elegy do not do their work 'idly.'<sup>10</sup> Such unease around the function of poetry can be productively viewed, I want to suggest, in relation to Kant's critique of neo-Platonism. Both Kant and Wordsworth examine the borderline between philosophy and poetry, and while Kant worries about the social consequences of a surrender of philosophy to poetic rhapsody, Wordsworth struggles with the task of writing what Coleridge had hoped would become 'FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHICAL POEM,' a poem that was to be active and socially productive but also visionary.<sup>11</sup>

Both Kant and Wordsworth argue for work as an alternative to the soaring visions of philosophical, theological and poetic exaltation. Especially in Kant, but also in Wordsworth, I want to suggest, the claims made for work expose an aristocratic disdain for toil on the part of those exalted thinkers who abandon the universal cause of humanity. In each case, the argument for work is forwarded as a means of guarding the hope of a utopian universalism and a commitment to progress that is disclosed through an attachment to humanity. Wordsworth and Kant were both intensely alive to the threat that any hope for humanity risked being junked as mere fanaticism in light of the failure of the revolution. Meeting this threat entailed a careful negotiation with both poetic and philosophical models of utopia deriving from the ancients (especially literary pastoralism) and from scripture, and an attempt to re-territorialize utopianism in ways that, through work and a focus on the quotidian, allowed each to hold on to the progressive universalism embedded in the idea of humanity.<sup>12</sup>

## 1

In the section of *The Conflict of the Faculties* entitled ‘A Renewed Attempt to Answer the Question: ‘Is the Human Race Continually Improving?’’ (1798) Kant takes issue with the self-fulfilling prophecies of what he calls ‘*prognosticative*’ histories, ancient and modern. It is all very well, he says, ‘for the Jewish prophets to foretell that the state to which they belonged would sooner or later suffer ... complete dissolution’ since those prophets, in their role as leaders of the people, had so overwrought their ‘constitution’ with civil and ecclesiastical burdens that the state became ungovernable, and therefore bound to fail. The prophets knew this, and so by sticking to their unworkable constitution, ‘they were themselves able to foresee the consequences with infallible certainty.’<sup>13</sup> Contemporary politicians, Kant goes on, behave in exactly the same way; they tell us that we ‘must take men as they are,’ and not ‘as the world’s uninformed pedants or good-natured dreamers fancy that they ought to be.’ But ‘as they are’ should in fact read, as Kant paraphrases the real meaning of the politicians, ‘‘as we have *made them* by unjust coercion, by treacherous designs which the government is in a good position to carry out.’’<sup>14</sup>

There are two principal consequences for Kant’s argument about what might be termed the politics of prophecy as disguised political creativity. The politically pragmatic consequence is that we should take care as to how we distribute and express our hopes for improvement, lest such expressions and distributions allow those hopes to be written off as utopian dreams. We must not ‘expect too much of

human beings in their progressive improvements, or else we shall merit the scorn of those politicians who would gladly treat man's hopes of progress as the fantasies of an overheated imagination.' While it is agreeable, in other words, to engage in the 'pleasant dream' of thinking up ideal political constitutions, to follow in the footsteps of 'Plato's *Atlantis*, More's *Utopia*, Harrington's *Oceana* and Allais' *Severambia*,' it would be 'foolhardy to put them forward seriously, and punishable to incite the people to do away with the existing constitution.'<sup>15</sup> The effort to realize such fictions of the ideal state presents an open door to a repressive status quo that uses them as an opportunity to scorn and write off any and all progressive tendencies.

A version of this pragmatic argument, with its ambivalent relation to the fictions of utopia, is found in Wordsworth's invocation of Plato's Atlantis in the 'Prospectus' to his projected philosophical poem that was published in the Preface to *The Excursion*:

*Paradise, and groves  
Elysian, Fortunate Fields – like those of old  
Sought in the Atlantic Main, why should they be  
A history only of departed things,  
Or a mere fiction of what never was?  
For the discerning intellect of Man,  
When wedded to this goodly universe  
In love and holy passion, shall find these  
A simple produce of the common day.<sup>16</sup>*

Where Kant warns against the danger of doing more than dreaming about utopia, Wordsworth seems to make a precisely opposite claim; that utopia can be found around us everywhere, a product of the marriage of mind and universe. Yet the passage contains a similarly pragmatic strategy around utopian dreams. Confining utopia to a fiction of the past can serve to reinforce a repressive status quo. As the weavers, members of which class make up the story of 'The Ruined Cottage' well knew, the idea of a lost golden age was a convenient one for those who would present their story of decline as inevitable or 'simple.'<sup>17</sup> Such myths need to be handled with care, since they risk being written into a narrative of inevitable or 'natural' decline if utopia is to be 'only' a history of departed things or a fiction of what never was. But Wordsworth does not entirely disband the idea of a lost golden age; looked at otherwise, it might present an important imaginative view of what are really socially and politically organized processes of decline and suffering. This is the kind of

reimagining that he enters into in ‘The Ruined Cottage,’ which participates fully in the weavers’ ‘legend’ of better days.

