

## **Poetic Identity, Aesthetics and Landscape in Wordsworth's Poetry**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I seek to do two things. First of all, I trace, roughly, the history of Wordsworth's representation of landscape in his poetry from his early poems, such as *An Evening Walk*, to the 1805 completed version of *The Prelude*. Secondly, I examine the poet's concerns about poetic identity as reflected in this history. In his early poems, Wordsworth, when describing nature, adopts eighteenth-century aesthetics such as the picturesque, but as his poetry moves toward the meditative mode, landscape—rather than being mere external objects—begins to symbolize the poet's imaginative mind. Such a development is most prominent in *The Prelude*, and can be seen in passages such as the Simplon Pass and the Climb up Snowdon. This development also shows how Wordsworth, in his poetic career, attempts to reconcile empiricism and transcendentalism.

### **Keywords**

Wordsworth, landscape, poetic identity, the sublime, *The Prelude*

W. J. T. Mitchell in *Landscape and Power* summarizes the study of landscape in the twentieth century. Although he is talking about landscape painting, the tie between painting and poetry (the sister arts) in the eighteenth century makes his assertion applicable to poetry as well. He writes:

The study of landscape has gone through two major shifts in [the twentieth] century: the first [...] attempted to read the history of landscape primarily on the basis of a history of landscape painting, and to narrativize that history as a progressive movement toward purification of the visual field; the second [...] tended to decenter the role of painting and pure formal visuality in favor of a semiotic and hermeneutic approach that treated landscape as an allegory of psychological or ideological themes. (1)

In this paper, I intend to do both kinds of reading: I will trace, roughly, the history of William Wordsworth's representation of landscape in his poetry from his early poems, such as *An Evening Walk*, to the 1805 completed version of *The Prelude*, and then I will examine his concerns about poetic identity as reflected in this history.

Eighteenth-century Britain saw an increasing interest in landscape and landscape art as more and more tourists went on the Grand Tour to the Alps and Italy, bringing back not only descriptions of the tour but also the enthusiasm for Italian landscape paintings. This enthusiasm was to influence, to a great extent, eighteenth-century British aesthetics—the picturesque, the beautiful and the sublime—as well as to stimulate tourists' interest in exploring remote areas of the native country, especially the Scottish Highlands, North Wales and the Lake District. Discussing the picturesque, Robin Jarvis points out that in the late eighteenth century, “[for] persons of educated taste, the conventions of ideal landscape became so thoroughly internalised that natural scenes were considered beautiful only insofar as they resembled one of Claude's paintings” (182). Such a taste became the underlying aesthetic principle of various guide books published during this period. Wordsworth certainly read these books,<sup>1</sup> and was influenced by the picturesque, as he admits in Book Eleven of the 1805 version of *The Prelude*. In this book, although the poet refers to the picturesque as an “infection of the age,” and seems to dismiss it in favor of a way of viewing nature in which the senses are “subservient” to “the great ends of liberty and power” (XI: 182-83), traces of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Duncan Wu's two books on Wordsworth's reading: *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799*, and *Wordsworth's Reading 1800-1815*.

picturesque can be found in his poems written as early as 1788 and 1790—*An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* as well as such later works as *Guide to the Lakes*. Besides the picturesque, Wordsworth was also exposed to another way of viewing landscape—the aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime,<sup>2</sup> the knowledge of which would most probably have been passed on to him by Coleridge, who was well versed in Kant and German philosophy.

Most critics agree that Wordsworth's early works, such as *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*, were written from a picturesque perspective,<sup>3</sup> and both poems, in their original versions, contain heavy borrowings from eighteenth-century poets and writers such as Beattie, Thomson, Goldsmith, Collins, and James Clarke. *An Evening Walk*, especially, is a poem under the pervasive influence of the picturesque as the narrator wanders from spot to spot, or "station" to "station," describing the scenes with picture-making rules and vocabulary, and imitative of his predecessors in topographical poetry. Nicola Trott observes that the opening passage of *An Evening Walk* "assumes acquaintance with the famous 'stations' and 'prospects' of the [Lake] District, and with the literature that defined them. On one level, [the poem] is an ambitious attempt to versify the prose Tours of scenes familiar from childhood" (115). Yet despite the imitative quality of these poems, there are signs showing that Wordsworth is beginning to experiment with his landscape. Trott finds such experiment in Wordsworth's use of "chiaroscuro"—the effects of light and darkness (115-17). James Heffernan also states that in representing the sublimity of the Alps in *Descriptive Sketches* Wordsworth has declared his poetic independence and gone beyond the rules of picturesque description (19).

I would like to complement their arguments by pointing out an aspect they have not mentioned: human figures in the landscape. Through the figures in these poems, the female vagrant with her infants in *An Evening Walk* and the wandering gypsy with her babe in *Descriptive Sketches*, Wordsworth begins to explore the possibility of the narrative mode, and also touches upon the theme of social injustice. In these respects the poems anticipate *Salisbury Plain* as well as the narrative poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. In a letter to Francis Wrangham, Wordsworth says that the object of *Salisbury Plain* is "partly to expose the vices of the penal law and the calamities of war as they affect individuals" (Wordsworth, *Letters* 20 November 1795). The vagrant figures in *An*

<sup>2</sup> Traces of the aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime can be found in *The Prelude*. One instance is in Book I of the 1805 *The Prelude* where the poet mentions how in his early childhood he "grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear" (305-6).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Noyes; Heffernan; and Liu.

*Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* represent Wordsworth's intention to address social problems in his early poetry. Generally speaking, his early topographical poems consist of three parts: picturesque descriptions, reflections on human suffering, and social protest. In these three parts we find the prototypes of poems Wordsworth was later to develop.

The poetic tendencies shown in Wordsworth's early poems were gradually formed in *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798. What stands out in this collection of poems is "Tintern Abbey," a poem that was added to the book at the last minute before its publication. While most of the poems Wordsworth contributed to *Lyrical Ballads* are, as the title suggests, narratives, "Tintern Abbey" is a highly meditative poem in which we begin to see the poet turn his gaze from external landscape to internal feelings and spiritual changes. Of the poem's 159 lines, landscape description takes up only 22 lines (lines 1 to 22). Now 1798 was also the year that saw the gestation of the plan for "a philosophic poem" as Wordsworth and Coleridge, roaming the Quantock Hills early that year, held enthusiastic conversations on this project. At the end of the year, William and Dorothy, following Coleridge, went to Goslar, Germany. It was during their stay in Goslar that Wordsworth started to write the highly personal and localized poetry that finally turned into the autobiographical *The Prelude* of 1799. In "Tintern Abbey," the poet already begins to associate the landscape of the Wye valley with his birthplace—the Lakes. John Barrell, comparing this poem with "Michael," comments:

The idea [in "Michael"] is different from that in "Tintern Abbey"; in which the knowledge Wordsworth has arrived at by the influence of natural objects can be discussed as separate from those objects; and in which we are entitled to feel that another landscape carefully enough chosen, might have served Wordsworth as well in helping him to "see into the life of things." (182-83)

While it is possible that another landscape might have served the same purpose for Wordsworth, the "sense of place," which is the crux of Barrell's argument, is surely there in the poem (even if not very strong). We must not forget that the poem was written on the poet's "revisit" to the place (a fact that he reiterates at the beginning of the poem), which solicited comparisons that led to his sense of time and change, and eventually to his recollection of the various stages of his spiritual growth. Barrell neglects the fact that the poem is not simply about transcendence, but also about the

poet's past relationship with *nature*, not simply about the landscape in front of him, but also about landscapes he saw in childhood and youth. Rather than presenting pictorial descriptions of these landscapes, he expresses emotions related to, or evoked by, them.

But there is a reason behind Barrell's comment, and it is to be found in the shift of emphasis from landscape to the self, which seems to undermine the significance of landscape and threaten the physical particularity of the place. So what we find in "Tintern Abbey" is a very interesting dynamic between self and nature, and I see it as a transition in Wordsworth's landscape poetry from imitations of eighteenth-century topographical poems to the emergence of an individual style. If landscape in this poem lacks a strong "identity of place" as Barrell claims, it is due, paradoxically, to a burgeoning sense of self which was identified with certain places in the poet's life, and which gave the poetry that he wrote later that year a highly personalized *and localized* quality.

In "The Politics of 'Tintern Abbey,'" Kenneth Johnston argues that in "Tintern Abbey" there is a tension, brought on by Wordsworth's social responsibility, in the poet's representation of the growth of his mind. Such a tension is reflected in Wordsworth's struggle to transform the picturesque way of nature-viewing to transcendental "quasi-religious" sentiments (Johnston, "The Politics" 6). In other words, Wordsworth tries in this poem to suppress the socially and politically violent aspect of Tintern Abbey represented by the beggars and the smoke produced by charcoal manufacturing depicted by William Gilpin in *Observations on the River Wye [...] Made in the Summer of 1770* (Johnston, "The Politics" 6-14). As Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" is in certain details indebted to Gilpin's book, the fact that Wordsworth transforms these two unpleasant sights around the abbey into "wreaths of smoke / Sent up, in silence, from among the trees! / With some uncertain notice, as might seem / Of vagrant dwellers, in the houseless woods" (17-20) reveals his anxiety of accommodating in a single poem both the aesthetic requirements and his social responsibility for the suffering humans. This, Johnston concludes, "is part of the cost of his becoming a poet, and the price of 'Tintern Abbey's' being the poem it is: moving without fundamental breaks from the beautiful landscape toward seeing into the life of things, with Nature as 'The soul of all my moral being'" ("The Politics" 12).

