

## Slow Time and Eighteenth-Century Futures

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How did those living in Britain during the later eighteenth century foresee the future? My current research thinks about futurity in connection with pace, and specifically about how anticipations of the future raise the question of *when*: what kind of time horizons are assumed when men and women in the eighteenth century anticipate future events and futurity more generally? How soon and how quickly do these projected futures seem to be arriving? Reinhart Koselleck has argued that for those living in the eighteenth century, two specific temporal determinants characterize the experience of transition from past to future: “the expected otherness of the future and, associated with it, the alteration in the rhythm of temporal experience: acceleration, by means of which one’s own time is distinguished from what went before.”<sup>1</sup> More recently, Hartmut Rosa has developed Koselleck’s emphasis on social acceleration into a new theory of modernity based on what he calls “the shrinking of the present,” an ever quickening rate at which the future seems to be approaching.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Koselleck, Rosa, and others, my work on eighteenth-century futures seeks to emphasize not just acceleration but also what I call slow time, and the renewed attention to processes that unfold so slowly as to be beyond observation. My pre-circulated paper, significantly edited in the version that follows here, opened with an account of Darwin’s journal of his *Beagle* voyage (1831-1836; publ. 1839, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1845) in which Darwin reflects on slow processes of change, invisible violence, extinction and decline, death and disappearance. What makes possible his protracted, slow understanding of time as something that is glacial and stony, characterized by rocks more than trees, grey rather than green, incomprehensibly prolonged and yet not infinite?<sup>3</sup>

The conditions of possibility for Darwin’s theory and its emphasis on slow time are of course over-determined. Darwin’s writings show a clear awareness of debates about timescale like those between Cuvier and Lamarck in the early nineteenth century, while Darwin himself explicitly acknowledges the influence of Malthus and Lyell, among others. Scholars have largely taken these sources at face value. My claim here, however, is that Darwin’s recognition of invisible violence, slow time, and the related mental wrangling with the unimaginably long periods of time that frustrate human comprehension (what we now call “deep time”) might also be understood as an outgrowth of changes in the understanding of time that developed in the later eighteenth century. To talk about virtually any aspect of Darwin’s theory requires an awareness of the plenitude of time and the consequent slowness of its movement, a fundamental reconfiguring of time that grows out of the increasingly large estimates for the age of the earth and its development from Buffon forwards. But such refiguring is also a representational and a formal problem: how can humans imagine and grasp the slowness of time and the presence of temporal processes that operate below the level of the visual? Poetry helps here because, in light

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, translated by Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 252.

<sup>2</sup> Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 72.

of new ideas about time in the later eighteenth century, it serves as an important source for working out the imaginative and formal implications, the representational problems, produced by slow time. My claim here, in other words, is that Romantic poetry can also be understood as an unacknowledged but no less important source for Darwin's thinking and, further, that the temporal problems confronted by Darwin and his Romantic precursors have not disappeared but continue to shadow current thinking about slow time and invisible violence.

Slowness is not a quality that we traditionally associate with modernity, which is more generally characterized by a perceived acceleration or speeding up, one commonly instigated by advances in technologies of communication and mobility like print and the railway.<sup>4</sup> But feelings of acceleration associated with print circulation and a later eighteenth-century media shift also produced a new understanding of slowness, one eventually developed by Darwin and exemplified here by Wordsworth's poetry of unspectacular time (and in a substantially revised and expanded version of this essay, also by the "slow time" of Keats's Grecian urn, and by the fossils overturned in Charlotte Smith's "Beachy Head").

My suggestion is that one of the defining features of the later eighteenth century is a sense of discordant temporality that responds to innovations within the conception of time, and, more specifically, to a new sense of slowness perceived beneath the more commonly acknowledged sense of acceleration or speeding up of contemporary life. This new sense of time produces "disturbance or unease," and a "particular type of tension," related to what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling,"<sup>5</sup> that can be grasped by looking at the formal and representational problems shared by later eighteenth-century and Romantic precursors to Darwin's writings. This structure of feeling persists and when I claim that Darwin's recognition of slowness is part of a structure of feeling that can be linked to the adjustment between entangled senses of acceleration and slowness that make their relation felt fully in the later eighteenth century, furthermore, I intend to suggest the later eighteenth-century qualities of other related and more recent attempts to rethink slowness and to grapple with our own current temporal confusions.

