

I

*Insight and oversight: reading  
"Tintern Abbey"*

It is a curious fact that nowhere in the poem does Wordsworth mention Tintern Abbey itself, though we know that he must have admired it, for they returned from Chepstow to spend a second night there. Gilpin describes its condition; the grass in the ruins was kept mown, but it was a dwelling-place of beggars and the wretchedly poor. The river was then full of shipping, carrying coal and timber from the Forest of Dean. This also Wordsworth does not mention . . .

Mary Moorman, *Wordsworth's Early Years* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 402-03.

I

IN A NOTE TO "Tintern Abbey," 1800, Wordsworth calls attention to the poem's odal transitions and versification; he hopes that the reader will find in these features "the principal requisites of that species of composition." Inasmuch as our criticism judges "Tintern Abbey" a work peculiarly comparable to the Intimations Ode, Wordsworth's formal hopes would seem to have been realized. We note, however, that the association of these poems probably has less to do with transition and versification than with the more general businesses of theme and procedure. "Tintern Abbey"'s subject is, like the Ode's, profound and universal, its mode of address lofty and abstract, and its questions and answers seem to originate in textual space.

I produce the comparison so as to bring out an interesting difference. Whereas the Intimations Ode explains its discursive procedures by reference to a determinate genetic problem, textually rehearsed, "Tintern Abbey"'s 'wherefore' is, strictly within the poem, strangely elusive. Its 'whereby,' consequently, assumes an independent interest and one that contains or engenders its own philosophic rationale. Most readers observe that an object does not materialize in the poem before it is effaced or smudged; a thought

does not find full articulation before it is qualified or deconstructed; a point of view is not established before it dissolves into a series of impressions.<sup>1</sup> These textual facts are typically situated as the semantic matter of the poem and as criticism's point of departure. To put this another way, it is easier and far more courteous to explicate "Tintern Abbey" than it is to explain it.<sup>2</sup> So rich, coherent, intellectually strenuous, and moving a reading does the poem enable that the *writing* dimension – the order of authorial and contextual urgencies – fades from view.

The representational tendencies noted above – all of which diminish the determinacy of Wordsworth's poetic subject *and* object – seem to me referable to a single but far reaching textual maneuver: Wordsworth's erasure of the occasional character of his poem. One does not generally expect an ode or odal form to incorporate into its utterance its contextually genetic conditions. One does, however, anticipate from a poem entitled "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798" – by that title, a loco-descriptive poem – some allusion or attention to the time and place of composition. "Tintern Abbey" does *allude*, although it does not attend, to the dimension designated by its title. Lines 1-22 – to all appearances, a series of timeless, spiritually suggestive pastoral impressions – in fact represent a concretely motivated attempt to green an actualized political prospect and to hypostatize the resultant fiction, a product of memory and desire.<sup>3</sup>

Students of Wordsworth commonly refer to the poem as "Tintern Abbey"; it even seems to have been something of a convention in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century textbooks and anthologies to print engravings of the Abbey alongside the poem.<sup>4</sup> I suspect that at some point, many readers have wondered why Wordsworth is so specific in the title about the circumstances of his visit, and so vague in the poem. Why would a writer call attention to a famous ruin and then studiously ignore it, as it were repudiating its material and historical facticity?<sup>5</sup> Why not situate his utterance in the bower or dell and avoid the cynosure altogether? Certainly it is noteworthy that Wordsworth's chosen focus is a tract of woodland rather than the monument at hand. And, given the emergence of the religious house as a subject of considerable importance in the later verse, its absence from "Tintern Abbey" looks uncomfortably like a suppression. It seems inadequate merely to suggest, as one critic has done, that had Wordsworth written "Tintern Abbey" after 1805,

the Abbey would have been the "centerpiece" of the poem.<sup>6</sup> In order to make sense of Wordsworth's advertised exclusion, one would infer some problem – in the poet's mind, in the prospect, or in both – that the poem at once solves and conceals.

We notice as well that the date so suggestively featured in the title announces a conjunction of themes no less public nor problematic than Wordsworth's location. While the poet underlines the strictly personal import of that date (it demarcates a five-year interval during which the narrator's responsiveness to Nature's vital influences seems to him to have diminished), the contemporary reader could have read in the date some far more dramatic meanings. July 13, 1798, marked 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, also the date of Wordsworth's first visit to Tintern Abbey.

Why Wordsworth composed for his lofty, psychically searching meditation a title so burdened with topical meanings is the question that motivates this essay. Why this question has gone so long unasked is a matter I take up in the afterword to this chapter. Let me just note that in neglecting to pose that question – or in failing to investigate the discrepancy between title and poem – "Tintern Abbey"'s readers have shown a discerning sensitivity not just to the poem's stylistic directives but to its doctrinal dimension as well.<sup>7</sup> Chief among the narratives developed by "Tintern Abbey" is one that appears to explain the text–title incongruity. To read the poem by its own lights is to contrast the narrator's private, abstract, and spontaneous devotion in a natural then psychic fane to the idolatry associated with institutionalized religion, viz, the original uses and meanings of Tintern Abbey, a Cistercian community. This contrast – a Protestant argument – cannot but discourage inquiry into the material and, as it were, institutional situation of Wordsworth's discourse. In refusing this propriety, I hope to explain the several stories encoded by that Protestant argument and to explore the uses of these narratives in Wordsworth's political and poetical development.

Specifically, I will suggest that what "Tintern Abbey" presents as, if not natural values, then undetermined and apolitical ones, define a negative ideal: the escape from cultural values.<sup>8</sup> "Tintern Abbey"'s Nature is a place – a concept – to fly to, not to seek, and the

poem's developmental psychology serves a primarily extrinsic remedial intention: the de- and reconstruction of the scene of writing.

I will show that what Wordsworth offers under the sign of the picturesque is a portion of rural England (overdetermined by his knowledge of urban England), in 1798. What Wordsworth presents as mythic, uninterpretable givens – e.g., "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods" – are the result of socioeconomic conditions whose causes were familiar to the poet and his readers. By attending to these conditions, we find that "Tintern Abbey" is a rather anomalous ode – its model more "Windsor Forest" (political allegory) than "Eton College," and its object the translation of ideological contradiction into natural variety, national myth, and psychic opportunity.<sup>9</sup>

The poem's prospect is as "determined by events of political history" as is Denham's in *Coopers Hill*. In each case, the poet occupies a "real hill with a view of an actual stretch of English landscape authentically rich in historical associations," and both vistas include the "ruins of a chapel despoiled by Henry VIII."<sup>10</sup>

We note as well that Wordsworth's selection of a prospect and his representation of it are neither entirely individual nor, of course, natural. While the first 22 lines of "Tintern Abbey" do not construct a scene that *any* man might see, they depict a landscape that any number of poets of Wordsworth's political persuasions might have selected in 1798 for their artistic sightings. The moral to be drawn from all this is that in "Tintern Abbey" as in *Coopers Hill*, "it is not the landscape that counts, so much as the use made of it," and as with Denham's georgic, "Tintern Abbey" "treat{s} a rural scene as the paradigm for a hortatory political discourse."<sup>11</sup> The doctrine delivered by "Tintern Abbey" is not, of course, a lesson about the Puritan Revolution but about both the French and Industrial Revolutions.

As long as we subscribe to the belief that "a Wordsworthian landscape is inseparable from the history of the poet's mind," we will never really see Wordsworth's mind or his landscapes.<sup>12</sup> What the poet sees is, of course, conditioned by how he sees, but we should add that the equation is reversible: what he sees *determines* how he sees, as do the when and the whence of his seeing.<sup>13</sup> Let us, then, hold Wordsworth to his claim, that he "endeavoured to look steadily at {his} subject." What were the circumstances surrounding

Wordsworth's 1793 and 1798 visits to the Wye Valley; what bearing had these facts upon Wordsworth's particular structure of feeling and belief, and upon the more general ideological conditions of that structure?

In the following sections, I assemble material long familiar to Wordsworth scholars and culled from the most general of nineteenth-century histories. By using this material in a systematic way and for the purposes of textual intervention, I hope to explain the poem's transformational grammar. By going outside the work, we may produce, I think, a closer reading of it. That reading, developed in sections III and IV, is the heart of the matter.

The various accounts which precede that discussion may seem to wander from the central inquiry: the analysis of lines 1–22, read as a synecdoche for Wordsworth's overall poetic project. I adopt this necessarily digressive mode in the interests of breadth and therefore accuracy. Wordsworth's response to Tintern Abbey, 1798, was a multidetermined affair, and no one determinant can justly be said to enjoy motivational or structural priority over the others. I hope my reader will exercise a willing suspension of disbelief until such time as I can organize my findings within the terrain of the text.

## II

Wordsworth's several biographers have charted the steady and severe distress he experienced between 1792 and 1796.<sup>14</sup> Money worries, career dilemma, family hostility, quarantine from Dorothy, problematic political commitment, city life, an abandoned lover, an illegitimate child: one need but list Wordsworth's circumstances during the period in order to appreciate his anxiety.

Wordsworth's unhappy separation from Nature ended in 1793 but this return, fondly recalled in "Tintern Abbey" (ll. 66–83) could not have been so renewing nor so unambivalent as he later chose to suggest, given the state of his personal life and of national affairs. David Erdman, in an unpublished note characterizes Wordsworth's feelings as follows.

In 1793, Wordsworth, having had nightmares on Salisbury Plain inspired by bloody warfare (having spent July and August, actually, on the Isle of Wight, every evening hearing the sunset cannon of Moira's transport readying attack on the Revolutionary armies), lost his companion, went on

foot to Bristol, running away from the horror of stone age combat and murder by "his" nation ...

It was during this tour, of course, that Wordsworth visited Tintern Abbey. Erdman's language is strong, but the facts alone (and the corresponding representations in *The Prelude*) mark a disparity between "Tintern Abbey"'s account and the life.

Wordsworth's fortunes improved between 1795 and 1798, chiefly because of the legacy bequeathed him by Raisley Calvert. The acquisition disposed of Wordsworth's career problem, and by enabling him to set up housekeeping at Racedown, it reunited him with Dorothy.<sup>15</sup> Wordsworth was introduced to Coleridge, Cottle, and Godwin, in whom he found his first intellectual circle. He embarked upon a period of notable productivity.

There are two theories abroad that explain this segment of time and this body of work, and E. P. Thompson has handily summarized both. One critical position has it that "Wordsworth the poet begins at the moment when Wordsworth the politically committed man ends."<sup>16</sup> Or, "as if to make room for the exercise of his poetical faculty," Wordsworth withdrew from active political life.<sup>17</sup> In 1796, following several years of disillusionment, Wordsworth's utopian hopes "took refuge in the free land of thought and meditation." "Free" of his political enthusiasm and its attendant anxieties, Wordsworth embraced his muse. According to the other point of view (Erdman's, Thompson's, Woodring's), "the creative impulse came out of the heart of this conflict between a boundless aspiration ... and a peculiarly harsh and unregenerate reality ... Once the tension slackens, the creative impulse fails also."<sup>18</sup>

Wordsworth had by no means sold out by 1796. He was still vigorously critical of the war and thought of himself (had no choice but to think of himself) as a radical – opponent not just of his country's policy but of its polity. Nevertheless, with Wordsworth as with Coleridge,

there is already {by 1797} a certain transposition of enthusiasm from overtly political to more lowly human locations. It was because the objective political referents appeared unworthy that it also seemed to be important to locate the aspirations of *fraternité* and *égalité* in more universal, less particular – and therefore less fragile – referents.<sup>19</sup>

Wordsworth's displacement of political and poetical interest certainly marks a swerve from an Enlightenment humanitarianism (an

engaged, ambitious, practically objectified orientation) and a turn toward a more theoretical, disinterested, and spiritually focused philanthropic mode (roughly, Romantic sympathy).<sup>20</sup> Wordsworth's 'transposition' of enthusiasm seems also to indicate a degree of uneasiness with the aggressively political persona he had established in the early verse.

Let me illuminate this observation by one of Marilyn Butler's characteristically fresh and penetrating distinctions. Butler identifies the social contexts of intellectual radicalism and its aesthetic expressions before and after 1793.<sup>21</sup> With England's entry into the war (and increasingly, with her growing economic and ideological investment in it), the intellectual experimentation and extremism that had been encouraged in the eighties – part of an Enlightenment faith in the products of unfettered Reason – were associated, correctly, with the Revolution and therefore construed as a "threat to ordered society."<sup>22</sup> Had *Lyrical Ballads* been published in 1788 rather than 1798, Butler opines that its reception would have been far more favorable (and certainly milder) since the volume's formal and doctrinal interests would have ratified dominant cultural values.<sup>23</sup>

By, say, 1793, lower- and middle-class sympathy with the French and English Jacobins had largely fallen away; Enlightenment universalism and essentialism shrunk to a narrow nationalism. Those liberals who cleaved to the values of the eighties were "increasingly identified with the republican, regicide, and atheistic French."<sup>24</sup> One could say that Wordsworth and Coleridge were washed up on the high strand by the Sea of Faith; they dug in and when the wave receded, they were left estranged from their countrymen.

Thus while the personal developments in Wordsworth's life during the five-year interval between his first and second visits to Tintern Abbey generally indicate increasing prosperity and existential consolidation, certain countertrends, some set up by these very successes, came into play.

The Calvert legacy of 1795 banished the family career pressure and financial distress, and it ended the separation from Dorothy, but these bounties were bought by the death of a friend. Consider in this light Wordsworth's tribute to Calvert, *The Prelude* (14, 366–71):

He deemed that my pursuits and labours lay  
Apart from all that leads to wealth, or even  
A necessary maintenance insures,

Without some hazard to the finer sense;  
He cleared a passage for me, and the stream  
Flowed in the bent of Nature.

The gratitude here is shadowed by a certain defensiveness, betrayed by the excessive formality and lofty indirection of Wordsworth's style. We might guess that Wordsworth's exemption from the necessity of work raised it to consciousness as an ethical theme (i.e., problematized it). Or, rather than focus 'the poet's' freedom to pursue his vision, we might entertain the meaning of that emancipation to the man. The legacy, although small, released Wordsworth from those traditional modes of obligation and satisfaction that bind individuals to their ancestors, their environment, their products, and their communities. Giving (labor) to get (a living) was suddenly neither a required nor, in light of Calvert's selfless investment in Wordsworth's as yet unproved genius, a seemly existential and relational mode. We might perhaps illuminate Wordsworth's enduring emphasis on poetic spontaneity and nonpurposive thought, as well as his doctrine of wise passiveness, by this fact of his financial life. Consider, for instance, the getting–spending anxieties (sensation–composition, material consumption–verbal production) coloring the early, two-book *Prelude* ("Was it for this . . .") and the *Intimations Ode* and "Resolution and Independence" years later. The desire to recompense Nature in the same gratuitous and, as it were, involuntary manner that Calvert, Nature's agency, endowed Wordsworth, becomes an increasingly central subject of the poetry.