Johnston's argument is convincing, and I agree to his assertion that

it is part of the triumph of ["Tintern Abbey"] to be able to include as full a representation of [the growth of the mind] as it does—in comparison, for

example, with Wordsworth's tendency elsewhere in the *Lyrical Ballads* to divide his poems into powerful narratives of human suffering [...] and equally powerful meditations about the interrelation of Mind and Nature. ("The Politics" 12-13)

Indeed, we do observe such a thematic split in *Lyrical Ballads*. What I would like to add is that we must remember that Wordsworth at this time had not truly established his poetic identity. In "Resolution and Independence," written in 1802, he still describes himself as being plunged into despondency over the tragic fate of poets. Johnston attributes Wordsworth's breaking off the composition of *The Recluse* in July 1798 to "his failure [...] to satisfactorily establish the connection between landscape viewing and social responsibility" (*Wordsworth* 9). This is true. But another reason, I suggest, is his need to assert himself as a poet. This assertion, we find, from the later-composed *Prelude*, must be made in the form of an autobiographical self-examination that proves to be something comparable to the myth-making of a transcendental mind. But in "Tintern Abbey," we already notice a turning in upon the self. As we mentioned before, in this poem, landscape description takes up only the opening 22 lines, and therefore the poem is, strictly speaking, less a landscape than a meditative poem. And it is interesting to note that, although the poet mentions "a sense sublime" (95), the sublimity is found not only in landscape but also in "the mind of man" (99). Jacqueline Labbe in her discussion of landscape and gender contends that this movement towards the sublime suggests that the poet has "outgrown" the "feminine eye" of viewing nature and achieved "completed maturation," which is represented by the sublimity which, in the eighteenth-century social context, usually only a male was privileged to attain (xvi). What the poet leaves behind is the "immature and feminized eye" that he yet finds in Dorothy, "mapping onto the feminine a visuality he associates with immaturity and the 'language of the sense'" (xvii). Labbe's feminist reading has called our attention to the gender aspect, which had often been neglected by Wordsworthian critics, and has thus contributed much to our understanding of Romantic poetry. However, she has overlooked the sense of uncertainty throughout "Tintern Abbey,"<sup>4</sup> and therefore fails to see that the poet's "abundant recompense" (88) is conditional; the compensation for the loss of the poet's former self is only partial. Moreover, when we read the "sense sublime" in the context

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<sup>4</sup> For example, lines 40 to 50 and lines 111 to 113 in "Tintern Abbey."

of Wordsworth's *oeuvre*, we find that such experience is not something gained in "maturity," but has been accessible since the poet's childhood.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, rather than seeing the sense of sublimity as gendered privilege granted to the male artist, I regard it as the beginning of Wordsworth's self-exploration, and thus a transition from the early phase of his poetic career to later developments.

As was mentioned before, Wordsworth began to work on what was to become the 1799 version of *The Prelude* in Goslar, Germany. The reason that he began to write *The Prelude* has much to do with his frustration in carrying on with *The Recluse*. But the experience of living, isolated, in a foreign country, might also have some bearing on his turning to recollections of his native land, and thus doubts about his poetic capability were not unnaturally linked to the river that passed through his birthplace. In the two-part *Prelude*, the sense of self that germinated in "Tintern Abbey" gains maximum importance as Wordsworth examines the self as a poet, and we find that his examination is inseparable from childhood landscapes. If landscape in "Tintern Abbey" is in danger of fading into the background of his meditation upon the self, in this early version of *The Prelude* it is always kept in the foreground. Even so, however, nature is given emphasis here, as it is in the full-length *Prelude*, because it is the nurturing spirit, the *genius loci*, that inspires Wordsworth's poetic genius. Depictions of landscape inevitably evolve into accounts of experiences that contribute to his awareness, whether then or later, of being the elect. The viewer of landscape is never a common person; he is always a poet.

Before Wordsworth embarked on the two-part *The Prelude* at the end of 1798, he had already written parts of *The Recluse* during his years at Racedown and Alfoxden, which include the poem that later became Book I of *The Excursion—The Ruined Cottage*. In this poem, Margaret's tale is of course about human suffering, and in the Pedlar's story, Wordsworth depicts him as a meditative soul who holds communion with nature, and through such communion develops his imagination and love for mankind. Here we again see the division Johnston mentions between human suffering and transcendental meditation in *Lyrical Ballads*. Without the Pedlar's biography, the story of Margaret would be simply another poem of human suffering and social protest, but the addition, in 1798, of the Pedlar's story, changes the meaning of the poem. Anne Janowitz, discussing *The Ruined Cottage*, points out that the poem "was written just as the poet's politico-poetical development was in transition," and the hostility of nature

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, "Immortality Ode" and the first two books of *The Prelude*.

in the poem was “transformed by the pair of meditative minds of Armytage and the narrator” (118, 119). Stephen Gill also states that in Margaret’s story, “Wordsworth was not [...] recapitulating on his social protest poetry of 1793 to 1795. He focuses now on Margaret’s suffering for quite different ends” (134). The ends, Gill suggests, are revealed in the philosophical passages of the poem which justify the telling of her story, and which indicate Wordsworth’s philosophical attempt to achieve truth through the workings of the imagination (134-37). These philosophical passages are largely to be found in the Pedlar’s story, and they are thematically linked to, and echoed in, Margaret’s tale:

Sympathies there are  
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,  
That steal upon the meditative mind  
And grow with thought. Beside yon spring I stood,  
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel  
One sadness, they and I. (*The Ruined Cottage* 79-84)<sup>6</sup>

The “natural” education that elevates the Pedlar’s mind and teaches him love is now brought to the test in Margaret’s story. Facing her plight and death, the Pedlar is able to interpret her tragedy and transcend it:

She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.  
I well remember that those very plumes,  
Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,  
By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o’er,  
As once I passed, did to my mind convey  
So still an image of tranquility,  
So calm and still, and looked so beautiful  
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,  
That what we feel of sorrow and despair  
From ruin and from change, and all the grief  
The passing shews of being leave behind,

