The “Other” Wordsworth: Philosophy, Art, and the Pursuit of the “Real” in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

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Abstract

This essay attempts to demonstrate the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’ critical and historical relevance, first, by considering its historical reception, and second, by reconsidering one of the key concepts of the Preface, the notion of the “real,” within the larger context of this reception. During his lifetime, Wordsworth was considered in two different respects: one, as the poet of simple ballads; the other, as the speculative, inwardly driven poet of *The Excursion*. I argue that this second model, expounded first by Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*, has influenced such major critics as Hartman, Pottle, and Bloom, particularly in their interpretations of Wordsworth’s early career. By considering the “other” Wordsworth, the Wordsworth of the Preface, the dialectic can be historically resituated. Ultimately, I wish to rethink the Preface by importing the idea of philosophy into what has hitherto been considered to be not a philosophical work.

Keywords

philosophy, Wordsworth, “real” (or material), ideal (or abstract),
the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, egotism, subjectivity

Though reared upon the base of outward things,
Structures like these the excited spirit mainly
Builds for herself….
—The Prelude VII. 650-52

I

Two hundred years have passed since Wordsworth and Coleridge collaborated on the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, a work which provoked a storm of controversy from reviewers, and, in retrospect, helped inaugurate the British Romantic period. The “experiment,” as Wordsworth referred to it, largely succeeded. Today the Preface is taught in virtually every course on the Romantics alongside Wordsworth’s major poems, and is generally regarded as epitomizing those qualities most ordinarily associated with Romanticism: primitivism, pastoral retreat, poetic simplicity.
Literary critics tend to divide up the long life that was Wordsworth’s into two parts. When we think of the later Wordsworth, we envision a happy, somewhat corpulent figure, reclining on Rydal Mount and basking in the warm attention of his English and American admirers. His early years, the years immediately after the Preface was published, were hardly so felicitous. The anonymous reviewer (most likely James Wilson) for Blackwood’s *Edinburgh Magazine* was still mindful of that more contentious era as late as 1841 when writing the following:

> Wordsworth is one of those on whom innumerable critiques and essays will be written—on whom a thousand attacks will be made, which will call forth as many defences—whose very faults will be raised into peculiar merits—whose merits will be as often rendered questionable by near contiguity to some most assailable defect—and a right estimate of whom … will certainly occupy many pens.

Wordsworth’s fault, if we can call it one, was due in no small measure to his decision to produce an essay so sweeping in its claims and so resoundingly opposed to tradition that it provided a seemingly inexhaustible fund of vitriol. Francis Jeffrey, whom Francis Flynn refers to as “the most important reviewer of his age,” set the fuse with his powerful denunciation in an 1802 review of a seditious group of poets living in the region of the Lake District. Though he does not mention Wordsworth by name, he does cite the Preface. Jeffrey’s review swiftly turned critical opinion against Wordsworth by emphasizing the work’s simplistic demeanor and its whiff of sedition. Jeffrey had four main points: (1) Affectation of great simplicity and familiarity leads to low and inelegant expressions. This serves as a rejection of art. Simplicity does not ennoble art, but degrades it. (2) Depraved sentiments stemmed from Wordsworth’s language. (3) Perpetual exaggeration of thought marred Wordsworth’s style. And (4) a splenetic and idle discontent with society was apparent in Wordsworth’s praise of rural life. This one review set the standard for future attacks of the poet.

Given the early favor *Lyrical Ballads* enjoyed, it is tempting to attribute Jeffrey’s and other critic’s hostility to sheer spite. Peter Morgan suggests this when he writes that

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1 The elder Wordsworth was far more than this of course: a poet still active, the reviser of the Prelude, a political activist, and jealous guardian of his poetic legacy.