Second, Wordsworth's political belatedness enjoined on him a painfully ironic contradiction. His humanitarianism effectively separated him from the contemporary popular mind, defining him to himself and his public as a self-serving ideologue. Thompson and Erdman have documented Wordsworth's defiance of the government as late as 1798. I simply add to their accounts a note on the increasing emotional stress – and ambivalence – produced by this stance and largely sublimated through the poetry.

Thompson has explained Wordsworth's and Coleridge's departure for Germany in 1798 as a draft dodge.<sup>25</sup> If one accepts this very plausible speculation, one should also accord Wordsworth's tour of the Wye a certain memorial quality. If Wordsworth was, or felt himself to be, a fugitive (" . . . more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads than one / Who sought the thing he loved"), then he could not have foreseen the duration of his exile. For all he

knew in 1798, the visit to Germany might turn out to be an extended expatriation. Given this uncertainty, the tour of the Wye Valley might well have figured to Wordsworth and Dorothy as a significant leavetaking, a valediction to Nature and to England. A pilgrimage to the Lakes would, of course, have made a more satisfying narrative; Wales seems to have been chosen for practical reasons. Wordsworth, already at Bristol, probably lacked the time for a Northern holiday. Besides, if Wordsworth *were* on the lam, it would have been dangerous to return to his native region where he could be easily identified.

Although Wordsworth's selection of the Wye Valley as "the last green field" surveyed does not bear interpretation, the meaning to Wordsworth of the return *can* be addressed. For whatever reasons, Wordsworth found himself at Tintern Abbey in mid-July (II-14). As I noted, the date marked the eight-year anniversary of Wordsworth's first visit to France, the nine-year anniversary of the original Bastille Day ("that great federal day," *Prelude* 6, 346), and the five-year anniversary of the murder of Marat. Marat's execution marked the beginning of the Terror, and in the contemporary mind, Marat figured as the first Revolutionary martyr. In him, the age read the image of the true cause destroyed by the false, the republic betrayed by the tyrant.

The multiple coincidences inscribed in the title of "Tintern Abbey" (that is, in the July return), would have reminded the poet of a more vigorous, simple, and promising era. Thompson characterizes 1797 as a "time of terrible isolation" for Wordsworth, and the isolation "did not relax in 1798." This was the year of the Irish rebellion; the year of the first execution in England for treason; the year of heightened invasion threat. Thompson underlines the pressures on Wordsworth to conform only to argue that the poet held to his first affections, maintaining at some cost his highminded commitment to the Revolution. One does not dispute Thompson's reading by emphasizing that cost, or surmising that such a "militarily critical moment" would be likely to prompt some intense reflection on what would have to seem a dangerous ideological allegiance.<sup>26</sup> We might also recall in this context that Wordsworth's 1793 visit to Tintern had occurred at the end of a tour begun with and subsidized by Raisley Calvert's brother, William. Raisley was, of course, Wordsworth's benefactor, promoter of the receptive existence Wordsworth was enjoying, perhaps somewhat doubtfully, in 1798. Moreover, Wordsworth was about to quit his first real

home since childhood, not to indulge a generous enthusiasm (as he had left for France seven and eight years earlier) but to escape a cherished country suddenly experienced as inimical to his interests, values, and essential wellbeing. It seems reasonable to assume that Wordsworth would have begun to feel his stake in England somewhere around this time. In the Lucy poems, written in Germany, Wordsworth fairly consistently identifies Nature with England, England with a loved wild child, Lucy, and Lucy with the poet's own principle of ongoing identity. By 1798, Wordsworth had to some degree established himself as an adult: he had become an identifiable element in English society (a published poet), a member of a class (the {barely} leisure class), head of a household, and a potential agent in his country's ideological governance (member of a small intelligentsia). Wordsworth had much more to leave in 1798 than he had had in 1790 and 1791. And beyond these attachments, there is the natural reaction of a man who sees his country threatened by a foreign power. His own, familial critique typically gives way to a defensive posture.

It is inconceivable to me that these issues and associations did not influence "Tintern Abbey" in the profoundest ways. Within the poem, the landscape figures as a repository for outgrown ego-stages, themselves enshrining certain social values Wordsworth was, throughout his life, keen to preserve. Nature in "Tintern Abbey" is not terribly Romantic; it neither dramatizes principles of self-renewal nor enables material and self-transcendence. "Tintern Abbey"'s Nature is a guardian of ground hallowed by private commemorative acts – Mnemosyne, a deeply conservative muse.

Wordsworth approaches this presence in a spirit of worship. The poem leaves no doubt about this. It is far less explicit, though, about the occasion for this homage, an occasion that might be reconstructed in the following way. Wordsworth, finding himself at Tintern Abbey on a day marking four troubling anniversaries and bearing its own immediate freight of sad significance, experiences a need for rededication: to his past, to his country, and to his own hopeful self-projections. Before embarking on an estrangement that would objectify his political status at home, Wordsworth would secure his birthright as an Englishman – the paternal blessing, so to speak. "Tintern Abbey" evinces the poet's desire to house his experience, past and future, in a mental fortress: a Peele Castle of the

mind. Or, the project of "Tintern Abbey" is to render Tintern Abbey a 'memory *locus*,' a portable resort and restorative: "thy mind / Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms, / Thy memory be as a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies."<sup>27</sup> The inmate of such a structure – priest, poet, hermit – is not, of course, the political enthusiast but the poet of "the philosophic mind," the mind that 'keeps its own inviolate retirement.'

Why, then, does Wordsworth not describe the Abbey as he describes Peele Castle or the many abbeys, Tintern included, in the later poetry? Is this a case of "Yarrow Un-Visited" – a determined refusal to let fact supplant fancy, to let the picture of the place usurp the picture of the mind? Perhaps, or what is more probable, the Yarrow poems originate in the conflict that puts Wordsworth in the Abbey's environs and then deflects his gaze, and ours, from that memorial.

We begin to explain this conflict and the representational strategies it inspires by remembering that Wordsworth had *seen* Tintern Abbey in 1793. His mental picture of the Abbey is not, in 1798, an ideal or strictly discursive construct such as the first Yarrow poem describes, but an *idealized* representation of a remembered and a presently observed scene. This is what the narrator seems to be getting at in lines 22–24: "These beauteous forms, / Through a long absence, have not been to me / As is a landscape to a blind man's eye" (1827; "Though absent long, / These forms of beauty have not been to me, / As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:" 1798). The reader infers that the scene rendered in lines 1–22 is not an entirely subjective configuration, such as a man blind from birth would conceive; nor does it excessively idealize/falsify a scene once seen, now yearned for, as with a man who loses his vision. The narrator thus alleges that his mental "forms" (half-created) include historical *shapes* or received meanings (half-perceived). He says that his ideas are metonymically related to the social and object world. Thus does he distinguish himself from the "morbid" guardian of the Yew Tree (Wordsworth's initial poem in *Lyrical Ballads* 1798), one "whose heart the holy forms / Of young imagination have kept pure."

But the simile protests too much, and its awkward and confusing litotes calls its claim into question. When one reconstructs the picture of the *place* (as I shall do below) and of the poet's *particular* (state of) mind (above, pp 18–23), one learns that the narrator achieves his penetrating vision through the exercise of a selective blindness. By narrowing and skewing his field of vision, Wordsworth manages to

"see into the life of things." At the same time and quite casually, so it seems, he excludes from his field certain conflictual sights and meanings – roughly, the *life* of things. This exclusion is, I believe, the poem's 'wherefore.' To convert this belief into a position, let me continue to elaborate some general, then concrete and immediate conditions of the poem's transcendentalizing impulse. We then study the mechanisms that mediate this impulse in lines 1–22 where the poem's semiotic program is encoded.

I consider first the mythology of the English monastery, and second, the appearance of Tintern, Abbey and town, in 1798. The Abbey is not of course and to belabor a point *in* the poem. Its iconic and conceptual absence, however – a visible darkness – precipitates and organizes that script, those features, that we call the text.

The English abbey has two histories, both of them 'romantic': a Protestant version (liberal, rational, Enlightened) and a Catholic account (conservative, fideistic, nostalgic). By 'history,' I mean a normative understanding having general currency among a wide but distinct segment of the population and regarded as a factual description rather than a partisan narrative. According to the Protestant history, Henry VIII's suppression of the monasteries was motivated by nationalistic and humanistic considerations:

that thereby such abundance of goods as was superstitiously spent upon vain ceremonies, or voluptuously upon idle bellies, might come into the king's hands . . . for the better relief of the poor, the maintenance of learning, and the setting forth of God's word.<sup>28</sup>

The feudal (nonproductive) convergence of function and identity began to dissolve as the wealth liberated from the Church found its way into new families.<sup>29</sup> And, as the Reformation steadily relocated the glories of the outward kingdom to the kingdom within, the gap between function and identity – social and private being – widened; the result, a breakdown of that reactionary power structure based on the assumption of spiritual and material correspondence. Collective worship by the isolated and exclusive religious community was replaced by private, 'democratic' acts of communion performed outside the institution and in forms defined by impulse and individual invention. The appropriation of the abbeys was taken to mark the inauguration of the new learning: Baconian empiricism and the inductive method triumphed over the tyranny of abstract Reason.

With the Dissolution, the function of the abbey as agent of social welfare was preempted by the ethic of individual acts of charity, conceived as enriching the benefactor more greatly than the recipient. Further, the Dissolution brought large quantities of land into the market, assisting the formation of a landed middle class.<sup>30</sup>

the policy which sapped the power of the lords (i.e., the fall of the monasteries) nourished the veins of the middle classes, the merchants and the industrials, who were favoured by the Kings.<sup>31</sup>

"Men who have sprung into wealth by suddenly purchasing new estates will make those estates pay."<sup>32</sup> An 'enlightened' improvement ethic, defined by the simultaneous pursuit of material and moral profit, modified traditional landowner-tenant relations, and guided by this wisdom, England emerged from her long sleep.

This is, of course, a very crude summary of the official position on the so-called conversion, and one could easily dispute its relevance to "Tintern Abbey." After all, the only habitations noted in the poem are a putative hermit's hut or cave, and isolated cottages joined only by the confluence of their smoke wreathes, a union occurring exclusively in the observer's eye. These hazy, humble, privatized images, however, derive their meaning in the poem from their implicit contrast to the Abbey, nearby but unacknowledged.

The image leads us on toward extreme solitude. The hermit is *alone* before God. His hut, therefore, is just the opposite of the monastery. And there radiates about this centralized solitude ... a universe outside the universe. The hut can receive none of the riches "of this world." It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed, it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases it gives us access to absolute refuge.

Gaston Bachelard *The Poetics of Space* trans. M. Jolas (New York: Orion Press, 1964), p. 32

Bachelard's phenomenological (romantic, impressionistic, Protestant) response to the hermit's hut as a form of poetic space suggests the power of this image as a substitute for that of the abbey or monastery and for the socioeconomic relations that gave rise to those institutions. In the same impressionistic vein, let me quote from Keats's letter to Shelley (August 16, 1820) where he writes, "My imagination is a monastery, and I am its monk." Keats does not offer the comment as a general reflection on literary vocation but the remark does suggest a certain conventional path of displacement.

The Protestant version of the Dissolution made for some a timely story during the era of the French Revolution. The destruction of the French Church, instrument of a corrupt ruling class, presented an obvious analogy to the English Dissolution. This analogy could not but please the Jacobins, as it could not but offend the conservative element – and for Wordsworth, with his vexed allegiances, the parallel had to be unwelcome. How might the individual who had grown up believing in the fortunate rout of Catholic fanaticism and privilege in the sixteenth century, justify his opposition to the French Revolution, agent of that same political, spiritual, and economic enlightenment England had long enjoyed? The radicalism and violence of England's own heritage – a heritage now regarded as sanction for the monarchy and for a distribution of power within the upper classes – were thus brought to the fore.

From a Catholic, 'gothic' perspective, Henry's appropriation of the Church apparatus was read as an act of political expedience and personal greed. Thus did the Crown destroy a dynamic organic community whose existence importantly benefited the secular world (and particularly that portion of it deprived of political status), of which it formed an integral part.

By abandoning the ideal of strict seclusion ... the abbeys had filled a large place in the medieval economy. They served as inns, ... as distributors of relief to the poor, ... as pioneers in farming and in the wool trade, as centres of learning and education.<sup>33</sup>

Beyond their active influence, the religious houses quietly embodied a lifestyle that served as a model for social organization: "though the service of God was beyond all question the prime object of monastic life, yet the more closely that life is examined the more clearly does it exhibit the element of associated labour."<sup>34</sup> With the destruction of this institution, class in its 'essential' sense (organic, not commercial: based on inherited social function and experienced as psychic integrity) was also destroyed. The poor were deprived of their primary benefactor and protector: "the condition of pauperism, as distinguished from that of poverty, may be traced distinctly to this event." Further, "an additional ... wrong was done {to the poor} by branding poverty with the mark of crime."

In the social and religious changes of this period the needy ... came unquestionably to have a less acknowledged right to any share in the Church revenues generally just as *Individualism*, which became the dominant

philosophy of 'the new men,' denied their claims as members of one Christian family.<sup>35</sup>

F. A. Gasquet, the author of these statements, traces to the suppression of the monasteries two additional national ills: the "destruction of custom as a check upon the exactions of landlords" (and he quotes John Stuart Mill in support), and more critically, the

destruction of the sense of corporate unity and common brotherhood, which was fostered by the religious unanimity of belief and practice in every village in the country, and which, as in the mainspring of its life ... centred in the Church with its rites and ceremonies.<sup>36</sup>

In the words of an anonymous chronicler writing fifty years after the suppression, the event "made of yeomen and artificers, gentlemen, and of gentlemen, knights, and so forth upward, and of the poorest sort, stark beggars."<sup>37</sup> According to another, roughly contemporary source, the "arts declined and ignorance began to take place again." Spiritual and aesthetic functions diverged, each entrusted to a specially educated class. England was brutally robbed of her cultural and spiritual repositories. "Like a swarm of locusts, the royal wreckers went forth over the land, and what they found fair and comely they blackened with their smelting fires and left useless ruins ... 'Defacing, destroying, and prostrating.'"<sup>38</sup> (The language of this indictment marks an association in the English conservative mind between the Dissolution and the Industrial Revolution – an association given visual form in the conditions of Tintern Abbey and its environs in 1798. See below, pp. 29–32.) In soberer prose, "the agrarian changes in the sixteenth century {most of them initiated by the secularization of religious lands} may be regarded as a long step in the commercialising of English life."<sup>39</sup>

Clearly, the Dissolution bestowed upon the abbey an enormous load of antithetical ideological implication. Its fortunes could be seen to initiate or to terminate the period of the highest achievement and the greatest happiness in English history.

