
Wordsworth, Gilpin, and the Vacant Mind

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In many a walk
At Evening or by moonlight, or reclined
At midday upon beds of forest moss,
Have we to Nature and her impulses
Of our whole being made free gift,—and when
Our trance had left us, oft have we by aid
Of the impressions which it left behind
Look'd inward on ourselves, and learn'd perhaps
Something of what we are.

Wordsworth, "There is Creation in the Eye" (8-16)¹

I. "Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree"

"—Nay, Traveller! rest." So begins the narrator of "Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree which stands near the Lake of Esthwaite, on a desolate part of the shore, yet commanding a beautiful prospect," Wordsworth's first poem in the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. The narrator teaches the traveler that nature is, literally, more than meets the eye, while forcing the reader to examine why this traveler needs to be so taught. Knowing who is talking to whom and how their exchange is structured enables the reader to see that Wordsworth is criticizing both Burke's theory of the sublime and Gilpin's ideas of the picturesque, as well as working out his own theories of mind that were to evolve into the "blessed mood."

I know that Charles Lamb called "Lines" an "inscription" and that Geoffrey Hartman wrote a famous essay on the subject.² My problem is not imagining a poem inscribed into or on a stone seat—even a poem longer than any of Wordsworth's other inscriptions and epitaphs. Though improbable, one could argue that its length testifies to the recluse's long, prison-like stay, assuming, of course, that he authored the text and, like the six letters of JOANNA "chiseled out" in "rude characters" ("To Joanna" 82), carved the 3,134 letters

of "Lines" in the rock. One could more easily imagine the text written with a lead or slate pencil, like the inscription "Written with a Pencil upon a Stone in the Wall of the House (An Outhouse), on the Island at Grasmere" (1800), or "Written with a Slate Pencil upon a Stone, The Largest of a Heap Lying near a Deserted Quarry, upon one of the Islands at Rydal" (1800). A text written outdoors with either a lead or slate pencil, though, would fade within a few years.

Nor is my problem imagining someone reading a text inscribed on a stone seat facing a view. Indeed, the image is doubly ironic. First, it means viewing a "country seat" that is not a country seat, a popular kind of site for picturesque travelers and print collectors, as evinced by such publications as *Picturesque Views of the Principal Seats of the Nobility and Gentry, in England and Wales. By the most Eminent British Artists. With a Description of each Seat* (1786-88). Second, it requires one to turn one's back to the landscape, as though using a Claude glass. This small, brown-tinted convex mirror, which Gilpin praised for its ability to transform nature into "the brilliant landscapes of a dream" (*Remarks* 2 225), reflects and frames scenes to resemble old landscape paintings. Its use requires turning one's back on nature and viewing a reflection rather than the thing itself. And therein lies the idea of picturesque theorizing as mediation, as "pre-established codes of decision" (Advertisement to the *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798) distorting perception and limiting knowledge. Reading text on this seat forces one not only to turn one's back on the view but also requires bending over so that the gesture resembles mooning the landscape more than one would care to admit. If the traveler bends over to read the text, then in fact he neither sits nor rests but is actively prevented from resting—or, at the very least, has his resting moment postponed—for the length of time it takes to read the sixty lines. For travelers to enjoy a seat by courtesy of a man who rejected his fellow man is also a nice touch of irony.

No, the problem is not in teasing out ironies or imagining how lines could have been left, but in figuring out how much was left and by whom. Was the entire poem left on the seat or just the first seven lines? If the entire poem, was it left by the recluse or a person who knew him? Reading “Lines” as a text inscribed by the recluse produces tonal and thematic inconsistencies between the first and second paragraphs. The recluse, speaking of himself in the third person, would in effect be saying, “Do as I say, not as I do—or did.” He comes off in the third paragraph Prufrock-like, knowing his problems and their solutions but remaining his ineffectual, “unfruitful” (29) self.³

For me, reading the sixty lines as the recluse’s is not possible. Imagining the first seven lines as his inscription followed by a poet’s commentary and moral may appear to resolve the abrupt shift in tone between the lyrical first and the hectoring second and moralizing third paragraphs.⁴ But the recluse is unlikely to have authored lines 1-7 because, as argued below, they recognize nature’s power to quiet the mind, the restoration through tranquility that induces the “blessed mood” that Wordsworth defines in “Tintern Abbey” and pictures in “Expostulation and Reply.” The person talking about being “saved from vacancy” by “one soft impulse” (6-7) could not be the person taking “morbid pleasure” (28) from brooding alone in nature.

