Slow Time

JONATHAN SACHS

IN A LETTER FROM 1847, THE POET EDWARD FITZGERALD REMARKED on the imaginative splendors of science. "It is not the poetical imagination, but bare Science," Fitzgerald insisted,

> that every day more and more unrolls a greater epic than the Iliad—the history of the World, the infinitudes of Space and Time! . . . So that, as Lyell says, the Geologist looking at Niagara forgets even the roar of its waters in the contemplation of the awful processes of time that it suggests. It is not only that this vision of Time must wither the Poet's hope of immortality—but it is in itself more wonderful than all the conceptions of Dante and Milton. (566)

Geology, for Fitzgerald, has replaced poetry as a source of the sublime. The falls of Niagara are astonishing not in themselves but rather in the steady ongoing processes that they suggest, through which, given time enough, the flow of water can turn rock to pebble to sand to dust and change the shape of the earth's surface. Such gradual processes require inconceivable depths of time, the "awful" vastness of which tests the limits of imagination and makes the poet's quest for immortality seem a brief, short-term hope. Fitzgerald associates this vastness above all with the work of Charles Lyell, whose name by the middle of the century had become synonymous with gradual change and slow time.

Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, published in three volumes between 1830 and 1833, sought to establish a method for the emerging science of geology. Stephen Jay Gould called this work "the most important, the most influential, and surely the most beautifully crafted work of nineteenth-century geology" (177). Its central claim was that in order to count as a science geology needed to explain natural phenomena by means of processes still in existence. This meant that one could not posit singular, one-time events like comet strikes,

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enormous floods, or gigantic earthquakes as the causes of geological change. In place of such sudden and violent episodes, Lyell substituted "the slow agency of existing causes" operating continuously over prolonged, almost unimaginable spans of time (*Principles* [1997] 16).[1] As Charles Darwin, one of Lyell's great admirers, commented, "He who can read Sir Charles Lyell's grand work on the Principles of Geology, which the future historian will recognize as having produced a revolution in natural science, yet does not admit how incomprehensibly vast have been the past periods of time, may at once close this volume" (282). Entering into Lyell's theory requires the reader, as Darwin points out, to acknowledge what Lyell repeatedly calls "the immensity of time" and the slow, steady processes that fill it (*Principles* [1997] 16).

Lyell's theory represents the methodological consolidation and popularization of models of time that were associated with naturalists like Comte de Buffon and James Hutton and that offered increasingly large estimates for the age of the earth (Gould; Rudwick, *Bursting* and *Worlds*). As Lyell pointed out, whereas astronomers had expanded our awareness of space, geologists "in the last thirty years" had used their techniques of observation to expand time and reveal the "slow but never ending fluctuations" of the earth's surface (24). They produced what we now call "deep time," a scale of time unimaginably longer than the timescale of human history.[2] Instead of referring to the absoluteness of deep time, slow time refers to the invisible, often insensible processes that fill deep time and that leave few traces. Slowness, however, is not a quality that we often associate with the thirty years to which Lyell refers, which are more generally described, both by those writing in the period and by later social theorists, in terms of processes of acceleration linked to the development of commerce and advances in technologies of communication and mobility like print and the railway.[3] Thomas de Quincey, for example, describes these developments as producing a "fierce condition of eternal hurry" (130), while William Wordsworth, as we will soon see in more detail, complains that "rapid communication" has dulled the audience for poetry circa 1800 (Preface 249).[4] Though this period has been distinguished by revolution and reaction, by the experience of war, by the revival of romance, and by the flourishing of philosophical aesthetics, my suggestion is that another of its defining features is a sense of discordant temporality that responds both to innovations in the conception of time and, more specifically, to a new sense of slowness overlapping with the more commonly acknowledged acceleration of contemporary life. Such discordant temporality produces "disturbance or unease" and a "particular type of tension" related to what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling" (167),[5] one that can be grasped by looking at the formal and representational problems addressed by Lyell and his Romantic contemporaries.

This tension between speed and slowness intensified after the late eighteenth century, when a self-conscious awareness of the accelerated pace of social change intersected with the enhanced understanding of slowness developing in geological theory. Romantic poetry responded to the convergence of these competing and complementary senses of time. Wordsworth's focus on the unspectacular time represented by old men walking slowly through the landscape, the slow time of John Keats's urn, and the layered times of human and natural history in Charlotte Smith's "Beachy Head" all take time as their subject; the temporal experiences that they portray suggest that experiences of slowness and acceleration are intricately entangled. Although for Fitzgerald the vastness of time makes geology more sublime than even the best poetry, in my account both Romantic poetry and geology address problems of slow time and incongruous temporality. Refiguring time on an expanded scale raises formal and

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representational problems about how human beings can possibly grasp the slowness of time and the temporal processes that operate below the level of the visual and tangible. Geology offered Romantic poetry new ways of understanding the importance of slow time and a new sense of how a seeming lack of eventfulness can be understood as eventful when placed on a longer timeline. Romantic poetry, in turn, showed in fine detail processes of slow change and allowed for an imaginative understanding of new geological models of time.

