

The Peculiar Romanticism of the English Situationists

Sam Cooper

IN HIS 1988 SURVEY of the Situationist International's 'penetration into British culture', George Robertson notes:

For various reasons – a traditional British suspicion of intellectualism, the historical presence of a Romantic element in the British left avant-garde, etc. – it seems that in Britain there was an attraction to the superficial, subjective and spectacular aspects of the SI [Situationist International].¹

Before I introduce the groups that Robertson discusses, and explain his objections to those three Ss that characterise the anglophonic reception of the SI (1957–72), I want to dwell for a moment on the two reasons he gives for why the British have got the Situationists wrong. First, he says that there is 'a traditional British suspicion of intellectualism'. He could perhaps be a little more specific. Certainly, at many moments in the twentieth century there was an assumed incongruity between anglophone cultures and the Continental avant-garde traditions of which the SI saw itself as the culmination. Robertson's mock-serious use of the term 'intellectualism' conjures a favourite epithet of British writers hostile to the SI: a decade prior, in a leading countercultural magazine, one such writer described the group as 'embittered scene-creamers' who tried 'in typically

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¹ George Robertson, 'The Situationist International: Its Penetration into British Culture', in Stewart Home (ed.), *What is Situationism? A Reader* (Edinburgh 1996) p. 123.

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French fashion to intellectualise the whole mood [of May' 68] out of existence'.² Similar objections had been met in the 1930s by the short-lived attempt to establish a British counterpart to André Breton's Surrealist group, an important precursor to the SI.³ This essay explores some of the aesthetic formations that have resulted from this performatively overstated anglophonic disdain for francophone 'intellectualism'.

Secondly, with less irony, Robertson regards the Romantic inheritance of 'the British left avant-garde' as self-evidently conservative. That anglophone Romantic element is, again, assumed to be incongruous with the SI's avant-gardism, and is to blame for an anglicised Situationist practice whose attentions have been misdirected. Here I will suggest that, actually, the earliest English Situationist groups were actively involved in a radicalised reworking of what it might mean to reproduce English Romanticism, whose politics may not be so far from those of the SI, nor so distant even now. In his recent history of the SI, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, McKenzie Wark signals a direction in which study of the movement might now be taken. He calls for attention to 'the supposedly minor figures' at its periphery: their 'borrowing and correcting' from the SI's project might have more contemporary resonance than the group's 'great men' and their canonised texts (though, of course, it needn't disqualify those texts entirely).⁴ Below I test the suitability of some English Situationists in such a role.⁵ Towards the end of his text Wark also notes, but only in passing, that the SI 'adjusted romantic tactics to suit new situations'.⁶ The first half of this essay will investigate how the earliest English Situationists used Romanticism as the archive and medium through which to anglicise the late modernist programme of the SI, with a focus on the historical reasons for doing so. The second half, through reading the Situationist Guy Debord alongside William Wordsworth, will argue that the English Situationists' decision serves also to illuminate a latent Romanticism in

² Heathcote Williams, 'The Illegible Split in the Situationist International', *International Times*, 4/1 (1978) p. 26.

³ The stilted efforts to form an English Surrealist group in the 1930s, and the subsequent formation of Mass Observation, are discussed in Jeremy MacClancy, 'Brief Encounter: The Meeting, in Mass-Observation, of British Surrealism and Popular Anthropology', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 1/3 (1995) pp. 495–512.

⁴ McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London 2011) pp. 3–5.

⁵ Scandinavian Situationist activity has already been re-examined in a similar manner. See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen (eds.), *Expect Anything Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere* (Copenhagen 2011).

⁶ Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, p. 157.

Situationist aesthetic practice even in its ‘proper’ francophone articulations.

French Situationists and English

Through the twelve issues of its journal, *Internationale Situationniste* (1958–69), the SI launched a critique of the cultural conditions in and through which capitalist social relations had come to determine the experience of everyday life in the West. Based in France though not exclusively French in its membership, the SI was concerned with the problems of alienation, boredom, and the historical amnesia propagated by the phase of capitalism that it named ‘the society of the spectacle’.⁷ Despite its world-historical ambitions the SI was also a product of more particular contexts – the socio-economic conditions of France’s belated post-war modernisation, for example, and the discursive conditions of dissident leftist theory as represented by proximate figures like Henri Lefebvre and the Socialisme ou Barbarie group.⁸ Keen to expand its operations into the anglophone world, the SI briefly maintained an English Section (1966–7), but when that group began to anglicise Situationist practice, it was deemed to have compromised the SI and was expelled.⁹

The English Section’s efforts to anglicise Situationist practice involved what we might call a cultural, rather than literal, translation of the group’s work. It was aware that the challenge was to produce not Situationism in England, but English Situationism. Because its project was terminated so rapidly by the SI, the English Section’s archive remains abject, but in one of its two original texts the group proposes an irony: the SI’s ‘most highly developed critique of modern life’ had been made in France, ‘one of the least highly developed modern countries’. England, on the other hand, was ‘the temporary capital of the spectacular world’, and thus most in need of the Situationist critique.¹⁰ However, the English Section also knew of the long history of anglophone scepticism and resistance to the

⁷ See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London 2006).

