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WORDSWORTH'S "INARTICULATE LANGUAGE": A READING OF SOME EARLY VERSE FRAGMENTS

by

Richard A. Rand

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1974

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Preface

This essay attempts a close reading of various fragments composed in blank verse by William Wordsworth during his years at Racedown and Alfoxden. More precisely, it attempts to uncover, in those fragments, Wordsworth's views on poetry as they developed from the period of his so-called "juvenilia" to the composition of Tintern Abbey. In this respect, the dissertation follows in the wake of recent work by such eminent Wordsworthians as Jonathan Wordsworth and Geoffrey Hartman, who have taken important steps in editing and analyzing this material in its raw state, before its reconstitution into such later works as The Prelude or The Excursion.

The dissertation was not originally so oriented or so conceived. It was our first aim to write on the development of Wordsworth's views of poetry between 1798 and 1804, between, that is, the publication of Lyrical Ballads and the completion of the so-called "A-text" of The Prelude. This project was frustrated by the fact that we could never arrive at a satisfactory reading of Tintern Abbey. Perhaps this dissertation is best regarded as preparation for the study of that extraordinary poem.

The organization of this essay reflects, with a somewhat awkward fidelity, the circumstances of its com-

position. It begins, in fact, with one problem arising in Tintern Abbey, a problem which, as the critics agree, is typical of Wordsworth in general. To anticipate our own argument, the passage in question deals with the phenomenon commonly called the "pathetic fallacy:" how one treats that phenomenon has a great deal to do with how one reads Wordsworth.

After examining the Tintern Abbey passage and the problems it poses, we proceed, in the second chapter, with a discussion of the "pathetic fallacy" as a theme in various of the Racedown and Alfoxden fragments. In particular, we examine a passage from the fragment known as Incipient Madness, and some lines from The Ruined Cottage. From these we develop a distinction between two forms of poetry, one which Wordsworth calls the poetry of "passion," in which the "pathetic fallacy" commonly occurs, and another which might best be called "meditative" poetry. We conclude the second chapter by exploring the poetry of "passion" more closely, through a retrospective glance at one of Wordsworth's earlier works, Descriptive Sketches, which happens, conveniently, to be rich in "pathetic fallacies."

In Chapter Three, we explore, across a series or group of four related fragments, the developing concept of "meditative" poetry. We observe how Wordsworth attempts, through a sequence of negative formulations, to neutralize the "pathetic fallacy;" and how he attempts,

by focusing on what he calls "inarticulate language," to discriminate between human and non-human nature in linguistic terms, staying, all the while, within the perspective of the sympathetic imagination. This prepares us for the theme of "language in nature," as an aspect of what Wordsworth calls "inarticulate language." This leads in turn to the proposition of nature as a text, the guiding notion behind the fragment which begins "There is an active principle alive/In all things . . ."

Chapter Four is devoted to the study of a single fragment, "In storm and tempest and beneath the beam/Of quiet moons . . ." Here we attempt to show how Wordsworth extends and refines the notion of "language in nature," particularly through a distinction between language as a system of sounds and language as a system of writing. This leads in turn to an analysis of language as a temporal entity, a sequence of sounds through time, and language as a spatial entity, a complex of traces on a surface. (Wordsworth, we might point out, greatly complicates the issue at this point by showing how language, in both its written and spoken forms, participates simultaneously in the categories of space and time. We dwell on that complication at some length.) Chapter Four closes, digressively, with a discussion of two different ways of "organizing" linguistic signs--either taxonomically, as in a dictionary or lexicon, or syntagmatically, as in a literary text; and we go on to argue

that Wordsworth limits his discussion to the latter form. We also take this moment to insist, parenthetically, that in either case all signs, the signs of nature included, are mediating entities. This we do in the interests of refuting a "mystical" reading of Wordsworth's concept of "inarticulate" language, which inevitably tends to regard signs as a means of immediate and direct access to pure Being or pure Presence.

The balance of the dissertation is devoted to the most ambitious and difficult of the Alfoxden fragments, which we refer to, after Jonathan Wordsworth's designation, as "The Pedlar." It is an utterly daunting text, lengthy, dense, ambiguous, hard to analyze. "The Pedlar" has long been recognized as the germ of Tintern Abbey and The Prelude, and for this reason alone deserves the closest possible scrutiny, especially in the light of our findings in the related fragments.

Our aim is not to offer a comprehensive reading of "The Pedlar," but to experiment with some of the poem's most obscure passages. Since "The Pedlar" relates the origins and growth of a poetic consciousness, we have naturally been drawn to the task of interpreting those concepts--"origin," "growth," and "consciousness"--as they intersect with, or impinge upon, Wordsworth's concepts of language. (It might be useful to point out here that our discussion of these concepts is inspired by related discussion in recent studies of Rousseau by Jacques Derrida

and Paul de Man.) Chapter Five therefore wrestles with several problems at once: the text of "The Pedlar;" de Man's concept of the "blind metaphor" as a genetic structure in Rousseau; and with Derrida's concept of the written trace as a genetic structure, as a source of differences. (We hasten to add that our aim is not to apply the ideas of Derrida and de Man to Wordsworth, but simply to recognize that Wordsworth himself anticipated their concepts in "The Pedlar," and that such concepts are therefore of some value in the business of explicating Wordsworth's text.)

Chapter Five is devoted, in its closing pages, to a digressive polemic against some traditional readings of "The Pedlar," particularly of the lines beginning "Oh then what soul was his . . ." (l. 95). We adopt the polemical stance in order once again to clarify our own position, especially our insistence on reading Wordsworth's "nature" poetry as a meditation on language, rather than a meditation on God or pure Being, as is argued by such critics as John Jones.

Finally, in Chapter Six, we attempt to show that Wordsworth's complex notions of language, of consciousness and of "origins" have implications which extend, inevitably, to the organization of his own narrative. The idea here is simply that how one conceives of a beginning will have repercussions on the way one organizes the "beginning" of a narrative. More specifically, we try

to show that the story of "The Pedlar" is not one of progress from ignorance to knowledge, still less a story in which the beginning is itself a necessary point of departure. Rather, we conceive the poem as a series of variations of transformations of the experience of language in its visible and audible forms. Among these transformations are the Pedlar's experience of nature, of pictures, of geometry, and of song.

We would like to close this introduction on a note of apology. The texts under discussion are obscure, and the issues they raise are frequently hard to cope with. It will become quickly obvious that the closer one gets to Wordsworth's language, the more bewildering it is. This situation presents the reader with an unenviable choice: either he can withdraw from the scrutiny of the text, or he can let that scrutiny guide him into smaller and smaller points of inquiry. In either case he is bound to run the charge of triviality--in the first instance, for ignoring the obvious problems, and in the second for simply making too much of what may, after all, be a simple confusion in the text. We have preferred to risk the second charge on the grounds that, with great poetry as with Pascal's God, it is prudent to bet on the existence of the thing.

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I

Let us begin by turning our attention to a brief passage at the beginning of Tintern Abbey, a point in the text which has given rise to notorious confusion among the commentators:

> --Once again
> Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
> That on a wild secluded scene impress
> Thoughts of more deep seclusion . . .
>
> (4-8)[1]

These lines, as we know, occur at the outset of a passage distinguished by its concise and literal-minded rendering of the spectacle of the Wye Valley. They are to be found in a literal context, empirically concrete and fastidiously precise in its accounting of the sights and sounds confronting the poet after his long absence from the scene. Moreover, the repeated character of the experience--"Once again/Do I behold . . ."--reinforces our sense that the poet speaks about this landscape with some authority; he has been there before, the impressions are not new, they are in the order of familiar recognitions. These are the words of someone who is

[1] The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (eds.); Oxford, 1940-49, vol. II, p. 259.

taking great pains to be accurate about something with which he is familiar: Wordsworth at the valley of the Wye is not the same as Cortez on the peak at Darien, not only because it is Wordsworth who does the viewing in propria persona (whereas Keats is describing another man's experience at a great distance in time and space), but also because Wordsworth, unlike Cortez, is confronting the old, the familiar, the recognizable.

In view of this state of affairs, it seems extraordinary that he should say something, without the least hint of recognition of doing so, that literally does not "make sense." In the midst of his controlled and careful iterations, there comes a passage that seems impossible to accept as a literal observation of actual facts.

The key locution is the following: "cliffs impress thoughts on a scene." To take this passage literally--as the tone and context encourage us to do--would be to grant a number of bizarre and un-commonsensical premises. For example, we would have to grant that cliffs, a natural object, can function as an agent, can perform an act, that of "impressing" something on something else. Next, we would have to grant that this capacity on the part of a natural object is in some way "subjective," that it is involved in the process of thought: either the cliffs actually think themselves, and in doing so "impress" those thoughts on something else; or else

they convey thoughts that originate elsewhere--faithfully, we may presume, and without distortion. Even if we grant the latter reading--which seems rather forced, since Wordsworth does not designate another "thinker" to whom the thoughts might pertain--we are still left with the embarrassing concept that the cliffs do indeed act in some capacity. They function as an agent, either for themselves, or as delegates for something else. And when there is an act--especially an act involving "thoughts"--there is, of necessity, a subjective agent at work, a principle of will. That willful agent, if we are to take this passage literally, is a geological formation made up of stones and soil.

Even if we grant this possibility, our problems with the locution have only begun: are we also to believe, for instance, that something called a "scene" can receive "impressions"? The phrase is oddly concrete, and emphatically transitive: the cliffs <u>impress</u> thoughts on the scene. The scene is serving here as a surface, such as a piece of paper, a board, or a piece of wax on which something else can trace a mark: a piece of type, say, or a piece of chalk, or a pencil. The landscape--the "scene"--is here regarded as an impressionable surface, and not a pre-established configuration of natural forms.

Let us next consider the phrase "impress thoughts on . . ." in its full implications. We normally conceive

of "thoughts" as immaterial events, as mental processes which may eventually take the shape of words, or forms, but which can occur independently of them, as a stream of psychic impulses. In this passage, our common sense notion of "thoughts" undergoes a strange reversal. Here, thoughts have an a priori shape which can then be imprinted on a surface: they exist like forms engraved on a plate which are then transferred to a piece of paper. In other words, the phrase "impress thoughts on on . . ." presumes that the thoughts already have an articulated and visible shape before being impressed on the scene, the receptive surface.

Or, if this notion is not to our liking, we can read the phrase "impress thoughts on . . ." in another way, but in one which does equal violence to our normal sense of things. In this reading, the landscape functions less as a "surface" than as a "psyche" in its own right, a thinking being which receives "thoughts" from an "external" stimulus. Two implications insinuate their way into this reading and make it seem very strange, and they both arise from the words "impress on," which suggest that somewhere, somehow, something is indeed visible. Either the "thinking scene," the landscape-as-psyche, is "visible," so that we--or the poet who observes on our behalf--can declare, from the evidence of his senses, that the impression really is there (in which case, of course, the "thinking" landscape

also functions as an impressionable and disclosed surface); or the "thoughts" themselves, as the pre-formal shapes pertaining to the cliffs, are somehow intrinsically visible, independent of the status of the "scene" as surface or as psyche. The "thoughts" would here serve as a sort of currency passed from one place to another, or as a message conveyed from one bulletin-board to another..

Finally, whatever the transaction between the cliffs and the scene may be, we cannot avoid another difficult and unequivocal aspect of Wordsworth's formulation: the "impression," whatever it may be, passes between one part of the Wye Valley, "the cliffs," and something referred to as "a wild secluded scene," which is either a part of the overall landscape, such as the "houseless woods" (l. 20), or is the whole of the visible scenery as such. Either a part of the scene interacts with another part, or a part interacts with the whole. (Which is to say, in rhetorical terms, that the interaction seems to be either one of metonymy, the interaction of contiguous bodies, or of synecdoche, the interaction of the part upon the whole.) In either case, the transaction is exceedingly difficult to grasp: both "cliffs" and "scene" are out there in "nature," but one part of nature is affecting another part, and this activity itself is at once subjective and objective, at once inward and outward. (The "thoughts," of course, are "thoughts of more deep seclusion": this construction can either be an appositive genitive, where

the modifier "deep seclusion" explains the noun that governs it, or an objective genitive, denoting the object--"seclusion"--towards which the thoughts are directed. Both readings heighten the subjective force of the phrase, the first by specifying their "thoughtful" attributes--"depth" and "seclusion," or inwardness--and the second by situating those "thoughts" within the opposition of subject and object, stressing their active, intentional character.)

To bring home the immanence of this interaction between "cliffs" and "scene," we might close by pointing out the independence of the "Wye Valley" from the rest of the world and from the visitor who inspects it. The Wye Valley has a certain spatial immanence, designated by that other activity of the cliffs--the one thus far ignored--in which they "connect/The landscape with the quiet of the sky." Such a "connection" presupposes a difference between the two, in position as well as in material property: though the sky is quiet, the landscape is suffused with the "soft inland murmur." Though the sky is "formless," or cloudless, the landscape is filled with contrasts of light and shade, color, vertical and horizontal traces, and so on. This difference between sky and valley, in sum, serves to emphasize the interactions between the elements that compose the valley itself. This is what we mean by the "spatial immanence" of the valley.

Its "temporal immanence" is defined, on the other hand, by the relation of the poet to the scene he describes. This definition is posed by contrasting functions of the present tense: though the poet's activity is defined by means of the terminate aspect ("Once again/Do I behold . . ."), the landscape is defined by means of an habitual present (the cliffs "impress" and "connect"). The activity of the landscape is continuous; it has taken place, and will continue to do so, in the poet's absence. This rules out the possibility that the "thoughts" being "impressed" do not somehow inhere in the landscape, at least if we take the passage literally. Such, in brief, is the "temporal immanence" of the landscape.

Let us now stand back for a moment from our efforts, if only to remark on what happens to the reader who really sets out to unravel Wordsworth's extraordinary phrasing. To begin with, our reading seems myopically obsessive; in the process of worrying over four lines, we have apparently lost sight of the poem in which they occur. At the current pace, our analysis would cover about 160 pages, without in any way exhausting the possible variations generated by Wordsworth's text. Secondly, it is not at all clear that the poem is worth this sort of effort, because, in fact, we have not yet begun to account for the perplexities that have surfaced so far. (Nor is it clear that we can account for them.)

It seems that the more rigorous our method, the deeper our loss of authority over the text. What we gain in precision, we lose in insight.

This perverse experience is the rule, not the exception, in reading Wordsworth. Time and again, our epistemological authority is subverted by the very rigor that is intended to found it. This experience can be frustrating, and we can respond to it in various ways: as, for example, by glossing over the problem; by pretending not to notice it; by passing it off as a blind spot in the text; or, more ingeniously, by asserting that the poem does not say what it says, that it should not be taken literally, even when, as in the opening lines of Tintern Abbey, a scrupulously literal context encourages or forces us to do so.

A brief examination of some of the criticism on this passage will illustrate some of these reactions.

Geoffrey Durrant makes the following statement:

> The 'steep and lofty cliffs' which impress on the mind 'thoughts of more deep seclusion' at the same time 'connect the landscape with the quiet of the sky.' The vertical lines of the cliffs at once enclose in their protective circle the scene in which the poet finds himself, and link the peace of the landscape with the profounder quiet of the heavens.[2]

[2] William Wordsworth, Geoffrey Durrant; Cambridge University Press, 1969; p. 35.

Here, the strategy consists in misrepresenting the passage, relegating the misrepresentation to a relative clause, and thus clearing the way for a solid, and valuable, finding. The cliffs, of course, do not "impress thoughts on the mind," but rather on the scene; but they do indeed "enclose the scene in their protective circle," a crucial point, and satisfyingly stated in this paragraph. Durrant is an astute reader; and his handling of the passage is in its own way "protective" and "enclosing," in the sense that it prevents the scandal of the text--"cliffs impressing thoughts on a scene"--from exhibiting itself to full view.

By contrast, Richard Onorato cites the passage as a clear indication of Wordsworth's self-mystification, as proof positive that "the artist who creates" cannot "become the god who understands":

> The same longing that results in an actual revisiting of the Wye Valley on a tour affects talking about it when there, indicating on the part of Wordsworth a strong wishful affinity with such natural or imaginary alternatives to his lot. . . . This actual landscape has provided an occasion for Wordsworth's receiving, as from outside himself, 'thoughts of more deep seclusion.' We should notice that Wordsworth has disregarded the ordinary way of saying things . . . as if the cliffs were pressing thoughts of a deeper seclusion on the scene itself and he were perceiving the thoughts there, rather than simply that a secluded scene is making him think of even deeper seclusion. Perhaps . . . the wishful language is telling us a greater

> truth, that thoughts of a more deep seclusion are forcing themselves on the perceiver and that inner reality is affecting the perception of outer reality. The mind often seeks the external object on which it can best project what it unconsciously wishes most to perceive. . . .[3]
> (emphasis added)

Unlike Durrant, Onorato has correctly paraphrased the literal meaning of the lines in question. He then goes on to dismiss this meaning as a wishful misconstruction of the actual state of affairs. It is obvious enough that Onorato is reading the passage from within a conceptual framework that cannot accommodate this literal text as a statement of reality, a framework constructed on the opposition of inner self to outer scene, of imaginary fantasm to one's "own lot," and, within these oppositions, on the psychological opposition of "projection" to "perception." From within this network of a Freudian world-view, Onorato here construes the passage as the straightforward instance of a (deluded) "pathetic fallacy."

It will become apparent, as our own reading proceeds, that Wordsworth himself was fully in control of the "pathetic fallacy" as a rhetorical impulse. Here, we shall simply limit ourselves to the observation that Onorato has, with a very keen touch, located a point in Tintern Abbey where each and every opposition that consti-

[3] Richard J. Onorato, The Character of the Poet, Princeton, 1971; pp. 45-46.

tutes his own conceptual framework is put to the test. For if, indeed, "the cliffs were pressing thoughts on the scene itself and (Wordsworth) were perceiving the thoughts there," then Onorato's assumptions would be invalidated at their core. To his credit, he sees this; but, rather than entertain the challenge, and rather than permit the text to put the question to the reader, he dismisses it summarily with a contrary-to-fact construction--the sentence italicized above--and a lengthy affirmation of his own perspective. By way of anticipating our own argument, we may call this gesture the wishful assertion of a reality principle on Onorato's own part; the result is to read the passage correctly, and then to recoil from its implications. This is a very common reaction to the subversive character of Wordsworth's poetry.

A similar, though decidedly more hesitant, response is the one of a reader like Colin Clarke:

> There is a sense in which 'We see into the life of things' at every point in the poem. . . . Though the cliffs are objects of contemplation they cannot be said to belong, in any simple way, to a solid objective world confronting the thoughts of more deep seclusion, intimately involved as these are with the very scene that gives occasion to them. The cliffs 'impress thoughts on . . .' with something of the immediacy and literalness of a craftsman impressing a pattern on wax. And it is almost as though the impressing goes on without the intervention of the

> observing mind. . . . The consequence is that the thoughts take on something of the objectivity of cliffs and secluded scene, and these latter the subjectivity of thoughts . . .[4]

It is clear, from the opposition in this commentary between the "subjectivity of thoughts" and "objectivity" of the "solid world," that Clarke participates in Onorato's conceptual framework, and, like Onorato, finds his concepts at odds with Wordsworth's text. Likewise, while recognizing the oddness of the text, he phrases this recognition in a contrary-to-fact construction: "it is almost as though the impressing goes on without the intervention of the observing mind." Almost, but not quite: the "thoughts take on something of the objectivity of cliffs . . . and these latter the subjectivity of thoughts." But this "taking on" is an evasive formulation: what, or who, is "taking on" what, and from what? The drift of Clarke's reasoning, and his subordination of the passage to the line "We see into the life of things," clearly indicates that the "thoughtfulness" of the scene happens in the presence of an "observing mind," be it "ours" or "Wordsworth's." Which is to say that the "impressing" really doesn't occur in its own right, in the absence of a human consciousness. Clarke is unwilling to let the text go that far, but neither does he write it off as an

[4] Colin C. Clarke, Romantic Paradox, London, 1962, pp. 44-45.

instance of the "pathetic fallacy." Rather, he permits the "reversal" of subject and object to occur, but only within the presence of a human subject, a controlling and presiding "observer." It is a way of asserting that thoughts belong to human subjects, but can, under certain conditions, be attributed to natural entities. Those conditions, as the reader of his book will recognize, are rhetorical in nature, and not epistemological. The "romantic paradox" that serves as the topic of his book, stems from an historically circumscribed equivocation in the meaning of certain terms, a "confusion (which) may have been disastrous for philosophy, but (which) Wordsworth, who inherited it, turned . . . to good account" (p. 92). Good poetic account, that is, but not to be taken as the literal, or "philosophical," truth: Clarke wishes to preserve the integrity of the poem without yielding to its subversive power. His own assumptions go unchallenged, but so, to some degree, do "Wordsworth's," or what he deems to be Wordsworth's: yet the poet's assumptions are fenced in by "history," or more precisely, by the "history of ideas," as is indicated by Clarke's overall method and by his assenting citations of Arthur Lovejoy. This approach, while serving the laudable impulse of granting the poet his "license," also preserves the reader's epistemological authority, and is thus a self-protective maneuver against Wordsworth's bewildering utterances.

