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Wordsworth's Abstraction of Forms From Nature: A Necessary Process

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There is a passage from Isaiah that reads as follows: "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever" (KJV 40:8). Ignoring context--and perhaps text--for a moment, if we were to take out the phrase, "of our God," we would have exactly the burden with which Wordsworth is confronted: "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word . . . shall stand forever." Indeed, the word must stand forever. Wordsworth's poetry abstracts forms from nature and man in order to make nature and man last; this abstraction is a changing of feeling into thought, of perception into conception, of the material into the word.

"Tintern Abbey"

"Tintern Abbey" is perhaps the best place to begin an examination of how Wordsworth forms a poem from his perceptions. This poem abounds with emotion without bowing to sentimentality. Such a quality is the direct result of a pervasiveness of emotion which though never gathered too disproportionately in one place (i.e., especially emotionally charged speech acts), is dispersed throughout the poem in order to make every word or its combination with other words in moving iambic pentameter full of emotion. But it is exactly an intensive, line-by-line analysis of this poem that seems to cut off its air. "Tintern Abbey" is unquestionably one of those poems that, because they are such a source of delight, easily evade an objective analysis So, let us try to analyze a few spots of special intensity.

We are at first struck by the discipline of the iamb. It is so crafted, so measured, making the poem easily withstand a rigid iambic reading; there are few places that could be read with other feet. Yet the rhythm is not too forced and flows as easily as the river it describes. The meter is noticeable and a bit weighty, because we often come down so hard on the second syllable: "the length of five long winters" (1,2). Thus it seems that certain words, whether through association of meaning or through sound, are accented more than others. Though they would ordinarily receive stress anyway, since they are the second syllable of the foot, they receive a special emphasis, a rhythmic height, surpassing the normal accent that they would receive.

Lines six and seven are especially interesting; they present two opposites which can be taken as representative of all of Wordsworth's poetry. The lines, "impress / Thoughts of more deep seclusion," cause the verse to move in on itself, even as at the level of meaning the mind is going deeper and deeper into seclusion. Yet in "Connect / The landscape with the quiet of the sky" there is an image just the opposite of "impress." This is connection, and the verse attempts to reach out, instead of to go in. So, "and" of line 7 actually functions as "but," placing into opposition these two parallel verbs, "impress" and "connect," followed by their objects.

Leaving the "impression" problem for a moment (that is, those features in Wordsworth's poetry that go in on themselves), let us consider more "connection" aspects of the verse, very

common in "Tintern Abbey." Connection is those aspects of the verse that reach out, expand. The ideal expression of this expansion becomes the comparative degree, and "Tintern Abbey" is full of modifiers in the comparative degree. Many other constructions in the poem, though not strictly in the comparative degree, perhaps not even modifiers, are very similar to that degree, in that they show a longing for more, a desire to transcend a present state. "Most" is of course superior, absolute, and in its confidence lacks the pathos of the yearning "more." Examples of particularly arresting modifiers trying to transcend their present state are the following: "purer mind" (29), "more sublime" (37), "far more deeply interfused" (96), "far deeper zeal / Of holier love" (154-155).

The first instance of the comparative degree (on an upward scale) occurs in line 7 with "more." Line 27 has "purer mind," and 37 has "more sublime," while 81 speaks of "a remoter charm." In line 96 are the famous words that seem so characteristic of Wordsworth's state of mind and style, "far more deeply interfused." The last modifiers in the comparative degree occur in lines 154 and 155: "Oh! with far deeper zeal / Of holier love." A superlative also exists in this most comparative of poems--the "purest thoughts" of 109.

But as I have said, there are just as many or more phrases in "Tintern Abbey" that are comparative in spirit, for they long for higher ground. The poem abounds with correlative constructions like "not only . . . but" and "both . . . and."

"Rather," as a way of comparing one thing to another, is also frequently used. Such constructions shout out, "Not this, but rather that," "Not the low this, but the higher this." "Both . . . and" constructions also, by their very nature, reach out to larger parts--in both meaning and style--to try to include them within their own framework. The "both . . . and" construction is not as selective as the "not only . . . but," for the latter includes but makes a clear distinction between its two terms. "Both . . . and" may still be categorized within "not only . . . but's" group, though, for it attempts to include not only the both but also the and. That is to say, "both . . . and," in accepting the lower term, also strives for something higher, even as when we say, "I want both this and this," the item following the "and" is generally a conflicting or less attainable goal in comparison with the first item (i.e., both love and money). Thus what seems to be a construction of equality often contains degrees of equality within it, with one term dominant.