The second consequence of Kant’s warning about trying to do more than dream about utopia is that such revolutionary creative action reveals itself to be an effort that is philosophically and morally misguided, in that it presumes ‘that the basic moral capacity of mankind will increase,’ something that would in fact require ‘a kind of new creation or super-natural influence.’ Kant is then making a philosophically transcendental and politically pragmatic claim about men ‘as they are.’ It is not in the gift of anyone to add to, or to detract from, the basic moral capacity of humanity.

While this is to surrender any ‘super-natural’ argument about revolutionary creativity, it remains committed to a radical claim precisely about the universalism of man’s moral nature.<sup>18</sup> Kant’s claim about the moral nature of humanity – of the human species taken as a whole – then needs specific individuals and peoples who through their actions can at times offer luminous examples of the working of that moral capacity across our history, and give confirmation that the human race is progressing. Such examples are of universal significance, holding a meaning for all of humanity. ‘There must,’ he writes, ‘be some experience or other which, as an event which has actually occurred, might suggest that man has the power or quality of being a *cause* and (since his actions are supposed to be those of a being endowed with freedom) the *author* of his own improvement.’<sup>19</sup> Kant’s search for such an event leads to his famous theory of the spectator of historical events, and especially of himself as a spectator of the French Revolution. The revolution in France may succeed, or it may fail. It may, Kant writes,

be so filled with misery and atrocities that no right-thinking man would ever decide to make the same experiment again at such a price, even if he could hope to carry it out successfully at the second attempt. But I maintain that this revolution has aroused in the hearts and desires of all spectators who are not themselves caught up in it a *sympathy* which borders almost on enthusiasm, although the very utterance of this sympathy was fraught with danger. It cannot therefore have been caused by anything other than a moral disposition within the human race.<sup>20</sup>

Kant is here close to the spectator morality and sympathy ethics of British moralists such as Shaftesbury and Smith; but his claims about the transformative power of sympathy take his theory of spectatorship in a different direction under the pressure of

contemporary political events. The actual outcome of the revolution, Kant seems to say, is of almost no importance. What is important is that spectators all over Europe cannot stop themselves from expressing a sympathy 'which borders almost on enthusiasm,' even at personal risk. Such a spontaneous, self-forgetting expression of near-enthusiasm is what guarantees that the revolution can be taken as an '*historical sign*' of the universal moral disposition of humanity. To this extent, the '*passion or enthusiasm*' with which onlookers embrace the events in France gives 'historical support' for an assertion 'which is of considerable anthropological significance: true enthusiasm is always directed exclusively towards the *ideal*, particularly towards that which is purely moral (such as the concept of right), and it cannot be coupled with selfish interests.'<sup>21</sup>

Peculiarly, Kant's argument focuses on the risk that *spectators* take in voicing a dangerous near-enthusiasm, and discards any interest in the lives of those who actually act. Any interest in the welfare of individual selves, whether actors or spectators, would seem in fact to fall under the anthropological rubric of selfishness. Somehow the revolution's political acts are to be taken as 'signs' for an ideal moral disposition that they do not themselves embody; the sufferings (or successes) of the actors, to this extent, mean little (and certainly no more than the fate of the spectators) since what the spectator sympathizes with is that ideal moral disposition that is readable from, but not reducible to real human lives, and that outlives those lives. It is hard to live with the disconnect in Kant's argument between actors and their acts, which seems licensed, in fact, by our complete incapacity to know the final outcome of the revolution. Yet this claim about active spectators has provoked one startling recent rereading of Kant and the Kantian enlightenment, in Alberto Toscano's *Fanaticism: The Uses of an Idea*. For Toscano, situating his reading against Hannah Arendt's effort (as Toscano understands it) to claim Kant as the philosopher of political communities, 'the impersonality of the feeling that greets the sudden event of emancipation in a distant land, signal[s] that the abstract dimension of humanity... is indispensable for Kant.'<sup>22</sup> Toscano mounts a peculiar defence of the Kantian spectator as encrypting an affective abstraction, a fanaticism oriented towards the universal. This is a Kant who recognizes the crucial importance of 'abstract passions' to the unfolding of a universal politics, and one who is therefore recuperable to a counter-history of the role of 'true enthusiasm' in the emancipatory and revolutionary political programmes that are a legacy of enlightenment. Toscano's claim hinges on his effort

to reframe Kant's idea of the spectator, to view the spectator as in some sense 'emancipated,' partly by the risk that he takes, as Kant records it, in voicing his enthusiasm for the event. What Toscano calls Kant's 'partisan affect' is 'itself a sign of humanity's capacity to be the cause of its own advance; it is the negative exhibition of collective freedom.'<sup>23</sup>

