

# On Political Readings of Lyrical Ballads



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Why this is ideology, nor am I out of it.

The criticism of Wordsworth, which took a linguistic turn in the New Criticism of the 1930s, and more sharply in the semiotics and the deconstructive criticism of the 1970s, has in the present decade taken a decidedly political turn. This sudden left-face in the march of Wordsworth studies, especially of the earlier poetry, is indicated by the prevalence of the term "politics" in the titles of books and essays, such as "The Politics of 'Tintern Abbey,'" "Criticism, Politics, and Style in Wordsworth's Poetry," *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics*. Three books, all published between 1983 and 1986, although they do not feature the word in their titles, are drastically political in their treatment of Wordsworth—Heather Glen's *Vision and Disenchantment*, Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, and Marjorie Levinson's *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*. I want to address two questions with respect to this recent critical direction: What are the premises and procedures of a radically political criticism? And what does such criticism make of the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, but especially of "Tintern Abbey"?

My discussion is not intended to apply overall to the current movement called the "new historicism." That term covers a broad range of overlapping critical enterprises. One wing (its practition-

*Wordsworth's Second Nature, ed. J. McGann*

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ers tend to identify themselves as "new historicists" and to use "power" as their critical leitmotif) is mainly in the lineage of Michel Foucault; the other wing (its exemplars are apt to call what they do "political criticism" and to use "ideology" as their leitmotif) is more distinctly in the lineage of Karl Marx. My concern is with the Sons of Karl rather than with the sons (and daughters) of Michel and, of these, primarily with some radical, or all-out representatives of that critical mode.

At first view, political criticism seems merely an intensified form of a prominent feature in earlier Wordsworth studies. For no other major poet has been more persistently treated from the vantage of his politics than has Wordsworth, in his shift from revolutionary radicalism to Tory conservatism, by a line of critics from his contemporaries to such distinguished recent commentators as Carl Woodring, David Erdman, and E. P. Thompson. Closer inspection, however, reveals an important shift in focus, assumptions, and methods among recent political critics. It seems to me misleading to claim flatly, as Stephen Greenblatt does, that "the traditional historical approach to literature . . . finds history to lie outside the texts, to function in effect as the object to which signs in the text point."<sup>1</sup> This description doesn't do justice to many historical critics, all the way back from Leslie Stephen to Ian Watt and David Erdman, who not only advert to social and political history as circumstances that shape a literary work, but also identify implicit social and political structures and values that are inscribed within the literary works themselves. But Greenblatt is revealing when he goes on to specify a newer approach that finds history "in the artworks themselves, as enabling condition, shaping force, forger of meaning." The view that history, not the author, shapes a literary work and forges its meaning is indeed the crucial feature in the shift from traditional historical criticism both to the new historicism and to the new politicalism.

To explore this difference further, we can say in the first place that political criticism, despite its frequent claims to the contrary, moves entirely with the critical current of the present, which is emphatically an Age of Reading. Like many of their critical contemporaries, political critics undertake to read a text so as to make out, whatever it seems to say, what it really means. They often, it is true, set themselves expressly to counter the apolitical close-

reading of New Critics, who analyzed a poem as an isolated and autonomous verbal construct, as well as what Paul de Man suggested was the still closer reading of apolitical deconstructive critics, who interpreted the text both as self-referential and as self-disseminative into an open set of undecidable meanings. In opposition to these precursors, new political critics announce what seems to me a laudable intention to salvage a literary work as a determinably meaningful human product, rooted in the biographical circumstances of its author and the social particularities of its time and place, and consequential to us in our present circumstances. They do so, however, by appropriating the modes and devices of close reading that they undertake to displace, but adapting them to a "political"—which is primarily a new-Marxist—way of reading. "Marxism," Irving Howe has ruefully noted, now "finds an old-age home in American universities."<sup>2</sup> We can add that political critics in the universities have modulated Marx's aim to change the world into changing the way we read poems.

Marjorie Levinson defines clearly the shift from earlier historical criticism, whether or not it was Marxist, to the kind she practices. "What [E. P.] Thompson and his fellow workers [she mentions Erdman and Woodring] could not, given their critical moment, address, were the subtler languages of politics in Wordsworth's poetry, and the way these languages inform and inflect the manifest doctrine of the poetry. . . ." Her own procedure is to use historical material expressly "for the purposes of textual intervention" in such a way as "to explain the poem's transformational grammar" and to produce "a closer reading of it"—a closer reading that discovers "new meanings" and, it turns out, "discredits" or "dismantles" a poem's "manifest statement," or "contradicts its expressed doctrine."<sup>3</sup> Political criticism is thus not only a mode of reading; it is also what I have elsewhere called a mode of "Newreading." That is, exactly like the various critical "theories" of recent decades that it sets out to replace, political criticism is designed to subvert what a poet undertook to say, what his text seems to say, and what other readers have taken him to say, in order to convert manifest meanings into a mask, or displacement, or (another of Levinson's terms) an "allegory" for the real meaning—in this case, a political meaning—whose discovery has been reserved for the proponent of the theory.

## I

What, on analysis, turns out to be the logical structure of a political theory and practice of reading literature? This structure is both most clear and most rigorous in explicitly principled critics like Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson—who invoke frequently both Marx and recent neo-Marxist theorists such as Macherey, Eagleton, and Jameson—but it controls in varying degree the reading of other political critics as well.

(1) The basic premise, to cite Jerome McGann's version, is that "poems are social and historical products"—products "at the ideological level" of social functions, which he describes as in complex interrelation with the "political" and the "economic" levels. That is, the ideology of a particular time and place processes whatever authors undertake to say into representations that McGann calls "concrete forms" of ideology, or an "artistic reproduction" that "historicizes the ideological materials, gives a local habitation and a name to various kinds of abstractions." It follows "that the critical study of such products must be grounded in a socio-historical analytic," and that all more "specialized studies"—such as stylistic, rhetorical, formal—"must find their *raison d'être* in the socio-historical ground." Like other current theories of Newreading, then, a radically political criticism is a "must-be," or necessitarian theory: it brings to the reading of any literary work a predetermination of the kind of meaning—in this instance, an ideological meaning—that the act of reading will necessarily discover.<sup>1</sup>

(2) Upon this must-be—that any literary work must be, and must be treated as, a historicized and concretized ideology—there follows another. In McGann's rendering: "In my view ideology will necessarily be seen as false consciousness when observed from any *critical* vantage, and particularly from the point of view of a materialist and historical criticism. Since this book assumes that a critical vantage can and must be taken toward its subject, the ideology represented through Romantic works is *a fortiori* seen as a body of illusions." In McGann's theory, as in that of most current Marxists, to identify the deflection of an ideological literary product from historical reality is complicated by the awareness

that the materialist critic has no option but to interpret that product through the ideology of the critic's own historical moment. Nonetheless, McGann is able to carry out his critical project with no lack of assurance. Of Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," for example, he says: "The poem generalizes—we now like to say mythologizes—all its conflicts, or rather resituates these conflicts out of a socio-historical context and into an ideological one."<sup>5</sup> Whatever the epistemological problems posed by a radical historicist relativism, the political critic is reasonably confident that he possesses the key to all Romantic ideologies.