Once broadening out the comparative degree (again, on an upward scale) to a type for all parts of the poetry that hope to reach out to something higher, we can find many of these reachings out in the poem. Once again, though these features do not structurally resemble modifiers in the comparative degree, they function as a comparative unit. Let us turn to a few examples. Line 32, "As have no slight or trivial influence," contains an implicit comparison, for we cannot understand what

the poet means without comparing it to what he does not mean; the poet has chosen negation to evade direct reference to his meaning, and this forces us to compare what he says "it is not" to "what it is," which is his intended meaning. This may have much to do with the subtlety we feel when reading Wordsworth--his refusal to refer directly but to refer to opposite meanings instead. At any rate, we must reconstruct the line in our mind (while we read, an often unconscious process) to read, "As have no slight or trivial influence [but rather great and significant influence]." We choose parallel opposites of the words negated in order to approximate the safest rendering of his intention. Had Wordsworth chosen a direct, affirmative mode, such a reconstruction would not be necessary--and "Tintern Abbey" would be a more direct and less charming poem. Similarly, a comparison of "less" in line 35 requires that the reader reciprocally encode the opposite of "nor less": "[And not less than this but rather more], I trust." In line 42, following its dash as if something were left incomplete or understood or just too powerful to verbalize, we can very easily insert "to more," making the line read, "In which the affections gently lead us on--[to more]."

There are still other spots where we could reconstruct a line to reflect comparative intentions. Line 55 represents, for example, in turning "to thee," a desire for more; it represents a flight from the insufficient "shapes / Of joyous daylight . . . the fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world" (51-53), and therefore compares the better feelings inspired by the

Wye with the "lower" feelings of lines 51-53. Similarly, we feel a reaching out and inclusiveness in the correlative conjunctions in lines 62 and 63 and in the "more" implicit in "abundant recompense" (i.e., "for such loss," the speaker receives more or higher repayment).

In lines 43-49, Wordsworth takes his readers to a higher plane, perhaps the highest plane in "Tintern Abbey," which epitomizes the poetics of selectivity, of transcendence. Indeed, though we find no instances of grammatical degree here, we know that by line 46 we have surpassed the material or corporeal and have entered the realm of the comparative, the higher, for "a living soul" is certainly higher on a transcendental scale than is "body" of the same line. But Wordsworth goes on; by line 49 he has taken us beyond this elevated plane, beyond comparison, to total knowledge and vision--the absolute, the superlative. Thus a poetics of selectivity, until now present only in the comparative, only in a longing for or attaining of more, has here achieved the superlative, has attained the most.

We can see how selective Wordsworth's composition is by looking at lines 142-145. Here we feel a pained emphasis on "healing" and "tender." This is due partly to the parallelism of the adjectives. We know instinctively when we read "healing thoughts" that the object of the following preposition will be preceded by an adjective as intense as the sound of "healing": "with what healing thoughts / Of tender joy." Wordsworth also places such emphasis on "healing" and "tender" because he is

holding on to them as he flees the opposite of those feelings, which pursue him ony a few lines behind: "solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief." Thus the emphasis is a way of selectively filtering his mind of all unpleasant emotions. He is painfully aware that healing thoughts and tender joy may not be polar opposites of fear, grief, and pain, but rather complementary emotions. He fights this convergence of the two types of emotion with all his might.

And to a large extent he succeeds. Notice the less appealing sounds he ascribes to the less positive emotions; most, like fear, pain, or grief, are auditorily flat, and lack the intensity and power of sound that "healing" and "tender" possess. Wordsworth does all this through selection, itself a type of comparison. He is trying to stave off the sad emotions by a comparative judgment, by saying that one is better than the other, even if he can only make the one better by giving it a more appealing sound.