This process of elimination appears to leave a poet responsible for all sixty lines, at the expense of a seemingly inconsistent tonal shift. Easson notes that “the poem’s length precludes inscription proper” and, evoking another “eighteenth-century literary form,” that of “the discovered manuscript,” suggests “we are to imagine the lines composed on paper and left to lie” (33). Hartman, on the other hand, is not bothered by the idea of a poet’s carving his long text into rock. “The setting is understood to contain the writer in the act of writing: the poet in the grip of what he feels and sees, primitively inspired to carve it in the living rock” (222). Consequently, “we are made to see the vital, if perverse, relationship of the solitary to his favorite spot, and to hear the poet’s *viva voce* meditation on this: he writes the epitaph before our eyes” (222). But whether one imagines finding a manuscript *on* or an inscription *in* the seat, one is imagining oneself in the role of a traveler *reading* in place, within the context of seat, spot, and prospect. One does not imagine *sharing* the space with the poet—and this I believe the poem requires. Hartman, in noting that one hears what one reads, unintentionally raises the reader’s most crucial question: do I imagine reading or hearing “Nay, Traveller! rest”? These opening words set up a dramatic conflict that unfolds most effectively when the reader imagines encountering or overhearing a narrator lecturing a traveler sitting on the seat in the yew tree. Doing so helps to illuminate Wordsworth’s engagement with—and critique of—Gilpin’s and Burke’s theories of nature.

II. “–Nay, Traveller! rest.”

—Nay, Traveller! rest. This lonely yew-tree stands
Far from all human dwelling: what if here
No sparkling rivulet spread the verdant herb

(1-3)

Wordsworth initially wrote, “Here traveller rest—this lonely yew-tree stands / Far from all human dwelling what if here / No sparkling rivulet spread the verdant herb” (DC MS 11, 37v). The first “here” refers to the seat and fits the self-reflexive convention of inscriptions. Wordsworth conceived of his text as an inscription and may have changed “Here” to “Nay” to retain “here” in line 2, which refers to the bower and not the seat itself. Or, more likely, he made the change, which is not recorded in the only extant page of Mary Hutchinson’s fair copy, after—and in response to—the third paragraph, in which the narrator is recast from storyteller to teacher. Whereas “here” directs the eye to the referent, “nay” immediately creates a confrontation or conflict of wills, one more easily imagined between a living narrator and traveler as teacher and student than between a seat and reader.

“Here traveller rest” connotes “traveler, stop, sit awhile and rest.” “Nay, Traveller! rest” connotes “stay, traveler, what is the hurry?” The former phrase invites the traveler to sit, and the latter admonishes him for wanting to leave. In the former scenario, the narrator—or text—is already there and a man walks by. Randomness infuses the scene; is this “stranger” (21) a tinker on his way to town, or an angler from a nearby village on his way to fish the lake? Perhaps, as in the “Inscription for a seat ascending Windy Brow” (1797), he is a “rustic artisan” who has “plodded on through rain and mire . . . laden with his implements of toil” (7, 8, 10, Landon and Curtis 754). If the “stranger” needs to be stopped, then he seems unlikely to be a picturesque traveler, since this spot, providing a view such travelers seek, functions as a “station.”⁵ In the latter scenario, the traveler is already there, seated and admiring the view, which explains his presence in a desolate spot and his reason for traveling. He is the picturesque traveler, that well-known and fashionable creature, seeking aesthetically interesting views in nature. Given the details of the poem’s title and because the poem’s moral depends on an analogy between just such an educated man of taste and the recluse, the narrator finds the traveler already seated and intercedes just as he is about to rise and walk on.