⁸ On the belatedness of French modernisation, see Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. 1996).

⁹ The English Section was comprised of T. J. Clark, Chris Gray, Charles Radcliffe, and Donald Nicholson-Smith. I shall refer to English, and not British, Situationist activity partly in concordance with that group’s identity, and partly to distinguish this activity from that of Alexander Trocchi, a Scot, who was a British member of the SI before it established an English Section.

¹⁰ The English Section of the Situationist International, ‘Ten Days that Shook the University’ (1967) p. 27. Available at <<http://dumauvaiscote.pagesperso-orange.fr/tendays.pdf>> (accessed 26 June 2012).

perceived haughtiness and obscurantism of francophone avant-gardism. Similarly, its historical consciousness was less Hegelian than the SI's, and so the English Section imagined itself not as the culmination of a tradition but as part of an ongoing current of vernacular English dissent.

The Gordon Rioters, the Swing Rioters, the Luddites: these are the figures whom the English Situationists imagined as their precursors. Yet those writers whom we now identify as the first wave of English Romantic poets are not often placed in such an assemblage of rioters and saboteurs. Such was the first Situationist heresy committed by the English Situationists: not only did they associate the SI with a *literary* movement, when the SI was so critical of the capitalist specialisation of knowledge, but with Romantic poetry, which has for so long been subject to the processes of canonisation and co-optation of which the SI was so aware and about which it was so anxious. Twenty years later, George Robertson still thought this a tactical error; a little more than twenty years further on, I want to engage with the English Situationists as a fellow heretic rather than a Situationist disciple. The English Situationists recognised that English Romanticism, like their own project, arose in part as a response to politically disparate situations between England and France: in the late eighteenth century there was the violent imposition of industrial capitalism at home, and in France the revolution beginning in 1789; in the 1960s, in England and in France, there was the uneven yet combined development of both spectacular capitalism and its Situationist critique. I shall argue that the English Situationists' aesthetic, which is principally a *literary* aesthetic – and which has its own subterranean legacy, most obviously by way of punk culture – was an attempt to reconstruct an English Romanticism that deployed something of its original radicality in the present.¹¹

Return of the Romantics

The first of the English Section's two original texts was a long essay, 'The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution' (1967), which introduces key themes from what was, by then, ten years of the SI's work. The English Section privileges two of the SI's concerns: its analyses of the limits of Dada and Surrealism, and it discusses youth revolt and

¹¹ Punk as the progeny of English Situationist activity is discussed in Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (Stirling 1991); Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (London 2001); Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming* (London 2005); and David Wise and Stuart Wise, 'The End of Music', in Home (ed.), *What is Situationism?*

juvenile delinquency as emergent, post-proletarian, political subjectivities antagonistic to the spectacle. The English Section conjoins these two lines of enquiry to declare that juvenile delinquents constitute a ‘new lumpen’, and are ‘the true inheritors of dada’.¹²

‘Delinquent violence’, the English Section asserts, ‘is a spontaneous overthrow of the abstract and contemplative role imposed on everyone.’¹³ The phrase ‘abstract and contemplative role’ is clearly drawn from the SI’s critique of spectacular society, in which alienated representation has replaced direct social engagement. Yet the English Section subtly alludes also to Wordsworth’s famous statement in his 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that ‘poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’.¹⁴ The English Section’s rephrasing performs three functions. First, it is an example of the SI’s tactic of *détournement* – the recontextualisation of artistic expressions to subvert their meanings – used on both Wordsworth and the SI’s own work. The SI described *détournement* as ‘a method of propaganda, a method which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of [existing cultural] spheres’.¹⁵ Secondly, the rephrasing conflates violence and poetry, to recall a long avant-gardist tradition of violent provocation as (anti-)art gesture, epitomised by Breton’s verdict that ‘The simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd.’¹⁶ Finally, the ease with which the two analyses are brought together serves to align the SI’s project with something of Wordsworth’s early politico-aesthetic sensibility. The SI is made to seem less prohibitively ‘French’; Wordsworth, before his loss of revolutionary faith, is dusted off and reframed.