The temporal problems confronted by Lyell and his Romantic contemporaries have never fully disappeared. They continue to shadow a range of current critical thinking that addresses issues of temporal scale and pace. David Simpson, for example, contrasts the speed with which monumental national events occur and the "slow time" that eventually produces their commemoration (2). His point, however, is that such slow time is under threat because some events can be "cashed in" at "breakneck speed" in a way that pressures the premium placed on slowness and sustained reflection by the variant of slow time that he calls "scholarly time" (11). We can think here also about calls to decelerate the pace of life in recognition of the "time-poverty" of the present (Honoré 29); the renewed advocacy of slow reading (Mikics) and the slow professor (Berg and Seeber); the debates between Wai Chee Dimock and Mark McGurl that have made "deep time" an important new term in the toolbox of literary criticism; the "chronoschisms" of Ursula Heise; and, finally, the "slow violence" of Rob Nixon, which I discuss below. All of this work might be understood as a continuing effort to work through slowness and speed and hence to resolve the temporal dissonance found in Romantic writing.

Acceleration and Slowness

In the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth declares that

> a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. (249)

Wordsworth describes his present as what Claude Levi-Strauss would later call a "hot chronology" (259), a moment marked by a plenitude of happenings: "great national events," urbanization, and "rapid communication," each of which, for Wordsworth, has a literary and aesthetic impact. These happenings blunt the discriminating powers of the mind and cause the best works of British literature—by Shakespeare and Milton—to be neglected in favor of "sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" (Wordsworth, Preface 249). Superficial reading, for Wordsworth, is a problem of speed, the result of the "rapid communication" of this eventfulness. Wordsworth associates his present with both an eventfulness (more things seem to be happening) and the "rapid communication" of this eventfulness. But such an intense acceleration also slows down most of those who experience it, in what Wordsworth describes as the "almost savage torpor" of the audience for poetry circa 1800; Wordsworth's *torpor* describes not only insensibility but also inactivity and even the unmoving state of a hibernating animal.[6] This is an initial indication of how fast and slow begin to contain each other in Wordsworth's writing. Wordsworth's sense that the acceleration and eventfulness arising from the rapid communication of information is characteristic of his contemporary moment aligns him with more recent theorists like Paul Virilio, Reinhart Koselleck, Hartmut Rosa, and

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Giovanni Arrighi, who also insist that such quickening is one, perhaps even the, defining quality of modernity.[7] Rosa, for whom "the experience of modernization is an experience of acceleration" (*Social Acceleration* 21), perhaps most comprehensively argues that "acceleration" increasingly distinguishes present from past. But all of these thinkers associate the perceived acceleration of the present with advances in technology and especially with the increased speed of communications media. Wordsworth also associates his contemporary moment with a speeding up linked to the spread of mass-communication technology and the seeming explosion in the number of newspapers, periodicals, and related publications. Recent work grounded in contemporary media theory has shown how Romantic readers like Wordsworth understood themselves to be living through a media revolution as well as a political revolution.[8] For Wordsworth the excess demand for news created by its rapid communication produces a dearth of response; speed and slowness are locked into a recursive pattern akin to a feedback loop. Wordsworth's reaction to the perceived acceleration of modernity, then, underscores the complex manner in which he understands processes of acceleration and slowness to be conjoined. Wordsworth's poetry, in turn, responds to this excess of speed by engaging and developing formal problems related to the representation of slowness. With minimal stimulation, then, his poetry heightens the responsiveness of its readers, who develop skills of attentiveness and a newly resonant awareness of slow time.

In suggesting that Wordsworth's emphasis on slowness arises from entangled senses of acceleration and slowness that make their relation felt fully in the late eighteenth century, I argue that more-recent attempts to rethink slowness and to grapple with our own temporal confusions have Romantic qualities. 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" (5–6), the origin of which she locates in the 1960s. This supposedly postmodern sense of time might more accurately be traced not to the 1960s but rather to the 1790s or thereabouts and hence to the "thirty years" that Lyell associates with the rapid development of geology. More recently, in his manifesto on "slow violence," Nixon has called for a project of redefining speed that recognizes the formal challenges of representing effects delayed over long stretches of time and that emphasizes the particular difficulty of such formal problems in the context of turbocapitalism and what he describes as "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" (8). In response, Nixon proposes a recasting of the glacial as "a rousing, iconic image of unacceptably fast loss" (13). It is 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 woven together 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 problems are not new. They might better be understood as Romantic problems whose terms, contours, and representational experiments we can recognize especially in what I will characterize below as a Romantic poetics of slowness.

Romantic Poetry and the Representation of Slow Time

Wordsworth's association of the increasing speed of communications technologies with the diminished intellect of the audience for

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poetry circa 1800 has implications for how we read Romantic poetry. If late-eighteenth-century historical actors sensed an acceleration of time and, like Wordsworth, were alarmed by this perception, we can begin to interpret what I describe as a Romantic poetics of slowness as a carefully conceived engagement with this apparent quickening and therefore as a poetics that takes up Nixon's clarification of the representational challenges inherent in making "slow violence visible" while also challenging "the privileging of the visible" (15). Nixon adds that

> [i]n 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. (15)

The terms are Nixon's, but they suggest also the agenda for Wordsworth's contribution to the *Lyrical Ballads* project and for works like "The Ruined Cottage" and Wordsworth's poetry of the late 1790s more generally. Perceiving the relation between slow time and slow violence in Wordsworth's poetry requires techniques of attentiveness and slow reading—what Reuben Brower would call "reading in slow motion" (4) but might here more accurately be termed reading slow motion.[9]

Wordsworth's poetry may thus be read as an aesthetic and moral appreciation of the slow—an exhortation to slowness, even—in response to the perceived quickening of the pace of modern life. This kind of attitude, for example, marks the development of the *Lyrical Ballads* project. I am 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 galloping tetrameter that accelerate the pace of reading, and "The Tables Turned," whose urgent opening appeal to haste is aided by explanatory punctuation, "Up! Up!" (1).[10] "Nutting" perhaps best exemplifies the speed of sudden violence when, amidst the calm stillness of the nook of hazels marked by "quiet being" (47) and "silent trees" (52), the speaker rises up and drags "to earth both branch and bough, with crash / And merciless ravage" (43–44).