As a final illustration in this survey of defensive gestures, let us turn to a rather lengthy interpretation by Geoffrey Hartman:

> When the poet writes
>
> Once again
> Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
> That on a wild secluded scene impress
> Thoughts of more deep seclusion
>
> the reader who believes in a literal meaning may at first be puzzled. How can one inanimate thing impress on another inanimate thing thoughts, the property of animate beings? The difficulty would resolve itself if one were to take this passage as a concentrated piece of writing that has omitted an obvious intermediary of perception. . . . But he who knows Wordsworth and his claim to verbal accuracy will doubt that concentration is a sufficient, let alone valid, cause. . . . The sentence, by omitting an obvious intermediary of perception, gives the effect that the impress of external nature on the mind is, by the mind, immediately reconstituted as the quality of the scene before it. . . . Yet, curiously, we receive an impression that the thought itself has deepened. . . . It is the cliffs that cause the scene to appear more secluded, it is the thoughts that are by nature more secluded even than the scene, but the suggestion persists that the cliffs and the scene have, by the very fact of entering the mind, caused a deepening there.
>
> The figure that makes possible this last interpretation is not readily explained, but since, in one form or another, it occurs rather often in Wordsworth's poetry, we shall give it a name. We may call it "incremental redundance": the quality of a thing redounds on the thing it qualifies and is perceived as its very cause; the part of the whole appears greater

> than the whole of which it is the part. "Thoughts of more deep seclusion" means thoughts that are more deeply secluded, or thoughts that concern, or belong to, a more deep seclusion.[5]

Unlike Durrant, Hartman homes in on the passage as an exemplary instance of Wordsworth's style ("A single instance could not bear such weight" he says further on "but the principle is often and unobstrusively used in Wordsworth's poetry"--p. 23). Unlike Onorato, he sees the passage as a deliberate, if enigmatic, structure, perhaps obscure but certainly not confused. And, unlike Colin Clarke, Hartman does not interpret the passage as the felicitous manipulation of inadequate "philosophical" terms. He treats it instead as a fiction, as a form of rhetoric so advanced that it forces us to coin a new terminology to account for it. Here, for the first time, the passage seems to receive the respectful attention that it deserves, above all as the instance of a "frequent" phenomenon in Wordsworth. One gets the feeling very strongly from Hartman's comments that if these lines would yield up their secret to the reader, Wordsworth as a whole may be read plain.

What, however, is Hartman actually saying about the passage? His language is an enigma in its own right, though not, perhaps, impenetrable.

[5] Geoffrey Hartman, The Unmediated Vision, New Haven, 1956, pp. 21-22.

He begins by acknowledging the "literal meaning" of the lines, which he calls a "puzzle." He then holds out the possibility that a "pathetic fallacy" is buried in the language by means of an ellipsis: perhaps the passage "has omitted an obvious intermediary of perception," i.e. an "animate being," such as the poet himself. Owing to such an ellipsis, the sentence "gives the effect that the impress of external nature <u>on the mind is, by the mind</u>, immediately reconstituted as the quality of the scene before it" (emphasis added). But does the sentence really "give this effect," even granting the "omissions" of an intermediary that would make such an effect possible? Does the sentence really "give the effect that the impress of external nature (is) on the mind"? Certainly not on the literal level; on that level, there is no "omission" of an "intermediary of perception;" rather, there is an <u>exclusion</u> of the intermediary, the perceiving mind. (This is due, as we remarked earlier, to the contrasting usage of the present tense as it pertains to an actual "intermediary," the poet, and to the landscape itself.) Which is to say that the effect of an "impress of external nature on the mind," and its "immediate reconstitution as the quality of the scene" itself, is not an effect that can be drawn from Wordsworth's lines, or not, at least, from their literal meaning.

Hartman knows this, and the rest of his commentary serves as an artful extension of the "literal meaning." On the one hand, he seeks to know Wordsworth's "claim to verbal accuracy." On the other, he is committed, like Clarke, to the view that the "thoughts" are really the poet's, the human subject's, and not the "scene's." Thus, the "cliffs . . . cause the scene to appear more secluded," a formulation which can account for the literal meaning. However, "the thoughts are by nature more secluded than the scene" (emphasis added). Why "by nature"? The phrase is clearly meant to apply to an intrinsic character of thought, namely, its "inherence," its immanence within a human subject, more precisely, the absent "intermediary." And here Hartman slips away, ever so subtly, from the "literal meaning" of the lines towards a "pathetic fallacy," but a "pathetic fallacy" in reverse, one that transfers the landscape into the mind of the (absent) intermediary: "the suggestion persists that the cliffs and the scene have, by the very fact of entering the mind, caused a deepening there" (emphasis added).

Why "there"? Why "in the mind"? Why not in the scene itself, as the poem so openly puts it ("Cliffs/That on a wild secluded scene impress/Thoughts of more deep seclusion. . . ."))? Why indeed, unless Hartman has an investment in confining those thoughts to the inward subjectivity of an "animate being"? For nowhere, in his very

subtle reading, does he ever really allow the transaction between cliffs and scene to occur independently of a human observer.

This restriction, indeed, is the hidden premise of the paragraph which elaborates the figure of "incremental redundance." This figure, which looks like a striking formula, turns out, upon closer scrutiny, to be a conflation of two classical tropes, metonymy and synecdoche. Metonymy in this instance is the substitution of cause for effect, or of effect for cause: here, "the quality of a thing" (in this case "seclusion" or inwardness, the quality of a "thought"), "redounds on the thing it qualifies" (the secluded scene), which in turn "is perceived as its very cause" (the scene is perceived as the "cause" of inward thoughts, whereas the reverse, for Hartman, is the actual case.) Synecdoche, the other component trope, is the substitution of the part for the whole: here, in Hartman's own words "the part of the whole appears greater than the whole of which it is the part." The "whole," in this instance, is the comprehension of the observing subject, and the "part" is the portion of the scene he contemplates, specifically, the "wild, secluded scene."

What interests us here is not so much the synthetic character of "incremental redundance" as the basis on which the synthesis is achieved. That basis is, of course, epistemological: both forms of substitution, metonymy

and synecdoche, originate in the mind of an observer. They could not, as Hartman conceives it, occur directly between those two "inanimate things," the "cliffs" and the "secluded scene." They presuppose the "obvious intermediary of perception."

What has Hartman done? His moves are subtle, even playful. He sets out to preserve the "literal reading:" he initially discounts the "intermediary of perception" in favor of Wordsworth's "claim to verbal accuracy;" and yet he then proceeds to expand the notion of the "literal reading" in such a way that it will accommodate a rhetorical maneuver so complicated that only a new term, "incremental redundance," can properly describe it. This maneuver is furthermore attributed to Wordsworth himself, as a testament to his astonishing poetic powers. Hartman is not embarrassed by the passage; he does not write it off as a blind spot in the text; and he does not circumscribe it as an event in the history of ideas. Instead, he celebrates it as a deliberate poetic act of the highest order.

But he also deserts the text. For there is nothing in the passage itself that demands the presence of that "obvious intermediary." As we agreed above, the contrasting usage of the present tense assumes the contrary: those "cliffs impress" those "thoughts" at all times and in all seasons. That, and that alone, is the literal meaning of the lines, and it is on this basis that Words-

worth's "claim to verbal accuracy" must stand or fall. Hartman, for all his sensitivity, audacity and tact, has recoiled from the poem in much the same way as Durrant, and Onorato, and Clarke.

It is clear that these readers share a common assumption about the nature of literary language in particular, and of "thoughts" and "impressions" in general. It is restricted to the epistemological concepts of a subject/object dichotomy, in which the subject, the poetic self, acts as a generative center, propagating analogies and receiving impressions. This position is pervasive and traditional; other readers have made the same points before them, and, as could be easily demonstrated, they all recoil from literal statements of the kind represented by this passage, which, as Hartman says, "occur rather often in Wordsworth's poetry."

We stopped once before in our chapter to arrest the myopic whirl that attends a close reading of Wordsworth. We must now stop a second time to arrest the myopic whirl that attends a close reading of his interpreters. Let us reflect for a moment: why the myopia? Why go on at such length? And why the whirl? Why submit to this confusion?

The confusion, and its obsessive pattern, point to a problem inherent in the reading of Wordsworth. There is something we want him to say, and he obstinately

refuses to do so. More precisely, in this instance, there is something we don't want him to say: we don't want him to say that the "cliffs impress thoughts on a wild secluded scene." This we cannot abide. This we resist at every opportunity.

We have, it is clear, a deep investment in the subject/object dichotomy. We cannot ignore this investment, and we cannot will it away, not even in a provisional spirit of accommodation. It is not enough, for example, to engage here in a "willing suspension of disbelief." We cannot simply pretend that Wordsworth's lines are literally true, for the simple reason that the text forces us to go further. We could suspend our disbelief if Wordsworth were engaging in a flight of fancy, but no such flight is involved in this passage. It makes, as Hartman says, a "claim to verbal accuracy." It forces us, against our will, to actively <u>engage</u> our belief, not to merely suspend our disbelief. It claims to be as truthful as the epistemology which it subverts but which, in other respects, it seems to uphold, as in the vividness, the literalness of the passage as a whole.

If we cannot "suspend our disbelief," could we not at least put our critical assumptions into brackets, agree, that is, to let the passage stand as a riddle in its own right, moving on to the broader dimensions of the poem? Could we not acknowledge the problem,

pass over it, and then get on with the business of reading?

Here, again, the poem presents its own insurmountable obstacle. Readers are bothered by these lines for an excellent reason, namely, because they work upon us as a riddle. Riddles solicit our attention, and they also haunt the man who ignores them. (There is good reason to believe, for example, that the poem as a whole would not make sense in its broader dimensions until the local problem is solved as well.) This, again, is a characteristic problem confronting the reader of Wordsworth. Christopher Ricks, among others, has commented very aptly on the minute enigmas in Wordsworth, and on the insistent demands that they make on the reader:

> Such poetry meets and makes high demands. In particular it asks that we take our time: in poetry such as Wordsworth's there is in the first place nothing more important that we should take. In such a spirit we may recall Wordsworth's anger: 'These people in the senseless hurry of their idle lives do not read books they merely snatch a glance at them that they may talk about them.'. . . The twentieth century is even more open to 'senseless hurry' than was the nineteenth century. Wordsworth urges us to take his time.[6]

To take his time, and to unravel his enigmas. But how do we go about this? If we are caught up in a con-

[6] Christopher Ricks, "Wordsworth: A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines," Essays in Criticism, Vol. XXI (January 1970), pp. 28-29.

ceptual framework which prevents us from reading the text, and if we cannot bypass or suspend that framework, then our task seems frankly impossible. There is no access to the riddle.

Or is there? We are, after all, dealing with a text. A text, in its etymological sense, is a woven object, like a piece of textile. And where there is weaving, there are threads that intersect along the warp and the woof. In the lines from Tintern Abbey, those threads are terms which denote "inanimate beings" on the one hand, and "subjective process" on the other. The warp of the "inanimate" intersects with the woof of the "subjective," in ways that defy the reader's assumptions.

These threads do not fall from the sky, and they are not confined to a single garment. Lane Cooper's concordance shows how very frequently certain words, or threads, recur throughout the texts that constitute Wordsworth's work: this recurrence is something that enables Colin Clarke to write a study like Romantic Paradox, devoted to the analysis of words like "image," "form," and "shape." Which is to say that the threads can be traced. Tracing the threads and their intersections is one way to unravel an enigma.

But tracing a thread also retards the reader. One must follow the thread wherever it leads; it may very well not lead us further into the poem, further into Tintern Abbey, at least not right wway. For Tintern

Abbey is a richly woven text; many threads make up its texture and, if one follows a single thread wherever it leads, one has to defer the reading of that single garment. To follow a thread is to take a detour.

We will, then, put those lines from Tintern Abbey into the kind of abeyance which is not a passing beyond, a going beyond the problem they pose. We remain within that problem by taking a detour away from it. The lines serve as a point of reference: a detour, according to Webster, is a "deviation from a direct course," and there can be no deviation without a norm, without a course of direction.

This detour will take us, inevitably, through the issues that have been called "pathetic fallacy," "subject/object dichotomy," and "rhetorical figures," as they figure in a group of texts associated with Tintern Abbey.

II

Let us pick up the thread of the "pathetic fallacy," since we already have it in hand. Wordsworth has addressed himself to this theme at a number of points in his work, most notably, perhaps, in his comment on the imagination in the 1815 Preface, where he says that the "processes of imagination are carried on either by conferring additional properties upon an object, or abstracting from it some of those which it actually possesses, and thus enabling it to react upon the mind which hath performed the process, like a new existence."[1] As elsewhere, Wordsworth's language here, his terminology, is too acute to allow for the possibility that the "conferring" or the "abstraction" are delusionary in their execution. As he says a bit earlier in the same text, "the Poet dares" to exercise his imagination "for the gratification of the mind" (emphasis added).[2] The imaginative process is a game, combining the twin features of risk and pleasure essential to any kind of play.

Tracing this theme to texts that are closer in date to Tintern Abbey, we find that the same critical precision

[1] Paul M. Zall, ed., Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1966, p. 148.

[2] Ibid., p. 147.

is at work in Wordsworth's formulation. A typical example occurs in the notebook fragment known as Incipient Madness, dating from the Racedown period:

> I crossed the dreary moor
> In the clear moonlight; when I reached the hut
> I entered in, but all was still and dark,
> Only within the ruin I beheld
> At a small distance, on the dusky ground
> A broken pane which glittered in the moon
> And seemed akin to life. There is a mood
> A settled temper of the heart, when grief,
> Become an instinct, fastening on all things
> That promise food, doth like a sucking babe
> Create it where it is not. From this time
> That speck of glass was dearer to my soul
> Than was the moon.
>
> (1-13)[3]

The passage, which reflects on an earlier, recollected event, analyzes a certain kind of intellectual error. There, the poet crosses an open landscape: he enters a hut that reminds us of the dreary hut of Salisbury Plain; and he sees a piece of glass which "seemed akin to life." Why? How is a "broken pane" akin to a living thing? The notion is sufficiently absurd for Wordsworth to analyze the very drawing of the analogy as the effect of a subjective mental state, of "grief/Become an instinct." This "mood," this "settled temper of the heart," is, as the key words "heart" and "instinct" imply, a "spontaneous overflow of natural feeling," preceding the critical faculty and in fact effacing it. It

[3] P. W. I, pp. 314-15.

is from the retrospective time, the time of recollection and of composing these very lines--as indicated by the digressive present tense of the phrase "there is a mood"--that Wordsworth can correctly assess his experience inside the hut. This, of course, was the experience of "fastening on all things/That promise food," and "creat(ing) it where it is not." This is an imaginative act: Wordsworth, in the hut, "conferred . . . properties upon" the pane of glass which it doesn't have. But he did not do so as a poet, as someone who plays the game. Rather, he did so naively, "like a sucking babe." As if to emphasize the distracting and erroneous tendency of this act, Wordsworth tells us that the "broken pane which glittered in the moon" became "dearer to my soul/ Than was the moon in heaven." And the story that he tells bears this out: he leaves the "clear moonlight" to enter the "still and dark" hut; he moves from the situation of openness and clarity to one of confinement and darkness, where, indeed, he remained, at least so long as the "speck of glass" maintained its entrancing spell, remained "dearer to my soul/Than was the moon in heaven."

This tale is a parable about the "pathetic fallacy," in that it accounts for the workings of the imagination as a mystification ("incipient madness") and a subsequent enlightenment. But it is not a parable about a specifically <u>poetic</u> experience, about the impulse which poets have of conferring qualities on the words they use that

the words do not actually possess. Although this passage analyzes an epistemological transaction between a subject and an object, it does not address itself to the rhetorical tensions involved in the handling of metaphor.

For a treatment of that limited, rhetorical problem, let us turn to the following passage from The Ruined Cottage, lines written, it seems, at some point during 1798, about a year after Incipient Madness:

> The Poets, in their elegies and songs
> Lamenting the departed, call the groves,
> They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,
> And senseless rocks--nor idly, for they speak
> In these their invocations with a voice
> Obedient to the strong creative power
> Of human passion. Sympathies there are
> More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,
> That steal upon the meditative mind
> And grow with thought.
>
> (73-82)[4]

Here, Wordsworth's analysis of "human passion" is restricted to the limits of a specific sphere, the sphere of literary language: "The Poets . . . call upon the hills and streams to mourn," to join the sorrowing singer

[4] Jonathan Wordsworth, The Music of Humanity, New York, 1969, p. 35.

The dating of this passage is uncertain: its terminus ab quo is March 5, 1798, the date of Ruined Cottage Ms. B., a draft in which it doesn't appear. Since it does appear in Ruined Cottage Ms. D., written out in the spring of 1799, that period will serve as its terminus ad quem. (See Mark L. Reed, Wordsworth, the Chronology of the Early Years; Harvard, 1967, p. 28.)

in his "elegies" and "lamentations," to lend a "voice" of their own to the occasion. The transaction here between man and nature is less "concrete" than in Incipient Madness, but it is also more specific. In the earlier passage, the grieving heart seeks "food," nourishment that is "dear to the soul," to be sure, but which is also described as a physical thing, as milk for "a sucking babe." There, the nourishment was of a general kind; it was not confined specifically to language.

Within the sphere of language, the lines from The Ruined Cottage offer an analysis par excellence of the "poetic fallacy." Wordsworth, that is, draws a distinction in the strongest possible terms between animate and language-bearing figures ("the Poets"), and the non-verbal, inanimate things of nature, the "senseless rocks" (senseless meaning both "insensitive," or "unresponsive," and "mindless," lacking the requisite intelligence to be articulate). The poets, then, like the figure in Incipient Madness, are turning to objects in nature and "calling upon" them to yield the one thing they cannot yield, the "language" of grief, the "lamentation."

However--and here the divergence from Incipient Madness is most striking--Wordsworth does not conceive of the "poetic fallacy" as an error. If we ask ourselves whether the poets know that the "hills" and "streams" can't mourn, that the "rocks" are actually "senseless," we will not get an answer from this passage. The phrase

"call upon to mourn" is epistemologically neutral; it signals a rhetorical gesture, a poetic intention. It is impossible to determine, on the basis of rhetorical gesture alone, whether the poet "knows" that the hills and streams won't answer. By confining the "poetic fallacy" to the rhetorical sphere, Wordsworth suspends it as a topic of veridical judgment.

He does grant it a value, moreover--be it error or otherwise--as a poetic gesture. The "invocation" is not an "idle" one, because it does indeed give rise to poetry of a certain kind: the poets "speak/ . . . with a voice/ Obedient to the strong creative power/Of human passion." The poetry may or may not be "mistaken," but it has in either event been "created," it exists where there was no poetry before. The creation of poetry, in this scheme of values, takes precedence over the truthfulness of the utterance. It is in this sense that the "invocations" are not "idle."

We should notice, however, that in this passage, as in the lines from Incipient Madness, Wordsworth distinguishes between "passion," or "instinct," on the one hand, and "meditation" on the other. In the Incipient Madness fragment, this distinction is formulated in terms of a delusion and its subsequent clarification. There is an opposition between "blind" instinct and "enlightened" meditation. In the lines from The Ruined Cottage, however, the epistemological valorization is

suspended, and we have, instead, two alternative modes of poetry: one is the poetry of "human passion," in which the "poetic fallacy" occurs; while the other is the poetry of "sympathies more tranquil," that "steal upon the meditative mind/And grow with thought." This poetry does not originate in passion, nor does it find its expression there: it begins in "meditation," which is also the medium in which it "grows."