The second of the English Section’s texts, a postscript to its translation of the SI’s pamphlet ‘On the Poverty of Student Life’, contains the comparison, discussed above, between England and France’s relative levels of spectacular development, and continues to introduce the SI to an English audience for whom few translations were then available. The English Section also takes a discreet liberty in translating the text’s penultimate sentence, in which the SI boasts of its own transgressiveness: ‘Ici comme

¹² English Section of the Situationist International, ‘The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution’, in Tom Vague (ed.), *King Mob Echo: English Section of the Situationist International* (hereafter *KME*) (London 2000) p. 68.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ ‘Preface’ (1800) to William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd edn., ed. E. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London 1991) p. 246.

¹⁵ Situationist International, ‘Definitions’ (1958) in Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology* (hereafter *SLA*) (Berkeley 2006) p. 52.

¹⁶ André Breton, ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism’ (1930), in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan 2010) p. 125.

ailleurs, il s'agit de dépasser la mesure' (roughly, 'Here as elsewhere, it is a question of exceeding the limit').¹⁷ Rather than attempt a literal translation of this abstruse sentence, the English Section make it echo an aphorism from William Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' (begun 1790): 'in revolution the road of excess leads once and for all to the palace of wisdom'.¹⁸

Such irreverent treatment of the group's decrees, and such disrespect shown to the SI's paranoid proprietorship of its genealogical identity, led to the English Section's expulsion, after it had allegedly sided with the American anarchist Ben Morea in a dispute with the SI's Raoul Vaneigem.¹⁹ One member, Chris Gray, subsequently formed the group King Mob, named after graffiti found on the walls of London's Newgate Prison after the Gordon Riots of 1780. I shall hereafter refer to the English Section and King Mob together as the English Situationists. Freed from the SI's authority, King Mob accelerated the development of a specifically English Situationist aesthetic practice. The group issued journals and pamphlets, but its presence in the London counterculture of the 1960s was felt mostly by way of its stunts and pranks. These included, for example, having a member dressed as Father Christmas give away the toys in Selfridges department store to attendant children: to witness kindly Santa's arrest, and the reclamation of the toys, by killjoy police would surely radicalise the younger generation!²⁰ King Mob's programme was confrontational, aggressive, and black-humoured, and involved playing the role of the juvenile delinquents who, it maintained, were spectacular capitalism's agents of negation. Like Captain Swing or General Ludd, King Mob was used as a persona, a spectre, from which to issue threats to bourgeois society. The group's performance of lumpen vulgarity might be read as an ironic overstatement of the anti-'intellectualism' so prevalent in anglophonic engagements with the European avant-garde; it was also,

¹⁷ Situationniste Internationale, 'Maintenant, L'I.S.', *Internationale Situationniste*, 9 (Aug. 1964) p. 5.

¹⁸ English Section, 'Ten Days that Shook the University', p. 23. 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom' is a 'Proverb from Hell' in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell': *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London 1966) p. 150. G. R. Sabri-Tabrizi reads Blake's aphorism as a response to the early phase of the French Revolution. See G. R. Sabri-Tabrizi, *The 'Heaven' and 'Hell' of William Blake* (London 1973) pp. 127–8.

¹⁹ One account of the expulsion is offered in Tom Vague, *King Mob Echo: From Gordon Riots to Situationists & Sex Pistols* (London 2000) pp. 41–2. The SI's own account is in 'The Latest Exclusions' (1969), in *SIA*, p. 376.

²⁰ King Mob's notoriety is the subject of many testimonials in Jonathon Green (ed.), *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground 1961–1971* (London 1988).

I want to suggest, very likely informed by the group's reading of Wordsworth. An early King Mob text, for example, speaks of the necessity to move 'from the Situationist SALON down to Skid Row', to speak in the 'language of the streets'.²¹ The statement echoes – 'détournes', perhaps – Wordsworth's claim to have forgone 'poetic diction' in favour of the 'language of men'.²²

King Mob's earliest allusion to the Romantics came by way of a reiteration of the SI itself. The first issue of King Mob's journal, *King Mob Echo* (1968), includes an article entitled 'Desolation Row' that admits to being 'freely translated from Raoul Vaneigem's *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, 1967' (though it doesn't thank Bob Dylan for its title).²³ The article reprimands Marx for overlooking the fact that 'Certain features of Romanticism had already proved ... that art – the pulse of culture and society – is the first index of the decay and disintegration of values' in capitalist society.²⁴ It then insists that 'What we need now is the conjunction of nihilism and historical consciousness'.²⁵ One of King Mob's responses to this challenge was to appropriate lines from Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge for graffiti daubed around the counterculture's epicentre in Notting Hill.²⁶ From Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode' (1802) King Mob took (and misspelled) the lines 'A grief without a pang, void, dark, drear, a stifled drowsy grief' (ll. 21–2);²⁷ from Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' it took 'The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction'.²⁸ Because I am more concerned with the question 'Why the Romantics?' than 'Why graffiti?', it must suffice for the moment to acknowledge that King Mob's reproduction of these lines running as paint down tenement walls literally inscribes their everyday environment with the spectral presences of Blake and Coleridge. A gesture of historical

²¹ *King Mob Echo* 3 (1969), in *KME*, p. 113. *King Mob Echo* 3 is composed mainly of an untitled essay by Chris Gray.

