



---

Review: The Law of/and Gender: Genre Theory and The Prelude

Reviewed Work(s): Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes by Alistair Fowler

Review by: Mary Jacobus

Source: *Diacritics*, Winter, 1984, Vol. 14, No. 4, Scholarly Journal (Winter, 1984), pp. 47-57

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/465051>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Diacritics*

# THE LAW OF/AND GENDER: GENRE THEORY AND *THE PRELUDE*

MARY JACOBUS

**Alistair Fowler.** *KINDS OF LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE THEORY OF GENRES AND MODES.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.

*The question of the literary genre is not a formal one: it covers the motif of the law in general, of generation in the natural and symbolic senses, of birth in the natural and symbolic senses, of the generation difference, sexual difference between the feminine and masculine genre/gender, . . . of an identity and difference between the feminine and masculine.*  
– Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” *Glyph*, 7 (1980), 221.

My epigraph comes from an essay whose already involuted paradoxes of classification and taxonomy I don't intend to elaborate (although I will be returning to Derrida at the end). Rather, Derrida's summary announces in brief the argument about genre and gender which I shall be making apropos of *The Prelude* in particular, and genre theory in general. Questions of genre involve both law and generation, or beginnings; both gender and sexual identity, or difference. Though my point of departure, or pretext, is provided by a reading of the Vaudracour and Julia episode in *The Prelude* – an episode whose plot is for my purposes summarized by Derrida's summary – I hope to suggest ways in which that episode can provide a re-reading of some current theories of genre, especially in light of Derrida's critical reflections on the (il)legitimizing effects of the law of genre. Instead of reading the episode in the light of theories of genre, in other words, I want to read theories of genre in the light of the episode. I have in mind especially Alistair Fowler's astute attempt to bring notions of generic transformations to bear on literary history in his recent book, *Kinds of Literature* (1982). Misleadingly subtitled *An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Fowler's book is an instance of the refusal of theory in the interests of maintaining an ultimately conservative view of literary history. Genre in effect does away with the need for theory since it organizes literature in the forms in which we already know it; recognizability and an unbroken line of descent are the final criteria, and literary hierarchies remain unchanged. The Vaudracour and Julia episode tells a story about illegitimacy, but the fate of the episode itself tells a story about literary hierarchy. The disreputable episode lost its place in Wordsworth's autobiography because it threatened to undo the legitimizing efforts that went into the authorized version of *The Prelude*. One way to expose the (non)relation between views of genre as different as those of Derrida and Fowler is to tell the story of the Vaudracour and Julia episode as it is told by Wordsworth himself, by the textual history of *The Prelude*, and as it (in turn)



retells the story of the law of genre – a story which necessarily engages questions of gender and (sexual) politics along with questions of theory.

“With That Prelude Did Begin/The Record”

To begin at the end: the naming of Wordsworth’s untitled posthumous poem by his widow can be seen as at once a legitimation, an act of propriety, and an appropriation. Here is his nephew Christopher’s account from the *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* (1851):

*Its title, “The Prelude,” had not been fixed on by the author himself: the Poem remained anonymous till his death. The present title has been prefixed to it at the suggestion of the beloved partner of his life, and the best interpreter of his thoughts, from considerations of its tentative and preliminary character. Obviously it would have been desirable to mark its relation to “The Recluse” by some analogous appellation; but this could not easily be done, at the same time that its other essential characteristics were indicated. Besides, the appearance of this poem, after the author’s death, might tend to lead some readers into an opinion that it was his final production, instead of being, as it really is, one of his earlier works. They were to be guarded against this supposition. Hence a name has been adopted, which may serve to keep the true nature and position of the poem constantly before the eye of the reader; and “THE PRELUDE” will now be perused and estimated with the feelings properly due to its preparatory character, and to the period at which it was composed. [i, 313; author’s emphasis]*

Guarded against the supposition that it is a later work (“his *final* production”), the reader knows where the poem belongs (“one of his *earlier* works”), and to whom – the poet’s family; more particularly, his widow (“the best interpreter of his thoughts”). The title, then, not so much pre-fixes *The Prelude* as fixes it, serving “to keep the true nature and position of the poem constantly before the eye of the reader.” The widow’s afterthought prepares us to be prepared. But for what? How can we know “the feelings properly due to its preparatory character” without knowing what comes afterwards? And what if its “true nature” were to have been an end, and not a beginning – the “tail-piece” to the unwritten *Recluse* which Coleridge had first envisaged? Or suppose the famous antechapel turned out to be an annex instead – “the biographical, or philosophico-biographical Poem to be prefixed or annexed to the *Recluse*” (Coleridge again [Griggs, i.538; ii.1104]). At once an end-less beginning and always an after-word to the life it narrates, Wordsworth’s autobiography seems not to have a proper place after all. It belongs nowhere and has no fixed character, is redundant to the non-existent text which its title is supposed to “prelude.” In short, it is an impropriety, and one properly suppressed during the poet’s lifetime.