3 Also see John Clive, *Scotch Reviewers: The Edinburgh Review 1802-1815* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1957). The *ER* was, according to Clive, the “most powerful organ of its kind” (42).
“Wordsworth’s prefatory matter of 1800 and 1802 provided a basis for the discussion of his poetry which unfriendly critics, including Jeffrey, were not loath to employ and to trample upon,” the implication being that critics found it useful more than objectionable. Yet without denying the almost savage glee with which some critics fastened themselves, we must also admit certain consistent objections against the ideas expressed within the Preface, objections intensified by Wordsworth’s insistence on reprinting the essay for all of the editions of *Lyrical Ballads* (1802, 1805, 1815). These objections were initially political. Wordsworth’s general plan of “making the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in … the primary laws of our nature” and to do so by choosing “low and rustic life [as] in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil” was considered a suspiciously republican sentiment at a time of growing revolt against imperial rule. An affiliated objection was related to social class. Wordsworth’s grandiose claims for the benefits of the rural life, along with his sentimental claims for the natural world, suggested that the lower classes (tenant farmers in particular) were superior to their betters; it also challenged accepted views of artistic expression. While Jeffrey’s Whiggish inclinations could lead him to support implicitly the ideals of the French Revolution, he could never support a “theory” that dissolved class.

Finally, Wordsworth’s contemporaries were stunned, both by his brash disavowal of aesthetic principles, and by his replacement of these principles with an ecstatic exaltation of daffodils, babbling streams, and babbling idiots—simple reality unvarnished by appropriate artistic decorum. What made the Preface so vexing was also its failure to signal, as all good manifestos must, its polemical target, save to suggest the necessity for new poetical forms based upon the feelings and affections.

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4 While I do not agree that politics was the only reason for Jeffrey’s (and other’s) attacks, it certainly did play a large role. 1797-1815 was a time when England’s jeweled sceptre was under grave threat, and seemingly innocent poetic ballads could be construed as inciting revolt.

5 Wordsworth’s views on the poor are ambivalent, at times driven by sympathetic condescension, at other times displaying a sense of their value as aesthetic objects. Wordsworth is fundamentally paternalistic at heart. He may rail against the land enclosures of the late 1790’s, which drove throngs of tenant farmers off their lands, yet did not welcome reform. For a fairly probing evaluation of Wordsworth’s social thought, see Marjorie Levinson, “Spiritual Economies: A Reading of *Michael*,” *Wordsworth Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1986). And Roger Sales, *English Literature and History 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics* (NY: St. Martin’s P, 1993).
found in rural life. This is perhaps why although Jeffrey constantly cites Wordsworth’s leech gatherers and other indigent denizens as proof of the author’s bankrupt imagination and love of the ridiculous, he never cites these representations as proof of political rebellion. Quite often, in fact, Jeffrey and others continually suggest that Wordsworth is simply deranged, intoxicated by plants, made delirious by daffodils.

One of the sticking points of Wordsworth’s Preface, and one reason why Wordsworth was accused of erecting a system, was that it was written as a Preface, a text attached to a specific collection of poems, rather than a general poetic treatise. While in most cases a preface does not carry beyond the immediate circumstances of its birth, the programmatic quality of the utterances allowed reviewers to plausibly suggest that all Wordsworth’s poetry adhered equally to the same formula. One recalls Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the generic and philosophical relationship between preface and host-text. In *Dissemination*, Derrida argues that the writing of a preface is itself a quixotic act aimed at both making way for and appropriating (cannibalizing) the parent. “Does a preface exist?” and “Do they form a genre?” are two sides of the same coin (8-9). This view may help explain why critics were unable to remove the Preface from mind when considering Wordsworth’s later poems. Yet Derrida’s reading of that which unsettles the frontiers between discourses, and that which would demarcate philosophy from ordinary conversation, also disrupts the “system,” putting into question the presumed inviolability of philosophic discourse. The Preface is thus an exemplary tool in undermining origin, fidelity, and philosophical integrity.

Following Derrida’s logic, one might be led to ask whether Wordsworth’s Preface itself undermines philosophic certitude, and, if so, does it do so within the boundaries of philosophical discourse itself? One might also ask, given the extent to which all Prefaces challenge/usurp their counterpart text, what relation does Wordsworth’s Preface have to *Lyrical Ballads*? In regards to the second question, I would suggest that the abstract generalizing in the Preface and its moralistic overtones obscures the relationship between Preface and poems. While some work has been done comparing Preface to poems and suggesting various ways in which the poetry at times departs

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from Wordsworth’s general prescriptions, we are led down a dark path if we presume to find an even match between Wordsworth’s theoretical pronouncements and their enactment in verse. Wordsworth himself only wrote the Preface as an afterthought, in 1800, and, as I will show, the haziness of his conjectures allowed hostile reviewers to suggest its pertinence to all of his subsequent achievements.\(^7\)

Given the ludic nature of Derrida’s critique and its specific grounding within German philosophy, we might instead ask a more specific, yet still general question, is Wordsworth’s Preface philosophical, and to what extent would this term carry any weight beyond standing for a general moral or spiritual bearing?