²² Wordsworth, 'Preface', p. 251.

²³ King Mob, 'Desolation Row', *King Mob Echo*, 1 (1968), in *KME*, p. 81. Vaneigem's text is now more commonly known as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁶ The countercultural newspaper *International Times* included an unattributed photograph of the Coleridge graffiti on the cover its 'Notting Hill Interzone' issue (*IT* 1/30 (3 May; 1968)). The image was reproduced in David Mairowitz and William Burroughs' anthology, *Some of IT* (London, 1969). Roger Perry included a photograph of the Blake graffiti in *The Writing on the Wall: The Graffiti of London* (London 1976). Both these images have since appeared in *KME* (pp. 94, 96).

²⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London 1997) p. 308.

²⁸ Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', p. 152.

solidarity is affected as the Romantics are made to speak through the same channels as the antisocial delinquents with whom the English Situationists allied themselves.

The English Situationists certainly weren't alone in turning to the Romantics in the 1960s. A growing body of work examines the reception and reproduction of English Romanticism in this period.²⁹ However, the English Situationists denounced the New Left as 'a New Establishment' and distanced themselves from the counterculture.³⁰ The difference between the Romanticism reclaimed by the English Situationists and that of their contemporaries is indicated by the recollections of King Mob members David and Stuart Wise, who write:

Ideas were mooted in '68 which were sufficiently tasteless to horrify the hippy ideology and its older, more conservative forms – romantic English pantheism. For instance, the dynamiting of a waterfall in the English lake district was suggested, with a message sprayed on a rock: 'Peace in Vietnam' – not because there was a deep going interest in the war like there was in the United States but because the comment was an absurdist response to ruralism and the revolution had to be aggressively urban. There was a suggestion to blow up Wordsworth's house in Ambleside, alongside the delphic comment *Coleridge lives*.³¹

The Wises explain King Mob's use of Romanticism as, in the first instance, iconoclasm and aggravation. In a later account, David Wise is a little more candid, and concedes that King Mob actually attempted a 'revival through appreciative critique' of English Romanticism.³² I want to establish *what* was revived from English Romanticism. What correspondence did the English Situationists, in the late 1960s, recognise between English Romantic poetry of the late eighteenth century and Situationist theory coming mostly from France? With what insights are we

²⁹ These reception studies typically focus on Blake. For example Robert J. Berthoff and Annette S. Levitt (eds.), *William Blake and the Moderns* (Albany, NY 1982); Steve Clark and Jason Whittaker (eds.), *Blake, Modernity and Popular Culture* (Basingstoke 2007); and Jeffrey Kripal, 'Reality against Society: William Blake, Antinomianism and the American Counterculture', *Common Knowledge*, 13/1 (2007) pp. 98–112.

³⁰ English Section, 'The Modern Art of Revolution and the Revolution of Modern Art', p. 69.

³¹ Wise and Wise, 'The End of Music', p. 68.

³² David Wise, 'Jumbled Notes' (1999–2003), unpaginated. Available at <<http://www.revoltagainstplenty.com/index.php/archive/34-archivelocal/93-a-hidden-history-of-king-mob>> (accessed 26 June 2012).

left into English Situationist practice, the SI, English Romanticism, or, more broadly, the persistence of Romantic aesthetic theory into late modernist practice?

I want to place Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* alongside – or, more accurately, as some estranged descendant of – Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. As the former has come to serve as the most comprehensive account of Situationist theory, so the latter has come to serve as a de facto manifesto of early English Romantic poetry. Wordsworth (rather than Blake or Shelley, who are candidates more obviously radical in their aesthetics or politics) is my counterpoint for three main reasons: because the English Situationists definitely read him, and, to judge by their *détournement*, did so closely; because his engagement with the revolutionary situation in France was direct, contemporary, and productively fraught; and because, like *Society of the Spectacle*, his Preface offers an aesthetic theory and a reflexive explication of how that aesthetic theory has been applied to its own articulation. It may seem overdetermined or historiographically abrupt to read these two writers together, but my interest here is to be a little more specific about the version of Romanticism that the English Situationists emphasised in their anglicisation of the SI.³³

Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* and the poems which preceded and immediately followed its 1789 and 1800 editions have, of course, been subject to an overwhelming range of academic readings, but that of the English Situationists, though broadly historicist, did not emerge from any particular literary-critical current.³⁴ Their reading of Wordsworth's poetry was not one, for example, which privileged its engagement with specific political debates or its attempt to revolutionise eighteenth-century modes of reading and hierarchies of poetic genres. Instead, the English Situationists recognised that Wordsworth's early project responded to large-scale political changes and their effects on everyday life – which I will discuss in terms of capitalist accumulation and the possibility of 'authentic' experience – and sought aesthetic responses whose very form might be antagonistic or even incommensurable with the new social order being imposed. The objects of

³³ Debord, for example, dismissed the 'revolutionary romanticism' expounded by Henri Lefebvre as 'an intolerance of the future'. See Guy Debord, Letter to Henri Lefebvre (5 May 1960), in *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957–August 1960)*, trans. Stuart Kendall and John McHale (Los Angeles 2009) p. 350.

³⁴ Surveys of historicist readings of Wordsworth's narrative ballads, and defences of those readings against New Critical and Deconstructive ones, are made in David Simpson, 'Criticism, Politics, and Style in Wordsworth's Poetry', *Critical Inquiry*, 11/1 (Sept. 1984) pp. 52–81, and M. H. Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts* (New York 1989).

my investigation are, in some sense, the different 'aesthetic ideologies' expounded by Wordsworth, the SI, and the English Situationists. 'Aesthetic ideology', for Fredric Jameson, indicates the 'situation-specific function of [a text's] aesthetic'.³⁵ He explains that, with such a focus,

ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions.³⁶

Accumulation and Authenticity

In the Preface, Wordsworth writes that his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* were intended to evoke 'the principal laws of our nature' through 'the incidents of common life'.³⁷ 'Low and rustic life', he continues,

was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are under less restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more readily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.³⁸

The organic metaphors exemplify the conception of an inherently good human nature from which people are distanced as society becomes more 'civilised' and sophisticated, which, M. H. Abrams explains, Wordsworth received as an eighteenth-century commonplace.³⁹ Nature, as the physical correspondent of that universal human nature, figures in the Preface as

³⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London 2002) p. 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁷ Wordsworth, 'Preface', pp. 244–5

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

³⁹ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford 1953) pp. 103–14.

the source of authentic experience. Rustic lives allow a closer proximity to that source of authenticity, and a rustic aesthetic allows for its representation with minimal mediation. Wordsworth radicalism is here literal: a return to the roots, to *radix*. Through his appraisal of the ‘essential’ and the ‘elementary’, Wordsworth introduces his rustic aesthetic as a return rather than an innovation; he has *uncovered* or *recovered* rather than discovered it; and uncovered or recovered it not least from what he saw as the false mediations and specious gentility of eighteenth-century verse diction as derived from polite rhetoricians like Hugh Blair. Wordsworth’s discussion of an ‘emphatic language’ was itself a *détournement* of an important concept from that discourse.

The dichotomy that Wordsworth establishes between a rustic life that is experienced in all its richness and a more sophisticated life that has lost its immediate connection with nature is echoed by a distinction made by Debord in the first thesis of *Society of the Spectacle*. ‘In societies dominated by modern conditions of production’, writes Debord, ‘life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.’⁴⁰ The title of the first chapter of Debord’s text heralds the spectacle as ‘the culmination of separation’.⁴¹ Like Wordsworth, Debord associates authenticity with that which is experienced directly, without mediation. The society of the spectacle, for Debord, is characterised by representation divorced from experience, evident in the proliferation of mass media and in the increasingly polarised forms of political representation that accompany alienated social relations. What might be obscured to a contemporary reader is how both Wordsworth’s and Debord’s aesthetic formulations (both of which rely on idyllic, even prelapsarian, conceptions of authenticity) were issued as responses to socio-economic changes in late eighteenth-century England and in post-war France respectively. More specifically, Wordsworth and Debord both held that authentic experience, or at least its possibility, was being obscured and sequestered by successive phases of capitalist accumulation.

The period during which Wordsworth composed *Lyrical Ballads* was momentous in reshaping British society. Marx describes the period as one of ‘primitive accumulation’ and the instauration of industrial capitalist production, when workers, while ‘freed’ from the bonds of feudalism, were violently expropriated from the land they worked and, therefore, from their means of production.⁴² Through the enclosure of common land, a

⁴⁰ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴² Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. i, trans. Ben Fowkes (London 1990) pp. 873–904.

class of people was forced through coercion and legislation into cities, left with only their labour power to sell, and thus bound in the chains of wage labour. '[T]he history of their expropriation', Marx writes, 'is written in the annals of mankind in blood and fire.'⁴³ Wordsworth knew that capitalist agrarian reform also served to create an army of the dispossessed who could not be expected to gravitate immediately to industrial employment, and who remained outside the new industrial working class – which is one reason why vagrants and discharged soldiers appear so frequently in his poems of this period. When Marx's insistence that 'the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic'⁴⁴ is read alongside Wordsworth's poems, we recognise that the latter's investment in images of rural idyll was a gesture of defiance and resistance.