Ursula Heise, for example, has coined the term "chronoschisms" to characterize a "sense of time that in its discontinuity, its fragmentation into multiple temporal itineraries and its collisions of incommensurable time scales highlights and hyperbolizes certain characteristics of a culture of time," one that she locates as beginning in the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> My suggestion, however, is that this supposedly post-modern sense of time might more accurately be traced not to the 1960s but rather to the 1760s or thereabouts. More recently, in his manifesto on "slow violence," Rob Nixon has called for a project of redefining speed, a redefinition that recognizes the formal, representational challenges of showing effects delayed over long stretches of time and that emphasizes the particular difficulty of such formal problems in the context of turbo-capitalism

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<sup>4</sup> The point is widely repeated and acknowledged. I have in mind, among others, theorists of modernity including Reinhart Koselleck and Hartmut Rosa (already cited), but also Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), Paul Virilio, *The Virilio Reader*, ed. James Der Derian (London: Wiley Blackwell, 1998) and Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Time*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Verso, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> "I have found that areas which I would call structures of feeling ... form as a certain kind of disturbance or unease, a particular type of tension, for which when you stand back or recall them you can sometimes find a referent." Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left Review* (London: Verso, 1981), 167.

<sup>6</sup> Ursula Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5-6.

and what Nixon calls “an era of enclaved time wherein for many speed has become a self-justifying, propulsive ethic that renders ‘uneventful’ violence...a weak claimant on our time.”<sup>7</sup> In response, Nixon proposes a recasting of the glacial as “a rousing, iconic image of unacceptably fast loss” (*Slow Violence*, 13). It’s an arresting image, and while I am sympathetic to both the urgency and the aims of Nixon’s intervention, it overlooks how an earlier eighteenth-century awareness of the increased speed and acceleration of contemporary life is already interpellated with the recognition of a concomitant slowness. Speed, slowness, and the collision of incommensurable time scales do create formal problems, as Heise and Nixon insist, but these formal problems are not new. They might better be understood as later eighteenth-century problems whose terms and contours, whose representational experiments we can recognize especially in what I will characterize below as a Romantic poetics of slowness.

### Acceleration and Slowness

The paper opens with a look at the “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in which Wordsworth laments a widespread “craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.”<sup>8</sup> In the more extended paper, this sense of speeding up is then developed with brief reference to contemporary theorists of acceleration and intensification like Koselleck, Rosa, and Paul Virilio, before the discussion focuses on a remarkable series of essays by Samuel Taylor Coleridge written for the *Morning Post* in 1802. Here, Coleridge compares the present state of France with that of Rome under the Caesars, and argues that France has been changed into an empire “by the same steps as the Roman Republic was, and under the same titles and phrases: only as before, differing in the degrees of rapidity with which the same processes have been accomplished. The reigns of the first three Caesars have been crowded into the three first years of the reign of Bonaparte.”<sup>9</sup> Coleridge and Wordsworth show that a sense of acceleration is not just something that has been recognized by contemporary theorists. Coleridge privileges Augustan slowness but his perceived speeding up of contemporary time offers consolation because it augers a more rapid end to the French regime; for Wordsworth the outlook is more ambivalent and the increased speed of modernity serves only to gratify a craving for incident or event. For both, however, acceleration and slowness exist in a complicated interrelation in which the perception of speed enables the recognition of slowness and vice versa. Moreover, both associate acceleration with changes in communications technology, with what we would today describe as the saturation of print in the later eighteenth-century with the explosion of periodicals and related publications. Romantic readers, as we are now beginning to understand from excellent recent work grounded in the concepts and terms of contemporary media theory, very much understood themselves to be living through a media revolution as well as a political revolution.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>8</sup> William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, eds. R.L. Brett and A. R. Jones, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1991), 239.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 3: Essays on His Times in The Morning Post and The Courier*, ed. David Erdman, 3 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 3:316-17.