What is at stake in referring to Geoffrey Hartman, that great avatar of all things Wordsworthian, has suggested that Coleridge’s dedication to Wordsworth as a philosophical poet discloses “a missed demonstrating philosophical echoes in Wordsworth’s text.” The perceived influences operating on the Preface have been attributed over the years to various “schools” of which Wordsworth was evidently knowledgeable: empiricism, eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, pantheism, associationism, idealism, Rousseauist and Burkean political philosophy, to name only the most prominent. It would be a hard undertaking, however, to argue that the Preface unfolds a coherent and rigorous philosophic program. The question is not whether Wordsworth ever formulated a philosophic system (I would agree he didn’t), but what it means to consider Wordsworth’s Preface within the once formally centralized yet now radically displaced sign of philosophy. Instead, what I wish to demonstrate in the following is, first, that the legacy of Wordsworth as a philosopher, a legacy which begins with Coleridge and has greatly influenced our modern day perception of the poet, obscures the central achievement of the Preface; and, second, that Wordsworth’s Preface provides a means of displacing the dominant model of the poet-philosopher we derive from Coleridge.

\(^7\) Ever since M. H. Abrams used Wordsworth’s Preface in his *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) to establish a general view of poetry, critics have had a hard time relating the Preface to specific poems. As a result, critics of *Lyrical Ballads* tend to dismiss the Preface entirely and concentrate on the lyrics, and critics of the Preface ordinarily discuss the work in terms of its general relation to theories of sensibility and language. Here, I can only suggest the difficulty of reading the ballads in terms of the Preface.
The association between Wordsworth and philosophy has been passed down to us via a network of critical interventions which began first with Coleridge. Coleridge claimed in 1804, in a letter to Richard Sharp, that Wordsworth would potentially become the “first and greatest philosophical poet,” a statement repeated in Biographia Literaria and elsewhere. Coleridge constantly pushed Wordsworth in this direction and believed that if Wordsworth wished to gain this objective, at least in Coleridge’s own opinion, he would need to overcome the temptation of writing the kind of simple, ballad poetry justified in his Preface and concentrate on The Excursion. Biographia Literaria forcefully proves how fully Coleridge believed Wordsworth had sacrificed his great potential to the ideals of the Preface.

In fact the Preface was the first indication of Wordsworth’s divergence from the Coleridgean program and quest for independence. For Coleridge then, and for later critics who have been influenced by him, the Preface was not only unphilosophical, but destructive of the very idea of a poem which would presumably unite the imaginative with the poetic faculty. Coleridge was famously ambiguous about what he meant by a “philosophic-poem,” summing up his thoughts in the letter of May 30, 1815, where he suggests that The Recluse should contain the “Colors, Music, imaginative Life, and Passion of Poetry; but the matter and arrangement of Philosophy.” As Stephen Gill writes in his biography of Wordsworth, “by late 1803 it was clear that Coleridge was hostile to all that Wordsworth had been doing lately” (223). And Wordsworth’s contemporaries would have agreed. Not until publication of The Excursion did Wordsworth become seen as a philosophical poet, an impression remarkably conveyed by Coleridge himself in Biographia Literaria, and furthered by William Hazlitt. Hazlitt, we might recall, in his review of The Excursion on August 21, 1814, calls it a “philosophical pastoral poem,” a claim he would repeat in the following week’s issue.

