A Study on the Power of Sound in the Early Poetry of William Wordsworth

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A Study on the Power of Sound in the Early Poetry of William Wordsworth

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ABSTRACT

This paper distinguishes three ways that Wordsworth uses sound to put forward his own ideas on the relationship between the natural world and the growing consciousness of the individual. Poetry from the approximate period of 1793-1807 shows three distinct uses of sound: first, it is used as a metaphor to express man's place in the harmony of all natural processes, second, it acts as a teacher of lessons of moral guidance, and third, sound leads to the creation and recollection of the "spots of time" which are seen as important milestones in Wordsworth's growth as a poet. These ideas slowly develop out of Wordsworth's earliest long poems, find clear expression in the *Lyrical Ballads*, and are further refined and reinforced in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" and both versions of *The Prelude*.

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The sounding cataract / Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock, / The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood, / Their colours and their forms, were then to me / An appetite.

(Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey)

Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her.

(Ibid.)

William Wordsworth's earliest work places no particular emphasis on the faculty of hearing or on the sounds to be found in the natural world. Any references to sounds or hearing in the long poems "An Evening Walk," "Descriptive Sketches" and "The Ruined Cottage" are largely traditional ones, evoking mood or helping to describe a scene. But with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, sounds, and the way in which the listener responds to them, begin to take on a new and personal significance to Wordsworth. Using some of the major works from the period of approximately 1793-1807, this discussion will attempt to show how Wordsworth moved from commonplace and relatively insignificant uses of sound towards a more individual and sophisticated conception of the art of listening. Through a full intellectual and sensual awareness of nature's sounds, in combination with her other manifestations, Wordsworth implies that man is able to achieve a state of spiritual harmony with nature. It is through an experience of this harmony that man can learn lessons which will help him to know the best ways to live and act. As well, through this communion with nature, he can best experience love, joy and contentment. Further, in the latest poems from this time period, sounds lead the listener to at first create and then later rekindle significant moments that Wordsworth names "spots of time." The solacing and regenerative qualities of sound-induced recollections of the past are important themes in Wordsworth's most sophisticated work,

including "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," and *The Prelude*.

Beginning with a brief discussion of the ways in which sound is used in the early long poems composed in the period between 1791 and 1798, I will then go on to trace the further development of Wordsworth's ideas on sound, culminating with "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," published in 1807. As well, isolated references will be made to a few later poems, as they support or expand on particularly significant ideas. Throughout discussion of these poems, I will introduce some of the ideas of Ernest G. Schachtel. Citing his essay "On Memory and Childhood Amnesia," I will make reference to the ways in which he believes children use their senses and how these early ways of perception affect memory. Specifically, Schachtel's theories help support my own understanding of the ways in which Wordsworth uses sounds and listening as vehicles for his own ideas, especially those on memory. Also, some of Wordsworth's critical ideas, taken primarily from his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, will help illuminate my interpretation of his works.

"An Evening Walk," composed in 1788-89 and published in 1793, is a nostalgic reminiscence of walks Wordsworth took near his boyhood home. Composed while away at school, this poem emphasizes the role of sounds in their ability to trigger pleasant memories, and this poem refers to both natural and man-made sounds more than the other early long poems. The sounds described are therefore meant to do more than simply evoke mood

or describe scenery: they serve to satisfy the narrator that his beloved home still exists alive in his mind, although he is physically removed from it. It is apparent that Wordsworth was, at this stage of his poetic development, already aware of the ability of sounds to stimulate memories. This poem, then, can be seen as a precursor to those that introduce Wordsworth's "spots of time." In later works, the poet claims that some sounds can trigger associations to earlier, similar sounds which have played an important role in the formation of the mature mind.

As depicted in this poem, most of the sounds of nature are varied and pleasant, "Sweet are the sounds that mingle from afar,"[1] and induce a state of happiness in the youthful narrator. Birds call, brooks "babble," trees "hum," sheep bleat, and the normally still or silent forms of nature make their own contribution to the agreement of comfortable sounds as well. The narrator remembers how his wild "carols" echoed off the surrounding rock faces, blending with the "woodman's echo'd stroke" (107) and the cock's crowing, which is answered from neighbouring farms. This mingling of animate and inanimate sounds creates a joyous mood, leaving no opportunity for sadness to enter the narrator's heart: "Then did no ebb of chearfulness demand / Sad tides of joy from Melancholy's hand" (21-22). The joy of experiencing such harmony is referred to again and again in later works where Wordsworth makes more specific statements about the significance of these harmonies.

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[1] William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk*, James Averill, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), l. 301.

In this poem occur the first reference to the effects of echo in the poems studied, and this subject becomes more significant in later poems. Not only do echoes emphasize the diversity of activity that the narrator remembers, they act as a metaphor for the ways that re-experiencing any phenomenon causes us pleasure and reinforces our memories of that experience. The landscape in the narrator's memory is filled with reverberating sounds: "How busy the enormous hive within, / While Echo dallies with the various din!" (143-44). The timber wagon "resounds" (116) as it moves through the scene, and the "ceaseless ring" (149) of bells contribute to the echo of this "rustic chime" (121). These all serve to illustrate the medley of sounds that lives in the narrator's memory.

"Natural sounds," or sounds produced by nature, are, in the mind of the narrator, made to mingle with man-made sounds. The result is a "sweet cadence" (325). Birdsong and water murmurs combine with the sounds of men at their work, church bells, boats, quarry blasting, fox hunting, playing children, and the whistling and singing of the local residents. A harmony arises: "These all to swell the village murmurs blend" (323). As evening falls, this harmony makes the atmosphere seem charged: "'Tis restless magic all" (345). The sounds form a type of natural music and the narrator begins to feel the presence of something intangible and mysterious:

> Fair Spirits are abroad; in sportive chase
> Brushing with lucid wands the water's face,
> While music stealing round the glimmering deeps
> Charms the tall circle of th'enchanted steeps (347-50).

As sounds slowly die away, an eerie silence reigns, and it is now that the "Genii hold their state" (358). In this state, sounds (and any sense of movement, progression, or linear time) are suspended and the narrator becomes aware of a type of communion between himself and the natural world, feeling "A sympathetic twilight slowly steal, / And ever, as we fondly muse, we find / The soft gloom deep'ning on the tranquil mind" (382-84). This short-lived silence is broken as the moon rises and evening sounds begin, and the meditative state of mind is disturbed. But nocturnal sounds, "unheard by day, Now hardly heard," (434) help the narrator maintain a little of this magical mood as he heads home. Later, as dawn breaks, the sounds of human activities intrude upon nature's night sounds, indicating the start of a new day and the resumption of time's passage. Morning sounds blend with the last evening sounds of the natural world; the sob of the owl and the cry of the lonely hound seem to lament the passing of this charmed state.

Here, Wordsworth introduces a pattern whereby calming sounds lull the listener through to a period of silence which is followed by a state of deep musing and introspection in order that he arrive at a condition conducive to the sense of communion or sympathy with his surroundings that he experiences. As already mentioned, this type of experience will later be crystallized into what Wordsworth names "spots of time." In his later work, the more mature poet is able to voluntarily evoke such states of consciousness by recalling to mind those early

experiences with the natural world, when "Nature spake to [him] / Rememberable things."[2]

"Descriptive Sketches," composed 1791-92, represents the most conventional use of sound in all of the poems under discussion. In this poem, sound seems to be used in a symbolic manner more than in any other work. Although Wordsworth wrote in his introduction to the *Lyrical Ballads* that "the Reader will find no personifications of abstract ideas in these volumes,"[3] in the earlier "Descriptive Sketches" he does personify such concepts as death, war, evil, liberty and terror. Most of the references to sound in this poem are of a fearful, alarming, melancholy or mournful nature. Not only do animals and birds make ominous or sad sounds, the "death-dog" howls,[4] for example, but human voices and values are attributed to nature's mute or inanimate forms as well: a frozen stream "growls," waves "roar," forests "moan," and the mountain crags "Vibrate, as if a voice complain'd within" (250).

The narrator does not make reference to uplifting or harmonious sounds as he travels through the Alps, for the predominant tone is one of danger. This creates a mood that expresses part of the poet's experience in an unknown landscape

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[2] *The Fourteen-Book 'Prelude'*, W.J.B. Owen, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), Book I, ll. 587-88.

[3] "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads, 1805* in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, Vol. I. W.J.B. Owen & J.W. Smyser, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 130, ll. 206-07.

[4] *Descriptive Sketches*, Eric Birdsall, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), l. 226.

and can be attributed to the fact that a hike through such terrain would seem more physically, and perhaps more psychologically, challenging than what Wordsworth was accustomed to. Another reason that the sounds in this poem are primarily disquieting is that Wordsworth here intends to go beyond the common use of nature's sights and sounds to evoke mood: he implies that a moral sense can be apprehended through such sensations. Through carefully listening and observing, the narrator, like the reminiscing narrator of "An Evening Walk," is able to enter a receptive state whereby he becomes aware of more than what his senses alone can communicate to him: "the falling leaf / Awoke a fainter pang of moral grief" (768-69). This isolated reference to the ability to associate a moral responsibility with one's experience of nature's outward forms is later taken up with much enthusiasm, as Wordsworth develops the concept of nature as teacher and moral guide. But, at this stage the narrator is only faintly aware of this connection between his consciousness and his environment.

Sounds, or the faculty of hearing are rarely mentioned in "The Ruined Cottage" (1798), but here Wordsworth makes rare reference to senses other than hearing or sight. The sensation of touch, specifically physical pressure and temperature, is emphasized to express the narrator's tired and over-heated body as he relaxes and listens to Armytage tell the history of the plot of land on which they rest. The narrator makes much reference to his own bodily sensations in the early part of this

poem. We are made aware of his tired feet and weak, stretched limbs as he reclines on the "soft cool grass" in a "dewy shade." We feel the power of the sun as he seeks shade and the "shadow of the breezy elms."[5] "With thirsty heat oppressed" (47) we share his pleasure at discovering a well in a "damp cold nook," and feel his relief as he takes off his hat to "catch the motion of the cooler air" (66).

Sound does play a significant yet commonplace role in this poem, where it helps to set the scene and create mood, for Wordsworth uses it to emphasize how exhausted and bothered the narrator feels. Drained by nature's heat and blinding light, his discomfort is compounded by the irritating sounds of bothersome flying insects, and the sharp sound "Of seeds of bursting gorse which crackled round" (25).

It is here appropriate to introduce psychologist Ernest Schachtel's ideas on how our senses differ in their ability to inform us of the outside world. Schachtel divides the five human senses into two subgroups. The first group is the more primary one, made up of the proximity senses of smell, taste and touch. It is through these three senses that young children gain the most information about their environment. These senses are "less influenced and molded by the categories of mind"[6] brought about

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[5] "The Ruined Cottage" in *'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Pedlar'*, James Butler, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), l. 109.

[6] Ernest G. Schachtel, "Memory and Childhood Amnesia," in *Psychiatry* (February, 1947, Vol. 10), p. 10.

as a result of education and conformity, and lead to more subjective, spontaneous, and physical experiences. They are more closely tied to the body, and are therefore less cerebral than the second category of senses. This second group is reserved for the more differentiated, later developed, and more "spiritual" senses of sight and hearing. Schachtel tells us that information gathered through these senses is less immediately related to its objects than that from the senses of smell, taste and touch.[7] He emphasizes the differences between these two subgroups of sense:

> . . . the distance senses, sight and hearing, attain their full development later than the proximity senses, smell, taste, and touch. Sight and hearing are more . . . closely linked up with the human mind than smell, taste, and touch. The latter senses, especially smell and taste, are neglected and to a considerable extent even tabooed by Western civilization. They are the animalistic senses *par excellance*.[8]

This information is relevant to the way in which Wordsworth is later able to recall the "spots of time" that so immediately informed him as a child. And this is also significant to the way in which Wordsworth emphasizes some senses over others in "The Ruined Cottage."

As we see the narrator of "The Ruined Cottage" physically and mentally relaxing after his journey, he subdues the input from his higher visual and auditory senses and is overtaken by the sensations he receives from his weary and over-heated body. This allows the reader to identify with him and to a degree it helps us experience nature's textures, humidities, and varying

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[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

temperatures. But without the additional information given through sight and sound we are presented with only a portion of his experience, his less cerebral responses, as he hears Armytage's tale of Margaret. One reason for this could be that this poem is not about its narrator; it is about Margaret, and to a lesser extent, Armytage. To identify too closely with the narrator's mind would deflect our sympathies away from their real objects. We are asked to relax along with the narrator and settle down to hear a good story, and this is the extent to which we need to be involved with him.

These three early long poems each hint at what in later works become more explicit statements on how our sensual, specifically auditory, responses to nature can teach and nourish our spirit. It is through our sensual apprehension of nature, in combination with the workings of the imagination, that we become aware of a force in nature that cannot be known to us by our five senses acting alone. In "An Evening Walk" Wordsworth relies on the sounds of man and nature, in their blending to form a harmony, to transport him to a state where he feels a communion with the "spirits" of nature. Developing his use of sounds further, in "Descriptive Sketches" Wordsworth first hints that we may, through this communing with nature, discover a moral guide to our behavior. "The Ruined Cottage" seems to emphasize neither of these ideas; instead it deals with human feelings and actions in a social and political sense. Therefore, the role of sound in this poem is minimal. It does, however, support some of

Schachtel's theories about the ways our senses inform us, although these ideas will become more manifest in Wordsworth's later works. With the publication in 1798 of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth in some poems has successfully incorporated these early ideas and shown how an appreciation of nature's sounds (as well as all of her sensible forms) can lead us to an expanded awareness of not only what she has to offer us in the way of beauty, but also of truth, love, and a moral sense that can, if used properly, help to build a sound and benevolent human soul. As well, it is through an experience of feeling oneself a part of a mysterious yet omnipresent whole that we can fulfill our spiritual needs for coherence and order.

Although written by Coleridge, "The Nightingale" (1798) is a good point from which to begin a discussion of some of the ways that the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* move towards synthesizing the aforementioned ideas. This poem picks up some of Wordsworth's ideas about the evocative and informative nature of sound that are first mentioned in "An Evening Walk" and "Descriptive Sketches," but takes the subject much further. "The Nightingale" can be seen as a piece of advice from one poet to another.

First of all, rather than using sound to induce mood or express human experiences of such feelings as melancholy or terror, this narrator puts forward the idea that sounds should lead to a natural communion between man and nature, which will in turn lead to an awareness of joy that such communion is possible. This poem's narrator first calls the nightingale's

song "melancholy," in an association of sound and mood similar to that made in the two earlier poems. Immediately after interpreting the birdsong in this way, he says: "But, . . . In nature there is nothing melancholy."[9] It is man who interprets nature, who "fill'd all things with himself / And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale / Of his own sorrows" (19-21); it is man who imposes his meaning on nature's forms without leaving himself open to the "influxes / Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements" (28-29). We are told that the poet and his friend "have learnt / A different lore" (40-41) and do not echo the "conceit" of previous poets who label nature. Instead, Coleridge, and by implication Wordsworth, work with nature in a co-operative way. They "share in nature's immortality, / . . . and so [their] song / Should make all nature lovelier, and itself / Be lov'd, like nature!" (31-34). This instruction to other poets demands a new way to approach nature, not with the habitual and clichéd response of past generations but, in a new, open-minded way, as a child would.

The echoes of the nightingale's concert create a harmony of sounds that the narrator's baby responds to intuitively with delight; the child would "bid us listen" (96). Although untaught, he can most fully commune with the sounds of nature, as he can with her sights: "He knows well / The evening star" (93-94). Schachtel presents a theory of the child's way of

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[9] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Nightingale," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, W.J.B. Owen, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), l. 15.

experiencing, predominantly through the senses of smell, taste, and touch, that the adult with the alleged "benefits" of education and socialization, can no longer understand. Once the child learns to use language, he naturally must repress, or forget, his earliest ways of self-expression, many of which are too base or sexual to be accepted by his society. Schachtel claims that the use of language, with all of its limitations, necessitates this standardization of experience if it is to be remembered and communicated. He explains why most adults cannot recall much before their fifth year of life:

> Since adult memory functions predominantly in terms of recalling clichés, the conventional schemata of things and experiences rather than the things and experiences themselves, it becomes apparent how ill-equipped, in fact, incapable, such conventionalized memory is to recall the experiences of early childhood in their freshness, in the real significance which they had at the time. The age of discovery, early childhood, is buried deep under the age of routine familiarity, adulthood.[10]

He goes on to say that adults also suffer from the problem of the "incompatibility of experience with language and the constant consequent forgetting of experience or its distortion by the cliché of language."[11] This can be seen as one reason for Wordsworth's repeated attempts to relive the "spots of time" that consist of non-linguistic, non-rational, non-schematic experiences that are available usually only to the very young. The baby's response in "The Nightingale" is one such experience, and the father hopes that it will be one that stays with his

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[10] Schachtel, p. 9.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

son, "that with the night / He may associate Joy!" (109-110).