The socio-economic changes to which Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* responds can also be understood as a phase of accumulation. This argument is made by the Retort collective, which includes T. J. Clark, ex-member of the English Section. Retort describes the concept of the spectacle as

a first stab at characterizing a new form of, or stage in, the accumulation of capital. What it named primarily was the submission of more and more facets of human sociability – areas of everyday life, forms of recreation, patterns of speech, idioms of local solidarity, kinds of ethical or aesthetic insubordination, the endless capacities of human beings to evade or refuse the orders brought down on them from on high – to the deadly solicitations (the lifeless bright sameness) of the market.⁴⁵

The phase of primitive accumulation to which Debord responded was capital's colonisation not of common land but of everyday life: *spectacular* rather than *primitive* accumulation.⁴⁶ The spectacle, Debord was keen to remind his readers, 'is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.'⁴⁷ Wordsworth and Debord

⁴³ Ibid., p. 875.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London 2005) p. 19.

⁴⁶ The phrase 'The colonisation of everyday life' was popularised by Lefebvre, but he took the expression from Debord. Michael Trebitsch, 'Preface: The Moment of Radical Critique', in Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. ii, trans. John Moore (London 2002) p. xxii.

⁴⁷ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 7.

both recognised that the processes of division inherent to capitalist accumulation – the division of labour in industrial production, and the division of experience and representation in the spectacle – force the separation of people from direct, unmediated, and authentic experience. As Rancière has recently remarked, the SI's critique of the spectacle is based in 'the Romantic vision of truth as non-separation'.⁴⁸ Though Wordsworth and Debord articulate similar conceptions of what constitutes and what obscures authenticity, thereafter their paths diverge. Wordsworth believed that there were poetic subjects appropriate for the representation of authenticity; Debord believed that any affirmative art would ultimately collude with the spectacle.

The Dominant Conditions of Artistic (In)Authenticity

Authenticity, according to Wordsworth, is transferred in the 'passions of the heart' and 'elementary feelings', though he makes concrete these abstractions. His contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* take as their subject matter a host of allegorical but individualised figures on whom he hangs his vision of authenticity. Take, for example, 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'. In response to changes in the Poor Laws which Wordsworth understood as an attack on mendicancy and almsgiving, the poem directly addresses the 'Statesmen' who had denounced the beggar's lack of economic productivity. Wordsworth advises them to 'deem not this man useless' (l. 67),⁴⁹ and launches a multi-tiered defence of the beggar. He begins with a pantheistic affirmation of the interconnectedness of the spiritual and the material, to remind law-makers that all men should be equal: "'Tis Nature's law ... | A life and soul to every mode of being | Inseparably link'd' (ll. 73, 78–9). That argument is complemented by a more pragmatic one in which the beggar, as he passes through the village collecting alms, acquires symbolic importance as a manifestation of the community's charity: he is 'A silent monitor' (l. 115) whose presence pushes the soul towards virtue. Finally, Wordsworth makes the Christian argument that the beggar facilitates the charity of even the poorest members of the community, who might be able to offer him only 'a blessing on his head' (l. 155) but which allows for the demonstration of their selflessness. The beggar is, in the poem's telling, a solitary figure, but he performs a social function valuable in terms that are economic,

⁴⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London 2009) p. 6.

⁴⁹ All references are to William Wordsworth, 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', in Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*.

humanistic, and Christian. In addition, as the beggar has become physically as much a part of the landscape as the birds and trees, he lives in that proximity to nature that Wordsworth extols. From a hypothetical case-study of the human impact of legislation, the beggar becomes an archetype and image of authenticity.

At the opening of the poem Wordsworth warns, 'The class of Beggars to which the old man here described belongs, will probably soon be extinct'.⁵⁰ The threatened disappearance of that class of mendicants, and the authenticity that Wordsworth has it represent, was due to capitalist accumulation and the legal structure that legitimised it. Such was the case for many of the protagonists of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. 'The Female Vagrant', 'Michael', 'The Mad Mother': these are victims of socio-economic processes whose monolithic advance is belied by the poems' apparent quaintness, provincialism, and acquiescence in fate. Wordsworth's representation of the pre- (or sub-) capitalist classes also reflected onto a contemporary discourse of poetry. He sought to prove incorrect the ideologues who regarded certain experiences – poetic, *authentic*, experiences – as incommensurable with certain class positions. Debord would certainly have appreciated that effort to offend bourgeois sensibility.