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9 William Hazlitt. Rev. of The Excursion, by William Wordsworth. The Examiner. August 21, 1814 (541-42); August 28, 1814 (555-58). I am unfortunately forced to move quickly over rather rough and rugged terrain. The history of Wordsworth’s development into a “philosophical poet” (1815-1820) has yet to be written.
This was the first instance of a designation which would become of central importance to the recasting of Wordsworth’s fortunes. Ironically, while most critics were united in praise of the “new” Wordsworth, Hazlitt, for political and personal reasons, as much as for aesthetic ones, espied a less attractive counterpart to Wordsworth’s contemplative mind. For Hazlitt, Wordsworth’s philosophy was Janus-faced, extending itself to the world, yet betraying an egotistical desire to swallow it whole. He writes in the August 28 review: “The power of his mind preys upon itself. It is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe” (542). Keats, a friend of Hazlitt’s, would later derive his “egotistical sublime” from Hazlitt’s conflation of the drive for self-knowledge with the drive to exclude. In a letter to Reynolds on February 3, 1818, Keats writes: “But for the sake of a fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist…. Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes a false coinage and deceives himself” (Keats 60).

Despite this alternate interpretation of the poet, The Excursion happily ushered in the second phase of Wordsworth’s career, one that eventually provided reviewers with the excuse of returning favorably to the earlier poetry that was once considered puerile and insipid. For a time these two worlds coexisted. The same year The Excursion appeared (1815), Wordsworth also republished a volume of earlier poetry, and, in 1819, published “Peter Bell,” a satirical ballad that would earn its quotient of immortality from Shelley’s savage response, “Peter Bell the Third.” A proof of how far Wordsworth had come may be seen from a review for Blackwood’s in 1841, which labored mightily to reconcile the first Wordsworth with the second:

Let no one suppose that it is any sign of real lowliness or humility of mind, that he so often selects a lowly subject for his sympathy. This is rather the sign in him of a lofty bearing, of an intellectual reserve. He chooses a subject he can look down upon, that so calm thoughts may mingle with his feelings. He cannot let his empathy go forth upon a level line…. He cannot quit his free, solitary, reflective station.

Wordsworth’s success in the later half of his life rekindled new interest in his early poetry, yet it was an interest determined in many ways by his later orthodoxy. Wordsworth was now lauded as a “philosopher-poet,” and his lyrical ballads, far from
being the product of an irresponsibly inane or whimsical view of the world, were now shaped, in the minds of his admirers, by profound contemplation.

The 1841 review comfortably puts us at the start of the Victorian era, with its comforting moral convictions and armchair virtues. Victorians like Leslie Stephen, John Ruskin, and John Stuart Mill had no difficulty preserving the early simplicity within the bookends of conservative faith (philosophy being in the 19th-century synonymous with an elevated capacity for self-reflection, morality, and theology). For Leslie Stephen, who did much to reassert the importance of Wordsworth as a thinking poet, Wordsworth’s “philosophical theory, in short, depends upon the asserted identity between our childish instincts and our enlightened reason” (206). Kicking against the pricks, Matthew Arnold, in his 1879 Preface to the Collected Poems, quarrels with Stephen. In a defining essay, he dismisses outright the possibility that Wordsworth had contributed anything of value theoretically: “His poetry is the reality, his philosophy,—so far as it may put on the form and habit of a ‘scientific system of thought’ … is the illusion…. We cannot do him justice until we dismiss his formal philosophy.”

We are left with two legacies, the first being the Arnoldian view of the poet as an anti-thinker; the second, Wordsworth as a sage/solipsist. Proponents of the first would dismiss large portions of the pedantic Excursion in favor of the Prelude, giving Coleridge the honors of metaphysician par excellence, while admitting that Wordsworth was, at most, an auxiliary figure. This view does not allow that Wordsworth was a philosopher in his earlier Prefaces, but dismisses the idea altogether.

The second view, and one that would prove a dominant influence, at least until the New Historicists emerged in the 1980’s, oscillates between the Coleridgean argument of Wordsworth as a philosopher-poet, and the Hazlitt/Keats counter-charge of egotism, with the first often underlying the other. Thus, Kenneth Johnston argues that “The Recluse project was detrimental to Wordsworth’s poetic development because it encouraged his natural egotism into abstract philosophical conceptions that led

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ultimately to his creative decline, diverting him from his best voice of ‘lyrical, narrative, and dramatic utterance.’”

John Jones wrote in 1954, “Wordsworth, though no fool, was no philosopher; and it were very perverse to seek a respectable metaphysical home for his poetry.” Those critics who do accept Wordsworth’s role as philosopher are quick to point out his didactic narcissism.