Such poems that turn on haste and rapid change contrast not only with poems of slowness and contemplation such as "Tintern Abbey," the Lucy poems, and (in the later, 1807 poetry) "The Leech Gatherer" but especially with "Old Man Travelling" and "The Old Cumberland Beggar." In "Old Man Travelling," the subject of the poem travels on:

> and in his face, his step,
> His gait, is one expression; every limb,
> His look and bending figure, all bespeak
> A man who does not move with pain, but moves
> With thought—He is insensibly subdued
> To settled quiet: he is one by whom
> All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
> Long patience has such mild composure given,
> That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
> He hath no need. (3–12)

Though the language of slowness here is not explicit, the passage emphasizes qualities of stillness and calm. The old man moves, but he does so with singular purpose and with thought. A phrase like "settled quiet" elicits qualities of stillness within movement and contributes to how the tenor of the passage builds to an emphasis on "long patience" so ingrained that such patience "now doth seem a thing, of which / He hath no need." A poem about traveling thus becomes a poem about traveling slowly with fixed purpose and settled quiet—the very picture of unspectacular time. The labored quality of the verse, with its frequent use of pauses and midline caesuras

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and its patterns of repetition ("he is . . . he is," "one by whom . . . one to whom"), underscores Wordsworth's attunement to the parallels between the steps of the traveler and the feet of the line. The formal qualities of the verse and the pace of the traveler who moves not "with pain" but "with thought" both stand for a slowness associated with the use of thought to overcome pain and invisible violence. Further, the old man's slowness carries its own kind of intensification. Movement such as there is remains in the service of slowness, and the wisdom of the old man is a quality indicated through pace. If one suffers into truth, it does not happen instantly but rather over time as character comes to be ingrained in slowness.

Perhaps the most remarkable emblem of slowness in the early Wordsworth is "The Old Cumberland Beggar," whose title figure moves so slowly and with such little impact that

> [h]is staff trails with him, scarcely do his feet
> Disturb the summer dust, he is so still
> In look and motion that the cottage curs,
> Ere he have pass'd the door, will turn away
> Weary of barking at him. (59–63)

This scene, like the slow time of Lyell's geology, suggests a profound eventfulness hiding beneath a seeming uneventfulness, an episode that unfolds so slowly, with such patient deliberation, that the sound of the event as marked by the barking dogs ends before the event itself has concluded. We might compare the scene to the famous opening lines of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late. The Evacuation still proceeds, but it's all theatre" (3). The sound that marks the event comes after it is over, and the event itself, the fall of a V-2 rocket, happens so quickly that by the time it is heard, "[i]t is too late." The point for Pynchon is that knowledge of the event cannot keep pace with the event because the event itself, as registered by the senses, has already happened. For a theorist like Virilio (although he does not discuss Pynchon), the speed of the V-2 as captured by Pynchon's description encapsulates the essence of modernity. Its speed shows what Virilio calls "the extermination of space" (51), which has lost its relevance after developments in weapons technology to the point that "[a]ll that counts is the speed of the moving body and the undetectability of its path" (47); further, "without the violence of speed, that of weapons would not be so fearsome" (48). Virilio understands speed as a process of acceleration and intensification, part and parcel of the same formation. What I am suggesting, in contrast, is a more complex formation in which the increased speed associated with modernity generates an increased slowness. This is why qualities associated with one are also so often present in the other. In contrast to the speed in the opening lines of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the pace of the drawn-out event in Wordsworth's poem is so slow that the beggar becomes part of the landscape. Knowledge of the event—the barking dogs that we might consider a pastoral predecessor to Pynchon's screaming rockets—cannot match the pace of the event, because the event unfolds so slowly as almost perpetually not to have happened yet. The event is so slow that it can no longer be acknowledged.

Such slowness is not merely decorative or paradoxical. Rather, the figure of the beggar and that of the old man traveling achieve importance by the effect that they have on those that see these figures of long-suffering endurance picking their way through the landscape. For example, the patience of the old man causes the young to behold him "with envy" (14). He serves as a model, as the epitome of slow patience. Ultimately, the effects of the Cumberland beggar are also explicitly moral: he shows the inseparable links between "every mode of being," and

> the villagers in him
> Behold a record which together binds

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Past deeds and offices of charity
Else unremembered . . . (88–91)

The beggar thus stands as an emblem of the moral economy under attack by political economy such that this "class," as Wordsworth describes in his headnote to the poem, "will probably soon be extinct" (205). Philip Connell is therefore right to link this poem to late-eighteenth-century debates on poverty and on the giving of alms to the poor. But before Wordsworth describes the moral effect that the beggar has on the wider community, we see the effect that he has on three individual figures, all of whom break their pace and interrupt their work as a result of the encounter:

The sauntering horseman-traveller does not
throw
With careless hand his alms upon the ground,
But stops, that he may safely lodge the coin
Within the old Man's hat; (26–29)

The interrupted rhythm of the third line, the way "But stops" forms a pause between two longer unpunctuated phrases, causes the reader to stop like the horseman. The keeper of the "toll-gate" (33) similarly "quits her work" (35), while even the "post-boy" (37) "[t]urns with less noisy wheels to the roadside, / And passes gently by" (41–42). The "horseman-traveller," the toll-gate, and, especially, the post-boy are all markers of the increased mobility and speed that we associate with developments in communication and distribution, and yet the beggar causes each to slow down or stop. For those around him the beggar is thus both a container for sympathy and collective local memory and a brake on the increasing speed and mobility of modern life. This braking effect also mimics the experience of reading the poem because its purposeful lack of eventfulness forces its readers to cultivate qualities of attentiveness and scrutiny produced by slow reading.