"The Idiot Boy" (1798) is a poem which attempts to capture and communicate the child's experience of the natural world. Johnny, the idiot boy, is a child who will never grow up. His experiences of nature's sights and sounds are markedly different from those of both the adult and the child who has his full faculties. Unlike others, Johnny seems to be in a state of constant communion with nature. He repeatedly makes a burring sound with his lips that mingles with the owlet's hoot and curr, producing a "merry tune," a harmony that is a sensual, unthinking celebration of life. But this particular way of communicating with nature cannot be translated into a language to speak to others. At the end of his adventure, his mother says: "'Tell us Johnny, do, / . . . / 'What you have heard, what you have seen, / 'And Johnny, mind you tell us true.'"[12] Language cannot "truthfully" express those things of which Johnny's senses inform him, for his experience was one primarily of the "proximity senses" of smell, taste, and touch. These senses are the least easily communicated to others; Schachtel says:

> . . . the vocabulary of Western languages is conspicuously poor in words for the description of smells and tastes. . . . the vocabulary for the description of the visible world and its forms and colours is much richer. Even poetry has never succeeded in conjuring the flavour of a smell or taste, although it sometimes enables the imagination to evoke a visual image.[13]

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[12] "The Idiot Boy," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, ll. 448-51.

[13] Schachtel, p. 12.

We might imagine Johnny in the somewhat enviable position of being unable to conventionalize, standardize, hence communicate his experience by striving to place it within the acceptable framework of vocabulary. He cannot freely rely on recalled clichés to take the place, in his memory, of the real experience he had that evening. His mother, and the reader, never learn what these adventures were. And when pressed to tell, Johnny does his best to try to conform his experience into a communicable cliché, but, in his limitations, he gets the cliché backwards: "'The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, / 'And the sun did shine so cold'" (460-61). Johnny is a happy child, and to press him to think and speak about his feelings would render them lifeless and take much of the joy out of his experience. Like the boy in "Anecdote for Fathers," Johnny is best left alone to appreciate what he can without the nagging insistence of logical interpretation and explication.

Many of the early *Lyrical Ballads* offer strong arguments for the instructive elements to be found in nature. These arguments are extensions of those first proposed in "Descriptive Sketches," where Wordsworth makes the merest suggestion that man can learn moral lessons from the natural world. But it is perhaps in "The Pedlar," begun in 1798, and originally intended to form part of "The Ruined Cottage," that we discover the strongest statements on the moral lessons one can discover in nature. First, however, certain *Lyrical Ballads* will be seen to provide an introduction to some of the complex ideas within "The

Pedlar."

In "The Tables Turned" and "Expostulation and Reply," both written in 1798, Wordsworth is beginning to make explicit statements about nature as teacher. In "Expostulation and Reply," Matthew, the teacher, argues that William, his pupil, should not waste so much time lost in thought; he should instead be studying his books. William's reply emphasizes the largely involuntary reaction of the mind to nature's forms. The senses are always in operation: "'The eye it cannot chuse but see, / 'We cannot bid the ear be still'"[14] and the powers of nature impress "themselves [on] our minds" (21-22) leading to "spontaneous wisdom."[15] Here it is implied that one has no choice but to accept what nature offers to teach: it is our natural condition to be always thus engaged in learning.

"The Tables Turned" supports this argument by agreeing that books are "a dull and endless strife" (9) and that nature is both a more interesting and a superior teacher:

> One impulse from a vernal wood
> May teach you more of man;
> Of moral evil and of good,
> Than all the sages can (21-24).

In this poem, nature's sounds play a particularly significant role in teaching. The linnet's music has "more of wisdom in it" (12) and the throstle is "no mean preacher" (14). Experiencing the joy and beauty of the lesson is part of the lesson itself,

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[14] "Expostulation and Reply," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, ll. 17-18.

[15] "The Tables Turned," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, l. 19.

for once we allow "Our meddling intellect" (26) to rationalize, hence, standardize and categorize our experience, we lose its pleasure and intimacy. "We murder to dissect," (28) and this is something that Johnny, the idiot boy, can happily never do.

Another poem which states simply the benefits of nature as teacher is "The Oak and the Broom" (1800). Subtitling his poem "A Pastoral," Wordsworth here gives us a moral lesson under the guise of a folk-tale which is supposed to have come from the real experience of Andrew, the poem's narrator. Andrew is said to have learned "simple truths": "A careful student he had been / Among the woods and hills."[16] An unusual feature of this poem is that Wordsworth personifies the oak and the broom, giving them voice and intelligence in order to make his moral point.

But it is the first version of "The Pedlar," begun in 1798 and completed in 1802-04, several years after the the shorter works of the *Lyrical Ballads*, which makes what is perhaps the most emphatic statement on the benefits of relying on nature for knowledge. Like a child, Armytage turns "his ear and eye / On all things which the moving seasons brought."[17] An eager student, his mind, through the sensual experience of nature, was "made quick to recognise / The moral properties and scope of things" (162-63). Wordsworth is careful not to limit Armytage's education exclusively to his senses, however, for he has the

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[16] "The Oak and the Broom," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1805*, Derek Roper, ed. (London: Collins Publishers, 1975), ll. 3-4.

[17] "The Pedlar," in *'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Pedlar'*, ll. 148-49.

pedlar study from books as well as nature. This can be seen to belie the sentiment behind "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned," but Wordsworth himself was a man who shared the benefits of both natural wisdom and a formal education.

The advantage of these two forms of learning, combined with Armytage's advanced age and mature vision, allow him to more fully feel himself a part of nature, and through this union, experience and reciprocate love:

> . . . he had felt the power
> Of Nature, and already was prepar'd
> By his intense conceptions, to receive
> Deeply the lesson deep of love, which he
> Whom Nature, by whatever means, has taught
> To feel intensely cannot but receive (180-85).

Armytage had learned, through a life of study, contemplation, and reading, in silence and solitude, the lesson of reciprocity that the young boys in the later poems "Nutting," "There Was a Boy," and the early books of *The Prelude* have just begun to notice. These boys "felt / Gleams like the flashing of a shield,"[18] mere hints of the "kindred power" (I, 329) that is in all things:

> O'er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings
> Or beats the gladsome air, o'er all that glides
> Beneath the wave, yea in the wave itself
> And mighty depth of water (II, 455-58).

But it is not until the boy matures that he is able to fully understand these early hints from nature who is trying to tell him that he is as much a part of her as are the rest of her

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[18] *The Prelude, 1798-1799*, Stephen Parrish, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), Part I, l. 197.

forms.

This idea of a harmony of existence, feeling one's self a part of a unity and a natural process that goes on and on without end, is often evoked through Wordsworth's use of sounds, especially, as already mentioned, by the use of the echo. But to define "harmony" in a literal sense, it is most often used to refer to a combination of parts or elements to form a consistent or orderly whole so as to produce an aesthetically pleasing effect. In our culture we give the word musical connotation: harmony is a pleasing combination or arrangement of sounds or musical notes. Wordsworth is playing upon this musical definition of the word when he expresses a harmony of "being" by using words which connote a harmony of sounds. Phrases like "The still, sad music of humanity," taken from "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," further blend these two meanings of the word "harmony."

Conversely, Wordsworth aptly uses the sense of disharmony to express the ills of a materialistic society that is dislocated from the natural world. In "The world is too much with us" (1804), he draws attention to our lack of sympathy for nature brought about by misplaced values: "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in nature that is ours; . . . "[19] The result of this man-made separation from nature is that we can no longer find a source of joy and comfort; "getting and

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[19] "The world is too much with us; late and soon," in *'Poems, in Two Volumes', and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, Jared Curtis, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), ll. 2-3.

spending" are not adequate compensation for this loss. For all of nature's forms, for the sea and the howling winds "we are out of tune; / It moves us not--" (8-9).

"Lines Written in Early Spring" presents a seemingly contradictory interpretation of man's response to the harmony produced by the "thousand blended notes" of spring.[20] The narrator of this poem is not promoting a child's view of nature's sounds, for the "sweet mood" induced by harmonious sounds "Bring sad thoughts to the mind" (4) and lead him to ponder moral questions. Unlike the moral revelation of the aggressive boy in "Nutting," this poem is concerned with the morality of human suffering. The poem ends with the question: "Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?" (23-24).

This question arises out of the joy and beauty of the narrator's own experience of nature; he cannot help but think "That there was pleasure" (20) in all that his senses gave him. Through this occasion he offers us a statement on how his moral sense was formed: "To her fair works did nature link / The human soul that through me ran" (5-6). It is through our experience of nature's "fair works" that our souls discover what is true and moral behavior. Nature, in all her outward forms, should be considered a model for us. Yet it is not until "Tintern Abbey" that Wordsworth is able to articulate just how this "soul

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[20] "Lines Written in Early Spring," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, l. 1.

forming" takes place.

Derek Roper, in "General Notes on the Preface" in his edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, tells of the influence that some of the ideas of David Hartley had on the young Wordsworth. Hartley promotes the modern idea of "conditioning," where "character is evolved by a continuous and largely automatic process"[21] which all begin with sensual experience. Roper writes:

> From earliest childhood we learn to associate certain sights, sounds, tastes, etc., with pleasant or painful feelings. As more and more associations are formed they build themselves into increasingly complex systems of responses which together make up the whole of our personality, 'imagination' being the first faculty thus developed and the 'moral sense' the last . . . .[22]

Because Hartley and Wordsworth shared the belief that nature was "rationally organized for a benevolent purpose," they concluded that "nature's conditioning must be to lead men to happiness and virtue."[23]

Although this idea was suitable for the young and happy Wordsworth, as he matured and saw more of the world he necessarily changed some of his beliefs. The realization that this seemingly benevolent and reciprocal scheme was not fully realized in man's social and political dealings led Wordsworth to statements such as those found in "Lines Written in Early Spring" and "Simon Lee,the Old Huntsman" (1798), where a subtle

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[21] Derek Roper, "General Notes on the Preface," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1805*, p. 275.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *Ibid.*

moral inference is made: "Alas! the gratitude of men / Has oftner left me mourning."[24] "The Ruined Cottage" also expresses grief at the inadequacy of social and political structures in dealing with human and moral problems.

"Tintern Abbey" (1798) marks an important change in Wordsworth's approach to nature's sights and sounds. Here he introduces for the first time the restorative and regenerative values of memory. Rather than limiting our sensual experience to immediate lessons and pleasures, this poem enlarges the value of these experiences by suggesting that through developing our memory we are able to store past experience. This experience can be recalled at will, or it may involuntarily recur, so that it can refresh, relieve, and remind us of the best part of our past, with beneficial results.

When shut away from nature, amidst the noise and crowds of cities, our memories of the natural world can give us "sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart, / And passing even into [the] purer mind / With tranquil restoration.[25] The "burthen" "Of all this unintelligible world / Is lighten'd" (39-42). But not only does the narrator of this poem take solace in the memories he already has, he is also aware that currently felt pleasures are continually in the process of forming new memories, "life and food / For future

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[24] "Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, ll. 103-04.

[25] "Tintern Abbey," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, ll. 27-31.

years" (65-66).

The formation of these memories is not solely for pleasure and therapy, however. We compile our experiences of nature; we perceive nature, and through the workings of the imagination, create new meaning, pleasures, and uses for those earlier experiences which are retained as memory. We are thus able to learn not only through our senses, but with the added powers of our memories and imagination. Through this synthesis of sense and imagination our soul is nourished, and we become "moral being[s]" (112). We "become a living soul" (47).

In "Tintern Abbey" Wordsworth relies on another synthesis or a fusion of the visual and the auditory to create an image of sight and sound functioning together as if they were one sense. This melding leads to an understanding more profound than that made possible by the senses operating independently:

> . . . with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things (48-50).

This ability to articulate such a state of ideal communion, the feelings of love and joy that accompany it, and a greater understanding of one's place in nature are the results of Wordsworth's early personal and poetic development. Perhaps the most fitting symbol for both the growth and realization of such process is the river. The sounds and motion of running water appear everywhere in Wordsworth's work; there is scarcely a poem that does not make reference to them. But rather than limiting

the river to a symbol for process, Wordsworth turns it into a metaphor of a more personal nature. At the end of the fourteen books of *The Prelude* he equates the development of his own mind to the movement and growth of a rill into a mighty river. The entire poem is an autobiographical account of Wordsworth's own spiritual growth:

> . . . we have traced the stream
> From the blind cavern whence is faintly heard
> Its natal murmur; followed it to light
> And open day; accompanied its course
> Among the ways of Nature
> . . .
> And . . . from its progress have we drawn
> Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought
> Of human being, Eternity, and God.[26]

The end product of this growth is that the poet can feel himself most fully a part of the spirit that dwells within nature: "A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things."[27] His voice, as poet and teacher, joins the harmony of all nature's sounds; his mature soul is made manifest in the "roar of waters--torrents--streams / Innumerable, roaring with one voice!".[28]

It is fitting that the opening lines of "Tintern Abbey" refer to the murmuring of rolling waters, for not only is the river Wordsworth's personal metaphor, it is the sound of flowing water that time and time again, like an echo, awakens

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[26] *The Fourteen-Book 'Prelude'*, Book XIV, ll. 194-205.

[27] "Tintern Abbey," ll. 101-03.

[28] *The Fourteen-Book 'Prelude'*, Book XIV, ll. 59-60.

Wordsworth's memory to similar water sounds from his past: "again I hear / These waters" (*Prelude*, I, 2-3). In the two-part *Prelude*, the sounds of the River Derwent, "fairest of all Streams,"[29] could be heard from Wordsworth's childhood home. These sounds are among the first heard by the infant William. He tells us that the river "sent a voice / That flowed along my dreams," (Part I, 5-6) forming a large part of his early non-schematic, non-linguistic experience of his natural environment. Each time the mature William hears such sounds he is able to recall some of his earliest memories, although they may be largely unconscious memories. Schachtel presents an argument for the benefits of involuntary as opposed to voluntary recollections of the past:

> . . . visual sensations are far outnumbered as carriers of . . . memories [than] those of the other, less spiritual more bodily senses, such as the feeling of [the] body . . . the hearing of a sound--noise or melody, *not* the sound of words. All these sensations are far from conceptual thought, language, or conventional memory schemata. . . . It is as though they touched directly the unconscious memory trace, the record left behind by a total situation of the past, whereas voluntary recall tries to approach and construct this past indirectly, coached and deflected by all these ideas, wishes, and needs which tell the present person how the past could, should, or might have been.[30]

Wordsworth believed that poets had an extraordinary ability to recapture such early forms of experience in all of the freshness and intensity of their original occurrence. In his introduction to the *Lyrical Ballads* he claimed that the poet has

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[29] *The Prelude, 1798-1799*, Part I, l. 12.

[30] Schachtel, p. 19.

a greater ability than is common to conjure up passions associated with real events and communicate them without the aid of external excitement.[31] This certainly seems to be his intention as he strives to create "spots of time." These recreations of significant moments in his youth are attempts to relive the intensity and mystery of the child's most consequential experiences.

The two-part *Prelude* contains many such episodes of Wordsworth's youth, some of which are associated with and recalled by particular sounds. Wordsworth's "spots of time" can be defined as those revelatory moments of early experience which turn out, in retrospect, to mark crucial stages in the growth of the mind:

> There are in our existence spots of time
> Which with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
> By trivial occupations and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
> (Especially the imaginative power)
> Are nourished, and invisibly repaired.
> Such moments chiefly seem to have their date
> In our first childhood.[32]

We are given a vivid example of how a "spot of time" is formed in the first part of each version of *The Prelude*. In the beginning of this autobiographical poem, William tells us how, when stealing from a poacher's snare, he "hears" "Low breathings coming after me" (Part I, 47). He then hears the wind's "strange

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[31] William Wordsworth, "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads, 1805*, p. 31.