(3) In the practice of critical reading, it follows from these linked premises that the first and essential task (whatever the critic may in addition undertake) must be to identify and expose the covert ideology implicated in a work's manifest or ostensible meanings, and so to unravel, or penetrate through, the web of illusions generated by that ideology that disguise, when they do not entirely displace, the social and political realities of its time and place.

In applied political readings, we find an ever-recurrent vocabulary of operative terms for undoing what a work ostensibly signifies and transforming it into its historic meanings. These terms are the reciprocal, in a "critical" reading, of what Levinson calls the "transformational grammar" imposed on the writing of a work by its author's unconscious ideology. Conspicuous in this transformative lexicon are "suppression," "sublimation," "substitution," "displacement," "dislocation," "occlusion." These of course are Freud's terms for the unconscious mechanisms that distort the latent, or true, meaning of dreams, but as Levinson, echoing Jameson, remarks of the paradoxical procedures for uncovering the "ideological subtext" for Wordsworth's poetic texts, "Freud worked out its psychic economy and Marx produced its political logic." Other operative terms often encountered in political readings, such as "absence," "elision," "erasure," "effacement," are imported from deconstructive criticism. As Levinson says, with her usual awareness of her interpretive procedures: to determine in Wordsworth's "Peele Castle" what it is that "works with a cruel perseverance to discredit the manifest themes of the elegy," one "must read the poem closely and deconstructively," but only as preliminary to "reconstructing the contemporary environment" in order that

"one might explain the strangely redundant energy of the poem in terms of social contradiction and ideological necessity." To such a fusion of Derrida with Marx, Levinson applies the name "deconstructive materialism."<sup>6</sup>

Especially efficacious is a mechanism for transforming what a text does not say at all into what it most deeply means. As McGann puts it, citing Pierre Macherey on necessary silences in a text, "From Wordsworth's vantage, an ideology is born out of things which (literally) *cannot* be spoken of." And Levinson cites approvingly a long list of political theorists and critics who, "at once materialist and deconstructive, represent the literary work as that which speaks of one thing because it cannot articulate another—presenting formally a sort of allegory by absence, where the signified is indicated by an identifiably absented signifier."<sup>7</sup> In the practice of a determined political reader, it seems clear, a poet's silence (can be made) to speak louder than his words, and what that silence speaks, the critic knows in advance, must be an ideological necessity and a suppressed historical reality.

It seems to me that something like this set of assumptions and interpretive operations, if appropriately formulated and applied, can yield—in some critics have yielded—credible political discoveries about a literary work. If, that is, the premises are formulated in terms of may-bes instead of must-bes (in other words, as a working hypothesis instead of a ruling hypothesis) and if they are applied in a way that permits the author's text some empirical possibility of countering a proposed political reading so as to adjudge it, say, probable, or forced, or even dead wrong. But the risk in an all-out, must-be theory and practice of political reading is obvious. The critic, bringing to any text an a priori knowledge of the kind of meaning that he or she must of necessity find, and possessed of a can't-fail set of devices for transforming anything whatever that a text says—or doesn't mention—into the predetermined subtext, will infallibly, given some biographical and historical information and sufficient ingenuity, be able to produce a political reading. But such a reading is in effect self-confirming because empirically incorrigible; it is the product of a discovery procedure that prepossesses the political meanings it triumphantly finds. The risk, in other words, is of a critical authoritarianism that brooks no opposition, since no particulars of a text, no indications

present?  
absent

if present  
absent

of what a poet undertook to say, and no appeal to able critics who read the text otherwise, can possibly resist conversion, by this apparatus, into an unconscious ideological cover-up, or displacement, or rationalization of political or social reality.<sup>8</sup> Nor have political Newreaders avoided the further risk of cancelling the imaginative delights that works of literature, in their diversity, have yielded to readers of all eras. For a rigorously political reading is not only a closed, monothematic reading; it is also joyless, casting a critical twilight in which all poems are gray.

## II

Recent political readers of Wordsworth have concerned themselves not with his late conservative poems, but with his early, reputedly radical poems, especially the *Lyrical Ballads*. I shall comment only briefly on readings of Wordsworth's narrative ballads in order to focus on "Tintern Abbey," the longest and most notable of what Wordsworth in his title to *Lyrical Ballads* called "A Few Other Poems."

The many political treatments of the narrative ballads are mainly concerned to lay bare their covert evidences of Wordsworth's built-in social ideology, and especially of his upper-class consciousness. As Michael Friedman puts the critical assumption, Wordsworth's "adult consciousness of his class status"—for he was inescapably "a gentleman"—"created a gulf between him and the common folk he observed," although he was incapable of recognizing his assumptions of superiority because they are part of the "historical constraints that limit his consciousness, as they limit the consciousness of all those subject to history."<sup>9</sup> Revelations of Wordsworth's unconscious social presuppositions and attitudes strike me as plausible to the degree that the political point of view functions as a heuristic position rather than an authoritarian imposition—to the degree, therefore, that what Wordsworth wrote is given a fair chance to resist the interpretation. Roger Sales differs from other political critics in his downright dismissal of the early narratives: "Wordsworth's travelling circus of freakish outcasts may appear to offer a critique of the unacceptable face of rural society, yet they merely endorse the same propagandist in-

terpretation of social change as 'Michael' tries to sell us."<sup>10</sup> What I find troubling, however, in even qualified and empirical-minded readings for ideology is that they derogate Wordsworth's ballads by ignoring their innovativeness and artistry and, in effect, cancelling their distinction from the flood of contemporary magazine verses which, as Robert Mayo showed in a pioneering article more than three decades ago, dealt with similar subjects and in similar ballad-meters.<sup>11</sup>

It is only when described in general terms, however, that Wordsworth's ballads seem to approximate the popular narratives of the time. To put a Wordsworth ballad next to a magazine poem it seems to resemble is to reveal sharp differences in idiom, artistry, and tone. The magazine verses condescend to their lowly subjects, are self-consciously simple in manner, are cliché-ridden, and exploit a pathos in the plight of the down-trodden and the social outcast that is tinged with a complacent sense of the author's own moral sensibility. In recent decades a number of excellent commentators have revealed the extent to which Wordsworth's seemingly simple ballads are in fact technically innovative; complex, and sometimes self-ironic, in the control of tone (that is, in the implicit expression of the social relations between narrator, subject, and reader); and reliant on implication and indirection, instead of direct assertion, in making their social and political as well as moral points. What I want to stress, in addition, is that in these poems, as Wordsworth himself tells us, he explicitly undertook to engage with and to reform what we now call the "ideology" of the reading public of his time.