'The Ruined Cottage' seems to make the same move that Kant celebrates, away from the lives of those suffering historical events to the spectator's tracing of 'that secret spirit of humanity' that yet 'survives' 'mid,' the processes that overwhelm those lives, processes that appear to be written as a kind of natural 'overgrowing' of human purpose, as if the failure of those purposes were the work of fate or the simple decay that is a product of the relinquishing of individual agency and cultivation. Their quasi-Edenic isolation and fall, the story of a man and woman with their two children alone in a landscape, makes Wordsworth's subjects seem suspiciously amenable to becoming vehicles for an abstract passion that, as Toscano would have it, bypasses plurality or 'community.' Yet as numerous commentators have noted, the poem exposes something problematic about the way in which individual lives are left behind in the name of a wise cheerfulness that can 'trace' something of that 'secret spirit of humanity' – a spirit which, as Alison Hickey has noted, 'remains "secret" in this poem, encrypted "'mid" a landscape from which it cannot be "extracted."' <sup>24</sup> The only way to live with their suffering is by reading its encryption of a secret spirit of humanity into nature, which is itself underwritten by the disturbing metaphysical claim that our affective response to all human experience is merely a product of its status as an appearance, the 'passing shews of Being' that spirit outlives.<sup>25</sup> Yet it would be too quick to propose that such an unwillingness to tell the secret is an example of political bad faith, recusancy, or displacement. There is something unpersuasive about the effort to claim that Kantian spectators can be re-viewed as radical actors in a revamped understanding of fanaticism, and the great strength of Wordsworth's poem is that it records a reluctance to leave behind the lives that made up the poem's story, and the discomfort involved in taking this kind of abstract, 'secret' message from them. The 'restlessness' of the poem's thoughts, as I will suggest in what follows, is testament to the failure of spectatorship and sympathy to reconcile the universalist claims of humanity with the problem of individual loss. But this restlessness is also the mark of an unreconciled fanaticism.<sup>26</sup>

Before moving to examine the role of fanaticism in ‘The Ruined Cottage,’ I would like briefly to examine the figure of secrecy as it appears in Kant. Secrecy is the sign, in an essay by Kant from around the same time as *The Contest of the Faculties*, for philosophical fanaticism. Kant’s polemic against secrecy takes place in the course of his attack on J.G. Schlosser’s 1795 translation, *Plato’s letters on the revolution in Syracuse, with a historical introduction and notes*, in ‘Of a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy’ (1796). Since philosophy relinquished its first meaning, the ‘scientific wisdom of life [*wissenschaftliche Lebensweisheit*],’ Kant argues, it has been taken on as an honorific title ‘that would adorn the minds of uncommon thinkers who now imagine it to be a mode where secrets are revealed.’ The newest owners of this lofty, arcane secret are ‘those who have it *in themselves* but unfortunately *cannot* express and universally communicate it through language (*philosophus per inspirationem*).’<sup>27</sup> The error of the inspired philosopher is the error of a neo-Platonism that has not noticed that the question that ‘hovered’ before Plato’s mind - ‘How are synthetic propositions possible a priori?’ - has been solved by Kant’s own critical philosophy, which has proven that ‘there are indeed intuitions a priori, although they do not belong to human understanding but are rather *sensible* (with the titles space and time)’ in such a way that all arcane knowledge can be kept out of philosophy. Consequently, ‘inspired’ philosophy remains stuck with the mystical thinking of Plato and Pythagoras. Because we cannot extend our knowledge beyond concepts, and because Plato discerned in certain geometrical forms a purposiveness, such that ‘it is as if the demand for the construction of certain concepts of size were *intentionally* planted in them,’ he had to assume that ‘we human beings had a priori intuitions that did not have their first *origin* in *our* understanding.’ This in turn brought him to promulgate the myth that a divine understanding had planted these ideas in us, but that ‘our birth has led to the obscuring of these ideas by making us forget their origin.’<sup>28</sup> Those who persist with this mythological thinking also, therefore, persist in the claim that ‘philosophy had come upon a *secret* where there was no secret.’ Thus anyone who persists with the arcane claims of a Pythagoras or Plato is left exposed to a powerful social critique:

...the one who *philosophizes* beyond a mathematical problem believes that he has hit upon a secret and even believes he sees something extravagantly great where he sees nothing; and he posits true philosophy (*philosophia arcani*) in precisely the fact that he broods over an Idea in himself, which he can neither

make comprehensible nor even communicate to others, and so here poetic talent finds nourishment for itself in the feelings and enjoyment of exalting [*im Gefühl und Genuß zu schwärmen*]: which is, to be sure, far more inviting and splendid than the law of reason whereby one must work to acquire a possession.<sup>29</sup>

Behind the ‘inspired’ philosopher’s claim to have been admitted into arcane knowledge lies both a failure of public communication – and therefore an abandonment of the cause of humanity - covered by poetic lyricism and a haughty disregard for the toil of philosophy. So too, such a philosopher presumes a social distinction, as Kant makes clear in the rest of his essay; the claim to be ‘inspired’ is underwritten by the ‘gifted’ philosopher’s membership of a coterie, such that he ‘does not merely rave on his own but at the same time is a club member.’<sup>30</sup> Yet Kant’s system leaves us with a secret of its own; once any possibility of an intellectual intuition has been evacuated out of human understanding and confined to a thinkable supreme being, the supersensible remains, ‘from a theoretical point of view... the true secret.’<sup>31</sup> Crucially, it remains as much a secret for the philosopher as for anyone else.