It would be difficult to cut *The Prelude* from the record of Wordsworth’s writings. But he did his best to excise another impropriety, also successfully suppressed during his lifetime. I mean, of course, his off-the-record love-affair with Annette Vallon and the birth of their daughter Caroline:

*Oh, happy time of youthful lovers, (thus  
My story may begin) O balmy time,  
In which a love-knot, on a lady’s brow,  
Is fairer than the fairest star in Heaven!  
So might – and with that prelude did begin  
The record; and, in faithful verse, was given  
The doleful sequel. [1850: ix.553–59]<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise specified, all Prelude references are to the 1805 text of William Wordsworth: *The Prelude*, 1799, 1805, 1850, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1979).

The record thus begun and aborted was the story of Vaudracour and Julia, published separately in 1820 and omitted altogether from the 1850 version of *The Prelude* in which these prelude lines occur (“and with that prelude *did* begin/The record”). Removed from its originally autobiographical context, “The doleful sequel” became yet another of Wordsworth’s pathetic tales, a “Poem Founded on the Affections.” The note added in 1820 indicates that the story was “written as an Episode, in a work [i.e., *The Prelude*] from which its length may perhaps exclude it” [*The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ii.59]. But in a letter of 1805 to Sir George Beaumont, Wordsworth makes it hard for himself to exclude anything from his ever-expanding autobiography. Offering, in his own phrase, to “lop off” any “redundancies” that may later become apparent in the completed poem, he withdraws the offer in the same breath: “this defect [i.e., redundancy], whenever I have suspected it or found it to exist in any writings of mine, I have always found incurable. The fault lies too deep, and is in the first conception” [*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* 587]. Contradictorily, Wordsworth seems to say that lopping off an incurable defect risks damaging an integrity which already includes redundancies. The cut would at once strike a blow to the integrity of the work and admit that it lacks integrity, since the “fault” or “defect” lies in its first conception. A story of impropriety, disowning, and cutting off as the result of a faulty conception, the Vaudracour and Julia episode suffers the same fate as its hero – surely the most lopped-off romantic lover since Abelard.

There is nothing in the 1850 version of *The Prelude* to tell us that Vaudracour and Julia are both victims of an *ancien régime* whose social and sexual codes of honor are founded on both the Name and the Law of the Father – on paternity, property, and propriety. Wordsworth contents himself with directing his imaginary reader elsewhere for “the doleful sequel” to the story, and at this point in the 1850 text substitutes a clumsy twenty-line paraphrase which is striking for its omissions: “Thou, also, there mayst read,” he tells Coleridge (who may be presumed to have known the whole story anyway),

*how the enamoured youth [i.e., Vaudracour] was driven,  
By public power abused, to fatal crime,  
Nature’s rebellion against monstrous law;  
How, between heart and heart, oppression thrust  
Her mandates, severing whom true love had joined,  
Harassing both; until he sank and pressed  
The couch his fate had made for him; supine,  
Save when the stings of viperous remorse,  
Trying their strength, enforced him to start up,  
Aghast and prayerless. Into a deep wood  
He fled, to shun the haunts of human kind;  
There dwelt, weakened in spirit more and more;  
Nor could the voice of Freedom, which through France  
Full speedily resounded, public hope,  
Or personal memory of his own worst wrongs,  
Rouse him; but, hidden in those gloomy shades,  
His days he wasted, – an imbecile mind. [1850: ix.568–85]*

To set the record straight: Vaudracour loses his liberty, his manhood, and his marbles because his noble father objects to a middle-class marriage (plebeian, as it becomes in 1820) with his childhood playmate; these are not star-crossed lovers, but class-crossed, and the paternal prohibition which mobilizes the law against Vaudracour means that the child he engenders outside marriage can never be legitimate – can never inherit the Name of the Father. The censored text of 1850 may tell us no more than the fact that by this time Wordsworth himself had become a Victorian Father, a reading borne out by the 1820 denial of his earlier, more permissive speculation that the lovers had been carried away “through effect / Of some delirious hour” [ix.596–97; “ah, speak it, think it, not!” is Wordsworth’s 1820 revision]. But where beginning fictions are concerned, omissions like this tell tales. Modern readers of *The Prelude* know – too knowingly, perhaps – that the episode is a pretext; for

Vaudracour read “Heartsworth,” or Wordsworth as lover; for Julia, read Annette.<sup>2</sup> But the biographical reading is a short cut. What should interest us is not so much the begetting of Caroline as the beginnings of *The Prelude*; not so much the (giving) life as the work.