[32] *The Prelude, 1798-1799*, Part I, ll. 288-96.

utterance" (64), recognizing even in his youth that these were rare moments of "gentle visitation; quiet Powers!" (Part I, 73). Although he did not often understand these experiences, he intuited that he and nature were somehow in communion; he was holding "unconscious intercourse / With the eternal Beauty" (Part I, 394-95). The awe and joy he felt in such situations caused him to delegate these moments, not necessarily in a conscious manner, to his memory.

One of the most striking examples of a sound-induced recollection of childhood experience occurs in the second part of the two-part *Prelude*. While young Wordsworth is visiting the ruins of Furness Abbey on horseback, he and his friends are interrupted in their play by the sound of birdsong:

> . . . that single wren
> Which one day sang so sweetly in the nave
> Of the old church . . .
> . . .
> So sweetly 'mid the gloom the invisible bird
> Sang to itself that there I could have made
> My dwelling place and lived for ever there
> To hear such music.[33]

In later years, the sound of a wren's song causes this moment of joy to resurface again and again for Wordsworth, allowing him to enjoy sweet memories and giving him the strength to cope with less lovely circumstances. In addition, the longer that one holds on to this kind of memory, the greater its value will prove to be. Echoing some of the sentiments of "Tintern Abbey," many parts of all versions of *The Prelude* emphasize that maturity is enhanced by informing, re-evaluating and giving new

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[33] *The Prelude, 1798-1799*, Part II, ll. 121-30.

meaning to the experiences of childhood which may have been "lifeless then, and doomed to sleep / Until maturer seasons called them forth / To impregnate and to elevate the mind" (Part I, 424-26). Like Armytage the pedlar, the young Wordsworth stored impressions and sensations in his mind until maturity showed him how to use such information. The pedlar had received "A precious gift,"[34] and as he grew in years:

> With these impressions would he still compare
> All his ideal stores, his shapes and forms,
> . . .
> . . . , he hence attain'd
> An active power to fasten images
> Upon his brain; . . . (139-44).

But it is not enough that a poet experience such passion and be able to recall it at will; he must also be able to communicate it. In his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth speaks of the difficulty in expressing the passion and truth of real life in language. The poet's attempt to describe and imitate passions is "altogether slavish and mechanical compared to the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering."[35] Wordsworth felt that the poet should consider himself a translator; his job was to mediate between nature and those who do not share the benefit of the poet's heightened sensibility, enthusiasm, tenderness, and "greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, that are supposed

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[34] "The Pedlar," in *'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Pedlar'*, l. 138.

[35] William Wordsworth, "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads, 1805*, pp. 31-32.

to be common among mankind."[36] Schachtel would add to this that:

> The artist, the writer, the poet, if they have any real claim to their vocation, must be capable of nonschematic experience. They must be perceptive; that is, they must experience, see, hear, feel things in a way which somewhere transcends the cultural, conventional experience schemata.[37]

Certainly Wordsworth is making the claim in his introduction to the *Lyrical Ballads* that he is indeed capable of such non-traditional modes of experiencing the world and communicating this experience in a similarly unusual manner.

In the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* appear two poems which most emphatically emphasize Wordsworth's ability to express the ineffable experiences of the child's growing mind. "Nutting" (1798-1801) is important to this discussion because it seems to simply capture a "spot of time," yet its very simplicity belies the complexity if its achievement. It begins with a statement that this day lives forever in the memory of the narrator; it was "One of those heavenly days which cannot die."[38] We are never told why this day was so important, but we become aware that the loss of innocence and gain of awareness that the speaker experiences represent a milestone in his growing self-consciousness.

"Nutting" sets down a sequence of events that is echoed in other poems. The natural sounds that accompany the roving boy

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[36] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[37] Schachtel, p. 19.

[38] "Nutting," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1805*, l. 3.

are soothing and bring him to a "sweet mood," a state of pleasure, ease, and joy, where "The heart luxuriates with indifferent things" (40). This scene, made up of both visual and auditory beauty, leads him to a dreamy state of consciousness, where time stands still and "fairy water-breaks do murmur on / For ever" (32-33). Here is a similarity to the quiet evening scene in the much earlier poem, "An Evening Walk." It seems as though the boy's experience, primarily informed by nature's sights and sounds, causes him to reach a joyous state whereby he feels communion with all that he senses. Not understanding the emotions that he feels, he believes that he is indulging his heart by "Wasting its kindliness on stocks and stones, / And on the vacant air" (41-42). So he denies such communion with nature's inanimate forms; he abruptly changes his mood and forces his aggression upon the "virgin scene" (20). The result of his ravage is silence, and it is through this period of silence that he becomes aware of the presence of something more than himself in this scene: "there is a spirit in the woods" (55). This revelation can be seen to represent the loss of his innocence: as he plunders from nature, he gains of her material world, but loses some of his own naiveté. As the silence leads him to ponder the morality of his behavior, he takes one more step away from childhood into the more complex realm of the adult.

Like "The Nightingale," "Nutting" emphasizes that man imposes his own values on nature and judges her by his needs,

not realizing that the best of what nature has to offer cannot be taken by force. Man must leave himself open to nature's subtle whisperings; he must converse with her in silence, alone, if he is to receive her greatest gifts.

There are similarities between "Nutting" and "There Was a Boy," which was written between 1798 and 1800. "There Was a Boy" is particularly effective in capturing one of Wordsworth's "spots of time," but this poem is unusual in that we cannot help but realize that the "boy" that the narrator is speaking of must be the narrator himself--although we are told in the poem that this boy dies as a child. It is also difficult to forget that the narrator seems to be Wordsworth himself, and so the poem takes on additional relevance. As well, earlier versions of this poem were written entirely in the first person, so Wordsworth's change from the simple first person to the more ambiguous later version is indicative of his growing awareness of the ways in which sounds influence memory.

The change of verb tense, from past (pressed, blew, etc.) to present perfect (has carried), emphasizes the irregular sequence of events in this poem and brings the moment spoken of closer to the time of speaking. The boy is described as having vocally communicated with the owls at evening: he "pressed" his hands together and "Blew mimic hootings."[39] The owls "would shout" in return; "silence mocked his skill" (17). The result of this "concourse" or flowing together of voices, realized in a period

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[39] "There Was a Boy," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1805*, l. 10.

of silence, was profound:

> . . . a gentle shock of mild surprise
> . . . carried far into his heart the voice
> Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
> Would enter unawares into his mind (19-22).

But rather than telling us this *did* occur, we are told that it *has* occurred. This emphasizes the ongoing present-day activity of re-experiencing nature. Through recalling this "spot of time," the poet is continually reliving the moment when the sights and sounds of nature entered his heart and his mind. This "unconscious intercourse" was unplanned, unexpected, and had far-reaching consequences. Each time the adult hears sounds (and experiences other sensations) that are similar to those of this "spot of time," he is able to re-enter his own past. Schachtel says that it "is not by chance then, that much later in life those rare instances of a whole vision recalled by involuntary memory are often stimulated by some body-sensation, that is, by the resensing of a sensation of long ago."[40]

Like "Nutting," and several other poems which follow a similar pattern of revelatory experience, silence plays an important role in allowing the narrator of "There Was a Boy" to be receptive to nature's voice. In "Nutting," the boy lived in a purely physical world; his mind and heart were closed to all but what his senses informed him of. He was in a position only to *take* from nature, and he does this brutally, not knowing any other way. Through the chastizing silence that occurs after his plunder, he becomes aware that something non-physical lies all

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[40] Schachtel, p. 13.

about him, in everything. An unconscious part of his mind and an untried area of his heart become receptive to this "spirit" and he is then able to receive some of what nature has to offer.

The same pattern occurs in "There Was a Boy." The boy in this poem is not as aggressively physical, but we are aware of his physical presence in the landscape: his fingers, hands, palms and mouth work with his breath to mimic nature's sounds. But after the echoing harmony dies away, and all is silent, he too moves from an awareness of his physical self to an awareness of his own heart and mind. He becomes able to open his spiritual self to receive what nature offers--he does not *take* anything.

This pattern of physical activity, awareness and appreciating of nature's sights and sounds, unexpected communion following in periods of silence, resulting in spiritual growth or revelation, can be found throughout Wordsworth's work, most often in *The Prelude*. But in "There Was a Boy," this early series of events is laid down in a simple yet effective manner which is supported with many references not only to sounds, but to the same mingling of various sights and sounds that takes place in "Tintern Abbey." The resulting auditory and visual harmony represents the spiritual harmony ideally felt by both the poet and his sympathetic audience as we read his work.

"Poor Susan," (1797-98), is a short but effective reiteration of Wordsworth's ideas on the restorative value of memory as it is evoked by sounds. However, there are notable

differences between this poem and "Tintern Abbey," dated from approximately the same time, which is concerned with many of the same ideas. Now living in the city, Susan is momentarily transported back to earlier days spent in the country when she hears a thrush singing. The lovely "note of enchantment"[41] causes her to relive previous "spots of time" in her life when thrush song was common. A mental picture of mountains, trees, waters, pastures, and her childhood home appear before her: "She looks, and her heart is in heaven" (13). But in this poem the recollection is more painful than not, and Wordsworth offers no solace other than her memories for poor Susan. He leaves her to go back to her work, implying that there is little comfort for people forced away from the natural world to work in the city, other than that which comes from her ability to recollect earlier, happier days.

The transport that Susan experiences, as in the three previously mentioned poems, requires a period of silence in order for the memory to take the present sound and regenerate earlier associations. Wordsworth emphasizes that a peaceful state is also a prerequisite for poetry to evolve, for he defines poetry as the spontaneous outflow of powerful feeling taking its origin from "emotion recollected in tranquility."[42] We might well imagine that poor Susan rarely is able to suffer such transport, for it is only in the "silence of morning" (4),

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[41] "Poor Susan," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1805*, l. 5.

[42] William Wordsworth, "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads, 1805*, p. 42.

which is short-lived in the city, that she is able to find the requirements for such an experience.

The "Poems on the Naming of Places" (1800) all stress the personal significance to Wordsworth of particular places in the country. One of the most striking features of some of these poems is the way in which Wordsworth emphasizes his own experience of nature's varied harmonies. These harmonies, so often merely hinted at in earlier poems, become the focus of "It was an April Morn." This poem begins with the sounds of a rivulet which "Ran with a young man's speed."[43] The sound of the river's motion suggests to the poet that the "spirit of enjoyment and desire, / And hopes and wishes, from all living things" (6-7) circle about in a harmony, "like a multitude of sounds" (8). As the stream furthers its course its sounds become more animated, and all of nature's sounds

> Vied with this waterfall, and made a song
> Which, while I listened, seemed like the wild growth
> Or like some natural produce of the air
> That could not cease to be (27-30).

This "song" of nature is continual and immortal, and beautifully represents process. Again the poet tells us that he is in the process of "listening" as he makes this personally meaningful interpretation of nature's concourse of sight, sound, and spirit.

"To Joanna," (1800), another of the "Poems on the Naming of Places," carries on with this idea of an "intermixture of

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[43] "It was an April Morn," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1805*, l. 3.

delicious hues" and sounds to form "one impression, by connecting force / Of their own beauty imaged in the heart."[44] The isolated senses of sight or hearing effect only the perceiver's mind: it is not until sensations blend to form a harmony like nature's own that these sensations are carried into the heart.

The suggestive powers of echoes are given predominance in this poem. The natural phenomenon of sound bouncing off surfaces and being redirected back to the listener, often over and over again, becomes a fitting metaphor for the personifying of the inanimate, yet not spiritless, forms of nature. In answer to Joanna's laughter, a rock "like something starting from a sleep, / Took up the lady's voice, and laughed again" (54-55). This echo reverberates and each answer seems to come from a different rock face, each given its own name and personality. These echoes are interpreted by the poet in two ways. They were either

> A work accomplished by the brotherhood
> Of ancient mountains, or my ear was touched
> With dreams and visionary impulses (69-71).

Regardless of the way one rationalizes this event, its effect on Joanna is to induce fear. But to the poet, long familiar with nature's voices and the power of his own imagination, it later, in a moment of silent recollection, causes great pleasure.

The latest poems under discussion were published in 1807, most composed between 1802 and 1806. "To the Cuckoo" (1802) is significant because of the way in which it condenses, in

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[44] "To Joanna," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1805*, ll. 47-50.

thirty-two short lines, much of the same ideas found in earlier, longer works. Its subject is exclusively the power of sound in evoking past states of mind which emphasize the mysterious spirituality of the natural world.

"To the Cuckoo" is filled with already familiar words and images suggestive of the ability of sounds to recall the past. The cuckoo's song strikes the listener's ear, evoking his past in a recollection of the "golden time" of his youth.[45] Again, verb tenses change to indicate the ongoing process of the action. The bird's "restless shout" (5) *is* heard in the present, *had been* heard in the past, *was* listened to in the past, and the poet "can listen to thee yet" (25), which emphasizes the possibility of future moments when "the earth we pace / Again appears to be / An unsubstantial, faery place" (29-31).

A similar sentiment can be found in "The Solitary Reaper" (1805). The reaper's song strikes the ear of the narrator as a song that "could have no ending."[46] As he passes out of earshot, he tells us that "The music in my heart I bore, / Long after it was heard no more" (31-32).

The final poem to be discussed is what is often informally referred to as the "Immortality Ode." "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," originally published in 1807 under the simple

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[45] "To the Cuckoo," in *'Poems, in Two Volumes', and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, l. 28.

[46] "The Solitary Reaper," in *'Poems, in Two Volumes', and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, l. 26.

title of "Ode," can be seen to offer the most specific, and perhaps controversial, treatment of the subject of the sensual recollection of past events, or "spots of time" which can lead not only to rejuvenation and joy, but go further towards developing a greater awareness, a "sober colouring"[47] of mature reflection.

This poem is structured in such a way as to lament the loss of certain ways of experiencing the world; it expresses a loss of something that was, and then makes an effort to view this loss as an inevitable result of maturation, socialization, and education. In an attempt to come to terms with this loss, Wordsworth invents a myth of pre-existence, suggesting that "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" (58) of our previous home, which was with God. This poem offers the first explicit statement that it is God, and not nature, which is seen as the manifestation of God, from whom man feels disconnected. This somewhat radical idea of a pre-existence in God's home allows Wordsworth to explore the idea that the child's earliest and primarily sensual ways of experiencing the world are closer than conventionalized and rational adult experiences to the glory and beauty of our previous life "And that imperial palace whence [we] came" (84).

The poem begins with a straight-forward declaration of loss: "There was a time" when perceptions that are now "common" to the

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[47] "Ode" in *'Poems, in Two Volumes', and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, l. 200.

narrator were not so, but appeared to be "Apparell'd in celestial light," with the "glory and the freshness of a dream" (4-5). Already Wordsworth compares these memories of early experience to a dream-state, where rationality and judgement are suspended and there is no longer any linear progression of events. This conforms to Schachtel's opinion that the child's first ways of experiencing the world, which are predominantly through the proximity senses of smell, taste and touch, are not readily accessible to adult memory, which functions by recalling the conventional schemata of things rather than the things themselves.[48] The adult narrator here expresses a sadness that his present experience of the world "is not now as it has been of yore;" (6) for "The things which I have seen I now can see no more" (9). Although nature is still beautiful, something is missing: " . . . there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth" (18). Here the reference is specifically to the faculty of vision, for all images are physical representations of beauty: the rainbow, the rose, the moon, stars, sunshine, and, here, the silent waters. And vision, belonging to the more cerebral subgroup of sense, being less closely connected to its objects, is not in itself adequate to trigger recall of the child's earlier, more immediate and subjective ways of perception. Also, the absence of sound fosters a sense of isolation, so it is fitting that Wordsworth ignores the memory-invoking qualities of listening to emphasize the feeling of loss experienced by the narrator.

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[48] Schachtel, p. 9.