This other language, as we have said, is an alternative poetic mode, neither more or less truthful than the poetry of "passion," since truth is not at issue in either case. The two modes, that is, are equal in the poet's esteem, they are "kindred," of "kindred birth." As a kindred birth, as an alternate mode, it is, furthermore, just as "original" as the language of passion. Which is to say that the "meditative" poetry does not derive from the passionate kind, a point which brings us to another striking difference between the Incipient Madness fragment and The Ruined Cottage lines. In the former, the "pathetic fallacy" participates in a temporal scheme or sequence: first, there is the instinct, and afterwards, at some later point, there follows the meditation. (This is signalled, as we said above, by the shift from the past tense, used to "describe" the event, to the present tense, used to "analyze" the event.) This is a diachronic sequence of demystification, in which the temporality is structurally inherent in the epistemo-

logy. We take it for granted, in other words, that truth will follow falsehood, just as the maturity of adulthood follows the naivete of adolescence or youth. In The Ruined Cottage passage, this scheme is discarded in all its aspects: just as there is no definite "falsehood" in passion, so too there is no superior "originality" in passion, no temporal priority of passion over meditation, and no genetic linkage between the two. They are, "perhaps," of "kindred birth," but also, on the other hand, perhaps not. Perhaps, that is, the "birth" of the other poetry springs from an altogether different source: Wordsworth doesn't answer the point directly; he simply distinguishes between the two poetries by telling us that they do not belong to a single genealogical scheme. The two poetries may be cousins, or they may be brothers and sisters. But the one is not the parent of the other.

Which is to say that there exists a kind of poetry that has no connection whatever with the "poetic fallacy." It has an alien origin and it follows alien rules. It neither precedes, nor follows, nor governs, nor obeys the poetry of "passion."

What kind of poetry might this be? In this immediate context, it is called a poetry of "meditation," "tranquillity," and "thought." But that doesn't take us very far. It doesn't tell us, for example, how it treats the objects of "nature"--except, of course, that they are

not treated as they are in that "other," that "passionate," poetry. Not, in other words, by means of the "pathetic fallacy."

It would be tempting, at this point, to pursue the question by delving further into The Ruined Cottage, composed, we can safely assume, in the other kind of language. We will not, however, yield to this temptation, because, at this point, it would be premature, since we do not yet have a fully developed sense of its opposite, of the poetry of passion. It is by first exploring the poetry of "passion" that we can best prepare to analyze the poetry of meditation.

Where shall we find the poetry of passion? It is a safe guess, of course, that the lines from The Ruined Cottage are, to some extent, a form of self-criticism, a retrospective glance at Wordsworth's own poetic practice. The kind of poetry he refers to belongs to a specific genre, the pastoral elegy, and, although he did not himself compose such an elegy, he did compose a pastiche of Lycidas and also tried his hand at translating Moschus' Lament for Bion.[5] But the poetry of "passion" is not confined to a single genre, although that genre may be more suited to it than any other. The poetry of "passion" is to be found wherever the "pathetic fallacy" occurs, wherever, that is, the poet confers human attributes on inanimate objects, be it by invocation,

[5] P. W. I, pp. 264,286.

description, or any other rhetorical mode. We can find this poetry throughout the work that Wordsworth calls his "juvenilia." We can find it, for instance, in the Descriptive Sketches. A rapid glance at the poem will be sufficient to indicate what the "poetry of meditation," the poetry of The Ruined Cottage and its contemporary work, is not.

A number of astute critics, from Coleridge, through Emile Legouis, down to Geoffrey Hartman in our own day, have agreed on one thing about Descriptive Sketches. It is a difficult, almost an impossible, poem to read. Coleridge puts the matter this way:

> The language was not only peculiar and strong, but at times knotty and contorted, as by its own impatient strength; while the novelty and struggling crowd of images acting in conjunction with the difficulties of the style demanded always a greater closeness of attention than poetry (at all events than descriptive poetry) has a right to claim. It not seldom therefore justified the complaint of obscurity.[6]
> (emphasis added)

We emphasize the phrase "at all events than descriptive poetry," because it points us in a direction which may reveal why, indeed, the poem is so obscure. It may not,

[6] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, London, 1965 (Everyman editions), p. 46.

that is, be a "descriptive poem" at all.

On a more technical level, Legouis and Marjorie Barstow Greenbie have definitively analyzed what Coleridge calls "the difficulties of the style." These consist, in brief, of an esoteric vocabulary, the frequently forced use of onomatopoeia, and, above all, an utterly tortured syntax featuring imitation ablative absolutes, suppression of the article, suppression of auxiliaries, and various kinds of inversions. The inversions especially verge on perversity, as thus, "--Of cloudless suns no more ye frost-built spires/Refract in rainbow hues the restless fires!" (390-391), in which, as Mrs. Greenbie remarks, "nouns in oblique cases" (i.e. "of cloudless suns," or "in rainbow hues") are "placed before those which govern them" (i.e. "spires" and "fires"), "a construction which Wordsworth manages with special awkwardness."[7] Another form of inversion, especially contorted, is the "violent displacement of the direct complement which is too short for the purpose, to make it precede the verb," as thus: "Th' unwearied sweep of wood thy cliffs that scales" (l. 122), or thus, "loose-hanging rocks the Day's blest eye that hide . . ." (l. 255).

What is the aim of this "language . . . knotty and contorted," as Coleridge called it? Does it serve a rhetorical end? Mrs. Greenbie suggests that it does. She

[7] Marjorie Barstow Greenbie, Wordsworth's Theory of Poetic Diction, New Haven, 1917, pp. 86-87.

attributes it to "the tendency of (Wordsworth's) ideas to become involved with intense emotional and imaginative associations, which his readers do not always share."[8] Readers like Coleridge, for example, bring certain expectations to "descriptive poems," and they are bound to be somewhat bemused by the "intense emotional associations" that they encounter in Descriptive Sketches.

What are these "emotional associations"? Mrs. Greenbie is somewhat reticent on the subject, but she brings us close to the source when she talks about Wordsworth's handling of poetic figures, especially personification: "His personifications are distinguished from similar figures in most contemporary verse by the fact that he gives abstractions and inanimate things the personalities of the lower animals, rather than of divine beings. Peace is a redbreast; Hope is a lark; Reason may be a dog."[9]

It might be more accurate to say that Wordsworth is less interested in personifying abstractions, than in humanizing natural objects. One of Mrs. Greenbie's favorite passages seems to support this shift in emphasis; it describes the moon as seen by the "Grison gypsey" (1. 188), also known as the female Vagrant:

[8] Ibid., p. 100.

[9] Ibid., p. 103.

> --Heavy, and dull, and cloudy is the night
> No star supplies the comfort of its light,
> Glimmer the dim-lit Alps, dilated, round,
> And one sole light shifts in the vale profound;
> While, opposite, the waning moon hangs still
> And red, above her melancholy hill.
> By the deep quiet gloom appall'd, she sighs,
> Stoops her sick head, and shuts her weary eyes.
> (emphasis added)
>
> (215-222)

The passage begins at a matter-of-fact level of diction. The only hint of personification in the first five lines is the potential "comfort" of the "star," but that star is kept in the neuter gender. Not so the moon, which is, commonly enough, a "she," by means of what Mrs. Greenbie calls the "pale Cynthia" motif. But what are we to make of the last two lines, here underscored? Mrs. Greenbie reads them this way:

> "(Wordsworth) is not content to speak vaguely of 'pale Cynthia.' When the image of the pale lady is suggested to his mind, it immediately becomes a separate and living entity. For example, he writes of the moon:
>
> > By the deep quiet gloom appall'd, she sighs,
> > Stoops her sick head, and shuts her weary eyes.
>
> Though the propriety of the image may certainly be questioned, there is no doubt that 'pale Cynthia' is a distinct person in the poet's imagination.[10]

No doubt at all that those lines refer to a distinct person; and, given the general rhetorical qualities of the

[10] Ibid.

poem, Mrs. Greenbie is entirely correct when she assumes that the "person" in question is the (personified) moon. But they may also refer to the "female Vagrant" who watches the moon: the "she" in this passage can go either way; it is hopelessly ambiguous, given the extent to which Wordsworth has "humanized" the moon. Nor does he resolve the ambiguity in the subsequent lines: it is as if all of nature were a "pale lady." The confusion can become quite hilarious:

> Behind her hill the Moon, all crimson, rides,
> And his red eyes the slinking water hides;
> Then all is hushed; the bushes rustle near,
> And with strange tinglings sings her fainting ear.
> --Vex'd by the darkness, from the piny gulf
> Ascending, nearer howls the famish'd wolf,
> While thro' the stillness scatters wild dismay,
> Her babe's small cry, that leads him to his prey.
>
> (235-242)

Whose "hill"? Whose "fainting ear"? Perhaps the Vagrant's, perhaps the Moon's. But then again, whose "babe"? Reading the passage as Mrs. Greenbie does, we may easily overlook the Vagrant; but when "Cynthia" produces a "babe" to feed a "famish'd wolf" we are forced to seek out a second, somewhat more earthbound, mother.

It is everywhere, this "humanizing" pathos: Legouis remarks that "these constantly recurring personifications extend even to the grammar. . . . The genitive case, commonly used only in reference to living beings, is

curiously applied to words of every sort"[11] (some random instances: "the mountain forest's brow," l. 225; "the Larch's giant boughs," l. 229; "the night's repose," l. 230). In effect, "humanity" is everywhere, and nature, in its non-human aspect, is nowhere to be found.

Let us drive the point home with a closing example, in which the properties of nature are so deployed, rhetorically speaking, as to emphasize the suffering of humanity:

> --Alas! in every clime a flying ray
> Is all we have to chear our wintry way
> Condemn'd, in mists and tempests ever rife,
> To pant slow up the endless Alp of life.
> "Here," cried a swain, whose venerable head
> Bloom'd with the snow-drops of Man's narrow bed,
> Last night, while by his dying fire, as clos'd
> The day, in luxury my limbs repos'd,
> "Here Penury oft from misery's mount will guide
> Ev'n to the summer door his icy tide,
> And here the avalanche of Death destroy
> The little cottage of domestic Joy. . . ."
>
> (590-601)

This is, strictly speaking, the telling of an actual event that took place between real people, a conversation between poet and swain, "last night," next to a "dying fire." But there the reality ends, losing itself in a moral perspective, though this happens in an oddly real, or mimetic fashion--obsessively so, and condensed to the point of unintelligibility. And this condensation is

[11] Cited in Greenbie, ibid., p. 101.

situated in a strange tension underlying the variety of tropes: there are metaphors ("our wintry way," a man's head "blooming with snowdrops") and there are personifications ("Penury," "Death," "Joy"). But these are, if one may say so, pseudo-metaphors and pseudo-personifications. What they really seem to be are metonymies, masquerading as metaphors and personifications: "Death" is an "avalanche," "Penury" a "flood," "Joy" is a "little cottage," the "way," "wintry," and the "hair," "snowdrops," because, after all, this "conversation" took place in the "Alps," and the "morals" drawn are, we must assume, contiguous to the scene in which the poet draws them. And therefore, when we "pant slow up the endless Alp of life," we are to understand that "life" is not just a toil, it is a toil up an Alp; but that "Alp" is not to be found in the Alps, not really, because Alps are not "endless," Alps can really be climbed. This is a "moral Alp," Alpine only because the moral is drawn in the Alps. It would be, in other words, an "endless Andes" in the Andes, and an "endless Sierra" in the Sierras. The game is fun to play, though "its propriety . . . may certainly be questioned," as Mrs. Greenbie would have us understand.

Nature disappears, which is to say that only its likeness to human nature appears in the poem. This is indeed a "poetic fallacy," nature echoing our age, our sex, our fears, our loves, our voice. And it has a

"passionate" source, the intersubjective desire for universal human happiness. Mary Moorman has described its animating commitment in the following words:

> Descriptive Sketches in fact reflects pretty faithfully the eschatology of the children of the Revolution--their faith in man's nature set free from oppression; their readiness to face war on behalf of their ideals; their hope of the swift advent of a new golden age.[12]

A poem, finally, of social protest, disguised--energetically disguised--as a "descriptive poem," to the bewilderment of Coleridge and subsequent readers. It belongs, in fact, to a group of texts which include "The letter to the Bishop of Llandaff," the translation from Juvenal, Salisbury Plain, and The Borderers. These are "passionate" poems: when nature returns to Wordsworth, as it does in The Ruined Cottage, it does so in the form of a very different poetry, a poetry of reflection in which, on reflection, nature really is "different," is not absorbed in moral metonymies and impassioned personifications.

[12] Mary Moorman, William Wordsworth, A Biography; Oxford, 1965; Volume I, p. 199.

III

We now turn to a consideration of the "other" poetry, the poetry "perhaps of kindred birth" to the language of human passion. But before examining a specific instance of the kind, we would do well to examine a group of statements by Wordsworth that constitute a poetics of "meditative" language. Between the composition of the Incipient Madness fragment in mid-1797 at Racedown, and the composition of the passage from The Ruined Cottage, in mid-1798 or in early 1799, Wordsworth tried to think through the problem of a new and different language. Tintern Abbey and the first book of The Excursion (including The Ruined Cottage and "The Pedlar") may be considered the most developed fruits of this investigation. As a way of approaching these texts, we will glance at a cluster of blank verse passages which serve as their theoretical threshold.

The four fragments that concern us here were apparently written at Alfoxden during the early months of 1798. In their published form, they are dispersed throughout The Prelude and The Excursion; in their raw state, they first appear in a pair of notebooks, one called "The Alfoxden Notebook," the other known as "Ms. Verse 18a," after its catalogue number in the Wordsworth library at

Grasmere. Although the fragments can be dated within four months or so of each other, there is no way to establish the order of their composition. In a sense they have no order; they should be regarded instead as a complex, a constellation of random thoughts on a single problem.

Let us begin with a fragment from the Alfoxden Notebook, which picks up a thread from The Ruined Cottage lines on the "pathetic fallacy":

> Why is it we feel
> So little for each other, but for this
> That we with nature have no sympathy,
> Or with such things as have no power to hold
> Articulate language?
> And never for each other shall we feel
> As we may feel, till we have sympathy
> With nature in her forms inanimate,
> With objects such as have no power to hold
> Articulate language. In all forms of things
> There is a mind.[1]

The thread, of course, is the word "sympathy." In The Ruined Cottage lines, Wordsworth introduces the concept of the "other" poetry in terms of the "sympathies" it can express,

> More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,
> That steal upon the meditative mind,
> And grow with thought. . . .[2]

[1] P. W. V, p. 340.

[2] Jonathan Wordsworth, op. cit.

"Sympathy," in the context of grief, suggests an intersubjective sympathy, the fellow-feeling of one human subject for another, as for example, of the Pedlar, who speaks these lines, for the dead Margaret. This intersubjective dimension provides the opening theme of the notebook entry ("Why is it we feel/So little <u>for each other</u>, but for this/That we with nature have no sympathy . . .?"). Taken by itself, this passage points to a quite unmistakable analogy between human subjects and natural things; both, it seems, can be related to as if they were human, by means of the sympathetic imagination. If anything, nature in this passage seems even more human than humanity; it would seem that sympathy with the intersubjective dimension of nature precedes, and serves as the condition for, sympathy with actual human beings:

> And never for each other shall we feel
> As we may feel, till we have sympathy
> With nature. . . .

The formulation seems in no way to differ from Coleridge's famous "He liveth best who loveth best/All things both great and small." And, read within the perspective of this intersubjective dimension, the notebook passage would hardly appear to differ, in any substantive sense, from the guiding principle of the "pathetic fallacy."

Yet it does differ, because it takes a sudden, unexpected leap out of the intersubjective dimension.

Not obviously, but decisively nonetheless:

> That we with nature have no sympathy,
> Or with such things as have no power to hold
> Articulate language?

Here the theme of language intrudes in a rather unexpected way: nature lacks "articulate language." It cannot speak to people as people speak to themselves. It is because nature is inarticulate and non-verbal that we fail to extend it our intersubjective sympathy; and, so failing, we fail as well to sympathize with each other.

Is this state of affairs irreversible? Is "articulate language" the essential medium of "sympathy"? Is language strictly a mode of communication, and is communication, or sympathy, limited to verbal interchange? If it were, then sympathy with nature and, by extension, with our fellow man would be impossible. But of course it isn't impossible, it is merely rare or unusual. This state of affairs could change, or so Wordsworth seems to imply:

> And never for each other <u>shall</u> we feel
> As we <u>may</u> feel, <u>till</u> we have sympathy
> With nature in her forms inanimate. . . .
> (emphasis added)

The sentence is a conditional one, but of the sort known to grammarians as a practical condition, rather than contrary-to-fact. Something <u>can</u> actually take place that would enlarge the sphere of sympathy.

What kind of change does Wordsworth have in mind? Not, it seems, a change in nature itself: there we confront "objects such as have no power to hold/Articulate language." Nature remains dumb; man alone can effect the necessary change.

But how? How can man, the creature of "articulate language," "have sympathy with nature"? The obvious answer would be to bypass language altogether, to give up language and to simply commune, in some manner that is not mediated by linguistic forms, with the dimension in nature to which the sympathetic imagination has access, i.e. the "human" in nature that is not verbal.

To say that nature has a human dimension that is not verbal is, of course, to remain within the enclosure of the "pathetic fallacy": the communication is mute but human, for nature is a subject: "In all forms of things/ There is a mind." This mind is human and sympathetic, a subject we can reach out to.

This, as we say, is at least the obvious answer. But it is not the only answer: the passage can be read another way. Another kind of change is possible.

To some extent it must be read another way, for Wordsworth in fact rules out an unmediated communication: he does not say "till we have sympathy/With nature . . . ," but rather "till we have sympathy/With nature in her forms inanimate." Let the emphasis fall on the preposition "in," and the whole direction of the passage changes. This is not an accident. The closing lines confirm it;

we should re-read them with this intonation in mind:

> . . . till we have sympathy
> With nature in her forms inanimate,
> With objects such as have no power to hold
> Articulate language. In all forms of things
> There is a mind.

"With nature," yes: but then, anaphoristically, "with objects." These objects are forms, "forms inanimate," as Wordsworth calls them. "Inanimate," but not mindless: "In all forms"--there it is that the transaction must develop, the act of sympathy--"In all forms of things/ There is a mind." Not "in all things," but "in all forms of things": the form of a thing, the "form inanimate," and not the thing itself, is where the mind is to be found.

We are twice removed from an unmediated contact with the "mind" of nature; we see it, and we "sympathize with it," in the "forms" (first remove) of its "things" (second remove). We communicate with the property of a property, not with the proprietor himself.

How can we "sympathize" with the property of a property? In the first place, by suspending a passion for the more direct routes of sympathy that pass from man to man. As, for instance, in speech: when I speak to someone who understands my language, he seizes my language instantaneously, he catches my words and repeats them immediately to himself, he hears them exactly as I

hear them. The process is simultaneous, direct, and uniquely transparent. It is also, if we read Wordsworth correctly, a bit too easy to be fully effective, at least if we limit our transactions to our fellow man. "We feel so little for each other" because we have no sympathy (no patience, no impulse) to understand, in the face of obstacles, "such things as have no power to hold/Articulate language."

If we can understand these things, then they must, somehow, convey to us a meaning of some kind or other. Which is to say something that Wordsworth doesn't quite say in this fragment--that there are other kinds of "language" besides "articulate language." The latter phrase to be sure, seems tautological, and indeed its reverse, a language that is not articulate, may strike us as a philosophical impossibility, certainly impossible if we stay within the etymological sense of "articulation" (latin articulare, "to utter distinctly"). For whoever heard of a language that wasn't uttered distinctly? What kind of language could it be? Wordsworth seems to be trying to have it both ways--to pull himself out of a view of nature saturated with human attributes, but to grant nature the one attribute that is uniquely human, the property of language, to the extent that understanding is defined as a mediated, formal experience.

He persists. The notion reappears in another fragment, one which will eventually turn up in The Excursion.

It begins

> Not useless do I deem
> These quiet sympathies with things that hold
> An inarticulate language, for the man
> Once taught to love such objects as excite
> No morbid passions, no disquietude,
> No vengeance and no hatred, needs must feel
> The joy of that pure principle of love
> So deeply that, unsatisfied with aught
> Less pure and exquisite, he cannot chuse
> But seek for objects of a kindred love
> In fellow-natures, and a kindred joy.[3]

There is, in this extraordinary passage, the sense of an idea moving towards its full maturity. It expands and sharpens the previous fragment. It begins with a turn of phrase that seems familiar enough, and yet resides on the far shore of a conceptual gulf. We read in the earlier passage about "things as have no power to hold/ Articulate language." This is a privative construction: the "things" lack something; they lack the "power to hold" something, to hold a language. In the new fragment, this is altered into its positive and mysterious opposite, no longer a feeble lack but a powerful force. We read of "things that hold/An inarticulate language." They have it; it is theirs, their own, and not the absence of something else's "own." We may never know what an "inarticulate language" is, may never escape the cage of our own logic, of our own etymology; but Wordsworth pre-

[3] Ibid., p. 269.

sumes that such a language exists, and in a manner different from our own peculiar "property."