In 1805, Wordsworth had introduced the episode as a digression from his main purpose in the Revolutionary books: “I shall not, as my purpose was, take note / Of other matters . . . – public acts, / And public persons, . . . – but I will here instead / Draw from obscurity a tragic tale . . .” [ix.544–51]. This turning away from history, or domestication of epic, is prefigured at the start of *The Prelude* when Wordsworth’s survey of mythic and historical themes for his projected poem comes home to “Some tale from my own heart, more near akin / To my own passions and habitual thoughts” [i.221–22]. Though it too proved a false start, the untold “tale from [his] own heart” is resumed in Book IX. The Vaudracour and Julia episode can be seen – not, I think, entirely fancifully – as the point from which *The Prelude* departs as well as a redundancy, as an opening as well as a cut. A history of error and transgression, the episode is also symptomatic of the errancy of Wordsworth’s abandonment of historical and philosophical epic for that mixed and transgressive genre, autobiography. Here a pause for classification seems in order. Wordsworth’s 1815 “Preface” includes under the heading of narrative the following genres or kinds: “the Epopoeia, the Historic Poem, the Tale, the Romance, the Mock-heroic, and, . . . that dear production of our days, the metrical Novel.” The distinguishing mark of this class, Wordsworth goes on, “is, that the Narrator . . . is himself the source from which everything primarily flows” [*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, iii.27]. Where does this leave autobiography, which Wordsworth, we know, regarded as “unprecedented” in literary history (“a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself,” as he wrote to Beaumont) [*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* 586]? Presumably, it leaves autobiography with Tales and Romances. In other words, Wordsworth’s lapse into “that dear production of our days, the metrical Novel” can scarcely be dissociated from his larger lapse in talking so much about himself. Cutting the Vaudracour and Julia episode makes amends for an error that can’t be cut, the altogether redundant *Prelude*. Romance – which is well known to be in love with error – is censored so that autobiography can speak out at unprecedented length.

#### *Revolution, Romance, and Sexual Difference*

What kind of poem is *The Prelude*? We could settle for Coleridge’s “philosophico-biographical” and leave it at that. But I’d like to press the question a little further. Genre might be called the frenchification of gender, and it was in France that (having left his French letters at home, as they say in England) Wordsworth discovered the literal implications of engendering. We know that France appeared to him under the sign of romance as well as revolution; “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive” [x.692], but also: “O balmy time, / In which a love-knot, on a lady’s brow / Is fairer than the fairest star in Heaven!” [1850: ix. 554–56]. In a strikingly proleptic passage, Wordsworth describes how on his first arrival in Paris in 1791 he gathered up a stone from the ruins of the Bastille “And pocketed the relick in the guise / Of an enthusiast” [ix.66–67]. Yet, “affecting more emotion than [he] felt,” he is less moved by this symbol of the Revolution than by a picture then on show in Paris as a tourist attraction, “the Magdelene of le Brun” [ix.71–80]. Le Brun, associated with Versailles and Richlieu, and a rapturously penitent Magdelene popularly (but incorrectly) thought to portray Louise de la Vallière, the mistress of Louis XIV, seem on the face of it to represent aesthetic lapses on the part of an aspiring Republican. But the incident foretells the Vaudracour and Julia episode, later in the same book, in a number of significant ways. The painting’s erotic religiosity provides an imaginary visual parallel for the tale of hapless lovers forced – like Louise de la Vallière, who retired to a Carmelite convent – to sublimate their passion in religious houses (Julia is consigned to a convent by her mother while, according to the Fenwick note, the final refuge of the real-life Vaudracour was the Convent of La Trappe [see *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ii.478]). Politically speaking, Wordsworth

---

<sup>2</sup>See David Erdman, “Wordsworth as Heartsworth; or, Was Regicide the Prophetic Ground of those ‘Moral Questions?’,” in *The Evidence of the Imagination*, ed. Donald Reiman, Michael Jaye and Betty Bennett (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 15.



Charles Le Brun, *La Madeleine Repentante* (1756–57)

himself had fallen in love with a woman of royalist sympathies in a Loire landscape bearing the traces of royal erotic history (“that rural castle, name now slipped / From my remembrance, where a lady lodged / By the first Francis wooed,” ix.485–87). Finally, the Vaudracour and Julia episode redeems sexual love as romance (this is no casual affair) and rededicates it to revolution.