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<sup>6</sup> Here I follow the version of *The Ruined Cottage* given in Jonathan Wordsworth’s *The Music of Humanity*, which is *MS.D.* of the poem. In this version, Wordsworth left out the story of the Pedlar, but later restored it in *MS.E.*

Appeared an idle dream that could not live  
Where meditation was. (512-24)

Wordsworth denied that the Pedlar's early experience and education were autobiographical, but told Isabella Fenwick:

Had I been born in a class which would have deprived me of what is called a liberal education, it is not unlikely that, being strong in body, I should have taken to a way of life such as that in which my Pedlar passed the greater part of his days. At all events, I am here called upon freely to acknowledge that the character I have represented in his person is chiefly an idea of what I fancied my own character would have become in his circumstances. (*The Poems* 952)

And there is an obvious association between the Pedlar's upbringing and Wordsworth's early experience described in *The Prelude*. Manuscript evidence shows that passages originally intended for *The Ruined Cottage* were merged with the poem on his own life.<sup>7</sup> Such an intertextual link suggests that Wordsworth probably had intended to place his own experience in a less personal context for the sake of both probing into philosophical questions and satisfying his social conscience at the same time, and on a larger scale. Janowitz also argues that Wordsworth in *The Ruined Cottage* seeks to "repair" human sufferings through a picturesque and humanistic representation of nature: "Rather than presenting a nature responding to political turmoil, Wordsworth here replaces the very problematic of politics with a poetico-aesthetic solution" (126). Yet the poet's ceasing to work, in 1798, on *The Recluse* and taking up composition on passages about his early childhood indicates that he probably discovered that the dramatic framework of *The Ruined Cottage* was inadequate to express what at that time became more urgent to him than social concerns—the examination of the poetic self. Jonathan Wordsworth avers that "[t]he earliest material connected with *The Pedlar* survives in the *Alfoxden Notebook* [...] and [it] shows Wordsworth's pre-occupation not with increasing the dramatic effectiveness of *The Ruined Cottage*, but with new philosophical ideas" (157). And Gill, analyzing why *The Recluse* was worked out by Wordsworth instead of Coleridge, concludes that Wordsworth was

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<sup>7</sup> For example, lines 321 to 341 in Book II, *The Prelude*.

simply not the right poet for the task, because Coleridge did not truly understand Wordsworth's genius. Coleridge had hoped that Wordsworth, in writing *The Recluse*, could "deliver upon authority a system of philosophy" (qtd. in Gill 145). Wordsworth never did have, Gill says, "a 'system of philosophy' to deliver, and he spent a lifetime searching for 'authority' in poetry which is essentially exploratory of what he does know and can trust" (145-46). The "new philosophical ideas" to which Jonathan Wordsworth attributes the provenance of *The Pedlar* must be what Wordsworth looked for and ruminated in connection with his own experience. Thus at the end of 1798 we see him turning from other people's stories to his own. Johnston also maintains that *The Recluse*, as a philosophical poem, must rely on "external" and "objective" knowledge gained from reading which would be supplied to Wordsworth by Coleridge. Yet as Wordsworth worked on the poem in Coleridge's absence, he used "self-definition as a necessary corollary to book-learning [...] and the 'egotistical sublime' arose to meet a [...] challenge of epistemological sublimity" (*Wordsworth* 54).

When Wordsworth combines the Pedlar's story with Margaret's, he is seeking to do two things: firstly, to find a form for the exploration and utterance of the philosophical questions he had been exposed to, and secondly, to solve the problems of human suffering and social injustice with these philosophical ideas. All these, however, as we have mentioned, had to be dealt with in relation to his own experiences in childhood and youth, which, as Wordsworth attempted to work out a philosophy from them, inevitably led him to search for the origin of his poetic identity.

This may be the state Wordsworth was in when he made a start on his 1799 version of *The Prelude*, and landscape in *The Prelude*, whether in the 1799 or the 1805 version, is therefore closely related to Wordsworth's poetic identity. There is, nonetheless, a distinction between its representation in the two versions. In the earlier poem, Wordsworth's concern is an affirmation of his poetic talent and the search for its origin, whereas in the longer version, although this concern remains the subject of the first few books, his sense of election is confirmed, and the theme of the dominant, "usurping" imagination emerges. Consequently, there is an additional dimension to the representation of landscape in the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, as nature and the imagination enter into a dialectic relationship. If in the two-part *Prelude* descriptions of landscape are presented for the sake of the viewer and his identity crisis, in the thirteen-book version there is an interesting reversal of the roles: it is no longer landscape that is being depicted and represented, but the mind that is being represented as landscape, or perhaps we can say that landscape has become the mind. This is

illustrated in the two famous passages in Book VI and Book XIII respectively—the Simplon Pass passage and the Snowdon passage.