Nor does he merely assert that such a language exists: he proceeds, by means of negative formulation, by means of telling us what "inarticulate language" is not, to suggest what indeed it might be. First, these "objects" are not human: they are "such objects as excite/No morbid passions, no disquietude,/No vengeance and no hatred." They don't excite these passions because they don't have them, not, at least, in the way that humans do. Which is to say that passions like fear, grief or hatred are confined to human relations; if we see another person suffer, or inflict suffering, that spectacle "excites" passions of a similar kind in us. The "objects" that excite those passions are not physical objects, but other human beings--the female vagrant in Descriptive Sketches, the aging swain in the Alpine cabin. Beings that hold "articulate language" also excite "morbid passions;" the reverse is true for "objects" that hold "inarticulate language."

Which exposes the true origin of the "pathetic fallacy" Returning briefly to our touchstone from The Ruined Cottage:

> The Poets, in their elegies and songs,
> Lamenting the departed, call the groves,
> They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,
> And senseless rocks. . . .
> (emphasis added)

The objects "exciting" the Poets are not the groves, the hills and streams; their objects are the "departed"; these excite the "lament," the morbid passion, the disquietude. The poets, thus excited, "call upon" nature to join them in their own "articulate language," their mournful elegies. They call upon nature to desert the sphere of inarticulate language.

Wordsworth has made a discovery. How does he proceed to handle it? The "quiet sympathy" with nature is not an intersubjective transaction; it is rather a mode of attentiveness. "Inarticulate language" is a mystery, and it has to be learned like a foreign tongue. One has to be "taught to love such objects." To pass out of the realm of "articulate language" and into the realm of the "inarticulate language" is to enter an apprenticeship, a process of learning, which, once achieved, will mediate our subsequent relationship to "articulate language." Those who are adept in "these quiet sympathies with things"

> . . . cannot chuse
> But seek for objects of a kindred love
> In fellow natures, and a kindred joy.

No longer excited by "objects" that torment him--the pathos of his fellow man--the initiate seeks in his

fellow man those objects that resemble closest the "things that hold/An articulate language." He seeks out the quiet, the "inarticulate" man: the "Old Man Travelling" or the "Discharged Soldier."

But we digress: Wordsworth has much to say, here as elsewhere, about studying the "inarticulate language." A brief quotation from this fragment will indicate the potential richness of the theme:

> Nor shall we meet an object but may read
> Some sweet and tender lesson to our minds
> Of human suffering or of human joy.
> All things shall speak of man, and we shall read
> Our duties in all forms. . . .[4]

We are not concerned, at this point, with the content of the lessons learned from nature, which, in this context, are the reverse of the "pathetic fallacy," and engage us in finding the "natural" in man as opposed to the "human" in nature. Rather, we must focus on the way in which the lesson is learned. Nature is learned through its language. We "<u>read</u> objects;" "things speak;" we "<u>read</u>/Our duties in all forms."

This may not seem like a particularly novel or striking point: it was a commonplace of Medieval and Rennaissance thought to look upon nature as the divine Book of the Creatures. God wrote it, and man read it.

[4] Ibid., p. 270.

But what kind of book was that? Let us say, for the sake of argument, that it was a lexicon, a dictionary. As with new words, so with new creatures: you add the discovery to the lexicon, whose totality is susceptible to infinite addition, and whose entries are classified, say, as animal, vegetable, or mineral. Let us further suppose that the Book of the Creatures was a dictionary with an author, like Johnson's, like Webster's. (We will have an opportunity to treat the issue of "the Book of the Creatures," here introduced rather whimsically, is a more concrete fashion later on.)

Wordsworth's is a book with a different organization; it is not a dictionary, though the passage quoted above may at least suggest that it serves as a moral thesaurus of sorts, in which we "read/Our duties in all forms." To get the true novelty of his conception, we should turn to two other fragments, both frequently cited as evidence of Wordsworth's mysticism or pantheism. The first is brief, and signals the direction to take:

> Of unknown modes of being which in earth,
> Or in the heavens, or in the heavens and earth
> Exist by mighty combinations, bound
> Together by a link, and with a soul
> Which makes all one.[5]

Again we encounter the inarticulate language, here conceived as the "unknown modes of being." Those "modes of

[5] P. W. V, pp. 340-341.

being" are there, they exist. But they do not speak to us, they cannot tell us "how" they are, or "what" they are. They have no names, or they cannot confer their own names upon themselves--not, at least, in a language we understand. The abstract diction of the fragment may lead us to think of those "unknown modes of being" as invisible, as ghosts, as pure spirits. But what if they were "trees"? A "tree" is unknown to us, at least in its own mode of being. We certainly do not know what it calls itself, if, indeed, the "inarticulate language" has a nomenclature. Nor can a tree give us its perspective on life--such a fruitful interchange is precluded by the language barrier.

What is obvious to Wordsworth, however, is that the unknown modes "Exist by mighty combinations, bound/Together by a link, and with a soul/Which makes all one." It is these "combinations" that can be seen and heard, as Wordsworth declares, and which make up his "book." Unlike the lexicon, his book of nature does not classify its objects in a taxonomic order, and it is not to be enlarged by addition. Those creatures interact across their categorical limits ("on earth/Or in the heavens"); they comprise a totality, bounded by "a soul/Which makes all one"; and the structure of their interaction and their totality is homogeneous, "bound/Together by a link."

As a totalized structure of interacting components, this "book" bears a strong resemblance to a literary text.

Another fragment pursues the point:

> There is an active principle alive
> In all things, in all natures, in the flowers
> And in the trees, in every pebbly stone
> That paves the brooks, the stationary rocks,
> The moving waters, and the invisible air.
> All beings have their properties which spread
> Beyond themselves, a power by which they make
> Some other being conscious of their life,
> Spirit that knows no insulated spot,
> No chasm, no solitude; from link to link
> It circulates, the Soul of all the worlds.[6]

These lines build on the previous fragment, with the "unknown modes of being" taking their names from the "articulate language" ("flowers," "trees," "brooks," "rocks," "waters," and "air"). "All" these beings form a totalized structure of interacting components.

But wherein lies the textuality of the structure? This is signalled by those "properties which spread/Beyond themselves," that "power by which they make/Some other being conscious of their life. . . ." Words in a poem have "properties which spread beyond themselves": among them are syntactic properties, semantic properties, and acoustical properties. (A rhyming sound "spreads beyond itself"; so do assonance, alliteration, and all the other phonological conventions.) We may call such relationships "intentional," not in the sense of that word that designates a psychological process, but in the sense, derived from phenomenology, which holds that the meaning of a

[6] P. W. V, pp. 286-287.

thing (or word) is in relation to something beyond it, something other. Every object "intends" another object, it "spreads beyond itself," as happens, for example, in the verbal elements that comprise a poem.

Are we being perverse? Are we pushing our analogy between nature and text too far? Isn't there one point at least where the connection breaks down? Specifically, how can we say that the "beings" of a text--a word or phrase--"have a power by which they make/Some other being conscious of their life. . . ."? Intra-textually? How can a phrase in a text make another phrase "conscious of its life"? How can a text be conscious?

This question can only be answered if we are willing to grant a text the same consciousness that Wordsworth grants to nature. Caught as we are--inevitably--in the confines of a subject/object epistemology, where consciousness is reserved for human subjectivity alone, the thought that objects--in nature or in texts--may be conscious, seems absurd. But it is precisely such a perspective that is being advanced in this fragment. Nor is Wordsworth writing here in a mystical fashion: let us not forget that he is writing about language--"inarticulate language"--and more specifically about the language of a text, of nature as a readable structure.

The point is hard to grasp; we can best explain what it means for a text to be conscious, for one of its parts to be conscious of another, by quoting a few sentences

from a modern-day literary critic which serve as a fitting commentary for the lines from Wordsworth:

> (We call) "literary," in the full sense of the term, any text that implicitly or explicitly signifies its own rhetorical mode. . . . It can do so by declarative statement or by poetic inference. "To account for" or "to signify," in the sentence above, does not designate a subjective process: it follows from the rhetorical nature of literary language that the cognitive function resides in the language and not in the subject.[7]

"The cognitive function resides in the language and not in the subject," in the language, that is, of "any text that . . . signifies its own rhetorical mode," by exhibiting, say, the sort of reflective, intra-textual consistency by which one word "enlightens" another; or one stanza clarifies another; or a sestet "reflects upon" an octave, or the end of a story illuminates the riddle of its beginning. This sort of thing happens in texts; it also happens (according to Wordsworth) in nature, where "some beings make another being conscious of their life."

Nature is a text. We already knew this, of course; we saw it in an earlier passage, in which Wordsworth beheld that "cognitive function" with his own eyes:

[7] Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight, Oxford, 1971; pp. 136-137.

--Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion.

IV

Having crossed a threshold, we find ourselves in a labyrinth, the labyrinth of an analogy between nature and human life, where both participate in a common rhetorical function. Wordsworth, upon crossing the same threshold, surrendered to the labyrinth gladly:

> Along the mazes of this song to go
> As inward motions of the wandering thought
> Lead me, or outward circumstance impels.
> Thus do I urge a never-ending way
> Year after year, with many a sleep between,
> Through joy and sorrow; if my lot be joy
> More joyful if it be with sorrow soothed.[1]

We will not analyze this fragment, but will proceed instead to analyze another fragment, whose own analysis of the common rhetorical function belongs to that rhetorical mode known as close reading:

> In storm and tempest and beneath the beam
> Of quiet moons [ ] and there
> Whate'er there is of power in sound
> To breathe an elevated mood, by form
> Or image unprofaned; there would he stand
> Beneath some rock. listening to sounds that are
> The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
> Or make their dim abode in distant winds.
> Thence did he drink the visionary power.

[1] P. W. V, p. 347.

I deem not profitless these fleeting moods
Of shadowy exaltation: not for this,
That they are kindred to our purer mind
And intellectual life; but that the soul
Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
Of possible sublimity, at which
With growing faculties she doth aspire,
With faculties still growing, feeling still
That whatsoever point they gain, there still
Is something to pursue. But from these haunts
Of lonesome nature he had skill to draw
A better and less transitory power,
An influence more habitual. To his mind
The mountain's outline and its steady form
Gave simple grandeur, and its presence shaped
The measure and the prospect of his soul
To majesty; such virtue had the forms
Perennial of the ancient hills; nor less
The changeful language of their countenance
Gave movement to his thoughts, and multitude,
With order and relation.[2]

In this fragment, Wordsworth defines the relationship of man and nature in acoustical and visual terms. We see this, first of all, in the general organization of the passage: the first twenty lines explore the acoustical properties of nature, "the power of sound," and the remaining eleven explore its "visual" properties. To limit one's "experience" of nature to sight and sound, the principal faculties by means of which language is exchanged, does not of itself, to be sure, make that experience linguistic. Certainly not. Yet Wordsworth urges us along this line: he calls the sounds the "ghostly language of the ancient earth," and the sights "the changeful language of its countenance." Language-in-nature

[2] Jonathan Wordsworth, op. cit., pp. 172-173.

is the fragment's theme.

There is a second argument, compelling but indirect, for reading the passage in this perspective: nowhere, in these lines, do we find an appeal to the other faculties of sensation--neither to smell, nor to taste, nor, more importantly, to the sense of touch. The absence of these sensations, on the level of the poetic figure, argues against a reading of the fragment that is not linguistic, at least in a general sense.

Let us see why this is so, in terms of the faculty of touch. By means of touch, we explore the tactile dimensions of an object, its texture, its shape, and also--as, say, in the case of water--the dimensions of surface and depth. Touch is the most "plastic" sense among the range of our perceptual faculties. Moreover, touch can also serve as a norm for the other senses, such as the sense of sight. For example, in the famous lines by John Keats,

> A casement high and triple-arched there was,
> All garlanded with carven imag'ries
> Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot grass
> And diamonded with panes of quaint device . . .[3]

the eye acts as if it were a hand. Keats is a master at employing visual figures that exploit the tactile properties

[3] John Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes," 11. 208-211; in The Poems of John Keats, ed. Miriam Allott; London, 1970; pp. 466-467.

of things, especially in his more erotic moments, and this is as good a point as any on which to distinguish his work from Wordsworth's. For Wordsworth's poetry, especially his nature poetry, is almost never erotic and rarely in any way tactile. He rarely resorts to images of touch in their own right; still less does he subordinate the sensations of sight or sound to the tactile model. Lines like "To his mind/The mountain's outline and its steady form/Gave simple grandeur . . ." direct our attention to a kind of blank surface without depth, the outline of the mountain being traced against this surface. We do not reach out with our eye to "touch" the mountain, as we do with the "carven imag'ries" on Keats's casement. Rather, we read it like words on a page. In this sense, Wordsworth's experience of nature is especially close to the experience of language.

This point should be taken a step further, in the sphere of rhetoric. By limiting the eye to the play of traces on a surface, Wordsworth largely foregoes the material resources of metaphor and synecdoche, figures through which so many critics have tried to read him. In synecdoche, for instance, where the part is substituted for the whole, we find a rhetorical opportunity for exploiting the spatial and plastic properties of a visual object, specifically, the properties of surface and depth. Here, the surface can serve as the outward face or visible part of a concealed inner dimension; being

continuous (within the definition of a synecdoche) with that inner depth, the surface is materially enriched by the very element it conceals.[4]

But synecdoches of this sort almost never occur in Wordsworth. Instead, the visible is disclosed as a totally revealed trace, which has no depth in the physical sense, but does have the pluri-dimensional resources of an entity within a relational system. As Wordsworth himself writes:

> The sun is fixed,
> And the infinite magnificence of heaven
> Fixed, within reach of every human eye;
> The sleepless ocean murmurs for all ears;
> The vernal field infuses fresh delight
> Into all hearts. Throughout the world of sense
> Even as an object is laid open to the view
> Without reserve or veil.
> (emphasis added)
>
> (Excursion IX, 209-217)[5]

"Without reserve or veil." To sacrifice the "veil," to forego the "reserved object"--the spatial depth of things as constituted in a language of symbols, synecdoches and metaphors--is the starting-point, and the crucial point of reference, for Wordsworth's whole poetic practice, above all where the theme of nature is concerned. But this

[4] These observations are inspired by a theoretical discussion of metaphor by Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in Interpretation: Theory and Practice, ed. Charles Singleton (Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), pp. 173-191.

[5] P. W. V, p. 293.

sacrifice most emphatically yields an alternative: it enables Wordsworth to treat the natural object as a sign in a system of signs, in a language. What the object loses in material texture, it gains in the multi-valence of a relational order.

The status of the natural object as a sign brings us back to the passage beginning "In storm and tempest," where the theme, as we noted earlier, is the language of nature. Several major issues stand out in Wordsworth's presentation. To begin with, he concentrates on the written as well as the spoken orders of language. Furthermore, the two orders stand on an equal footing: writing is not privileged over speech, and speech is not privileged over writing. Wordsworth is not committed to a "phonocentric" view of language, which conceives of the written word as a mere transcription of speech, a phonological simulacrum.[6] Writing has its own integrity, its own order. Our task at this point is to interpret the two modes, sound and trace, in terms of their differences and their similarities.

First the differences: Wordsworth appears to base his distinctions on the fundamental categories of time and space. Sound belongs exclusively to the order of time: it is "by form/Or image unprofaned" (4-5); in contrast to writing, it is a "transitory" power (22) which

[6] For a critique of the "phonocentric model," see Jacques Derrida, de la Grammatologie (Paris, 1967), pp. 42-108.

gives rise--and also exists in the form of--"fleeting moods" (4, 10). Also, in its affective aspect, it is "exalted" and "sublime" (11, 16). By contrast, the "mountain's outline" and its "form" are "steady" (24) and "perennial" (28). In their affective aspects, the mountains are of "influence more habitual" (23), and their "grandeur" is "simple" (25). These silent forms, in opposition to the "power of sound," seem static and perdurable, rather than "fleeting" and "exalted."

But Wordsworth's account is far more subtle than this. It is no exaggeration to say that sound participates in the properties of writing, and that writing participates in the properties of sound. For instance, the language of sound is "of the ancient earth" (7) and it "makes its abode in distant winds" (8). It is, in its own right, durable, or lasting, and it belongs to whatever space ("abode") is provided by those mysterious winds. The "sounds" that is, are constant like the lines, a position signalled, characteristically, by that hallmark of Wordsworth's style, the shift of a verb tense out of its contextual order ("there would he stand . . . listening to sounds that are . . .").

Conversely, writing is penetrated by the categorical properties of speech: the "language of (its) countenance" is "changeful" (29); though not specifically "sublime," the outline of the mountain does have a "simple grandeur" (25) which can "shape" the soul to "majesty" (27). Its

kinetic ("changeful") properties consign it, in some degree, to the category of time. And, by extension, to history: just as "sounds are the language of the ancient earth," so the outlines are the "forms/perennial of the ancient hills. . . ."

But if speech and writing are fundamentally similar in their categorical properties, do they not at least differ radically in their subjective impact on the beholder? One offers "fleeting moods/Of shadowy exaltation" (10-11), the other provides "an influence more habitual" (23) which shapes "the measure and the prospect of (the) soul" (26). One is immediate, passionate and unreflective; the other is sober, reflective and proportioned. Sound is the medium of instantaneous language, sight of the language of duration. This, surely, is not open to challenge.

It is true that Wordsworth loads his case toward this particular distinction: the silent forms are, in fact, called "better and less transitory." But this is a phrasing of degree; are we entitled to interpret the differences as one of kind?

The problem centers on a passage that we have avoided up until now, the lines in which Wordsworth analyzes the immediate impact of the "fleeting mood" associated with the power of sound. His language is remarkably intricate. He tells us that he values these moods "for" something.

. . . not for this
That they are kindred to our purer mind
And intellectual life. . . .

Which is to say that they are indeed kindred to our purer mind--the mind, let us say, whose thoughts are characterized by "movement . . . and multitude/With order and relation" (31-32)--but that the kinship is not the source of value; rather, it is

. . . that the soul
Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
Of possible sublimity, at which
With growing faculties she doth aspire. . . .

Which is also to say the "fleeting moods" are not valued for their immediacy, their fleetingness, but for intricate temporal relations they occasion, movements of recollection (toward the past) and aspiration (towards the future), movements out of the "fleeting mood" and into a complex temporal system, made doubly complex by a symmetrical movement of awakening ("remembering how she felt") and repression ("but what she felt/Remembering not . . ."). This system, on closer examination, is not even exclusively temporal: for if the relative clause "at which/With growing faculties she doth aspire" refers to the "moods" in general, then the words "at which" would mean "on the occasion of those moods," and the emphasis would fall on the spontaneity of a "temporal"

eruption, of an inspiration. But if the "which" refers to "sublimity," the nearest antecedent, then the phrase "at which" would mean "towards the condition of sublimity," and the emphasis could fall on duration, on the time required to fulfill an ambition ("with growing faculties"), and on the deferral of immediate "exaltation." And that deferral and that aim are principles of an economy; they can only happen through a kind of spacing, an ordering in the mind of one's thoughts, granting them "movement . . . and multitude/With order and relation." Within the purest experience of time, a spatializing principle is at work--a principle that belongs to the other language, the language of "steady forms."[7]

For that matter, we find a mirror image of this synthesis in the written language. We read that the "presence" of the "mountain's outline" . . . "shaped/The measure and the prospect of his soul/to majesty. . . ." And what is a "prospect"? Is it merely a vantage point, or is it also an expectation, a possibility to which we "aspire," a thing that takes time to realize? And also "measurement": one must "temporize" one's "outlines," distribute them according to one's "prospects," "spatial" in character though these may be.

Finally--if there is any finality to the vertigo of this passage--no "presence" is ever merely present,

[7] This paragraph, and the one following, are inspired by Derrida, op. cit., pp. 96-108.

and this is due to the primordial character of language in both its written and spoken forms as a generator of differences. There is no pure presence in the temporal sense, no present moment, as we saw in our study of lines 11-17; and no presence in space either. No "presence" is merely present: the mountain isn't present, for example, but its "outline" is, its "steady form." And what is an outline or a form but a trace that marks the difference between two presences, or between a "presence" and its absence? When I see the outline of a mountain--the "presence" of the outline--I see the mark at which the mountain ceases to be itself, ceases to be present. It is "not all there," not the only "presence" there. Its absence, what it is not, is there also.