<sup>10</sup> I have in mind here Celeste Langan and Maureen McLane, Langan, “The medium of Romantic Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. James Chandler and Maureen McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Maureen McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British*

Wordsworth's understanding of acceleration and his association of the increasing speed of communications technologies with the diminished intellect of the audience for poetry circa 1800 has implications for how we read Wordsworth's poetry. If later eighteenth-century historical actors sensed the acceleration of time, and, if some, like Wordsworth, were alarmed by it, we can begin to interpret what I describe as a Romantic poetics of slowness as a carefully-thought response to this quickening, and therefore as a poetics that takes up Rob Nixon's clarification of the representational challenges inherent in making "slow violence visible" while also challenging "the privileging of the visible" (*Slow Violence*, 15). Nixon adds that "In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration. The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen" (*Slow Violence*, 15). The terms are Nixon's, but this might easily be read as the program for Wordsworth's contribution to the *Lyrical Ballads* project as well as for works like "The Ruined Cottage" and for Wordsworth's poetry of the late 1790s more generally. Wordsworth's poetry responds to an excess of perceived speed by slowing things down. The poetry can therefore be understood as minimally stimulating specifically in order reciprocally to heighten responsiveness.

Read thus, Wordsworth's emphasis on the slow becomes a hortatory slowness, one that responds to a perceived quickening, to the fast becoming faster, with an aesthetic and moral appreciation of the slow. This kind of attitude, for example, marks the development of the *Lyrical Ballads* project. I'm thinking here about the speed and bustle of poems like "The Idiot Boy," whose effects are achieved not only through the description of speed but also through formal qualities like repetition and the use of galloping tetrameter, and "The Tables Turned," with its jarring and urgent opening appeal to haste aided and abetted by explanatory punctuation, "Up! Up!" Such moments contrast with the slowness and contemplation of "Tintern Abbey," the Lucy poems, and (later, in 1807) "The Leech Gatherer," but especially with "The Old Man Travelling" and "The Old Cumberland Beggar." After a close reading of these latter two poems that elicits the particular resonances of slow movement in each, the essay returns to a comparison of Wordsworth and Darwin.

### **Wordsworth, Darwin, and the slow**

Having shown the centrality of slowness in Wordsworth's early poetry (and in the paper's revised version, in the poetry of Keats and Charlotte Smith as well), the essay suggests that Darwin inherits formal and representational problems related to slowness from Romantic poetry. My argument thus expands the sources of Robert Richards's claims for the importance of aesthetic influences on Darwin from a German to an English context in a manner less insistent on direct influence, though we can see overlap between Darwin and his Romantic precursors,

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*Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. pages 112-116; Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); and the work of the research group "Interacting with Print: Cultural Practices of Intermediality, 1700-1900": <http://interactingwithprint.org>.

especially Wordsworth.<sup>11</sup> After considering a series of verbal invocations of Wordsworth's poetry in Darwin's work, I suggest that while telling, such echoes are admittedly limited and an argument for the importance of Romantic poetics to Darwin's thought will require more than a series of verbal echoes.

Beyond the particular resonances of Wordsworthian language, Alan Bewell has taught us to recognize how Wordsworth's poetry models a fascination with the marginal, with the dispossessed, and with a series of social and racial types on the verge of extinction.<sup>12</sup> These marginal figures contribute to what I have been describing as a poetics of slowness, one marked not only by figures nearly extinct but also by rocks and stones and by the interaction and frequent figural transposition between the marginal and the rocks. Indeed, the prominence of rocks in Wordsworth's poetry has prompted Paul Fry to ask whether "the nature poetry of Wordsworth is green or gray" given that " 'rocks and stones' make up two thirds of the Wordsworthian cosmos" (*Wordsworth*, 72). Similarly, in her recent book on *Romantic Things*, Mary Jacobus devotes a chapter to rocks, which, she suggests, provide Wordsworth with a key for reading nature's silences. Jacobus's attention to the resonances between rocks and the nearly extinct is clear in her argument that the Leech Gatherer "records the infinite slowness of glacial time."<sup>13</sup> These recent emphases on Wordsworth's fascination with rocks should come as no surprise after Noah Heringman's convincing argument that "the literary culture producing this poetry was fundamentally shaped by many of the same cultural practices that formed geology as a science during the period 1770-1820."<sup>14</sup> Romantic poetry and the formation of geology might thus be understood as offering an archaeological framework for Darwin's appreciation of nature's slowness and the extinct former beings whose specimens Darwin collected on his voyage.

