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Wordsworth and Charles Le Brun: Expression, Colour, Sensation

Figure 1 is a reproduction of the painting that Wordsworth records having sought out as he passed through Paris on his way to Orléans in 1791, early on in Book 9 of *The Prelude*.\(^1\) He recalls a whistle-stop tour of some of the key sights of the early Revolution, including the Champ de Mars, the National Assembly and the Jacobins, and the site of the Bastille. But he writes that these ‘spots,’ as he calls them,

Seemed less to recompense the traveller’s pains,  
Less moved me, gave me less delight, than did  
A single picture merely, hunted out  
Among other sights, the Magdalene of Le Brun,  
A beauty exquisitely wrought—fair face  
And rueful, with its ever-flowing tears.\(^2\)

The painting captures the Magdalene in transition—renouncing worldly goods for a life of retirement and spiritual devotion, as its full title, *Sainte Madeleine Repentante Renonce A’ Toutes Les Vanités de La Vie*, discloses. The restless, energetic zig-zagging of her body across the picture plane gives a sense of its subject caught in transformation. Wordsworth’s encounter with the painting forms a linchpin for Alan Liu’s and Jerome Christensen’s influential readings of the relations between painting and history in his verse.\(^3\) Liu understands Wordsworth’s response to the painting as a denial of the sublime vio-

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1 Permission has been sought for reproduction of Figure 1. Other images in this paper are believed to be free of copyright and will be removed on application.
lence of the revolution through an appeal to the aesthetics of the picturesque and beautiful. Christensen claims this moment in the poem as instead evidence of the “postmodern” way in which Wordsworth’s
poetry ‘invites misreading rather than suffers from it’ (Christensen, 65). I would argue that both approaches block attention to the historical life of paintings as singular, material objects, and fail to pay close enough attention to the peculiar fate of the genre of history painting in this period.¹ What I describe here as the “historical life” of a painting can be tracked through the institutional conditions of its survival, that is to say, where, how and if it gets displayed, as well as in any efforts made to restore it. These institutional conditions might also be taken as an index of, or causal factor in, the growth or decline of public interest in a painting. Debates around the different possible techniques for display and restoration of artworks were in fact important subjects of ideological dispute in the revolutionary decade in France, where they registered a highly visible opportunity for the new political power to define its relationship to the past and to shape an emergent public sphere through its management of public access to newly-nationalised treasures. As I’ll suggest in what follows, the singular fate of Le Brun’s painting is worthy of closer attention for what it can begin to tell us about Wordsworth, painting and history.

I want to suggest that reading the painting in this way might enable a closer understanding of the embodied, sensory appeals to history that Wordsworth makes throughout The Prelude.² After all, his being “moved” by the Magdalene stands in for, or in some way compenses him for the feeling of disengagement or estrangement that he experiences at the monumental sites of recent history in Paris in 1791. If new historicism was guilty of making an ‘abstract appeal to history’³ in its effort to track denials of history across Wordsworth’s

¹ For an influential argument about the re-assertion of the hierarchy of the genres in the second half of the Eighteenth Century in France, which sees this as foundational for the modernity of painting rather than simply backward-looking, see Michael Fried, Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 72. The case in Britain is somewhat different, of course: but it is important to note that key theorists such as Reynolds in the Discourses continue to mount a defence of history painting over landscape, while the importance of the genre to Wordsworth’s self-conception can be glimpsed in the sonnet to Haydon “High is our calling, friend!”

² For a full discussion of this topic, see Noel Jackson, Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 23–63.

poetry, then the recent turn against new historicism has done little, as yet, to redress this. Closer attention to the place of Wordsworth’s response to the painting in the web of reflections on history that constitute a deep structure of *The Prelude*, as well as attention to the fate of the painting itself, can offer ways forward.