## 2

At the heart of Kant’s own system is a theoretical secret that he, too, has to point towards through morality and the experience of duty as a sublime law within us. It is work, and especially Aristotle’s adumbration of categories (Kant deeming Aristotle the philosophical ‘artisan’ in contradistinction to Plato as the philosophical enthusiast and lyricist), that allows us finally to bridge the immediate apprehension of the secret in the form of the moral law and its remaining a secret from the point of view of theoretical knowledge. Wordsworth is as preoccupied with the work or toil that gives us access to moral predispositions as Kant; and as suspicious of the dreaming enthusiasm that thinks it can get to supersensible knowledge without exerting itself. ‘The Ruined Cottage’, as Book 1 of *The Excursion*, begins as follows:’

’T’WAS summer, and the sun had mounted high:  
Southward, the landscape indistinctly glared  
Through a pale steam; but all the northern downs,  
In clearest air ascending, shew’d far off  
A surface dappled o’er with shadows, flung  
From many a brooding cloud; as far as the sight  
Could reach, those many shadows lay in spots

Determined and unmoved, with steady beams  
Of bright and pleasant sunshine interposed.  
Pleasant to him who on the soft cool moss  
Extends his careless limbs along the front  
Of some huge cave, whose rocky ceiling casts  
A twilight of its own, an ample shade,  
Where the wren warbles; while the dreaming Man,  
Half conscious of the soothing melody,  
With side-long eye looks out upon the scene,  
By that impending covert made more soft,  
More low and distant! Other lot was mine;  
Yet with good hope that soon I should obtain  
As grateful resting-place, and livelier joy.  
Across a bare wide Common I was toiling  
With languid feet, which by the slippery ground  
Were baffled; nor could my weak arm disperse  
The host of insects gathering round my face,  
And ever with me as I paced along.<sup>32</sup>

The poem immediately establishes an opposition between ease and work, and opens up a hope for ease in prospect - a 'livelier joy' than the 'dreaming Man' may feel - on the far side of toil. Yet the shape of the poet's imagining and displacement, the fact that we are lured into the pleasurable ease of apprehending the landscape as an image through the 'finer distance' that the sheltering covert of the cave offers to the dreaming man, only to disjointedly find the speaker toiling through the 'bare wide Common,' suggests a renunciation of immediate ease in favour of that hope. Even so, the livelier joy is never quite attained, since the rest that follows the poet's toil - the 'noontide rest' in the shade of the ruined cottage's overgrown garden - is overwhelmed by the tale of Margaret's suffering and the poet's need to process it. The poet's 'languid feet' may associate the rhythm of verse with the ease of the dreaming man; the steps are difficult, progress is uncertain, and the fact that the feet are 'baffled' by the slippery ground suggests the trouble poetry has in gaining traction on a landscape which has become, in a term that Celeste Langan takes from Deleuze and Guattari, 'deterritorialized,' liquefied, expropriated. The slippery common, a kind of moving ground, perhaps refers to enclosure and the expropriation of church land in

France, making of the scene a commentary on the development of capitalism and its property relations. There is also an association here with language: the ‘languid’ or ‘language’ being ‘the flat plate of metal that lies over the top of the foot, just inside the mouth [of the shoe].’<sup>33</sup> Langan’s reading of walking in Wordsworth suggestively invokes the relation between feet, steps and Marx’s account of the progress of capital accumulation:

Here we may add to the picture Marx’s *historical* explanation [in *Capital*] of the emergence of capital: the expropriation of the agricultural labourer. The historical ‘first step’ or ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ again acquires a telling literalness in Marx’s account: the expropriation of the agricultural labourer sets capitalist production ‘on its legs [*Füßen* – feet].’<sup>34</sup>

The difficulty of finding traction on the slippery ground, then, baffles and tempts the poet to renounce his effort and seek for ease. The rich literary allusions of the poem’s opening have received valuable readings, both as a meditation on Epicurean ideas of retirement and the Puritan notion of life as toil in a fallen world. In this vein, David Simpson associates the ‘insect host’ both with Milton’s cloud of locusts and the ‘beehive humming’ of the angels’ deliberations in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*.<sup>35</sup> But behind that early-modern allusion might be found a further one, to the humming swarm of the religious fanatics, the *Schwärmerei*, and their rejection of all ecclesiastical and civil authority that Luther had first attacked in the person of Thomas Muentzer, leader of the peasants’ rebellion. As Anthony J. La Volpa puts it:

When Luther wants to castigate the mobs that followed the self-appointed field preachers or rampaged through churches, smashing the statues, the verb *schwärmen* was ready to hand. It evoked bees swarming around the hive; a flock of birds zigzagging across a field; a pack of hounds straying off the scent. One could hear an ominous buzzing and flapping (or murmuring) and imagine the erratic movement of an aggregate, a kind of perverse order in freewilled disorder.<sup>36</sup>