It matters who hears—or needs to hear—the narrator’s moral “that true knowledge leads to love” and that pride is “littleness” (56, 48). “Stay” identifies a specific kind of traveler, which in turn raises the question of how he expresses “pride.” “Stay” intimates the effects of pride by implying that the traveler sat for the prospect but missed the bigger picture, missed what “William,” in “Expostulation and Reply,” sitting “for the length of half a day” (2) on another stone near the same lake, did not. The prospect, not the spot and

its “impulses” (7), commands the traveler’s attention, and the narrator identifies those so attracted and impervious, those who briefly occupy the seat, as symbolically entering or occupying the mental state of its original occupant and like him as sitting in judgment of nature, as proud, contemptuous, and selfish—and as needing his guidance. Unlike Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, who recognizes but has no hand in choosing his audience, the narrator seeks a very particular kind of person—and he knows exactly where to find him. His hunt is not for the picturesque, but for the picturesque traveler. Theirs is not a “chance meeting,” as inscriptions in out-of-the-way places sometimes put it, any more than this seat’s having a view is by chance.⁶ Indeed, like the Mariner, but for different reasons, the narrator is telling a story he has told before, to others occupying that seat in a similarly preoccupied and judgmental mind, and is in effect the *viva voce* and guardian of the place.

Most of Wordsworth’s usages of “Nay” are dramatic (e.g., “Nay, we are seven”). According to the Concordance, he used the word seventy-one times, twenty-three of them in *The Borderers*, the drama he was working on from late October, 1796, to late May, 1797 (Reed 329), which overlaps the period during which he was writing and revising “Lines,” February through June, 1797 (Reed 192n2). Wordsworth was no doubt well practiced by this time in creating characters and conflicts in blank verse, and while intrigued with inscriptions and epitaphs—with language made physical—he was equally interested in dramatic language and situations. By early March, 1798, Jordan argues, Wordsworth found himself improving in his poetic facility and “got the idea of writing a number of short poems which did not simply see and describe, but created people seeing and describing, so as to bring in the history of feelings. Such poems were not to be formal and hortatory, as the earlier ‘Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew Tree’ had been, but direct and natural in the language of observing personae.” Jordan cites Coleridge’s comment in *Biographia Literaria* that Wordsworth “added two or three poems written in ‘his own character’ [ii.6], implying that most of those designed for *Lyrical Ballads* were in some other character” (165). “Lines” is formal and hortatory, but the poem is so because Wordsworth creates a character who is so. The narrator as teacher earnestly presents a story by which the traveler is “instructed” (56) *indirectly* and then, in the third paragraph, admonished directly. The narrator’s feelings toward the recluse are often conflicted, a mixture of admiration and criticism. But, of course, “Lines” is not about the speaker and does not function like one of Browning’s dramatic monologues, in which narrators reveal more about their emotional and psychological selves than they think they do. Here, the narrator reveals much about the backlash against the fashion for picturesque touring and sketching.⁷

Whatever Wordsworth’s original intentions, the tone and situation of “Lines” changed with “nay,” a sound—easily imagined as being accompanied by a hand gesture—used to hold a man in place to hear a story. Five months or so before

Coleridge began creating a narrator who, traveling from land to land with strange powers of speech, holds his listener in place with a hypnotic, glittering eye, Wordsworth had created a narrator effecting the same with his voice, an image, albeit, more domestic than gothic. But like the Mariner’s, that voice convinces most when heard as the voice of experience. Though the “tales” of Mariner and narrator differ, they express the same primary lesson. The Mariner stresses love’s role in revealing the kinship of all living things: “He prayeth well who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast,” and “He prayeth best who loveth best, / All things both great and small” (644-47). The narrator, speaking as authoritatively as the Mariner on the need to love, warns the traveler against feeling “contempt / For any living thing” (48-49), which is to say, against feeling pride over “man and bird and beast.”