A second sort of appropriation had occurred in the more recent memory of those living in 1798. The abbeys, fallen into disrepair, had been celebrated since the middle of the eighteenth century for their picturesque qualities – their value enhanced by the increasing scarcity of unimproved areas. The fascination with ruins, and the intersection of this interest in the late eighteenth century with theories of history, taste, landscape, and affective psychology form,

of course, an enormously complex issue in the history of ideas. My interest here is only to observe that the abbeys, already robbed of their function within the life of the community and literally pillaged by the locals, were further reduced by the artist and tourist. The aesthetic, contemplative approach to these ruins was, in effect, an extension of that older Protestant – or rather, Puritan – tendency. Or, the tourist's private, disinterested appreciation of the abbey marked the emergence of a new but familiar refinement in religious experience. By facilitating communion with the ecumenical spirit of the place (topographically competing with its *history*: grass against stone, sky against nave), the ruined abbey seemed to fulfill its original purpose, the difference of course being the thoroughly individual and immaterial nature of this new devotion. Having passed through Nature's refining fires, the abbey was reborn as a meditative spot, stimulus to and guardian of free – that is, nonpurposive, non-partisan, ideologically innocent – thought.

These remarks seek to gauge in a very approximate way the ideological potential of the English abbey within an early nineteenth-century semiotic and social context. Of particular interest here is the range of impressions Tintern Abbey made upon the mind of one particular poet at a particular moment. What did Tintern look like to Wordsworth in 1798?

Tintern was a singularly appealing ruin due to its isolated situation in a lush green valley threaded by the Wye. Its state of preservation added to its appeal: all walls standing, open to the sky, it had, then as now, the look of a classical temple. But perhaps the best explanation of Tintern Abbey's charm is the contrast it offered to the surrounding countryside. In 1798, the Wye Valley, though still affording prospects of great natural beauty, presented less delightful scenes as well. The region showed prominent signs of industrial and commercial activity: coal mines, transport barges noisily plying the river, miners' hovels. The town of Tintern, a half mile from the Abbey, was an iron-working village of some note, and in 1798 with the war at full tilt, the works were unusually active. The forests around Tintern – town and Abbey – were peopled with vagrants, the casualties of England's tottering economy and of wartime displacement. Many of these people lived by charcoal burning, obviously a marginal livelihood. The charcoal was used in the furnaces along the river banks. The Abbey grounds were crowded with



the dispossessed and unemployed, who begged coins of the tourists anxious to exercise their aesthetic sensibilities. The cottage plots noted in the poem are "green to the very door" because the common lands had been enclosed some time back and the only arable land remaining to the cottager was his front garden.<sup>40</sup>

Let me quote a passage from an undistinguished poem about Tintern Abbey, a poem written during the period in question. This poem speaks to the historical and ideological contrast between Abbey and town.

Here now no bell calls Monks to morning prayer,  
Daws only chaunt their early matins here;  
Black forges smoke, and noisy hammers beat,  
Where sooty Cyclops puffing, drink and sweat;  
Confront the curling flames, nor back retire,  
But live, like Salamanders, in the fire ...  
Here smelting furnaces like Aetna roar,  
And force the latent iron from the ore ...  
Huge iron bars here dwindle into wire;  
Assume such forms as suit the calls of trade,  
Ploughshare or broad-sword, pruning hook or spade ...  
Such is the state of Abbey at this day,  
For sloth, affrighted, fled with monks away.  
But with the monks departed not the flame  
Of hospitality, but glowed the same,  
While White and Jordan {owners of the Works} treated all that came:  
Their open houses travellers supply'd  
With what the fallen convent now deny'd.<sup>41</sup>

A few extracts from well-known guidebooks of the period, including Gilpin's (Wordsworth carried it with him to Tintern) are germane.

But elegant and perfect as is the Abbey, it is not more to be admired than the peculiarity of its situation. ... Nothing can be more just than the remark of Mr. Shaw, "That before the introduction of the Iron Works, how passing excellent must it have been for monastic life and discipline!" (1788)

Before the introduction of this Manufactory, the woods around must have been grand indeed; but the works requiring such quantities of charcoal, they are now fallen in the course of every 12 or 14 years (1793, Grose, *Antiquities of England and Wales*, vol. 3, in *Descriptive Account of Tintern Abbey ... Selected from Grose, Gilpin, Shaw, Wheatley ... and an History of Monasteries*, by Charles Heath, printer, Monmouth, 1793).

But were the building {Tintern Abbey} ever so beautiful, encompassed as it is with shabby houses, it could make no appearance from the river ... Among other things in this scene of desolation, the poverty and wretchedness of the inhabitants are remarkable. They occupy little huts, raised among the ruins of the monastery and seem to have no employment, but begging.

The country around Tintern Abbey hath been described as a solitary, tranquil scene: but its immediate environs only are meant. Within half a mile of it are carried on great iron-works; which introduce noise and bustle into these regions of tranquility ... Hitherto the river had been clear, and splendid ... But its water now became ouzy, and discoloured. Sludgy shores too appeared, on each side, and other symptoms, which discovered the influence of a tide. (William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye*, 1792).

Descended ... into a deep and sequestered hollow, formed by a sweeping recess of the Western banks of the Wye, and enclosing in its secluded bottom the village and abbey of Tintern: a delicious retreat, most felicitously chosen ... for the purposes of religious meditation and retirement. — *After encountering the thick enclosures and vile hovels which in every direction vexatiously obstruct the approach to the Abbey-Church, and intercept a distinct view of it, magical and sublime effect, on entering the West door, of the whole interior of this venerable pile, carpeted with velvet turf, and roofed by the azure sky: — the lofty side walls of the nave, bleached by an exposure to two centuries and a half, and beautifully stained with mosses and lichens of various dyes, retiring in long and deep perspective to the tall eastern windows, aereally light, and gracefully festooned with wreathes of ivy: — an exquisite and inimitable picture; singularly, yet harmoniously, blending the solemnity of Gothic architecture with the chearful gaiety of nature — Strolled in the evening up the banks of the Wye, through the scattered village of Tintern: — Many of the houses in ruins, and the whole place exhibiting strong marks of poverty and wretchedness.* Ivy everywhere luxuriates in wonderful profusion: taking advantage of the general listlessness which reigns here, it has quietly forced its way into the little church of Tintern, and spread completely over the soundboard of the pulpit, which it fringes very picturesquely. (Thomas Green, *Extracts from the Diary of a Lover of Literature*, Ipswich, printed John Faw; London, Longmans, 1810. Entries: Sept. 12 1796–June 24, 1800. 143–44, Entry for June 27, 1799. No knowledge of Wordsworth indicated for entire volume. [my emphasis])

The poem quoted above celebrates the advance of industry into erstwhile "indolent glades"; the guidebooks sharply regret the despoliation. The evidence of all the passages would strongly suggest that Wordsworth and his readers were alike cognizant of the contrast between Abbey and town, inwardness and industry, and all

the attendant emotional, historical, economic, and intellectual complexities. We might observe in this context that Wordsworth's explanation of his position *above* Tintern (note, 1798: "The river is not affected by the tides a few miles above Tintern") strikes a disingenuous note. Had he situated himself downstream – within the tidal field – the river would not have "reflected the several objects on its banks" with a clear grandeur. Wordsworth would have instead observed an "ouzy, and discoloured," that is, polluted surface. Or, respecting the contradictory evidence of Wordsworth's prose account (I. F. "I began {the poem} upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye, and concluded it just as I was entering Bristol in the evening . . .": i.e., downstream), we would locate the elision in Wordsworth's title, not his station, and at a more conscious level. Whatever interpretation we choose, we are bound to see that Wordsworth's pastoral prospect is a fragile affair, artfully assembled by acts of exclusion.

To a man of Wordsworth's experience and inclination, Tintern Abbey would have represented a retreat from the commercial interests so clearly figured by its neighborhood, the Abbey's cultural value sharply defined by the visual opposition and the destiny it inscribed. A poet given to historical perspectives could not but remark the Abbey's continuity of function. From its inception, this building had sheltered those who refused or were excluded from the dominant exchange interests of the day: monk, hermit, tourist, pauper, poet.

Today's critic breaks no new ground in characterizing Wordsworth's Nature as "a refuge from man; a place of healing . . .; a retreat."<sup>42</sup> But by resurrecting the image of the Abbey and its neighborhood, one can learn how urgent and specific this landscape architecture is, or, how distinctly 'man' is conceived.

The image of the abbey, convent, or monastery occurs in both "Descriptive Sketches" and in the 1850 *Prelude*. In "Descriptive Sketches," the most fervidly republican of Wordsworth's poems, the author is more than a little uncomfortable with the political intrusion upon consecrated ground. The Chartreuse passage in *The Prelude* 6, 418–88, and the analogous section in "The Tuft of Primroses," 1808, are Wordsworth's most eloquent and explicit representations of this ambivalence. In these several instances, the narrator profoundly resists the imagined or remembered invasion of the sacred precinct, objectification of national habits of affection.

While Wordsworth records no ancestral pile in his poetry, he persistently celebrates the abbey, convent, castle, cottage, cathedral – his sacred space. What I bring out here is the aura of the enclosure in Wordsworth's authorial ideology. Despite his genuine commitment to the Revolution, Wordsworth cannot abide the desecration of hallowed ground. The reaction – sometimes disproportionate and always conflictual – suggests an immediate existential issue: fear of losing the housed associations that make thought possible and that permit the poet to know himself to be a continuous, integrated personality. The "parting Genius" ("Descriptive Sketches," l. 72) implies a creative as well as a spiritual death. Wordsworth calls the Convent of Chartreuse "a place / Of soul-affecting *solitude* . . ." (*Prelude* 6, 420, 421). We might consider the fact that a land stripped of its sacred spots offers the individual no escape from the social body and the historical moment. "Let this one temple last, be this one spot / Of earth devoted to eternity!" (*Prelude* 6, 434, 435). As late as 1822 (*Ecclesiastical Sonnets*), Wordsworth laments loud and long various military invasions of the ancient monasteries, violent expressions of "National and Religious prejudices," and he denounces in these acts a general offense against charity. "Would that our scrupulous Sires had dared to leave / Less scanty measure of those graceful rites / And usages, whose due return invites / A stir of mind too natural to deceive; / Giving to Memory help when she would weave / A crown for Hope . . ." (Sonnet 33, "Regrets"). Also, see "Old Abbeys" (Sonnet 35).

Wordsworth's recognition that the liberation of the Bastille meant in a very real way the desecration of Chartreuse, activated a conflict, the attempted resolution of which eventually sent him over from, in Thompson's phrase, "disenchantment to apostasy." That conflict involved on the one hand Wordsworth's attraction to certain libertarian and humanitarian values, and, on the other, certain habits of thought and feeling more engrained and more crucial to his character structure: his reverence for place, for the past, and his attachment to silence, solitude, and self-denial. We might name this conflict "soft" vs. "hard" primitivism, by reference to Lovejoy's and Boas's scheme, and we might use that name to distinguish the Protestant from the Catholic or gothic Wordsworth: progressive from conservative, spiritual from material (see Chapter 3; New vs. Old Testament).<sup>43</sup> Wordsworth's 'Protestant' voice would have us believe that the physical decay of the abbey, initiated

by Nature and hastened by historical currents, releases the sacred from its confining material form, making that power available to and through private, spontaneous worship. "[T]hat monastic castle," for example, on Emont's banks (*Prelude* 6, 205), a ruin associated with Sidney and his Arcadia, yields to Wordsworth a similarly sanctified literary experience. The poet and his sister "looked / Forth, through some Gothic window's open space, / And gathered with one mind a rich reward / From the far-stretching landscape, by the light / Of morning beautified . . ." (*Prelude* 6, 215-19). A liberal humanist, this Wordsworth glosses over the psychic loss ensured by the conversion.<sup>44</sup>

This is the doctrinal thrust of "Tintern Abbey," but the poem's power derives from Wordsworth's gothic, materialist, and in Lionel Trilling's phrase, 'Jewish' sensibility. "Tintern Abbey"'s celebrated mysticism, that I associate with its Protestant, progressive theme, produces the deathly isolation of the mind that would find this "the image of the sole self."<sup>45</sup> By its morbid representational aura, this persona confesses its divorce from an order of collectivity that might validate poetic achievement, or confirm the poet's social and therefore individual being. Monks seek the thing they love and they seek it in the company of their fellows. Hermits are in flight from a dreaded reality, a social way of life felt to oppose interiority. The private, meditative poet is not, one feels, a credibly satisfying substitute for that older form of worship. And it is *certainly* not, as the poem argues, an evolutionary improvement on that 'primitive' model.<sup>46</sup>

We might also reflect on the fact that by 1798, Wordsworth's hermit was something of a stage prop. Wealthy landowners would sometimes hire a man to live in a picturesque hut, grow a picturesque beard, and display himself from time to time for the amusement of visitors.<sup>47</sup> Wordsworth's image does not, of course, refer to the role I describe – the debased servant of a business class seeking to collapse spiritual and aesthetic functions into one vicarious expenditure. But in so representing "the sole self," Wordsworth betrays something of the anxiety he must have felt at this time – something of the self-disgust, perhaps.