Wordsworth’s Poet’s toil across a bare wide common suggests not only the Miltonic post-lapsarian life of struggle, but specifically a struggle with a host that swarms around the toiling poet’s face (a kind of intentional encounter with a creaturely other in place of the tangential sidelong glance of the dreaming Man), a host that keeps pace with his steps and refuses to be left behind. Wordsworth’s verse, perhaps, cannot outstrip the fanaticism that shadows it. As Jon Mee suggests, ‘Wordsworth was beset

with the problem of distinguishing his transports from the illapses of vulgar enthusiasm.<sup>37</sup> But might the slightly unbalanced, dizzying motion of a toiling poet, whose feet slip while his head is surrounded by an insect host, not also suggest the difficulty of writing a philosophical poem, the difficulty, that is, of bringing the feet and the head into harmony? The Poet, too, we are told thirty lines later, is uncomfortably close to the swarm in his provenance, having been singled out by the Wanderer as a boy:

He loved me, from a swarm of rosy Boys  
Singled out me, as he in sport would say,  
For my grave looks - too thoughtful for my years.<sup>38</sup>

The hint of election or predestination suggests that the poet has been destined for something more than the swarming life of enthusiasm, something more thoughtful and 'grave'; but the Wanderer, too, from his early, solitary life as a shepherd 'has learned to look on nature 'with a superstitious eye of love', a 'lone Enthusiast' who 'vainly' 'strove/ To mitigate the fever of his heart.'<sup>39</sup> The Wanderer figure is presented to us as a model of justifiable repose, of retirement after a life of labour who has managed, in part at least, to mitigate his heart's fever; but in his retirement, too, he struggles to accommodate the mournful thoughts brought on by his testimony to Margaret's suffering, making a claim for repose and a relinquishing of a potentially unproductive sympathy with the dead that is suspiciously unpersuasive in the way that it calls, again, on the swarm as an image of calm -

At this the Wanderer paused;  
And, looking up to those enormous Elms,  
He said, 'Tis now the hour of deepest noon. -  
At this still season of repose and peace,  
This hour, when all things which are not at rest  
Are chearful; while this multitude of flies  
Is filling all the air with melody;  
Why should a tear be in an old Man's eye?  
Why should we thus, with an untoward mind,  
And in the weakness of humanity,  
From natural wisdom turn our hearts away,  
To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears,  
And, feeding on disquiet, thus disturb

The calm of nature with our restless thoughts? (I 1.621634)

The search is for an ease after toil that chooses the multitude of flies as an emblem for itself, but also hints that, in 'feeding on disquiet,' 'restless thoughts' more naturally mimic the scavenger life of the flies. The 'restlessness' of thinking, the un-directionality of an 'untoward mind' struggles not to think of the ease that it seeks as a version of fanaticism. Restlessness, for Coleridge at least, is a symptom of the afflictions of superstition and fanaticism. 'Cold and phlegmatic in their own nature,' he writes in *Biographia Literaria*, 'like damp hay, they heat and inflame by co-acervation; or like bees they become restless and irritable through the increased temperature of collected multitudes. Hence the German word for fanaticism (such at least was its original import) is derived from the swarming of bees, namely, *schwärmen*, *schwärmerey*.'<sup>40</sup> The unpersuasive claim that the humming of flies is in fact melodic and cheerful – which reaches back to the 'soothing melody' of warbling wrens of which the dreaming Man was 'half conscious' - introduces an echo of this restlessness into the Wanderer's image of repose. The swam of flies look singularly unpersuasive as an exemplum of a melodious, creaturely humming that would turn us away from a view of humanity's 'weakness' for sympathy. The flies might more happily signify the repose of death and decay.

The poem's struggle with versions of fanaticism is presented, serio-comically, as a virtuous toil that takes place in the bright light of the common, and is opposed to the indolence and ease of the 'dreaming Man.' But the temptation of idleness that that latter figure suggests needs itself to be understood, in a Kantian frame, as signaling a form of crypto-aristocratic fanaticism, which is, further, keyed in with the poem's important meditation on the question of utopia, and its relation to dreams. The 'dreaming Man' is at the entrance of Plato's cave, or perhaps is a kind of Delphic oracle, looking out into the bright sun (that Kant, following Plato in the 'Apocalyptic Tone' essay, associates with the supersensible) but apprehending it aesthetically, as an image made 'more low and distant' by the shelter of the cave itself.<sup>41</sup> He looks readable as a figure of neo-Platonic, aristocratic ease in apprehension, looking out into the bright world of forms while resting contented and indifferent at the margin of experience that he knows, albeit half-consciously, to be illusory.