Critics have read the Crossing of the Alps episode in terms of the sublime. Eve Walsh Stoddard states that “in narrating his disappointment and confusion [in learning that he has unknowingly crossed the Alps], Wordsworth suddenly discovers that his expectations were the locus of sublimity” (35). She also points out that “this revelation parallels the movement of Kant’s mathematical sublime” (35). Indeed, the apostrophe to imagination does correspond to Kant’s theory of the mathematical sublime in *The Critique of Judgement*, where he maintains that “the sublime is not to be looked for in the things of nature, but only in our own ideas,” and that “it is the disposition of soul evoked by a particular representation engaging the attention of the reflective judgement, and not the Object, that is to be called sublime” (97, 98). What we would like to focus on here is the Simplon Pass passage that follows the apostrophe to the imagination:

The immeasurable height  
 Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,  
 The stationary blasts of waterfalls,  
 And everywhere along the hollow rent  
 Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,  
 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,  
 The rocks that muttered close upon our ears—  
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside  
 As if a voice were in them—the sick sight  
 And giddy prospect of the raving stream,  
 The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,  
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,  
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,  
 Characters of the great apocalypse,  
 The types and symbols of eternity,  
 Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (VI: 556-72)

The last few lines in the Simplon Pass passage show that the landscape Wordsworth depicts is something eternal. But how is a landscape eternal, and how are we to

visualize “[t]he immeasurable height / Of woods decaying, never to be decayed, / The stationary blasts of waterfalls,” or “[t]umult and peace, the darkness and the light”? Read in the light of the Kantian sublime, these lines cease to be merely a factual depiction of the external world, but have gone beyond the world of everyday experiences and entered what Kant calls the “supersensible” realm. And yet they remain on the surface a description of the landscape, and a “sublime” landscape at that; this is because of “subreption”: “The feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we attribute to an Object of nature by a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the Object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self—the Subject)” (Kant 106). And therefore the Simplon Pass passage is not simply a description of the object—the gorge, but of the subject, or, the poet’s mind, as well. Albert Wlecke, discussing the same passage, though not in a Kantian context, draws a similar conclusion:

The apocalyptic features of Simplon Pass are therefore to be taken as generally expressive of the dialectical relationship that imagination sustains between sublime self-consciousness and the phenomenal world. The discordant phenomena of Simplon Pass passage are expressive of one mind working in two dialectically opposed directions. (103)

As we go into the poet’s mind, we find that the Simplon Pass passage involves two aspects concerning human faculties. On the one hand, the passage is about the failure of the poet’s imagination to represent the greatness of the Alpine scene, and on the other hand, the lines attest to the imagination’s transcending every standard of the senses in its attempt to achieve the infinite. Paradoxically, although the imagination falls short of representing the infinite, it is precisely in this inadequacy that one gains an epiphany of the infinite.

Thomas Weiskel in *The Romantic Sublime* differentiates between the positive and the negative sublime. He identifies the latter with the Kantian mathematical sublime, and classifies the Simplon Pass passage under this category in which, in semiotic terms, “the signifiers cannot be grasped or understood” (26). Analyzing the Simplon Pass passage, Weiskel asserts that “[t]he structure of the passage is not immanence but double vision, with the leap of signification between its two terms” (198). He also explicates the negative sublime, or Kant’s mathematical sublime, in psychoanalytical terms:

An “identification” with the higher power—ultimately with the Godhead—is required in order to cross the threshold into the domain of the supersensible, and this identification requires the suppression or turning against the narcissistic self-consciousness associated with perception. Hence the sensible imagination is depressed; it feels a sacrifice or deprivation of its “hopes that pointed to the clouds.” (201)

Grounding his reading on this psychoanalytical interpretation of the Kantian mathematical sublime, Weiskel argues that “[t]o reenter Gondo Gorge in memory would have exposed [Wordsworth] to the extinction of self-consciousness with which he identified imagination” (201), and therefore the poet needs a screen memory, which is the passage on the disappointment in crossing the Alps unawares, to replace the threat of subliminal experience and regain self-consciousness. Two points should be problematized in Weiskel’s reading: firstly, since his argument is based on a dichotomous philosophical rationalization, he sets Godhead against self-consciousness, “immanence” against “double vision,” and therefore is unable to conceive the possibility of their co-existence which, I suggest, is what Wordsworth tries to convey in the passage. Secondly, because of this dualism and his application of Freudian psychology, Weiskel has forgotten to mention that in Kant’s mathematical sublime, the entering into the supersensible produces not only depression, *but also* “*pleasure*.” The mind is indeed frustrated in its failure to grasp the object in totality, but in its attempt to do so the imagination is awakened to its own greatness. The effacement of the self in crossing the sensory threshold is thus at once threatening and rewarding, and this annihilation should be seen as almost an identification with immanence, not as an opposition to it.