Two critics have recently and persuasively argued for the centrality of the erotic motif in Book IX, offering their own readings of both of “The Penitent Magdalene” and of the Vaudracour and Julia episode. For Alan Liu, elaborating what he calls “the Genre of Revolution” in Books IX and X of *The Prelude*, the Magdalene is the female “genius” of the revolutionary landscape; Wordsworth, writes Liu apropos of Le Brun’s painting, “wants to see a revolutionary country in which liberation arrives, not with the pike-thrusts of violence, but

with the soft, fluid undulations of a necklace spilling from a box, of clouds rolling through a window, or of the clothes, hair, tears, and body of a woman flowing out of old constraints" – the point being that Wordsworth misread both "The Penitent Magdelene" and Revolutionary France.<sup>3</sup> For Ronald Paulson, drawing on Liu's argument that Wordsworth is trying to fit revolution into an aesthetic category or literary genre in order to make it manageable, "love itself is the symbol of revolution" and "The act of love . . . an act of rebellion, or at least a scandalous act, in the context of a society of arranged marriages, closed families, and decorous art and literature" [*Representations of Revolution*, 265]. The story thus becomes for Paulson "the hidden center" or "displaced paradigm" of Wordsworth's revolutionary experience which he reads as follows: "he falls in love with an alien woman (alien by class and nationality), challenges his father, runs away with her, but eventually succumbs to the external, paternal pressures. The act of loving with this slightly alien woman *is* [repeats Paulson] the act of revolution . . ." [268–69]. Thematically speaking, the Vaudracour and Julia episode clearly represents just such "an act of rebellion, or at least a scandalous act" and it is no surprise that the later Wordsworth should have chosen to hush it up on political as well as personal grounds. But persuasive as these readings are, I want to offer an alternative reading, one which bears not only on the genre of *The Prelude* but on the gender of the poet (and on that "slightly alien woman"). This must be my justification for retelling the story which Liu and Paulson in their different ways have already told in the context of their common concern with genre and revolution in Books IX and X.

In brief, I want to suggest that the metonymic swerve of passion from fallen Bastille to fallen woman, from history to romance, puts a woman's face on the Revolution and, in doing so, makes a man of Wordsworth. Without "a regular chronicle" of recent events, Wordsworth (he tells us) is unable to give them a "form and body" [ix.101–6]; "all things," he complains, "were to me / Loose and disjointed" [ix.106–7]. Lacking a body ("the affections left / Without a vital interest," ix.107–8), how can revolution engender desire? Chaotic, formless, and multitudinous, revolutionary uproar – the "hubbub wild" of Milton's Pandemonium which strikes Wordsworth on his arrival [ix.56] – mocks all attempts to textualize it for posterity: "Oh, laughter for the page that would reflect / To future times the face of what now is!" [ix.176–77], writes Wordsworth, dropping into the present tense. Superimposed on the faceless face "of what now is" we find that of Le Brun's stylized Magdelene: "A beauty exquisitely wrought – fair face / And rueful, with its ever-flowing tears" [ix.79–80]. Le Brun's expressive theory of the passions was famous for transforming the face itself into an intelligible or speaking text. Embodied as a beautiful woman (whose expression, Liu points out, is closest to that of Ravishment or Rapture in Le Brun's scheme), revolution becomes readable. Elsewhere, Wordsworth himself admits to having prized "the historian's tale" only as "tales of the poets"; only as romance – "as it made my heart / Beat high and filled my fancy with fair forms" [ix.207–10]. Seduced by fair forms once more as he encounters the reality of revolutionary France, Wordsworth substitutes the Vaudracour and Julia episode for the historian's tale. But, like the penitent Magdelene with her fair face, the episode gives form to more than the unreadable, risible text of history. The story of Vaudracour and Julia is also a way of constituting Wordsworth himself as an autobiographical subject. The late Paul de Man has written of the resistance of autobiography to attempts to make it look less disreputable by elevating it into a genre or mode and installing it "among the canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres"; rather, autobiographical discourse becomes "a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts." He goes on: "The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution"; as a figure of face (posited by language) and simultaneous defacement (since language for de Man is always privative) ["Autobiography as Defacement," 919, 921]. Because the woman's face images his own, reflecting the onlooker's desire much as the supposed Magdelene (Louise de la Vallière) might be thought to reflect that of Louis XIV, the autobiographer can come into existence as a specular image of the reader. When the page has a face, it can

<sup>3</sup>"Shapeless Eagerness: The Genre of Revolution in Books 9-10 of The Prelude," *MLQ* 43, (1982), 10; see especially 8–13. Liu offers a particularly suggestive analysis of the Le Brun "Magdelene," which he reproduces in his text.

speak to the future; or at any rate to Coleridge—another of the autobiographer's self-constituting mirror-images or faces in *The Prelude*.