Modern critics, consciously or unconsciously, influenced by Keats, Coleridge, and Hazlitt, have privileged the cognitivist, subjectivist, and linguistic aspects of Wordsworth’s verse over his mundane depictions. Admittedly, the privileging of mind over matter has produced brilliant interpretations of Wordsworth’s struggle to endow the world with sense. Yet it also participates in an interpretive history which can blind itself to its own underlying assumptions.

The most important exemplar of this latter mode is Geoffrey Hartman. In his first important work, *The Unmediated Vision*, Geoffrey Hartman, by establishing the poet as a Cartesian subject, witnesses Wordsworth’s futile attempt to reconcile the dialectic between “man and Nature,” from which the concept of imagination appears (Hartman 35). Can the poet, Hartman asks, be true to the imagination and, at the same time, to the external world? Because it brilliantly analyzes the inexorable conclusions of a questing of mind found in Wordsworth’s poetry of reflection, Hartman’s work has had an important effect on our understanding of Wordsworth’s poetry. We have come to see the relationship between “nature” (defined as the world of objects) and man not so much as a harmonious whole, but as a war, in which the imagination does not affirm actuality, so much as to negate it. The war is over the mind’s attempt to reign over the material world. The “egotistical sublime,” with its twinned coordinates of mental narcissism and sublimity, appears to rid itself of hard fact.

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12 Cited by Kenneth Johnston “The Triumphs of Failure: Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798.” *The Age of William Wordsworth: Critical Essays on the Romantic Tradition*. Eds. Kenneth Johnston, and Gene Ruoff (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1987): 355. In what follows, I do not suggest that all criticism has followed these two paths, or that the early poetry has not been the subject of a great deal of very good criticism—it has been. I am at pains here to show two strands of critical reception as they have developed over time and to suggest why the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* has failed to be considered as a philosophical work. It is true, however, that critics tend to interpret poetry at least partially based on their own interests.

Considering the importance he gives to *Lyrical Ballads*, Hartman does not have much to say about the Preface. Perhaps this neglect is what causes him, in one of the rare places he mentions Wordsworth’s reception, to form an erroneous conclusion. As he writes in *The Unmediated Vision*:

Contemporary opposition to Wordsworth and the Lake School … tended to center on what Keats termed the “egotistical sublime”…. Wordsworth’s egotism, however, would have been beneath notice had it not contained something precariously “spiritual” which was not exhausted by his overt choice of scenes from low or rural life…. What is so precariously spiritual about Wordsworth, and so difficult to separate from egotism, is the minute attention he gives to his own most casual responses, a finer attention than is given to the nature he responds to. (4-5)

Hartman’s nuanced distinction between “egotism” and the subtlety of Wordsworth’s view of reality (“nature”) is on target, yet his account of the reception of the “egotistical sublime” is not historically accurate. Most early criticism of Wordsworth was not based on the poet’s excessive self-reflection, but on his claims for the value of portraying rural and simple scenes. This may or may not be a historical quibble. Considering how emphatic early reviewers were in attacking Wordsworth’s banalities, we might be led to assume that Hartman’s lack of interest in the Preface is due to his awareness of that work’s physical grasp of reality. In *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787-1814*, Hartman argues for a Wordsworth who accepts reality only as final compensation, as he flees from the ungrounded powers of the imagination. Hartman would contradict himself by arguing that Wordsworth was also grounded within that world.

To choose another example, Frederick Pottle discusses Wordsworth’s claim in the Preface and says that he has “at all times endeavoured to look steadily at [his] subject” (23). For Pottle, this steady perception testifies mainly to Wordsworth’s mental prowess rather than his access to the material world or success at depicting it. For Pottle, the “subject is a mental image” in Wordsworth’s mind, which is then “simplified” to reveal its essential meaning (280). The poet’s world becomes a reflection of himself.