With its emphasis on the slow and its understanding of the often fraught relation between slowness and speed, Wordsworth's poem bears comparison with another Romantic touchstone of the slow. In Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" the slow is marked by the classical itself rather than by pedestrian movement or an absence of eventfulness. The poem's speaker begins by addressing the urn as a "still unravished bride of quietness" and "foster-child of silence and slow time" (1–2). Keats associates the urn with the absence of sound and also, like Wordsworth, with stillness. The double meaning of *still* links the absence of movement to undisturbed continuity through time, to a quality of being pure and "unravished." As the poem continues, this lack of movement and sound most distinguishes the scene depicted on the urn. The scene is explicitly visual and not verbal, expressing its "flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme" (4), and while the speaker deliberately calls attention to the material and visual qualities of the urn, the longing of the ode might also be understood as a longing to achieve a purity of representation akin to what the German art historian and connoisseur Johann Joachim Winckelmann described as the "edle Einfalt und stille Größe" ("noble simplicity and sedate grandeur"; 34) of classical material culture.[11] In Keats's account, such purity of representation becomes so transcendent that it escapes both the noise of mediation, the processes that come between things and transmit ideas through their materiality, and the noise of history, the realm in which things happen. It might even be argued that the quality of directness and purity associated with the lack of sound and movement stands for a classicism whose origins extend back to Winckelmann's influence on eighteenth-century aesthetics.[12] Neither the ode nor the urn, of course, can achieve the unmediated qualities for which they long, and, like the bold lover who can "never, never" reach his "goal" of kissing his beloved

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(17, 18), they will never realize the transparency toward which they aspire. But like the lover's failure, their failure has its compensations—namely, the poem's reflections on the unavoidable quality of mediation and on the rich potential of silence ("unheard melodies" [11]) and slowness, of stillness and lack. Such reflections, moreover, reveal Keats's sense that materiality itself, like the slow time it signifies, requires the imaginative mediation of poetry to elicit fully its implications.

The contrasts through which these reflections are achieved suggest that for Keats the classical itself is a mark of slowness, a slowness that acquires its full meaning through its contrast with the apparent speed of a newly mediated present, one that is driven by the "rapid communication of intelligence" that Wordsworth linked to technologies of mediation like print. This may seem like a reach, but if the urn delivers its legend, its history, through its materiality, that materiality and its durability contrast with more ephemeral forms of historical transmission like the newspaper and even the seemingly more permanent book.[13] Recall that in addition to noting the urn's unspoiled quality, its stillness and quietness, and despite its attempts to locate the scene on the "leaf-fringed legend" in a moment out of time (5), the poem necessarily acknowledges the movement of time and the inevitability of mediation. For the urn is a "foster-child" not only of "silence" but also of "slow time." It is a "sylvan historian" recording the deeds displayed on its surface (3). Echoing the earlier description of the urn's "leaf-fringed legend," Keats's "sylvan" contains a pun that represents the slow time of antiquity through the bookish metaphor of the leaf. The characterization of the urn as a historian explicitly associated with the book is a reminder of the urn's timekeeping qualities. The time kept by the urn, though, is "slow time," and this furthers the association of the classical with slowness. Keats understands print technology as speeding time up, in contrast to the urn, which slows it down; the classical, then, is a space in which such technologies are absent, and in their absence a deliberate slowness emerges, one marked by stillness and silence. This is not to suggest that classical antiquity was any more slow or quiet than the present for Keats but rather to suggest that he uses the perceived slowness and stillness of antiquity to mark the present as a time of speed and noise. Antiquity, then, is a mark of slowness whose inverse and countersign we do not see explicitly, but the persistent emphasis on its slowness and quiet forces a recollection of the ghostly presence of the speed and noise that oppose it.

As we saw with Lyell, slow time can also serve as a reminder of a different kind of time, the "deep time" of geology, the earth sciences, and other emerging disciplines that expanded estimates of the age of the earth and introduced, among other things, the possibility of species adaptation and extinction. If Wordsworth develops a poetics that, in Nixon's terms, "bring[s] into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration" (15), then Keats in his poetry offers an understanding of slowness in response to an explicit visual image and material object to which, however, he assigns a distinct temporal significance. Charlotte Smith, in turn, combines the two by offering a version of pedestrianism that in crisscrossing the landscape works like Lyell's geology to excavate that which is invisible and hence to turn up new understandings of time that arise from the interplay of the fast and the slow, the material and the immaterial, the concealed and the visible. This kind of temporal thinking not only emphasizes the acceleration that Wordsworth and Keats associate with their contemporary media culture's representation of the texture of everyday life, but it also explicitly highlights the expansion of time found in early geology. In Smith's poetry, slow time precedes and enables the emergence of deep time. Smith shows clearly how the perceived acceleration that marks

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Romantic media culture can be understood to develop in relation to the long timescales of natural or geological history.