Unlike Goldsmith’s traveler, who among “Alpine solitudes” sits “down a pensive hour” to contemplate man and society (“The Traveller” 31-2), the picturesque traveler does not sit to reflect, nor does he actually “rest” or spend much time in any one spot. By definition this traveler holds well-defined ideas of what constitutes worthy views and prospects. He has, according to Gilpin, come to examine “the face of a country by the rules of picturesque beauty” (*Observations on the River Wye*, 1). Or, according to John Aikin in “Picturesque, a Fragment,” he has been “taught / To judge of prospects by an artist’s rules” (2-3). He is analogous to Wordsworth’s poor reader who suffers “the solitary word Poetry, a word of very disputed meaning, to stand in the way” of his “gratification” (*Advertisement, Lyrical Ballads*); instead of the word “poetry,” however, words like “landscape,” “view,” and “prospect” mediate his perception as he sits judging scenes before him. Hence, the traveler’s “own pre-established codes of decision” enable him to appreciate the “distant scene” but not the intimate space of tree and seat and lapping water marked by an invisible “impulse” (“Lines” 31, 7). Wordsworth, though, nowhere explicitly states that the traveler’s perception has been distorted and restrained by fashion or convention, which makes the traveler’s desire to continue his tour understandable to the modern reader unfamiliar with the then critical discourse on the picturesque. To the modern reader, the narrator’s admonition against pride and contempt in the third paragraph seem harsh to the point of harassment. Coleridge’s “The Nightingale,” on the other hand, which immediately follows “Lines” in the London edition of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, expresses the theme of predetermined judgment explicitly and will serve as a helpful foil to “Lines.”

Upon hearing the first notes of the nightingale, Coleridge immediately thinks of Milton, *Il Penseroso*, line 62, describing the bird as “Most musical, most melancholy” (12-13). As in his other conversation poems, Coleridge’s mind moves quickly from object to interpretation to an awareness of the act of interpreting. He hears the bird’s song in terms of poetry—something natural in terms of artifice—and as quickly recognizes that he has done so and questions the verity and origin of doing so. “A melancholy bird? Oh! idle

thought! / In Nature there is nothing melancholy” (14-15). To think the bird melancholy is to let another think for you; it is indeed an “idle thought!” The grounds for judging the thought “idle,” in the sense of lazy and unmoving, are an inferred syllogism: the bird is in nature; nothing in nature is melancholy; thus the bird cannot be melancholy. Coleridge locates the origin of the misconception in some early perceiver’s emotional state:

But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
(And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,
And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,
First named these notes a melancholy strain.

(16-22)

And so the legend of a melancholy bird is born and in verse perpetuated.

Sounding much like Wordsworth in “Tables Turned,” Coleridge advises the poet to put his notebook down and go outside to “let Nature be your teacher” (16), and, as in “Lines,” to allow nature’s shapes and sounds to calm his spirit to receive nature’s impulses:

And many a poet echoes the conceit;
Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
When he had better far have stretched his limbs
Beside a brook in mossy forest-dell,
By sun or moon-light, to the influxes
Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song
And of his fame forgetful! (23-30)⁸

The poet would have been better served had he ignored his craft, ambition, and the tradition of imitation, and instead had surrendered his whole spirit to the one life around him. Had he forgotten—or unlearned—all he knew of nightingales, he would have been able to share in nature’s joy unmediated, and his own song would have been as original and true as nature itself. Others also hear the nightingale’s song as sorrowful; the sensitive and fashionable “youths and maidens most poetical, / Who lose the deepening twilights of the spring / In ball-rooms and hot theatres” (35-37), know Ovid’s “Philomela” rather than the bird itself. Poets and poetical youths are all “too learned far to feel a vulgar joy,” as Aikin says of the picturesque traveler and man of taste in general (9). To paraphrase Blake: As the ear is formed, so it hears. They have much to *unlearn* if they are to hear the real nightingale’s song. Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Dorothy, who surrendered their spirits to the impulses or “influxes / Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements,” “have learnt / A different lore” (40-41). They now hear the nightingale not as observers from the outside but as initiates into nature’s

beauty, who know at first hand that “Sweet is the lore which nature brings” (TT 25).

Just as Coleridge’s poet and poetical youth hear the nightingale in terms of poetic convention and thus not as it is or for themselves, Wordsworth’s traveler sees prospects in terms of art, the “rules” of which transform them into landscapes and encourage comparison and judgment. Coleridge makes the connection between education and perception explicit and shows another way to be educated and another source of knowledge than books and art. Wordsworth does the same, implicitly, by dramatizing the difference between the narrator’s receptiveness (2-7) and the recluse’s “mournful joy” (39). The third paragraph distills the lessons explicitly. Wordsworth does not explain *why* the traveler must be instructed, relying instead on an implied analogy between picturesque traveler and recluse and the readers’ familiarity with the anti-picturesque discourse, like that expressed in Aikin’s poem, that assumes and belittles the idea of judging scenes aesthetically and resents the idea of having to be “taught” to see and enjoy nature. Wordsworth’s core analogy is grounded in this image: traveler and recluse sit in judgment, of nature and people respectively, with minds too restless and proud to receive nature’s impulses—and, for both, travel, as metaphor for experience and maturation, has stopped.