In the Simplon Pass passage, the connection between landscape and the imagination is implied metaphorically. But towards the end of *The Prelude*, in the Snowdon passage, the landscape becomes “the perfect image of a mighty mind” (XIII: 70). The scene Wordsworth sees on top of Snowdon exists manifestly as a revelation to the poet as prophet. The pictorial and aesthetic function of landscape is replaced by the sublimity of the imagination; nature is completely internalized. It is worth noting that the Snowdon scene is a reworking of a passage in *Descriptive Sketches*. There the scene is a picturesque Alpine landscape with no mention of the imaginative mind. While the Snowdon cloudscape invokes a meditation, the Alpine scene is for the sake of picture-making. If we compare the lines that follow the roar of waters sent up from the abyss, we find that to the Swiss peasant the landscape is merely a delightful picturesque

spectacle and nothing else, but it reveals an apocalyptic vision to the viewer on the summit of Snowdon:

Mounts thro' the nearer mist the chaunt of birds,  
And talking voices, and the low of herds,  
The bark of dogs, the drowsy tinkling bell.  
And wild-wood mountain lutes of saddest swell.  
Think not, suspended from the cliff on high  
He looks below with undelighted eye. (*Descriptive Sketches* 506-11)

The universal spectacle throughout  
Was shaped for admiration and delight,  
Grand in itself alone, but in that breach  
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,  
That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged  
The soul, the imagination of the whole. (*The Prelude* XIII: 61-65)

It is interesting to notice, too, that in the 1836 revised version of *Descriptive Sketches*, a slight hint of the soul's elevation by the scene is added: "Think not, the peasant from aloft has gazed / And heard with heart unmoved, with soul unraised" (436-37). It seems that although in composing *The Prelude* Wordsworth borrowed from *Descriptive Sketches*, later on *The Prelude* also exerted influence on the former.

Given Wordsworth's crisis at the beginning of *The Prelude* and his need to assert himself, it is natural that he finds the picturesque an inadequate way of relating to nature, because it does not provide the means for self-examination. With the Simplon Pass and the Snowdon passages the imagination gains total triumph as it "usurps" the landscape and transforms it into the meditative mind. This ultimate triumph of the mind also suggests Wordsworth's conversion from the picturesque to the sublime. In Book XI, Wordsworth, speaking of the "tyranny" of the eye, tells us that he would gladly unfold the means

Nature studiously employs to thwart  
This tyranny, summons all the senses each  
To counteract the other and themselves,  
And makes them all, and the objects with which all

Are conversant, subservient in their turn  
To the great ends of liberty and power. (178-83)

But this, he adds, is “matter for another song” (XI: 184), referring, presumably, to *The Recluse*. Actually, however, in the Simplon Pass passage, he has already demonstrated how this might be done. The main poetic devices Wordsworth employs in the Simplon Pass passage are oxymorons and the juxtaposition of contrasting images—decaying woods that are never to be decayed, stationary waterfalls, speaking crags, tumult and peace, darkness and light. The confusion of sensory data renders the senses powerless. By describing each of the objects in nature counteracting itself, Wordsworth shows the resistance of sensual representation of landscape, thereby freeing himself, if only in poetic form, from the thralldom of the senses.

In *The Prelude*, therefore, Wordsworth’s representation of landscape manifests the change of his concern from poetic identity to the power of the imagination. The landscape first helps him define his career, and then serves as the medium of sublime revelations. It also helps delineate the progress of the poet’s recognition of the mind’s sublimity, and in this progress we see its gradual internalization. Geoffrey Hartman argues that Wordsworth, while discovering the source of the visionary power in his own imagination and not in nature, chooses not to abandon nature because it is nature that leads him beyond his senses. This Hartman terms the “via naturaliter negativa” (41). Although he shows that Wordsworth returns to Nature at the end and thus denies himself total apocalypse, Hartman’s contention is still based on what I outlined above—a progression from empiricism to transcendentalism. It is true that even though *The Prelude* delineates such a progression, Wordsworth does not discard nature entirely; nature and landscape remain of the utmost importance throughout his *oeuvre*. However, instead of seeing this as an act of loyalty towards nature, due to which, Hartman suggests, Wordsworth became less creative than he could have been and lost the chance to become a truly visionary poet like Blake and Milton, I see it as an attempt to recognize and reconcile the power of both nature and imagination, because in the Prospectus to *The Recluse* Wordsworth clearly proclaims that his theme is not only how the mind is fitted to the external world, but also the reverse—how the external world is fitted to the mind. That he should make a distinction between the two reveals that he has not given up the imagination to restore himself to nature, and that in the marriage of the two, rather than at the sacrifice of imagination (for nature) as Hartman suggests, they are granted the same importance.

After *The Prelude* we see Wordsworth constantly going back to picturesque descriptions of landscape. This is especially conspicuous in his *Guide to the Lakes*, which, though different from most of the eighteenth-century tour books, contains a considerable amount of picturesque presentation of landscape. In his letters to George Beaumont, we also see him discuss paintings in picturesque terms. All these suggest that Wordsworth's attitude towards the "infection of the age" is not as clean-cut as he claims in *The Prelude*. But why is this discrepancy? Instead of justifying his adoption of the picturesque aesthetics by examining how he transforms it to serve his own ends, which several critics, with whom I agree, have done,<sup>8</sup> I would like to propose a different approach by looking again at *The Prelude* in the context of the composition of *The Recluse*. As was mentioned earlier, Wordsworth turned from writing *The Recluse* to *The Prelude* because there was a need, whether a conscious or an unconscious one, to examine his own identity and the formative influence of nature on his poetic imagination. Since *The Prelude* is a construct by the poet to formulate the history of the imaginative mind at the expense of chronological and biographical facts, it is inevitable that the taste for the picturesque should be condemned to allow the "restoration" of the imagination in Book XI, which prepares for both the "spots of time" that follow immediately, and the revelation upon Snowdon in Book XIII. This is not to say that in reality Wordsworth was not against the picturesque. My point here is that read in the context of the composition of both *The Prelude* and *The Recluse*, as well as the poetic career of the poet, *The Prelude* shows a concern different from those in other works, a concern that not only dictates the thematic progression within the poem, but also brings out possible conflicts between it and other works. In this case, the conflict is revealed in Wordsworth's aesthetics and his representation of landscape.