Smith's "Beachy Head" provides an account of this temporal drama through a rich texture of interlinked temporalities, alternating lyric immediacy with narrative verse passages punctuated by expository notes. The poem opens with geological catastrophe, the "vast concussion" that Smith imagines as rapidly forming the cliffs of Dover in a sudden "awful hour" (6, 5), which then contrasts with the speaker's own slow movements across the South Downs and the stillness of a scene in which the sound of a sea snipe "[j]ust tells us that something living is abroad" (114). Though the poem says little about the proliferation of media that so troubles Wordsworth or the bookishness that Keats contrasts with his urn, it does call attention to a fraught watchfulness and an impending eventfulness associated with new media of communication.[14] In one scene, Smith imagines a peasant lighting beacons: "Then flames the high-raised heap, seen far off / Like hostile war-fires flashing to the sky" (227–28). Her note explains, "The beacons formerly lighted up on the hills to give notice of the approach of an enemy. These signals would still be used in case of alarm, if the telegraph now substituted could not be distinguished on account of fog or darkness" (227). While reminding readers of a potential eventfulness—the looming threat of war and invasion—the beacons also signal a contrast of pace wherein a slower mode of communication has been replaced, but not completely, by a more rapid one. Such beacons contrast also with the "slow white smoke" (196) of the peasant's peat fire that Smith imagines in the same verse paragraph. The medium of fire thus indicates both a potential speed and eventfulness and a more ordinary, everyday slowness. Like this fire, geology is not simply a figure of slowness, for geology's association with catastrophe in the poem's opening links geology also to suddenness and speed.

The central question in this juxtaposition of different times and distinct senses of time is how one can comprehend one's own time, where time refers to both a historical situation and a sense of lived time. What makes "Beachy Head" so important for this question is its collocation of immediate, minutely observed lived experience—lyric time—with remnants of a more distant past, starting with visible markers of that past like the ruins of Pevensey Castle and Battle Abbey but pushing further back into those markers of time that lie not in view but underground: the fossils of seashells and the bones of elephants. Such a question comes to a head in the passage that has drawn the most critical attention recently,[15] the moment when the speaker of the poem notes the presence of seashells far from water, even at the tops of mountains:

> Or did this range of chalky mountains, once
> Form a vast basin where the Ocean waves
> Swell'd fathomless? What time these fossil
> shells,
> Bouy'd on their native element, were thrown
> Among the embedding calx; when the huge hill
> Its giant bulk heaved, and in strange ferment
> Grew up a guardian barrier, 'twixt the sea
> And the green level of the sylvan weald?
> (382–89)

The answer to Smith's question is less important than the fact that she poses it, since she later dismisses the truth or content of geological speculation as "[f]ood for vague theories or vain dispute" (394). What matters instead is how the questions derived from excavation address the relation between spatial and temporal change. For Kevis Goodman, this very process of excavation marks, uncovers, and ultimately resists "the contradiction between phenomenology and historicity, between local ground and global system" (986), and hence reveals how poetic form and figuration themselves can gesture to a historical situation, a ground that defies representation. In Goodman's account, Smith's attention to fossils and

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bones indicates not that the natural historical landscape described by Smith is static or atemporal but rather that such "spatial displacement encodes historical difference" (992). For my purposes, the temporal questions raised by excavated fossils, especially the question of what time or when an event could have happened, expose the contradiction between the poem's various temporal rhythms. Here and in the following verse paragraph, when the speaker of the poem tries to make sense of the elephant bones also found nearby, bones and fossils remind us of how large spans of time and their slow, unrepresentable movement invade the experience of the everyday, inflecting the seeming suddenness of ordinary experience with a composite slowness and modulating the immediacy of lyric with a plenitude of time. Smith's representation of bones and fossils in "Beachy Head" shows the imaginative work that Romantic poetry can do when it incorporates the vast timescales of geology.

Such a poetics, which can hold together contrasts of pace and resist the oversimplifications of slow or fast in favor of a more complex modulation of time that accounts for them both, links Smith's poem to my earlier examples from Keats and Wordsworth. Viewed collectively, these poems reveal how perceptions of speed are inherently tied to perceptions of slowness and how the comparative eventfulness and speed of the present emerge alongside an increasing awareness of the intricate processes of slowness and invisible change related to what Lyell called the "immensity of time," an awareness that is needed to grapple with the "slow agency" of geological change (*Principles* [1997] 16). Such overlap between the fast and the slow is a central concern in a Romantic poetics of slowness.

Romantic Poetry, Geology, and the Slow

My argument thus far has shown the centrality of slow time to Romantic poetics. I have suggested that this poetics shares with geology the formal problem of how to imagine the significance of slow, gradual processes of change that transpire beneath the level of immediate observation. By the mid–nineteenth century, these processes would have been identified explicitly with Lyell.[16] For example, in Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, just after the oft cited passage about the violence of "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (56.15) the speaker asks if Man, "Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills, / Who battled for the True, the Just," should "Be blown about the desert dust, / Or seal'd within the iron hills . . ." (17–20). This is Lyell's bleak landscape of sand and water, an earth steadily in flux and in which human beings seemed peripheral, where species become extinct and where, "From scarped cliff and quarried stone" (2), Nature cries, "A thousand types are gone: / I care for nothing, all shall go" (3–4). In the vast reaches of time, human life and human works fade to insignificance. Later in the century Matthew Arnold expressed a similar perplexity, looking out from Dover Beach and listening to

> the grating roar
> Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling
> . . . . . .
> With tremulous cadence slow (9–10, 13)

These are poems written in the wake of Lyell's geology (and, in the case of Arnold, after Darwin's *Origin of Species*) that take for granted the connection between slow processes and deep time. Their meditative drama arises from the quandaries presented by different kinds of time, the way the poems move between the fleeting qualities of human time, the slow change of geological time, and the ungraspable solidity of eternal, cosmic time. In this context, they reveal the apparent triviality of human life and human time when these are juxtaposed with the deep time of geology—Lyell's "immensity of time," which, as Fitzgerald noted above, withers the poet's hope of immortality. Such poetry responds to the purchase

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that geological time had on the nineteenth-century imagination (Zimmerman).