"Tintern Abbey," like so many of Wordsworth's poems, is a palimpsest, and as is often the case, what the poem depicts is less interesting than the subject thereby overwritten. Beneath the titular Abbey, we glimpse Chartreuse and its host of meanings, as well as

Furness, and even further back perhaps, the great house of Wordsworth's maternal grandparents. The site on which Wordsworth experienced "an appetite: a feeling and a love, / That had no need of a remoter charm" was not Tintern Abbey, 1793, but Furness, scene of wild boyhood rides. *Those* outings represented to Wordsworth the seeking of a thing he loved; it is the present visit to the Wye as well as the 1793 excursion that suggest to the poet flight from a painful situation, and that call out precisely the need for a "remoter charm, / By thought supplied," or, "the consecration and the poet's dream." Rather than invest Tintern Abbey with that charm or gleam, Wordsworth consecrates a nearby stretch of farm and woodland, ascribing to this landscape the power to prompt a devotion finer – more abstract – than even "la sentiment des ruines." He does this for two associated reasons. First, the actual impression made by Tintern, town and Abbey, defeats even Wordsworth's genius for imaginative alchemy. Tintern Abbey is not just another religious house wasted by time, nor are its decays the result of some glorious state whirlwind heralding a fair dawn. Tintern's devaluation is the effect of irresistible socioeconomic forces allegorically and *immediately* inscribed in the town, along the river banks, and within the ruin itself. And, Wordsworth had himself abetted those forces, consciously and unawares.<sup>48</sup>

In Greece, Italy, and Turkey, the poor traditionally took shelter in and around the ancient ruins. But in 1798, in *England* – felt at that time to be economically and militarily endangered – the spectacle of a national monument overrun with what looked to be a morally and materially unfixed class could not be taken lightly, especially by a man not entirely easy with his egalitarianism, a man already homesick for the memorialized landscapes of his childhood. The spatial juxtaposition of Tintern Abbey and town would bring into mental and causal relation iron works and paupers. The temporal translation of this relation would, of course, contrast a mode of social organization that dignified and, as it were, disarmed poverty (feudal 'organicism'), to one that engendered a debased and destructive pauperism.

On a more personal level, the spoiled ruin would have figured to Wordsworth the loss of a meaningful collectivity, a brotherhood of the self-elect, subsidized by the whole society: an idealized prefiguration of the intellectual community, Coleridge's "clergy." Like André Chenier, who passed through the pre-revolutionary, revolutionary, and Jacobin periods in France, Wordsworth saw the poet as "moving from a position of communal authority to one of socially

dispossessed guardian of his own imagination."<sup>49</sup> Yet more disturbing to a poet who had supported the French and anticipated an English Revolution, the ruin and its neighborhood visually juxtaposed the slow, continuous, and inexorable processes of organic renewal, against the violent catastrophe of political impulse. The general intellectual opposition is, of course, growth vs. change, with all the Miltonic resonance of that antithesis.

I would not say that Tintern Abbey looked very different in 1798 than it had in 1793; it just looked different to Wordsworth in the different political context of 1798. By that year, Wordsworth had clearly conceived London as an impossible environment ("the dreary intercourse of daily life"); he had been stunned by faceless urban misery and by the oppressively quantitative character of city life. Surely, the apparently 'urban' contamination (industry, poverty, crowds, noise, pollution) of the pastoral ruin would be of greater moment to Wordsworth in 1798 than it had been in 1793.

Then too, could a poet anxiously seeking to purify his mind of political thoughts (held to be the cause of a mental crisis and of an uneasy departure from England) fail to be troubled by Tintern's condition? The appropriation by beggars, industry, and tourism of this meditative spot could not but undermine Wordsworth's confidence in the continuing availability of artistic materials and in the possibility of individual vision, unimplicated in a decadent sociality.

... Oh! why hath not the mind  
Some element to stamp her image on  
In nature somewhat nearer to her own?  
Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad  
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?

*The Prelude* 1805, 45-49

Wordsworth's "shrines" are, in 1805, books, not ruins. The lament, which articulates "Tintern Abbey"'s undertone, would suggest that Wordsworth learns to sever his interests from history (the places, people, and events that had, he felt, betrayed him), and to align them instead with poetry, a safer investment.

The historical knowledge produced but not presented by the narrator interprets the pastoral farms as well. The vigorous improvement ethic, one of whose byproducts was the pauperism and social

fragmentation evidenced by the Abbey and town, directly threatened the endurance of those little farms, images of the lifestyle Wordsworth celebrates throughout his poetry. That sustained celebration is a function of the poet's knowledge that such spots are doomed. Or, these spots are pastoral in the literary sense; they depict a vanished and idealized way of life and mode of feeling. The farms *are there* in 1798, but Wordsworth sees them with an eye that compares, interprets, and predicts, and the resultant picture betrays its sources in memory and apprehension and desire. Hence its astonishing elegiac beauty.

By constructing that idyllic landscape, lines 1-22, Wordsworth not only exorcizes the soulless image on the eye, he establishes a literary immortality for the endangered farms and woods. Or, what we witness in this poem is a conversion of public to private property, history to poetry. In 1793, preoccupied with 'forward-looking' political thoughts, Wordsworth did not know to cherish - to preserve by internalizing - Abbey and farms. Now that he feels his need for these mental resorts and at the same time sees them past and passing, he brings to bear the massive imagination that is "Tintern Abbey."

"Tintern Abbey" originates in a will to preserve something Wordsworth knows is already lost. At the same time, it arises from the will to deny this knowledge. By 1800 ("Michael"), Wordsworth knows his sad subject and seeks consciously to work out its redemptive logic. Michael's sheepfold is explicitly offered to the reader as a historical landmark testifying to an earlier, more satisfying way of life; at the same time, the narrator persuades us that the passage of that historical moment has brought about a finer tone in social bonding. In "Tintern Abbey," it is less apparent that the farms, and behind them the Abbey, mark a constellation of values Wordsworth feels to be essential to his character structure as to his sense of metier: his Little Gidding as it were. And, while the narrator of "Tintern Abbey" can transcend his subject, it is clear to us that he cannot redeem it.

III

Given the sort of issues raised by "Tintern Abbey"'s occasion, it follows that the primary poetic action is the suppression of the social. "Tintern Abbey" achieves its fiercely private vision by

Wordsworth's great period poems

directing a continuous energy toward the nonrepresentation of objects and points of view expressive of a public – we would say, ideological – dimension: that knowledge which is neither natural nor individual but which defines and hides within the former and constructs a certain kind of consciousness as the latter. The poem defines its utterance as a natural history dictated to the poet in a natural language (“inland murmur”), and offering a natural lesson “of moral evil and of good” (“The Tables Turned”). What is ‘good,’ the poem tells us, is organically sublative evolution. We realize this process when we refuse that wilfulness which binds us to a fetishized past, as to our particular dreams of the future, forcing us thereby to live a discontinuous, inauthentic present. The 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. Wordsworth cancels the social less by explicit denial and/or misrepresentation than by allowing no scope for its operation.<sup>50</sup>

The most prominent syntactic device in the poem is the doublet. Inevitably, one finds that the apparent synonymization, apposition, and amplification turn out to represent a subjective and objective notation of the phenomenon in question (see below).

The early version of “. . . what they half create / And what perceive” ran “half-heard and half-created.” This comparison confirms for us the narrator’s governing association of auditory stimuli with perception of *what is* (the given material world), and of vision with creative formulation (intellectual life). Or, thus do we begin to identify the binary logic of this poem, whereby knowledge gets produced either objectively or subjectively, the two modalities together describing the totality of human experience. Below I list some additional doublets that conform to this pattern. The reader may not agree with the particular modal discriminations I offer. “Steep” may sound a subjective note, for example, and “lofty” an objective tone. This is not important. What matters is our alertness to the general binary scheme and to the analytic and ideological acts in which it engages us.

*Objective*

steep  
hedge-rows  
in the blood  
heavy

*Subjective*

lofty  
little lines  
along the heart  
weary

“Tintern Abbey”

*Objective*

serene  
harmony  
murmur  
feeling  
harsh  
subdue

*Subjective*

blessed  
joy  
mourn  
love  
grating  
chasten

The impression produced by this consistently deployed syntactic formula is that these two acts of mind – one freely embodying internal realities, the other slavishly registering external and immutable fact – make up the whole show, “the mighty world / Of eye, and ear, – both what they half create / And what perceive.” What is thereby expunged is the third function – call it the social, historical, ideological – or the process and relations that in part create the creator, his perceptual objects, and his range of responses to those objects. This is the ghost in the machine. We glimpse it when we reconstruct the scene of composition, or the fact of Tintern Abbey – its evidence of poverty and pollution and above all, its memorial to an extinct form of social existence yearned for by the poet.

The success or failure of the visionary poem turns on its ability to hide its omission of the historical. It must present culture as Nature and Nature as a landscape framed but not altered. And of course, the framing itself must figure an innocent, inert procedure. Consider in this light the narrator’s randomly descriptive musings – sylvan historiography, as it were, that tells no story but that of its own unfolding. The definition of objects and of a representational style must proceed continuously and impersonally so as to remain imperceptible. In this way, the figure appears to exclude nothing of the real. By these remarks, we might guess that the near seamlessness of “Tintern Abbey” is proportional to the number and strength of the spirits it must suppress.

Consider the opening lines. “Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters!” While the statement seems more than slightly tautological, I think we can all agree that the opening clause offers an apparently objective (as well as abstract and formulaic) statement and that the following phrase presents the same phenomenon as a subjective experience. The years *felt like* five blocks of lived time (summer is, for Wordsworth, a *seme* for freedom, holiday, happiness, see *Prelude* 6, 190–203,

322) separated by five of endured time, the two portions seemingly of unequal size ("the *length* / Of five *long* winters"). The syntax, diction, punctuation, and lineation of this sentence, however, strongly urge the commutability of objective-quantitative and subjective-qualitative experience. Or, the device works to conceal the difference between an object and an object of knowledge. What we can see only with difficulty is that in the conversion of objective to subjective, formulaic to felt, something is lost: spring and fall. Or, the realities (discursive and experiential, if we can make this distinction) produced by objective and subjective processes do not in fact account for all the matter in question. In adding the two modes of representation, Wordsworth subtracts something – in this case, nothing of great moment. There is a place held open by the semicolon and in that aperture an act of selection has taken place. That which is not consecrated by private experience is eliminated and the blank is covered over. That is, in his subjective analysis of the objective fact, Wordsworth liberates a quantum of negative energy that, by resisting, reinforces the positive charge or expressed subjectivity. When we respond to the "length" of those "long winters," we have unconsciously tacked on to them spring and fall.

The most significant omission of this sort is found in the phrase, "all thinking things, all objects of all thought." One tends to read this as an exhaustive statement touching both poles of possibility. The poem argues that "thinking things" largely construct the object world, so that the latter, while its first cause is "a motion and a spirit," is subject to an efficient cause as well. There is, however, no indication of reciprocity. "Thinking things" and their products, thoughts, apparently suffer no interference from the material and social world. Thought is free – the mind is its own place, the world is another. Given the foregoing contextual discussion, however, it would seem that "Tintern Abbey"'s poet must conceive of this free mental activity as involuntary – a natural process operating through him and escaping his full consciousness. Not to do so is to associate himself with that order of praxis which has reduced Tintern Abbey and town to their present state of conspicuous decay. Wordsworth's Cartesian problematic (create vs. perceive, discover vs. impose, thinker vs. object of thought, self vs. other) leaves him no alternative to this vicarious, transcendentalized myth of production but to regard himself as a product. If thought is not mystified and, as it were, referred, then it must be materially possessed, obsequiously

reproductive. It is this bind that explains, I believe, Wordsworth's self-projection: that hollowed-out emblem of uncompromised consciousness, the hermit.

My textual project here is not to identify new formal configurations but to entertain: "Tintern Abbey"'s most commonly noted features as semiotic devices rather than as independent semantic units. These features are, of course, part of the poem's meaning – indeed, a larger, or more nuclear part than we usually allow – but only insofar as they are recognized as the agency by which meaning is produced. For example, Wordsworth's peculiar use of comparative adjectives is often regarded as an important aspect of "Tintern Abbey"'s metaphysical argument.<sup>51</sup> The recurrent and confident perversion of this syntactic relation suggests that reality, as experienced by the narrator, is unceasing process, its shapes and fixities simply degrees and directions of movement our minds are generally too gross to detect. The repeated withholding of the referent that would explain (anchor) "more deep seclusion," "remoter charm," "more sublime," etc. leads us to regard all that we behold *on* – not "from" – this green earth as "unfathered vapour," without assignable source, without determinate form, and incapable of definition or even adequate description, limited as we are to a language whose structures are contrastively normative. As we ask, "five years have passed since what event?" or "deeper *than what*, purer and holier *than what*?" and we feel our questions repeatedly slighted, we learn or decide that "Tintern Abbey" is neither a mimetic nor an expressive discourse but, following Abrams, formulative.<sup>52</sup> Or, the poem constructs a reality that is self-contained and perspicuous without reference to the observed scene or to the observer. This impression of nominal and ontological autonomy is, of course, a familiar Romantic effect. What I try to expose in "Tintern Abbey" is the use to which it is put. By formally installing this (heterocosmic) concept, Wordsworth obscures both the scene before his eyes and the circumstances defining/disturbing the particular observer of that scene. By the time we reach line 96, we are prepared to accept "something far more deeply interfused" as a description of transcendent reality. We no longer query the fixed point it exceeds in profundity.

The poem employs other, no less disarming discursive strategies. We notice, for example, that Wordsworth's pastoral vision actually foregrounds features that encode potent historical meanings. To the

contemporary reader (or viewer) – and in any context but “Tintern Abbey” – these details would have indicated the effects of concrete social relations. “These pastoral farms, / Green to the very door” helps establish the monochromatic blend of the separate elements in the scene (one principle of the picturesque), the visual material suggesting a conceptual sequence and affective continuity. As I noted above, however, the green lawns, that figure in the poem as an image of psychic and material wellbeing, are the miserable product of an economic fact and its charged history, as are the attractively, ‘sportively’ sprinkled lines of hedges, another emblem of enclosure. Ironically, Wordsworth corrects his initial statement (“these hedgerows”) as if to acknowledge its inaccuracy, the result of its objective (here, nonsensational, socially mediated) provenance. True to the syntactic laws of the poem, the formulaic description (the speaker’s received, ‘objective’ knowledge of the identity of those lines: a reified abstraction, or, assumption) is replaced by the truth of sensation (all he can really see from his vantage are lines: his concrete, subjective impression, or, the picture of the mind). Thus evincing scrupulous sincerity, the narrator converts substance into formal property, reality into design, the end result being the suppression of the historical significance of those lines: their cause and effect. This is empiricist idealism of a most seductive kind. Ignorance provides no counterargument. Gilpin’s commentary, which Wordsworth carried with him, starkly delineates the general social significance of the landscape. Moreover, we might recall that in “Simon Lee,” the narrator observes the impoverished hero – a man profoundly, *existentially* disabled by the passing of the old, the ‘manorial’ organic order – tilling his front yard, a “scrap of land” that Simon, “from the heath / Enclosed when he was stronger.” The detail is one of a series of similar observations, all of them documenting the material, psychic, social, and physical decline of the protagonist. (Only on a spiritual plane does Simon prosper.) We can assume, I think, that the meaning of those hedgerows was available to Wordsworth.