The fragment seems to make a distinction between two languages, and to valorize one over another in term of values that can be limited or consigned to each. But a closer analysis shows that these values are devalorized, made invalid, so to speak, by the categories of time and space according to which they are conceived. For the languages share their common categories. They are in this respect the same, and they command an equal position in the poet's regard.

Yet they also differ. To begin with, they differ in a purely sensory fashion. We cannot see sounds: they are "ghostly," they "inhabit distant winds." Nor can we hear lines, which move before us as a "countenance,"

a spectacle for the eye alone. This is the difference; Wordsworth, having found the primordial similarity of the two, is prepared to play them off against each other.

Before proceeding forward, let us double back on a brief detour through an earlier problem. We are now in a position to assert, somewhat less whimsically or tentatively than before, that Wordsworth's "language in nature" is not by any means a lexicon. And we are also in a better position to define the "inarticulate language" in terms of its difference from a lexicon. In doing so, we also assert that Wordsworth, while working inside a traditional concept of nature and writing, revised that concept in a radical way.

J. A. Appleyard, commenting on the fragment that begins "Not useless do I deem/Those shadowy Sympathies with things that hold/an inarticulate language," cites, as its conceptual precedent, its source, the "theistic immaterialism of Berkeley." He defines that source as

> The Berkeleyan doctrine that nature is the language of God, that the existence of sensible things consists in their being perceived by a mind, that these things of nature are ideas directly communicated to us by God to reveal his creative and conserving presence, and that the apprehension of these ideas is the function of pure intellect, spirit responding to spirit.[8]

[8] J. A. Appleyard, Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature; Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965; p. 49.

The key phrase here, which is also a point of potential confusion, is the one suggesting that "things of nature are ideas," a formulation that would allow these ideas to be "directly communicated to us by God," without the mediation of a sign system. Appleyard clearly intends that we should approach the problem in this way, because he defines the whole transaction as "spirit responding to spirit," as "God revealing his creative and conserving presence," his (pure) presence, to our "pure intellect." This immediate "apprehension," as he calls it, would be greatly complicated--not to say profaned--by the intrusion of the "indirect" medium of a sign. "Signs," from this standpoint, are substitutes: they stand for the thing signified. They serve as delegates and records: in the absence of the referent, we grasp its import through the signs it leaves behind.

In the best of possible worlds, according to this notion, there would be no signs of any sort whatsoever. Least of all, signs left by "God." Yet the book of the creatures, by definition, comprises such a system of signs, and Appleyard considers the "things that hold/An inarticulate language" to be signs of this sort, though his presentation serves to suppress the threat thus posed to immediate and "pure" "apprehension."

In fact, as Appleyard goes on to acknowledge, Berkeley himself regarded the language of nature as a mediating system of signs, and defined those signs in

terms of a category--the "arbitrariness" of signs--whose own history extends back at least as far as the Cratylus of Plato. Appleyard writes

> Berkeley's interpretation of sense phenomena as the language of God, however, is basically idealistic and immaterialistic. Sensible signs are, like true language, arbitrary and have "no resemblance or necessary connexion with the things they stand for and suggest." They are merely the medium by which ideas are directly communicated to us by God.[9]

Things are the signs of God: but signs have "no resemblance or necessary connexion with the things they stand for and suggest." How, then, shall we know their referents? These, of course, do not fall from the sky, any more than the meanings of words or of any other signs. They are historically given, but this history--the history of the meaning of divine signs--has, within a theocentric scheme, a specific point of origin, when the meanings were divinely revealed, as in, for example, The Book of Revelation.[10]

Wordsworth, like Berkeley, acknowledges the arbitrary condition of signs, above all of words, the signs

[9] Ibid., p. 50.

[10] My treatment of this theme is deliberately brief. For a definitive treatment of its history, see E. R. Curtius European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages; New York, 1963; pp. 302-347. Jacques Derrida has analyzed the conceptual basis of the theme (op. cit., pp. 109-121).

of "articulate language." For example, he writes in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads about "those arbitrary connections of feelings and ideas with particular words, from which no man can altogether protect himself."[11] And the signs in nature, visible or audible, are governed by the same arbitrary structure. Unlike Berkeley, however--and unlike the theocentric tradition for which "Berkeley," somewhat arbitrarily, himself serves in this discussion as the sign--Wordsworth does not assume that the referents of those signs can be revealed to human beings. They are meaningful signs whose meanings are concealed. This is one way to read that mysterious phrase, "inarticulate language." On the one hand, the signs really are "distinctly uttered;" the variation between the signifiers can be clearly grasped by the senses:

> There is an active principle alive
> In all things, in all natures, in the flowers
> And in the trees, in every pebbly stone
> That paves the brooks, the stationary rocks,
> The moving waters, and the invisible air. . . .

The forms of nature are distinctly different from each other; in fact, each article within a given form has its own separate and distinct existence ("in every pebbly stone . . .").

[11] Zall, op. cit., p. 29.

But their "articulations" are "inarticulate," in that they have no referent that we can recognize. They are a language because their components are differential; but they are also not a language, because their (arbitrary) referents are void and absent. "Arbitrary and differential are two correlative qualities," as de Saussure observes in his famous definition of language.[12] Wordsworth, recognizing the same principle, called the language of nature an "inarticulate language," or half-language.

But why, finally, is the book of nature not, in Wordsworth's view, an "inarticulate lexicon"? Appleyard, in the process of tracing Berkeley's "influence" on Wordsworth through the mediating figure of Coleridge, quotes the following passage from The Destiny of Nations:

> For all that meets the bodily sense I deem
> Symbolical, one mighty alphabet
> For infant minds.[13]

"Alphabet" suggests a dictionary, a taxonomic order: this is one way for the student of languages to organize his findings. It is not, however the literary way, and Wordsworth is a literary man, concerned with the differential interaction of signs within their formal horizon:

[12] Ferdinand de Saussure, Cours de Linguistique Generale; Paris, 1968; p. 163.

[13] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Destiny of Nations, ll. 18-20; cited in Appleyard, op. cit., p. 49.

> The changeful language of their countenance
> Gave movement to his thoughts, and multitude,
> With order and relation.

They gave those properties, of course, because they had them to give, by being a language.

V

Of all the fragments devoted to the theme of language and nature in Wordsworth's work--of all such fragments, at least, that date from his years at Racedown and Alfoxden--none is more richly developed than "The Pedlar." In certain respects, "The Pedlar" deserves to be considered as a poem in its own right: it offers a relatively coherent narrative, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, that roughly follows the life of its hero from childhood to old age. It reads like a biography, and, with good reason, Jonathan Wordsworth has published it as a single text in his Music of Humanity.[1] Yet is also serves as an integral part of the longer poem known as The Ruined Cottage, itself a "book" in that considerably longer poem called The Excursion, which, as we all know, is itself the middle section of a projected three-book work, The Recluse. "The Pedlar" is a text with a context, however narrowly that context may be defined, and to read it in isolation is to violate its textual integrity.

Our own approach will do further violence to this integration: we shall confine our attention to a sequence of passages within "The Pedlar," treating them as if they

[1] Citations to "The Pedlar" are from Jonathan Wordsworth, The Music of Humanity; New York, 1969; pp. 172-183.

were fragments in their own right. And some of these fragments, in their turn, will be decomposed into smaller fragments still.

Is there any justification for this sort of exigetical violence? Only if it yields a point of entry, an initial opening, into the meaning of the text as a whole. The violence is redeemed, if at all, by the refinements in reading that follow upon it. In fact--and this is one way to justify the preliminary violence--dismembering the poem may be the best means for understanding the principle of its coherence. The ease with which it comes apart and comes together may hold the secret to its organization.

Nor can this issue be ignored. Every reader of Wordsworth has to confront it at some time or other--editors when they settle on the text to publish, and critics when they settle on a text to read, be it The Recluse, The Excursion, The Wanderer, "The Pedlar," or a particular passage from "The Pedlar" that illuminates a specific point.

"The Pedlar" is organized according to a system of binary opposites, whose symmetry is so pervasive that the reader may sometimes feel that he is studying a mathematical or logical exercise. Let us survey this symmetry at the outset of our reading.

To begin with, the poem falls into two parts, the first recounting the Pedlar's boyhood in the Cumbrian Hills (8-184), and the second his vocational wanderings

across the English countryside (223-324). (Both passages are preceded, linked, and followed by digressive commentary.) In the first section the boy is seen as a more or less stationary and somewhat passive figure, while in the second, he is peripatetic and active. In the first, he seems to be receiving an education, while in the second he dispenses the recollected wisdom of a sage.

In the interests of economy, we will confine the majority of our remarks to the early section, where the binary system is most fully developed.

This section--the section on the Pedlar's boyhood--is apparently organized throughout in terms of the traditional opposition between subject and object, between the inner self and the things it confronts in the outer world. And this opposition itself is treated in terms of a variety of conventional polarities. In the first part (13-81), the objects are "dire," inspiring the subjective state of "terror." In the second part the objects are "beautiful" and they inspire "love." This polarity of "terror" and "love" is deployed along a temporal axis--we read in a transitional passage that "within his heart/Love <u>was not yet</u> . . . (91-92)--which seems to serve as a kind of genealogy, in which "terror" gives rise to "love." The notion of a genealogy introduces, or appears to introduce, the additional opposition of cause and effect, of beginning and end. (Whether or not such a genealogy is actually in effect--at least on the thematic level of

"terror" and "love"--is a problem that has to be deferred to a later point in our discussion.)

Within the two spheres of subjective response, of "terror" and "pity," there is yet another opposition, the polarity of "nature" and "art." Thus, in the section on "terror," we read first about the terror of natural entities (19-57), and then about the terror of books and pictures (57-81). In the section on "love," we likewise read first about the love of "nature" (92-139), and then about the love of literature and geometry (140-184). (This sequence, twice repeated, is also saturated with strong genealogical overtones, the experience of nature leading to the experience of art.)

This, in brief, is the overall organization of "The Pedlar;" at this level, it seems an almost rigidly schematic poem. One would expect, under the circumstances, that reading the text would be an easy, if not exactly pleasurable, undertaking. But it is not easy, and, in fact, the experience of reading seems to obliterate its schematic markings. That is because, within each section, or within some of the sections, the poem's language is of an extraordinary difficulty. We will now proceed to tackle some of these local problems, in the light of our findings about the language of nature.

The Pedlar's story begins on a disarmingly simple note:

I loved to hear him talk of former days
And tell how when a child, ere yet of age
To be a shepherd, he had learned to read
His bible in a school that stood alone,
Sole building on a mountain's dreary edge,
Far from the sight of city spire, or sound
of Minster Clock. From that bleak tenement
He many an evening to his distant home
In solitude returning saw the hills
Grow larger in the darkness, all alone
Beheld the stars come out above his head,
And travelled through the wood, no comrade near,
To whom he might confess the things he saw.

This passage, which describes the origins of the Pedlar's consciousness ("So the foundations of his mind were laid"--26), looks at first glance like the absolutely literal rendering of an habitual act. The boy's evening walks are marked by certain perceptions--real observations, which he cannot communicate to his absent comrades. It seems devoid of figures, of the fanciful transfers that we associate with "passionate" poetry.

But what about the phrase, "saw the hills/Grow larger in the darkness"? Is this a literal fact? It is reported as if it were, and the syntax--the use of the indicative mood, and of a declarative sentence with the simple structure of subject, verb and object--would seem to place the phrasing within a securely literal zone. And this literality is further supported by the context. The other perception, with which the first is contiguous (and presumably, therefore, of the same rhetorical order) is incontestably a "matter-of-fact" statement: he "beheld the stars come out above his head."

Yet the phrase "saw the hills/Grow larger" is in fact a metaphor. Those hills are said to behave in a certain way, as if they were animate beings capable of growth. The figurality of the phrase may be subdued, but it cannot be removed from the category of metaphor. Had Wordsworth written "he saw more and more of the hills' mass as he changed his position in the landscape," then the phrase would indeed be a literal rendering of the event. As it stands, it is a figure of speech.

This is not an accident. For Wordsworth, the "original language," be it a nation's or an individual's, is a language of rhetorical figures: "The earliest Poets of all nations wrote naturally, and as men: feeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring, and figurative."[2] Our purpose in citing this famous statement is not to focus on its historical or anthropological themes; we are concerned only with the connection between "powerful feelings" and "figurative language." In "The Pedlar," we find Wordsworth describing the origin of a consciousness which is an experience of perception, as a transfer of qualities from one domain, that of animate beings, to another, that of inanimate objects. That transfer is the epistemological correlative of a metaphor. And, just as we are entitled to ask what it means to confer the status of "origin" on a "transfer" in the epistemological domain, so we are entitled to

[2] Zall, op. cit., p. 63.

to ask what it means to confer the status of "origin" on "metaphor" in the rhetorical domain. In this context, moreover, we are entitled to prepare our investigations of the rhetorical issue by first investigating the epistemology, not because epistemology takes precedence over rhetoric as a field of inquiry, or even determines or dominates it, but because the event itself, which is a rhetorical event--the first moment of a fictional narrative, "The Pedlar"--is presented as if it were an epistemological event. By treating the "epistemology" first and the "rhetoric" second, we proceed from a literal-minded reading to a deliberately critical one. (We make this point to defend ourselves, beforehand, against the accusation of confusing the rhetorical with the epistemological domain, or vice versa.)

Why the transfer? Why are the hills said "to grow larger"? It is, we must suppose, an objectively false account, for hills do not grow, or certainly not before the gazing eye. The transfer, then, misrepresents the true state of affairs. Which prompts the question, why misrepresent the state of affairs?

For the answer, we must look to the one who does the misrepresenting--in this message, to the solitary boy. He is alone; he is afraid: "So the foundations of his mind were laid./In such communion, not from terror free . . ." (26-27). The transfer occurs in a state of fear, of passion, which, as we recall, is the original

condition of literary language ("feeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring and figurative . . .").

What, we must then ask, gives rise to the state of fear? Not, surely, the hills themselves, which are, objectively speaking, stationary and remote (the boy is not climbing the hills, he has no fear of falling from them, which would be an instance of objectively inspired fear.) For the answer to this question, I will turn to an observation by Jacques Derrida on a remarkably similar passage in Rousseau, in which a "primitive man" mistakenly calls the first man he meets "a giant," a distortion arising from fear. Derrida points out that "absolute fear would arise from the first encounter of the other as other: as other than myself, and as other than itself. I can only respond to the threat of the other as other (than myself) by changing it into an other (than itself), by altering it in my imagination."[3] I protect myself from a fear of the absolutely unknown (the "other"), by imaginatively transforming it into something that it is not, namely, into something that is, relatively speaking, known. The thing that is best known in a state of fear, is, of course, the state of fear itself. I accordingly transfer, in my imagination, the intimately familiar onto the terrifyingly alien, altering the mode of the inspiration giving rise to the fear (its "otherness"),

[3] Jacques Derrida, de la Grammatologie; Paris, 1967; p. 393.

from a foreign to a familiar mode--in the passage from Wordsworth, from an inhuman to a human mode. It is not the hills in their pure "otherness" that terrifies me now, but the hills in a "familiar," "human" aspect. Which is, of course, to ignore the true state of affairs ("I am afraid") and to displace it with an extraordinary hypothesis ("the hills grow terrifyingly larger").

Even this formulation can, and ought to be, further refined: commenting on the same passage in Rousseau as Derrida, Paul de Man points out that the real violence occurs in treating an hypothesis as a statement of fact.[4] Here, in Wordsworth, the difference would lie between saying "the hills <u>may</u> grow larger," an hypothesis that could then be validated by measuring their altitude, and saying "the hills <u>are</u> growing larger." In the condition of fear, we not only alter the nature of a thing, but we also regard that alteration as an objectively truthful fact. This kind of gesture is especially interesting for its potential impact on the handling of rhetorical figures, because it demonstrates how a metaphor can be false without therefore being a lie. As de Man further argues, a metaphor like "the hills grow larger," which is based on a potential correspondence between inner and outer, (the necessary condition for any transfer)--here, between "fear" and "size"--

[4] Paul de Man, "Theory of Metaphor in Rousseau's <u>Second Discourse</u>," in <u>Studies in Romanticism</u>, Spring 1973; pp. 489-490.

> may be objectively false, . . . but it is subjectively candid. . . . (It) may be in error, but it is not a lie. It "expresses" the inner experience correctly. The metaphor is blind, not because it distorts objective data, but because it presents as certain what is, in fact, a mere possibility. . . . Metaphor is error because it believes or feigns to believe in its own referential meaning.[5]

Of the many and intricate conclusions that can be drawn from this discussion, we limit ourselves to three. First, it is totally consistent within the terms of the rhetoric at play in "The Pedlar," that a statement can be objective without being "truthful" in the epistemological sense. One need not, indeed one cannot, challenge the meaning of a sentence like "he saw the hills/Grow larger in the darkness" on the basis of objective validity. Its truth does not lie "in the hills." Nor does its truth, or falsehood, lie in the subjective state of the Pedlar, even though, as de Man and Derrida point out, "it 'expresses' the inner experience correctly." That correctness, from the perspective of rhetoric, is not a matter of contention. What does matter, and this is our second point, is what de Man, writing from an epistemological standpoint, designates as the "blindness" of the metaphor, its "belief in its own referential meaning." (These terms, as he uses them, are of course devoid of ethical values.) That belief is a property of the text, of its grammar--as in the use, which we cited before, of the indicative

[5] Ibid.

mood in the phrase "he saw the hills/Grow larger. . . ." That belief may be mistaken or erroneous, but it serves as the structural foundation of the text, and without it the text could literally not come into being. The story of "The Pedlar" could not exist; the Pedlar himself would not exist. In that belief the text objectively begins.

Third, as a form of blind belief, the text, and the figure of the Pedlar that it constitutes, exist along with the mode of truth. This is to say that the rhetoric of the text can be lucid as well as blind; we might better say that the lucidity of a text is a correlative of its blindness. If the metaphor renounces the error of its ways, if it renounces the faith in its own referential meaning, it does so as a gesture of contrast, a permutation within the line of the text itself. The truth of the text is only truthful in reference to the error of the text; it has nothing whatsoever to do with a state of affairs existing before, after, or beyond the text. From the epistemological standpoint, in short, the truth of the text is not an objective truth at all; it is simply an error that has undergone a metamorphosis into another kind of error.

We are confronted, immediately after the disarmingly literal start of "The Pedlar," with a series of observations about "communion" with nature (under the tutelage

of fear):

So the foundations of his mind were laid.
In such communion, not from terror free,
While yet a child and long before his time,
He had perceived the presence and the power
Of greatness, and deep feelings had impressed
Great objects on his mind with portraiture
And colour so distinct that on his mind
They lay like substances, and almost seemed
To haunt the bodily sense. He had received
A precious gift, for as he grew in years
With these impressions would he still compare
All his ideal stores, his shapes and forms,
And being still unsatisfied with aught
Of dimmer character, he thence attained
An <u>active</u> power to fasten images
Upon his brain, and on their pictured lines
Intensely brooded, even till they acquired
The liveliness of dreams. Nor did he fail,
While yet a child, with a child's eagerness
Incessantly to turn his ear and eye
On all things which the rolling seasons brought
To feed such appetite. Nor this alone
Appeased his yearning. In the after day
Of boyhood, many an hour in caves forlorn
And in the hollow depths of naked crags
He sate, and even in their fixed lineaments,
Or from the power of a peculiar eye,
Or by creative feeling overborne,
Or by predominance of thought oppressed,
Even in their fixed and steady lineaments
He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind,
Expression ever varying.

This passage falls into four separate sections, each treating the topic of "communion" from a distinct perspective. The first begins "In such communion, not from terror free . . ." (27); the second, "He had received/A precious gift . . ." (34-35); the third, "Nor did he fail . . ." (43); and the fourth, "nor this alone . . ." (47). With the

possible exception of the third, each of these sections is sufficiently intricate to warrant a reading in its own right.

None is more difficult than the first:

> In such communion, not from terror free,
> While yet a child and long before his time,
> He had perceived the presence and the power
> Of greatness, and deep feelings had impressed
> Great objects on his mind with portraiture
> And colour so distinct that on his mind
> They lay like substances, and almost seemed
> To haunt the bodily sense.

As with the lines about walking home in the dark, this passage is presented in a literal and objective manner, in the indicative mood. Yet it, too, is extraordinarily complex.