But if Darwin adapts a Romantic poetics of slowness, he abandons its frequent emphasis on benevolent interdependence in favor of a new model that sees such interdependence as part of a violent struggle for existence dissociated from moral values. Both, however, are part of what I have earlier described as a structure of feeling predicated on a particular type of tension between the seemingly accelerated, fast time of modernity and the slow time of evolutionary change. The fossils Darwin collected on the *Beagle* are literally indurate objects, bodies become rocks, that in their transformation tell us about duration, about time, and about the history of life on earth. If scholars like Heringman have placed their emphasis on induration, on the materiality of terrestrial history and geof ormation in Romantic literature and science, my interest in the conjunction between Romantic poetry, Darwin, and geology is more about duration, about time. Darwin's thinking about fossils in his journal of the *Beagle* voyage and his reflections on time when he contemplates the sand along what is now the Uruguayan coastline echo historical disputes between the French naturalist Georges Cuvier and the botanist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck that hinge on how we understand the historical nature of life on earth, and the appropriate scale of time in which we imagine the earth's development.

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Noah Heringman, *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), xii.

It will come as no surprise that Darwin developed his theory in relation to important precursors like Cuvier and Lamarck. We can locate this push towards larger timescales not only in Lamarck and Cuvier, but also in their precursors Buffon, Saussure, de Luc, Hutton, Blumenbach, Demarest and other *savants* discussed by Martin Rudwick in his magisterial *Bursting the Limits of Time*. What this means is that the perceived acceleration of modernity, commonly dated to the later eighteenth century, can be understood to develop in relationship to the longer timescales of natural or geological history, what Keats called “slow time,” but which is at present more commonly called “deep time.”<sup>15</sup> For my purposes, however, the very changes that Rudwick describes in relation to the expansion of timescale by *savants* is part of a more widespread and less disciplinarily specific understanding of time that gains currency in the 1770s and develops through the Romantic period. The accelerated time of Wordsworth’s preface and the slow time of his poetry emerge together. How, then, does Darwin address the representational problems framed by the interpellation between these two competing—but also, as I have suggested, complementary—ideas of time?

In response to this question, the longer version of this paper looks at the frequency with which Darwin invokes slowness in the *Origin*—a concept he uses considerably more often than the struggle for survival for which he is better remembered. I then consider Darwin’s recognition of the timescale that it would take for evolutionary processes to unfold, “a lapse of time” by Darwin’s own admission, “so great as to be utterly inappreciable by the human intellect.”<sup>16</sup> This, of course, is the problem of slow time: that it eludes representation and often requires a temporal span so large as to be almost without meaning. How, after all, can we comprehend the significant difference between a ten million and a hundred million years, or, for that matter, even ten million and eleven million years? And yet this is also the representational problem that Darwin must confront if he wants to make the case for slow and gradual change within an almost incomprehensibly long time span that is nonetheless not infinite. Darwin understands the difference that deep time makes, and to render a vast timescale comprehensible he turns not to the poetic strategies of Wordsworth, but to a visual aid, a printed chart, the only illustration in Darwin’s *Origins*. What is interesting and innovative about Darwin’s chart, I suggest, is that it joins fast and slow into a variant of deep time that can now be made available to representation, one that offers the possibility of accounting for vast swathes of time in a single glance, in the same amount of time that one can account for shorter periods of time.

In calling attention to the multiple temporalities enabled by Darwin’s chart, I do not mean to suggest that Darwin has solved the representational problem of deep time; rather I want to underscore how Wordsworth and Darwin face related formal problems in their attempts to call attention to unspectacular but not insignificant events, events that are characterized by an intensity of slowness that commonly escapes representation but that must nonetheless be shown in relationship to time. Such formal and representational problems, moreover, do not disappear, and indeed, they continue into the present as attested by Nixon’s recent call for a redefinition of speed in relation to slow violence. The conditions for these ongoing problems, I have suggested,

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<sup>15</sup> Coinage of this term is often credited to John McPhee. The term, whose use has been widespread in geology, has recently become a contested topic in literary studies with the appearance of Wai-Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) and Mark McGurl’s critique of Dimock, “The Posthuman Comedy,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (2012): 533-553. Dimock uses “deep time” to mark a Braudelian long durée; my usage is closer to that of McGurl, though I am not convinced that either elicits fully the role of literary writing in developing the metaphorical force of the concept.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Darwin, *Evolutionary Writings*, ed. James A. Secord (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 192.

are set in the later eighteenth century when a sense of acceleration and eventfulness generated by print media and exacerbated by the monumental revolution in France develops in felt tension with new understandings of slowness and new awareness of the increasingly large estimates for the age of the Earth that we now associate with deep time.