Hence gender (sexual difference) establishes identity by means of a difference that is finally excised. What we end up with is not difference (that "slightly alien woman") but the same: man, or man-to-man. Like the Vaudracour and Julia episode, and like the feminized genre of romance, woman becomes redundant. Her role is to mediate between men, as the role of romance is to mediate between history and the historian's tale, or page. The real hero of this tale is in fact Beupuy, Wordsworth's surrogate narrator for the Vaudracour and Julia episode, as well as his mentor and idealized revolutionary self (his name, tellingly, combines beauty and power—a masculine or *beau idéal*). Their "earnest dialogues" beneath the trees of the Loire valley are compared to those of Dion and Plato [ix.446, 415–16]. But Wordsworth's thoughts soon wander from philosophic debate about freedom (Dion liberated Sicily from tyrannical rule) to tales of damsels more or less in distress—fantasies drawn from Ariosto, Tasso, and Spenser: "Angelica thundering through the woods," "Erminia, fugitive as fair as she," satyrs mobbing "a female in the midst, / A mortal beauty, their unhappy thrall" [ix.454–64]. Beupuy himself is an errant knight who wanders "As through a book, an old romance, or tale / Of Fairy" [ix.307–8], and chivalry turns out to be the motivating force for his political idealism even when he points to a present-day reality, the famous hunger-bitten girl feeding her heifer by the way-side ("Tis against that / Which we are fighting," ix.519–20). Beupuy's political program, in fact, is none other than to transfer to the people "A passion and a gallantry . . . Which he, a soldier, in his idler days / Had payed to women" [ix.318–20]—as Gayatri Spivak has noted in her analysis of "Sex and History in *The Prelude*," "an unwitting display of class and sex prejudice" [341]. This embodiment of the people as an unhappy female thrall in need of rescue suggests that their role (like that of the beauty surrounded by satyrs) is to mediate relations between men. Both politics (the people) and romance (woman) go under, leaving the philosophic dialogue addressed by one man to another which Dorothy Wordsworth called "the Poem addressed to Coleridge" [*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 664]—a poem "fair-copied" by the women of the Wordsworth-Coleridge circle, but rarely addressed to them.

In the economics of chivalry, it is the woman who pays. Wordsworth, who in 1793 had called Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) "a philosophic lamentation over the extinction of Chivalry," knew the price. The Vaudracour and Julia episode reads like a critique of Burke's famous lament (inspired by the fate of Marie Antionette) for "the age of chivalry": "It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness . . ." [*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, i.35, 56n]. The Vaudracour and Julia episode translates "that chastity of honour" as ruthless persecution of the lovers, even to the point where the father imprisons his son rather than recognize marriage to a commoner; even to the point of disregarding primogeniture rather than recognize an illegitimate child. Yet Wordsworth's own unmasking of the ideology which sustains the fictions of "chivalry"—an ideology based on class and sexual inequality, and maintained by laws designed to perpetuate the interests of the upper classes—might be accused of participating in the values of an out-moded genre. If only by its contiguity with chivalric romance, the "tale" is anachronistic, identified with the values of the ruling class even when it tells of simple people, and complicit in the retreat from the specificity of history whereby romance conceals that class's social basis—that is, its exploitation or oppression of the ruled [see Parker, 9]. Though Wordsworth claims for Beupuy's narrative of Vaudracour and Julia "the humbler province of true history" [ix.643], the story—based in part on Helen Maria Williams' *Letters Written in France in the Summer of 1790* (1790) [see Todd, 219–25]—preserves all the self-consciously literary qualities of sensibility and pathos common in late eighteenth-century fiction and metrical tales. Vaudracour himself is a man of feeling whose single act of violence (the murder of one of the men sent by his father to arrest him) accentuates his passivity and feminization in the face of paternal authority. His final impotence, roused neither by "the voice of Freedom, . . . public hope, / Or personal memory of his own worst wrongs" [1850: ix.581–83] is the impotence of the pathetic tale itself to confront history. Set in a pre-Revolutionary era, it is a relic, a pre-text, its lovers for ever belated, as if caught in a time-warp from which *The Prelude* itself can escape.



Unlike Wordsworth (or for that matter the voluble Annette) who lived to tell his own tale, Vaudracour is silenced: "From that time forth he never uttered word / To any living" [ix.912–13]. His imbecility is the autobiographer's unacted part; though he had found it hard to get started on his epic, Wordsworth had not "wasted" his days, and his release came through timely and copious utterance: "a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself."