Along these lines, we note that in “An Evening Walk,” Wordsworth describes “A peace enlivened, not disturbed, by wreathes / Of charcoal-smoke.” Charcoal burning, a maintenance to which many were forced by the economic upsets of the nineties, had to introduce into the poet’s consciousness a somber social note.<sup>53</sup> Remember, we are not reconstructing here the response of a determined aesthete (a Thomas Green, “*Lover of Literature*,” see above) but of a poet

whose social engagement was, throughout his life, strong and outspoken. Hence, perhaps, the self-vexing tendency of the representation. In this context, we observe that the smoke wreathes, which figure in the passage as a kind of natural sacrifice to the benevolent God responsible for the rich harmony of the scene, are perversely demystified by those curious lines, “as might seem, / Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods.” The curiosity of the phrase is, of course, its gratuitous allusion to the vagrants. The strictly notional being of these figures (“as might seem . . .”) marks an attempt to elide the confessed factual intelligence. Or, while the passage explicitly associates the smoke with the cosy pastoral farms, and situates the image as an instance of natural supernaturalism, the ‘surmise’ identifies the smoke as the effects of charcoal burning. More to the point, it identifies those idealized vagrants – a sort of metonymic slide toward the hermit/poet – as the actual charcoal burners who migrated according to the wood supply and the market. Or, more simply, Wordsworth reverses objective and subjective knowledges: he presents real vagrants as hypostatized (archetypal) figures, and positions the scene all grateful – an idea *tout court* – as unmediated sensory impression. Moreover, we observe that by equating the wanderers with the hermit – one who possesses even less than they but whose spirit is inversely enriched and exalted – Wordsworth further discredits the factual knowledge hiding in his representation. Following the text, we forget that hermits choose their poverty; vagrants suffer it.

Another example of this device – the purloined letter trick – is the phrase, “little unremembered acts.” Thus, according to Karl Kroeber, does Wordsworth “make history out of nature.”<sup>54</sup> I would say that Wordsworth does just the opposite. By defining the stuff of history as private, or generally inconsequential, unchronicled, and plastic experience, Wordsworth suppresses all those large, recorded events – of which Tintern Abbey is so formidable a reminder – not so obsequious to the imagination.

Finally, lest we focus too closely on the meaning of these scenic elements – lest we perversely insist on reading them as cultural features – Wordsworth classifies them in summary as “beauteous forms.” The phrase echoes lines 25–28 of “The Tables Turned,” another cautionary idealism: “Sweet is the lore which Nature brings: / Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things; / We murder to dissect.” By this point, we can appreciate

Wordsworth's repetition of the phrase in lines 22–24 of "Tintern Abbey." "These beauteous forms, / Through a long absence, have not been to me / As is a landscape to a blind man's eye." Above (p. 24), I suggested that the formal properties of the assertion undermine its claim. Or rather, the line, which pronounces the empirically and socially responsible character of the narrator's visioning, at the same time describes his enabling blindness.

Perhaps we can recognize now the Cartesian inscription of Wordsworth's simile. In *The Dioptrics*, Discourse I, Descartes takes on those philosophers who assume a necessary correlation between material object, mental image, and sensation – a correlation based on visual resemblance. Descartes argues that "it is the soul that sees, not the eye," that "very often the perfection of an image depends on its not resembling the object as much as it might," and that "there need be no resemblance here between the ideas conceived by the soul and the disturbances that cause them." Descartes's proof is largely analogical, and the heuristic model throughout is that of "men born blind."

When our blind man touches bodies with his stick, they certainly transmit nothing to him; they merely set his stick in motion in different ways, according to their different qualities, and thus likewise set in motion the nerves of his hand, and the points of origin of these nerves in his brain; and this is what occasions the soul's perception of various qualities in the bodies, corresponding to the various sorts of disturbance that they produce in the brain.

The blind man's stick is, for Descartes, a functional extension of his nerves, that organ which presents to the brain "impressions of external objects." We are all blind with respect to the actual and largely visual facts of the material world. Or, reality for us, no less than for the blind, consists in the mechanisms of reception and coordination. Descartes reinforces this conclusion by reference to various perceptual anomalies, such as those produced by distance.

It is not the absolute size of the images that counts ... our judgments of shape {like those of size}, come from our knowledge, or opinion, as to the position of the various parts of the objects, and not in accordance with the pictures in the eye.

Wordsworth's hedgerows describe, of course, just such a phenomenon. Descartes intimates in passing the advantages of this apparent limitation – that is, the mental unavailability of the

world's body. "But we have to consider that thought may be induced by many things besides pictures – e.g. by signs and words, which in no way resemble the things signified."<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps it is appropriate to say that Wordsworth's visual/conceptual field cannot sight/think the *unlovely* forms – the *contents*, *shapes* – of that landscape. The speaker looks on Nature through the spectacles of thought; mixing metaphors, the "still, sad music of humanity" drowns out the noise produced by real people in real distress. Even as we see this, we should be careful to observe that the visionary authenticity of "Tintern Abbey" is a *function* of its authentic visual restrictions. To forget this – to miss the necessity, the historical reality, and the power of Wordsworth's solution – is to betray the wisdoms of our own moment, that very wisdom Wordsworth could not, in 1798, produce. Coming as it does on the heels of a murderous dissection, my assertion may sound like special pleading. It is not. It is the point of this criticism. By the social reality of its fictions, "Tintern Abbey" demonstrates that the privatized concept or cognitive object ("beauteous form") is the philosopher's stone. By it, we remain capable and conscientious in a world ruled by loss and double binds. It is the enabling "as if," and it becomes a usable truth for us when we deconstruct its Truth for Wordsworth. Another way to focus this virtue is to see that "Tintern Abbey"'s suppression of a historical consciousness is precisely what makes it so Romantic a poem. Prometheanism, spontaneity, the imageless deep truth: these valorized Romantic effects are produced by an operational ignorance concerning the degree to which the subjective eye – the individual 'I' – is constituted by its field of vision: a horizon, a structure, and a set of relations external to individual psyche insofar as that psyche leads an independent existence.

"Tintern Abbey"'s narrator makes no secret of his blindness; we all know the light of sense has gone out by line 22. Because he defines himself as an individual spirit, dependent only on Nature and on his own responsiveness for his sense of meaning and attachment (ll. 108–111), he cannot conceive himself as anything other than a role (the recluse) – or, what amounts to the same thing, a past and a future projection. The turn to Dorothy, then, is a move toward otherness, or toward a social reality, albeit a greatly complaisant (cathected) instance of that order. Dorothy functions in the poem as a final surface, the condition for the poet's ongoing reflective life.



Lacking this screen – a kind of alienated *tabula rasa* – the speaker knows himself only as a fixture of the landscape; unable to reflect upon it, and therefore, by his problematic, produced by it, and, as its creature, incapable of self-reflection.

The brilliance of "Tintern Abbey" is a function of its half-light. It is a transitioning, a liminal poem, delivered by a man who situates himself at a junction of inland waters and ocean tides. Wordsworth has one foot in a new field of vision, one that could conceive a social form neither subjective (a world of Dorothys) nor objective (London). Instead of opposing interiority, this as yet unthinkable sociality would facilitate self-realization by a process of recuperative alienation, a process more clearly foreshadowed in "Peele Castle." Haunting about the edges of "Tintern Abbey" (and at the center of "Peele Castle") is Wordsworth's fear of exhausting his own feeding sources, that sensuous concrete reality he repeatedly cannibalizes by way of transforming Nature into "beauteous forms" and culture into lyrical ballads.<sup>56</sup>

Wordsworth needed to see those hedgerows as "little lines"; to entertain their concrete social reality would have meant confronting his own enabling insertion in a system he could not consciously abide. This is an unfortunate and a painful bind, but it is not tragic. That dimension arises from the fact that Wordsworth, like the Lady of Shalott, knew himself deprived by his magic mirror, a surface projecting only Nature's "fairest and most interesting" properties, and reflecting a proportionately attenuated authorial image. In beholding *from* this green earth, in seeing *into* the life of things, the poet lost the ground he stood on and the teeming life of things.

Wordsworth knew that "beauteous forms" do not equal "huge and mighty forms," and that "landscape" lacks that chthonic power we feel in the *Prelude's* "holy scene{s}" (2:107). This knowledge hides in those transitions Wordsworth advertises in his 'odal' note. It is inscribed in the syntactic themes of the poem: its obsessive doublets and its refusal to tether to this green earth what Hartman calls its "incremental contrasts and blendings." Wordsworth writes what he wants to believe is an ode, invocation of a full presence – a Nature God identified with an earlier self and at the same time, incarnation of that qualitative essence distilled from the observed scene. He ends by producing an elegy, a confession of absence. This is the authentic form of the poem.

IV

Wordsworth's glancing awareness of alternative problematics could explain the poem's general, structural (as opposed to local, stylistic) procedures. The movements which Hartman designates as turns and counterturns might also be conceived as approaches to and withdrawals from the object of address. By this Pindaric allusion, so to speak, Wordsworth suggests the ultimately elusive, ineffable nature of his subject, and the necessity of an approach-avoidance relation to it. We see the scene and its meanings by glimpses and peripherally, probably the only way we ever start imagining what we know, which is to say, knowing our imaginations. Not to put too enlightened an edge on it, though, we must also observe that Wordsworth's invocation of the conventionally numinous presence effectively marginalizes the orders of actuality we have been focusing here. These become, collectively, the poem's *deus absconditus*. Concerning ourselves now with compositional matters, we can guess that Wordsworth's flying visits to the Abbey effectively shielded him from local knowledge – a sense of the lived social meanings of the place. For all his disdain of the tourist, Wordsworth assumes that role in order to compose his vision, his poem, and his mind.

Lines 1–22 form a strophic unity; here the narrator invokes and describes his divine subject. Because the subject is a landscape, or a *genius loci*, the approach takes the form of a composition of place, requiring a concomitant decomposition of actual site, effected by the devices discussed above. In lines 22–48, the antistrophe, the speaker withdraws from the enthrallments of vision. The movement is characterized by negation and regression ("an eye made quiet"). The composed scene dissolves, making room for reflective revision, a usurpation (presented as sublation) of fact by feeling. In this section, Wordsworth adds the charm of thought, compensation as we have seen, less for a psychic or existential change in the observer than for the changed meanings of the English countryside, the observed. Wordsworth's anxiety about sensory and particularly visual tyranny seems a displacement of the greater terror, the tyranny of fact.

Lines 49–111 develop a second strophe, emergence from reverie into self-knowledge. We see that the self has replaced the landscape as the poetic subject (i.e., a self-apotheosis has occurred), an achievement produced by the rejection of present place and occasion. The

many "how oft"s, announcement of habitual action, undercut the immediacy and specificity of the compositional moment. "And now . . ." (l. 58) leads us to expect a climactic and unique conjunction of past and present experience, but what follows is a description of any return to any place by any man – or so it seems. The lesson taught by this return, or its governing sentiment, is, roughly, *sic transit gloria mundi*. One is urged to put one's trust in the inner life, an impregnable dimension. The indicative ("For I have learned . . .") – like the landscape architecture, lines 1–22 – is the form of a negative impulse: sublimation of oversight to insight. The insight (the mind is its own place) names that blindness which assumes the autonomy of the psyche, its happy detachment from the social fact of being. The sensibility dictating this section posits "nature and the language of the sense" as the motives to thought and action. While the speaker acknowledges an order of determination we might call the social or historical, he identifies this pressure as a complement to individuality. The former is as the plural, bass, ground, or ballad to the singular (treble, form, lyric) of individuality. The social world in its actual and compelling character is, of course, annihilated by this celebratory representation which reads it as the supportive medium of private life, and not a special historical template for psychic experience. The poet's discovery of the "still, sad music of humanity," the capable consolation, allows him to terminate the ode. The consolation is authentic but the genuine need for it is, as we have seen, suppressed by the work's Cartesian epistemology. It is *Tintern* (town and Abbey) selected *out* from the poem, that compels the formulation of this particular thought that lies too deep for tears.

Lines 112 to the conclusion develop the consolidation and farewell that mark this section as the odal epode. By a series of simple actions, the narrator has deconstructed his dangerous real, rebuilding it in the selfsame motion within a formal universe and, of course, in finer tone. We admire at the end his Tintern Abbey of the mind.

Each of the four textual movements I have plotted has a contextual original or equivalent. Wordsworth and Dorothy bypassed the Abbey *en route* to Goodrich Castle, Monmouth, then again on their way to Chepstow, back in the other direction. On the next day, they paused to observe the Abbey and then proceeded to Bristol.<sup>57</sup> One might construe this strangely frantic itinerary as a sort of physical effort on Wordsworth's part to change his point of view spatially, as the narrator alters his temporal position within the poem. One may

recognize the futility of this epistemological hopscotch and still admire it. The intuition of one's prison house and the interest in escaping it are, one must think, knowledge enough.

Wordsworth's Preface circles uneasily around the knowledge that production and consumption cannot be distinguished, even heuristically, but this relationship remains in "Tintern Abbey" innocent and perhaps in consequence, artistically fertile.<sup>58</sup> Wordsworth's transformation of landscape into aesthetic prospect consumes, of course, certain resources: what we might call sensuous concrete reality, and the human meanings sealed in that physique. While "Tintern Abbey" does not *discover* that its coming into being effects this impoverishment, it does contain this knowledge. The sister who consumes the speaker's wisdom will, according to the logic of his utterance, reproduce him at some later date, and a reciprocal deconstruction of his historical actuality is implied. Were the poet to articulate this logic, he would explode the subject-object (create-perceive, produce-consume) ratio that gives him a writerly selfhood. The turn to Dorothy is not only a rhetorical move showing us how to take the poem (i.e., psychologically, as a record of individual consciousness, or "kindly"). The address, like the peripheral sightings of the Abbey and Wordsworth's Pindaric maneuvers represents a genuine effort to escape the binary problematic through which the poem gets written. Since the poet's steady and focused gaze cannot illuminate the pockets of actuality whose presence he senses, he beseeches the "shooting lights" of his sister's "wild eyes." "Wild" is, consistently, Dorothy's epithet. She is felt to exist on the margins of the speaker's enclosure and to have access both to that haven and to the unimaginable relations outside it. She is the hypostatized, desired alien – a phantom figure – always on the boundary of the familiar and now and then sliding into the beyond. By her faery freedom, Dorothy-Lucy is to Wordsworth an invaluable textual device; led by her, he is now and then estranged from his knowledges. We might recall in this context Lucy Gray, that aptly named liminal figure. Lucy's parents lose her in the middle of a bridge, the seam between their field of vision and the one she has entered. Past that border, she is invisible and inaudible to them – to anyone of their moment. The narrator, however, of a different moment, hears Lucy from time to time, and sights her transmuted shape. It is his historical estrangement, and his poetical character

(his delight in "contemplat{ing} . . . volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe") that account for his power.