In a remarkable essay of 1825, William Hazlitt proposed a political interpretation of Wordsworth's "innovations" in the *Lyrical Ballads* and other early poems: "It partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments. His Muse . . . is a leveling one. It proceeds on a principle of equality, and strives to reduce all things to the same standard."<sup>12</sup> What Hazlitt, I believe, had in mind was that, in his ballads and early narratives, and in the essays he wrote to explain and justify his poetic aims, Wordsworth had in effect subverted the official theory of poetry which had been dominant in European culture since the Renaissance and was still evident

among conservative critics of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. This theory had posited a hierarchy of poetic genres, modeled on the hierarchy of social classes, in which the ruling principle of decorum had fitted the social status of the protagonists, and the social level of the poetic language, to the rank of the genre. As Hazlitt says, Wordsworth's "popular style . . . gets rid of all the high places of poetry," while "the distinctions of rank, birth, wealth, power . . . are not to be found here." What Hazlitt recognized was that Wordsworth had leveled this built-in social hierarchy, and in doing so had translated the egalitarianism of French revolutionary politics into the egalitarianism of a revolutionary poetics.

But we can say more than this about the politics of Wordsworth's enterprise in *Lyrical Ballads*. In his "Advertisement" of 1798, he asserted that most of his poems were "experiments" that needed to overcome what he described, ironically, as "that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision." When he elaborated on this claim in his later prefaces, he made it apparent that these "pre-established codes" are built-in determinants of what we now call "reading" but Wordsworth, in the critical parlance of his time, called "taste"; also that the reading-codes which his poems were designed to overcome consisted of a tacit upper class consciousness, governing the way his contemporaries understood and responded to poetry, that, again in contemporary parlance, he called "pride." Wordsworth also indicated that in his view, the ways in which poetry is read and responded to are interdependent with revolutionary changes in the structure of society. He said in the *Preface* of 1800 that, to provide a "systematic defence of the theory" on which he had written poems "so materially different" from those now generally approved would necessitate "a full account of the present state of the public taste," which would in turn require "retracing the revolutions not of literature alone but likewise of society itself."<sup>13</sup> Fifteen years later, in the *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface* of 1815, Wordsworth returned to the subject of the social determinants of reading poetry in dealing with the difficulty faced by himself, as an original poet, in "creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed." There he raised the question of the extent to which that difficulty lies in "breaking the bonds of cus-

tom" and "overcoming the prejudices of false refinement," and especially, given the poetic object "which here and elsewhere I have proposed to myself," the extent to which it lies

in divesting the Reader of the pride that induces him to dwell upon those points wherein Men differ from each other, to the exclusion of those in which all Men are alike, or the same; and in making him ashamed of the vanity that renders him insensible of the appropriate excellence which civil arrangements, less unjust than might appear, and Nature illimitable in her bounty, have conferred on Men who stand below him in the scale of society.<sup>14</sup>

Neither Wordsworth's qualification in this passage of his earlier radicalism, nor the critical idiom of his period, should conceal the fact that he viewed the prevailing mode of reading by the poetic public of his time as informed by upper-class social "codes" that constitute what political readers now call "ideology." Even in 1815, Wordsworth described his poetry as involving "emotions of the pathetic . . . that are complex and revolutionary," against which the heart of the reader "struggles with pride."<sup>15</sup> If political readers now find that even Wordsworth's early poems, which he said were intended to revolutionize the built-in politics of his readers' sensibility, were in fact covertly conservative in their ideology, it seems an act of historical justice to recognize that in doing so, political readers apply to Wordsworth a theory of the class-determined writing and reading of poetry of which Wordsworth was himself a pre-Marxian innovator.

### III

For an example of the radically transformative power of political readings, we need to turn from Wordsworth's spare narratives about the lowly and the down-and-out to that other poem in *Lyrical Ballads* that we conventionally call, by a convenient but misleading shorthand, "Tintern Abbey." To the uninitiated it might seem that a meditation in a natural setting on the course of the lyric speaker's life would be immune from a passage-by-passage political interpretation. From the ruling principle, however, that all Wordsworth's poems must be an ideological representation, it

follows that the personal subject of "Tintern Abbey" must be an evasion of a political and public subject, and that its very silences bespeak what, by ideological necessity, it can neither know nor say, yet can't help revealing. As Marjorie Levinson sums up this way of reading the poem, "The primary poetic action is the suppression of the social. 'Tintern Abbey' achieves its fiercely private vision by directing a continuous energy toward the nonrepresentation of objects and point of view expressive of a public—we would say, ideological—dimension." Kenneth Johnston, in "The Politics of 'Tintern Abbey,'" is more guarded: "It may well be, in light of these interpretive possibilities, one of the most powerfully *depoliticized* poems in the language—and, by that token, a uniquely political one."<sup>16</sup>

What makes such readings of "Tintern Abbey" especially interesting, and challenging, to an Oldreader like myself is that—unlike their procedure with other descriptive-meditative poems by Wordsworth—critics in this instance put forward an explicit textual ground for postulating an occluded political subtext. This ground, however, is not in "Tintern Abbey" but in William Gilpin's travel book *Tour of the Wye*, which had been first published in 1771 and was often reprinted. As early as 1957, Mary Moorman had remarked that, on their tour of the Wye valley during which the poem was composed, William and Dorothy Wordsworth "seem to have taken with them" Gilpin's book. Moorman pointed out that, by Gilpin's account, the ruined abbey itself "was a dwelling-place of beggars and the wretchedly poor," and that "the river was then full of shipping, carrying coal and timber from the Forest of Dean." In a footnote, she also cited a passage from Gilpin: "Many of the furnaces, on the banks of the river, consume charcoal, which is manufactured on the spot; and the smoke, which is frequently seen issuing from the side of the hills, and spreading its thin veil over them, beautifully breaks their lines, and unites them with the sky."<sup>17</sup> As Moorman suggests, this passage was probably echoed in the opening description in Wordsworth's poem, where the charcoal smoke is aestheticized, as in Gilpin, into "wreathes of smoke." It can be added that Wordsworth may also have mentioned the poor people in the vicinity of the abbey, although in the mode of a conjecture, in the lines that follow the reference to the smoke:

wreathes of smoke  
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,  
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,  
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods . . .

For a quarter century this land mine remained buried in Moorman's *Wordsworth* until detonated by political readers, who added to Moorman's account the fact, mentioned by Gilpin and other travelers, that the ironmaking furnaces along its lower banks made the river, however pristine in its upper reaches, "ouzy, and discolored" in the tidal section downstream from the Abbey.<sup>18</sup> What these critics take to be Wordsworth's brief and unfeeling aversion to the wretched social realities in and near the ruined abbey seems to have made them especially severe in their reading of the poem as a whole. The stance at times verges on the prosecutorial, with the verdict "guilty as charged," though palliated by assertions that "Tintern Abbey" nonetheless remains, for reasons not clearly specified, a great poem.