Kant's own opposition between philosophical toil and the aristocratic disdain for that toil in neo-Platonism similarly works with figures of apprehension. The discursive understanding, he writes in the 'Apocalyptic Tone' essay

must expend a great amount of labor to analyze its concepts and then arrange them according to principles, and it must climb many difficult steps in order to make progress in knowledge; instead of this labor, an *intellectual intuition* would immediately present the object and grasp it all at once.<sup>42</sup>

The step-by-step labour of the concept can never hope to live up to the impossibly attractive image of instantaneous apprehension of the whole thing, and Kant keys in the fanaticism of the neo-Platonists with a basic set of anthropological predicates, laziness and vanity (which he describes as ‘a misunderstood freedom.’) Anyone who feels inspired or empowered to ‘fly above all labor’ will look down on philosophical labour with ‘contempt; and conversely,’ he goes on, ‘the very ease of such an employment of reason is a powerful lure to boldly assume a faculty of intellectual intuition and likewise to recommend that philosophy is best founded on it.’<sup>43</sup> The claim of insight fulfils its own prophecy, and the aristocratization of philosophy that it brings about needs to be understood as a political, not philosophical move. Schlosser had published Plato’s disputed letters from Syracuse in order to forward a view of Plato as an anti-democratic philosopher, a tutelary figure for the nascent anti-democratic reaction of German Romanticism that disdains, from a Kantian view, the public work of enlightenment.

Just as in his essay on the French Revolution, Kant shows here that claims to privileged mystical insight need to be understood as socially licensed. Mysticism in philosophy, as in politics, is finally a cover for exclusion, domination and power. Kant stakes out a powerful set of polemics between philosophy and poetry, the discourses I am associating with the head and the feet as the subject struggles to move forward and that are mediated, perhaps, by the warm heart of the fanatic. The collapse of philosophy into poetry is countered, in Kant, by the slow and laborious work of the concept that is capable of a powerful social critique. The complicated relationships to enthusiasm or fanaticism that one finds in Kant and Wordsworth, however, also gesture towards the investment of each in utopian ambition and the hope for a redeemed future. Having dismissed Schlosser’s pseudo-mysticism with his powerful social critique, Kant’s essay, much as he did in the *Contest of the Faculties*, finds its way to its own form of enthusiasm or deferred mysticism. This is found especially in his claim that, perhaps, in the moral law, we can hear an echo of inspiration since we cannot be sure whether the voice of the categorical imperative comes through man or ‘another.’ Even though, Kant claims, all philosophy is prosaic, not poetic at bottom,

there is something of an inverted exaltation in this claim, as the *Aufklärer* ends up ‘rising above’ the question of whether the voice comes from within ‘since such research is only speculative.’<sup>44</sup>

Just as Kant cannot quite let go of the mystical discourse he wants to set himself against, a discourse that risks surrendering poetry to philosophy, so Wordsworth’s verse figures its own protracted engagement between poetry and philosophy in the name of improvement or progress. Later in *The Excursion*, such hopes are discussed through attention to the ways in which philosophy and poetry insist on misapprehending one another’s utopian ambitions.

*The Excursion* sees its dramatis personae grappling with a set of assumptions around the relative merits of poetry and philosophy, which are taken to figure competing models for human improvement. In the figures of the poem’s Solitary and its poet-figure, each of philosophy and poetry is made to accuse the other of escapism, of turning away from the reality of accident, and from the causes of suffering. Yet the different forms of escapism that poetry and philosophy practice are figured in markedly different ways. In Book 3, the poem’s despondent Epicurean, ‘The Solitary,’ living in rural retirement, counsels a losing of the self in scientific investigation of nature’s ‘elements’ as the best humanly available salve for loss and suffering. He contrasts what he takes to be the successes of science in turning us away from loss while keeping us in touch with natural dynamism with what he takes to be poetry’s habit of portraying a utopian, pastoral vision of a static nature as its own salve for loss:

‘How rich in animation and delight,  
‘How bountiful these elements – compared  
‘With aught, as more desirable and fair,  
‘Devised by Fancy for the Golden Age;  
‘Or the perpetual warbling that prevails  
‘In Arcady, beneath unaltered skies.’<sup>45</sup>

It is the assumption that ideals of a golden age exist purely to turn us away from animation and vitality that underwrites, here, the claim of natural science to be in touch with nature. The Solitary’s attack on poetry leads the Poet both to enunciate a progressive tendency in poetry itself, as ‘framing models to improve the scheme/ Of man’s existence, and recast the world,’ and it also leads the Poet into a counter-offensive against philosophy.<sup>46</sup> He goes on to adumbrate the different schools of