In the third stanza, sound is introduced. While gazing at the sights of spring the narrator's lament is emphasized by his feeling of isolation from the rest of the world around him. He feels that he cannot share the communion and celebration of the birds, animals and children he sees and hears about him: "To me alone there came a thought of grief" (22). But it is with the intrusion of nature's sounds, as they steal into the predominantly visual scene, that we, and the narrator, sense a change in the way that he feels about the his surroundings. With the help of birdsong, music, the "trumpets" of "Cataracts," echoing mountains and shouting children, the listener is reminded of earlier, almost lost ways of experiencing the world in all of its glory. While the poet feels that it is somehow wrong to impose his own grief upon the landscape, these sounds, combined with the happy sights he sees before him, serve to teach him that although his perception of nature has changed, her outward forms themselves have not. It is only he who has changed. The young creatures celebrate May with much joy, and even the "Land and sea / Give themselves up to jollity" (30-31). Through memories of earlier ways of knowing, induced by listening to nature's sounds, he is here able to recall the time when he too felt an unconscious unity and joy as a part of the natural world around him.

It is the sounds of the happy communion of child, animal and nature's forms that allow him to once again take part in the spring celebration. He recognizes the harmony that he hears: "I

have heard the call / Ye to each other make" (35-36). He can remember such early, joyous ways of communicating from his own youth. It is not just verbal modes of communication that are heard, but animals, birds and sounds from nature's inanimate forms are all working together to create a harmony that the children respond to. And, through memory triggered by such harmony, the narrator is once again able to put himself into the same state of mind as the young celebrants: "I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!" (50). The repetition of phrase in this line reinforces the echoic themes that have already been stressed in earlier poems.

These early and all-but-lost feelings are all that the narrator has left in his memory of his earlier pre-linguistic, non-rational ways of experiencing the world around him. What we can remember as the "glory and the dream" (57) is a period in our earliest youth when we were not yet socialized, educated and conditioned to perceive things and experiences in a conventionalized manner. From a 20th century perspective, these memories, which we can barely find words to articulate, are what Schachtel refers to as the earliest stages of human development which rely on the primary senses of taste, touch and smell for information. Once socialization begins, we lean towards the more intellectual faculties of sight and hearing, both of which are relatively easy to express in language. Wordsworth, understanding that education necessarily changes the way a child experiences the world, is harsh in his criticism of the

restraints society places upon the child's spirit: "Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy" (67-68). These lines emphatically state that the "light, and whence it flows" (69), which is still visible to the very young, daily grows dimmer as one learns more and more of the world's ways. As children grow they must necessarily travel "farther from the East" (71), their original home, and move towards the restrictions of rational modes of thought and prescriptive social behaviors. By the time the boy has grown into a man the former "vision splendid" (73) fades "into the light of common day" (76). Speaking from an adult point of view, the narrator can recognize the irony in the fact that children cannot enjoy their childhood: they cannot wait to grow up, not realizing or appreciating the fact that their very youth and inexperience are a blessed and short-lived state that, once lost, can never be fully recovered. The narrator asks: "Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke / The Years to bring the inevitable yoke?" (126-27). Once grown up, the "earthly freight" of knowledge and experience changes forever the innocent, spontaneous and joyful pleasures of life. Yet children cannot know that adulthood, and its attended "permissiveness," is not a state of freedom at all. It is not until the boy is grown that he can know that it is not adulthood that offers joy and freedom, but that the closest thing to this desired condition was to be found in that blessed state of his own childhood. The child, we learn too late, intuitively knows "those truths . . . / Which we are toiling all our lives to find" (115-16). Rational thought cannot lend

insight into these "truths," for it hampers an acceptance and understanding of them.

This poem makes clear Wordsworth's idea that the only way the adult can come anywhere near recapturing these earlier, non-rational, intuitive communions and feelings of harmony with nature (and the God who created it) is through the fragmented memories of very early youth and the recollection of significant "spots of time." These acts of remembering are seen as beneficial and therapeutic, as formerly stated in "Tintern Abbey," for here, too, they "breed / Perpetual benedictions" (136-37) in the mind of the rememberer. Used creatively, "those first affections, / Those shadowy recollections" (151-52) inform our adult vision, and become "the fountain light of all our day" (154) and "a master light of all our seeing" (155).

Although Wordsworth does not refer specifically to any "spots of time" in the "Immortality Ode," we can interpret the poem as referring to the regenerative value of all "spots of time" in a general sense. These recollections serve to remind the adult, as nothing else can, of "that immortal sea" (166) from whence we came, and, further, can serve to transport us; we "Can in a moment travel thither, / And see the Children sport upon the shore, / And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore" (168-70). They offer us philosophic comfort and security in the knowledge that we are a part of something larger than ourselves, to which we will return after death.

But the "Immortality Ode" goes further than any other work of the period to offer hope that we have not totally lost our best abilities to take part in and derive pleasure out of a mature experience of nature. Although the adult can never fully recapture the joy associated with full communion with nature, "nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower" (180-81), there is one benefit to maturity that helps us deal with the loss of a "radiance that was once so bright" (178). Nothing can replace lost innocence, but faith, which comes out of the experience of the "years that bring the philosophic mind" (189) can help us live a fuller, more joyous life, in harmony with nature and her many forms. The final lines refer back to the opening stanzas of the poem: "Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves, / Think not of any severing of our loves!"(190-91). The hope expressed here is one for a continued union between the adult and nature, although the speaker fully realizes the limitations of communion between rational man and the spirit of all that animates nature.

It is the sounds, rather than the carefully described visual scenes of the opening and closing stanzas of "Ode" which serve to jog the narrator's memory and cause him to re-experience, to the best of his ability, some of the joy of his youthful ways of experiencing the world around him. Through his recollection of earlier states of consciousness, his imagination and experience help him come to terms with the limitations of adult perspectives. If it were not for the ability of sound, which,

more effectively than sight, can trigger recall of those "spots of time" so important to the child's self-consciousness and learning processes, this narrator would never be able to make the kind of philosophical statements he does. Like Armytage, the pedlar, this narrator has been given the gift of being able to listen. Armytage

> . . . was a chosen son:
> To him was given an ear which deeply felt
> The voice of Nature . . .
> . . .
> . . . In all shapes
> He found a secret and mysterious soul,
> A fragrance and a spirit of strange meaning.[49]

It is through the ability to listen to, and feel, nature that we can "see into the life of things."[50]

This examination of some of the ways that Wordsworth uses sounds and the faculty of hearing in his earliest poetry has concentrated on three main points. Most often, sound is used as a metaphor to express man's place, as listener and contributor, in the harmony of all natural processes. Wordsworth also believes that nature's sounds are in some mysterious way able to offer us moral guidance. As well, hearing seems to be the sense primarily responsible for the recollection of memories, or "spots of time," which not only function as ways to measure one's development and growth, but also serve to nourish and comfort the mature mind. However, the ways in which sounds are able to serve us in these various capacities are never

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[49] *The Ruined Cottage*, ll. 76-85.

[50] "Tintern Abbey," in *Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, l. 50.

completely explained in any of these poems. Although Schachtel's theories on childhood amnesia do lend some interesting insight into the ways that memories are stored and recalled, most of Wordsworth's ideas on sound remain part of his private mythology which cannot lend itself to rational explication. Support for this can be found in "On the Power of Sound" (1828-29), which was written over twenty years after the last poem to be treated in this argument.

Here, Wordsworth is still celebrating the functions of the ear, naming it an "Organ of Vision".[51] This poem reiterates the idea that through listening to all sounds, both natural and man-made, and by contributing to their harmony, one can be led towards the apprehension of some sort of moral truth. But at this stage of his poetic development, Wordsworth seems to have reached a point of indecisiveness with respect to whether or not one can achieve such enlightenment. Rather than the simple claim, found in such poems as "The Pedlar" and "Descriptive Sketches," that listening to nature will lead one to a moral awareness of the best ways to live, here Wordsworth has arrived at the position where he can only hope for such a didactic force to occur in nature. In the introductory "Argument" to this poem, he expresses a wish that sounds, and the mind's response to them, "could be united into a scheme or system for moral interests and intellectual contemplation." The power of sound,

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[51] "On the Power of Sound," in *'Poetic Works', Volume Two*. E. de Selincourt and H. Darbishire, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), l. 3.

and specifically music, is persuasive, and the poet longs for some positive results from what are naturally strong responses to that which we hear all around us:

> . . . has earth no scheme
> No scale of moral music--to unite
> Powers that survive but in the faintest dream
> Of memory?--O that ye might stoop to bear
> Chains, such precious chains of sight
> As laboured minstrelsies through ages wear!
> O for a balance fit the truth to tell
> Of the Unsubstantial, pondered well! (169-76).

This poem has little more to offer the reader, and the poet, than the idea that through the harmony produced by the voices of man and nature, God's word will be felt and understood. Vague as this is, it confirms that Wordsworth's ideas on sound are not meant to offer direct statements on the ways in which sounds teach and inform. Rather, the mysteries of the "power of sound" are left unresolved, and this emphasizes the enigmatic qualities of the workings of God, and indeed, all of his creations. One should not view this as avoiding a complex issue, however, for the ideas that Wordsworth does put forward on the ways in which sounds teach and enrich are compensation enough.

In conclusion, after a careful study of Wordsworth's use of sound and his many ideas about it, one can deduce that although "unsubstantial" in nature, sounds, and the ways in which we respond to them, have been integral to some of the poet's most original and beautiful works. And, regardless of the seeming lack of coherence in his theories on sound, it is clear that the subject was, in fact, "pondered well," as the richness and

variety of his results will verify.

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Tipping the Scales: A Student of Poetry Fights a Personal Battle to Put Rationalism in its Place

by

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Tipping the Scales: A Student of Poetry Fights a Battle to Put Rationalism in Its Place

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ABSTRACT

Intended as a companion piece to "A Study of Sound in the Early Poetry of William Wordsworth," this paper, by acknowledging subjective methods in my own literary decision-making, questions "objective" or traditional ways of approaching Wordsworth's poetry. Through a narration of my experiences researching and writing the paper on sound, I reflect on my earlier subjective approaches to my readings, explaining that it is these intuitive and unrestricted responses that give the fullest pleasure. Discovering that objectifying or rationalizing these intuitive responses has left me with an incomplete understanding of the ways Wordsworth had intended the reader to approach his work, I have learned that it is through a balance of the two approaches, subjective and objective, that I can achieve the greatest understanding of his work. Further, I illustrate that this conclusion has led me to temper the ways I teach, treating students' subjective responses to literature as valuable to their literary education.

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PREFACE

This second essay is subjective in its tone and subject. It is about me, my role as a reader, and my experience as a student. While preparing both essays for submission to fulfill the requirements for the master's degree, I necessarily had to foresee any possible questions that might be raised about a work that has the student as its focus, rather than literature itself or its writers and critics. Since completing these papers, two things have occurred which have helped me to better explain the value of the subjective approach I have adopted in my study of Wordsworth's poetry.

Firstly, as I was carefully checking my quotations and line numbers for my first paper on Wordsworth's uses of sound, I was horrified to discover a misreading, on my part, of a large portion of "The Ruined Cottage." I realized that I had been so adamant in gathering proof to support my argument that Wordsworth intentionally downplays the role of sight and sound in this poem that I claimed that the narrator becomes physically and mentally relaxed after his journey, subduing input from his "higher" visual and auditory senses. Wordsworth has his narrator do this, I felt, because he wants to emphasize to the reader that the narrator's physical sensations from his tired and over-heated body overwhelm his cerebral functions. I went on to say that the narrator is put into a frame of mind that is more

conducive to a dream-like escape from his surroundings: he is able to remove himself from his physical environment. I claimed he was only half-conscious of hearing a wren's song, only partially aware of those things around him: he "With sidelong eye looks out upon the scene, / . . . soft and distant."[1] My point was to emphasize Ernest Schachtel's differentiation between the primary senses of taste, touch and smell and the more intellectual senses of sight and hearing. And I was delighted to discover that the narrator of this poem does in fact seem to be losing himself through his primary senses, in the enjoyment of this physical langour, ignoring sights and sounds around him.

However, a re-reading of "The Ruined Cottage" showed me that it is not the narrator who is intially described as relaxing, becoming only half-conscious of his surroundings, but a theoretical second character, who does not actually appear anywhere in the poem. The narrator does introduce the poem by describing the scene, stating that it was the kind of day where a man *could* stretch out on the cool, mossy shore and enjoy repose. But, he quickly says, "Other lot was mine" (17). He then proceeds to tell how he had been travelling a long distance in the hot sun and was greatly fatigued. His reference to a second, imaginary character serves to create a contrast between the narrator's actual situation and the ideal, between what he must

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[1] "The Ruined Cottage," in *'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Pedlar'*. James Butler, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, ll. 15-17.

do and what he would like to do, and foreshadows his later period of relaxation as he stops to listen to Armytage's story. My eagerness to fuse Wordsworth and Schachtel's ideas caused me to misinterpret the beginning of the poem, although it is plain enough that it is not the narrator who initially describes himself as lazing in the shade.

When I discovered this misreading I was naturally concerned, and surprised that my desire to support my ideas could so easily lead me to misinterpret such straight-forward statements. The fact that it was so easy to make such a mistake supports much of the argument I present in the following paper, where I begin to reconsider the ways in which I read poetry, the ways that my preconceptions influence the meaning I derive from a poem, and the ways that my own expectations need to be met within a poem, even to the extent that I will unconsciously read meanings that are not there in order to confirm my ideas. This latter point struck me not only as dangerous, from an academic point of view, but also as defeating the purpose of the author, to some degree. Surely Wordsworth did not write "The Ruined Cottage" in order that the ideas within it should be manipulated by current fashions in literary criticism. I realized that the subject of my first essay, tracing the evolution of Wordsworth's use of sounds in his early poetry, was forcing me to apply artificial restrictions upon this poetry, causing me to manipulate the material in order to best express my conceptions of the ways Wordsworth uses sounds. By wanting to develop a coherent

argument which claims that Wordsworth moves from an orthodox, commonplace use of sound in his earliest work towards a more personal, metaphorical and complex use in his mature poetry required that I outline a linear model of the ways in which this treatment of sounds develops. This necessitated that I manipulate my understanding of the purpose of sound in these poems in order to have them conform to my model of progression. Here was my mistake: because "The Ruined Cottage" differed from the other two early, long poems "An Evening Walk" and "Descriptive Sketches," I tried to somehow force it to conform to my preconceived idea that it represents some sort of progress in the ways that Wordsworth uses the faculty of hearing, and the other senses. I now see how artificial is a model which requires a steady, linear, progressive change in Wordsworth's uses of sound, for nothing develops steadily, without digressions or reversion, however small or large. This is especially true of poetry.

In order to be fair to myself, I was not completely wrong in the way that I have outlined a progression in the way that Wordsworth uses sounds in these poems. I believe that I have adequately supported my reasons for believing that Wordsworth was aware of the value of suppressing the more intellectual faculties of hearing and vision in order to experience in a more basic way one's environment through the senses of touch, taste and smell. But I was guilty of being over-eager to make this poem conform to my ideal model. And the danger of approaching

poetry, or anything else, in this way is that one can not only distort or misconstrue the ideas within a poem, thereby missing the author's intentions, but one is also robbed of much of the spontaneity and pleasure of the reading of the poem. This is a subject that my second paper addresses in some detail, for many of the ideas within it arose from my experiences while writing the paper on sound.

Discovering this misreading has led me to take an even greater interest in how readers respond to literature. Becoming more aware of how the reader makes meaning out of a literary text has made me question the ways that I teach, and the ways in which I evaluate my students' performance. This brings me to the second incident which has left me better able to argue for the advantages of studying literature from a subjective point of view. This happened between myself and a mature student in one of my tutorials last semester.

The text assigned at this time was Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and the essay assignment allowed the students to choose among several topics, all of which were chosen by the instructor of the course. My student was obliged, like everyone else, to choose a topic for her paper which would ideally provide her with a way to deal with the complex issues within the novel. But, because this student had more life experience than the average first-year student, Camus' work affected her differently. Some of his ideas struck her with great force, and she came several times to my office to discuss her responses

with me. She told me how her reading had opened new doors of awareness to her, how Camus' character of Mersault had helped her to understand a long-time friend whose attitudes and behavior had always baffled her. She drew many parallels between the ideas in the text and her own philosophical ideas, and as we talked she became more and more excited about the things she was discovering about the text, the author, human nature, other people, and herself. But, when it came time to translate some of her enthusiasm to paper, she ran into trouble. Although representing an improvement over her previous two essays, her Camus paper communicated little of the vitality and depth of thought that I knew this student could express. Disappointed with her grade, she later appealed to me, saying that she had learned *so much* from preparing this paper; why couldn't I see that and acknowledge it accordingly with a higher grade?