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These later readings suggest poetry of mental transcendence even as they distance themselves from the more explicitly dogmatic (philosophic) work, such as *The Excursion*. I am not suggesting that Hartman, Pottle, and other critics were unconsciously borrowing from a particular interpretative tradition staged after *The Excursion*, but that their respective interpretations carry on a tradition derived from it, particularly as seen from Coleridge’s perspective. In fact, the tendency to consider Wordsworthian subjectivity in relation to the “egotistical sublime” has had an effect on how we understand Wordsworth’s grasp of reality. The dominance of the Keatsian dialectic suggests that Keats was more concerned than Wordsworth with the world as it was, rather than what it could become (ironic given early reviewer’s concern that the Lake Poets were obsessed with documenting trivial and mundane episodes from daily life). But we would be wrong to thereby assume that Keats’s, at least in theory, is less bound to the self. From this tradition has been derived the common idea that Keat’s universe is abundantly centered around the embrace of the sensual world. Yet one might argue that the “annihilation” of the world, not its recovery or enjoyment, is the key to decoding all of the great odes. For Keats, at the supreme moments of physical exaltation in such poems as “To Autumn,” and “To a Nightingale,” the mind abandons sensory experience altogether. The submission to the world, expressed by Keatsian “negative capability,” is thereby nicely balanced by the “egotistical” Wordsworthian psyche.

The two strands of criticism elaborated have undeniably produced brilliant criticism. Yet it is interesting to note that in recent years, the term philosophy, once rejected entirely in connection with Wordsworth (Hartman tends to avoid it) has returned, often in connection with the earlier poetry—not the later. David Hodgson’s *Wordsworth’s Philosophical Poetry, 1787-1814*, Lee Johnson’s *Wordsworth’s Metaphysical Horse: Geometry, Nature, and Form*, Keith Thomas’s *Wordsworth & Philosophy, Empiricism and Transcendentalism in the Poetry, 1787-1814* suggest the
potentially of the term for a broad recasting of the terms of the Wordsworthian debate.\textsuperscript{15}

Perhaps the most provocative figure for our argument is not a Romantic critic at all, but a philosopher, Stanley Cavell. Though he does not specifically discuss Wordsworth’s Preface, Stanley Cavell’s thoughts on Romanticism have brought the debate full circle from the early (and perhaps, to some extent, current) linkage of Wordsworthian philosophy to egotism/subjectivity. More importantly, as a professional philosopher, Cavell shares, like Derrida, in a particular philosophic tradition whose terms and mechanisms he is attempting to disrupt (albeit not in the same way or with the same tools). And for Cavell, the Romantics are paramount disrupters of conceptual space.

For example, Cavell writes in his lecture “Texts of Recovery (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Heidegger...)” that Romanticism insists on a “working out a crisis of knowledge … a response at once to the threat of skepticism and to a disappointment with philosophy’s answer to this threat” (Cavell 52). In other words, if Romanticism attempts to transcend the ordinary, it is quickly brought back to earth by understanding its own limits.\textsuperscript{16}

Cavell’s attempt is the retelling of a story heard before: of Romanticism’s quest for the (literary) absolute, the eventual failure of that quest, and the ultimate willingness to accept the world as it is. One may interpret Cavell’s quest as an effort within philosophy to clarify the conceptual means necessary to account for this failure—thus, as with Derrida, the disciplinary and epistemological space of the text is (un)bound by the demands placed on it by, in the first case, the parasitical excrescence of the Preface and, in Cavell’s text, the failure of metaphysical project. The difference, of course, is

\textsuperscript{15} Of course, one could plausibly argue that philosophy, and its explicit thematization in Wordsworth’s poetry, has never gone away. We might also cite Wordsworth and Schelling: A Typological Study of Romanticism (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960) and Alan Grob, The Philosphic Mind: A Study of Wordsworth’s Poetry and Thought (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1973).

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. Edward Duffy, “The Romantic Calling of Thinking: Stanley Cavell on the Line with Wordsworth.” Studies in Romanticism 37 (Winter 1998): 615-45. Duffy agrees with what he calls Cavell’s “patient” exposition of romanticism as an unfolding “into a cleared space of acknowledgement … an endless set of things, conditions, terms, histories, and responsibilities which … we have manifestly not lived up to” (Duffy 626).
that where Derrida’s preface leaves itself open at all points, thus dissolving the boundaries between philosophic and all other discourses, Cavell’s Romanticism is brought down to earth by its own failure to escape the limits placed on it.