*A Family Romance; Or, the Politics of Genre*

Oedipal interpretations of the Vaudracour and Julia episode are fuelled by Wordsworth himself when he writes of "A conflict of sensations without name" which he experienced after his return from revolutionary France on finding himself unowned and silent in the midst of a congregation praying "to their great Father" for victory against the French [x.265–73]. Oedipal conflict becomes synonymous with revolution ("in the minds of all ingenuous youth, / Change and subversion from this hour . . . that might be named / A revolution," writes Wordsworth in Book X; x.232–37). Paulson's Bloomian version of the oedipal plot has Wordsworth staging a successful poetic rebellion against the literary Father, Milton; "the struggle with (as Bloom would put it) his poetic father reflecting in microcosm the oedipal conflict of the Revolution itself . . . the rebellion against Milton [is] a successful version of the Vaudracour-Julia story in which the father *is* defied" [see *Representations of Revolution*, 273–75]. For Spivak, in the most ambitious attempt so far to read the Vaudracour and Julia episode in the combined light of gender, politics, and psychoanalysis, Wordsworth's disavowal of paternity (his fathering of Caroline) is crucial to the plot of both *The Prelude* and the Great Tradition which has it that "the Child is father of the Man," i.e., "man as son." Paulson's Wordsworth reverses the fate of Vaudracour, who remains by contrast for ever son not father – his marriage forbidden, his freedom curtailed, and his child illegitimate. Spivak's reading is less indulgent of the oedipal plot, seeing it as a ruse that allows Wordsworth to play at Mothers and Fathers, thereby acceding to an androgyny which finally excludes women in the interests of a restored Imagination. "Suppression of Julia, unemphatic retention of Vaudracour as sustained and negative condition of possibility of disavowal, his sublation into Coleridge . . . Imagination as the androgyny of Nature and Man – woman shut out. I cannot but see in it the sexual-political program of the Great Tradition" [see "Sex and History," 23, 331, 336, and 326–36 *passim*]. The plot, in short, is a (Great) Master-plot.

But what about the baby? – the baby to whom Vaudracour becomes so devoted after Julia's incarceration in a convent, and whom he curiously resembles in his own helplessness and in his dependence on Julia. When we recall the baby's omission from the 1850 text of *The Prelude*, we might pause to ask whether, in suppressing it, Wordsworth may not provide us with another twist to the oedipal narrative: that of the so-called "family romance." In his edition of *The Prelude*, Ernest de Selincourt took time out to grumble about the Vaudracour and Julia episode in a footnote as "among the weakest of [Wordsworth's] attempts in narrative verse." "Its most radical fault," he goes on,

*lies in that part which was probably true to fact, but farthest removed from his own experience, i.e. the character of the hero, with whose meek resignation it is as impossible to sympathize as with the patience of a Griselda. . . . Wordsworth completely fails in presenting a character so unlike his own; and the matter-of-fact detail which he supplies, often so effective and moving in his narratives, only makes Vaudracour and Julia more ludicrous, till in [the lines narrating the death of the baby] it reaches a climax of absurdity difficult to parallel in our literature. [The Prelude; Or Growth of a Poet's Mind, 592–93]*

"A hero," writes Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), "is someone who has had the courage to rebel against his father and has in the end victoriously overcome him" [xxiii.12]. The antithesis of such a hero and therefore (for de Selincourt) unlike Wordsworth himself, Vaudracour can only be a woman or a patient Griselda. For woman, read "neurotic," since according to Freud in "Family Romances" (1908) the failure to liberate oneself from the

authority of one's parents determines a class of neurotic. the essay goes on to identify a characteristic form of fantasy in children and in the erotic and ambitious fantasies of adolescents—one never yielded up by such neurotic individuals; namely, the fantasy of being a step-child or an adopted child. In the Moses story, it is the aristocratic father who disowns his child or condemns him to death (a role taken by Vaudracour's implacable father in the *Prelude* episode). Vaudracour, then, assumes the role of nurse to himself as abandoned infant when disowned by the father. This may shed light on the unparalleled "climax of absurdity" denounced by de Selincourt, lines describing Vaudracour performing "The office of a nurse to his young child, / Which . . . by some mistake / Or indiscretion of the father, died" [ix.906–8]. Negligent nursing and negligent narrative coincide. Wordsworth's off-hand aporia (is this a displaced suicide, a mercy-killing, or an infanticide?) raises a bizarre line of questioning. Freud remarks on an interesting variant of the family romance in which a younger child robs those born before him of their prerogatives by imagining them illegitimate, so that "the hero and author returns to legitimacy himself while his brothers and sisters are eliminated by being bastardized" [ix.240]. When one recalls the lines which depict Vaudracour "propping a pale and melancholy face" [ix.812] on one of Julia's breasts while the baby drinks from the other, this is a less far-fetched interpretation than might at first appear. Killing off the illegitimate child leaves Vaudracour (Wordsworth as Heartsworth) without a rival in his mother's affections, while simultaneously re-legitimizing him as his father's son and heir.