According to Liu, the conventions of classical history painting’s representation of national history, classical myth and scenes from Scripture, and especially moments of violent or agitated transition, were ‘arrested,’ first in Claude’s landscapes and then in the British picturesque that took him as its model (Liu, 55–137). Picturesque and Claudian landscapes sought instead, according to Liu, to represent a new, post-sectarian model of liberal freedom. In France, however, the religious power of history painting remained a key issue of contestation in the revolutionary decade. The plundered art that began to arrive in Paris after 1792, especially the artworks confiscated from the Church, presented the new public authority with a problem. How was it to use the great masters to foster public instruction—the expressed intention for the Louvre when it was opened in 1793, —without re-subjecting the public to the iconography of Catholic fanaticism, and its association with absolute sovereignty? This conflict, as Andrew McLellan has argued, was solved through investing the museum space itself with secularizing tendencies. The mystical power of individual paintings was disarmed by organising those paintings into different schools and chronologies that turned them into objects of art-historical and aesthetic appreciation, intended to contribute to an enlightenment narrative of the historical progress of the arts.¹

As McLellan claims, influenced by the new taxonomies of the natural sciences, and the rise of historicism, late eighteenth-century museums initiated the now-commonplace practice of isolating works of art, both from each other, and from the social roles and physical contexts that they originally enjoyed, in the service of direct or transparent viewing. This desire for transparency aimed to erase the his-

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historical life of the picture, partly through newly-developed restoration techniques that sought to return the painting to the condition that it had been in at the time that it left the artist’s studio. These restoration techniques were themselves highly contentious and ideologically—loaded in the 1790s, and might even seem to function as metonyms for the revolution itself, since the line between restoring an artwork to its imagined original purity and vandalising it was not always an easy one to draw.

The Magdalene of Le Brun became a victim of just these radically historicizing tendencies: displaced from the Carmelite Convent in 1792, where the painting had been a witness to the September Massacres a little over a year after Wordsworth saw her, she failed to make the grade for inclusion in the Le Brun collection at the Louvre in 1793. Where Le Brun had carefully matched the light represented in the picture with the real flow of light in the chapel of the Convent dedicated to her and where she had hung, the Magdalene was deemed to look colourless in the Grand Gallery and sent to the lesser museum at Versailles. There, encountered as just another picture in a museum, she became a forgotten classic. At the time Wordsworth saw her, the Magdalene was still just about an unmissable highlight of any tourist’s itinerary in Paris, but her stock was in rapid decline. Today, she remains in storage at the Louvre.¹

If the Magdalene was a victim of late Enlightenment exhibition practice as it was adopted by the new French republic, she proves that only certain works of art are amenable to the illusion that their historical life can be stripped away in the name of restoring them to their original context. Others, that can’t be separated from that life, are left at the roadside (something that the apocryphal story, associated with the painting into the Nineteenth Century, that the model for the Magdalene was a former mistress of Louis XIV, who herself

¹ ‘In times gone by, an informed traveller who would have left Paris without having seen Le Brun’s Magdalene would have appeared as someone ignorant of the arts; today, if the same person dared to compliment himself on having made the trip to Versailles in order to pay the same homage to this picture as it received generally before ’89, he would be considered a rather superficial connoisseur’ writes François Lauzan, a keeper at the Musée spéciale, in 1797. Cited in McClellan, 1994, 203–4.
renounced worldly goods for life in the convent, seems to prove).

I think it’s possible that Wordsworth’s poem explores a mode of counter—history that has to do with the duration and change of particular objects. This can begin to be glimpsed through the poetic trope invoked in *The Prelude*, and that reaches back to Richard Crashaw’s own weeping Magdalene, of her ever-flowing tears. But I want to approach this mode of counter—history sideways through three aspects of the painting’s duration; first, through the expressive tradition that Le Brun is often taken to stand for; second, through the issue of colour as a mark of duration and/or decay, as well as identity; and then finally through a reading of sense and sensation that will emerge from this thinking about colour.

**Expression**

It is partly as a theorist of expression that Le Brun was remembered and still influential across the Eighteenth Century, especially for the extraordinary studies of expression in heads that were still used as a copy-book for students, and that had been made to illustrate a conference on general and particular expression that he had given to the French Royal Academy of Painting in 1668. It is not difficult to understand why the public imagination in the Revolutionary decade should be captivated by Le Brun’s studies of isolated heads in states of violent contorted passion as in Figure 2. In 1797, a related aspect of Le Brun’s work, that had not gone out of fashion, that is, his curious physiognomic drawings comparing personal-
ity types to animals, were on display at the Louvre. While the effort to classify human personality types through physiognomy took on a particular urgency as public life became less rigidly defined with the advent of newly-permissive conditions of visibility in the 1790s, the French public’s fascination with human-animals also emerges as a key reflection on the traumatic events of 1792–5. Having visited the Louvre exhibition in 1797, Sébastian Mercier recounts in his *Nouveau Tableau de Paris* that, after surveying the drawings, visitors would furtively sidle towards the mirrors at the end of the gallery to scrutinize their features, and to verify as to whether they resembled an Indian cock or an eagle, a dromedary or a lion, a monkey or a pig.¹ The joke is partly one about a new, vulgar public exposed to art, but the point is also a political one. Mercier recalled that in the context of recent history, such comparisons seemed valid as Robespierre had