If Wordsworth consciously defends himself against certain emotions, he must obviously ward off certain words in his poetry that embody those emotions. But if Wordsworth is this selective about which words will permeate the selective membrane around his poetry, then there must also be certain words that diffuse easily through that membrane. There is no question that there is a stock Wordsworth vocabulary; the most obvious words in this vocabulary are Latinate compounds that have complex meanings: sublime, interfused, recollect, tranquil. All of these contain

prefixes that reflect motion; in the list given here, these prefixes are, respectively, motion under, motion among, motion back to, and motion across. It is part of Wordsworth's selectivity that he chooses words of such suppressed activity, words which have meanings associated with movement but which through their Latin sophistication, their yoking of more than one thought at once, evade any such denotation. This linguistic selectivity creates the equally selective world that we know as Wordsworth: reflection and tranquility and solitude.

As I have also already noted, negation is a way to assert that the poet's desire is not for the current situation, but for a higher one. Indeed Richard Brookhiser suggests that by negation Wordsworth is trying "to talk himself into something" (45). It may be said that all of the figures he uses to aspire to higher ground (negation, comparison, dashes, interjections) are attempts "to talk himself into something"--to keep talking of the good things and to avoid the bad things, just as he does in lines 144 and 145 of "Tintern Abbey": "fear, or pain, or grief." Perhaps the culmination of all this, the ultimate victory of pleasing emotions over painful ones through these figures of aspiration occurs in lines 153-155 of "Tintern Abbey": "rather say / With warmer love--oh! with far deeper zeal of holier love." "Nor" of the following sentence also attempts to rule out the opposite of Wordsworth's desired emotion. Thus we have all the instruments of comparison outlined to this point: "rather," "warmer," "far," "deeper," "holier," "Nor." And the interjection

"oh!" has a comparative quality to it. It seems to sigh for another world, and in longing for another state it ultimately compares that state with its present one. And here again there is great emphasis to be placed on certain words and syllables, because of sound or the long-established emotion of the word: "With warmer love--oh! with far deeper zeal of holier love." In this we clearly hear Wordsworth saying, "Not this, but rather this."

We know what Wordsworth compares, but what does he compare to? When he says "not this, but that," we generally know what the first term is. What he compares is almost always his present state, the earthly existence, the corporeal, the material. But what is more perplexing is the question of what the second term is, what he compares to. Generally, we are not really sure about this second term and allow Wordsworth to describe feelings that we may not have had yet but long to understand. In the third book of The Prelude, during Wordsworth's moving flight from "comrades . . . buildings and groves," he asserts, "let me dare to speak / A higher language" (99-100). We wonder what this higher language is, but we get only more description of what it is like to be on this higher plane. Therefore, all of the figures of aspiration have not only a comparative quality, but also an elliptical quality. They purposely leave out description of the higher realms as too awesome to withstand accurate explanation. Dashes play the greatest role in this ellipsis, and again the best examples are the dashes in "Tintern Abbey" and

The Prelude. Here the dashes act merely as references to an inexplicable feeling, to a referent which can never be expressed.

"Simon Lee"

"Simon Lee" also attempts to abstract a form from experience onto paper. What makes its final image really pathetic (and I probably mean pathetic in the modern sense of pitiful more than in the sense of pathos) is the effortless easiness of the moral gesture, which is met with such gratitude. The disparity between strength and weakness, have and have not, is widened to a treacherous chasm, and the reader is aware of, indeed pities, the dependence on so simple a task. That the strength is exaggerated to nearly heroic proportions ("I struck, and with a single blow / The tangled root I severed") makes us even more aware of the disparity. Also sad is the poem's implication, by the old man's gratitude, that not enough of these easy acts are performed. Indeed the poem may hope for a world where "little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love" ("Tintern Abbey," 34-35) are more frequent; that would certainly be the grade school application of the tale, anyway. There is also an inexplicable element here, an ellipsis. Words are not spoken, and praises seem to come out of the heart, not the mouth. Communication is a problem, especially for thoughts and feelings that lie so deep. The ultimate interpretation of the poem by the establishment might be, "Actions speak louder than words."