The old problematic – the question etched on the *tabula rasa* – asks for the ratio between (passive) consumption of sensory data and (active) production of reality. The way this ratio is set up suppresses the formulation of the question: to what extent does the act of perception perceive the perceiver? To what extent does the act of production produce the producer, writing write the writer? "Tintern Abbey"'s answer to this shadow question is as follows: it is neither the object nor the thinker that determines cognition but rather "the mind as representative of all other minds" (i.e., as conditioned by forces too psychically imbricated – too social – to identify) together with the object; not *an sich* but as it exists in its social relations.

While "Tintern Abbey" contains this answer it does not, of course, offer it. What it does recommend is an apparatus for the transformation of reflective into reflexive thought. We might call this apparatus or method 'natural selection.' The idea is to install psychically a mechanism such that incoming data are preconsciously processed. Thus is the psyche 'naturally,' as it were, or innocently furnished with representations purged of conflictual (unconsecrated) particulars. Simply, the unthinkable, ideology-refusing suggestiveness of the world is expunged unconsciously, leaving the individual's confidence in the disinterested holism of his knowledge intact.

at length, . . . such habits of mind will be produced that by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits we shall describe objects and utter sentiments of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves . . . must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted and his affections ameliorated.

Preface, *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800

"Tintern Abbey" dramatically rehearses this protocol; the poet incorporates and reproduces the object world not in its 'uninteresting,' that is, unworkable aspect, but as the representation of former feelings – a sort of psychic allegory spatially disposed. ' . . . thy mind / Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms . . . ' Upon return to the object world – in "Tintern Abbey," a return to the Wye Valley – the writer finds the place "impressed" with his own symbolic material.

Epistemologically situated as the object world, the scene confronts the writer as a second self – a temporally displaced double. The enterprise invited by or, more precisely, encoded in the psychic projections constituting his sense of place, is an introspective act – a self-confrontation.<sup>59</sup> When we step back a bit, we can see that the process effectively sutures the subject-object wound – in Wordsworth's idiom, heals the breach. Or, "Tintern Abbey" invents and idealizes a procedure whereby the mind's extension (denotation, object representation, quantitative knowledge) is experienced as intension (connotation, valorization, qualitative knowledge). The pun is well meant; the narrative project of "Tintern Abbey" is to intentionalize matter, and matter-of-fact. The functional agency is, of course, memory. Under its direction, the return to a place is experienced as the passive creation of it (ll. 4–7: "Once again / Do I behold these . . . cliffs, / That on a wild secluded scene impress / Thoughts of more deep seclusion"). Recognition (a self-other, subject-object dynamic) is felt as reproduction of the inner life, the valorized order of "beauteous forms." Yet the expressive modality assumed by this experience is description: a discourse in praise of Nature and not in competition with it.

A surprisingly explicit formula for this production protocol occurs in one of Wordsworth's letters. "He {Wordsworth} deplored Scott's rather mechanical fashion of jotting down in a notebook various items that struck him as he took a walk." The author quotes from Wordsworth's letter to Aubrey De Vere (in F. W. H. Myers, *Wordsworth* (London: Macmillan, 1881).

He should have left his pencil and notebook at home, fixed his eye as he walked with a reverent attention on all that surrounded him, and taken all into a heart that could understand and enjoy. Then, after several days . . . he should have interrogated his memory as to the scene. He would have discovered that . . . much was . . . wisely obliterated; that which remained – *the picture surviving in his mind* – would have presented the ideal and essential truth of the scene and done so . . . by discarding much which, though in itself striking, was not characteristic. (my emphasis).<sup>60</sup>

One can discern in Wordsworth's cognitive/compositional program a resistance to an instrumental or operational notion of literature.

Not . . . that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my

feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*.

Preface, *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800

And by now we can guess that Wordsworth's defensive, rather mystifying and highminded denial of vulgar intentionality – his commodity critique – is informed by his knowledge that a man's best purposes can betray him. Wordsworth's entire experience had led him to conceive Tintern Abbey as the incarnation of a social ideal and as the passionate expression of inner vision: 'poetry' in Shelley's general sense. That notion was disconfirmed in the cruellest way by the physical and social reality of the place – a terrible tribute to a humanistic, enlightened ethos and its 'improvements.' Or, an image of wilful creativity "vexing its own creation." The obvious authorial question posed by that scenic text is, how to write; or, how to write oneself out of that miserable script? Wordsworth's answer is that the poet must work in the dark, with only a phantom or negative knowledge of the sources, interests, and objects of his labor. By his natural selections, the poet not only engenders for himself an illusion of freedom and sincerity – the condition of his writing – but also develops a social image of this labor. "Tis (Nature's) privilege, / ... to lead / From joy to joy: for she can so inform / The mind that is within us, so impress . . ." To paraphrase, poets do not work for their meaning; they receive it from a Nature which has been already and unconsciously appropriated, that is vicariously (ideologically) worked.<sup>61</sup> The poet's materials are a "ready wealth" ("The Tables Turned") and their availability to him signifies his election. He is as it were Nature's appointed translator, who consumes, reproduces, and historically effectuates her vernal impulses.

By suggesting that we find our thoughts "impressed" upon Nature, Wordsworth denies that we make our thoughts, that we are made by those thoughts, and that a good deal of social thinking gets done, for good and ill, through our most private reflections. Moreover and more deliberately, Wordsworth dissociates thoughts from their effects, cancelling in this manner thinking responsibility at a certain practical level. Wordsworth's thoughts and purposes – his adult pragmatic structure, so to speak – betrayed him, and Tintern Abbey's appearance holds him to that treason. Wordsworth escapes by denying culture's perfidy – that is, by placing that perfidy or its manifestations under the sign of Nature–Psyche and their

redemptive operations. By this transposition, this testimony – "Knowing that Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her" – Wordsworth brings forth the *sententium* that crystallizes the poem's self-understanding: *sic requiescat gloria mentis*.<sup>62</sup>

"Tintern Abbey"'s myth of production entails a myth of consumption. The poem argues that a purposive attention to the text is as dangerous for the reader as an interested representationalism is for the writer. The narrator's advice to Dorothy – "Therefore let the moon / Shine on thee in thy solitary walk; / And let the misty mountain-winds be free / To blow against thee" – offers her the protection of his own relation to the real. Dorothy is urged to naturalize an utterance whose historical matter is already largely digested. By 'maturing' otherwise unprocessed experience, she will furnish her memory with "all lovely forms, . . . all sweet sounds and harmonies," thereby establishing her own retirement zone and reproducing her brother's psychic fane.

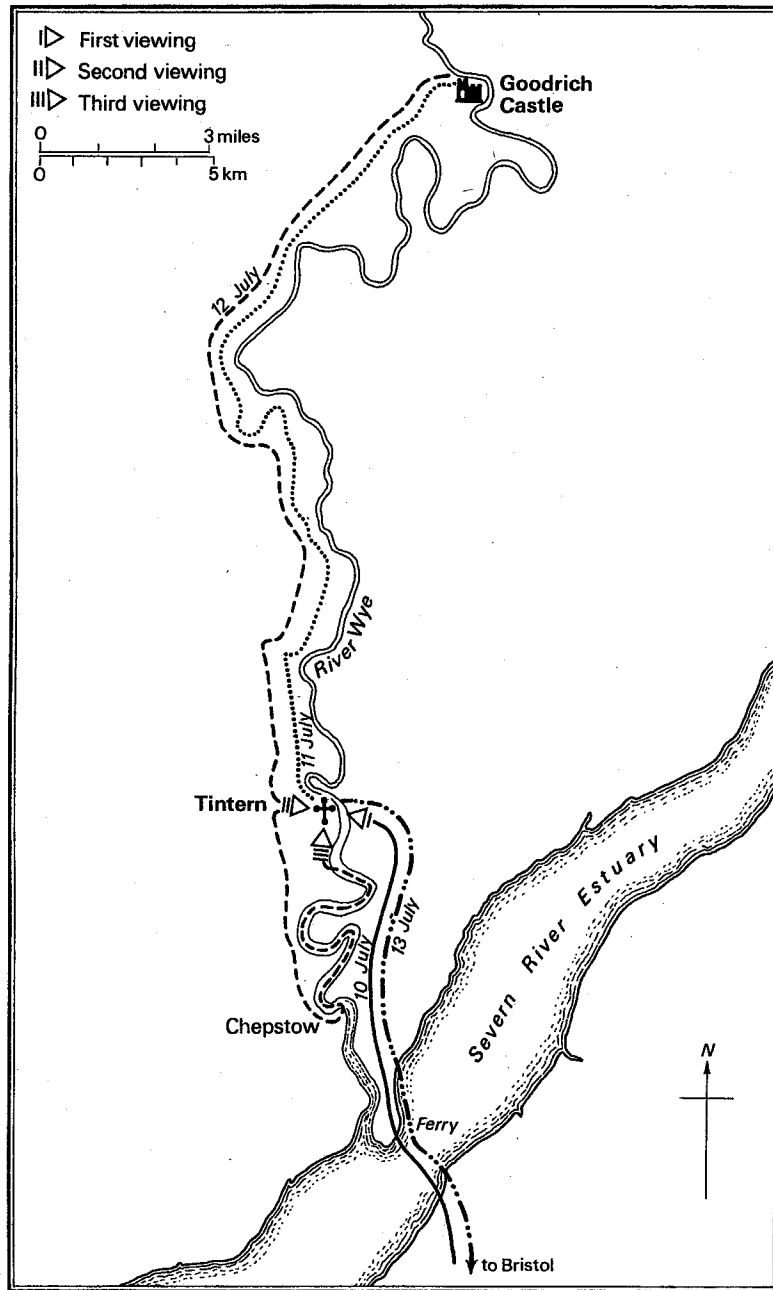
"Tintern Abbey" finally represents mind, and specifically memory, not as energy – a subtle psychic ongoingness – but as a barricade to resist the violence of historical change and contradiction. With the displaced but certain elaboration of this figure, Wordsworth overrides his own defenses against the sighting of Tintern Abbey. The ruin enters the poem and not by the backdoor but as the divine subject of the odal apostrophe. Knowing as we do the genetic conditions of this topos, we can grasp at once its deeply historical character and at the same time, its archetypal power.

The house protects the dreamer . . . The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind.<sup>63</sup>

V

As I mentioned, each of the four odal sections corresponds to a physical movement toward or away from Tintern Abbey. Wordsworth said he composed the poem on the way to Bristol.<sup>64</sup> As Moorman and others have noted, this means that his phrase, "A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" should have been "A Few Miles Below Tintern Abbey" (see page 32). No one has been terrifically exercised by the discrepancy.

The first – the *very first* – impression made by Wordsworth's snake of a title is that the speaker gazes *down upon* the Abbey from some



54

### "Tintern Abbey"

peak a few miles above it. It takes a split second for "miles" to sink in, especially if the reader's expectations have been formed by poems such as "Grongar Hill" and the "Eton College Ode" – topographical poems that situate the speaker on an eminence offering a wide prospect to his view. The conventions of nineteenth-century landscape painting would also reinforce this impression.

In substituting – unintentionally, I believe – 'above' for 'below,' Wordsworth not only puts himself above the polluted segment of the river, he implies his possession of a Pisgah prospect – an overlook permitting comprehensive and composed vision. The preposition 'above' gives us the poetic action of 'looking over' Tintern Abbey. In that nuance hides a "play on words," (Wortspiel) that is necessarily impenetrable for its author.<sup>65</sup> In that nuance lies the authentic explanation of this great escape, "Tintern Abbey."

The Abbey is precisely what gets looked over and overlooked, as does the significance of 13, 14 July 1798, 1793, 1790, and the actual appearance of the banks of the Wye. The inward vision for which the poem is properly renowned is produced by the controlled constriction of object-related social vision. "Tintern Abbey"'s transcendence does not confirm the narrator's discovery of "the thing he loved," it betrays his flight "from something that he dreads." Wordsworth's negotiations with an impossible reality sketch a response one is likely to share, understand, and forgive, if such things need forgiving. I have hoped to bring "Tintern Abbey" back to earth that we may do more than worship it.

### AFTERWORD

I have suggested that criticism's failure to address the occasion of "Tintern Abbey" is part of a more general problem. Most of the poems we call Romantic resist historical elucidation in particular and particularly effective ways, as we have begun to observe.<sup>66</sup> "Tintern Abbey," however, even among Romantic poems is an especially difficult work to situate, for its primary action is the dramatization of a man reading a landscape, an exhibition offered as a model for our own reception of the work. We recall that *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) installs "Tintern Abbey" as the conclusion to a volume that opens with "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned," both lessons in nonviolent reading. What the first two poems teach, the last demonstrates. As "Tintern Abbey"'s

55

narrator consumes the wisdom of the place, so he exhorts his readers to consume the material he has just worked – or rather, 'purified.' Like Dorothy, the reader is urged to offer Nature's (poetically mediated) impulses absolute hospitality. We are cautioned not to ask our guests rudely where they came from and who they are. Or again, rather than murder to dissect, we are asked to swallow the poem whole.

If one is uneasy with this kind of courtesy, one must refuse the distinction in readership and more generally, in sensibility that the poem postulates: roughly, gentle vs. vulgar. If a teacher wants his students to feel the force of "Tintern Abbey," which is the force of its negativity, he cannot approach the poem as a finished product, endeared by its experimental, essayistic rhetoric. Of what use is the record of a victory, and of a victory bound to seem nugatory to the modern reader? What does it mean today to know that Nature never does betray the heart that loves her? Who fears that it would, or did, and what did betrayal (and Nature) mean to Wordsworth and his readers anyway? What do these words mean to us?

In this chapter, I try to revive for today the power in those famous words by identifying the material that "Tintern Abbey" so consummately sublimates. While Wordsworth's contemporaries could not critically articulate the poem, as we can, they were in a position to appreciate the tendentiousness of the representation.<sup>67</sup> We, however, cannot easily see what image the Abbey presented in 1798 nor what Wordsworth *saw* when he gazed at his pastoral prospect. Without a conscious act of reconstruction – of the place and the person more – one must take Wordsworth's impression at face value, and today's face value is not that of 1798. Of course, all serious readers of the poem recognize its general and deliberate movement of idealization, but "Tintern Abbey"'s identity or peculiar virtue, in Pater's sense, resides in its *particular* patterns of displacement. In order to hear again the voice of a man speaking to men, one must expose that powerful definition as a platform, one that denies the historicity and the instrumentality of literature.