Hence I partially agree with Keith G. Thomas in seeing that Wordsworth's attitude towards nature and the imagination throughout his poetic career is a fluctuation between the empirical and the transcendental. Thomas remarks that "Wordsworth's philosophical development does not come to rest at transcendentalism but continues as an oscillating tension between that hard-won transcendentalism and a reemergent, reenergized, almost atavistic empiricism" (15). Yet since an oscillating attitude means adopting one of the two philosophies at a time, I would like to add that empiricism and transcendentalism are not always antagonistic forces that vie for Wordsworth's attention, but that using both Wordsworth strives to reconcile the power of nature and

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<sup>8</sup> See Nabholz; Marder, Trott; and Kostelnick.

the imagination, since his transcendental experiences invariably begin with, or are based upon, sensory perceptions. His direct contact with nature lays claim upon him, yet he cannot ignore the creative energy of the imagination, nor suppress it, if it is so powerful as to “usurp.” Landscape, therefore, is the space in which both reconciliation and thematic conflicts in Wordsworth’s poetry are acted out.

As can be seen, our discussion of *The Prelude* inevitably brings us from the external world to the internal realm of the mind because of Wordsworth’s pre-occupation with his poetic identity and the imagination. This internalization of the external world through sublime experience reveals an inclination towards the so-called “egotistical sublime” that sometimes verges on solipsism in Wordsworth’s poetry. Like his tinkering with chronology and facts, landscape is also at the service of his meditation on the self and his myth-making of the soul. Towards the end of *The Prelude* and just before the apocalyptic passage on Snowdon, Wordsworth describes his walking tour across Salisbury Plain, with which he closes Book XII. The passage echoes a poem about the same trip written earlier in 1794—*Salisbury Plain*. In this poem Wordsworth relates the story of the female vagrant, and in 1795 he expanded it to include the sailor’s story. The purpose of the story, as mentioned before, was to address social problems. But the Salisbury Plain passage in *The Prelude* does not mention the female vagrant or the sailor. Of course we are aware that in reality Wordsworth did cross the plain alone, and that *Salisbury Plain* was written with a more dramatic framework than *The Prelude* was, but the absence of human figures in the bleak landscape is telling. Gone with them is the element of social protest. Here Wordsworth depicts himself as traveling in solitude, and all the humans that appear are ghostly figures conjured up by his fantasies. Although the reveries and fantasies of Britons and Druids also appear in *Salisbury Plain*, they serve different ends in the two poems. In *The Prelude*, the passage’s association with social perspectives has become implicit; its more conspicuous significance is to reaffirm the poet of the “high power” of the imagination and to connect his prophetic poetry to the “new world” envisioned in the exchange between mind and nature:

I seemed about this period to have sight  
Of a new world—a world, too, that was fit  
To be transmitted and made visible  
To other eyes, as having for its base  
That whence our dignity originates,

That which both gives it being, and maintains  
A balance, an ennobling interchange  
Of action from within and from without:  
The excellence, pure spirit, and best power,  
Both of the object seen, and eye that sees. (XII: 370-79)

The last line of this passage brings us from the new world to the poet's "eye that sees," which concludes Book XII and serves as a link to what will be revealed in the vision atop Snowdon in the following book. The Salisbury Plain vision does not have the sublime quality the Simplon Pass and the Snowdon passages evoke, but its function greatly resembles theirs if we remember that the sense of sublimity finds its source in the mind rather than in nature. The self-sufficiency of the imagination highlighted in the Crossing of the Alps and the Snowdon passages is an essential quality in Wordsworth's mental power with which he can boldly claim himself a poet. It is the same aspiration that haunts the Salisbury Plain vision:

And that the genius of the poet hence  
May boldly take his way among mankind  
Wherever Nature leads—that he hath stood  
By Nature's side among the men of old,  
And so shall stand for ever. Dearest friend,  
Forgive me if I say that I, who long  
Had harboured reverentially a thought  
That poets, even as prophets, each with each  
Connected in a mighty scheme of truth,  
Have each for his peculiar dower a sense  
By which he is enabled to perceive  
Something unseen before—forgive me, friend,  
If I, the meanest of this band, had hope  
That unto me had also been vouchsafed  
An influx, that in some sort I possessed  
A privilege, and that a work of mine,  
Proceeding from the depth of untaught things,  
Enduring and creative, might become  
A power like one of Nature's. (XII: 294-312)

As can be seen, the mood to which the poet is raised whilst crossing the plain historically and geographically associated with the “men of old” is one of poetic identity and aspiration, and it is in this aspiration we find the link with the poet’s myth-making of the mind.