A second aporia immediately follows the lines relating the death of the baby: "The tale I follow to its last recess / Of suffering or of peace, I know not which —" [ix.909–10]. The last recess is presumably the grave—a "sepulchral recess," like one of those included in the gothic edifice of which *The Prelude* is the ante-chapel. Literally, it is the end of the line; Vaudracour, the eldest son, dies without issue. The prominence of genealogy in the Vaudracour and Julia episode provides scope for the reversal I promised at the start. What light does the episode throw on genre theory?—in particular, on an analogy given currency by Alistair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature*: that of family resemblance. Preferring to see genres as characters or types rather than classes, Fowler invokes Wittgenstein's famous analogy between word-games and games in general: "We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing . . . I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc., overlap and criss-cross in the same way" [41]. Fowler glosses this as follows: "Representatives of a genre may then be regarded as making up a family whose septs and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all" [41]. (One recalls Wordsworth's grouping of different kinds of narrative according to a common line of descent: "the Narrator . . . is himself the source from which everything primarily flows.") A "sept," appropriately, is a clan or tribe claiming descent from a common ancestor. Though Fowler himself had earlier dismissed the view that genres form distinct classes (preferring to see genre in interpretative rather than taxonomic terms), the family analogy allows him to reintroduce qualities of distinctiveness, individuality and integrity commonly associated with the concept of "character"—a concept which buttresses our sense of the separateness of subjects against the dangers of (inter-)mixing. By means of the "mutual reflexive substitution" or "alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading" which de Man identifies as constitutive of autobiography, genre puts a face on theory. Is genre-theory, then, no more than "a figure of reading or of understanding"?—a means of stabilizing the errant text by putting a face on it, and so reading into it a recognizable, specular image of our own acts of understanding? In this light, theories of genre become inseparable from theories of the subject, and hence inseparable from theories of writing. However mixed the genre or mixed-up the "self," the source of writing ("the source from which everything primarily flows," in Wordsworth's phrase) is held finally to be a more or less integrated and coherent author, the individual named "Wordsworth" who guarantees the stability and, finally, the legitimacy of the text by means of what Fowler elsewhere calls "legitimate authorial privilege."

The family analogy also throws light on what might be termed the politics of genre—a politics implicitly conservative. As Fowler himself goes on to point out, the basis of such family resemblances ("build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc.") is literary

tradition; specifically, features such as influence, imitation, and inherited codes: "Poems are made in part from earlier poems: each is the child . . . of an earlier representative of the genre and may yet be the mother of a subsequent representative" [42]. The implications of this genealogical view of genre are clearly stated in Fowler's book: "in the realm of genre, revolution or complete discontinuity is impossible" [32]. To break with literary tradition would be to break with the possibility of perceived resemblance. The result would be an unrecognizable text or a faceless page, like the one with which the French Revolution presented Wordsworth ("Oh, laughter for the page that would reflect / To future times the face of what now is!" [ix.176–77]). To get over the difficulty inherent in his privileging of continuity – how then does literary change occur? – Fowler elaborates the family analogy in the direction of genetic mutation: "Naturally," he goes on, "the genetic make-up alters with slow time" [42]. *Naturally?* By consecrating genre as part of the order of nature while simultaneously emphasizing the gradual evolution of genre in response to historical change, Fowler reveals himself to be a conservative rather than revolutionary not only in the realm of genre-theory, but in the realm of theory itself, where "farouche structuralistes" are said to be at work with "mere bad effects of Yale formalism" and "deconstruction is no more than a regrettable but unavoidable necessity" (like "political iconoclasm . . . inappropriately directed against legitimate authorial privilege" [264–66]).