III. “By one soft impulse saved from vacancy”

what if here
No sparkling rivulet spread the verdant herb;
What if these barren boughs the bee not loves;
Yet, if the wind breathe soft, the curling waves,
That break against the shore, shall lull thy mind
By one soft impulse saved from vacancy.

(2-7)

Wordsworth made no changes to these crucial lines when he first published them, other than adding punctuation missing in the manuscript.⁹ But he deleted from the fair copy, with an “X” over their second words, the eighth and two-thirds of the ninth line: “Nor wants there here in summers hottest hour / The roar of distant torrents” (DC MS 11, 37v). As originally written, the passage evoked the beautiful and sublime and dismisses the picturesque. Noon is the least picturesque time of day according to Gilpin, who favored morning mist or evening tints (*Lakes* 1.170). A peaceful stream juxtaposed against roaring torrents echoes Hugh Blair’s comment that “a stream which glides along gently within its banks is a beautiful object, but when it precipitates itself with the impetuosity and noise of a torrent, it immediately becomes a sublime one” (“Sublimity in Objects” 27). Burke notes a similar shift regarding the “beautiful in sounds,” that it “will not bear that loudness and strength of sounds, which may be used to raise other passions; nor notes,

which are shrill or harsh, or deep; it agrees best with such as are clear, even, smooth, and weak." These soft, pulsing sounds evoke "that sinking, that melting, that languor, which is the characteristic effect of the beautiful as it regards every sense" (112). For Burke, "excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror. The noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind" (75). To this list, Blair added "torrent," because it too is an "exertion of great power and force" (27). By deleting the references to noon and torrents, Wordsworth emphasizes the nonpictorial but hypnotic lapping of water in the light breeze, thereby sustaining a more coherent idea of the beautiful. Nevertheless, the scene, as shall become apparent below, is infused with Wordsworth's new sense of the sublime, with the torrent's power and force transferred to the "one soft impulse" filling the otherwise vacant mind, an image that brings to mind Burke's comment that "we are not so powerfully affected with any one impulse, unless it be one of a prodigious force indeed" (129).

Deleting the thirteen words restructures the first seven lines as a verse paragraph (a format made explicit *after*—but already implied in—the fair copy) and, most important, foregrounds "vacancy," the culminating word of the new unit. The remaining one-third of the original line 9—"Who he was"—forms the shortest line in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*.¹⁰ Wordsworth uses it to start a new paragraph, which begins with a long rule that visually leads to these three words, each accented and together forming an auditory and typographic structure that stops the narrator's speech, sustains a long pause, and redirects his topic, as though the narrator suddenly realized that the traveler was losing interest or did not understand what he has just said. Or, first things being first, he realized that before he can speak of "vacancy" and receiving nature's "impulse," he needs to reveal that pride—in all its forms—prevents them. Although thematically disruptive, the shifts in tone and direction dramatically draw attention to the very idea from which the narrator suddenly turns, keeping it in the background while he sets out to answer his own question.

Wordsworth's use of "vacancy" here does not refer, "as elsewhere in Wordsworth," to "mental vacancy" (Mason 112), or to "complete sensory deprivation" (Sheats 157). It refers to the tranquility induced by nature's sedating sounds, which vacates and prepares the mind to receive nature's impulse. Wordsworth uses it also, however, to criticize the picturesque experience as superficial. The traveler's inability to stay seated signals he is one of the "vacant minds" Gilpin specifically identifies as benefiting from "*searching after effects*." He hopes his theories would "engage [such] vacant minds" who "travel without any end at all, amusing themselves without being able to give a reason why they are amused" (*Essays* II 41). Wordsworth appears to have had this self-deprecating passage in mind. The narrator in effect tells the traveler that his "mind" is saved from vacancy not by theories on how to trans-

form nature into pictures, but by nature's impulses and hence by its own receptiveness to the vitality of nature.¹¹