However, the figures represented by Wordsworth were fictionalised and idealised as much as they were the record of struggling underclasses. Paul de Man claims that the blurring of documentary and fiction is characteristic of Romantic literature, whose images are always produced through a dialectic of perception and imagination.⁵¹ Similarly, John Barrell observes that the depiction of the rural poor in the eighteenth century became not only increasingly common but increasingly idealised, to become only half-revelations that occluded the miseries of poverty.⁵² The English Situationists, I suggest, recognised that Wordsworth's commemoration of soon-to-be eradicated, pre-capitalist ways of life was not simply nostalgic, but a tactic of resistance and assault. When they anglicised the work of the SI, the English Situationists replicated Wordsworth's tactic: they privileged the SI's discussion of juvenile delinquency over its many other discussions, and even attempted to locate that delinquency structurally as evidence of a 'new lumpen' class which was the repository of revolutionary potential; and King Mob not only chose that name for itself but, by way of its actions, its graffiti, and its fiery rhetoric, role-played as a violent lumpen-prole. These are examples of Romantic tactics – literary, imaginative, and

⁵⁰ Wordsworth, 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', p. 205.

⁵¹ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York 1984) pp. 1–17.

⁵² See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840* (London 1980).

performative tactics – adjusted to address the conditions of spectacle described by the SI.

‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’ concludes by imploring the Statesmen to allow the beggar to live freely in the countryside:

As in the eye of Nature he has liv'd,
So in the eye of Nature let him die. (ll. 188–9)

Wordsworth is both sermonising and making a pragmatic demand against forced resettlement. That his final couplet should summon the ‘eye of Nature’ illuminates two of his assertions regarding the relationship between the aesthetic and the authentic. First, Wordsworth is confident that there exists a language suitable for the articulation of authenticity, evident in his rejection of high poetic language in favour of the ‘low and rustic’ language and homespun wisdom of this maxim, and in the couplet’s uncluttered formal mirroring. Secondly, Wordsworth allies that poetic faith with a philosophical proposition: that authenticity can be recognised and represented.

‘The Convict’ (which was included only in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*) corroborates but also complicates the aesthetic ideology that Wordsworth develops. Like ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, the poem engages with a pressing political issue and calls for the sympathetic treatment of those on society’s margins, but it also passes a verdict on the possibility of experiencing and representing the authentic. The poem’s narrative is simple. At its opening, the poet celebrates the view from a mountainside. For reasons unexplained, he is then compelled to visit a convict. At the cell, the poet continues to survey what is before him. There is a succession of images of sight and vision: he encourages the reader to ‘behold’ (l. 12) the convict, to notice his downcast ‘eyes’ (l. 15), to ‘gaze’ on his ‘visage’ (l. 17), and to consider his own ‘view’ (l. 24). Indeed, the reader is encouraged only to *look* at the convict, not to reflect on why he might be in his miserable situation. The decisive moment occurs when the poet’s gaze is reciprocated, as it is not in ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’. In the poem’s antepenultimate stanza, the convict ‘half-raises his deep-sunken eye’ (l. 41) to see the poet outside his cell. The ‘motion unsettles a tear’ (l. 42), and the poet believes that his presence is being questioned. He replies (aloud or not, we can’t be sure) that he is there to share the convict’s sorrows. He then expresses his Godwinian aversion to penal law. He tacitly acknowledges the convict’s guilt (ll. 49–50) but confides:

My care, if the arm of the mighty were mine,
 Would plant thee where yet thou might'st blossom again. (ll. 51–2)

His commendation of transportation over capital punishment is unconvincing. The plant metaphor feels heavy-handed, and patronises the convict. Wordsworth's indictment of the convict may be sardonic, or it may be a refusal to become embroiled in juridical procedures only marginally more successfully addressed in Coleridge's 'The Dungeon' (which remained in the 1800 edition), which speculates that of the 'poor brother[s]' in jail, 'Most [are] innocent, perhaps' (ll. 3–4). Either way, I suggest that Wordsworth does not proffer the convict as an image of authenticity as he does the beggar. Instead, he uses what was to become a recurrent theme of his poetic method: the recognition of the poet's intrusion into the scene; the poet, indeed, being seen himself. Coleridge's 'The Dungeon', by way of contrast, never troubles its omniscient perspective, and thus never draws attention to the act of seeing and then of writing about what has been seen. In 'The Convict', the poet's presence is acknowledged; he is witnessed in his act of witnessing. He fails to articulate a satisfactory response to the political issue which he faces – there is, perhaps, only so much we can ask of the young Wordsworth – but as a result the poem's focus is on the poet's *experience* of distinguishing authenticity from its debasement.