Everyone who has been in the position of assigning grades knows similar experiences, and many students undeservedly ask for a better grade, but part of me felt that this student had a valid argument. In order for her to conform her ideas to the requirements of the assignment, she had to impose what I could see as restrictions on her responses to her reading and understanding of the text. None of the assigned topics could come close to providing her with the type of framework necessary to begin a discussion of what she had learned from reading this novel. The value of her reading was not given a fair chance of expression. This experience made me realize that she probably

had learned more than the other students in her class; she had likely learned more than those students who had received higher grades. But, they were better able to organize and express their ideas in what was a more academically acceptable manner. And of course the grading system did not take into account the personal value of what was learned. It could only measure how well students could mold their ideas into the established format of the assignment. It was the personal benefits of study that had led me into the field of literature in the first place, so how could I justify propagating a system which rewards conformity of expression at the expense of individual enlightenment? I see now that it is my challenge as a teacher of literature to discover ways of allowing my students to write about what is important to them, with respect to their readings. At the same time I realize that some degree of scholarly format must be preserved. I believe that encouraging a more subjective approach to study can fill both of these needs, for not only will this ensure that academic conventions of form will be maintained, but the student will also be free to respond to literature in the way that it was meant to be responded to--with curiosity, an open mind and the license to not only *feel* freely the effects of the work, but to be able to treat these responses as a legitmate aspect of literary criticism.

This next paper is an exploration of how I have become able to make such a statement. It is an exploration of my own changing attitudes towards study and teaching, and of how I had

made a move from an early, enthusiastic study of literature for what it can teach me about the world and myself, to a more intellectual, competitive and formal approach to what I study. This gradual change had resulted in much of the joy and life of my study being replaced by pedantry and a desire to conform to "acceptable" ways of criticizing literature. Realizing this, and bothered by the fact that my study was no longer personally rewarding to me, I can now see the need to move back to a position much like the one from which I began as an undergraduate. I now, more than ever, see that the *value* in studying literature is and always should be mainly subjective. Literature is written by people, for people. It is meant to cause us to think and feel and grow. To concentrate upon it as an artifact, separate from the effect it has on ourselves as readers, acknowledges only one facet of literature, and ignores that part which breathes, speaks, and lives.

Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

(Ode: Intimations of Immortality)

My brain / Worked with a dim and undetermined sense / Of unknown modes of being.

(The Prelude, I, 139)

Science Appears as what in truth she is, / Not as our glory and our absolute boast, / But as a succedaneum, and a prop / To our infirmity.

(The Prelude, II, 212)

Maybe a good place to begin is to admit that I learned several very interesting and significant things while I was researching this paper. Some of these things are relevant to my studies of poetry, but, more importantly, much of what I learned is more personal in nature. The exciting thing about learning is that one never knows where an idea will lead, and this has certainly beeen the case in this instance. My words took on a shape and direction of their own and the resulting essay is a surprise even to me.

When I began work on this project several months ago I did not know what I wanted to write about. Themes and theses ran through my mind but none of them inspired me enough to settle down to work. I found that I could not feel strongly enough about any relevant subject to begin earnest study. This feeling of ennui, I soon realized, was representative of my last year or so in graduate school. Much of my study had been uninspiring, undertaken almost automatically as if coursework and working as a teaching assistant were the means to an end--graduating. I had never had this kind of experience as an undergraduate, when I approached every day as something fresh and unknown, filled with the potential to teach me wonderful things. Lately I had become only too aware of the slow change from this positive and productive attitude towards learning to a sense of study as something obligatory, almost like an unpleasant contract that had to be completed.

There could be many reasons for such a shift in the way I felt about my work: too many years spent in school, too demanding a schedule, not enough of a balance in my life between work and play, etc. But the most significant reason for my inability to become enthused about my work, I have come to believe, was because of a fundamental change in my values. I have just learned to what degree one's values influence and inform all of one's experience. I realize that eight years of formal education have caused me to place an uncharacteristically heavy emphasis on rational ways of thinking, to the exclusion of the more emotional and intuitive ways by which I had been experiencing the world prior to enrolling in university. Simply put, I blamed the structure and discipline of academic institutions for robbing me of much of the joy and enthusiasm that I had earlier found in learning. Of course it is always convenient to name a scapegoat, but I have seriously considered that remaining at university for a longer period of time can do little more for me than increase my feeling of dislocation, and can only further deaden my spirit. To be fair to a system that gave me more than it took from me, I will not hesitate to suggest that I am grateful for much of what I have learned at university. But it is the loss of certain ways of thinking and feeling that I lament--for an emphasis placed upon rationalism to the neglect of more intuitive and emotional ways of arriving at knowledge has left me with an unbalanced, hence an incomplete, education.

In the past year or two I have been complaining to anyone who would stand still long enough to listen that I was finding myself incapable of enjoying anything the way I once could--not just my studies, but most other things as well. I felt that I was increasingly approaching everything from a distinctly rational perspective. I analyzed all experience, matching it to certain preconceptions I had, and I judged people, objects and events by how they measured up to such standards. Feelings had become suspect, mistrusted, something to be suppressed for fear that they would cloud my objective (and therefore "superior") opinions with unnecessary or even harmful values. I became most aware of this new imbalance in my way of experiencing the world when I was recently informed by several people whose opinions I respect that I was "too rational."

The irony of this situation lies in the fact that I should know better than to prefer one way of looking at the world to the exclusion of other ways. Wordsworth, whose work I have been studying for years, warns against limiting oneself by approaching anything new with firmly held beliefs and prejudices already in place. In his advertisement to the *Lyrical Ballads, 1798* he suggests that the reader of his poems approach them with an open mind, stating that the "most dreadful enemy to our pleasure, is our own pre-established codes of decision."[1]

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[1] William Wordsworth, "Advertisement" to the *Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, Stephen Gill, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 591.

Naturally I was alarmed that such changes had occurred. How could this have happened and what did it mean? I believed that if I could answer these questions then perhaps I would be able to correct the problem, and recapture the natural inquisitiveness and vigour that once had propelled me through my undergraduate years.

It is the purpose of this paper to show how an examination of what I consider to be a problem of imbalance between two modes of thought, the rational and the intuitive, has led me to discoveries that I did not expect to find. One of these discoveries is that although academic training has in some ways limited the way in which I experience life, it has also greatly contributed, in more ways than I could express, to improving the quality of my life. Through a new awareness of how I have been limiting myself by taking a rational approach to all things, I am led to ponder larger questions about the ways we learn and then teach what we have learned. As well, the exercise of writing this paper has reinforced my awareness of the danger of trying to conform reality to a preconceived model. I am reminded just how complex all issues are: it would be an oversimplification to divide my mental processes into two opposite factions--rational and intuitive. But in order to best explain myself and to clearly present my argument I will look at several possible reasons for what I believe is a tendency to favour one faction over the other in the way that I approach my studies, Wordsworth in particular, and life in general. I will

also address the fact that I am not the only person in the world who is seeking to better order sense perceptions through rationalization, and I will support my ideas with those of poets, novelists and scientists who share similar concerns.

The problem of trying to come up with a thesis for this paper had been leading me back to the same questions: why do I want to read Wordsworth's poetry in one way, from an analytical perspective, and not in many ways? Why do I want to force an interpretation that most pleases me upon poetry that is meant to be interpreted in many different ways? What am I missing by accepting certain readings of these poems and rejecting others? What I then began to realize was that these kinds of questions are precursors to a more fundamental question, namely, that which asks to what degree do my expectations, experiences, education, the culture that I come from and the very nature of this assignment itself determine my responses to Wordsworth's work, as well as to all of my readings? Going even further, I could ask this question of my responses to everything around me. Writing this paper has led me to examine this question as if I had never considered it before. And, not, coincidentally, I have discovered ways of answering it that are also new, and most enlightening.

I have just stated how I have noticed a dramatic change, recently, in the way that I approach and interpret my experiences. Just as recently I also became aware of a similar change specifically in my responses to the way I read poetry.

Last year I was sitting in a small seminar group where the subject under discussion was Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems. This group of poems had at one time seemed to me to be in a class by themselves, for I could see no connection between them and Wordsworth's other poems. I notice that already I am limiting my experience of these poems by wanting to automatically classify them into one group or another for easy reference. Of course Wordsworth did this himself when he placed poems into classifications such as "Poems of the Imagination" or "Poems of Fancy." But then he had pragmatic organizational concerns as the tremendous volume of his work needed to be coherently ordered for publishing.

During the discussion already mentioned, each student contributed his or her own ideas and I was struck with the force of my desire to prove that my own theories were the "correct" ones. I could now see, for the first time, that throughout the "Lucy" poems ran some of the same images and themes as were present in much of Wordsworth's other poetry. This awareness was a result of becoming more familiar with the poet's work over the past few years. I had therefore sought to connect images from some of the "Lucy" poems to other poems. For example, in "A slumber did my spirit seal," I could see the beloved Lucy's death as representing one part of a natural, yet animated world of process. I was thrilled to have finally gleaned some larger significance than my original readings had allowed me from this seemingly simple little poem. My earlier, less sophisticated

responses to the "Lucy" poems had been purely emotional, for I could not make any "sense" out of them. I could only "feel" their power, and I responded to something in them that I could not articulate.

And now the irony of the situation becomes apparent. Just as I was feeling confident that I now "understood" Wordsworth's intentions in these poems, just as I could argue my reasons for believing that Wordsworth was making "this" kind of a statement in order to express "that" kind of an idea, a revelation came to me. In my haste to make my fellow students understand *my* reading as the one that must be "correct," because, after all I could logically connect what these poems were expressing with similar expressions in other poems, I neglected to give full credence to what other people in the room were saying unless it happened to support what I already believed. Now certainly I had defeated the very purpose of a seminar discussion.

When I was able to clear my head of my own thoughts for a moment, I realized that there was more than one legitimate way not only to read the poetry itself, but that each part of what makes up a poem is open to various interpretations as well. In "A slumber did my spirit seal" many words carry meanings that can have negative and/or positive connotations. While I could self-righteously argue that Wordsworth is promoting a positive union of man and nature when he expresses the deceased girl's rolling "round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks and stones

and trees,"[2] another student shudders and exclaims that is a terrible fate for anyone to suffer. Therefore, Wordsworth must be meaning something else. Of course it is the place of the more sophisticated student to step in at this point and say that each of us is valid in our responses, and remind us that Wordsworth wished our disagreement to take place. The question then became not which is more valid, opinion A or opinion B, but what was the poet leading us to consider by requiring us to accept all opinions as more or less equally valid? Perhaps this question is too difficult, as there is obviously no one answer that will adequately meet its demands, so I pretended that it doesn't exist.

I began to see that I was so full of my own line of reasoning that I discounted all others. And what I noticed was that people could accept what I had to say, but they could *also* offer other interpretations, point out nuances that either contributed to or negated some of my dogmatism. And so I relearned what I had originally learned six years ago as an undergraduate--Romantic poetry can mean A *or* B, but most likely it means A *and* B (and maybe even C and D as well, etc.). The possibilities for significance and pleasure to the reader are virtually endless, I had once learned, and I remember how joyously I had once accepted such an idea. To me it meant that there was no black; there was no white; there were only

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[2] William Wordsworth, "A slumber did my spirit seal" in Gill, ll. 7-8.

illimitable shades of grey. It meant that there was no "right" answer to the problems posed in reading a poem; there was no "right" or absolute meaning. Each reader brought his or her own experiences into the poem and each time one reads a poem it is newly re-created in something like the reader's own psychological image.

I had openly embraced this idea in the past, in fact I even held it primarily responsible for my choosing to continue studying the Romantic poets. But now I was faced with the question of how I could have forgotten something so fundamental to my overall studies. Doris Lessing, who is the writer I am reading this week, and who therefore molds many of my perceptions as I try to write this paper, aptly defines these instances of such insight as "those rare moments when a door creaks open, light grows upon a fact or an object known to the point where one has not seen it for years."[3]

This reacquaintance with something I had known all along jarred me. Or was it not so much a question of forgetting as much as it was a problem of suppressing this flexible, subjective and necessarily inaccurate way of reading poetry in order to develop a rational and therefore more precise way of arriving at a poem's meaning? Somehow I had moved away from the freedom to experience Romantic art as it was intended, with the reader contributing much of the meaning. I had come to prefer to

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[3] Doris Lessing, *The Four-Gated City*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 440.

approach the material in a logical manner, full of expectations that certain patterns or models would be reinforced. And further, I had come to believe that there exists in each poem an explicable "meaning," an essential truth that is knowable and absolute and carries the same information to all readers. Yet I know such a notion is absurd. Once I came to understand what I was doing in my rational attempt to analyze, categorize, label and explicate the poems I had been reading, I could begin to ask myself why I had begun to think about Romantic art in a way that I *knew* was invalid. I knew better than to try to make static an art that is meant to represent process itself. So it was no wonder that my study had begun to seem lifeless; I had "murder[ed] to dissect"[4] and found that I could not resuscitate the poetry after I had had my way with it. It held no more joy for me.

Having understood the problem, I have been able to discover at least three main influences in my life that could help explain my new tendency to use logic to approach what are in essense non-logical forms of communication. The first is that maturity and the training of a formal education necessarily result in the development of reasoning abilities beyond those of the immature or uneducated. As I matured I would have naturally become more rational than I was when I was younger, but university encouraged and accelerated this development. The second factor has to do with my attitudes about studying the

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[4] William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned" in Gill, l. 28.

arts in an age where they can seem impractical, esoteric, and self-indulgent. Favouring a rational or somehow more practical approach to my studies may have filled a need to justify my work to myself. Lastly, the third reason for emphasizing rational approaches to all things has to do with the predominant values of the society that we live in. A culture that worships science and technology can have little regard for the fluidity of the "either/and/or" ideas expressed in Romantic thought. Unconsciously, perhaps, I have been seeking a way to make my work seem more legitimate in the context of my community by trying to make it seem as precise as science would require of its students. From these attempts to see my behavior as a response to this set of circumstances, I will go on to explore the implications of what I have learned.

There are two points that have to do with education that are relevant to my attempt to explain how I have come to favour a rational over an intuitive approach to my studies, and, indeed, to all of my experiences. First are the necessary changes that all students experience, in one form or another, as a result of acquiring a formal education. The second is very much a part of the first: in other words, what I can now see in myself as a newly discovered rationality is partially a natural result of the habits formed during my studies. But, more significantly, this rationality was an unforeseen, hence confusing development in a person who had been informed by a culture that not only failed to cultivate but actually discouraged rational modes of thought in females.

I'll begin with my perceptions of how the academic environment has changed the ways that I think. It is easy to understand how eight years of study could have a profound effect on anyone's ideas. In order to meet the requirements of educational organizations, which must measure students' progress in order to confer degrees, students must learn rules, conventions, valid methods of analysis and argument, and the differences between acceptable and non-acceptable forms of discourse. Once everybody conforms to the same methods, measurement is more accurate, and students can easily be slotted into group A or group B, etc. This is obviously a regulatory, restrictive, yet logical way to make sure that all students are meeting certain requirements, and I have no argument here with

the necessity of such conventions. I have, in the past, eagerly adopted whatever method would enable me to most efficiently do my work. (My work, I believed, was the business of learning as much as I could, as fast as I could, with the least amount of effort). But now, for the first time in the course of my studies, I have stopped to consider how these conventions affect not only how I approach an assignment, or anything else in my life, but also how I am limited by such an approach. Whereas good organizational skills and a logical approach to absorbing new material is perhaps the most efficient way to get through the university system, we all know that education is more than memorizing chunks of data. In order to meet the demands of a schedule, efficiency had come to take the place of natural curiosity and a natural pace and method in learning. I also narrowed my concerns to those that were immediately relevant to my field of interest, ignoring entire realms of information in such areas as current affairs, the sciences, economics and politics, to name just a few.