My emphasis, however, is somewhat different from that of critics focused on post-Romantic works who see poetry as a response to geology. I have been trying to show how Romantic poetry engaged problems of slow time before Lyell and thus how both geology and a Romantic poetics of slowness think together about changes in the perception of time in the late eighteenth century, especially the recalibration of the relation between speed and slowness. Romantic poetry offers an imaginative space for working through the implications of complex and contradictory models of time in which senses of acceleration and slowness can be experienced simultaneously. Out of this crucible come new formal and representational problems related to slowness, problems confronted explicitly by both poetry and geology.

Alan Bewell has taught us to recognize how Wordsworth's poetry reveals a fascination with the marginal, with the dispossessed, and with a series of social and racial types on the verge of extinction. These marginal figures contribute to a Romantic poetics of slowness, marked not only by figures nearly extinct but also by rocks and stones and by the interaction and frequent figural transposition between these figures and the rocks and stones. Lucy Grey, after all, is "Roll'd round . . . / With rocks, and stones, and trees" ("A slumber did my spirit seal" 7–8), and the prominence of rocks and stones 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" (72). In *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" (158). These recent emphases on Wordsworth's fascination with rocks supplement 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" (*Romantic Rocks* xii). Geology and Romantic poetry might thus be understood as offering an archaeological framework for the enhanced awareness of nature's slowness and of the extinct former beings whose specimens are crucial to both poetry and geology.

Consider Wordsworth's poem "The Old Cumberland Beggar" in this context. For those around him, the beggar is both a container for sympathy and collective local memory and a brake on the increasing speed and mobility of modern life. For the villagers he is "a record" (89) much as fossils and rocks are a record for geologists of the prehuman history of the earth. Next, just as Lyell (and, later, Darwin) sees all organic beings, both extant and extinct, as belonging to the same system, Wordsworth describes the beggar as part of a natural economy whose components are interlinked and in which there is no waste:

> 'Tis Nature's law
> That none, the meanest of created things,
> Of forms created the most vile and brute,
> The dullest or most noxious, should exist
> Divorced from good, a spirit and a pulse of good,
> A life and soul to every mode of being
> Inseparably link'd. (73–79)

These lines suggest a less hierarchical version of the older concept of a great chain of being, in which all matter and life, "every mode of being," is "[i]nseparably link'd." The slowness of the beggar—and Wordsworthian slowness more generally—is laden with moral value, creating an ecosystem that offers an alternative to the quickening of the wider world. Such slowness partakes in "a spirit and a pulse of good." Similarly, Lyell's theory of the

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earth acknowledges that some geological formations have been shaped by violent events like earthquakes and volcanoes, but Lyell also insists that "many distinguishing features of the [earth's] surface may often be ascribed to the operation at a remote era of slow and tranquil causes—to the gradual deposition of sediment in a lake or in the ocean" (*Principles* [1997] 6). By this account, both Lyell and Wordsworth 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 geological change.

The geological method Lyell developed in his *Principles* followed the stratigraphic research program advocated by the Geological Society of London (founded in 1807), whose central task was the ordering of events in time on the basis of the fossil record. As Lyell explains, "In recent times, we may attribute our rapid progress chiefly to the careful determination of the order of succession in mineral masses, by means of their different organic contents, and their regular superposition" (*Principles* [1830] 30). Fossils are literally indurate objects (bodies that have become rocks) whose transformations tell us about duration, time, and the history of life on earth. While scholars like Heringman have emphasized induration—the materiality of terrestrial history and geoformation in Romantic literature and science—my interest in the conjunction of Romantic poetry, Lyell, and geology is more about duration, about time as process. Fossils are signs that represent physical events, that "convey to our minds more definite ideas than figures can do, of the immensity of time" (Lyell, *Principles* [1997] 25). Before the publication of Lyell's *Principles*, the key figure using fossils to order past events was the French naturalist Georges Cuvier, who argued for a binary theory of life on earth. Applying his considerable skills in comparative anatomy to the fossil record, Cuvier suggested that in a former age, a broad range of species, including the famous Megatherium found in Paraguay, populated the earth.[17] At some point, however, a great catastrophe wiped out these life forms. A second set of species, which included human beings, developed after this catastrophe. Others, most prominently the botanist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, rejected the theory of extinction in favor of a model of transformation and species adaptation. For Lamarck the greater the contrast between fossils and living forms, the more proof there is that an ubiquitous transformation occurred on a vast timescale, not that a whole world of species went extinct. In a dispute with Cuvier over the mummified remains of a three-thousand-year-old ibis, Lamarck insisted that species transformation could not be observed in a mere three millennia. As Lamarck notes, "for nature, time is nothing" (qtd. in Rudwick, *Bursting* 391). The dispute between Cuvier and Lamarck hinges on how we understand the historical nature of life on earth and the scale of time in which we imagine the earth's development.