Consider, to begin with, the interaction of the pluperfect and perfect tenses. They seem to suggest a contrast between two periods of time in the past, the pluperfect situating events or conditions anterior to those in the perfect, and designating them as completed prior action. Furthermore, the phrases in the pluperfect ("he had perceived," "feelings had impressed"), coupled here with the adverbial clause "so distinct that . . ." (known technically as a "manner clause of pure result"),[6] apparently designate the cause of subsequent events. There seems to be a genetic link between the two.

[6] George O. Curme, English Grammar; New York, 1947; p. 86.

Next, consider the phrase "he perceived the presence and the power/Of greatness." It seems literal at first glance, but is actually a figural statement. (One cannot perceive an abstraction.) Designating the transfer of a mental property to a physical substance, it resembles the metaphorical phrase "(he) saw the hills/Grow larger in the darkness." (It is, in fact, a blind transfer.) It is followed in turn by an explicitly figural statement: the feelings "lay on his mind like substances," and "seemed to haunt the bodily sense." We move, that is, from an implicit (and misleading) to an explicit mode of figurality. And that movement seems to signify a correction, a gain in lucidity over blindness. But it is also a genetic movement; the correction springs from the error it corrects. The correction is therefore illusive; it has no extra-textual validity. (This state of affairs extends through the text as a whole. It would seem that Wordsworth's careful distinctions between truth and falsehood, and between cause and effect, are different aspects of the same fiction. They are fictitious events, devoid of ultimate truth.)

The passage is complex for yet another, unexpected reason. Though it effectively exploits the tensions of rhetorical transfer, it does not necessarily describe the epistemological process of transfer. It states that "Feelings . . . impress . . . objects on (the) mind," not on the "external" forms of nature. Those deep feelings are inward; no doubt they belong to the boy,

to his inner "mind." When we examine the word "objects," the situation seems more confusing still. Taken simply to mean "aims" or "intentions," the word "objects" at least preserves some degree of inwardness. And we are encouraged, of course, in the context of the verb "impress," to assume that those "objects" repose on the same side of the surface as the force that "impresses." If, on the contrary, we consider those objects as external, as being on the other side of the receiving surface from the impressing force (the "deep feelings"), we have on hand a paradox that no analogy or model can possibly accomodate. (We could, it is true, stamp an image on the "other" side, on the <u>verso</u> of the receiving surface. But if we did, we would not see that image at the same time, at least not with its "distinct portraiture and colour." We could also, perhaps, situate those "deep feelings" within nature and "outside" the boy's mind; but such a reading would do unacceptable violence to the affective focus of the passage, to the subjective state of "terror.")

Proceeding to a further complexity, there is the curious fact that these difficulties arise with the appearance of the theme of writing, of "impression," of the inscription of a form on a surface. The riddle posed is this: how does the theme of writing relate here to the theme of transfer? And what light, if any, does the connection between them shed on the genetic link--supposing one to exist--between the process of transfer and the process of impression? Let us consult the text once again:

> . . . deep feelings had impressed
> Great objects on his mind with portraiture
> And colour so distinct that on his mind
> They lay like substances. . . .

Let us concentrate on the figure of "impression." We observe that "feelings are said to "impress" those "objects" on the mind, and that they do so in such a way that the objects thus impressed "lay on" the mind. "Lying on" the mind is one of the strangest of the many strange formulations in this passage. A book lies on a table; a rug lies on a floor; a man lies on a bed. In each and every example, a physical body lies on a surface, but the surface does not support it by itself. The surface is supported in its turn--by the legs of the table, by the frame of the building, or by the frame of the bed. We can best put it this way: the very fact that a body with some weight is supported by a surface--that it does not break through the surface--suggests that the surface is supported by a depth of some kind. Given the laws of gravity, no other interpretation is possible. Which is simply to say that the phrase "lies on" constitutes, by its very formulation, a surface with a support beneath it.

What interests us here is the status of that "beneath": it is a space. We must conceive of the mind as a surface on which the objects lie, with a supportive space beneath it. This inner space is further constituted by another turn of phrase, by the statement that "feelings . . . impressed" those "objects" on that surface where they lie. That is because the phrase "impressing on" constitutes a distance in its own right. In other words, in order for the movement

of stamping to occur, there must be a distance between the stamping tool and the surface, the distance required for the stamp to strike the surface.

In sum, the model of the mind suggested by this passage is of a surface marked by impressions which it also supports: the impressions, and their position of rest, would force any observer examining such a surface and such a support to assume that a depth or an inwardness of some kind lay beneath them.

Does this not take us away from the notion of "writing" discussed in the previous chapter, of writing as constituting, not a depth, but a contextual surface? We feel that it does not, for the simple reason that the depth here indicated is not at all continuous with the surface that it supports: not, at least, in the way that the surface of a piece of fruit, say, is continuous with its (inner) flesh. Wordsworth precludes this continuity be defining the space as a virtual space, a free zone within which--or across which--impressions are transmitted or conveyed. He wishes to impart the notion of an inner space, certainly; but his emphasis on "impression," on "writing," should warn us off from the notion of a solidarity, a "plastic" continuity, between the surface of the mind and its foundation (a virtual foundation, to be sure, which we take to be the feelings themselves, that agent of the impressions).

This surface then, has generated the dimension of an inner space. And such a notion already carries with it,

by implication, the symmetrically opposite dimension of an outer space. But is this "outer space" actually disclosed? Remembering that our vantage point is from within the inner space itself, are we to suppose that the mind, on which the feelings make an impression, then functions as a screen or veil that hides the outside world behind it? Or does the surface create the outer space in the same way that it creates the inner space? Is there anything in Wordsworth's terminology here that would allow us to conceive of the "printed" surface as a <u>verso</u> as well as a <u>recto</u>, in which, if we may do some violence to our analogy, the <u>verso</u> carries the same message as the <u>recto</u>, reads the same way, constitutes in the same fashion a virtual space for impressing?

To answer this question, we take a final look at the passage, turning from its manipulation of prepositional statements like "lying on" or "impressing on," to its overtly "figural" or analogical statements, its similes. We read that

> . . . deep feelings had impressed
> Great objects on his mind with portraiture
> And colour so distinct that on his mind
> <u>They lay like substances</u>, and almost seemed
> To haunt the bodily sense. . . .
> (emphasis added)

Once again, a modest, almost an invisible, ambiguity of syntax complicates an apparently simple and straightforward statement. And we are compelled to take notice

of that ambiguity before we can hope to answer any questions about a space outside, or beyond, the surface of the mind. Here the ambiguity surrounds the word "like": is it an adverb, or an adjective, or both? If it is an adverb, modifying "lay," the phrase means that "great objects lie on the mind as substances do;" if an adjective, modifying "substances," it means that "great objects lie on the mind" (as indeed they, and they alone, can do) "as if they were substances" (which indeed they are not, if only because, from this perspective, "substances," unlike "great objects," cannot lie on the mind).

If we adopt the first reading, we must say that the "objects" are indeed physical things, that the feelings effect a physical impression on the mind, quite literally engraving an object/image on the surface. This process, even if purely intra-psychic, would require that such mental operations in fact be purely physical, and that, furthermore, there could be no such thing as a categorical difference between inside and outside, at least where the opposition of mental to physical is concerned, since such operations, being purely physical, would occur in a common medium (matter), belonging to a common category (space). From this perspective, the distinction between inner and outer is largely illusory, the illusion arising from within the mind itself, which is really nothing more than a kind of surface--viewed from one side, the inside (the side where impressions are made), but

nonetheless continuous, in its mode of being, with the world on the other side, the outside.

The second reading, in which "like" is taken as an adjective, would appear to receive some valuable support from its context. No, it says, the object impressed on the mind is not an object in the strictly substantial or physical sense; it is merely a vivid impression, whose "portraiture and colour" are "so distinct" that it can lie on the mind as if it were a substance; and it can "almost seem" (but not quite) "to haunt the bodily sense," the sense by which real "substances" are perceived (or, perhaps, the "sense" of our own body, or corporeality--"sense" is a notoriously "fickle" term, as Wordsworth himself might say). But the impression isn't really a "substance;" no, it is an "object" of the sort that "<u>feelings</u> impress," unsubstantial and distinct. "And if you care to observe an effect of that distinctness," this reading seems to say, "then notice how it can make you misconstrue the meaning of the language in which it is discussed. You insist that 'like' has the force of an adverb, and so it very well may: those images can indeed lie on the mind 'as' substances do. But <u>how</u> do substances lie on the mind? They do <u>not</u> lie on the mind, that's 'how' they lie on the mind. And the phrase 'they lie on the mind like substances' means precisely what it says, namely, that they seem to lie on the mind, vividly seem to do so, but of course they do not in strict fact

actually do so, any more than physical substances do."

Which leads us to a crucial finding: if an impression is so distinct that it can make us believe, not only that it acts like a substance, but also that only a substance can act that way, can be so impressive in the first place, then the outer world has invaded the inner world completely. The mind, on which the deep feelings inscribe their impressions, far from being an inner depth divided by screen or threshold from an outer depth, is being treated in its own right as an outside, even if it is seen from a perspective which seems to be inside in relation to an outside. The perspective, however, does not determine the modality of the objects' being, still less of the "space" that the object constitutes; rather, the "distinctness" does. That distinctness defines the objects and constitutes the space they occupy, be it inside or out, up or down, before or behind. One can even say that such distinctness, the property of the line, brings those oppositions into being. It is the sole point around which those polarities revolve. Those terms are themselves an effect of form, as Wordsworth himself elsewhere declares when he speaks of "the difference that makes the likeness clear," or of "that distinctness which a contrast gives/Or opposition. . . ."[7] If "deep

[7] William Wordsworth, The Prelude; ed. Ernest de Selincourt; Oxford, 1959; the first quotation is from p. 576, l. 180; the second from Book VII, ll. 511-512 (text of 1805).

feelings" can "impress objects on my mind," if such objects are subject to such an operation, then objects are neither merely inner nor outer, neither merely palpable nor ideal, neither merely subjective nor objective--"of these (are) neither and (are) both at once."[8] If one must submit to the tyranny of definition, to the conceptual dominance of the third person of the present indicative of the verb "to be," then one can only say of an "impressed object" that "it is" . . . what? "Distinct." "A form." "Articulate." "A trace." "A portrait." "An image," whose vividness makes us think it is "there," and which constitutes the "there" by its very vividness, be it an inner vividness, an outer vividness, or a vividness that falls in between. It is <u>distinctness</u> that gives rise, as we say, to every opposition, that of inner and outer included, an opposition which, as we said before, gives rise to that blind transfer from one different domain to another, from subject to object, and from animate to inanimate.

Let us proceed with "The Pedlar." The passage analyzed above continues with the following:

> He had received
> A precious gift, for as he grew in years
> With these impressions would he still compare
> All his ideal stores, his shapes and forms.
> And being still unsatisfied with aught

[8] Ibid., Book V, l. 123.

> Of dimmer character, he thence attained
> An <u>active</u> power to fasten images
> Upon his brain, and on their pictured lines
> Intensely brooded, even till they acquired
> The liveliness of dreams.
>
> (34-43)

As a development of the statement "deep feelings had impressed/Great objects on his mind," this passage provides an invaluable confirmation of our reading of "impressions"--impressions taken as vivid traces, be they inner or outer, rather than as strictly subjective, or inner, phenomena. It is because those impressions are not intrinsically subjective, for example, that Wordsworth can tell us that the Pedlar would compare them "with all his ideal stores, his shapes and forms." Those "ideal stores" are also vivid (they have articulated shapes and forms), but they evidently belong to a region opposed to the real--the region, perhaps, of geometry, which is explored further on in the poem.*

*To some extent our interpretation hangs here on a choice between two readings: we take the prepositional phrase "with these impressions" as a modifier of the verb "compare," but it can also modify the verb "grew," and perhaps it modifies both. We should not, by the way, pass over Wordsworth's choice of a preposition: had he written "<u>To</u> these impressions would he still compare . . . ," the emphasis would fall on the similarity of "impressions" and "ideal stores." By choosing the preposition "with," he emphasizes the difference, because, according to Fowler, "to compare <u>to</u>" is "to suggest or state a similarity," whereas "to compare <u>with</u>" is to "examine or set forth the details of a <u>supposed</u> similarity or estimate its degree."[9] In the first instance, we group two things in a common class; in the second, we set forth an <u>extended</u> comparison. And why should that comparison be extended in the first place, unless we have doubts as to the degree of similarity?

The argument then continues to distinguish between impressions, and to do so in a manner that carries us still further fron the conventional polarity of subject and object. Wordsworth not only installs a term with subjective overtones ("impressions") on the objective side of the polarity real *versus* ideal; he goes on to insist that ideal forms, like real forms, can only attain to sufficiency in terms of vividness, of difference and of articulation:

> And being still *unsatisfied with aught*
> *Of dimmer character*, he thence attained
> An *active* power to *fasten images*
> *Upon his brain*. . . .
> (first and third emphases added)

Two noteworthy phrases stand out here. There is, first of all, the notion of "dissatisfaction" as a source of energy, of "*active* power." (We take the adverb "thence" to refer to "being still unsatisfied," to the state of insufficiency.) This dissatisfaction springs, it would appear, not from the ideality of the "ideal stores," and still less from the brute solidity of "real" or tactile objects, but rather from a discrepancy between dimness and vividness, wherever it is found. It is to vividness that the boy aspires, the vividness and distinctness of the "original" forms, whose own character, we might say, pertains to the articulate shape of a written character, the inscribed, the indisputable image. Secondly,

the phrase "to fasten images/Upon his brain" refers back to the earlier phrase about objects that "lay like substances on his mind". Here, the images are certainly conjured up by the subject himself, but they are nonetheless distinct, substantial, and even portable, like signs, the sign that one fastens on a wall or a lampost.

Wordsworth mines the vein still further, cutting, in a single transgression, across the familiar strata of inner and outer, active and passive, real and imaginary, cause and effect, vital and inert:

> . . . he thence attained
> An <u>active</u> power to fasten images
> Upon his brain, and on their pictured lines
> Intensely brooded, <u>even till they acquired</u>
> <u>The liveliness of dreams</u>.
> (emphasis added)

What is the "liveliness" of those pictured lines," and what does Wordsworth mean when he calls it the "liveliness of dreams"? Is it lively like a dream? Or is it unreal like a dream, the hallucinatory after-effect of "intense brooding"? For that matter, does the vividness inhere, latently and potentially, within the "<u>pictured</u> lines" themselves, these to be seen by one with the skill to see?

These questions cannot really be answered; indeed they should not really be asked, because they inject us into the issue in the wrong way, by presupposing those very categories--real and unreal, inner and outer, pro-

jected and inherent--whose very status as categories, as polarities of difference, proceed from the existence of the lines themselves. The "lines" are the source of those differences, their "cause" and not their "effect"--if one may resort to yet another "polarity" whose status, as a polarity, proceeds from the distinctness of "lines" and cannot, therefore, encompass them in a definitional perspective. (Nothing, in sort, defines the line, the original impression; it is the line, and the line alone, that makes possible the process of definition--of "portraiture," "image," or of "character," as well as of "cause" and "effect.")

Nor is Wordsworth content to rest at this point. He surges on with ferocious, serenely ferocious, energy, the sort of energy that propels a discovery to its fullest explication:

> Nor did he fail,
> While yet a child, with a child's eagerness,
> Incessantly to turn his ear and eye
> On all things which the rolling seasons brought
> To feed such appetite. Nor this alone
> Appeased his yearning. In the after day
> Of boyhood, many an hour in caves forlorn
> And in the hollow depths of naked crags
> He sate, and in their fixed lineaments,
> Or from the power of a peculiar eye,
> Or by creative feeling overborne,
> Or by predominance of thought oppressed,
> Even in their fixed and steady lineaments
> He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind,
> Expression ever varying.
>
> (43-57)

We cite this passage at length because it holds forth, at the close of an exceedingly concentrated meditation on the line, the altogether seductive opportunity of renouncing the line--its priority--in favor of old and familiar oppositions. Yes, there is a distinction between the time of the "child" (44) and the "after day/Of boyhood" (48-49); yes, the condition of the "child" is one of passive ingestion, of "feeding such appetite" (47) with the twin faculties of "ear and eye" (45); and yes, symmetrically enough, the older boy, with his "inner" faculties enriched--his "eye," his "thought," his "feeling"--proceeds to confer on natural objects those properties which are not there: in the "fixed lineaments" of nature, he seems to make out "an ebbing and a flowing mind." And he has "brooded". Here, at least, we can say that some lineaments "acquire" their liveliness from a subject "by creative feeling overborne . . . by predominance of thought oppressed." And thus the logic of inner and outer, of subject and object, reasserts its rightful authority, the possession of its own effects.

Actually, it does <u>not</u> so reassert itself, and we quickly recognize the reason why. Let us examine those closing lines:

> Even in their fixed and steady lineaments
> He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind,
> Expression ever varying.

The weight of the passage, its drift and tenor, turns on the meaning we accord to the verb "trace." It is an extraordinary word in this context. Wordsworth does not say "he saw," as he might have done, and which would certainly preserve the familiar categories. Nor does he say "he inscribed," which would shift the sense from perception to projection, to the notion that the boy invented the landscape with his own eye, his eye working like a pencil. The word "trace" carries both meanings within it--"seeing" and "inscribing," perceiving and projecting. As such, it functions as a kind of middle voice, leaning neither to the active nor the passive, but operating in between, creating, as we would argue, the very possibility of an active and passive opposition.[10] To this we must add a third sense of "trace," its archaic sense of "traversal," as when a ship traces its course through the water. "To traverse," we should argue, is to build up, to construct an itinerary. The phrase "he traced an ebbing and a flowing mind" could therefore mean that he "built up," or created, that mind as in the formulation, "So build we up/The being that we are"[11].

[10] For the notion of the articulation as generator of categorical differences, including the differences of the active and passive voice, we follow the reasoning of Jacques Derrida in his essay "La Differance," published in Marges de la Philosophie; Paris, 1972; pp. 1-29. (His discussion of voice can be found on p. 9.)

[11] In Jonathan Wordsworth, op. cit., "Appendix 2," p. 270, 11. 57-58.

But whose is that mind? His own? or nature's? The honest answer, the only answer, is that we do not know. We don't even know the agent of the tracing, notwithstanding the conventional syntax of the phrase "he traced." Could not, for instance, the "lineaments" themselves be the "agent" of the tracing? If those lines are in nature, and the boy enters "in" them through an act of "tracing," he follows the lines laid down before him. Subject and line then participate in the common enterprise of "tracing," of "building up," so that the "line" is in the subject, and the subject is in the "line." And the mind that they trace together, or that traces itself by means of them, is in fact a tissue of lineaments, of "pictured lines," a "portrait," a "traversal" of impressive distinctions. One might even call it a text.

We are so absorbed in the minute enigmas of Wordsworth's language that we run the risk of losing sight of larger, and very startling, developments. Up to this point in "The Pedlar," Wordsworth has proceeded as if the language of nature, its "inarticulate forms," rather than "articulate language," were the boy's actual language. (We will recall, of course, that the whole detour into the language of nature, at least in this context, is a non-veridical critique of the "language of passion," a genetic account of the "original" language which is neither genetic nor really an account, at least not in

the sense of a factual demonstration.) But, of course, the "language of nature" is not the language of men: Wordsworth develops the differences between them in his subsequent treatment of the Pedlar's contact with pictures, books and people (57-81, 115-184, 238-294).

We will consider these issues in the next chapter. But first we should like to take a polemical detour through a few critical positions on another passage that deals with the Pedlar's boyhood communion in the light of the mood of joy, as opposed to the mood of terror, which closely parallels the lines so minutely examined above; and by drawing a contrast between the received positions and our own views on the passage, we hope to further clarify the import of our premises. The passage in question reads as follows:

> Oh then what soul was his, when on the tops
> Of the high mountains he beheld the sun
> Rise up and bathe the world in light. He looked,
> The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
> In gladness and deep joy. The clouds were touched,
> And in their silent faces did he read
> Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
> Nor any voice of joy: his spirit drank
> The spectacle. Sensation, soul and form
> All melted into him. They swallowed up
> His animal being. In them did he live,
> And by them did he live. They were his life.
> In such access of mind, in such high hour
> Of visitation from the living God,
> He did not feel the God, he felt his works.
> Thought was not: in enjoyment it expired.
> Such hour by prayer or praise was unprofaned;
> He neither prayed, nor offered thanks or praise;
> His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
> That made him. It was blessedness and love.