The narrator knows the traveler "had no . . . interest / Unborrowed from the eye" ("Tintern Abbey" 82-84). He holds the traveler in place initially by seeming to agree with him, noting that the spot has no stream, no play of light on water, no blue serpentine line dividing flora, or colorful canopy at noon. Unlike ruins of an abbey seen from within or a giant oak branching directly overhead into a rich baroque tapestry of colors and lines, this intimate space appears barren, or at least it does to an eye in ready and constant "*pursuit* of his object." According to Gilpin, "the expectation of new scenes continually opening, and arising to his view" is the "first source of amusement to the picturesque traveler" (*Essays* II 47). This seemingly barren spot has much to offer, however, if the traveler were to rest with a "heart," as opposed to an eye, "that watches and receives." This is "William" speaking to "Matthew" in "Tables Turned" (31-32), symbolically inviting him to sit quietly on another old stone, in an equally nondescript spot, to enter a state of mind that "Matthew," in "Expostulation and Reply," perceives as empty or vacant. And, ironically, "William" is "vacant," in the adjectival sense of being "open or accessible *to* some influence" (OED), which is how Dr. Johnson used the word when describing youth's inherent desire for experience: he is "vacant to every object, and sensible of every impulse," and his "heart is vacant to every fresh form of delight."¹² In a mystical sense, a vacant mind signals the self-emptying necessary to receive the grace of God.

That the traveler is saved from a vacant place or, as an empty-headed person, is saved by nature's impulse is an ironic reading. More important is the literal reading: the mind is vacant *except for* the "one" impulse, implying that the mind contains only—and is filled entirely by—a single impulse. In this sense, a mind vacant of all but one impulse alludes to the state of mind that Burke defines as "astonishment" and Gilpin as "high delight." Burke defines "astonishment" as "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror," and as "the effect of the sublime in its highest degree." In this state, "the mind is so entirely filled with its [one] object that it cannot entertain any other, nor, by consequence, reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings and hurries us on by an irresistible force" (53). Blake put the idea of the sublime this way: "One thought fills immensity" (Erdman 36).¹³

This intense experience of nature—the "chief pleasure" of picturesque travel—Gilpin calls "high delight": "after the pursuit we are gratified with the *attainment* of the object. Our amusement, on this head, arises from the employment of the mind in examining the beautiful scenes we have found. Sometimes we examine [beautiful scenes] under the idea of a *whole*: we admire the composition, the colour-

ing, and the light, in one *comprehensive view*. When we are fortunate enough to fall in with scenes of this kind, we are highly delighted” (*Essays* II 48-49). He clarifies further the distinction between examining compositional details of beautiful scenes, which he calls “*scientific* employment,” and the pleasure derived from examining scenes in their entirety at once, which is not really “examining” at all, but is rather an immediate apprehending of the whole. Using printing metaphors, such as “strike” and “impression,” Gilpin describes the perceiver as receiving the image quickly and forcefully, as though it were a cast struck into soft metal or an engraving pressed into paper: “But it is not from this *scientific* employment, that we derive our chief pleasure. We are most delighted, when some grand scene, tho perhaps of incorrect composition, rising before the eye, strikes us beyond the power of thought—when the *vox faucibus haeret* [voice sticks in the throat] and every mental operation is suspended. In this pause of intellect; this *deliquium* of the soul, an enthusiastic sensation of pleasure overspreads it, previous to any examination by the rules of art. The general idea of the scene makes an impression, before any appeal is made to the judgment. We rather *feel*, than *survey* it” (*Essays* II 50).

Before judgment or reason—or rules of art—can respond, the image impresses the mind directly; this pre-analytical, unmediated moment is signified by an intensity of feeling, by the melting of soul or overspreading of “enthusiastic sensation.” Seemingly dematerialized, the moment is also wrought with a sense of physicality. The printing metaphors, reinforced by the words “feel” and “impression,” bring into play an idea of contact or connection, because when an engraved plate presses into paper, the paper is pulled into the incised lines forming the image, so that quite literally the support receiving the image simultaneously projects something of itself into the image. The pleasure of this contact, or marriage, is short-lived, as paper and plate separate, as intellectual cognition awakens. But while it lasts, one “feels” connected, as though occupying an intimate space rather than being in an open space looking out at an image, the critical and formal experience of nature suggested by “survey.” In “high delight,” nature is experienced bodily, within hand’s reach, as it were, whereas normally nature is out there, a “distant scene” (“Lines” 31). Wordsworth differentiates between intimate and critical experiences of nature in “Lines”—overtly in “Expostulation and Reply” and “Tintern Abbey”—using images associated with ear and eye, with the former sense suggesting the interplay of conversation and the latter an awareness of the surface of distant things.