Lyell's *Principles* drew on Cuvier and Lamarck to create an influential method for geological practice built on the existence of slow processes unfolding through an immense period of time. But in adapting Lamarck's gradualism while rejecting his materialism and his belief in the progressive nature of transmutation, Lyell rendered the longer timescales of geology safe for conservative readers (Secord 138–72), which made his work a bestselling standard well into the nineteenth century. Perhaps not surprising, an emphasis on timescale and on the unimaginably slow movement of time that he inherited from his late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century precursors marks Lyell's oeuvre. Lyell bases his theory on "the slow agency of existing causes" (*Principles* [1997] 16), which encompass the "tranquil deposition of sedimentary matter and the slow development of organic life" (24). This is what Gould calls Lyell's "uniformity of rate" (120), his a priori

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belief in gradual change whereby large-scale events can be explained through the accumulation of "an indefinite number of local revolutions" (Lyell, *Principles* [1997] 68).[18] As Lyell notes, the objections to this idea rest on the "incalculable periods of time" required to explain sedimentation, but "in the last forty years" the stratigraphic research program had proved "that successive strata, containing, in regular order of superposition, distinct beds of shells and corals . . . could only have been formed by slow and insensible degrees in a great lapse of ages" (36–37). Slow time enables Lyell's *Principles*. But, as Nixon reminds us, slowness poses formal problems and requires figural resources. Lyell concedes as much when he acknowledges that "[t]he imagination was at first fatigued and overpowered by endeavouring to conceive the immensity of time required for the annihilation of whole continents by so insensible a process" (16). How can slow processes like geological change and the extinction of species be represented?

Lyell himself frequently relies on cutaway or cross-sectional drawings to show intersections of primary, secondary, and tertiary strata. Such images, however much they clarify Lyell's point, do not help us imagine the vast stretches of time that Lyell's theory requires. In thinking about the representational problem faced by Lyell and others who emphasized slow change and long timescales, we can turn to the figure most identified with Lyell's ideas in the mid–nineteenth century, Charles Darwin. In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin built on Lyell's slow time as he repeatedly speculated about the length of time required for species change, a subject familiar to those trying to explain geological change. We can begin to grasp the extraordinary timescale imagined by Lyell and Darwin when we consider the diagram that Darwin offers us to show the differentiation of species over time (fig. 1).

This image has fifteen horizontal lines. The interval between each line, Darwin tells us, represents a thousand generations, but he quickly adds that "it would have been better if each had represented ten thousand generations" (164). Darwin later qualifies this figure yet again: "In the diagram, each horizontal

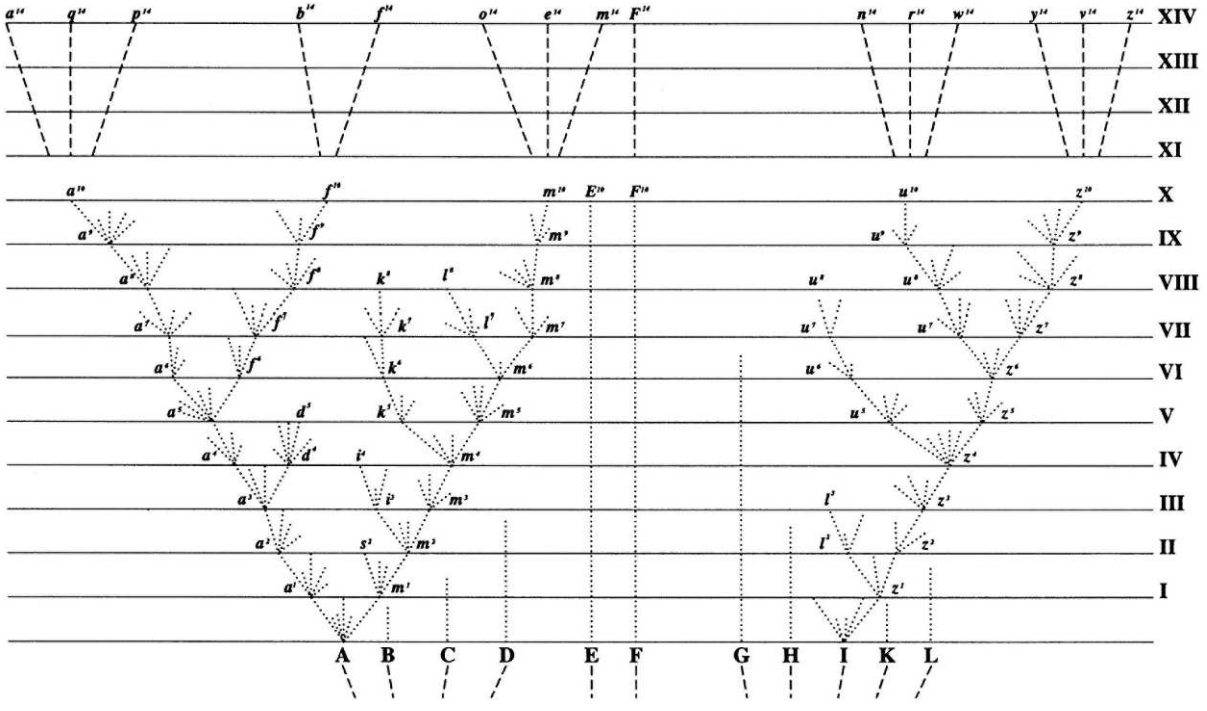


FIG. 1
From Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859).

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line has hitherto been supposed to represent a thousand generations, but each may represent a million or hundred million generations" (169). A thousand, ten thousand, a million, a hundred million—the increase in the ordinal power of these numbers stretches the limit of our imagination, but they represent merely the start of the vast lengths of time that Darwin's theory needs.