In "Simon Lee" so obvious a display of gratitude for so little a deed makes the display of kindness and the gratitude for it seem disproportionate, makes us, who strongly identify with the speaker (since we are probably more like the speaker in age and agility), feel uncomfortable. Simon's weakness embarrasses us. While ingratitude has a strength and pride and independence to it, Simon's weakness is pitifully dependent, for "So vain was his endeavour, / That at the root of the Old tree / He might have worked for ever" (78-80). Simon's gratitude is also elliptical, since he does not express it verbally. In the line, "So fast out of his heart, I thought they never would have done," there is a great deal of ellipsis, as the line avoids telling us how fast "thanks and praises" ran. It does not give us a specific rate of speed or even a full comparison, but rather an inspecific description like "talked so much I thought he never would stop," "I've never seen anything so fast," and so forth. But ellipsis actually communicates, since in its omission it allows us to construct the possibilities that have been left out.

We see, therefore, that there has been a communication of emotion in "Simon Lee." We pity Simon not because we are told to by words but because we are given a picture and moved to abstract from that picture a great deal of pity. But what about poems that do not just give us a picture but also tell us what to do with that picture? Such a poem is Whittier's "In School Days." This poem has some of the elements that we noticed in "Simon Lee." Here again we have a tale, culminating in a gushy,

tearful utterance, though not an action, as in "Simon Lee." "In School Days," though, contains a moral application that is consistent with the tale, whereas Wordsworth's moral application, "the gratitude of men hath often left me mourning," is inconsistent with a tale that would seem to move us to commit more good deeds to effect more gratitude. Let us look at some representative stanzas from "In School Days."

> He saw her lift her eyes; he felt
> The soft hand's light caressing,
> And heard the tremble of her voice,
> As if a fault confessing.
>
> 'I'm sorry that I spelt the word:
> I hate to go above you,
> Because,'--the brown eyes lower fell,--
> 'Because, you see, I love you!'
>
> * * *
>
> He lives to learn, in life's hard school,
> How few who pass above him
> Lament their triumph and his loss,
> Like her,--because they love him.
>
> (29-36; 41-44)

The reader may feel that the girl's utterance is so trite as to be laughable, that the poet should not indulge such emotions, that these emotions are not worthy of mention, or that these emotions are so powerful as to be explosive if ever brought to

the surface and "worn on the sleeve." He feels that these emotions (or the communication of them) are repressed for a purpose--and that they should stay repressed. These feelings constitute an aversion to something that Whittier is well known for--sentimentality. We turn our head in embarrassment from the blatant gushiness as we do from all sentimentality.

The ellipsis that we noted in "Simon Lee" is clearly absent here. Whittier makes every attempt to effuse sentimentality in his poem through overstatement and quaint moralizing. What offsets "Simon Lee" against "In School Days" is its use of restraint for the edification of emotion, not a downplaying of it; yet the restraint is not an exaggeration of emotion either, for that would be sentimentality. Thus where Whittier makes the effort to explain the moment and to apply it to general morality, Wordsworth knows that such feelings lie too deep for words, and his verbal omission is what makes emotion superior here; Wordsworth's emotion succeeds precisely because words do not eclipse it, precisely because the dash of the second to the last line and Simon's tears unfettered by words allow us to reconstruct the moment that lies too deep for words. Once again, ellipsis ironically communicates.

What, then, defines strong verse? What keeps poetry away from sentimentality? Certainly we have heard of "muscular prose," "good, strong stuff," phrases used in an English teacher's Friday afternoon pep talk before Monday's paper. In such phrases may lie the answer to unsentimental language; it must be an honest

representation of emotion without lavishing it with overstatement. Of course it must not deny emotion either, for that would be delusion. "Simon Lee" would seem to be a stronger poem than "In School Days," because although it does not express emotions in words, it nevertheless recognizes emotions through verbally denying them, making Simon's tears and gratitude and the speaker's sadness very obvious. "In School Days," on the other hand, exaggerates emotion to sentimentality. Strong, muscular writing must, then, be honest representation of emotion, no more, no less. The girl's simple but honest expression of emotion in "We are Seven" is a prime example. She puts her all into the statement, "We are seven," and she allows her faith to be tested and tried throughout her inquisitor's calculations; yet the truth, the simple honesty, weathers the heresy, and at the end, far from the fervid instability of "O Master! we are seven," her language assumes the quiet grace, the conviction through negation of "Nay, we are seven."