Cavell’s importance for our study is his use of a conceptual terminology and method ostensibly removed from rarefied world of philosophy and, even more, his demonstration of how these terms emerged as compensatory virtues (the same way, say, Worsworthian wisdom emerges as compensation for aging). In “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary,” to cite the title of another lecture, the appearance of the “ordinary” emerges after the breakdown of idealism. It is ordinary because it is all we have left, and its sheer ordinariness is exciting, just as Wordsworth’s empiricist emphasis in the Preface on watching the ground upon which we walk is liberating rather than simply banal.

Here I wish to compare Cavell’s “ordinary” to Wordsworth’s use in the Preface of the “real,” keeping in mind the relevant difference in meaning between these terms. If Cavell carries a Wordsworthian gene, we may say that Wordsworth’s early conceptual preoccupations are in line with modern speculations on reality. Like Cavell, the early “non-philosophical” Wordsworth shares an occupation with the epistemological uncertainty of the material world, and is therefore sensitive to the terminology we use to describe it. Wordsworth tries to overcome this uncertainty numerous times in the Preface by emphasizing the “real.” He wishes to fit “to metrical selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation…” (my emphasis). Moreover, the “real” is always seen in connection with rural people, those same creatures whose presence caused critics so much chagrin. In fact, much of the controversy over Wordsworth’s Preface and early poems (that he was a popular radical, a destroyer of established aesthetic principles, or purveyor of disgusting imagery) centers around his representations of the poor. Wordsworth’s rustics are a mystery, as is his claim for them: they are neither “real” in the sense of Crabbe’s “matter-of-fact poems,” nor “ideal,” in the pastoral sense of painting nature in Arcadian hues. And the power Wordsworth imports to them makes them larger than life.17

17 Coleridge would criticize Wordsworth for idealizing the rural classes in Biographia Literaria.
It is no exaggeration then to say that Wordsworth, in his early years, at least partly due to his need to justify the characters he was exploiting in his verse, was obsessed by the notion of the “real” as a means of indicating authenticity, a term he saw in terms of the rural peasantry of his native region. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, he alters the earlier “language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society” (from the 1798 Advertisement) to “a selection of language really used by men.”\(^{18}\) By separating the “language really used by men” from “low and rustic life” (cited in the same paragraph), Wordsworth intends us to understand that his discussion of rustics does not demonstrate the total superiority of their language, but only points to its relative importance. In this formulation, “low and rustic life” may only be a branch of this “real” language. Yet the overriding impression, further amplified in the 1802 Appendix to the Preface, is that the language of the rustics is more “real” than other types of language.\(^{19}\) In the 1802 Preface, he writes that the rustics’ language comprises “a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets.” It is important, here, that Wordsworth only claims that the rustic has access to a philosophical language, but does not suggest they are capable of reading his poetry. Hence, the rustic is a wildcard in the equation: “ordinary” because “they” lie before or after knowledge, but never inside it. Their language rises “out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets” (18).

This more authentic “real,” even if it is not enjoyed by the rural peasants who possess it, causes Wordsworth to often doubt his own commitment to art and to city life, as can be seen in his description of the artificial landscape of London in *The Prelude*. In Chapter Seven, “Residence in London,” Wordsworth describes his acquaintance with

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\(^{18}\) This tendency towards abstraction recurs in Wordsworth’s transformation of the “public” into “the PEOPLE, philosophically expressed” in “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” (187).

\(^{19}\) I have benefited greatly from David Simpson’s *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real* (London: Macmillan, 1982). Simpson places the issue of the “real” within the discourse of authorial control, particularly with regard to socially constructed reality. One could also argue that for Blake, “seeing” is socially constructed as well. Also cf., more recently, Brooke Hopkins, “Wordsworth, Winnicott, and the Claims of the ‘Real.’” *Studies in Romanticism* 37 (1998): 183-216. Hopkins engages the idea of the “real” as psychological reality: the quest for authenticity.
the city from childhood in the same terms used to criticize modern art in the Preface.  

As a child, living in the countryside, he was bewitched:

There was a time when whatso’er is feigned  
Of airy palaces, and gardens built  
By Genii of romance; or hath in grave  
Authentic history been set forth of Rome,  
Alcairo, Babylon, or Persepolis;  
Or given upon report by pilgrim friars,  
Of golden cities ten months’ journey deep  
Among Tartarian wilds—fell short, far short,  
Of what my fond simplicity believed  
And thought of London.  