The SI did not take up the Romantic faith in positive aesthetic experience, but repeated the denigration of vision that Martin Jay identifies as common to much twentieth-century French philosophy.⁵³ The SI avoided identifying so positively an image of authenticity equivalent to the old Cumberland beggar, and it dismissed the individual's ability to distinguish authenticity from its inverse just through observation. For the SI, positive representation in an era of spectacle only perpetuates alienation. The SI feared that if it were to represent positively that which it deemed authentic, such representations would inevitably be co-opted by the spectacle, divested of their authentic content and circulated as mere images; the inauthentic sign would replace the authentic signified. The Situationist Attila Kotányi encapsulated the SI's position when he proposed:

We are against the dominant conditions of artistic inauthenticity ... we know that [our artistic] works will be coopted by society and used against us. Our impact lies in the elaboration of certain truths which

⁵³ See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley 1994).

have an explosive power whenever people are ready to struggle for them.⁵⁴

The evasiveness of Kotányi's phrase 'certain truths', like Debord's 'everything that was directly lived', confirms the normative basis of the SI's critique of spectacle, which Benjamin Noys has recently described as its vitalism, its 'retention of a ground of reality as positivity' at odds with its professedly negative critique.⁵⁵ That vitalism is, I believe, its principal Romantic inheritance.

Kotányi and Debord's phrases also indicate the SI's response to the problem of the co-optation of images of authenticity. It took recourse to what we might call a Situationist sublime: a vague and tentative gesture towards an authentic *something else* which cannot be given a positive aesthetic form for fear of its spoliation by the spectacle. That *something else* can be represented only negatively. Thus, in *Society of the Spectacle* Debord discusses his own text's 'mode of exposition', which he deems the only appropriate mode for a critique of spectacle.⁵⁶ Such a mode must be predicated on negation, *détournement*, and the subversion of already-existing aesthetic material to expose the alienated social relations therein reproduced. 'The real values of culture', Debord writes, 'can be maintained only by negating culture.'⁵⁷ This verdict is clearly at odds with Wordsworth's efforts to identify and represent authentic experiences positively.

Situationist Heresies

Perhaps the English Situationists deemed Debord's negative-dialectical mode of exposition to be the stumbling block in the SI's anglophonic reception, the target of the accusations of 'intellectualism'. When they decided that the crucial unit of the SI's analysis was its attention to youth revolt and delinquency, and when they proceeded to develop a textual practice of role-playing and even hyperbolising that anti-sociality – a lumpen aesthetic analogous to Wordsworth's rustic one – the English Situationists reproduced Wordsworth's faith that authenticity can be identified and represented, that positive representation is not necessarily spectacular or alienating. They attempted to transpose the core political

⁵⁴ Situationist International, 'The Fifth SI Conference in Göteborg' (1962), in *SLA*, p. 116.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh 2010) p. 98.

⁵⁶ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 112.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

content of the SI's critique of spectacle into a distinctly English literary tradition, but in severing the SI's political analysis from its aesthetic one, in articulating the former by way of a Romantic, affirmative, and positivistic mode of exposition, the English Situationist aesthetic practice became diametrically opposed to that of the SI.

The English Situationists, heretically, attempted to level a critique of the spectacle by way of supposedly spectacularised forms; a critique that was based on the affirmation of images of authenticity rather than the negation of spectacular ones. They defied the SI's anxiety about co-optation, and its iconophobia, to suggest that things that are productively incommensurable with the spectacle *can* and *should* be represented. In direct contravention of the SI's aesthetic austerity, the English Situationists went directly to the three Ss – the subjective, the superficial, and the spectacular – which remain the bêtes noires of Situationist discourse, to ask whether they could yet be sabotaged into becoming sites of contestation.

There remain paradigmatic differences between the aesthetic practices of Wordsworth and the English Situationists, not least by way of the agency that Wordsworth gives to the individual poet, as opposed to the English Situationists' veneration of the mob. Similarly, though Wordsworth believed that poetry can facilitate and heighten the reader's sensitivity to authentic experience, in the paucity of their archive and the marginal nature of their own productions (the 'free translations', for example, and the graffiti quotations) the English Situationists seem to have maintained something of the SI's suspicion of *proper* artistic production. Nonetheless, in their attempt to reclaim for the present something of the project of early English Romanticism, the English Situationists remained in full accordance with Debord's account of the function of *détournement*, which 'radicalises previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths and thus transformed into lies'.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 113.