This honesty of Wordsworth's emotions renders simple truths, simply expressed:

> For her good neighbor, Susan Gale,
> Old Susan, she who dwells alone,
> Is sick, and makes a piteous moan,
> As if her very life would fail.
>
> ("The Idiot Boy," 18-21)

What is obvious here--and even wears on some readers--is the utter familiarity, the desire to communicate quickly something as

common as danger and sickness in words no less immediate. Indeed Susan does make a piteous moan, and I am sure that anyone who hears it would pity her. Similarly, Susan's life is in danger; therefore, the lines, "[she] makes a piteous moan, / As if her very life would fail" honestly represent that condition; the simile of that last line, while not going for anything distant like "Sick as a deer shot with an arrow," talks about the fact that Susan may die. This direct honesty results from a notion that such events as sickness and death are not grand and cosmic, but universal. They are immediate, but still powerful, just not distant. In Wordsworth powerful common language expresses powerful universals. The simplicity of Wordsworth's poems with themes like "The Idiot Boy's" fails to see the tragic as grand, because such a view distances the tragic, but rather as local, accompanied by local expression. Wordsworth brings the tragic down without reducing it. It is human, not something of the gods. He says, "It is here, not out there!"

But a view of the tragic as local is not the only thing that makes many a student cringe at those lines from "The Idiot Boy." What grates on him is its failure to conceal the barefaced fact of death. As I have said, the expressions and metaphor do nothing but express the situation at hand. What makes some feel uncomfortable with the situation and its homely expression is probably the intentional and honest representation of sincerity, its earnestness, earnestly expressed, that we have been taught to dismiss. Thus the uncomfortability with these

lines from "The Idiot Boy" reflects an aversion to direct emotion and expression, preferring in their place to transcend immediate emotion and to aspire for something higher. Perhaps, then, we have been told, we ought not to indulge ourselves in direct communication, and perhaps not even in honesty, for the truth may be sad (as it is here, with the possibility of Susan's death) and may therefore leave us vulnerable. So, we transcend direct communication for the indirect; embracing sophistication, elusion, abstraction, and metaphor, we take a step up from the referent, the unembellished truth in itself (here Susan's sickness) to the reference, the allusion, the clothed truth, the indirect communication. Thus allusion becomes a form of elusion. It is interesting to note that even this passage, with its direct honesty, sincerity, and frankness, indulges in one metaphor, one figure of transcendence: "As if her very life would fail." But note also that what is reached for is not anything distant or high; indeed the second term of the metaphor, the thing being compared to (death, "as if her very life would fail") is really not much different from the first term (the sickness and moan, which are related to death). The line, "As if her very life would fail," while a euphemism for death, expresses it rather directly, as we know that "her life failed" expresses a death of some sort, whether a termination of life itself or of quality of life. Thus there is a much closer and direct relationship in kind between the two terms of the metaphor than that between, say, lovers and the legs of a compass. Direct, unmasked emotion

dominates "The Idiot Boy"; indirect, couched emotion for transcendence of fact or truth (though perhaps in the hope of aspiring to truth) is absent, with a few exceptions.

Excluding this discussion of "The Idiot Boy," I have throughout this paper looked at ways that Wordsworth tries to reach out to a higher plane. The pastoral is another form of yearning for something higher than ordinary scenes and ordinary life. The irony of the pastoral, though, is its lifting up of the ordinary; we know by the pastoral's construction of an ideal world in artificial surroundings that it is truly a lifting up. And yet the lifting up is done with ordinary people in surroundings which, though idyllic, are really quite ordinary. Wordsworth therefore makes the local high by lifting up the local and bringing down the tragic to meet on common ground.

But before seeing how Wordsworth lifts up the pastoral, let us examine for a moment his elevation process in general. In "I wandered lonely as a cloud" or "The Daffodils," Wordsworth demonstrates the vision and revision, really an elevation, of nature:

> I gazed and gazed but little thought
> What wealth the show to me had brought:
>
> For oft, when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude;

And then my heart with pleasure fills,

And dances with the daffodils (17-24)

Of course, the Wordsworthian twist to all this is that the aesthetic moment comes in reflection, in a "recollection in tranquility." Wordsworth does not realize the power of those daffodils until he is away from them: "For oft, when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood, / They flash upon that inward eye." Away from the daffodils Wordsworth's mind conceptually reconstructs the vision that he had earlier perceived.