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resembled a wild cat (fig. 3 shows Le Brun’s cat-man) while Marat had looked like an alarming night-bird (fig. 4 shows Le Brun’s man-owl; a quick glance at David’s *Death of Marat* confirms Mercier’s thesis about the birdlike shape of Marat’s face).

![Figure 4](image)

Le Brun’s interest in expression is bound up with his desire to give history painting the dignity of a liberal art. Through expression, which relates both to the depiction of passion in the human face, and the general composition of the picture space, it was hoped that painting, which can only refer to a single moment in time, could capture something of the dynamic narrative movement of poetry, a movement which renders poetry ripe for employment in the charting of
epic national histories. This association of expression with history painting seems significant for the kinds of history Wordsworth experiences in *the Prelude*. He tells us at the beginning of book 9 that he was drawn to France by a personal wish ‘[t]o speak the language more familiarly’ (9.37), and his linguistic lack gives him a particular view on the atmosphere in Paris. The fact that language is sound rather than fully articulate meaning attunes Wordsworth to mood and sense; in this case the chaotic, hissing fanaticism of the Miltonic swarms of factionists he encounters in the streets. It also cues him to read the expression of faces absorbed in their plots:

I stared and listened with a stranger’s ears  
To hawkers and haranguers, hubbub wild,  
And hissing factionists with ardent eyes,  
In knots, or pairs, or single, ant-like swarms  
Of builders and subverters, every face  
That hope or apprehension could put on—  
Joy, anger, and vexation, in the midst  
Of gaiety and dissolute idleness. (9. 55–62)

The faces whose expressions he reads in fact correspond remarkably well to Le Brun’s heads, designed to accompany his conference (fig 5 shows joy, but Le Brun also has heads for hope, apprehension and, as we’ve seen, anger). If the sounds of Paris are hissing and creaturely, so its faces have the expressive qualities of a LeBrunian history painting.

**Colour**

While Le Brun’s studies of expression remained influential and of general interest into the 1790s in France, his Cartesian theory of expression went out of fashion in the early Eighteenth Century. The rise of Rococo and the cult of sensibility privileged the beautiful and natural over the agitation of violent passions; and even with the turn against the Rococo in the mid-Century, the return to an emphasis on expression in painting and commentary, as Michael Fried has argued, takes place in the context of the absorption and self-forgetting of the
subject in particular tasks, where the depiction of specific passions becomes little more than an afterthought (see Fried, 24). Part of this shift also had to do with a new emphasis on the importance of colour in creating painterly effect. While later theorists such as Reynolds in the Discourses would still try to defend the narrative form of history painting, and especially the Roman school’s use of simple, often discordant colours over the blended, colourful luxuriance of the Venetian school, this was mainly a rearguard effort. Because Le Brun’s effort to give painting a literary status had led him to privilege line over colour, and because he consequently often applied paint thinly to the canvas, the colour quality of his own images deteriorated rapidly over the Eighteenth Century, giving rise to frequent puns on his name.

If they departed from the violent contortions of Le Brun’s passion heads, Jennifer Montagu argues that Eighteenth Century theorists retained an interest in the other half of expression, general expression, which made a more immediate impact on the spectator, and required less attention and analysis than emotions written on the
Since the end of the Seventeenth Century, and the work of Roger de Piles, the best way to create this general mood was considered to be through colour, and there was consequently a shift towards a heightened emphasis on colour with the growing mood of sensibility in painting. Montagu shows that in painting as in other arts such as sculpture, there was a shift towards the selection of objects for their expressive qualities, and in effect the birth of what Ruskin was later to call the ‘pathetic fallacy.’ Ruskin wrote in *Modern Painters* that his reader would find the pathetic fallacy ‘eminently characteristic of the modern mind; and in the landscape, whether of literature or art, he will also find the modern painter endeavouring to express something which he, as a living creature, imagines in the lifeless object, while the classical and medieval painters were content with expressing the imaginary and actual qualities of the object itself.’