The same could be said of Wordsworth, a Girondist turned Tory when it comes to literary tradition (and finally politics too). I said at the start that I would come back to Derrida's essay on "The Law of Genre" – a law which Derrida ventriloquizes as follows: "genres should not intermix. And if it should happen that they do intermix, by accident or through transgression, by mistake or through a lapse, then this should confirm, since after all, we are speaking of 'mixing,' the essential purity of their identity" [204]. The Vaudracour and Julia episode, in which intermixing occurs "by accident or through transgression, by mistake or through a lapse," says in effect: let genres (classes) mix; there is no such thing as illegitimacy (the unrecognized baby), since the only law Wordsworth recognizes is the law of nature (the gradual transformation of class-systems by social or literary intermixing). The baby becomes "Nature's rebellion against monstrous law" [1850: ix.571]. But so long as the notions of authorship and identity remain intact, the law itself continues unchallenged, albeit in a naturalized form. "*Pater semper incertus est, sed mater certissima*" ("paternity is always uncertain, maternity is most certain," the old legal tag invoked by Freud in "Family Romances" [ix.239 and note]) means that legitimacy must still be bestowed by legal process, by the father, and not the mother. As necessity is the mother of invention, "Nature" becomes the mother of *The Prelude* – nature, in all its "essential" impurity. But only when it has been named by the poet's family does *The Prelude* become legitimate, a recognized and recognizable literary text. In the last resort, nature proves to be merely the common-law wife of a Wordsworth who subsequently married within the family (thereby, incidentally, refusing the principle of exogamy which is also the principle of intermixture). If *The Prelude* as autobiography is Romanticism's rebellion against the law of genre, it is a rebellion which turns back to the order of the past in the interests of a readable text. Engendered by the illicit mixing of aristocratic and middle-class genres – "the Epopoeia, the Historic Poem, the Tale, the Romance, the Mock-heroic, and . . . the metrical Novel" [*The Prose Works of Williams Wordsworth*, iii.27] – *The Prelude* simultaneously defies the Law of the Father and goes out of its way to preserve it.

The Vaudracour and Julia episode reminds us that there is no history without error; that genre is always impure, always "mothered" as well as fathered, and that "lodged within the heart of the law itself [is] a law of impurity or a principle of contamination." But although it questions the authority of epic-as-history, it stops short of questioning the law; specifically the law of its own lopping-off from *The Prelude*. The Vaudracour and Julia episode remains (in Christopher Wordsworth's sense of the term) "anonymous," nameless like Vaudracour's child and disowned like Vaudracour himself; hence at once unauthored and unauthorized – a mere prelude to *The Prelude* proper. But just as we can see in *The Prelude* itself the playing out of possibilities that are occluded by the silencing of Vaudracour and the death of the baby in its "pre-text," so we can see in Derrida's elaboration of "the law of genre" the playing out of possibilities which Wordsworth himself must occlude in the interests of installing his poem (however unprecedented) in "literary history": "The genre has always in

all genres been able to play the role of order's principle: resemblance, analogy, identity and difference, taxonomic classification, organization and genealogical tree, order of reason, order of reasons, sense of sense, truth of truth, natural light and sense of history" [228]. It might be argued that to appropriate *The Prelude*—a poem innocent of poststructuralist literary politics—for Derridean literary theory merely repeats the proprietary gesture of Wordsworth's widow ("THE PRELUDE' will now be perused and estimated with the feelings properly due to its preparatory character, and to the period at which it was composed" [*Memoirs of William Wordsworth*, i.313]). Rather than simply re-fixing the face of genre with the face of Derrida, I would argue instead that the Vandracour and Julia episode reveals what is at stake in all such acts of appropriation, naming, or legitimation: not the genre of literature, but the literariness—the fiction—of genre. The "fair form" that puts a recognizable face on the page of literary history and thereby makes it readable, genre allows us to find our own faces in the text rather than experience that anxious dissolution of identity which is akin to not knowing our kind; or should I say, gender?

#### WORKS CITED

- de Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-facement." *MLN* 94 (1979).
- Derrida, Jacques. "The Law of Genre." *Glyph*, 7 (1980).
- Erdman, David. "Wordsworth as Heartsworth; or, Was Regicide the Prophetic Ground of those 'Moral Questions?'" in *The Evidence of the Imagination*. Ed. Donald Reiman, Michael Jaye and Betty Bennett. N.Y.: New York University Press, 1978.
- Fowler, Alistair. *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. London: The Hogarth Press, 1953.
- Griggs, E. L. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. 6 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71.
- Liu, Alan. "'Shapeless Eagerness': The Genre of Revolution in Books 9–10 of *The Prelude*." *MLQ* 43 (1982).
- Parker, Patricia. *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- Paulson, Ronald. *Representations of Revolution (1789–1820)*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Sex and History in *The Prelude* (1805): Books Nine to Thirteen." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 23 (1981).
- Todd, F. M. *Politics and the Poet*. London: Methuen and Co., 1957.
- Wordsworth, Christopher Jr. *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*. 2 vols. London: E. Moxon, 1851.
- Wordsworth, William. *William Wordsworth: The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*. Ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill. N.Y. and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940–49.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Letters of Williams and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787–1805*. Ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. C. L. Shaver. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Prelude; Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*. Ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Helen Darbishire. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959.