This quality of absence from the perceptual vision in order to appreciate the image that it represents is the crux of Wordsworth's forging of nature and man into art. He accepts and loves nature even as he loves man; in retreating from and rejecting man's outward forms, Wordsworth loves man's constructed forms. He loves the essential image of man as he loves the resurrected image of the daffodils. What he rejects is the accidental image or the outward form.

All of the poems that I have discussed in this paper have in some way or another attempted to abstract a form, to make a fleeting moment permanent. "Simon Lee" is an attempt to abstract a moral gesture and the many nuances of gratitude and pity which accompany it. "Tintern Abbey" is an obvious groping for something higher and a record of that reaching out as well. Certainly "The Daffodils" is the very illustration of how

perceptual visions are made into permanent conceptions of the mind.

If we take a humanistic perspective for a moment, we might ask the question of whether this abstraction process, this elevation of man from perception into conception, pays a compliment to him. In withdrawing from man the poet chooses not to judge him, while living with him directly might in its daily familiarity make man too commonplace and might incite anger and possibly a loss of love. Moreover, by living among abstracted forms, the reflective poet aggrandizes man into a pure, perfect type, isolated and abstract, formed and conceived. This is the man of Lyrical Ballads: ideal characters living ideal (or idyllic) lives in ideal (or idyllic) surroundings, responding to any trouble in ideal ways. Indeed the pastoral is the perfect vehicle for this abstraction, for it takes man violently from his present world and places him into an ideal one. Certainly what has made many dislike the pastoral is its artificiality, its convenient way of putting people into foreign, idyllic lands for safe political or societal commentary, among other things. But once again, does this compliment man? In that it makes him higher, surely yes. In that it makes him artificial, makes him a product and subdues him under art, surely not. Not only does art conquer man, but it makes him an objective form, a statue, so to speak. Furthermore, such "forming" or "objectifying" precludes the poet's direct intimacy with his fellow man; he can only appreciate man after shaping him into a form fit to his mind's

liking. It is delusion and denial and ironic rejection, not acceptance, of mankind as he is; transcendence becomes a kind of snobbery.

The Intimations Ode

"Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" shows a different transformation of the pastoral. There is a frenzied, almost pagan celebration of nature here, and Wordsworth physically partakes in the pastoral, is present at its festival:

> Ye blessed Creatures, I have heard the call
> Ye to each other make; I see
> The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
> My heart is at your festival,
> My head hath its coronal (36-40)

His physical union with the pastoral is consummated by nature's coronation of him.

But we know that in the Ode the pastoral joy is broken, and it is only after many stanzas of hope and despair that Wordsworth picks up the pastoral again in stanza X. Wordsworth need not now participate in the physical dance with nature manifested by the pastoral romp of stanza IV. "Though inland far we be" (IX, 166), we can travel (mentally now, through memory), "in a moment" (IX, 169) to that dance and participate in it. Wordsworth's participation with nature is now much more "formal," in that he

participates with nature and childhood through a resurrected form of their glory, rather than through a direct physical communion.

Thus Wordsworth redefines the pastoral in stanza X, though it "Be now forever taken from my sight" (180). We may read "my sight" as outward sight, but the dance can be forever reenacted and seen with the "inward eye": "We in thought will join your throng" (175). Wordsworth is here at the peak of his form-making ability, for he has elevated the pastoral from a perceptual form requiring direct participation to a mental form that his mind controls.

In stanza XI, too, he recognizes that he cannot be as purely joyful as nature, that he cannot have direct physical communion with the pastoral, but he also recognizes that his human ability to perceive and to reconstruct such perceptions into forms is his greatest gift and blessing:

> Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
> Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
> To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.
>
> (204-207)

By human faculties he apprehends those thoughts, and by human faculties he can, with effort--and he does--give readers the same thoughts in language and image so subtle that they, too, receive "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." Though The Prelude would seem to imply that the imagination is supreme, the Intimations Ode implies that Wordsworth can never be as simple--

and perhaps not as divine--as nature, but he can construct an ideal pastoral form, one solely of his mind's creation.