Ruskin has Wordsworth as a key example of what he calls the first order of poets, the man who ‘perceives rightly in spite of his feelings, and to whom the primrose is for ever nothing else than itself’ (Ruskin, 209). While for Ruskin this capacity has to do with the ability to manage one’s emotions in all but the most extreme situations—when it would be psychotic not to break down—it also has to do with the ways in which this emotional restraint gives their own life to objects.

In Book 11 of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth records his having been cured of a tendency, derived from an idolatry of reason in logic and minute analysis, to substitute a perception of general expression for a deeper communion with nature: he records that he had been, in the early 1790s, ‘Bent overmuch on superficial things, / Pampering myself with meagre novelties / Of colour and proportion, to the moods / Of Nature, and the spirit of the place, / Less sensible’ (11. 159—63). His attunement to the deeper moods of nature enables a sensory encounter with particulars that resist the despotic eye’s effort to classify them as parts of an aesthetic effect or a landscape, and to enter into a comparison of scene with scene. In place, he offers his

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lovely homage to his own youthful and Mary Hutchinson’s uncorrupted capacity just to receive from nature, which leads to a kind of higher converse with things. Such a converse with things – with the thingly pitcher on the head of the girl ascending a hill in the first spot of time that follows on from this passage, or the garments vexed and tossed by the strong wind, refuses general expression, a mannered aesthetics, in favour of the mood given out by things themselves. It invests in the world of the spontaneous life in things, a world that would need colours and words unknown to man to picture its visionary dreariness.

**Sensation**

Colorfulness does not stimulate the animal senses because the child’s uncorrupted imaginative activity springs from the soul […] The order of art is paradisiacal because there is no thought of the dissolution of boundaries—from excitement—in the object of experience. Instead the world is full of color in a state of identity, innocence, and harmony.¹

Benjamin argues that colour is not a deceptive layer thrown over discrete objects, but rather provides contours that fashion boundaries while giving individual objects a nuanced relation to the world. In place of the Kantian forms of intuition, space and time, that formally determine our experience and downgrade colour to the categories of objective and subjective sense, he imagines a different life in the world, where parts give and receive from an overall complexity. For a Wordsworthian equivalent of this different texture of reality, we could turn to the cave of Yordas in Book 8 of *The Prelude*, that describes the experience of moving through an overwhelming, spectral obscurity into a lifeless, written clarity before waiting for the move back into a kind of moving, living obscurity and complexity of folds. This latter movement is of ‘a senseless mass,’ that ‘In its projections, wrinkles, cavities, / Through all its surface, with all colours

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streaming./ Like a magician’s airy pageant, parts./ Unites, embody-
ing everywhere some pressure/ Or image, recognised or new, some
type/ Or picture of the world’ (8. 731–7). This projection offers us a
picture of the world, not a world picture: it is not a delusive meta-
physics that asks us to act suspiciously towards what it defines as
unifying layers of sense that are painted onto a world of discretely
deﬁned particulars. This projection can then imagine boundaries as
the site of paradisiacal fulﬁlment, rather than the trauma of an origi-
nal separation.

Sense in Wordsworth, in fact, is about duration, or perhaps better
movement in duration. When he records his complex attraction to
a history of longue durée just after the Cave of Yordas episode, he
writes that both national history and local, familiar, ‘extrinsic’ his-
tory had never delighted him; instead he searches for ‘a sense / Of
what had been done, and suffered here / Through ages, and was
doing, suffering still’ (8. 781–3). Sense is, rather than a handmaid to
reason, the possibility of our contact with duration, with what goes
on—like the Magdalene’s ever-ﬂowing tears. Sensation can offer
pictures of unity in multitude, as in Wordsworth’s record at the end
of Book 8 of ‘One sense for moral judgments, as one eye/ For the
sun’s light’ (8. 830–1). Consequently, he can offer a post-lapsarian,
but also heliotropic image that can stand for a different possible
aesthetic account of sense in his recollection of an ‘artificer,’ who
has just left off work and sits on the corner-stone of a low-wall that
fenced in the green plot of an open square in London, where he is
seen eyeing with unutterable love his sickly babe—‘as if he were
afraid both of the sun/ And of the air which he had come to seek’
(8. 857–9). Expression is this double-edge: dead passion, but also
living joy, a sensation of history found in particulars rather than a
sensational history, just as the sun can both bleach away the colour
of particulars and bring them to light.