Marjorie Levinson's analysis—paralleled by that of Jerome McGann—takes off from a detailed inquisition of what she calls its "snake of a title," whose length and particularity provide tacit evidence that it functions, although unconsciously, as an ideological cover-up for Wordsworth's true subject. (No matter, presumably, that such elaborate titles, specifying a locale, occasion, and even date—establishing, that is, the precise vantage point from which the poet views the prospect, and the time of the viewing—had long been standard in eighteenth-century local poems, the immediate precursors of "Tintern Abbey"; a convention that was continued by Coleridge and other writers of the extended Romantic lyric of description and meditation.<sup>19</sup>) In Levinson's view, that Wordsworth in his title should call attention to the abbey but "then studiously ignore it" indicates his suppression of the socioeconomic facts of the miserably poor who populated the area. In the date of composition Wordsworth cites, July 13, 1798, what gets noted yet "overlooked" is its significance as marking "almost to the day the nine-year anniversary of the original Bastille Day, the eight-year anniversary of Wordsworth's first visit to France, and the five-year anniversary of the murder of Marat." By substituting "above Tintern Abbey" for "below Tintern Abbey," Words-

represents ability to be perceived by representing them.  
in poem

worth evades the fact that, downstream from the abbey, the river was polluted by effluents from the iron furnaces.<sup>20</sup> Then she proceeds through the text of the poem, intent always on exposing its "transformational grammar" and the ways in which its author "excludes from his field certain conflictual sights and meanings"—an "exclusion," she says, which "is, I believe, the poem's 'wherefore.'"<sup>21</sup>

These interpretive tactics and findings leave me unpersuaded; but also, I confess, somewhat nonplused. For radical political readers preempt the high ground from which they can look down on critical gainsayers as not only politically laggard and intellectually naive, but also as morally insensitive to social woes. According to Jerome McGann, for example, the "priests and clerics of Romanticism"—that is, scholars and critics who, like himself before his critical enlightenment, read Romantic poems for what they say, without exposing them as ideological "dramas of displacement and idealization"—serve to "perpetuate and maintain older ideas and attitudes," hence "typically serve only the most reactionary purposes of their societies"; although, he charitably adds, "they may not be aware of this."<sup>22</sup>

But I must risk confirming my status as a cleric of Romanticism, and at least inadvertently reactionary, by proposing, in place of the authoritarian must-bes of sternly political readers, some principles of a more open—in political terms, a liberal—way of reading poetry.

(1) First, as Coleridge in his radical youth wrote to his even more radical friend, "Citizen Thelwall": "Do not let us introduce an act of Uniformity against Poets."<sup>23</sup> Consequently, a poet is free to write a political poem, but also any kind of nonpolitical poem he or she may choose to write. As against the political version of the prevailing hermeneutics of suspicion, this principle entails that we respect a poet's chosen and manifest subject matter, without the theoretical predetermination that it must be an evasion or cover-up of socio-historic realities that the poet could not or would not confront. And as against the closed political mono-reading, the principle requires that we keep our reading adaptive to the variousness of poetic possibilities, in subject as well as rendering; it is a reading open to surprises.

(2) Let us grant a poet also his *données*—that is, the concep-

tual frame of reference, or the belief system, that he may use to account for and to support, or may represent as following from, the modes of experience that the poem articulates. What traditional critics call Wordsworth's "philosophy" or "myth" of nature, as put forward in "Tintern Abbey," is entitled to the suspension of disbelief for the poetic moment that we yield to Homer, Dante, Milton, and the great preponderance of poets who write in accordance with postulates and beliefs that we do not share. Wordsworth suggests, for example, that in trance states like the one induced in him by remembrance of the Wye valley, "We see into the life of things"; that he has felt in nature "a presence" that "rolls through all things"; and that the remembered scenes, and "nature and the language of the sense" in general, have profoundly influenced his moral life.<sup>24</sup> For the scholar and critic to expound such passages, and for any reader to yield to them a pro tempore imaginative consent, is not, as McGann proposes, to be seduced into accepting and propagating an outworn ideology. It is, instead, to make possible an adequate experience of the poem, part of whose value, in fact, is that it widens the limits of responsiveness imposed by our own beliefs.

The requisite for our imaginative consent to Wordsworth's myth of nature is the feature that he later proposed in order to justify his using, in the "Intimations Ode," the concept of the pre-existence of the soul. His subject in that poem, he says, is the experience of a lost "vividness and splendour" in the perceptions of a child to which "every one, I believe, if he would look back, could bear testimony." The sole requisite for employing the concept of preexistence as a way of accounting for this general human experience is that it have "sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a Poet."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, in "Tintern Abbey," if we attend to the syntax of the passages in question, it is notable how carefully Wordsworth distinguishes between the belief or creed he postulates and the actual experiences that the creed would serve to explain: "such, perhaps, / As may have had no trivial influence"; "Nor less, I trust, / To them I may have owed another gift"; and not "I have known," but "I have *felt* / A presence." Wordsworth's distinction between experiential fact and explanatory concept is especially obvious when, having proposed that in a trance-state "We see into

the life of things," he immediately qualifies the proposal as possibly mistaken—"If this / Be but a vain belief"—in order to reassert the experience itself:

If this  
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft, . . .  
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee  
O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods,  
How often has my spirit turned to thee!<sup>26</sup>

(3) A third principle of an open reading is that it take into account, and take delight in, the artistry of the poet in articulating and structuring the component parts of a poem, from its beginning to its end. When a strong political reader takes note of Wordsworth's artistry, it is by way of acknowledging his skill (albeit unconscious) at deploying what Levinson calls "disarming discursive strategies," and McGann terms "a strategy of displacement," to disguise or evade the real political subject.<sup>27</sup>

When read in this open and adaptive way, and read in its entirety, "Tintern Abbey," I believe, is recognized to be about a subject that rigorous political readers, by their preestablished code of decision—that is, by imposing their critical ideology—have veiled, displaced, and in important aspects totally occluded. Put briefly, hence reductively: the poem that Wordsworth composed is a sustained lyric meditation, in a natural setting, about what it is to be mortally human, to grow older, and to grow up, through vicissitudes and disappointments, into the broader, sadder knowledge of maturity; about what in this temporal process is inevitably lost, but also what may be gained, and for another person as well as the lyric speaker himself.