"Michael"

"Michael" also attempts to create a pastoral form. In Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest de Selincourt's edition, it is classified in a section entitled, "Poems Founded on the Affections." The affectivity is here, but it is far beneath the surface. Like "Simon Lee," "Michael" contains deep emotion, but that emotion is verbally left out. We simply feel the presence of emotion, though we cannot always put our finger on it. Appreciation of "Michael" demands a realization of its subtlety.

"Michael" contains all the conventions set up for a moral tale: a child brought up in a loving, natural environment, a wayward son motif, the choice of a gesture to symbolize a bond (the building of the sheepfold), and so forth. A few tears are also shed here and there. But with all the opportunity for such tears, the characters do not cry very often, even though their only son is leaving to go to a cruel world. The poem resists such displays of emotion.

But it does indulge in some plays on emotion. "Michael" begins as do many pastorals or poems recording the simple life--with the more sophisticated speaker of the poem protecting its simple characters from his (the speaker's) own kind that may deride them: "If from the public way you turn your steps . . . .

And grossly that man errs, who should suppose / That the green valleys, and the streams and rocks, / Were things indifferent to the shepherd's thoughts" (1, 62-64).

How, then, are spots of extreme emotion guarded against in "Michael"? One of the most obvious ways is the poem's control of pity. Through most of the poem there is a great deal of humility, but little pity. Though the family is poor, its members seem proud. Lines 98-102 especially illustrate this humility as they list the constituents of the family's ample but simple meal. The height of this happiness comes right before the land problems begin. In what is the poem's deepest submersion in the idyllic shepherd life, Michael's gift of a staff to his son (177-184) represents a rite of passage for Luke and celebrates the uncomplicated pastoral life. But the claim on their land is made, and though it does not elicit our pity and still allows room for hope, the innocent shepherd world is permanently shattered. We hope with Michael in his scheme, and though we know that we are walking on treacherous ground, we keep our fingers crossed. Pity enters around lines 371-381. The image of Michael's toiling ceaselessly for no gain is painful, as is the possibility that the land will be taken away from his family. In these lines we also faintly hear Michael's despair in his choking-up of voice, his clamping of emotion: "Heaven forgive me, Luke / If I should judge ill for thee, but it seems good / That thou shouldst go" (380-382). He even indulges his despair, though quickly checking it: "when thou art gone, / What will be

left to us!--But I forget / My purposes" (401-408). In this way the poem gives glimpses of immense emotional potential, of the power that lies beneath the surface, but stifles it as quickly as Michael does here.

Pity, though, gives way to strength as Michael and Luke enter into a covenant by placing stones on the building site and as Michael promises, "I will begin again" (391). And Michael's voice swells to a strong, biblical eloquence from 404-412. Even at the end of the poem after Luke has been lost forever, at the point where one would expect pity to have full reign, Michael still plods along his way. As line 448 tells us, "There is a comfort in the strength of love." There is pity, but it is understated and quiet. The deaths of Michael and Isabel, the sale of The Evening Star, and the death of the pastoral life are all narrated with equally reserved distance. A line like "And never lifted up a single stone" is exceedingly flat and makes a dire attempt, somewhat successful, to quell emotion; it understates the despair. Although the emotion is deeper, less recognizable, and more suppressed, it is no less real. Indeed its presence is felt in an ever more general ague, one which we cannot shake off quite as easily as emotions closer to the surface.

Also typical of Wordsworth is the other-worldliness that he ascribes to the land and the common people, his removal of them from the commonplace. It takes the speaker 17 lines to get from the beginning to the heap of stones on which his story hinges.

Some of this prolongation is the result of introducing a story, of setting the scene, but much of it is also the deliberate attempt to separate the common people, who are in this poem the subject of Wordsworth's art, from the speaker and us. We must struggle with an "upright path," there are mountains all over, and the ascent is said to be bold. Furthermore, even when the valley opens, it is entirely isolated. Thus "Michael" does everything it can to separate the common people from the "public path." In doing this Wordsworth abstracts the common people, forges them into types and forms that reflect the preferences of his own mind. Rural scenery becomes a perfect setting for such forms, because it isolates them and keeps them permanent, far from changing influences.