When we encounter Wordsworth's disclaimers of the objective importance of his incidents, characters, and settings, we might reflect that these trivial(ized) events and scenes often block the emergence of material already and independently significant. "History in the mode of reflexive consciousness enters into poetic landscape" and it often does so in order to keep history in the mode

of social consciousness out.<sup>68</sup> As I have noted, this sort of understanding is hard to maintain in that Wordsworth encourages his reader to regard the verbal dramatization or poem proper as the referential matter, the history proper. By asking questions about motivation rather than effect, one begins to feel that such advice is designed to avert confrontation with a larger world – not a nontextual world, whatever that would be, but a contextual one.

The scenes offered in Romantic nature poetry are used as "foci for unconventional criticism of accepted value systems . . . Retiring into solitude for the Romantics is a means of exercising profound aspirations."<sup>69</sup> No one would wish to deny these heroic uses of retreat but one would wish to see whether they also serve more urgent interests, such as *accommodating* the poet to the dominant social structures, without whose recognition he has no voice to praise *or* condemn his times.

Romantic transcendence is a bit of a white elephant. One wants to find a use for it. I believe that the way we do this today (which may not be tomorrow's way), is to refuse the transcendence until such time as we can trace its source and explain its character. Then we too are liberated; we share in the poets' ecstasies, or recover them in a meaningful form. After all, the prolific contraries of Romantic poetry and criticism (impose–impart, create–perceive, innocence–experience, subject–object) are not our family of conflicts, which is to say, they are not prolific for us. To pretend otherwise is to forget ourselves through a facile sympathy, and to lose our enabling, alienated purchase on the poems we study.

critique can formulate, one produces the contextual truths which that enlightenment effaces. What distinguishes today's historicist work is its conviction that the content goes beyond the form, or that its own, operationally critical concepts are as reflexively limited as the histories on which they operate. In the Romantic idiom, we could describe this activity as a redemptive violence visited upon the mythoi of the past, and anticipated from a future present. (See Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso and NLB, 1981), pp. 43-78).

I sketch the complex history of the word 'historicist' in order to put in perspective a statement such as the following. In a critique of Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), Nina Auerbach notes that "almost all the major books published this year {1983} share a historical vision that finds no need to proclaim itself" and, she continues, "for most of us, the deeply political nature of Romanticism does not need this sort of overassertion." (Auerbach, "Recent Studies in the Nineteenth Century," *SEL* 24 (1984), 770-806). Auerbach is right - we have known for a long time of the "political nature of Romanticism," and that very locution - so easily, dismissively general - inscribes the special ignorance which such knowledge maintains. Simply, we have not understood the "actual life of the past" in such a way as to explain its profound procedural pressures on actual Romantic poems and on dimensions other than manifest theme and gross form. Nor have we had till now a way to theorize those pressures and their mechanisms. McGann's "overassertion," properly contextualized, is, of course, nothing of the sort. Moreover, in linking "empiricist and historicist," and reading this "tendency" as a "repudi{ation} {of} the abstruse abstractions, the bardic pretensions, the political myopia, associated with Yale's visionary company," Auerbach rehearses the old, idealizing positivism. In short, she misrepresents the situation of much contemporary Romantic work - its objectives, procedures, and provenance.

- 2 John Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology in Fiction* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), p. 30. This remark occurs in the context of Goode's appraisal of Dickens's realism. I do not think that Goode would object to the liberty I take in abstracting and generalizing his local observation.
- 3 John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), p. 164. Also, Barrell, *English Literature in History 1730-80: An Equal, Wide Survey* (London: Hutchinson Press, 1983); and *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840; An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972). For superb work in this line, see James Turner, *The Politics of Landscape: Rural Scenery and Society in English Poetry 1630-1660* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979) and

T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic 1848-51* (Conn: New York Graphic Society, 1973); "Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of 'Olympia' in 1865," *Screen*, 1980, vol. 21, no. 1, 19-41; and "Courbet the Communist and the Temple Bar Magazine," in *Malerei und Theorie Das Courbet-Colloquium 1979*, 23-48.

- 4 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 176-77.
- 5 E. P. Thompson, "Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon," in *Power and Consciousness*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien and W. Vanech (London: Univ. of London Press, 1969) p. 152.
- 6 Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982); Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983); David Simpson, "Criticism, Politics, and Style in Wordsworth's Poetry," *Critical Inquiry*, Sept. 1984, vol. 11, No. 1, 52-81; and lecture, Univ. of Pennsylvania, April 1984.
- 7 In "Michael," the mediations are enabled by the postulate of a poet-narrator removed temporally, sociologically, and ideologically from the chronicle he delivers.
- 8 M. H. Abrams, "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age" in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), pp. 107, 110.
- 9 Thompson, "Disenchantment or Default," pp. 155, 180.
- 10 I have, of course, polarized the field so drastically as to suppress the important and influential work of David Perkins, Harry Lindenberger, Stephen Parrish, Mark Reed, Paul Sheats, and others. What I try to identify by my scheme are the spheres of influence that tend to determine the way these mediating voices get used.
- 11 Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London: NLB, 1984).
- 12 Abrams, "Spirit of the Age," 90-118.
- 13 Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB 1970; first pub. 1968), p. 90.

#### 1 Insight and oversight: reading "Tintern Abbey"

- 1 Geoffrey Hartman observes in "Tintern Abbey" a "peculiar type of redundancy {which} indicates resistance to abrupt progression." Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), p. 26.
- 2 The poem's withholding of something to be intense upon and its sometimes strenuous phrasing are typically greeted as instances of imitative

form (genetic sincerity) and, somewhat paradoxically, as artfully understated effects. The poem's beauty is located in a plainness that is read as a refusal of rhetoric and a disdain for effect. The capacity to appreciate this subtle stuff proves the reader's refinement.

We recognize in these effects the argument of the *Lyrical Ballads* Preface. The poet is he whose susceptibilities are keenest; he finds distinction and gradation where others see featureless uniformity. He writes for those who have, or covet, a similarly responsive sensibility.

Apparently, then, "Tintern Abbey" is not so anomalous a lyrical ballad as it seems. We might expect to find further occult resemblances between this lofty meditation and its humbler companions. For example, Wordsworth's achievement in one direction and through one body of texts – his ballad portrayal of "precisely those states and feelings least susceptible to narrative presentation" (Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads 1798* {Oxford: Clarendon, 1976}, p. 233) – is balanced by his "subjective" portrayal of material traditionally unsuited to lyric representation. Or, "Tintern Abbey" is more of a ballad than it appears; there is a tale in the poem, and a timely one. This narrative is largely submerged by the lyric presentation, much as the "Ancient Mariner's" lyric aspect is dominated by its balladic dimension. In fact, the objectives Wordsworth and Coleridge set themselves (imagining the mundane, authenticating the supernatural) might be read as strategies for the blunting of historical consciousness. When the narrator of "Simon Lee" protests, "It is no tale: but should you think, / Perhaps a tale you'll make it," he also reminds us that there *is* a tale in the poem, independent of our making and the narrator's: a tale of economic and social change in its homely particularities.

Wordsworth's concern to include "Tintern Abbey" in the 1798 edition may further illuminate his intentions for that poem. The complete distinction (subject, form, tone) of "Tintern Abbey" within its volume might figure a reward to those who read along the lines set forth in "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned." In giving himself over to the apparent nonsensicalness of certain poetic maneuvers throughout the volume, the reader is inducted into a believing state apt for the understanding of "Tintern Abbey." With that understanding comes the pleasure of the lofty, poetical, meditative experience. Further, "Tintern Abbey" demonstrates to the *Lyrical Ballads* reader that the poet is capable of writing in a style and on a subject consistent with the refined tastes of his audience. The poem might thereby assuage anxieties raised by the plainness or grotesquerie of many of the foregoing poems. The display puts the bulk of the poems in a certain light; there, it is not that Wordsworth aims at the sublime and produces the bathetic, but that he seeks to modify – and in a decidedly benign direction – a recently legitimate, lately polemical form; the ballad. It is critical that the reader

be aware that all the poems in the volume were written by a gentle – that is, apolitical – man, or, that they are *literary* ballads.

Moreover, "Tintern Abbey" celebrates, among other things, a (romanticized), feudal, organic estate, its humanistic sentiments notwithstanding. Attachment to place and to the traditions centering in particular, institutionally defined places, are presented as principles of psychic and political wellbeing and as guides to artistic propriety. This conservative statement, coming as it does at the end of *Lyrical Ballads*, would seem to interpret the ballad dimension of the volume as an attempt to restore to contemporary nationalistic ideology the figure of the rustic, focused as a venerable expression of irreducible Englishness. The idealization would, of course, indirectly refuse the association of ballad with polemical populism, broadside critique, and Enlightenment political essentialism.

- 3 My understanding of landscape and topography and the ideological dimensions of their relationship derives from the work of John Barrell (*The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare; The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840; English Literature in History 1730–1780: An Equal, Wide Survey*); T. J. Clark (*Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic 1848–51; The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848–51* {Conn: New York Graphic Society, 1973}); James Turner (*The Politics of Landscape: Rural Scenery and Society in English Poetry 1630–1660* {Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979}); and Louis Althusser & Etienne Balibar, trans. Ben Brewster *Reading Capital* (London: NLB 1970; 1st pub. 1968), pp. 13–69, 83–90.
- 4 And conversely, English guidebooks and ecclesiastical histories often embellish their remarks about and drawings of Tintern Abbey with quotations from Wordsworth's poem.  
John Timbs, *Abbeys, Castles, and Ancient Halls of England and Wales*, 3 vols., ed. Alex Gunn (London: Frederick Warne, 1872), p. 475, vol. 2. "Tintern has ever been a favoured locality with poets and visitors of a poetic turn of mind." William Beattie, *Castles and Abbeys of England*, vol. 2 (London: Virtue, 1842–51), p. 67. Cardinal Francis Gasquet, *The Greater Abbeys and Monasteries of England* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1908), p. 269. Clifford MacCalla, *Wonders of Operative Masonry: Sketches of the Principal Abbeys and Cathedrals of England, Scotland, etc.* (Phila: Masonic, 1877); Edward Foord, *Cathedrals, Abbeys, and Famous Churches; Hereford and Tintern* (London: Dent, 1925); Harold Brakspear, *Tintern Abbey*, (Monmouthshire, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1934).
- 5 Advertisement to Poems on the Naming of Places, *Lyrical Ballads*: "By Persons resident in the country and attached to rural objects, many places will be found unnamed or of unknown names, where little incidents must



have occurred, or feelings been experienced, which will have given to such places a private and peculiar interest." (p. III, vol. 2, de Selincourt and Darbishire). It is one thing thus to distinguish spots of strictly local renown or those entirely undesigned, quite another to reduce an object of national consequence to a condition of anonymity.

For a line of argument consonant with my own, see Kenneth Johnston's "Wordsworth and *The Recluse*: The University of Imagination," *PMLA* 97, no. 1 (January 1982, pp. 60-82). Johnston explores Wordsworth's interest in existential consolidations following his disappointment over the failure of the Revolution and his recognition of profound social changes afoot in the Lake District. Johnston locates Wordsworth's disillusion later than I have done; or, he is less interested than I in the ambivalence inscribed in some of the 1798 and 1800 work. Johnston's is a splendid essay and should be read in conjunction with this chapter. I was unable to draw on Johnston's major work, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984) in the writing of these essays; I like to think that our books might be read as companion studies.

- 6 Laurence Goldstein, *Ruins and Empire: The Evolution of a Theme in Augustan and Romantic Literature* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), p. 179.
- 7 The narrator's spontaneous worship in Nature's temple, psychically reproduced, is presented as an advance beyond the 'idolatry' - this is Hartman's word - associated with an actual temple and a living community of the faithful. The progression is from "stern Religion" ("Lines, by the late Mr. Richardson, on the Ruin of Finchale Abbey," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 78 {October 1808}, 924) to effortless *pietas*: Catholic to Protestant.
- 8 "Whenever we attempt to define the romantic nature it is always helpful to enquire to what this nature is being opposed, what is *not* nature." E. P. Thompson, "Disenchantment of Default? A Lay Sermon" in *Power and Consciousness*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien and William Vanech (London: Univ. of London Press, 1969), p. 151.
- 9 The topographical poem is used to 'green' certain institutions, facts, contradictions, and attitudes - that is, to naturalize certain histories and thus render them scripture, texts to be interpreted, not explained. The necessary erasures are often effected by the substitution of image for argument. As Michael Cooke observes, a picture admits no negativity. Or, the image fends off a potentially contentious - analytic - response. Michael Cooke, *Acts of Inclusion: Studies Bearing on an Elementary Theory of Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979). And Turner, *Politics of Landscape*, 188 ff.

The new interest in topographical poetry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries tells us a bit about Wordsworth's formally

allusive title. The topographical poem enjoyed its greatest popularity during the political crises of the seventeenth century and within a climate of conscious fear. There was, of course, real danger that real property would be swept from its owners by rural insurrection. One might safely conjecture that a comparable, though far more diffuse, unconscious, and displaced fear troubled the nation during the period of "Tintern Abbey"'s genesis. Economic conditions at home and events in France were, of course, the major issues, but one should not discount the unsettling potential of visible landscape changes, effects of industrial development. Landed interests would seem to be threatened from both sides: on the one hand, the working class and on the other, the mercantile *nouveau riche* (the former in the service, often, of the latter). (See Turner, *Politics of Landscape*, pp. 7, 57, 117.)

- 10 Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision*, (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1975), pp. 91, 92, 103.
- 11 See Brendan O Hehir, *Expans'd Hieroglyphicks: A Critical Edition of Sir John Denham's Coopers Hill* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969), pp. 3-24; pp. 9, 11, 13.
- 12 Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision*, p. 103. Kroeber, of all the critics, seems most alive to the historical dimension of "Tintern Abbey," inasmuch as he works it most explicitly by the poem's stylistic argument. Kroeber sensitively registers the "blurriness, strained awkwardness" and avoidance of "decisive clarity of surfaces" that characterize Wordsworth's procedures throughout "Tintern Abbey" (pp. 39, 41). He relates this impulse toward representational anonymity (with respect to speaker and subject) to the general philosophic themes of the poem, themes he contrasts to the polemical, social issues raised in the other poems of the 90s (p. 38). We can see, I think, that the poem's deflection of interest from the object world to the narrator's impersonal but unique and profound perception of it not only illuminates the "craft and class of the poet," (p. 37) but suppresses that object world and its more generally available meanings. Kroeber's description reminds us that anonymity and "voicelessness" (p. 38) are social effects of the profoundest, most insidious kind. Wordsworth *keeps* his majority silent; he speaks *for* them and as their "music" to keep them from speaking *through* him.