“Vacancy” as meant in “Lines” is clearly expressed in the fragment from 1800 that serves as the epigraph to this essay, where it is described as a “trance” in which we give “our whole being” to “Nature and her impulses” and receive “impressions” (11-14), and in “Long had I stood and looked into the west,” another fragment from 1800, in which nature assists in suspending the “stirring mind” as a prerequisite for its receiving nature’s “impulses”:

I stretch[ed] myself beneath the shade
And soon the stirring and inquisitive mind
Was laid asleep: the godlike senses gave
Short impulses of life that seemed to tell
Of our existence[.]

(8-12; Butler and Green 325)

Of course, Wordsworth expresses the idea of the quiet, receptive mind more effectively in other works in *Lyrical Ballads*, recognizing in Gilpin’s “*deliquium* of the soul” the dissolution of boundaries between mind and nature, and recognizing also that the sense of One Life has nothing to do with “terror.” The clearest expressions of the vacant mind in *Lyrical Ballads* are the meditative state “William” experiences in “Expostulation and Reply” and what Wordsworth, using the rhetoric of “astonishment” and “high delight,” describes in “Tintern Abbey” as the “blessed mood” (38). In both poems, the quiet mind is manifest in a physically still character, in contrast to an overtly active, restless character. The image of the “thoughtless youth,” for example, “more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads, than one / Who sought the thing he loved” (TA 71-73), captures Wordsworth’s idea of the sublime as evolving from an intense terror- and self-centered, conventionally Burkean experience, to an awareness of the other deepened by a sense of union and community that Burke associated with the beautiful.¹⁴ Wordsworth does more than shift the emphasis from self-preservation to self-perpetuation, the instincts Burke associates with the sublime and beautiful. He contrasts his youthful self’s frantic energy and intensity of feeling with the “tranquil restoration” of mind experienced by his mature self, a state in which “we are laid asleep / In body” and “with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things” (TA 31, 46-50).

In his noiseless, quiet mind, “William” also senses the veil lift and the vital presence of all things. He hears “the mighty sum / Of things for ever speaking” (ER 25-26) and refuses to believe “That nothing of itself will come, / But we must still be seeking” (ER 27-28). The comment alludes to Gilpin, who states that picturesque travelers “seek [picturesque beauty] among all the ingredients of nature” and that “the general intention of picturesque travel” is “*searching after effects*” (*Essays* II 42, 41). Indeed, read in light of the fashion for picturesque touring, the very gesture of sitting on an “old grey stone” (probably smooth rather than rough) before a non-pictorial scene “for the length of half a day” parodies Gilpin and the picturesque tourist. Instead of pursuing new views from station to station, “William” sits listening and “conversing” (30). He *hears* nature, experiencing it as an *intimate* interplay between self and world, rather than *viewing* and mentally transforming scenes through aesthetic schemata into landscapes. Wordsworth also deliberately shifts the emphasis from eye to ear, from the sense associated with landscape to the sense associated with conversation, in a key passage in “Tintern Abbey”:

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

(89-94).

Almost a year earlier than these works, Wordsworth was already challenging the Burkean idea of the sublime as an experience associated with terror and self-preservation. He inverts Burke's hierarchy to value feelings of connection—that "one soft impulse" signaling what it anticipates, the "presence" that "rolls through all things" (TA 95, 103)—over the intense feelings evoked by resisting a "great power and force," an act which now appears immature, ensuring a disconnected, isolated self analogous to the recluse. Wordsworth retains the idea of a mind filled by its one object and suspended of its other operations, but implies that the experience, rather than being dependent on chance encounters among overwhelming or "grand scenes," can be self-induced and brought forth slowly.