If the historical figures on Salisbury Plain are fantastical images, the shepherds in the Cumbrian landscapes are not. However, these shepherds in *The Prelude*, who symbolize Wordsworth’s love of mankind, are mostly larger-than-life figures viewed only from afar. They have no real contact with the poet:

A rambling schoolboy, thus  
Have I beheld him; without knowing why,  
Have felt his presence in his own domain  
As of a lord and master, or a power,  
Or genius, under Nature, under God,  
Presiding—and severest solitude  
Seemed more commanding oft when he was there. (VIII: 390-96)

When round some shady promontory turning,  
His form hath flashed upon me glorified  
By the deep radiance of the setting sun;  
Or him have I descried in distant sky,  
A solitary object and sublime,  
Above all height, like an aerial cross,  
As it is stationed on some spiry rock  
Of the Chartreuse, for worship. (VIII: 403-10)

These shepherds are more or less idealized figures whose “sublime” solitude in effect reflects the viewer’s own poetic needs. As Johnston rightly points out, “[it] is not the hard life of real shepherds that seized [Wordsworth’s] ‘heart with firmer grasp,’ but the imaginative, ‘spiritual’ stimulation they provided, in their close, dialectical, now-this-now-that proximity to the exaggerated fictions of pastoral convention” (*Wordsworth* 171). In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s love of mankind is idealistic and less substantial than he wishes it to be, and we have to go to poems such as those in *Lyrical Ballads* (“Michael,” for example) and *The Pedlar* to find shepherds in flesh and blood, or to wait for the churchyard tales in *The Excursion*.

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth employs the landscape to test, or to assure himself of, his poetic imagination. But after the completion of *The Prelude* in 1805, a work composed in preparation for *The Recluse*, questions about his identity and ability as poet are more or less answered. Although his intended magnum opus was never finished, and existing parts of the poem were written intermittently over a period of time that expanded from 1798 to 1814, after *The Prelude* his concern with “self” undergoes a change. With the autobiography reaching the summit of Snowdon that symbolizes the absolute power of the imagination, Wordsworth’s exploration of the self and the relationship between self and nature has come to a momentary end, and when continued, it is to be carried on in a form and context different from that in *The Prelude*. Hartman attributes this change to Wordsworth’s deliberate return to nature. And Johnston claims that there had always been a conflict in Wordsworth between his penchant towards meditative verse and his social responsibility, a conflict that not only led to Wordsworth’s indecision as to what kind of poetry he ought to have written, but also shaped, or even discontinued, the progress of *The Recluse*.<sup>9</sup> Bringing their arguments together, I suggest that both nature and a sense of social responsibility play important roles in the development of Wordsworth’s poetry, and I see Wordsworth’s need for meditative verse, which is closely related to his search for the poetic self, as becoming less urgent than before with the completion of *The Prelude* in 1805.

Barrell, discussing the eighteenth-century topographical poets, asserts that they

were influenced, in the descriptions they made of places, very little by the accidental knowledge they might happen to have about them, and in particular they have very little sense of what can perhaps be called the “content” of a landscape—I mean, they gave little evidence of caring that the topography of a landscape was a representation of the needs of the people who had created it. (59)

After *The Prelude*, landscape in Wordsworth’s poetry is close to what Barrell says about the “content” of a landscape. In the exploration of this “content,” Wordsworth seems better able to erase the division that differentiates the highly individual and transcendental from his social concerns. For example, in “Poems on the Naming of Places,” Wordsworth begins to show an interest in local places. Although such an

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<sup>9</sup> See Johnston, “The Politics of ‘Tintern Abbey,’” and *Wordsworth and The Recluse*.

interest stemmed from an urgent need to strike root as he moved back to the Lake District at the end of 1799, and although it was based on a symbolic act of appropriating the public sphere to fulfill his sense of home-making (Yu 87-95), the group of poems nevertheless reveal a move away from the egotistical sublime or social protests. I am aware, of course, that a poem like “There is an eminence,—of these our hills,” read from a feminist point of view, can, as Labbe claims, suggest a “privileged male social position” (6). Yet Labbe also admits that Wordsworth at this time was “worriedly beginning to rethink the radical attitude that had produced ‘Salisbury Plain,’ and it seems questionable that he would blithely assume one of the most significant of culturally powerful symbols” (6).

In the poems written after *The Prelude*, although landscape continues to serve as a medium for Wordsworth’s expressions, it is presented with less intensity than those shown in the “spots of time,” or with less “sublimity” than those revealed in passages such as the Climb up Snowdon. The cloudscape the Solitary witnesses in *The Excursion*, for example, is magnificent and apocalyptic in its own right, yet it lacks the personal and thematic significance that pervades scenes and sights in *The Prelude*. When landscape is no longer closely attached to poetic origin and identity and appears in stories of the other (the churchyard tales in *The Excursion*, for example), rather than the self, it becomes part of a “community” and assumes symbolic meanings in a topographical and communal sense, instead of the egotistical sublime. So in “Poems on the Naming of Places,” we begin to see Wordsworth going in a direction that leads towards poems such as *Home at Grasmere* and *The Excursion*, poems through which Wordsworth explores, in Regina Hewitt’s words, “models of more functional societies, trying to discover the normal condition from which revolutionary experience strayed” (xii). Whether such models could be put into practice or whether such explorations came to fruition, however, is the subject of another paper.

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