Kroeber aptly delineates the rhetorical stance of "Tintern Abbey": "In 'Tintern Abbey,' the poet is simply 'a man speaking to men' ... From the poem we learn nothing about the poet's class, occupations, position, or ambitions in the world." Nor is "Tintern Abbey" "addressed to an audience particularized as to class, culture, or taste" (pp. 36, 37). Again, Kroeber's description highlights the expedience of the phenomenon discriminated. Or, by cultivating the rhetorical effect Kroeber describes, "Tintern Abbey"'s narrator tells us a great deal

about his class, occupations, and ambitions, and he particularizes his audience sociologically as well. The poet's conviction that he can discard point of view and "speak directly to everyone" (p. 37) is itself a point of view and a privileged one, just as his rejection of ambition to improve nature (p. 124) – his embrace of a "life of sensation and sensibility" – marks another kind of ambition, or defines a special kind of membership in the social life of the nation.

- 13 Hazlitt seems to have grasped the insight/oversight ratio that drives "Tintern Abbey": "... so Mr. Wordsworth's unpretending Muse ... scales the summits of reflection, while it makes the round earth its footstool and its home!

Possibly a good deal of this may be regarded as the effect of disappointed views and an inverted ambition." (William Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1935), p. 120. Or, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt, Centenary Edition*, ed. P. P. Howe after the edition of A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, (London: Dent, 1930-34) p. 88, vol. II.

Wordsworth's blind spot, the source of his knowledge as well as its horizon, locates the point where social knowledge becomes psychic experience. The technical, anatomical name for the blind spot is the optic disc; at this point on the retina, stimuli are effectively converted into neurological impulse. Or, sensation crosses over into impression, precursor to thought. Ironically, the optic disc – the structure that creates a field of vision – has no receptor cells of its own. It is therefore unable to register images. This mechanism is as it were the eye within the eye, that cannot see its own reflection. It is the master-light of all our seeing.

- 14 Emile Legouis, *The Early Life of William Wordsworth, 1770-1798: A Study of the Prelude*, trans. J. M. Matthews (London: Dent, 1897), pp. 221-84; Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: A Biography. The Early Years, 1770-1803* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957 rpt., 1968), pp. 171-320; Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment*, pp. 15-37.
- 15 Wordsworth did not pay rent for the use of the Racedown house; it was lent to him by a friend, John Pinney. "Pinney had fallen, like Raisley Calvert and Montagu, under Wordsworth's spell, and ... showed his admiration by opening up ... this haven in the west" (Moorman, I, p. 267). Although Wordsworth leased the Alfoxden cottage, Thomas Poole negotiated the arrangement and "in view of Wordsworth's precarious financial position, made himself security for the rent." (Moorman, I p. 324). Wordsworth did, of course, eventually acquire property, but these early affairs illuminate an aspect of Wordsworth's social way of being. We could say that the pattern of receiving rather than acquiring, or engaging rather than appropriating – a pattern clearly central to the poet's canonical statement and methods, and, on one level conceived

as a release from debasing commercial relations – reflects a fear of his own aggression, or, of the inevitable losing that comes with ownership.

- 16 E. P. Thompson, p. 149.
- 17 Legouis, p. 252.
- 18 E. P. Thompson, p. 152; David Erdman, unpublished remarks, March, 1981; Carl Woodring, *Politics in English Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970).
- 19 Thompson, p. 151.
- 20 Butler, p. 31.
- 21 Butler, p. 31. See pp. 11-38, 39-68 and, for a concentrated and well supported version of this argument, pp. 178-87.
- 22 Butler, p. 180.
- 23 Butler, pp. 58-61.
- 24 Butler, p. 49.
- 25 Thompson, p. 168.
- 26 Thompson, pp. 156, 162.
- 27 Francis Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 1-26. A system for the reception, storage, and retrieval of sensation.
- 28 R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Harcourt, 1926), p. 144. Quotation from Thomas Lever, *Sermons*, 1550.
- 29 R. H. Tawney, *Religion*, p. 33.
- 30 Arthur Birnie, *An Economic History of the British Isles* (New York: Crofts, 1936), p. 72. (London: Methuen, 1935).
- 31 S. B. Liljegren, *The Fall of the Monasteries and the Social Changes in England Leading up to the Great Revolution* (Lund: Lunds Univ. 1924), p. 150. See G. G. Perry, *A History of the English Church, Second Period, 1509-1717* (London: John Murray, 1894), p. 137, for an alternative but no less 'Protestant' explanation of the political effects of the new property relations.
- 32 R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Longmans, 1912), p. 384.
- 33 H. A. L. Fisher, *The Political History of England 1485-1547*, vol. 5 (London: Longmans, 1900), pp. 370, 371.
- 34 Cardinal Francis Aidan Gasquet, *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries*, vol. 2 (London: John Hodges, 1889), p. 495.
- 35 Gasquet, *Henry VIII*, vol. 2 pp. 505, 510, and Gasquet, *Henry VIII*, revised ed. (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1910), p. 474.
- 36 Gasquet, *Henry VIII*, 1889, vol 2, p. 523; and F. A. Gasquet, *The Eve of the Reformation* (N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971; reissue, 1900 ed.), p. 324.
- 37 Quoted in Gasquet, *Henry VIII*, 1889, vol 2, p. 503.
- 38 Quoted in Gasquet, *Henry VIII*, 1889, vol 2, p. 520, and Gasquet, *Henry VIII*, 1910, p. 419.
- 39 Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem*, p. 3.

- 40 Goldstein, *Ruins and Empire*: Chap. 10 "The Auburn Syndrome; Change and Loss in Grasmere," pp. 163-83; J. H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century, 1714-1815* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1950), p. 153.
- 41 "Poetical Description of Tintern Abbey," extracted from "A Guide to Chepstow and Tintern Abbey, by Water," pp. 46-49 in *Descriptive Account of Tintern Abbey ... Selected from Grose, Gilpin, Shaw, Wheatley, and other Esteemed Writers ... and An History of Monasteries*, by Charles Heath, printer, Monmouth, 1793. I thank Professor Stuart Curran, Univ. of Pennsylvania, for giving me the Thomas Green reference.
- 42 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 80.
- 43 Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (New York: Octagon, 1965), p. 10.
- 44 See "At Furness Abbey," pp. 47, 48; "Miscellaneous Sonnets" 1845, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, revised ed. Thomas Hutchinson and E. de Selincourt (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), p. 225. (Oxford Univ. Press, 1909, p. 283).
- 45 Hartman, p. 175.
- 46 The very literal Dr. Charles Burney sniffs out the ghosts in the poem; he, for one, remarks the significance of Wordsworth's selected vantage. (Donald Reiman, comp., *The Romantics Reviewed; Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, 9 vol. (New York: Garland, 1972), Part A, vol 2, p. 717. From *Monthly Review*, 2nd series (June 1799).
- Although Burney admires "Tintern Abbey," he finds it "somewhat tintured with gloomy, narrow, and unsociable ideas of seclusion from the commerce of the world: as if men were born to live in woods and wilds, unconnected with each other! Is it not to education and the culture of the mind that we owe the raptures which the author so well describes as arising from the view of beautiful scenery, and the sublime objects of nature enjoyed in tranquility, when contrasted with the artificial machinery and 'busy hum of men' in a city?"
- 47 John Dixon Hunt, ed., *Encounters: Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts* (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 8, 9.
- 48 The need for the consolation forged in "Tintern Abbey" - the "still, sad music of humanity" - is both less and more immediate than it appears. Less, in that it is informed by the dramatic conditions of Chartreuse, 1791-92, and more, in that the actual appearance of Tintern and its neighborhood, selected *out* from the poem, compels the formulation of this particular solace. At Tintern, Wordsworth confronts the concrete effects of the Godwinian benevolism he had once and probably still, at some level, espoused. The scene associates a freethinking resistance to ritual and institution with the creation of a

rootless, dispirited populace, a menace to cultural values Wordsworth esteemed. This class is for Wordsworth a kind of metonym for all that threatens significant place and being.

The larger scene, or conditions not directly registered in "Tintern Abbey" but nonetheless part of its immediate historical context, should also be outlined. In 1798, England was fighting France and faring badly. The foreign defeats brought on an increasingly repressive political climate back home. Habeas Corpus was suspended in 1794 and again in 1798. Dissidents were jailed and tried under the Treason and Sedition Acts, 1795; censorship laws were vigorously enforced and offenders severely punished. The old charitable mechanism of the parish was unable to deal with the economic crises and there was as yet little understanding of government's role in social welfare (viz, the Poor Laws). Vagrants (soldiers, gypsies, widows, children, the elderly) were commonly encountered in many rural areas, a fact documented by both Wordsworth's early poems and Dorothy's journal. The population of England and Wales doubled between 1750 and 1832. Over two million acres were enclosed between 1790 and 1810; small holdings largely disappeared. An already romanticized way of life - the sturdy yeoman with his self-sufficient domestic economy - was dying out. Moreover, the face of England was changing. The land was crisscrossed by hedgerows and fences, by busy roads and canals, and it was spotted with factories and expanding cities. In the country, the white stucco homes of the prosperous new commercial families interrupted the old, mellow continuities. Rural poverty was worse than urban, and, if the visible evidence was not appalling enough, Malthus and the doomsayers theorized contemporary conditions in the bleakest way. Napoleon invaded Switzerland in January, 1798 and in April of that year, just two months before Wordsworth's visit to Tintern, rumors of an impending French invasion swept the country. (Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century*, 145-58. And see Albert Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty: the English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London: Hutchinson, 1979).

- 49 Jean Starobinski, "André Chénier and the Allegory of Poetry," quoted in Kathryn Heleniak's review, *Images of Romanticism*, ed. Karl Kroeber and William Walling, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 11, no. 3 (Summer, 1980), 163-65. p. 163.

Consider the excessive justification of personal decision in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800: "... it is dangerous to make these alterations on the simple authority of a few individuals, or even of certain classes of men; for where the understanding of an Author is not convinced, or his feelings altered, this cannot be done without great injury to himself: for his own feelings are his stay and support, and if he sets them aside in one instance, he may be induced to repeat this act till his mind loses all

- confidence in itself and becomes utterly debilitated." (*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 1, Owen and Smyser, p. 152).
- 50 M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970). Abrams describes "Tintern Abbey" as a poem remarkably "complete, self-sufficient, and endless," p. 206.
- 51 Hartman, p. 176.
- 52 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 26–29.
- 53 *The Excursion*, 8, 123–27, in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, vol. 5 (Oxford Univ. Press, 1949), p. 269. "Abodes of men irregularly massed / Like trees in forests, – spread through spacious tracts, / O'er which the smoke of unremitting fires / Hangs permanent, and plentiful as wreaths / Of vapour glittering in the morning sun." Wordsworth's note: "Truth has compelled me to dwell upon the baneful effects arising out of an ill-regulated and excessive application of powers so admirable in themselves." The *Excursion* passage describes a huge industrial town that has engulfed the surrounding countryside.
- 54 Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision*, p. 106.
- 55 René Descartes, *Extracts from The Dioptrics, illustrative of Descartes's Theory of Vision*, Discourse I, 1637.
- 56 Wordsworth converts what he believed to be a popular, collective expression of social reality – the ballad – into lyric: the private, self-reflexive utterance of a privileged class, one with the leisure to explore its inner life. Clearly, Wordsworth's formal procedures enact social ones that cut both ways.
- 57 John McNulty, "Wordsworth's Tour of the Wye, 1798," *Modern Language Notes*, no. 60 (May 1945), pp. 291–95.
- 58 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800: "For to treat the subject {a new class of Poetry, adapted to interest mankind permanently} with the clearness and coherence, of which I believe it susceptible, it would be necessary to give a full account of the present state of the public taste in this country, and to determine how far this taste is healthy or depraved: which again could not be determined, without pointing out, in what manner language and the human mind act and react upon each other, and without retracing the revolutions not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself." *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 1, Owen and Smyser, p. 120.
- 59 Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision*. The narrator is "invited to undertake a self-confrontation," p. 106.
- 60 Quoted in F. W. H. Myers, *Wordsworth* (London: Macmillan, 1881), p. 144. Letter to Aubrey De Vere: In Martha Shackford, *William Wordsworth's Interest in Painters and Painting* (Wellesley: Wellesley Press, 1945), p. 32.

- 61 Turner, *Politics of Landscape*, p. 162: "the inert defeat the strenuous."
- 62 The image – not of Tintern Abbey but of its dissolution into an influence or essence – "discovers the restoration as opposed to the depredations of time" (Cooke, p. 205).
- 63 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas, (New York: Orion Press, 1964), p. 6.
- 64 My diagram is based on McNulty's account, "Wordsworth's Tour of the Wye, 1798," *Modern Language Notes*, no. 60, (May 1945), pp. 291–95.
- 65 Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1970), p. 24. Quotation from Marx.
- 66 McGann identifies the palimpsest effect that structurally and doctrinally organizes "The Ruined Cottage." Margaret's misery – a direct result of contemporary and very specific social conditions – is represented in the poem as an inevitable, inexplicable – that is to say, *natural* disaster. Although the narrator makes some telling allusions to contemporary life ("shoals of artisans sunk down ..."), he pretty much rescinds the offer to read Margaret's experience in terms of collective life by emphasizing the cosmic necessity of her tragedy as well as its redemptive logic. As with "Michael," (see Chapter 2), it feels as if Wordsworth wrote two poems: one a trenchant political critique and the other an exercise in natural supernaturalism and the transcendent literary imagination. The 'later,' or revisionary poem, displaces the earlier but it does so imperfectly. That imperfection – trace of an ideological disorder – is the way into and perhaps more importantly, out of the poem.
- 67 John McNulty, "Wordsworth's Tour of the Wye," p. 294. "Wordsworth's two trips along the Wye were very much a part of this new crest in the popularity of Monmouthshire." And, according to Lewis Simon (*Journal of a Tour and Residence* (New York: 1815), p. 208), each tourist traveled "with his Gilpin or his Cambrian Guide in his hand."
- 68 Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision*, p. 103.
- 69 Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision*, p. 95.

## 2 Spiritual economics: a reading of "Michael"

- 1 The letter appears in W. J. B. Owen, ed., *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 99–102. Citations of "Michael" will be to Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, eds., *Wordsworth's Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1944), vol. 2, p. 80 ff.
- 2 "Michael" is a bold poem: while it solves its determining problem in a way that comes to characterize the Romantic ideology, it nonetheless allows this problem to take shape in the text and for the critical reader.