An example of one way in which I had emphasized a logical over a holistic approach to any subject I studied occurred at the end of my first year of graduate school. My assignment required that I present an oral discussion of the significance of the title of Ford Madox Ford's novel *A Man Could Stand Up*. Taking the title literally, I went straight to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and was delighted to find various definitions for the term "stand up." I laboriously copied out each

reference, and applied each one to a relevant characteristic belonging to the protagonist or to a development in the plot. By the time I was ready to deliver my findings, I had amassed large amounts of uninspiring and not-very-significant information. I could tell by the reactions of my peers that nobody was impressed. It was the first comment of the professor supervising the seminar that startled my sensibilities and made me realize that I had approached the subject in a limiting way. When I had finished speaking, he was silent for a moment, then said that of course there was also the obvious, sexual, implication of the phrase "a man could stand up." My embarrassment was acute, for although the sexual innuendo was the first thing that sprang to mind when I read the title, in my haste to discover the "real" reasons for Ford's choosing such a title, I suppressed this natural, intuitive response as being somewhat incomplete, and rushed off in quest of a literal understanding of the words chosen for the title. In my desire to analyze the title for all possible significances, I had overly stressed rational approaches, which turned up empty and lifeless definitions. The real significance of the title was tied up in the flesh-and-blood of a character with real human needs and desires, and sexuality was a major factor in both the motivation of this character and the plot of the novel. By emphasizing a pedantic approach to literary criticism I had literally *forgotten* that literature is something created *by* human beings *for* human beings.

Again, I should have known better than to allow such things to happen to me. Parallelling this unbalanced approach to learning, Wordsworth addresses the subject of formal versus informal learning, warning against emphasizing one over the other. In the companion poems "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" we see opposite attitudes towards learning through conventional, formal routes. In the first poem, books, representing conventional education systems, bring light "To beings else forlorn and blind,"[5] but in the latter poem, reading the "barren leaves" of books is described as a "dull and endless strife."[6] Here, Wordsworth states unequivocally that "Our meddling intellect," the result of an education which develops rational ways of looking at the world, "Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things."[7] Certainly I can understand Wordsworth's sentiments here, for I too have experienced the frustration felt by all students of having to make one's feelings and natural responses conform to the logical formats of essays, examinations, and "accepted" points of view. It is unnatural, we protest, to conventionalize the variey of our experiences, yet most of us concede that the better we learn to commit this unnatural act, the smoother our trip through a degree program will be.

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[5] *Ibid.*, "Expostulation and Reply," l. 7.

[6] *Ibid.*, "The Tables Turned," l. 9.

[7] *Ibid.*, ll. 26-27.

But, increasingly, a "smooth trip" through university is not providing me with the kind of education that I had hoped for. I feel that I am missing much for the sake of efficiency. While studying at Cambridge, Wordsworth felt himself unsuited for the strictures of formal education. In Book III of *The Prelude* he writes that in other people had been bred "A fervent love of rigorous discipline," but, he goes on, "such high commotion touched not me."[8] He was "ill tutored for captivity," feeling "other passions" which made him "less prompt, perhaps, / To in-door study than was wise or well" (III, 373-74). One of a fortunate few, he had been "trained up in paradise" and could not pay proper homage to "science and to arts / And written lore" (III, 384-85) because Nature was his first and primary love, and must always be his greatest teacher.

Well I know that I was not "trained up in paradise," for I grew up in Burnaby, and living in this time and place I have not been able to experience Nature quite like the young William did in the late 18th century. My trip to the Lake District emphasized to me the unique appeal and natural beauty of that particular part of the world. So, for pragmatic and rational reasons, I embraced logic as the best way for me to approach education, and I felt its influence in all that I undertook. Yet I know that Wordsworth's capital N Nature can teach me things that can be learned nowhere else.

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[8] *Ibid.*, *The Prelude*, Book III, ll. 347-50.

Wordsworth, however, was not beyond an understanding of the powerful appeal of the rational. In the 6th Book of *The Prelude* he admits the pleasure he found in "geometric science." He tells of a shipwrecked sailor who possesses only one book, of Geometry, and with it is able to "oft beguile his sorrow, and almost / Forget his feeling" (IV, 173-74). Certainly one can imagine times when forgetting one's feelings might be desirable; he continues:

> Mighty is the charm
> Of those abstractions to a mind beset
> With images, and haunted by itself; . . . (IV, 178-80).

Here I can see Wordsworth's desire to fall into the same mode of thinking as I have adopted--when the chaos of our experience becomes too much to absorb comfortably, it is convenient and comforting to call upon rationality to put it into some kind of managable order. I have learned to do this when I have to write an essay: I outlined a coherent, progressive, linear structure for this particular paper before I began to write down my various ideas. In this way I can more easily deal with a large amount of data. Yet I never approached essays like this when I was an undergraduate. Then I would wrestle with conflicting ideas and masses of unrelated data, hoping that the "muses" or maybe divine intervention would cause me to create an inspired finished product. I have since learned that I cannot always count on such unpredictable sources to see the finished product through before the due date.

In other facets of my life, when masses of information come hurtling at me from all directions, and I experience terror and confusion, I have learned through mental discipline, to organize the input, set priorities, look for patterns, and otherwise handle the chaos that my senses flood me with. This is no doubt a valuable skill to have at one's disposal, but often, I find, I am so busy organizing and naming phenomena that I neglect to *feel* them. Experience becomes deadened; I don't take time to smell the roses because I'm too busy making sure that like varieties or colours are grouped together and that their name tags are legible.

This habit of ordering our universe is, I have discovered, partly intuitive and inherent in all people, and partly learned behavior. I have emphasized that I had *learned* to think in a rational manner, and I was happy to have learned this skill. This may seem like a ridiculous statement until I clarify it by admitting that although natural maturity will usually result in the adult becoming more far-sighted and responsible, hence more rational in behavior than the child, as a young woman I had never considered the possibility that I would learn such behaviors other than those I was "born with" or encouraged to develop as a little girl. And I certainly did not know that I was born with rational capabilities.

The second relevant point that has to do with education helping me to develop rational ways of thinking is this: I had, previous to attending university, not known that I possessed the

capacity for rational thought in any but the most basic sense. When I grew up, and in the schools I attended, rationality was the exclusive domain of the male sex. I could see for myself that boys had a predisposition for the sciences and mathematics, whereas girls always lagged behind in these subjects. Science teachers in the elementary grades were invariably men; the "brains", as we called them, were always the boys who took top marks in science and math. In high school the number of male teachers increased, and again it was the men who almost always taught math and science courses. In fact I remember feeling a particular prejudice towards a female science teacher in the ninth grade because I for some reason felt that she should not be teaching a "male" discipline.[9]

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[9] There has, of course, been much work done in the study of sexual sterotyping that has helped me to understand my early attitudes towards gender specific behaviors and occupations. Dale Spender (*Man Made Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) and Robin Lakoff (*Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975) both suggest that as soon as children learn to use language, which is male-biased, they internalize sexist views of reality. These views create stigmatization, whereby girls develop behavior patterns which reflect their own sense of inadequacy or incompetence. But even before children learn language, the picture books that they are exposed to present societal roles that are male-dominated. In "An 80s Look for Sex Equality in Caldecott Winners and Honor Books," (*The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Jan. 1987, pp. 394-95), Dougherty and Engel point out that among the best received of children's books there exist powerful strereotyping influences. Edwin M. Schur, in *Labeling Woman Deviant: Gender, Stigma and Social Control* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), explains that the stigmatization that accompanies sexual stereotyping backs up and enforces the restrictions and limitations that our basic learning processes and educational institutions produce. I adopted the stereotype of the "weak-minded" or illogical female before I entered the first grade, and once in school, I fell victim to a self-fulfilling prophecy: if I really believed that I couldn't learn math, I couldn't learn math. This devaluation of my own ability, of course, led to an impaired intellectual self-esteem, but as I was confident that I would be more

My earliest memory of this sexual division according to discipline occurred in the second grade. At the time report cards were issued, rumour got around the classroom that I had received some good grades. The smartest boy in the class (and the cutest, too) came over to my desk and asked to see my grades. They were pretty good, except for the C- I had received in arithmetic. So I showed him my report card, slyly (or so I thought) placing the tip of my finger over the embarrassing grade. Of course he had received an excellent grade in arithmetic--it was expected. And it had probably confirmed his expectations that girls, even if they excelled in other subjects, did not have what it takes to grasp arithmetic. I'm sure he was pleased to see my weakness, but as he said nothing, I will never know what he thought.

Nurtured with fairy tales, songs, stories and the company of other little girls, I learned that while boys corner the market

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[9](cont'd) feminine for my inability to develop mathematical skills, I had some small compensation for acknowledging my own "weakness." Wynne Harlen, in "Girls and Primary-school Science Education: Sexism, Stereotypes and Remedies" (*Prospects: Quarterly Review of Education*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 1986, pp. 541-51) emphasizes that girls learn their place in the hierarchy of the school system, being pre-programmed to avoid the sciences through their acceptance of these stereotypes. Cann and Haight, in "Children's Perceptions of Relative Competence in Sex-Typed Occupations" (*Sex Roles*, Vol. 9, No. 7, 1983, pp. 767-73) found that as children mature, their degree of adherence to stereotypes increases. Growing children not only increasingly recognize adult stereotypes, but an evaluative bias develops as they become more socialized. This explains the grounds for my own bias against my science teacher. Studies such as the one by Philip Goldberg, which asks "Are Women Prejudiced Against Women?" and findings by Dale Spender help explain how I, and other women, are taught to devalue women whom we felt were stepping "out of place."

on rational thought, girls excel in their own domain--that made up of feelings. I was encouraged to see everything through a haze of emotion, creating my values based on how experiences made me *feel*. If anyone asked me what I *thought* about any particular subject, even up until a few years ago, I would be confused and defensive in my attempt to come up with a suitable answer. But, if they asked me how I *felt* about the same subject, I could more comfortably express myself.

So, intuition, creativity, imagination and intense emotions were all acceptable, and desirable, female characteristics, I learned. And I strove to develop these as proof of my femininity. *All* of my decisions, I can now safely say, were informed not by logic, but by feelings. In retrospect, I can say that I made some very bad choices.

When I enrolled in university I truly believed myself to be a disorganized, overly emotional woman who would probably be unable to handle the stringent requirements of higher education. To my surprise and delight I immediately discovered that I had no problem thinking logically, and that organization and efficiency seemed inherently as much a part of me as intuition and emotion. As I progressed through the semesters I learned to become even more logical in my approach to my work, and I could see that I was as rational as anybody else, regardless of their sex. It was almost as if I had discovered, after being taught that I was right-handed, that I was really left-handed all along, and that my left hand proved to be more adept at all

tasks, once I began to use it.

I spend so much time on this subject only because, when I realized in myself a mental capacity that I formerly did not know I possessed, I became almost drunk with the knowledge. I had spent my entire life feeling almost like a second-class citizen because I believed that I was too emotional and not as reasonable as other people. This had been a common criticism hurled at me throughout my life. When I learned that I had previously untapped ways of thinking within myself I placed a disproportionately high regard on these abilities. If logic could cause me to be successful in university, I reasoned, then it must follow that it could cause me to become more successful in everything that I did. I began to neglect and mistrust my feelings.

So what has happened is obvious. Having spent the first two and one half decades of my life believing that I could only respond emotionally to experience, I learned that I had within me a powerful and previously little used ability that allowed me to order and process the data that flowed into me. So, as far as thinking went, I gradually shifted the balance that had once favoured the emotional side of my psyche over to the opposite, or rational side. And the results have been more than I could ever have imagined. A person has only so much mental energy and when one takes too much energy away from one side to re-invest in the other side, an imbalance must occur. The challenge, I can see now, is to even the distribution of energy between the two

extremes. It is through a co-operation of reason and emotion that I can achieve the greatest knowledge and the fullest experience of life.

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The second way I will attempt to explain my decision to favour a too-rational approach to my studies, and indeed all other aspects of my life, is to look at the social factors that influence the way I regard my work. I could call these influences "peer pressure," but a more accurate way to describe this phenomenon is to see it as a result of my own questioning of the validity of my chosen field.

Going back to peer pressure, I have learned that I still place a disproportionately high regard on the opinions of other people. Perhaps this is a good sign, because it suggests that I am not as completely rational as I suspected: people whose opinions may not necessarily be valid can affect me more than they should. When I am asked what I am studying, I more often than not discover that people are either puzzled or disappointed by my answer. Over and over again I get the feeling that my work does not meet the expectations people have of someone who has been at university as long as I have. When I admit that I study literature, particularly poetry, but that I have no specific interest other than developing a solid background in the field, people look at me as if I was somewhat foolish or irresponsible. After all, if I had been studying science or law I would be almost ready to enter the work force as a respected

professional, earning a potentially enviable salary. But it's the inevitable next question that really makes me uncomfortable--what are you doing to make the society that educated you a better place for others? This always makes me squirm, and I do feel guilty for indulging myself by studying what I most enjoy and for *no other reason* than because I love the subject matter. I may never use my degree to teach, I always tell people. It doesn't matter to me whether I do or not, but I recently have begun to feel a new sense of social responsibility. This nagging feeling that I have been self-indulgent and socially irresponsible has left me somewhat defensive about my work. I feel that I am somehow seeking to "legitimize" it by placing emphasis on the more "scientific" analysis of literature's forms, to the exclusion of those ineffable and aesthetic qualities which make literature art. Unable to yet effectively argue that an understanding of the subtleties and nuances of human behavior as learned through a study of poetry can have much to contribute to present society, I suffer doubts as to whether or not I should spend more time in the pursuit of such "impractical" knowledge. My newfound rationality keeps telling me I would be better off in so many ways if I were to study more marketable or more useful subjects. Although I feel that my studies contribute towards making me a better person, I still see the study of literature as a primarily selfish and personal quest for a certain kind of knowledge: I want to know what human beings are so that I can better understand who and what I am. I cannot with confidence

admit to myself that I will use what I learn at university to do any significant good in the world. Who is going to benefit from reading my paper on Wordsworth's use of sound? Who, besides myself, should care about my increased ability to read poetry? *I* care--but more and more, this is not enough.

An example of how I feel about some academic disciplines being more valid or somehow superior to others is the way I respond to the titles of other students' theses. This one is from the Department of Biological Sciences: "Evolution of salmonid mitochondrial DNA."[10] I cannot help but speculate on the potential far-reaching effects of such a study. It could influence such fields as medicine, genetics, aquaculture, and both commercial and sports fishing, to name just a few. From the Chemistry Department comes "Triplet state ketone sensitized photoreduction of Ni(acac)-2 and its applications." I have no idea what this thesis could be about, but the jargon is impressive so I cannot help but assume that it must be important work. The Psychology Department produced "Situational and personality characteristics as determinants of coping." This study sounds as if it could actually help somebody deal with the pressures that can only increase in our fragmented and fast-paced world. And, from Education, "Teacher education in the Soviet Union" may help to break down the fears and prejudices between peoples of two different cultures. I would be proud to

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[10] All theses titles are taken from various editions of *Simon Fraser Week*, published by the Simon Fraser University news service.

say that I was involved in work that has such noble aims.

Granted, not all thesis research is as significant to the bettering of the human condition. For example, the Sociology/Anthropology Department awarded a degree to someone for writing "An Ethnographic Analysis of Luck in Hockey." I must concede, however, that hockey is big business in this country and has the support of many people.

When I learn what my fellow students in the English Department are writing, I, like many others, cannot help but doubt the validity of putting so much energy into such obscure studies. Is this kind of research important: "The Unity of Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*;" "Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and the problem of Critical Response;" "The Politics of Allusion in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*"? In the face of such feelings I wonder if I have begun to feel guilt over being for years in love with the "ivory tower" aspect of my life. I have often felt that university allowed me the pleasure of taking refuge from the "real" world and its mundane concerns. It seems that I have now begun to realize that the "real" world is more important to me than the theoretical and isolating world of the university. I may now feel something like regret for letting my love for studying the beautiful and the obscure override the responsibility for studying something that will prove to be useful to more people than myself. Holding this point of view often makes me feel as if my work is invalid or insignificant by today's requirements and standards. And this brings me to the

third and most important attempt at an explanation for my too-rational approach to life--I live in a society that undervalues much of what Romantic art promotes in deference to new values and a new religion, a religion which worships science and technology.

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The final possible explanation for my choosing a rational over an intuitive approach to life (and Wordsworth) is closely tied to what I have just said about my feelings that studying the arts is somehow not as respected, or as useful, as studying the sciences. This obviously has much to do with the fact that I live in a scientific age. Science touches every aspect of our lives, and, one could argue, art no longer plays a significant role in the life of the average person. Therefore, as a student of the arts, I am under ever-increasing pressure to legitimize my study to a society that is rapidly losing sympathy and understanding for that which cannot be measured, plotted or named.