This, once again, is clearly a passage about the "inarticulate language" of nature, and it stands as a striking parallel to the opening lines of the "Fragment" beginning "In storm and tempest and beneath the beam/Of quiet moons. . . ." There, Wordsworth discussed

> Whate'er there is of power in sound
> To breathe an elevated mood, by form
> Or image unprofaned. . . .
> (emphasis added)

He discussed, that is, the language of nature in its phonological dimension. Here, on the other hand, his attention is drawn to its "written" dimension, its "graphological" character, its status as a language that is "read" by the eye alone:

> The clouds were touched,
> And in their silent faces did he read
> Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
> Nor any voice of joy . . .
> Such hour by prayer or praise was unprofaned. . . .
> (emphasis added)

"Unprofaned" by the sound of "prayer or praise" is what Wordsworth is telling us here. It would make no sense to speak of prayer as a profanation in its own right; and, indeed, we read that the "mind," the silent mind, itself does service as a kind of "unprofane" prayer: "His mind was a thanksgiving to the power/That

made him." So too, in the corresponding lines from the "Fragment," "form or image" would be profane, not for their content but for their intrusion into a domain that is not their own. Wordsworth uses this ethical or theological term, in sum, to underscore the inviolate barrier, the pure difference, between written and spoken forms of language. (We would undoubtedly be correct in detecting some polemical pressure behind his choice of an ethical term such as "profanation": Wordsworth, of all the Romantics, was singularly rigorous in his discrimination between the two modes of language. We have searched in vain, for instance, for some sign in his work that writing is a phonological phenomenon, a transcript or copy of the spoken word.)

But we digress from our own polemic. This passage, as we said, explores the communion between the child and the written forms of the "inarticulate language." And this, for Wordsworth, implies a very intricate communion indeed. His readers, however, have sought to pass over this intricacy: a common way of doing so has been to emphasize the theological content of the text, and then to intepret this theology as a form of mysticism. The following lines serve as the basis for doing so:

> In such access of mind, in such high hour
> Of visitation from the living God,
> He did not feel the God, he felt his works.
> Thought was not: in enjoyment it expired.
> Such hour by prayer or praise was unprofaned. . . .

Samuel Alexander, an English philosopher described by Newton Stallknecht as "an outstanding student of Spinoza and a lover of Wordsworth," treats this passage as a "mystical" parallel to Spinoza's "scientific account of the intellectual love of God." And Stallknecht himself endorses Alexander's parallel, first by describing Spinoza's doctrine of "intellectual love" as an "ecstatic contemplation of the divinity"--really a form of mysticism--and then by declaring, in the light of Alexander's remarks, that "we need not doubt that this mystical tendency of Spinoza's was quite akin to Wordsworth's."[12] More recently, H. W. Piper has followed Stallknecht's approach by describing the passage as "clearly of a mystical nature, (though) Wordsworth's explanation is a rational one in terms of his system. The power of nature, 'soul and form,' first enters the mind through the senses. and then the mind is swallowed up in the sea from which it is born."[13] And the latest comment in this tradition, by Reeve Parker, shows where the appeal of such an approach most probably lies--as a pretext for by-passing the real problems of Wordsworth, of his meaning: "(the passage) seems a species of mystic experience. . . . The circling and incremental repetitions, the blurring of metaphor,

[12]The citations from Alexander and Stallknecht are in Newton P. Stallknecht, Strange Seas of Thought; Bloomington, Indiana, 1958; pp. 192-193.

[13] H. W. Piper, The Active Universe; London, 1962; p. 112.

the mingling of senses all are among Wordsworth's means for moving beyond the merely discursive semantics of language."[14] Which is to say that if one can show the metaphors are not blurred, and that the senses are not mingled, then one has gone a long way towards demonstrating that the term "mysticism," as here employed, is really one of Professor Parker's own "means for moving beyond the merely discursive semantics of (Wordsworth's) language."

Let us postpone this demonstration for a moment, or rather, let us commence the demonstration by quoting at length from one last critic, John Jones, who really does try to grapple with Wordsworth's language:

> Wordsworth addresses himself to the child's experience in two different ways. On the one hand, he resorts to huge opaque technicalities--"sensation," "soul," "form"--worn smooth in centuries of speculative use. On the other, he describes the child's relation with his world by means of a single metaphor. He "drank" the scene, and the "scene" swallowed him; so that Wordsworth concludes, emerging from the violent particularity of this image, that the scene lived in him and he in it. Here the two methods of approach consort a little uneasily, and in consequence they both attract the wrong sort of attention. "Sensation, soul and form" looks like an intellectual smokescreen, hastily laid to conceal a false move in argument; we ask what it means, and we find it contorted and pretentiously obscure. This leaves the metaphor

[14] Reeve Parker, "'Finer Distance': The Narrative Art of Wordsworth's 'The Wanderer'"; in E L H, 1972; p. 102.

> exposed in a way it can ill afford. Isolated, it is a blunt and conventional device; and, in its reciprocal reference to child and scene, somewhat grotesque.[15]

Jones, be it said, is known as a master of scholarly prose, and his book is considered a classic in the field. And his virtues are quickly evident on reading this passage; he can move, with no effort at all, from the humble detail to the broad perspective, from careful counting to brisk and sensible judgment: "we ask what it means, and we find it contorted and pretentiously obscure." Let there be meaning, he tells us, and let it be straight and humble and clear, without contortion or pretense.

For our own part, we are thoroughly struck by the opposites, the differences, that seem to be at play in his approach to the text: "on the one hand," he tells us, "(Wordsworth) resorts to huge opaque technicalities--sensation, soul, and form--worn smooth in centuries of speculative use. On the other, he describes the child's relation with his world by means of a single metaphor" (emphasis added). The first is a "move in argument" ("false," it seems, but a move in argument all the same), and the second an "image . . . of violent particularity." Many and subtle are the contraries here developed: "concrete" is opposed to "abstract," "particular" to

[15] John Jones, The Egotistical Sublime; London, 1954; p. 83.

"general," "metaphor" to "speculation," and they all line up against each other in the rhetorical opposition of "argument" (or "idea") and "figure" (or "matter").

One might protest, in fact, that Jones does not permit his oppositions the full freedom of their playful tendencies, for abstractions can be concrete, speculation can be vivid and new, and particularities can be huge and opaque. This is, indeed, a rather merry game, and we wonder why Jones is so reluctant to play it.

He may not like the game; why else would he castigate its players? Those images, we read, are "violent," and the arguments "hastily laid" for devious ends. The whole passage, in fact, is fraught with troublesome spectres. It might "attract the wrong sort of attention;" there are outspoken fears of the "isolated," and the "grotesque," as if certain words were headed for the madhouse or the leper colony.

Jones, indeed, does not enjoy the game, and he wants the opponents to stop playing, to make peace. He laments the differences, and he would like them to come together in a synthesis, a marriage, with the "particular" giving substance and limit to the "speculations," and these imparting, in return, a certain gentleness and breadth to the "violence" and "particularity" of the image.

And indeed, according to Jones, such a happy union can, and ought to, occur. That is because the differences are not so fundamental after all; they belong, that is,

to one and the same category. "Thoughts" and material things are the same in their manner of being, both having spatial extension The "technicalities" are "huge," they are "smokescreens," large clouds of smoke in the space of clear and distinct objects. And if "thoughts" and "things" exist in the same dimension, i.e. space, if they differ only in location or extension, they could easily be harmonized by a proper, a mature poet.[16] They could "come together," quite literally.

Such, in brief, is Jones's deepest orientation. We find it hard, it is true, to grant his original premise, that thought and thing are co-extensive, identical at their foundation. We have argued, instead, that the very principle of identity is grounded in an original "non-identity," the non-identity generated by the differences inherent in the very notion of form. (As Saussure has said, "in language there is nothing but differences."[17]) And is it not, in fact, the difference that forms the basis of any final synthesis? Which is to say that the common ground of thought and thing is not a foundation at all, but rather a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Conversely, and perversely so, Jones sees unity where it doesn't actually exist. He tells us, for

[16] Paul de Man has analyzed the spatial structure of co-extensive abstract and concrete language in his discussion of the symbol in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," Singleton, op. cit., p. 190.

[17] Saussure, op. cit., p. 166.

instance, that there is a "single metaphor": "(the boy) 'drank' the scene, and the 'scene' swallowed him; so that Wordsworth concludes, emerging from the violent particularity of this image, that the scene lived in him and he in it." Which is to conflate three figures under the one rubric of "single metaphor": the first figure, a metaphor, is the phrase "'drink' the scene;" the second figure, also a metaphor, is the phrase "the 'scene' swallowed him." And the third figure, which "unifies" the two, is not a metaphor but a chiasmus, in which the terms of transfer in the first figure--"boy swallowing scene"--are symmetrically reversed in the second. It is the buried chiasmus that makes those two metaphors seem "single."

And that chiasmus and the unity it posits are in their own turn, figures of a wholly different order; figures, that is, of Jones's imagination. Because the passage reads as follows:

> . . . his spirit drank
> The spectacle. Sensation, soul and form
> All melted into him. They swallowed up
> His animal being. In them did he live,
> And by them did he live. They were his life.

It is not the "scene," but the "sensation, soul and form," that "swallowed up/His animal being." Which cancels out the chiasmus, and transposes, if we may say so, the "violent particularity of this image" from the poetry

of Wordsworth to the prose of John Jones.

And there it pursues its violent search for unity, for the shotgun wedding of the metaphor. Let us grant the metaphorical value of verbs like "drink" and "swallowed up," notwithstanding the literal force they gain at Wordsworth's hands. But what about the phrase that Jones ignores, and which serves, indeed, as the crux to the passage as a whole? "Sensation, soul and form/All melted into him:" this utterance is an interesting one, because it suggests that all three terms, "sensation," "soul," and "form" share a common attribute--not, we would argue, the common category of spatial extension, but the common property of "form," in the various ways that Wordsworth uses that term. If it is protested that "soul" is unmediated presence without mediating form, we would reply, in the light of the other fragments studied above, that Wordsworth uses the word "soul" to denote the dynamic interrelationships between sensory phenomena, that "soul" designates sameness in difference, and serves as a formal principle of unity. It is "not a punctual Presence, but a Spirit/Living in time and space, and far diffused,"[18] unitary as well as vital.

"Sensation," too, is a formal category, designating the "form" of affective experience, above all of auto-affective experience in its temporal aspect. For instance,

[18] The Prelude, VIII, ll. 610-611.

we discover, in the course of time, the form of our own body through the medium of sensations, and that discovery is itself a kind of form. And it is interesting to notice, in a celebrated passage from Tintern Abbey, how intimately the form of sensation, as that term is understood here, communicates with the visible and audible forms of nature:

> These beauteous forms,
> Through a long absence, have not been to me
> As is a landscape to a blind man's eye;
> But oft, in lovely rooms, and 'mid the din
> Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
> In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.[19]

This is not to say that the phrase "sensation, soul and form/All melted into him" does not describe an immediate experience. It clearly does so; the whole passage does so. We can go still further and say that the entire first half of "The Pedlar" relates immediate experiences of various kinds. But it is not the immediacy of the immediate that is being described; it is the immediacy of the mediate, of the formal, the shaped, the articulate. If "form sinks into him," it is an immediate apprehension of form that occurs. It is form that does the "sinking," and where there is form, there is mediation, not the direct affective contact between two undifferentiated presences that

[19] P. W. II, p. 260, 11. 22-28.

lies couched in the concept of "mysticism." We most heartily agree with Hartman that "Wordsworth is not a mystic,"[20] and we heartily disagree with Stallknecht's emphasis on that term.

John Jones, as we were saying, passes over this critical phrase in his account of the "single metaphor." And he does so, perhaps, for the very good reason that the phrase "sensation, soul and form/All melted into him" may not be a metaphor of the same order as "drinking" and "swallowing." To say "his spirit drank/The spectacle" is to confer a bodily function on the "spirit," and this is indeed a metaphor, as is the phrase, "They swallowed up/His animal being," which confers an animate function on inanimate objects. And these two metaphors seem to govern the word "melt." Thus, if we put our emphasis on the word "melt," then "sensation, soul, and form" seem to yield up their identity, their separate form, to the person "into" whom they melt, and to "melt," in this sense, is to be ingested, and corresponds to the figure "drinking the spectacle." If, on the other hand, we put the emphasis on "into," then it is the "sensation, soul and form" that keep their initial shape, invading the boy who yields up his identity to them. "Melting," in this sense, is like ingesting, and corresponds to the second figure, the

[20] Geoffrey Hartman, Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814; New Haven, 1964; p. 350.

"swallowing up" of the boy's "animal being." But if we accept "melting" in both its figural senses--active as well as passive--then we have to accept the notion of an interpenetration, a synthesis of the self and the other, which amounts to a mutual effacement of the two terms and the production of a third for which there is no physical analog. To put it in a single word, Wordsworth tells us that the boy is "informed" (57), a process which, however obscure it may be, cannot be considered equivalent to the two metaphors with which it communicates.

If, finally, we remind ourselves that the boy contemplates nature in its written form in this passage, then we see, in this phrase, an exact parallel to the earlier lines "Even in their fixed and steady lines/He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind." What results in both instances is neither an autonomous subject nor an autonomous (and independent) language of nature, but a synthesis of the two in which both forego their self-presence, either as subject or object. The formation, finally, is of something very like a text, as we said earlier. Never forgetting that nature is a language, we are entitled to read this passage as parallel to a statement from The Preface to Lyrical Ballads, in which Wordsworth speaks of how, in poetry, "man and the objects that surround him"--including, of course, all manner of signs--"act and re-act upon each other, so as to

produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure."[21]

Are we not entitled, in the light of the evidence so far, to consider "The Pedlar" as an extended meditation--an allegory, if you will--of the poetic process itself? If so, then the early material in the text describes the infinite complexity of its basic structure--the nature, in fact, of the act of reading. Reading, as we shall see, is a form of writing, and vice versa.

But we anticipate the outcome of our argument. Something happens when the boy grows older; we might describe that process as the transformation, through the medium of the human subject, of the "inarticulate" into an "articulate" language. The "line," it develops, has a history; a "line," that is, of its own. The "line of the line" is the topic of our final chapter, and the "lines" in which we find it are the lines that make up "The Pedlar."

VI

The preliminary experience of nature, in which the subject is shaped and marked by the sounds and traces of the "inarticulate language"--the process of being "informed," as Wordsworth calls it--is not a simple genetic structure in its own right: it is not an experience of simple cause and effect, in which a prior nature, a system which antedates the subject, shapes the subject into a predetermined form. Rather, it is a communion, an interaction, in which the subject is just as active as nature and just as passive. Put in temporal terms, one would say that the subject precedes nature just as nature precedes the subject, and the history of the self in the world (in language) begins at the point where the two anteriorities intersect. This scheme is not, to be sure, explicitly stated in "The Pedlar," but it is predicated by the interactive process of "tracing a mind" in the "lineaments of nature." For an explicit statement of the scheme, we need only turn to another passage on the topic of tracing:

> . . . let us trace this streamlet to its source;
> Feebly it trickles with an earthly sound,
> And a few steps may bring it to the spot
> Where, haply, crowned with flowerets and green herbs,

> The mountain infant to the sun comes forth,
> Like human life from darkness.[1]

We cannot "trace" the human soul before its apparition as a trace, as an informed subject, any more than we can trace the course of the stream before its existence as a trace. But the soul, like the stream, antedates the trajectory of its formation in nature, just as nature antedates the arrival of the soul on the scene. This is what we mean when we say that being informed is not simply a genetic structure of cause and effect; and if the "moment of origin" is not itself a simple genetic structure--not even, strictly speaking, a genetic structure--then the subsequent moments of the history of the trace are likely to be just as complex in their own temporality. They are neither effects nor causes. There is no simple chain of cause and effect in the history of the trace. Rather, there is a sequence of transformations, in which the original communion is repeated in different forms. The history of the trace is the episodic repetition of "communion;" this history is discontinuous, each episode existing in a position of pure anteriority and/or posteriority to each other episode. This, of course, is also the relational mode of signs in a written text. Signs are discontinuous (the very possibility of their articulation lies in their spacing,

[1] The Excursion, Book III, ll. 30-35; P. W. V, l. 76.

their being apart from each other); but, insofar as a text is coherent, each sign maintains within itself the trace of the other signs in the text.

This discontinuous coherence is a function of the structural play of difference and repetition inherent in every sign system--a function, be it emphasized, which is temporal as well as spatial. This point is difficult to grasp, and therefore deserves a brief digressive explanation. We are so accustomed to thinking of form and structure in purely spatial terms that we overlook the temporal dimension. We, the readers, may overlook it, that is: Wordsworth himself did not, which is why he can describe all intra-textual relationships--be they of "articulate" or "inarticulate language"--in a terminology that is at once temporal and spatial, as when he refers to

> . . . the curious links
> With which the perishable hours of life
> Are bound together, and the world of thought
> Exists and is sustained.[2]

Here, "life" and "thought" are described as unitary and totalized structures--as having "links," that is, which are "bound together," and as a "world," that is, as a whole. And if we take our clue from words such as "link," "bind" and "world," which define those struc-

[2] "The Pedlar," ll. 78-81.

tures as chained, or monadic, we are likely to conceive of their forms in purely spatial terms. Such a concept, in turn, could easily tempt us into thinking of those forms as spatial objects, which would then be present to consciousness in the way that objects are, as an opposing term in the polarity of object and subject.

But those structures have a temporal dimension as well. The "world of thought" is "sustained," which is to say that it has duration. And those "curious links" "bind together" the "perishable hours of life." Such phrasing brings home, in a very curious fashion indeed, the spatial character of time, and the temporal character of paradigmatic systems. For, on the one hand, the "hours of life" are the foci, the modal points, in the system, whereas the "links" perform the subsidiary function of relating those points to each other. Conceived in this fashion, the "hours" are the present terms of the system, whereas the links are absent and virtual, like the bonds between the atoms of a molecule.

But this model does not do justice to the text nor, for that matter, to the structure of sign, of form (the terms of the system) as Wordsworth himself conceives it. For a sign is a synthesis, an interpenetration of the self-present and the non-self-present, of self and other, as when, for example, the subject

gazing on the landscape is "informed" by the spectacle. Seen in terms of a system, the synthesis operates in the following way: every term in a system carries within it the traces of every other term in the system; every word in a language, for instance, carries within it the traces of every other word in the language--which is to say that the "word" is not purely present-to-itself.[3] Nor, in the phrase "perishable hours of life," is the "hour," the sign-term of the (temporal) system, purely present-to-itself: those "hours" are "perishable," their very "presence," as hours, is predicated on their brevity, and their function as terms is predicated on their relation to other "hours," equally "perishable," in a system of hours. They are "perishable" precisely because they are hours in relation to other hours. "Links," on the other hand, may be absent, i.e. purely virtual, but they are stable, like the bonds in a chain They "sustain" the "world of thought". They have duration. They may not be "hours," but they have a temporal dimension. In effect, the more carefully one examines this extraordinary passage, the more struck one is by the similarities, as well as the differences, of "hours" and "links". They are purely relational terms. (This is not a minor issue. On the rhetorical level, for instance, it solicits a reconsideration of the position of the "spots of time" in The Prelude.)

[3] Jacques Derrida, Positions; Paris, 1972; pp. 38-46.

To summarize before proceeding: the interactive process between child and landscape is not inherently genetic, though it may be taken as a model or exemplar for his other interactions. The narrative of those interactions, as related in "The Pedlar," is not a continuous genealogy of causes and effects, but a sequence--not purely "temporal," but to a considerable degree expository, along the lines of an argument--a sequence of discontinuous episodes that repeat the structure of interaction. In other words, the coherence of the text does not lie in its diachronic continuity, but in the degree to which the episodes "interpret" one another, analeptically and proleptically, in the degree, that is, to which they "impress thoughts" on one another. Finally, coherence of this sort extends beyond the immediate context. No single passage in this poem, or in any other poem by Wordsworth, can be read by itself in isolation.