In such a reading, the opening description of the natural scene is not interpreted as, of necessity, an elaborate evasion of painful social realities. On social injustices and the sufferings of the dispossessed—what in another of the *Lyrical Ballads* he decries as "What man has made of man"—Wordsworth had just written a number of other poems. In the course of the poem the setting functions in various ways, but an emphatic initiating function, since it is a scene revisited after a five-year absence, is to trigger in the lyric speaker a meditation, continued through all the poem, on the import of such a passage of time at a critical stage of his

life and experience. "Five years have passed. . . ." The opening phrase, with its repetitions, announces the theme which resonates throughout, especially in the deployment of the adverbs, "again" (again I hear . . . behold . . . repose . . . see), "when," "while," "still," and above all in the recurrent opposition of "now" and "then," with their shifting references. These are all temporal adverbs, and Wordsworth's manifest, reiterated, and sustained lyric subject is time—time present, past, and future. Not time, however, as an abstract concept, but (in a way that inaugurates a basic concern of Wordsworth's later poems, and also of much modern literature through Proust to the present) *erlebte Zeit*—concretely lived time and its significance to us, in whom time is of the human essence, and for whom time involves, for better or worse, change, on the way to the point at which our lived time must have its stop. And this, dramatically, against the backdrop of a nature unchanging through time—unchanging, that is, as measured by a human rather than a geological temporal scale.

Our principles of reading, adaptive to the text the author chose to write, do not take the allusion to "Tintern Abbey" in the title to be an unconscious revelation of the true social subject of the poem. Instead they enable the recognition that the function of the reference, as in the titles of many local poems, is simply to locate the descriptive vantage point by reference to a recognizable landmark. And that point is "a few miles above Tintern Abbey" because, as the text makes clear, this is the precise place (line 10, "Here, under this dark sycamore") where the lyric speaker had been positioned five years before, and from which he "once again" sees (the text will soon reveal the functional importance of this fact) exactly the same objects, "these steep and lofty cliffs," "these plots," "these orchard-tufts," "these hedgerows." Our principles also grant the poet his representation of the scene again before his eyes as imbued with peace, harmony, and relationship—a relationship that incorporates the wild scene and quiet sky, woods and cottage grounds, and yes (tough-minded judgment for a liberal reader!), even the wreathes of smoke in line 18, despite our knowledge of Gilpin, and whether or not the notice they seem to give is of vagrants who have not chosen their lot of being houseless. The observed landscape serves the speaker—as God, or the cosmic order, had served earlier poets—as an objectified norm for



the connection and harmony he struggled to achieve in the disconnection and distresses of the experiences he goes on to describe.

Traditional scholars have their own critical predispositions, including a tendency to focus on the conceptual and philosophical elements of a work of literature. In the second verse-paragraph of "Tintern Abbey," scholarly interest in the creed of nature that Wordsworth puts forward has diverted attention from the no less compelling way in which he expresses his experiences of remembering the scene of the Wye amid the alien and anguished circumstances of the intervening five years. In a way without close precedent, Wordsworth represents his emotional states and feelings as modes of internal sensation, more than eight decades before William James propounded the theory that what we experience as moods and emotions is constituted by a complex of internal and organic sensations.<sup>28</sup> The lyric speaker has experienced

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;

and also

that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world  
Is lighten'd;

as well as times

when the fretful stir  
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,  
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart.

In such passages Wordsworth does what only the great poets do: by transforming inherited descriptive categories, he makes us realize anew our shared, or sharable, human experiences.

"And now . . . / The picture of the mind revives again: / While here I stand." Both Levinson and McGann, having predetermined that the poem must be about an absented social subject, gloss "the picture of the mind" as a spiritual displacement for what Levinson

calls "the picture of the place"—that is, the ruined abbey with its beggars and vagrants. What the lyric speaker asserts, however, is that now, as he stands at the precise spot on the upper Wye where he had stood five years before, the landscape he had pictured in his memory "revives again," in the landscape before his eyes.<sup>29</sup>

Wordsworth uses here a poetic tactic he had found in earlier local poems about a revisitation (including Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College"), but in a way that he makes distinctively his own and will go on to exploit, with variants, in his later poems on the human significance of passing time, the "Intimations Ode" and "Peele Castle." The banks of the Wye, as the title announces, are revisited, and reposing once again "under this dark sycamore," he sees again the former prospect. This is the Wordsworthian *déjà vu*; the scene on the Wye is twice-seen. But as "the picture of the mind revives again," it is with "somewhat of a sad perplexity (line 61)." For while the scene as he remembers it and the scene now present are similar (there are "many recognitions dim and faint"), they nonetheless differ. And to account for, as well as to evaluate, that difference, the speaker reviews the course of his life. For he recognizes that although the scene-as-now-perceived has changed, it is not because the visual givens have changed, but because the mind perceiving the scene has changed, as a result of its experiences during the intervening five years—"changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first / I came among these hills."

Wordsworth exploits here, as in later poems, his insight that an apparently integral perception involves what professional psychologists, decades later, were to call "apperception"; that is, *ad*-perception. What seems simply to be perceived is in fact apperceived—invested with aspects and a penumbra that are the product of prior experiences of the perceiving mind. Elsewhere Wordsworth often represents this alteration by the figure of the mind projecting light and color on the objects that it seemingly mirrors. At the end of the "Intimations Ode," for example, he represents the altered perception of a sunset that is effected by a matured mind in terms of a sober coloring projected on the visual radiance:

The clouds that gather round the setting sun  
Do take a sober coloring from an eye  
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality.

In a parallel way in "Tintern Abbey" the scene which, when first visited in his "thoughtless youth," had been perceived passionately, but without "any interest / Unborrowed from the eye," is now apperceived differently by a mind that has been matured by experience. In this passage, however, Wordsworth represents the change not in optical terms, but in the great alternative figure of a somber musical accompaniment to the visual phenomena:

For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue.

How the speaker, five years older, perceives the former prospect implicates his intervening experiences, summarized in the preceding two verse-paragraphs, of loneliness amid the din of towns and cities, of the heavy and weary weight of a world that has become unintelligible, and of the occasions, often, whether in darkness or joyless daylight, when the fret and fever of the world have hung upon the beatings of his heart.

Political readers ascribe a drastic evasiveness to these allusions to the formative five years, 1793–98, between Wordsworth's first and second visit to the Wye. "We are not permitted," McGann says, "to remember 1793 and the turmoil of the French Revolution, neither its 1793 hopes nor—what is more to the point for Wordsworth—the subsequent ruin of those hopes." Kenneth Johnston, who recognizes, I think justly, the central function of the lines on "the still sad music of humanity," asserts that Wordsworth represents therein his process of learning "as smooth, continuous, and unbroken" instead of "disruptive, violent, uncertain, or threatening," because "harsh, grating music" might "open up the gaps in the fabric of thought, or society, such as those that [Wordsworth] could only anticipate with dread." The critical assumption underlying such claims is made patent in James K. Chandler's comment on the "skewed treatment of the revolutionary period in

"Tintern Abbey." "The more," he says, "one looks at 'Tintern Abbey' as autobiography, the more the poem seems an evasion of what [Wordsworth] had actually stood for in 1793."<sup>30</sup> The assumption is that "Tintern Abbey" is not only a political poem, but a political autobiography as well, and as such commits the author to tell the truth, the explicit truth, and nothing but the truth about his political experiences. For their own knowledge of these experiences, political readers rely almost entirely on Wordsworth's expressly autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, parts of which he had already written in 1798 and in which, as completed seven years later, he details his inordinate revolutionary hopes, his disillusionment, and his consequent intellectual and emotional collapse. It seems an odd move to use the political experiences that Wordsworth narrates in one poem as the ground for charging him with unconsciously evading or disguising those facts in another, earlier poem.