Once into the valley, though, we find that nature plays a primary role in bringing about moral goodness. Nature is good, as are people:

> Fields, where with cheerful spirits he had breathed
> The common air; hills, which with vigorous step
> He had so often climbed; which had impressed
> So many incidents upon his mind
> Of hardship, skill or courage, joy or fear;
> Which, . . . preserved the memory
> Of the dumb animals, whom he had saved,
> Had fed or sheltered, linking to such acts
> The certainty of honourable gain (65-73)

Morality therefore becomes a learned process, and he who has shunned nature and goodness need only accept nature, which is good, to accept the good. Indeed nature's pervasiveness implies the pervasiveness of good, allowing this view to be expanded to optimism. According to this formula people who live in the reflective joy of nature are themselves full of joy, impelled to acts of kindness by nature.

It is of course interesting to speculate on the origin of the pastoral and its appeal over the years. The appeal, aside from its ability to break with reality and to go into another world, must be its easy capacity for linking nature and man. This may be a formal connection, but pastorals do portray man in intimacy with his natural surroundings. Because its artificiality allows Wordsworth to place man and nature into a vacuum, the pastoral becomes a perfect form for Wordsworth's desire, expressed in his Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads, of "incorporating" "the passions of men . . . with the beautiful forms of nature" (Hutchinson and de Selincourt 734-735). But the pastoral may have deeper roots. As the pastoral deals with shepherd life, it necessarily connotes the image of the lamb which, renamed the "Lamb of God," is the single most common symbol of Christianity outside of the cross. Perhaps here we might diverge from the pastoral form to see its implications for perceptual and conceptual forms. Phrases such as "Lamb of God," "Word made flesh," "God made Man," and many others contain precisely the oxymoron of perception and

conception living together as one. God and word are conceptions. Words are especially conceptions, because they are not physical; their essence is not tangible but denotative or connotative of the tangible. Words are physical only in that they are a collection of tangible graphemes; otherwise, words can only be representational of the physical. The idea of God, though not limited to conception, is clearly more of an idea than a perceived and tangible presence. Flesh, Lamb, and to an extent Man, however, connote tangible images. The relationship may be expressed as follows.

God (conception)

Word (conception) Man (flesh and thought)

Lamb

(flesh which contains the divine symbolically)

So, the pastoral in its various associations conveys not only the linking of man and nature but also, even perhaps within the same context, the linking of flesh and spirit, the fleeting and the eternal. A figure of aspiration itself (in that it wants to transcend present conditions), the pastoral, even in its associations with the flesh, yokes with that flesh the spirit, and thus it attempts to transcend the former through the latter.

If one thing marks Wordsworth's abstractions of forms from nature, it is a reliance on certain conventions by which he can transcend his present state. Before I began writing this essay, I believed that Wordsworth made a conscious effort to break with the forms and conventions that preceded him. I have learned,

though, that he depends on these conventions a great deal, however subtly he employs them. We might conclude that, because he cannot achieve a poetic language free from convention, he does not transcend the conventional. But in the convention itself, in the metaphor, is great aspiration, for it compares a higher state with a lower one. In comparing it longs for something higher, and the choice of a convention, so long as that convention represents aspiration, is a noble one.

I have also come to the conclusion that man and nature in Wordsworth are not man and nature as we ordinarily perceive them. They are filtered in his mind of all "undesirable" elements, and they are transformed into a type of his mind's liking. He probably does not make many changes in nature, other than that of making it permanent for later recollection. At any rate, his treatment of nature does not bother us as much as his treatment of man. Indeed he may even compliment nature by abstracting it from gross physical perception and almost making it divine. But I feel especially uncomfortable about what he does to people in his poems; he keeps them from us, though he may perhaps make them purer by protecting them from "the fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world" ("Tintern Abbey," 52-53). This may be the difference between art and life, and this is perhaps necessary for his art, since surely all of the poems that I have included within this paper are moving and beautiful. Still, though, I cannot help missing the intimacy, the direct nearness,

of our fellow man that seems to be so absent in Wordsworth's poetry.

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