When he first addresses himself to the theme of "transformation," Wordsworth takes explicit pains to minimize the difference involved in the passage from one realm to another (from reading nature to reading books), and to emphasize the one element common to the two heterogeneous regions, the common property of form. We can see his emphasis in his handling of transitions, such as the following:

> Even in their fixed and steady lineaments
> He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind,
> Expression ever varying.
> Thus informed,
> He had small need of books. . . .
> But greedily he read and again,
> Whate'er the rustic Vicar's shelf supplied. . . .
> (55-58, 65-66)

The passage occurs from nature to books, but it does not do so out of necessity: there is no need to read the Vicar's books, no deficiency in nature to be supplemented. That is because nature is fully formed. Wordsworth, at one point, even extends the argument to the level where real books seem to be an inessential addition to the "rustic Vicar's shelf":

> A Shepherd on the lonely mountain-tops
> Such intercourse was his, and in this sort
> Was his existence oftentimes possessed.
> Oh <u>then</u> how beautiful, how bright, appeared
> The written promise. He had early learned
> To reverence the volume which displays
> The mystery, the life which cannot die,
> But in the mountains did he FEEL his faith,
> There did he see the writing. All things there
> Breathed immortality, revolving life,
> And greatness still revolving, infinite.
> There littleness was not, the least of things
> Seemed infinite, and there his spirit shaped
> Her prospects, nor did he <u>believe</u>--he saw.
>
> (115-128)

We might be tempted, on the strength of the phrase "All things there/Breathed immortality . . . ," to assume that the appeal of the book of nature is its phonological component, "the power in sound/To breathe an elevated mood." Unlike books, which are without

breath or voice, and therefore "lifeless,"[4] nature is fully animated, and respires with song. This distinction is indeed important to Wordsworth, at least in his later work, but we do not find such an emphasis in this particular passage. Rather, the weight of the theme falls on the line, "there did he see the writing." Nature is written, inscribed; and, because the boy is fully read in that scripture, Wordsworth is able to say "Oh <u>then</u> how beautiful, how bright, appeared/The written promise," again emphasizing the common feature of the two regions, and minimizing their differences. Indeed, there are moments when he seems to encourage us to ignore the distinction between "inarticulate" and "articulate" language altogether; when he seems to suggest that the signs in nature have identifiable referents; as when, for instance, he writes about

> . . . some peak
> Familiar with forgotten years which shews
> Inscribed, as with the silence of the thought,
> Upon its bleak and visionary sides
> The history of many a winter storm,
> Or obscure records of the path of fire.
>
> (168-173)

It is hard to remember that these "inscriptions" are "inarticulate," for, like the "articulate language"

[4] As in the lines, "The scene before him lies in perfect view,/Exposed and lifeless, as a written book." <u>Prelude</u>, VIII, 11. 726-727 (1805 version).

of men, they function as signs representing "thought." The difference lies only in the words "histories" and "records": in "articulate language," it will be recalled, the relationship between sign and referent is in essence arbitrary and unmotivated. There is no motivation, no essential link, between the concept of "tree" and the written or spoken sign, "tree."[5] The same would hold for the broader documents of language. There is no motivated link--mimetic theories of discourse notwithstanding--between an historiographic account and the events accounted for; the conventions of discourse at play in von Clausewitz's account of Waterloo bear no essential relation to the happenings of June, 1815. But in the lines "some peak/ . . . which shows/inscribed . . ./The history of many a winter storm./Or obscure records of the path of fire," the arbitrary gap between sign and referent is absent, simply because the signs, the "history" and "records," are themselves the physical residue of storm and fire--the blackened traces of ash, the eroded scars of snow and rain. These signs are totally "motivated," as Saussure would say, which removes them from the purely formal sign system of human language. But the difference is easily overlooked, partly because the notion of the "arbitrary" is itself so easily disregarded, and more particularly because, in this passage, Wordsworth has brought "inarticulate language" to a

[5] Saussure, op. cit., p. 99.

point of near congruence with "articulate language." This is consistent with Wordsworth's efforts, in "The Pedlar," to stress the element of "form" common to both languages--to stress, more precisely, the linguistic or textual quality of nature.

Conversely, when Wordsworth discusses books in "The Pedlar," he does so in such a way as to minimize the singularity of literary language. We saw, for example, that he mentions the Bible only in connection with the boy's rapport with nature--and nature's is the more compelling text: "But in the mountains did he FEEL his faith,/There did he see the writing" (122-123). When mentioning Milton, Wordsworth simply flies past him in the space of two lines:

> Among the hills
> He gazed upon that mighty orb of song,
> The divine Milton.
>
> (144-146)

Given the depth of Wordsworth's devotion to Milton, a comment of such spectacular brevity can only be taken as an ellipsis--a hyperbolic ellipsis, if one could hazard such an oxymoron. Nor do the special properties of literature draw any consideration when Wordsworth actually describes the contents of the Pedlar's early books. Consider the emphasis in the following lines:

> But greedily he read and read again
> Whate'er the rustic Vicar's shelf supplied:
> The life and death of martyrs who sustained
> Intolerable pangs, and here and there
> A straggling volume, torn and incomplete,
> Which left half-told the preternatural tale,
> Romance of giants, chronicle of fiends,
> Profuse in garniture of wooden cuts
> Strange and uncouth, dire faces, figures dire
> Sharp-kneed, sharp-elbowed, and lean-ankled too,
> With long and ghostly shanks, forms which once seen
> Could never be forgotten . . .
>
> (65-76)

"Book of martyrs," "romance," "chronicle of fiends": three very different kinds of books, all brought together under the common rubric of "terror" (Milton and the Bible are the books of "love") are here enumerated quickly and in a circumstantial fashion. We are told where the boy found them, how few of them there were, how battered the volumes were. And when we are introduced to their content, only their subject matter is discussed among their literary dimensions. Wordsworth turns our attention, not to the appearance or the style of the writing, but to the "wooden cuts," to the "pictured" rather than the written lines, to the vivid "figures" and "forms which once seen/Could never be forgotten" (emphasis added). Again, it is the common property of books and nature that Wordsworth dwells on; the differences do not serve his purpose here, the purpose of bringing home the similarities of the languages.

When he finally discusses the differences, he does so in an indirect and understated way, so indirect that

the passage in question--it concerns the study of geometry--tends to subdue our curiosity even when arousing it. For the reader drawn to Wordsworth's gentle enigmas, the passage is a loaded rift of ore. Within the perspective of this essay, furthermore, it serves an essential purpose: it tells us how to move from "inarticulate" to "articulate language," from natural to human signs, without resorting to the "language of passion." And it prepares us, finally, for one possible answer to a question that has lurked in the margins of this paper from the outset--namely, what, if anything, distinguishes a literary text from the text of a landscape, the sort of landscape that appears in the opening lines of Tintern Abbey.

Here is the passage on "geometry":

> Lore of different kind,
> The annual savings of a toilsome life,
> The Schoolmaster supplied; books that explain
> The purer elements of truth involved
> In lines and numbers, and by charm severe,
> Especially perceived where nature droops
> And feeling is suppressed, preserve the mind
> Busy in solitude and poverty.
> And thus employed he many a time o'erlooked
> The listless hours when in the hollow vale,
> Hollow and green, he lay on the green turf
> In lonesome idleness. What could he do?
> Nature was at his heart, and he perceived,
> Though yet he knew not how, a wasting power
> In all things which from her sweet influence
> Might tend to wean him. Therefore with her hues,
> Her forms, and with the spirit of her forms,
> He clothed the nakedness of austere truth.
> While yet he lingered in the elements
> Of science, and among her simplest laws,
> His triangles they were the stars of heaven,

> The silent stars; his altitudes the crag
> Which is the eagle's birth-place . . .
>
> (146-168)

A rapid paraphrase of the passage might go something like this. The boy studied geometry, a useful field because diverting at times of boredom when "nature droops." Yet something, perhaps geometry itself, has a tendency or "wasting power" to draw us away from nature altogether. "Therefore," somewhat paradoxically to be sure, the boy somehow uses geometry to preserve his rapport with the "sweet influence" of nature; or perhaps he binds geometric forms to natural forms, so as to keep the two spheres of interest from diverging.

John Jones apparently reads the passage in this spirit. In a paragraph consistent with the commentary cited earlier, he writes:

> There is no passage in Wordsworth more important than this, for it makes the main argument of his poetry brilliantly clear. The juvenile and clumsy statements of sympathy, in terms of open correspondence of inner and outer, are in fact directed toward the experience which Wordsworth here describes. The child does not learn about one world of unchanging abstract types, of mental stuff, and about a second, shifting world of natural objects. He learns about a single world in which triangles march about the sky. . . .[6]

[6] Jones, op. cit., p. 81.

Jonathan Wordsworth disagrees with this appealing vision of unity, though of course he operates within the same traditional oppositions of inner and outer, of subject and object. For Mr. Wordsworth, the passage is a "curious, and of course unsuccessful, attempt to make scientific truth acceptable by treating it in terms of Nature. . . . Mathematical fact cannot be humanized, integrated with a world of feeling. . . ."[7] When two critics, starting from the same premises, diverge so strongly in their readings of a given passage, we can be fairly sure that the passage is ambiguous, and that it probably escapes their premises as well.

First, the ambiguity. These lines are written with assurance, but their tone conceals a persistent vacillation of reference. This vacillation occurs, most strikingly, in the handling of relative clauses. To begin with, in some relatives, such as "books that explain" (148) or "all things which" (160), the pronouns are expressed, while in others, such as "the purer elements of truth involved" (149) or "the mind/Busy in solitude" (152-3), they are unexpressed, or "asyndetic"--and there is often a problem, with the latter kind, of determining whether, in fact, there is a relative clause at all. In either kind of relative, moreover, there lies the question of whether it is restrictive or descrip-

[7] Jonathan Wordsworth, op. cit., pp. 225-227.

tive. For example, is the clause "books that explain/The purer elements of truth" a descriptive clause, enlarging on the contents of the book, or does it carry a restrictive sense in opposition to "books that do not explain" the elements--books, for example, like Milton's "mighty orb of Song" (145)? Grammatically, the relative clause performs both functions, and the reader's task is to choose a reading on the basis of his interpretation of the context.

These minutiae of syntax have a hermeneutic value, far exceeding their affective impact on the reader. Consider, for instance, the phrase "the purer elements of truth involved in lines and numbers." "Involved," as we say, is an asyndetic relative, standing for "that are" or "which are involved." But what is its antecedent, "truth," or "elements of truth"? And, whatever its antecedent, is the clause a restrictive or a descriptive one? And while we are at it, we might also notice a double function in the phrase "purer elements": we can take it either as a "relative comparative," contrasting "purer" to "grosser" elements, or we can take it as an "absolute comparative," as in the phrases "higher education" or "lower orders." As with the relative clauses, both readings of the adjective are valid, so that the intonations of the line are of an almost indeterminable variety. They could mean "the purer, as opposed to the grosser, elements of truth,

which is involved in lines and numbers;" or "the purer elements of truth (as opposed to fiction) that is involved in lines and numbers;" or "the purer element of the truth that is involved in lines and numbers (not colors and sounds);" or any variation of these that is either restrictive or descriptive in some sense. What reading we decide on is of some moment, of course, given the definitive position of the phrase in the passage as a whole--a passage which, at subsequent points, is marked by ambiguities of a kindred order.

Given this flux of the passage, one could write it off as unreadable. But to do so would trivialize the problem, and even distort it. The passage, after all, really oscillates between two fundamental readings, which, on the syntactic level, we have called "restrictive" and "descriptive." Perhaps a better way of putting it would be "restricted" and "broadened," at least in reference to its thematic material. In the narrow or restricted sense, "the purer elements of truth involved/In lines and numbers" clearly refers to the discipline of geometry--we recall that the title of Euclid's text is the Elements, and at the close of the passage, we read about "triangles" and "altitudes." But a broader and more general sense of "the purer elements of truth involved/In lines and numbers" may also apply; it could refer, for instance, to another discipline, such as prosody, the study of the "lines

and numbers" of poetic language. More abstractly still, it could apply to any kind of formalism that takes shape and quantity as its topic; "the nakedness of austere truth" may simply be a phrase describing formalism in its most general sense. One could, finally, read the passage as an equipoise between the restricted and the broadened meaning, so that geometry becomes an exemplary version of formalism in general.

Does all this splitting of hairs have any bearing on the text? We believe it does: for just as the "line" is the universal feature of all language, so the "science of the line," formalism, is a universal science--not limited to geometry alone, but extending to the study of the language of nature and the language of man.

We will go further. As a science, formalism is a meta-language, the language that takes all language as its subject. And since it can, indeed, take language as a subject, it functions as an "articulate language," a system of signs with (arbitrary) referents--the referents, in this case, being the signs of the language under study.

Formalism, then, is a human language. One might even call it the essential human language, the one that takes human language as its subject. And therein lies its main resource and its main limitation. As a language of language it need not study the forms of

nature. Rather, it can, and indeed must, give its attention to the more accessible and more complex issues of articulate forms. In this sense it is autonomous, and indeed truly independent from nature. "From her sweet influence" it might very well "tend to wean" us, by virtue of its own specificity as a discipline. Formalism is an "un-natural" activity, and has no need of nature, of the things in nature, to fulfill its destiny as a science. And within its own domain it is infinitely complex, can thus "preserve the mind/Busy in solitude and poverty." It exerts "charm severe" when the "sweet influence" of nature "droops," but--and this is crucial--it also "suppresses" that influence. This double movement of filling the void and also creating it is caught in the following lines:

> And thus employed he many a time o'erlooked
> The listless hours when in the hollow vale,
> Hollow and green, he lay on the green turf
> In lonesome idleness.
> (emphasis added)
>
> (154-157)

"O'erlooked" is a verb that moves in two directions at once. It means, on the one hand, absenting oneself from the vacancy of the "listless hours," or, in terms of the landscape, from the "hollowness" of the vale. On the other hand, it also means "ignoring," "not paying attention" to nature in one of its aspects--in terms of the landscape, ignoring the "green" turf on which

"he lay." So that "o'erlooking" is both a kind of "employment" and a "lonesome idleness." (Wordsworth emphasizes the doubleness of the process by phrasing it in an intricate chiasmus, "employment" and "idleness" passing through "hollow vale" and "green turf" to intersect in a single phrase, "hollow and green," where both terms act proleptically and analeptically--the landscape is "hollow" but so is the idleness; the turf is "green" but so is the "employment.")

The problem posed by the acquisition of formal knowledge is one that Wordsworth answers in a manner consistent with his fidelity to the "line," to the destiny of the experience of form. One does not forsake the science of forms, as if such a thing were even possible. Rather, one "lingers in the elements of science;" one adopts, that is, the perspective of formalism, but one extends it beyond its most reduced subject matter. For if form is everywhere, one need not confine the meditation of form to the "purer elements of truth involved/In lines and numbers," to the region of geometry, say, or of prosody. One can, so to speak, range through other regions without forsaking the formalist perspective--the region of nature, for instance, of "inarticulate language," whose "sweet influence" Wordsworth, or rather the Pedlar, is clearly determined to sustain.

How is this done? Wordsworth offers two suggestions:

> Therefore with her hues,
> Her forms, and with the spirit of her forms,
> He clothed the nakedness of austere truth.
> While yet he lingered in the elements
> Of science, and among her simplest laws,
> His triangles they were the stars of heaven,
> The silent stars; his altitudes the crag
> Which is the eagle's birth-place. . . .
>
> (161-168)

In the first three lines, "austere truth" is represented as the essential, the determining mode, the body for which the forms of nature are as garments or adornments, attributes or properties that are disposable and inessential. But then a second proposition is advanced: "his triangles they were the stars of heaven,/The silent stars." The language is awkward and strangely forceful. Wordsworth does not say--something the first three lines would lead us to expect--that the stars "clothed" his triangles, nor even that the constellations were <u>like</u> triangles; no, "his triangles they were the stars of heaven." He asserts a principle of identity between forms pertaining to heterogeneous and discrete regions. It is this literal equivalence of the indicative form of "to be" that has caught John Jones's attention, and prompted him to write about "a single world in which triangles march about the sky."

Where have we seen this sort of expression before? Does it not recall the Pedlar's initial contact with nature, when he "saw the hills/Grow larger in the darkness"? Here, as there, we are confronted with a trans-

fer; the first we called a "blind" transfer, the attribution of human qualities to inanimate beings arising from the experience of passion, of terror; its rhetorical correlative was the figure of metaphor. In the line "his triangles they were the stars of heaven," we are also dealing with a transfer; it is of a slightly different kind--not from a subject to an object, but from one sort of object ("triangles") to another ("stars")--and yet it is a transfer nonetheless.

But is it a blind transfer? For several reasons, we submit that it is not. One could point, for instance, to the affective circumstances of the transfer, which are not at all passionate, but are "listless hours" of "lonesome idleness," a time when "feeling is suppressed," and which anticipates the "tranquillity" that Wordsworth will soon designate as the precondition for literary composition. More important, no doubt, is the perspective from which the Pedlar effects the transfer; it happens "while yet he lingered in the elements of science." While "in" the region of geometry, he confers geometric properties on forms that are not "geometric," and he does so with a full comprehension of both spheres, of geometry as well as nature. He knows the difference. The transfer is therefore a lucid act of the will. Later, Wordsworth will characterize this gesture as an act of the imagination, in which "images independent of each other (are) endowed by the

mind with properties that do not inhere in them" (emphasis added).[8]

Which is to say--reverting now to our contrast between "clothing the truth" and asserting that "triangles are stars"--that the "formalist" is confronted with a choice. He can emphasize the truth of his forms and the laws that govern them, or he can use those truths as a starting point for inventing fictions. The first choice is the philosopher's, the epistemologist's; the second is the poet's. Starting forth from a state of demystification, he proceeds to generate statements which are not true--stating, however, the truth about the things that are not true by designating them as fictions.

We must not forget, however, that the two modes of truth related at this moment of the poem, do themselves actually belong to a narrative that quite literally began in a moment of blindness; and, to this reader at least, everything subsequent to that origin is haunted by its priority, even when, as in the instance of the passage just read, the moment of blindness has been subsequently analyzed. Which is one way of asserting that not even the most lucid and truthful utterances in poetic language can be taken as statements of fact. Rather, they are configurations in the game of forms.

[8] Zall, _op. cit._, p. 148.

I should like to close this essay with a comment on one further transformation of the line. Throughout "The Pedlar," we are presented with the hero's experience of the trace, as an immediate "impression," as an object of reflection, and as a medium of invention. But Wordsworth doesn't stop here; instead, after taking us through a sequence of similar experiences--the Pedlar's decision to wander and his subsequent adventures--he suddenly drops the narrational mode and starts to speak <u>in propria persona</u>. What he offers is a description of the Pedlar as he knew him, and addresses the reader in a spirit of passionate eloquence:

> He was a man,
> One whom you could not pass without remark:
> If you had met him on a rainy day
> You would have stopped to look at him. Robust,
> Active and nervous was his gait, his limbs
> And his whole figure breathed intelligence.
> His body, tall and shapely, shewed in front
> A faint line of the hollowness of age,
> Or rather what appeared the curvature
> Of toil; his head looked up steady and fixed.
> Age had compressed the rose upon his cheek
> Into a narrower circle of deep red,
> But had not tamed his eye, which, under brows
> Of hoary grey, had meanings which it brought
> From years of youth, which, like a being made
> Of many beings, he had wondrous skill
> To blend with meanings of the years to come,
> Human, or such as lie beyond the grave.
>
> (294-311)

Yes, you would have to "look at him." You would observe the shape of his body, the "faint line of the

hollowness of age," his "steady and fixed head," the "circle of deep red" upon his cheek. You would look at his eyes, which have "meanings," and not just present meanings, but meanings that "blend with meanings of the years to come." You would read him, as you read a text, because, in his commerce with the lines and shapes of life--articulate or inarticulate--he has himself become a text, and the text has become him. His story is the history of the trace.

It would be tendentious and laborsome to show how the words used to describe the Pedlar repeat the words that describe the "line" in its earlier transformations. Rather than do this, we will round out our own "transformation" of the text by quoting an intermediate transformation, the one that passes from the Pedlar to Wordsworth himself:

> Long had I loved him. Oh, it was most sweet
> To hear him teach in unambitious style
> Reasoning and thought, by painting as he did
> The manners and the passions. Many a time
> He made a holiday and left his pack
> Behind, and we two wandered through the hills
> A pair of random travellers. His eye
> Flashing poetic fire he would repeat
> The songs of Burns, or many a ditty wild
> Which he had fitted to the moorland harp,
> His own sweet verse, and as we trudged along
> Together did we make the hollow grove
> Ring with our transports.
>
> (312-324)

Poetry does not happen in a void. To revert to an earlier metaphor, it is a text, a woven cloth, and

its threads are the traces and the forms that the poet finds at hand. Some of these traces he finds in nature; according to Wordsworth, indeed, those traces impress us, and predispose us to find other traces elsewhere. And when we compose a text--and compose ourselves in the process, for "text" and "self" are synonymous in the act of composition--we re-inscribe, or repeat, the traces we receive. Thus the Pedlar, his "eye flashing fire," "would repeat/The songs of Burns." Or he would repeat "his own sweet verse" in the form of "The Pedlar." And so we repeat it here, re-weaving its traces into our critique. In those fixed and steady lineaments, we trace an ebbing and a flowing mind.

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