Darwin was aware of this problem, and his language here recalls Lyell's concession that he experiences imaginative fatigue when contemplating the vast reaches of time. Darwin explained that his theory required "a lapse of time . . . so great as to be utterly inappreciable by the human intellect" (192). This, of course, is the problem of deep time: it eludes representation and often demands a temporal span so long as to be almost without meaning. How, after all, can we comprehend any difference between ten million and a hundred million years or, for that matter, ten million and eleven million? Yet this is also the representational problem that Darwin must confront if he wants to make the case for slow and gradual change in an almost incomprehensibly long time span that is nonetheless not infinite. In this context, slow time enables the imaginative leap. Darwin understands the difference that slow time makes, and to render a vast timescale comprehensible he turns not to the poetic strategies of Wordsworth, Keats, and Smith but to a visual aid, a printed chart. Darwin's willingness to expand the significance of each horizontal line (labeled with Roman numerals) does not indicate backsliding or confusion on his part but rather underscores how the chart itself depends fundamentally on uniformity of scale. Scale is heterochronic: the same spatial representation can be used for very different experiences of time. Darwin's innovative chart fuses fast and slow into a variant of deep time that accounts for vast swaths of time in a single glance.

But this combination of fast and slow does not suggest that Darwin has solved the formal and representational problems of slow time. If Darwin and his Romantic precursors like Lyell, Wordsworth, Keats, and Smith address the difficulty differently—the first through a visual chart and the others through verbal representation of the temporal quandaries raised by pedestrianism, antique remnants, and fossils—they all face related formal problems in their attempts to call attention to unspectacular but not insignificant events characterized by an intensity of slowness that commonly escapes representation but that must nonetheless be shown in relation to time. Such problems remain unsolved, as Nixon's recent call for a redefinition of speed in relation to slow violence attests. These ongoing problems, I have suggested, intensify in the late eighteenth century, when a sense of acceleration and eventfulness generated by print media and exacerbated by the revolution in France developed in tension with new understandings of slowness and the emergence of deep time. It is the challenge of criticism to call attention to these formal problems, to frame their conditions of emergence and their persistence into the present, and to insist, in the manner of this essay, that we must not substitute a singular focus on the slow alterations of geology or the rapid accretions of information technology for the more complex task of thinking about individual and historical human time. In this context, the slowness of Romantic poetry and of Lyell's geology provides a bracing, intentionally antidramatic reminder that, unlike biological or geological forms, the insights arrived at in the past are not extinct now.

Not

Particular thanks go to Andrew Piper, Omri Moses, and Kevis Goodman for rigorous and sustained engagement with my thinking and helpful suggestions for revision. This essay intersects with readings developed for my

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book, *The Poetics of Decline in British Romanticism* (Cambridge UP, 2018), here drawn in a different direction.

1. Rejecting unique events like a comet, a shift in the earth's axis, or a cooling earth, Lyell explained changes in the earth's climate and surface through shifting relations between land and sea, including sedimentation, erosion, the uplift of mountains, and glacial movement.

2. McPhee is credited with coining this term, but the concept is thought to originate in Hutton's *Theory of the Earth* (1788). The term, whose use has been widespread in geology, has lately become a contested topic in literary studies with the appearance of Dimock; McGurl. For a more recent account, see Heringman, "Deep Time."

3. This point is widely repeated and acknowledged. I have in mind theorists of modernity such as Koselleck, Rosa, Habermas, Virilio, and Arrighi, all of whom locate a new sense of acceleration, and a new self-consciousness about this sense, in the late eighteenth century.

4. See also A. Smith on the "hurry of life" in commercial society (112).

5. Williams writes, "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" (167).

6. For more on how *torpor* was used around 1800, see Mitchell 56–60.

7. I am thinking here of Koselleck, esp. 279–84 and 31–38; Rosa, "Speed," esp. 443, an article now expanded in *Social Acceleration*; and Virilio's use of the concept of "dromology" to characterize the critical role of brakes and accelerators as modernity moves "at speed from the confines of space to the exigencies of time" (vi). Arrighi, who describes processes of acceleration and compression, states that "as we move from the earlier to the later stages of capitalist development, it has taken less and less time for systemic regimes of accumulation to rise, develop fully, and be superseded" (221). See Pocock on the relation between credit and "high speed" (98; see 91–102). Most recently, Crary characterizes modernity through the acceleration of novelty into a regime of the 24-7.

8. I have in mind here Langan and McLane; McLane, esp. 112–16; Goodman; Piper; Burkett; and the work of the research group Interacting with Print (interactingwithprint.org).

9. Brower describes what he calls "slow reading" as "slowing down the process of reading to observe what is happening" (5, 4).

10. All poetry is cited by line numbers.

11. Keats's ode is one of the most written-about poems in the English language, and so a comprehensive review of the literature on this poem is beyond the scope of this essay. For the most seminal argument on Keats and the ideal of art, see Brooks's essay "Keats's Sylvan Historian" (139–52); Jack. On Keats and ekphrasis, see Scott.

12. Cox calls Keats's classicism, which he links to Catullus, "Cockney classicism" (146; see 146–86).

13. Influential accounts of Keats and history include Levinson; Chandler 389–440; and the essays collected in Roe.

14. Gurton-Wachter uses the threat of invasion from this spot to read the entire poem as built around an entwined watchfulness.

15. See, e.g., Heringman, "'Very Vain'"; Gurton-Wachter; Bode; Kelley; Goodman.

16. On Lyell's pervasive influence, see Armstrong 246–64.

17. The South American Megatherium refers to a large skeleton displayed in the Royal Museum of Madrid, where it was seen in 1795 by a French diplomat. Engravings were sent to Paris, where Cuvier assigned it the Latin name *Megatherium americanum* and controversially claimed that it was distinct from any living species. For a full description of the episode, see Rudwick, *Bursting* 356–60.

18. See also Gould 99–179, esp. 120–23.

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