As an adult, revisiting the “spectacle” of London, the mature poet shrinks from the “same perpetual whirl/of trivial objects” (725-26). The city, we are led to believe, is not “real,” but presents itself to the viewer as a panoramic whirligig of images which never stabilize. In the 1800 Preface, Wordsworth contrasts this surfeit of external stimuli to the simple, elemental tranquility of nature in which the rustics live:

… because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.  

In its broadest sense, then, the “real” functions as ontological, psychological, material, and linguistic forms of authenticity against artificiality. The notion of the “real,” therefore, only makes sense as opposition to the governing order in the cities and the cultural forms attributed to them.

Once we have shifted the opposition from the “real” and “ideal” to the “real” and artistic expression, we can more readily see why reviewers were so suspicious of these portraits. Partly, as we see with the poem “To a Highland Girl,” the problem involves language. How does Wordsworth co-opt a language which is not his, and transform it into art while recognizing its inviolate “nature”? Wordsworth himself, as he suggests in the Preface, is deprived of access to the experience the rustics enjoy.  

20 In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth’s reason for turning to the peasants for inspiration is partly his disgust with the sordidness of much modern art and drama.

21 I am thus inclined to disagree with Bialostosky’s argument in Making Tales that where Coleridge insisted on an “ideal,” Aristotelian language, Wordsworth spun his tales from the colloquial, “real” language of speech. His assertion that the “real” is simply meant to imply that the rustics really talk
Paul Hamilton suggests that Coleridge’s opposition to Wordsworth’s theory of poetic language was partly determined by his understanding of poetry as constitutive of an aesthetic language removed from everyday life. Similarly Jeffrey strenuously objected to the idea that poetry, and by extension culture itself, might find its ultimate expression in the mouths of inarticulate peasants. It violated the whole notion of culture which the *Edinburgh Review* meant to champion. Wordsworth never intended to use the rustic’s language verbatim, but to adapt it to the demands of art.

This “selection” contains a contradiction. By attempting to differentiate itself from the “artifice” of modern poetry, and recognize its own detachment from the rustics, the Preface does not succeed in showing how a certain kind of poetry opposed to artificial productions can succeed in becoming “real.” Thus, Wordsworth must, instead, suppress the rustic’s language, in order to insist on the authenticity of his own art (as opposed to citified, degenerate art). Language is not a fluid commodity to transfer between rustic and poet, but a tottering bridge between the “natural” and the “artificial.” Nature, ultimately, does not, and cannot, speak. Wordsworth does not accept the limitations of his own knowing, nor accept the artificiality of his poetry, but, in his best work, represents this tension in the characters he chooses to portray.

Understanding the complexity of these engagements may lead us away from the competing dialectic of Wordsworth as a simple poet of reality and Wordsworth as an egotist/idealist and, in turn, as we have seen with Cavell, produce new configurations. Wordsworth’s early verse, which was faulted for displaying too much objective detail, was in fact a product of a mind obsessed by the thought of losing the world. We know that when Wordsworth was young he used to clutch the walls on the way to school fearful that the external world would disappear. And yet one could argue that his early poetry derives its tension and power from this obsessive, at times faltering, grasp of reality. The dialectic is not dissolved, but simply rerouted.

In one of the four key reviews he wrote for *Blackwood’s* in 1829, John Wilson touched on what he called Wordsworth’s “incongruity,” his tendency, stylistic and thematic, to swing wildly between categories of mind and matter, epic and comic. Wilson writes that “it is the mixture of philosophy with low and humble subjects which is the real peculiarity of Wordsworth’s poetry—not, as some persons imagine, a mere childishness both of thought and meaning. It is on Wordsworth’s faith … that his admirers found his claim to great and original excellence.” What appears more clear to us today than in Wilson’s time, is how this vacillation could be a kind of triumph, and how his view of societal and artistic change evidently transforms his work from a mere paean to rustic values to a complex interrogation of the conditions for “true” poetic appreciation. In an age of simulacra, the concept of the “real” may paradoxically help us rethink the notion of the material in art. As Wilson knew, Wordsworth’s understanding is not simply something idealizing, or something predominantly material, but something in-between.

**Works Cited**


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**About the Author**