The main point, however, is that to an open and adaptive rather than a peremptory reading, the poem that Wordsworth undertook in "Tintern Abbey" is different from his narrative autobiography, *The Prelude*, both in kind and in organizing principle. Its artistic intention is not to represent what is personal and unique about Wordsworth's experiences in France and with the Revolution, but to be a lyric meditation on what it generally is for a human being to grow older and, inevitably, to experience vicissitude, disappointment, and dismay. Consequently the "I" who utters the poem is recognizably Wordsworth, but Wordsworth in the literary agency that Coleridge calls "the I-representative." To the lyric speaker, that is, the poet attributes experiences other men and women can be expected to share, of isolation and fevered depression in a world that seems unintelligible; he trusted that they might also share something of his speaker's consolation at achieving a mature identity that has been informed and tempered by exposure to what is recognizably the modern world of all of us.

The lyric speaker, of course, conducts his account, and accounting, of the changes effected by time in the elected terms of his changing relations to the natural world. "That time is past" (lines 84 following) of his youthful, passionately unreflective responses to nature, and that change is indubitably a loss. But the process of time has also brought a chastened maturity (signified

by his hearing often the still, sad music of humanity), as well as the feeling of a pervasive "presence" that binds the mind of man with the enduring natural world. These constitute time's "other gifts . . . for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense." This claim of abundant recompense in growing older is not an easy nor an unqualified optimism. "For such loss, I *would* believe" suggests a sought, or willed, belief; whatever the possible gain, time effects loss as we go our mortal way. Many readers of the poem have been sensitive to the elegiac tone in its seeming assurance. The sadness deepens in Wordsworth's later poems on what it means to grow older—the "Intimations Ode" and, still later, after an experience of tragic loss, the "Elegiac Stanzas on a Picture of Peele Castle."

A remarkably acute and sensitive contemporary, John Keats, did not read the wherefore of "Tintern Abbey" as an evasion of a harsh social reality or as the asseveration of a creed of nature, but as a meditation on growing up into the knowledge of a world of suffering. While nursing his dying younger brother in May 1818, Keats wrote, in a letter that repeatedly echoes the phrases of "Tintern Abbey," that "an extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people—it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery."<sup>31</sup> He went on to assert that "in his hintings at good and evil in the *Paradise Lost*," Milton "did not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done"; that is, Milton retained the religious creed of a heavenly recompense for earthly suffering, whereas Wordsworth proposes a rationale solely in terms of our temporal life in this world.<sup>32</sup> Keats sketches his own rationale, or "recompense," for suffering in what he calls a "simile of human life" as a "Mansion of Many Apartments," obviously modeled on the sequential stages of his life represented by Wordsworth in his fourth paragraph. From "the infant or thoughtless Chamber" (Wordsworth's "thoughtless youth," line 91), we move into "the second Chamber," where gradually we convince our nerves "that the World is full of Misery and Heart-break, Pain, Sickness and oppression. . . ."

We see not the ballance of good and evil. . . . We feel the "burden of the Mystery." To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I

can conceive when he wrote "Tintern Abbey" and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages.

Keats, I think, identified rightly the central concern of "Tintern Abbey," in its first four verse paragraphs.

But at this point we are not much more than two-thirds of the way through the poem. And at the beginning of the long last paragraph comes a lyric surprise. The speaker is not alone, "For thou art with me, here. . . ." Abruptly, what we had taken to be an interior monologue is revealed to have been overt speech addressed to an auditor, "My dear, dear Sister," who is not even, as the reference to hearing her voice in lines 117–18 shows, a silent auditor. And in this turn to his sister, the focus of the poem shifts from what it has meant for the speaker alone to what it means to share with a loved other person, the experience of a life in time.

Political readers give remarkably short shrift to Dorothy and her role in the poem. "Dorothy," McGann declares, "is, of course, the reader's surrogate," which I take to be a laconic way of saying that she serves as a device for manipulating the reader into sharing with her the displacement of the actual abbey by "the abbey of the mind." Heather Glen reads the last section of the poem as affirming Wordsworth's "beleaguered subjective individualism." In his attempt to realize his own self "not in interaction with other men, but in isolation from them," any other person "can only be seen as a threat"—unless, that is, the other is "in some sense (as Dorothy is here) identified with the self" in a mode that Glen calls "an *égoïsme-à-deux*." In a similar vein Marjorie Levinson, proposing that "the primary poetic action is the suppression of the social," or the "public," dimension so as to achieve a "fiercely private vision," says that while the role of Dorothy is to serve the poet as an audience, that "audience consists of one person, the poet's 'second self', and even she is admitted into the process a third of the way through, a decidedly feeble gesture toward externality."<sup>33</sup>

Such readings demonstrate the potency of a political *partipris* to override all evidence to the contrary. Of course "Tintern Abbey" is "subjective" or "private" in its point of view; inescapably so, because the first-person lyric establishes the lyric speaker as

its center of consciousness. But within this constraint of the genre, it is hard to imagine how Wordsworth could have made it more patent that, in the poem, Dorothy is both a real and crucially functional "other." He startles us into awareness of her presence, devotes the last fifty lines to her, and gives her the salient role of concluding the poem. He prefaces his address to her by asserting (lines 112–14) that, even if the course of his life hitherto had not provided the recompense he has described, the fact of her presence with him might in itself be enough to sustain his "genial spirits"—his vital strength of mind. He even risks seeming sacrilegious, in suggesting her importance to him by an echo from the best-known of the psalms, the twenty-third—"For thou art with me"—which, in the context of a meditation on a life in time, may carry with it some resonance of the sentence that precedes it: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Furthermore it is by the act of turning from himself to identify, in imagination, with the consciousness of the other person that the lyric speaker moves, with quiet artistry, from the present to the future, but a future that turns out to comprehend both the present and the past, until the discourse rounds back, in an echo of the lyric beginning, to an inclusive close.

I can only sketch briefly the flow of the speaker's memory and imagination—the human faculties that alone free us from the tyranny of time—as he identifies with the conjectured process of his younger sister's life, memory, and imagination. She is now, on her first visit to the Wye, at that stage of her life at which he had been on his first visit, for he detects in her voice and eyes the repetition of his earlier responsiveness to the natural scene:

in thy voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures in the shooting lights  
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while  
May I behold in thee what I was once,  
My dear, dear sister!