philosophy which lack the visionary scheme that he defends in poetry— the ‘soft Epicureans, taught ... to yield up their souls/ To a voluptuous unconcern, preferring/ Tranquility to all things’ are compared to the Stoic, whose heart is closed ‘against the vain approach/ Of admiration, and all sense of joy’.<sup>47</sup> The vision of Stoicism adumbrated here echoes especially the ‘restless thoughts’ of a weak humanity that the Wanderer had sought to turn away from in Book 1 of the poem, thoughts that ‘From natural wisdom turn our hearts away; / To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears’.<sup>48</sup> Such claims lead the Solitary away from his lauding of science and attack on poetry, towards a defence of philosophy as a pragmatic method of turning man away from accident into a protected retirement. ‘Slight, if you will, the *means*, but spare to slight/ The *end* of those’ who rank ‘Security from shock or accident’ the ‘prime object of a wise Man’s aim’.<sup>49</sup> In this way the poem offers a meta-commentary on its unfortunate task, given to it by Coleridge, to become the first true philosophical poem in existence. The problem with this identity is that each of poetry and philosophy cannot help misapprehending the other; the Poet partially concedes to the Solitary a utopian view of poetry as a static pastoralism because of his attack on philosophy, while the Solitary allows philosophy to be figured as a hard-hearted or voluptuous retreat from the world.

But the poem also offers a counter-claim, a disarming of these ideological views of poetry and philosophy as in love with abstraction, turning away, retirement and rising above. It does so, for example, in the way that it embodies Stoicism rather than allowing it to be written off as a projection of an ideological fantasy. Vitality, especially the vitality of movement associated with work, is crucial to the providential harmony that the poem wants to cultivate. Alongside its polemic, the poem makes practical use of Stoicism as a philosophy in touch with the vital universe. In this way the use of Stoicism that the poem comes to is equivalent to the stoic idea of nature described by Marx in *The German Ideology*, and used to attack the ‘static’ picture of Stoicism on the part of the Young Hegelians, following on from Hegel’s association of it with the unhappy consciousness. Stoicism, for Marx, is ‘Heraclitean, dynamic, developing and living.’<sup>50</sup> It is given to the Poet to imagine what it would be to act as a pure vital force, which he figures in Book 4 of *The Excursion*, in line with his effort to enthuse Stoicism with a type of emotionalism, as joy - ‘What a joy to roam/ As equal among mightiest Energies.’<sup>51</sup> No longer elect, the poet can figure himself as ‘raised

up' to mightiest energies, which are yet 'below,' emanating from the earth – a resolution of sorts to the conflict between poetry, philosophy and fanaticism.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. S. Bushell, J. A. Butler et al (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), I.956-965.

<sup>2</sup> I. Kant, 'On Philosophical Exaltation' in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. P. Fenves (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> See, especially, Kant's involvement in the pantheism controversy, and his refutation of F.H. Jacobi's claim that the *Critique of Pure Reason* contained traces of Spinozism in his essay 'What is Orientation in Thinking?' (1786). For Kant, Spinoza was a dogmatic metaphysician, and the first *Critique* 'completely clips dogmatism's wings', *Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. A. W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 15. Kant argues in this essay that Spinozism 'leads directly to enthusiasm' [*Schwärmerei*], p. 15. On the pantheism controversy, and Kant's part in it, see also F. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard, 1987), pp. 113-126.

<sup>6</sup> See J. G. A. Pocock, 'Enthusiasm: The Anti-Self of Enlightenment,' *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 60 (1998), pp. 14-28. For the English context, see especially J. Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Mee describes *Schwärmerei* as enthusiasm's 'virtual synonym' (p. 12) although he also points to Kant's effort to distinguish between the terms in the *Critique of Judgment* and its possible influence on Coleridge. For Spinoza's place in the Enlightenment, see especially J. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Wordsworth defended *The Excursion* against the accusation that it was 'Spinosistic' by referring to the 'dramatic propriety' of the account of natural religion that the poem offers, chiefly through its main protagonist, 'The Wanderer.' See *Letters of William Wordsworth: A New Selection*, ed. A. G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 173. See also Coleridge's attack on Wordsworth's description of the child as a 'best philosopher' in the 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality,' which for Coleridge suggests that Wordsworth gives to the child a 'conscious intuition,' 'such as would suppose an immediate revelation to the inspired communicator, and require miracles to authenticate his inspiration,' *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (London, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 138. For Coleridge, the doctrine of intellectual intuition that Wordsworth implies in his poem suggests Spinozist pantheism – and therefore atheism. On Wordsworth and Methodism, see Francis Jeffrey's claim in a review of 1814 that *The Excursion* has too much 'of the mystical verbiage of the Methodist pulpit.' Cited in Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation*, p. 214.

<sup>8</sup> E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. F. M. Turner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, ed. J. Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and S. Gill (New York, London: Norton, 1979), p. 76, II.233-6.

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<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, p. 62, 1.510.

<sup>11</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 156.