I must admit that science holds a powerful appeal to me; the more I learn about it the more fascinated I become. The fact that our scientific knowledge is increasing so quickly makes me often feel as if it is only a matter of time before nature's most mysterious processes, including those that result in the creation of poetry, will be revealed to us.

It is with this attitude that I approached and so enthusiastically embraced a recently published article by Barbara Schapiro that appeared in *The Wordsworth Circle*. "Wordsworth's Visionary Image: A New Critical Context" excited me because it seemed to fill particular needs I had at the time I was casting about for a thesis for this paper. At this time I was unconscious of my desire to find a scientific model or explanation for the poetry I was reading. All I knew was that Schapiro's essay was timely in its subject matter, convincing in its logic, and her references were impressive. I instantly became enthused over what seemed to be, at last, a rational explanation of what many critics could only vaguely refer to as the "visionary" aspects of Wordsworth's poetry. Here was someone who, through analogies to the hard sciences, presented a argument to account for Wordsworth's ability to recreate the type of experience that normally defies rational explication. Schapiro suggests that Wordsworth

> may be giving poetic expression to an intuited dimension of reality that our personal apparatus is not normally programmed to perceive. His visionary poetry thus describes an experience of an order that transcends our ordinary notions of space and time.[11]

Modern scientists, she continues, are now discovering parallels between the mind and the external world that Wordsworth may have known about all along:

> Quantum physics has shown that as we probe deeper and deeper into the material universe, we cannot consider the objects of our observation as objectively separate

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[11] Barbara Schapiro, "Wordsworth's Visionary Imagination: A New Critical Context." (*The Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. xviii, No. 3, Summer 1987), p. 139.

> and apart from our observing consciousness--observer and observed are inextricably linked. The physicist David Bohm has pushed the connection even further, claiming, "If we probe matter deeply enough, we will find a reflection of the same qualities which are revealed when mind is similarly probed." Similarly, the neuropsychologist Karl Pilbram asserts that "mental operations (such as mathematics) reflect the basic order of the universe," that "mental properties are the persuasive organizing principles of the universe." This mutual reflection of the operations of mind and Nature is Wordsworth's constant theme.[12]

Schapiro goes on to argue that some individuals, artists in particular, have a greater insight into what scientists are now discovering as natural laws of the universe. Wordsworth, through his heightened sensitivity to the natural world and its processes, had extraordinary abilities to glimpse inside or behind the workings of the external world.

There are several instances in *The Prelude* where Wordsworth describes the strange intimations he experienced as a boy, ephemeral "Gleams like the flashing of a shield."[13] By the time he was in his teens he was able to say: "I at this time / Saw blessings spread around me like a sea" (II, 413-14) and "I felt the sentiment of Being . . . in all things / I saw one life, and felt that it was joy" (II, 429-30). Reading these passages, and others like them, one can feel their power, and somehow intuitively attribute some sort of meaning to them; but increasingly, I had been finding that I wanted more explication. Not trusting my feelings to give me the complete experience of Wordsworth's art, I applauded Schapiro's attempt to go beyond an

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[12] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[13] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* in Gill, Book I, l. 615.

intuitive, subjective reading towards a more tangible, scientific explanation of this kind of poetic experience.

Although scientific rationalism is fashionable, hence appealing to me, there is another reason for my desire to accept Schapiro's "New Critical Context." She uses as the basis for her argument what I feel is the most interesting and mysterious aspect of Wordsworth's work--his visionary passages, or "spots of time." Since my first exposure to *The Prelude* I have been fascinated with the poet's premonitions of himself as a single part of a holistic order that encompasses all things. Enthralled with the idea of the universe as a holistic entity, I imagine that I was unconsciously seeking some sort of "proof" or confirmation that such an order could in fact be within the realm of possibility.

Schapiro's article was all the more convincing to me because it was well supported by the findings of scientists like David Bohm and his theory of "implicate order." Bohm, who was in agreement with Einstein, we are carefully informed, was able to prove *mathematically* (emphasis mine) that the movement of individual electrons is not haphazard, as once believed, but followed a pattern which "implied or concealed the movement of the whole." Bohm then proposes, as Schapiro puts it, an

> implicate order . . . an all-encompassing active source of the visible or "explicate" physical universe. . . . he maintains that each region of space and time "contains a total structure 'enfolded' within in." Wordsworth's sense of an "underpresence," a deeper reality that endows his perception of "parts" with a "feeling of the whole," may be an intuition of that

underlying, undivided wholeness described by Bohm's implicate order.[14]

While reading the newspaper recently, my eye was irresistably drawn to a headline which read "One man's theory of invisible patterns." Hoping for evidence that Wordsworthian ideas are alive and well, I read on and discovered that a British scientist named Rupert Sheldrake recently published a book in which he promotes the idea that collective memory shapes the world and everything in it. *The Presence of the Past* presents his idea of "morphic resonance," where any action or behavior, when repeated often enough, forms a "morphogenetic field--a memory bank of invisible patterns that shapes all natural systems."[15] Acting like a giant cosmic television transmitter, these collective experiences can be "tuned" into, making it easier, for example, for children to learn behaviors that have been repeated countless times before. Unprovable as this theory is, I find it appeals to my need to discover some sort of verifiable data to support and explain Wordsworth's ability to sense order and harmony in nature.

It was these attempts to discover some sort of mathematical formula or rule of "implicate order" to account for the existence of phenomena or states of consciousness that most people cannot normally experience, and that someone as gifted as Wordsworth could only slightly and sporadically feel, that most

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[14] Barbara Schapiro, p. 137.

[15] Vancouver Sun, August, 1988.

intrigued me. For I myself had been puzzled by my own flashings and gleamings that suggested to me some sort of inherent order in my own universe. Granted, my own experience of a seeming pattern in the chaos of experience was never as profound or as uplifting as Wordsworth's, nor did I feel the same childhood intimations of unity as he has described (or at least I cannot remember such feelings). I must admit that it was through maturity and education that I began to clearly see the order that runs through seemingly unrelated objects and instances. My readings have helped me to notice carefully the "implicate order" in a world that once seemed to be operating solely by chance. In fact, for some years now my favourite maxim has been taken from the French: "The more things change, the more they remain the same." I was never able to understand this statement when I was younger, for I needed experience to teach me its truth. Now I use it to reinforce to myself the existence of permanent, unchanging laws of human nature and of the external world. It helps me to order my universe, and, to some small degree, perhaps I feel that if I can order my life, I can have some control over my destiny.

And that seems to be what this love affair with rationality is all about--a desire to have some control over one's fate. If one can distinguish patterns, or things that are alike in one's experience, it follows that one can then come close to predicting the future. Patterns give us a bearing as we move through life, and these bearings allow us to feel that we are

somewhat in control in a world that is increasingly fast-paced, ever-changing and alienating to the individual.

But, again, I should know better than to believe that an acknowledgment of patterns in the past and in the present can lead to an accurate prediction of the future. Physicist Stephen Hawking, in his quest for a "unified theory" to explain the workings of the universe, reminds us that even if "we actually did discover the ultimate theory of the universe," . . . "we could never be sure that we had indeed found the correct theory."[16] Also, it would not mean that we would be able to predict events in general:

> A complete, consistent, unified theory is only the first step: our goal is a complete *understanding* of the events around us, and of our own existence.[17]

As I realized the other day, I have always enjoyed creating patterns or noting similarities in what I perceive. A love of order and design caused me to arrange like books together in my bookcase when I was a child; the stamps in my collector's album were neatly arranged in patterns of similar colour, theme or shape. I used to take pleasure in organizing the family pantry, placing all of the tinned soups in one queue, fruits in another, and so on. Not only did it cause me pleasure to do these things, I also experienced some odd sort of comfort from this exercise. As I was planning this essay I remembered similar positive

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[16] Stephen W. Hawking. *A Brief History of Time*. (New York: Bantam, 1988), p. 167.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 169.

feelings I received from repeatedly seeking out and recognizing a pattern within the shapes of what initially appeared to be a randomly patterned floor tile in my parent's home. So, I have come to believe that there must be an innate need within human beings either to create order or to seek proof of order in one's own private world. Of course these examples from my childhood are not profound, but as I have matured I have noticed a tendency to seek order not only in the material world, but in the realms of ideas, situations and feelings as well. Through study and experience I have been exposed to increasingly more and more patterns, designs and likenesses in both my external world and in my internal world. So, it seems that, like Wordsworth, I cannot help but allow my mind to freely create images of wholeness, or to try to arrive at some sort of irreducible truth through noticing the "affinities / In objects where no brotherhood exists" to other minds.[18] It seems an unconscious act to let the mind reconcile "Discordant elements and [make] them move / In one society" (I, 354-55).

In his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), Wordsworth writes that we take a natural pleasure in the "perception of similitude in dissimilitude."[19] Certainly my youthful and naive attempts to organize objects by their likenesses caused me pleasure, but more often I now feel that what was once a natural affinity for pattern-making has grown into a kind of

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[18] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* in Gill, Book II, ll. 403-04.

[19] William Wordsworth, "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) in Gill, p. 610.

super-rationality where I am continually engaged in the task of organizing and classifying data in the attempt to somehow "make sense" out of the welter of my experience. Constantly busy with such exercises, I lament the loss of earlier, less structured ways of experiencing life, where my feelings reminded me that I was a human being and not some sort of flesh and blood computer.

Re-reading parts of *The Prelude* recently caused me to remember the joy I felt when I first became aware of more significant patterns that existed in the universe than those I knew of as a child. About ten years ago I read a book called *The Story of an African Farm* written by Olive Schreiner. Until recently, I had not thought of this novel for years, yet it has had a profound effect on my life. I vividly recalled a passage where a character notes with wonder and awe the similarity of certain shapes found within nature. Dissecting a dead goose, he marvels at the arrangement of its intestines:

> Each branch of the blood-vessels is comprised of a trunk, bifurcating and rebifurcating into the most delicate, hair-like threads, symmetrically arranged. We are struck with its singular beauty. And, moreover-- . . . --this also we remark: of that same exact shape and outline is our thorn tree seen against the sky in mid-winter: of that same shape also is delicate metallic tracery between our rocks; in that exact path does our water flow when without a furrow we lead it from the dam; so shaped are the antlers of the horned beetle.[20]

The boy narrator then goes on to ask what we could call Wordsworthian questions:

> How are these things related that such deep union should exist between them all? Is it chance? Or, are they not

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[20] Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*. (London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1929), pp. 181-82.

> all the fine branches of one trunk, whose sap flows through us all? . . . This thing we call existence; is it not a something which has its roots far below in the dark, and its branches stretching out into the immensity above, which we among the branches cannot see? Not a chance jumble; a living thing, a *One*. The thought gives us intense satisfaction, we cannot tell why.[21]

These questions lead the boy towards an awareness that Wordsworth expressed often; as he says in *The Prelude*: "in all things / I saw one life, and felt that it was joy."[22] In "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" he states:

> . . . I have felt
> A presence . . .
> . . .
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.[23]

Just as Wordsworth, growing up in the Lake District of England, could intuit the interrelatedness of all forms of nature, so did the young boy of Schreiner's novel learn a similar lesson from the velds of Africa:

> And so, it comes to pass in time, that the earth ceases for us to become a weltering chaos. We walk in the great hall of life, looking up and around reverentially. Nothing is despicable--all is meaning-full; nothing is small--all is part of a whole, whose beginning and end we know not. The life that throbs in us is a pulsation from it; too mighty for our comprehension.[24]

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[21] *Ibid.*, p. 182.

[22] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* in Gill, Book II, ll. 429-30.

[23] *Ibid.*, "Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey" in Gill, ll. 93-103.

[24] Olive Schreiner, p. 182.

Olive Schreiner was a young woman working as a governess on an African farm when she wrote this novel. So it seems that both she and Wordsworth learned at an early age that one could learn valuable lessons by allowing "Nature [to] be your teacher."[25] It is interesting to note that Schreiner seemed to be much influenced by Wordsworth, or at least by Romantic ideas, although there are no specific references to the poet in her novel, which was published in 1883. However, in the preface she includes a quotation from Alec de Tocqueville (1805-1859) who, as will be apparent, *must* have read Wordsworth (the *Lyrical Ballads* were published seven years before he was born). Echoing the sentiments that Wordsworth expresses in the line "The Child is the Father of the Man,"[26] this is a fitting preface to a story about the ways in which children learn about the world:

> We must see the first images which the external world casts upon the dark mirror of his mind; or must hear the first words which awaken the sleeping powers of thought, and stand by his earliest efforts, if we would understand the prejudices, the habits, and the passions that will rule his life. The entire man is, so to speak, to be found in the cradle of the child.[27]

I realize now that Schreiner's novel in many ways prepared me to accept Romantic poetry before I had been exposed to it. A few years after I read *The Story of an African Farm* I read Wordsworth, seriously, for the first time. Recently, I went back to re-read the first essays and examination answers I had

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[25] William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned" in Gill, l. 16.

[26] *Ibid.*, "My heart leaps up when I behold" in Gill, l. 8.

[27] Alec de Tocqueville, in Schreiner, p. 10.

written in response to Wordsworth's poetry. Perhaps the most significant thing that I have learned from this exercise is that my current values, or world view, influence my interpretation of the poetry that I read to a greater degree than I ever could have imagined. One part of me knew that as my values change, so does my experience of a poem; as I approach the poem I bring into it my own unique expectations, knowledge and past experiences, and I create, as it were, a poem that is unlike anyone else's re-creation of the same poem. But it seemed that I had forgotten this valuable piece of knowledge. Yet I had learned as an undergraduate that William Blake believed the eye is the organ of the mind, and the mind creates the object it beholds. Wordsworth often writes of how the external world is but a creation of his own mind. In Book II of *The Prelude* he says that the mind:

> Even as an agent of the one great mind,
> Creates, creator and receiver both,
> Working but in alliance with the works
> Which it beholds.[28]

And in Book III he expresses the joy of his own perceptions:

> . . . I was most rich,
> I had a world about me; 'twas my own,
> I made it; for it only lived to me,
> And to the God who looked into my mind (III, 141-44).

So it puzzled me that I could have forgotten such a fundamental lesson as this one. What else could I have forgotten?

It became obvious to me that as a graduate student I was approaching Wordsworth in a much different way than I did when I

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[28] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* in Gill, Book II, ll. 272-75.

first read his work. This is to be expected, for not only am I much more familiar with his poetry, I have biographical data and what I have learned from my exposure to textual criticism to further inform me. But as I re-read my answer to the following question I became aware of the degree to which my current knowledge and my values determine my reading of a poem. I was asked "Do the Romantic poets speak to the reader of 1981?"

I began my essay answer by stating that the poems I had read spoke to me "vividly" and in such a way that I felt I would continue to read them "well into the future." (If only I had known how true that statement would turn out to be!) Then I immediately went into a discussion of Wordsworth, stating how strongly I was struck with his poems about nature. I explained how I felt that the restorative and educational qualities of the natural world are more important today than they have ever been, in the face of our technological society, and so on. The interesting thing about this statement is that at the time I wrote it I was involved, for the first time, in a personal quest for the benefits of a "natural" lifestyle. In my attempt to live closer to the natural world than my upbringing in the city had allowed, I was, as it were, living the philosophy that I was promoting in my essay answer.

I had not realized until now that the Romantic poets spoke to me as "vividly" as they did because I had already been primed, through reading, thinking and making a conscious choice to create a more natural or holistic lifestyle, to accept what

they had to tell me. Growing up in an urban setting, I had had little exposure to things that were not man-made. Fueled by the sentiments of the sixties, and a desire to understand how earlier generations had lived without all that I had taken for granted, I had left the city and made a home on acreage in the Fraser Valley. Teaching myself all about growing plants, raising animals, and the cycles and processes of the natural world was like a newly found religion to me at the time I first discovered Wordsworth. But before I had seriously studied any Romantic poetry I had already been placed into a frame of mind receptive to its tenents by such ideas as those I found in Olive Schreiner's novel. I was already filled with enthusiasm for promoting nature as the best of teachers.