His wish is that the procession of time might in her instance make a pause. But time and aging he knows are inexorable, and he goes on at once to consider his sister's future life, in his elected terms of the interaction of her altering mind with the natural scene,

whose normative stability and harmony will be able to counteract for her the experiences, inescapable even in a domestic life (lines 129–32), of evil tongues, rash judgments, selfish sneers, social hypocrisy, and the dreariness of the daily routine.

"Therefore let the moon / Shine on thee. . . ." In the traditional rhetorical cadence of a blessing by an older brother, he anticipates her "after years" when—in exact parallel with the change in him from the "dizzy raptures" of his youth to hearing "the still sad music of humanity"—her "wild ecstasies shall be matured / Into a sober pleasure." "When . . . when . . . Oh! then. . . ." The temporal drama is managed by the adverbial shifters—the "whens" and "thens," which in the preceding paragraph had referred to his past visit, now refer to her conjectured future. "Oh! then, / If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief, / Should be thy portion. . ." But such sufferings, though expressed as conditional, are for all lives inescapable. And if then "I should be, where I no more can hear / Thy voice"—a suggestion, left inexplicit, that time is capable of removing him by more than physical distance. Her recourse then, like his now, will be to the memory of her earlier visit to the Wye, but with a crucial difference. What he now remembers is a visit when he had stood alone; what she will then remember, however, is that, at her first visit, "on the banks of this delightful stream / We stood together." And her remembrance will include also what he has been saying as they stand together . . . "me, / And these my exhortations."

"Nor wilt thou then forget. . ." Thus, by way of her remembering in the future the discourse that constitutes the entire poem, the speaker rounds back to those aspects of the scene that he had described at the beginning, namely (ll. 158–159),

these steep woods and lofty cliffs  
And this green pastoral landscape. . .

But what she will then remember about these natural objects is what he now tells her, that they

were to me  
More dear, both for themselves, and for thy sake.

"For thy sake": more dear to him because now, on his second but her first visit, they stand on the banks of the Wye together.

The effect of the lyric closure is only heightened by our

awareness that this affirmation to another was uttered by the poet exemplifying what Keats, between admiration and exasperation, called "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime." But as Keats recognized, the poet of the egotistical sublime had also thought "into the human heart."<sup>34</sup>

## IV

In presenting the course of life in terms of an interplay between nature and the observer's altering mind, in the way it conceptualizes that nature, and in its idiom and rhetoric, "Tintern Abbey" is not only distinctively Wordsworthian, but distinctly a poem of the Romantic age in England. Insofar, I agree with political readers who assert that the poem is, in Jerome McGann's terms, "time and place specific," even though I disagree with the further claim that this specificity must be an ideological rationalization of the contemporary economic and social reality. And as so obviously a poem of its time and place, "Tintern Abbey" poses the cardinal critical question: "What's in it for us readers now?"

Political critics, and new historicists generally, are united in opposing the concept that literature and art can either represent or appeal to what Stephen Greenblatt calls "a timeless, cultureless, universal human essence."<sup>35</sup> "The idea that poetry deals with universal and transcendent human themes and subjects," McGann says, is itself "a culturally specific one."<sup>36</sup> The radical conclusion sometimes drawn from such claims is that the relevance and power of a literary work such as "Tintern Abbey" are confined to the form of consciousness specific to the poet and his moment, or to reactionary revivals of that ideology at a later time, or to a refashioning of the work in terms of the reader's own ideology. The only "trans-historical" value that McGann specifically recognizes is in fact trans-ideological: a critical determination of the ideology particular to an earlier work helps make us aware of the ideology particular to our own time and place: "The importance of ancient or culturally removed works lies precisely in this fact: that they themselves, as culturally alienated products, confront present readers with ideological differentials that help to define

the limits and special functions of those current ideological practices."<sup>37</sup>

In despite of such strictures, however, an open reader of "Tintern Abbey" finds that it speaks now, as it has spoken for almost two centuries, and will continue to speak. Not because of transcendent and universal features (metaphysical essences of which I am no less wary than McGann), but for entirely empirical reasons. That is, the poem articulates and orders—although in time-and-place-specific ways that enhance its historical interest and invite imaginative participation beyond our parochial limits—modes of experience that we share with the poet, and that people will continue to share in any predictable future. Should the political and social conditions prophesied by Marx come to pass, it is beyond peradventure that even in a classless society men and women will continue to live a mortal life in time; will suffer, as Wordsworth put it (line 144), "solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief"; will as a result surely become sadder, but may also, provided they are both strong and fortunate, become more comprehensively and sensitively human; and will find support in the awareness that they are not alone, but share their lot with those they love. From such readers "Tintern Abbey" will continue to evoke a deep response because it speaks, in its innovative, ordered, and compelling way, to enduring constants amid the ever-changing conditions of what it is to be human.

## NOTES

1. Stephen Greenblatt, ed. *Representing the English Renaissance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988), introduction, p. viii.
2. Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York, 1987), p. 253.
3. Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 6, 18, 2, 101, 107, 113.
4. Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago, 1983), pp. 3, 11.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 89; see also p. 134.
6. Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, pp. 130, 103, 10.

7. McGann, *Romantic Ideology*, p. 91; Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, pp. 8–9.
8. The impossibility of countering a predetermined political reading is exemplified on a small scale by McGann's treatment (pp. 68–69) of Wordsworth's eight-line poem "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" and by Levinson's divergent interpretation of the same poem, p. 125.
9. Michael H. Friedman, *The Making of a Tory Humanist* (New York, 1979), pp. 191–92.
10. Roger Sales, *English Literature in History, 1780–1830: Pastoral and Politics* (New York, 1983), p. 63. Even Heather Glen, who illuminates what was distinctive in Wordsworth's ballads in their time, nonetheless finds, in contrast to Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, "an implicit affirmation of the primacy of the polite point of view." Wordsworth's portrayal of Simon Lee, for example, is "never entirely free of condescension," and the blow of the mattock with which the narrator severs the root at which the old man has been vainly hacking—which, Glen remarks, "in its violence seems almost like castration"—"completes that belittlement of him which has been implicitly present in the tone throughout," and so serves as an "image for the unwitting ease of the paternalistic 'pity' which diminishes that which is to the suffering other impossible" (*Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's "Songs" and Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads"* [Cambridge, 1983], pp. 236–37).
11. Robert Mayo, "The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*," *PMLA* 69 (1954), pp. 486–522.
12. "Mr. Wordsworth," in *The Spirit of the Age: The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London, 1932), 11:87. Although Hazlitt couldn't have known it, his political analysis of Wordsworth's early poetry paralleled what Wordsworth himself had asserted in *The Prelude* of 1805—that he had discovered that his vocation as an original poet lay in a shift of his revolutionary and democratic creed from the realm of politics into that of poetry. See *The Prelude* (1805), 12:45–312.
13. *Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth*, ed. Paul M. Zall (Lincoln, Neb., 1966), pp. 10, 16–17.
14. *Ibid.*, pages 182–83. In this passage and its context, both Wordsworth's argument and his syntax are tortuous. He poses the question, "Where lies the real difficulty of creating the taste by which a truly original Poet is to be relished?" then proceeds to answer this question by a series of rhetorical questions, each of which proposes a difficulty in altering his readers' taste, although not "the real" (that is, the supreme, most demanding) difficulty. Wordsworth then asserts the principle that a reader's taste for poetry is not simply a passive responsiveness to proffered knowledge; hence, the supreme difficulty for a writer is to evoke an active cooperation, or "power," on the part of a reader, adapted to the originality of his poetry: "Therefore to create taste is to call forth and bestow power, of which knowledge is the effect; and *there* lies the true difficulty" (p. 184).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

16. Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, pp. 37–38; Kenneth R. Johnston, "The Politics of 'Tintern Abbey,'" *The Wordsworth Circle* 14 (1983), 13. In reading Wordsworth, Johnston does not apply the neo-Marxist hypothesis that all Wordsworth's poems are ideological representations; instead he applies to Wordsworth's early nature poems the hypothesis that they are troubled attempts "to satisfactorily establish the connection between landscape viewing and social responsibility" (p. 9; see also p. 7).
17. Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: A Biography*, I (Oxford, 1957), 1:402–403.
18. See the quotations in Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, pp. 29–32.
19. A few examples of eighteenth-century titles of prospect-poems: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, "Verses written in the Chiask at Pera, overlooking Constantinople, December 26, 1718"; Thomas Gibbons, "A View from Hay-Cliff near Dover, June, 1749"; Henry James Pye, "Ode, Written at Eglehurst, which commands a View of Spithead, October 10, 1790." For the continuation of such titular specifications in the Romantic era, see M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York, 1984), pp. 83–89.
20. Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, pp. 15–16, 55. Kenneth Johnston, giving reasons for conjecturing that Wordsworth may have completed the poem one day later than the title specifies, proposes that Wordsworth may have "turned its clock back twenty-four hours, to avoid setting off the powerful buried charges that would be exploded," if the poem had been dated July 14, the *quatorze juillet* ("Politics of 'Tintern Abbey,'" p. 13). It should be remarked, by the way, that July 14 was not adopted as the official anniversary of the French Revolution until the end of the 1870s; see Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris, 1988).
21. Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, pp. 18, 25. David Simpson's political reading of "Tintern Abbey" as an "example of displacement rather than of the Wordsworthian affirmation of nature and imaginative memory" parallels that of Levinson and McGann. See his *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York, 1987), pp. 109–13.
22. McGann, *Romantic Ideology*, pp. 1–2; see also p. 13.
23. Coleridge to John Thelwall, December 17, 1796, *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford, 1956), 1:279. On May 13 of that year Coleridge had written to Thelwall, "Why pass an act of *Uniformity* against Poets?—I received a letter from a very sensible friend abusing Love-verses—another blaming the introduction of Politics. . . . *Some for each*—is my Motto. That Poetry pleases which interests . . ." (*ibid.*, p. 215).
24. Lines 36–50; 94–103; 31–36; and 108–112. I cite throughout the text of "Tintern Abbey" as Wordsworth published it in *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798. The passage on the "presence . . . that rolls through all things," by the way, if it is a Romantic ideological representation, nonetheless echoes the description of the *spiritus mundi* in Wordsworth's revered predecessor Vergil, in *Aeneid*, 6:724 ff.

25. Wordsworth to Isabella Fenwick, in *The Poetical Works*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1947), 4:463-64.
26. Lines 50-58. In accord with his ruling political hypothesis, McGann (*Romantic Ideology*, p. 88) reads "If this be a vain belief" not as a reference to the immediately preceding assertion that "We see into the life of things," but as one of the moves whereby Wordsworth "displaces" unpleasant socioeconomic facts and his ruined political hopes "into a spiritual economy where disaster is self-consciously transformed into the threat of disaster. . . ."
27. Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, p. 41; McGann, *Romantic Ideology*, p. 90. Both these readers apparently attribute the artistic greatness of "Tintern Abbey" to the remarkable intricacy and efficacy of its tactics of displacement and evasion. As McGann says with reference to the process by which Wordsworth "displaces" political disaster first into a threat and then a hope, and also converts political loss into seeming spiritual gain: "The greatness of this great poem lies in the clarity and candor with which it dramatizes not merely this event, but the structure of this event" (p. 88). And Levinson: the poem's "identity, or peculiar virtue, in Pater's sense, resides in its particular patterns of displacement" (p. 56).
28. William James, *Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York, 1890), vol. 2, chap. 25.
29. Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, pp. 5-6, 24-25. McGann comments on "The picture of the mind revives again": "The abbey associated with 1793 fades . . . and in its disappearing outlines we begin to discern not a material reality" but by an act of "spiritual displacement," the "landscape of Wordsworth's emotional needs" (*Romantic Ideology*, p. 87).
30. McGann, *Romantic Ideology*, p. 88; Johnston, "The Politics of 'Tintern Abbey,'" p. 12 (see also p. 7); James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 8-9.
31. To J. H. Reynolds, May 3, 1818, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 1:277-82.
32. Keats's comparison of Wordsworth to Milton, in their treatment of human suffering, is clarified in his later letter of April 15, 1819; see *Letters*, 2:101-103. In that letter Keats also replaced the simile of life as a sequence of chambers by the simile of the world as "The vale of Soul-Making," and (still in parallel with Wordsworth's theme in "Tintern Abbey") justified the human experience of "a World of Pains and Troubles" as "necessary . . . to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul," and thus to give it "the sense of Identity."
33. McGann, *Romantic Ideology*, pp. 87-88; Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment*, pp. 257-58; Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, pp. 37-38. And pp. 45-46—"the turn to Dorothy, then, is a move toward otherness, or toward a social reality," by making her "a kind of alienated *tabula rasa*"; also, p. 49. David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination*, p. 110: the poem acknowledges "access to a community. . . . But it is a self-reflecting community, for what he sees in Dorothy is an image of his former self"; and p. 113: his final

turn is toward "the desperately limited version of the social world represented by Dorothy."

34. *The Letters of John Keats*, 1:387 and 282.
35. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980), p. 4.
36. McGann, *Romantic Ideology*, p. 71; see also 69, 134.
37. Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford, 1985), p. 158; see also *Romantic Ideology*, p. 13. Similarly, Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, p. 57, voices the need for an "enabling, alienated purchase on the poems we study," and on page 129 says: "It is precisely the contradictions and the formal ruptures . . . beneath that smooth surface that endear ['Peele Castle'] to readers who thereby know it as a work, a work profoundly of its time, and one which therefore and thereby, criticizes our work and our time."