<sup>12</sup> While the argument posed here might well look like a re-investment in the ‘enlightenment project’ of critique, which is subject to ever-more subtle and persuasive interrogation, I would not want to claim anything quite so naïve. An extraordinary body of recent work defending a disinvestment in the transformative power of critique has also sought to defend the ethical importance of ‘recessive action’ or ‘looking away,’ a provocative kind of repose which sets itself against programmes for transformative action and which celebrates, precisely, experiences which cannot be subsumed to a Kantian idea of universal communicability. While I find this work, and its reinvestment in retirement and its scepticism about improvement (to frame its concerns in a familiar enlightenment discourse) both powerful and richly creative, my interest in what follows is rather in the ways in which political subjects struggle to disengage from the transformative projects of ‘progress’ that they may well know to be foredoomed. The restless toil of Wordsworth’s poet figure in ‘The Ruined Cottage’ is one such example. While there is no space in the constraints of this essay to engage fully with the important recent turn to recessive action or disinvestment in the claims of metaphysics, nor to investigate the risks of political quietism that, to my mind, it poses, my general sense – articulated marginally in footnotes, - is that the political will of subjects occupies something like the space of the Kantian faculty of understanding. Even when reason seeks to police its ‘need’ or tendency to enter into the worrying territory of transcendental illusion, this does nothing to stop that transgressive tendency from exercising itself. Indeed, while it is illusory, it helps to produce a critical sense of the shape of our knowledge. Still, the policing activity of critical reason is itself needed in order to prevent the understanding from sliding into fanaticism. On the recent literature, see especially A.-L. François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) and R. Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, Mass. And London: Harvard University Press, 2009), chapter 2 of which offers a sympathetic reading of the status of transcendental illusion in Kant.

<sup>13</sup> I. Kant, ‘A Renewed Attempt to Answer the Question: ‘Is the Human Race Continually Improving?’ in *Kant’s Political Writings*, ed. H. Reiss and H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 177.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>16</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, 1.47-55.

<sup>17</sup> The history of the weavers in the nineteenth century ‘is haunted by the legend of better days’, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 297. Thompson immediately spots the ideological vulnerability of this legend; it opens the door to the counter-claim, found for example in Engels’s English editors, that ‘the period before the Industrial Revolution was a golden age is a myth’ (p. 298). It is too quick and easy to write off memories of a golden age as myths, since such a claim risks effacing what is in fact a close, if simplified indicator of an objective historical truth – the suffering and decline of an entire class of workers, justified under the false narrative of ‘progress’ as mechanization, rather than the deliberate and instrumental reduction of a complex class structure into the status of outworkers. Something of the truth of the legend determines, in fact, the weavers’ attraction to utopia; it was ‘as a whole community that they demanded betterment,

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and utopian notions of redesigning society at a stroke [...] swept through them like fire on the common' (p. 326).

<sup>18</sup> Kant, "Is the Human Race Continually Improving?," p. 188.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>22</sup> A. Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), p. 141.

<sup>23</sup> Toscano, *Fanaticism*, p. 146.

<sup>24</sup> A. Hickey, *Impure Conceits: Rhetoric and Ideology in Wordsworth's 'Excursion'* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, I.981.

<sup>26</sup> See also François' argument about the 'open secret' of recessive action, which she defines as 'a way of imparting knowledge such that it cannot be claimed and acted on', *Open Secrets*, p. 1. While François is alive to the ways in which the 'open secret' becomes in new historicist criticism 'a trope for the implicit workings of ideology itself' (p. 5) she wants to claim for it a release from the narcissistic over-valuation of the de-fetishizing power of acts of interpretation, and to claim for it instead a simple disclosure of 'the taking in of *x* and the leaving it at that.' (p. 3). My claim is not too distant from François' in that Wordsworth signals unease with the kind of redemptive tracing of spirit in or 'behind' nature that allows his Poet to discharge his guilt and sorrow about Margaret's suffering – but so too, he suggests that this may be all we can do. But to this extent, Wordsworth leaves us in an altogether more restless and uneasy place than recessive action promises.

<sup>27</sup> Kant, 'On A Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,' in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy*, p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>32</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, I.1-25)

<sup>33</sup> *OED*.

<sup>34</sup> C. Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 64.

<sup>35</sup> D. Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 41.

<sup>36</sup> A. J. Volpa, 'The Philosopher and the *Schwärmer*: On the Career of a German Epithet from Luther to Kant,' *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 60 (1997), pp. 85-116, p. 88. On murmuring, or humming, it is notable that in the poem's first version the 'insect host' had 'joined their murmurs to the noise/ Of seeds of bursting gorse that crackled round' (l.25-6). The aural, creaturely life of the swarm here seems to anticipate the Wanderer's invocation of melody discussed below.

<sup>37</sup> Mee, *Wordsworth*, p. 214.

<sup>38</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, I.57-9.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, I.264, I.377, I.323-4.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Toscano, *Fanaticism*, xv-xvi.

<sup>41</sup> Kant, 'On A Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,' p. 63.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

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<sup>45</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, III.323-8.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, III.341-2.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, III.355-9, 362-3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, III.631-2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, III.367-70.

<sup>50</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 150. The shrewd move Marx, a trained classicist, makes, is to oppose Max Stirner's view of ideas as the driving force of history with a more nuanced and accurate account of the ideas of Stoics and Epicureans. Finally, '[i]nstead of describing the 'world of things' which provides the material basis of Christianity, [Stirner] causes this 'world of things' to be annihilated in the world of the spirit, of Christianity' (p. 156).

<sup>51</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, IV.531-2.