Gertrude Stein, in her own way, expresses similar ideas that did not make sense to me when I first read them, years ago. But now, I can look upon her words and glean a new significance from them. In "Composition as Explanation" she claims that things, specifically literary works, in themselves do not change: it is the people who read them that effect changes in the ways the works are perceived and understood:

> The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.[29]

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[29] Gertrude Stein. "Composition as Explanation," in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*. Carl Van Vechten, ed. (New York:

I can more clearly see now that whenever I approach one of Wordsworth's poems I take into it the sum total of all of my beliefs, experiences, prejudices and expectations. Everything that I am is somehow put to task to create meaning out of poetry that, in itself, is static on the page, but springs to life as soon as I internalize it. Its significance to me depends upon who I am and what I am doing with my life at the time of the reading:

> The composition is the thing seen by everyone living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living.[30]

Now, years later, I have learned that what I most value at this time informs my reading of the same poems I had initially responded to so warmly, if not naively. And these days, I seem to value rationality more than anything else. But rationality gives me only one side of a poem, and it misleads me to distort what I read. After a few years spent naming components of poems, and noting instances of repetitions in sounds, themes, styles, and symbols, to name just a few, I have come to believe that a poem is not something which one intuitively creates meaning and derives pleasure out of as much as a puzzling construct made up of words. When I approach a poem now I see it as a challenge, and often a chore, to take each part and turn it over and over to try and see how it works. It's much like taking a mechanical device apart to see how each part functions in the context of

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[29](cont'd) Random House, 1972), p. 516.

[30] *Ibid.*

the whole. But what has happened is that I have tended to ignore the whole, and how it operates. My goal in reading poetry now seems to be not pleasure, but to analyze in the hope of discovering what poetry is. And I well know I can never discover what poetry is by examining its parts to the exclusion of their operation together as a whole.

Re-reading my first responses to Wordsworth has helped me to see how much my values have changed in the past ten years. I can see that when I was living a life informed by my emotions and intuition, placing faith in my own nature as the best guide to decision making (this is an over-simplification, of course), I could read Wordsworth with pleasure and excitement. Now, after years of formal education I have been trained to employ a more analytical approach to these poems, and in my desire to understand everything that they could possibly "mean," and how, I have lost the ability to enjoy them as I once could.

But I cannot blame my formal education for robbing me of all pleasure in reading literature. Although I can rationalize that schooling has caused an imbalance between my intuition and reason, I must admit there have been many benefits to my studies. And it is here I must digress to explain the ways in which more rational ways of thinking have benefitted me. My newly developed abilities to recognize patterns and organize them into meaningful wholes has enabled me to see connections between writers, ideas, cultures, and styles and modes of expression that have opened new doors of awareness to me.

Whatever poems or novels that I read, whatever paintings or sculptures that I see, whatever films or plays that I watch, even television and newspaper writing all show me recurrent human concerns in myriad forms. This ability to see patterns in all of these human expressions is much like Schreiner's acknowledgment of patterns in the natural world. My new awareness of the patterns in things abstract causes me great pleasure; as Schreiner's character says: "The thought gives us intense satisfaction, we cannot tell why."[31]

As I write this essay I can think of so many relevant examples, from all subjects, to help illustrate the point that I am increasingly aware of the interconnectedness of all things in the universe, external and internal to the human mind. One example is particularly apt, because I have taken it from a poem by Mark Akenside, a poet Wordsworth was familiar with. Of course it is no surprise to discover like ideas between two poets, one of whom was influenced by the other, but the significance to me is that I could not see the parallel in ideas between the two until I had a personal interest in doing so.

Last year I read an excerpt from Akenside's "The Pleasures of Imagination." I remember nothing significant about my reading of this poetry; but last week I read it again. The following lines almost leaped off the page at me. They describe the workings of the mind as it strives to make sense out of a jumble of sense perceptions. The mind:

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[31] Schreiner, p. 182.

Now compares
Their diff'rent forms; now blends them, now divides;
Enlarges and extenuates by turns;
Opposes, ranges in fantastic bands.
And infinitely varies. Hither now,
Now thither fluctuates his inconstant aim,
With endless choice perplexed. At length his plan
Begins to open. Lucid order dawns;
And as from Chaos old the jarring seeds
Of nature at the voice divine repaired
Each to his place, till rosy earth unveiled
Her fragrant bosom, and the joyful sun
Sprung up the blue serene; by swift degrees
Thus disentangled, his entire design
Emerges.[32]

Another example came out of my recent trip to Oxford. While attending lectures at Somerville College I was introduced to the novelist John Wain. He spoke with us about his fiction, but because he was not telling me anything that was of particular interest to me at the time, and because I had not read any of his work, I do not remember much of what he said. When I got home, I chanced to spot a book of his poetry in my local public library. Curious about the kind of poetry he might write (my most vivid memory of Mr. Wain was the fact that on both occasions I saw him he wore mismatched socks), I borrowed the book. Again, as I read some of his poems, certain lines struck me with a new and exciting relevance. Here were Wordsworthian ideas: they expressed a reverence for the comfort, joy and teachings to be found in nature. In one poem, "As a Child, I Saw the R101," Wain tells of a young boy faced with being torn away from his solitary, unstructured playtime:

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[32] Mark Akenside, "The Creative Process" from *The Pleasures of Imagination* in *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 393, ll. 54-68.

Playing for me at that time
usually meant being close to the ground,
. . .
attentive to pebbles, grains of sand
. . .
It meant being intimate with surfaces,
distinguishing colours and textures. [33]

Taken away from his natural playground, the boy was forced to attend school, where he learned things he would rather not know:

. . . I put on school clothes and said goodbye to
solitary conoisseurship of ground textures:
had to sit up to a desk and forget about
earth-grains, pebbles, the dark red soil

[I] started going to school and learning that life
meant coping with fools and bullies and bending one's spirit
to crush through the rigid bars of rule and convention[34]

Preferring the lessons of the natural world, he feels some of the joy and wonder already expressed by Wordsworth, Schreiner and Akenside in their realization of the existence of natural truths:

the pebbles I coaxed and counted, crouched in the garden,
were my world of truth: . . .
. . .
To clamber up clown-high among the clustering leaves,
braced against bark, gave enough of the bright
sky for me to taste, to touch and treasure:
a spider-web on a still morning, dew-silvered,
or the luminous white of a pebble, light laced
with veins of red, was verity's voice.
. . .
and Earth, home and haven, receive my homage for ever
. . .
I found my refuge in your rough-coated roots.[35]

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[33] John Wain, "As a Child I Saw the R101" in *Open Country*. (London: Hutchinson Ltd., 1987), ll. 2-154.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Ibid.*

This boy's seemingly unconscious and inherent need to search for truth led him from a social, formalized learning environment back to the open-air classroom of nature. I have had to realize that whether I am seeking the "truth" that I believe must exist within a poem, or an "implicate order" within the universe, or any other kind of definable reality, I cannot emphasize one way of seeing (an ordered, rational perspective) to the exclusion of other ways. I cannot understand what an artist wishes to communicate to me by counting tropes or brush strokes. And, absolute truth, if there is such a thing, does not exist only in the work of Wordsworth, or in any poetry. It does not exist in the work of Picasso, or in any painting. It does not exist in quantum physics, or neuropsychology, or in watching the seeds I plant grow and mature into other "seeds with little embryo souls."[36] It does not exist exclusively in any one corner of the universe, but, rather, it is through an awareness of the likenesses within all facets of mind and matter that there lies my best chance at discovering the kind of knowledge that I seek.

I have been aware for some time now that I have been too limited in my attempt to reduce experience into manageable, nameable units. I have discovered that I am in good company, however, when it comes to the desire to reduce phenomena to a single truth, a "unified theory," or mathematical model or design. Norman Mailer was only in his twenties when he wrote *The Naked and the Dead*, yet he has shown that he was acutely aware

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[36] Schreiner, p. 181.

of this need to somehow control one's personal universe by attempting to rationally explain it. In this novel Mailer has created a fascinating character, General Cummings, whom I can identify with strongly. Cummings is a man torn between the innate desire to enjoy the thrilling and poetic experience symbolized by the firing of a howitzer at enemy troops at night, and his contrary need to let his logic (military training and organizational skills) take over to somehow order and make sense out of this same experience.

Firstly, Cummings has spent weeks carefully analyzing every facet of his invasion of the Japanese front. Every minute detail of supplies, manoevering of troops, digging of ditches, etc. has been his responsibility and he is respected for his efficiency. He even has the foresight to remove any possible interference of the irrational in his own character (in this case the strange emotions evoked in him by the character of Captain Hearn) by having Hearn transferred away from his command. Cummings is an ultra-logical man.

Yet, when inspecting the battery one restless evening, he uncharacteristically feels the desire to shoot the large gun himself. What he then experiences is a rush of complex and powerful feelings: "he felt rather than saw the great twenty-foot flambeau of flame that discharged from the muzzle."[37] He listens for the "silent rhapsodic swoop of the

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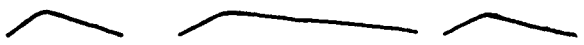
[37] Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*. (New York: New American Library, 1948), p. 439.

shell"[38] as it rushes through the air--and his mind soars. He begins to think abstractly, creating pictures in his mind and speculating about the nature of what he had just done:

> The war, or rather, *war* was odd, he told himself a little inanely. But he knew what it meant. It was all covered with tedium and routine, regulations and procedure, and yet there was a naked quivering heart to it which involved you deeply when you were thrust into it. All the deep dark urges of man, the sacrifices on the hilltop, and the churning lusts of the night and sleep, weren't all of them contained in the shattering and screaming burst of a shell? the man-made thunder and light? He did not think these things coherently, but traces of them, their emotional equivalents, pictures and sensations, moved him into a state of acute sensitivity.[39]

He returns to his tent, but his mind is too charged for sleep, too alive to perform the routine tasks awaiting him, and he begins to write in his journal. He feels as if he were in a dream: "In this mood everything familiar seemed unreal. How alien the earth is at night, he sighed."[40] As he writes, he begins to allow images and metaphors to create themselves as he remembers the feeling of the howitzer's explosion. He is led to contemplate the curve, an asymmetrical parabola, of the shell's path into Japanese territory. He draws versions of this curve:  . He is then led to draw analogies between this curve and other phenomena:

> Re: Spengler's plant form for all cultures (youth, growth, maturity, old age, or bud, bloom, wilt, decay). But the above curve is the form line of all cultures. An epoch always seems to reach its zenith at a point past the middle of its orbit in time. The fall is always more

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[38] *Ibid.*, p. 440.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 441.

> rapid than the rise. And isn't that the curve of tragedy? I should think it a sound aesthetic principle that the growth of a character should take longer to accomplish than his disaster. But from another approach that form is the flank curve of a man or woman's breast . . . the fundamental curve of love . . . It is the curve of all human powers . . . and it seems to be the curve of sexual excitement and discharge, which is after all the physical core of life.[41]

Cummings goes on to connect even more seemingly unrelated ideas until all of a sudden he throws down his pencil in disgust, aware that he had been merely "playing with words":

> It had been all too pat, too simple. There was order but he could not reduce it to the form of a single curve. Things eluded him.[42]

After this realization he relaxes and again allows his senses and imagination free play, looking up at the stars, listening to the wind in the trees: "Not since he had been a young man had he hungered so for knowledge. It was all there if only he could grasp it. To mold . . . mold the curve."[43] At the end of the scene he hears another artillery piece being fired, and its echoes make him shudder; he is once again caught up in the mysterious longings and stirrings of his feelings.

For further support I will call upon some even better known names than Mailer to help me express how I am not alone in my attempts to reduce experience to a single law, or truth, or model. As I was watching television the other night I was pleased to learn that Galileo Galilei, whose discoveries are

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[41] *Ibid.*, p. 443.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 444.

[43] *Ibid.*

said to have heralded the beginning of the Scientific Revolution, spent many years looking for one law which would govern all moving objects.[44] His experiments led to a mathematical formula that we know today as the universal law of acceleration. Coincidentally, he was helped towards this discovery by studying the arc formed by balls shot from a cannon. I learned that this law represented the first time that nature had been described with mathematics. I therefore reasoned that if nature could be described mathematically, then human beings (and their art) could also be described in this way. Hence my desire to see ideas like those expressed in Barbara Schapiro's essay as some sort of breakthrough in literary criticism.

But that's not all. Getting back to the image of the falling cannonball or artillery shell, Schapiro writes that:

> Einstein's four-dimensional space-time continuum, as described in his special theory of relativity, also conceptualized space and time as a single fused whole, as one moving curve of energy.[45]

The temptation is very strong to marry the best ideas from science with the best that the arts have to offer. And, I suspect, that it is in a reciprocal balance of the two, or, an understanding that art and science are not opposites as much as two different ways of trying to come to the same knowledge, that will lead me to the truth that I seek. And so, it only makes

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[44] These ideas are taken from the television series *The Day the Universe Changed*.

[45] Barbara Schapiro, p. 139.

sense to suggest that striving for a balance between the two different ways of thinking about the world is also in order if one hopes to achieve any sort of accurate knowledge.

I can now freely charge myself with allowing an imbalance to occur within my own mind, and I admit that I was aware of this growing imbalance; I even fostered it. Yet, all the while, if I had just paid a little more attention to some of the things that Wordsworth had to say about the need to incorporate new ideas into the old, I may never have had to suffer the restrictions of such a lopsided personality. Although one may be tempted to charge the poet with placing too much emphasis on the intuitive side of his own nature, he was more flexible than one might think. In the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) he writes that "Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge--it is as immortal as the heart of man."[46] This seems dogmatic in the face of the newly emerging popularity of scientific knowledge in his day. He here seems hesitant to grant science the status of equality with poetry, yet this is understandable because of the fact that science was still a relatively new and suspect field at the time these words were written. So I can forgive Wordsworth's hesitancy to place too much faith in its values.

However, possessing more wisdom than most, Wordsworth does allow that science may one day create some "material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions

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[46] William Wordsworth, "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) in Gill, p. 606.

which we habitually receive."[47] And when it does, he says that the poet will be at the side of the man of science, "carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the Science itself."[48] Science may need the poet's divine spirit to help him in his transformation, its assuming a "form of flesh and blood, into a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man,"[49] But Wordsworth makes it clear that there is enough room in men's souls for both ways of knowing. Today, we may feel the need to grant more import to science and to downplay the significance of poetry, but still, as always, we must strive for a balance as our best defense against dogmatism and prejudice.

As I was puzzling through this problem the other day, I happened to be listening to a recording of Alan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind*. He made a point that is relevant here, for he tells of how Plato and Aristotle once disagreed in their definition of the nature of the good. Bloom explains how their common concern for the problem linked the two men, but their disagreement about it proved that they needed each other in order to arrive at the fullest understanding of the issue.[50] It is through their mutual working out of all aspects of the question that the greatest knowledge will result.

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[47] *Ibid.*

[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 606-07.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 607.

[50] Alan Bloom. *The Closing of the American Mind.* (Simon and Schuster Audioworks).

Another pattern emerges for me as I write this, for I can see that this is very much a Romantic attitude, echoing Wordsworth's habit of introducing contrary ideas in his poetry, only to leave none of them resolved. This seems to be the only way to achieve true knowledge (whatever that is), by ever questioning and comparing, not by limiting oneself to one form or another of inquest, as I fear I have been doing. Carson McCullers, in her novella *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, creates a metaphor that is apt in the context of the imbalance I have created for myself within my own mind:

> The mind is like a richly woven tapestry in which the colors are distilled from the experiences of the senses, and the design drawn from the convolutions of the intellect.[51]

It is only through balance between color and design that the most beautiful and meaningful tapestry can be woven. Also, it is only through balance between any two extremes that harmony can be achieved. I see now the necessity of a balance between ways of thinking and feeling; even the act of dividing our thought processes into opposing poles, right and left sides of the brain, rational and intuitive halves, logical and emotional responses, is in itself a limiting exercise. If one can conceptualize the universe as a holistic entity then one must realize the need to approach it in a holistic manner.

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[51] Carson McCullers. *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. 131.

Afterword

Suppose, fifty years into the future, scientists and literary critics alike are able to say: "Yes, Wordsworth *did* have unusual psychic abilities, combined with an exceptional command of the English language, which enabled him to create poetry that offered its readers something like a 'sneak preview' of what we know now are the underlying patterns of our universe. Now we can *see*, with our new technology, those parts of the human brain which are more receptive to these patterns. Now we can understand, through our mathematical data, how he was more 'tuned into' those modes of consciousness as would make him seem the recipient of a 'Visionary Gift.' All of this can now be described and communicated--the mystery is solved." If in fact such statements could ever be made, I now have to ask myself--Does the ability to make such claims mean anything in the context of enjoying poetry? I can only answer--I hope not.

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