Wordsworth also had begun to contrast characters to dramatize different ways to experience nature, a technique perfected in the dual consciousness of "Tintern Abbey." Contrasting narrator and recluse in terms of their experience of nature, however, required an important revision to the manuscript. Initially, the vacant mind appears to belong to the recluse, because in effect it is similar to his experience of the "distant scene" (31). The narrator, who points to the "distant scene" as self-evidently "lovely" (31), giving the traveler no instructions for viewing or details of the composition, no "what ifs" (2, 4) to redirect the mind, says the recluse would lift "his downward eye" (27) from the bower's vegetation and "barren rocks" (25) to "gaze" on the landscape "till it became / Far lovelier, and his heart could not sustain / The beauty still more beautiful" (32-34).¹⁵ It was at "that time" that the recluse recalled "those beings" (35) who see beauty in both "the world, and man himself" (37), painfully reminding himself of his own inability to do the latter and triggering a "sigh" of "mournful joy" (38-39). "That time" comprises these interwoven actions of gazing, swelling heart, recalling, and sighing.

In the manuscript, Wordsworth qualifies "that time" with the phrase "At the return of thought" (DC MS 11, 28v 34). As noted, the phrase implies a mind "in which all its motions are suspended" and "so entirely filled with its [one] object that it cannot entertain any other, nor, by consequence, reason on that object which employs it," for the "great power of the sublime . . . anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force." In this context, the recluse's return to thought after being emotionally swept away signals that he had experienced the sublime or "high delight," an idea supported by his sad memories coming *after-*

wards, with the *return* of reason and voice, whose coming unstuck in the throat is expressed here as a "sigh" over the loss of ever feeling connected to his fellow man. In manuscript, then, the receptive state of mind described in lines 5-7 and the recluse's gazing on the distant prospect are similar kinds of sublime experiences, implying that both initially belonged to the recluse. In both experiences, the mind is filled with one object—impulse or landscape—before reason returns. By deleting "the return of thought," Wordsworth differentiates them and makes the recluse's experience of the landscape appear emotionally intense but psychologically superficial compared to the experience of the nondescript spot itself, which now appears to belong to the narrator. By conflating the recluse's recollections and self-pity with gazing, Wordsworth gives him a mind busily surveying rather than quietly receiving. By assigning the poem's two key experiences of nature, both initially associated with the sublime, to different characters, Wordsworth implies that they differ in kind. The narrator's experience of nature resembles Gilpin's "feeling," or "high delight," though intimating an experience of self and nature more immanent and profound than Gilpin implies, and the recluse's resembles Gilpin's "surveying."

In "Lines," these two types of experience are kept separate and distinct. In "Tintern Abbey," recollection of the latter activity induces the former as evidence of Wordsworth's growth. His memories of the view (and of himself taking in the view) a few miles above the abbey, therapeutically recalled in "lonely rooms," brought forth "sensations sweet" and helped to lift the "fretful stir" (53). More importantly, they induced "that serene and blessed mood / In which the affections gently lead us on" (41-42)—feelings as the "irresistible force" unfolding *gently*, not hurriedly—until his "breath" and "motion" are "almost suspended" (45-47). From "forms of beauty" (24) to seeing "into the life of things," Wordsworth moves from virtual surveying to epiphany. This reverses the progression of "Lines," which begins with the idea of a meditative state and then contrasts it with a busy, unquiet mind whose painful recollections elicit a sound of resignation. Why "others felt" what the recluse "must never feel" (39-40) is not explained, but these lines create an image of a vanquished spirit. Indeed, in 1800, Wordsworth defines "that time" as "When Nature had subdued him to herself" (37), perhaps to imply that contemplating the view becalmed the recluse's own "fretful stir," but by keeping melancholy memories and self-pity as part of that experience, Wordsworth continues to deny the recluse the "blessed mood." Overwhelmed like the "thoughtless youth," the recluse experiences nature intensely but not lovingly or as a means to knowing himself or to loving his fellow man. His nature—the "distant scene" and the "lonely yew-tree . . . far from all human dwelling"—distracts rather than illuminates. It subdues in the sense of subjugates.

Wordsworth's first recorded use of the word "subdue" is in "Tintern Abbey" in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, when he

traces his growth to having “learned” to hear the “still, sad music of humanity” and to feel its power to “chasten and subdue” (89, 94). This deeper, humbling understanding of himself, man, and nature compensates for his loss of “aching joys” and “dizzy raptures,” of the sensual intensity of his earlier experiences of nature. He has *learned* to listen, to move from busy eye to receptive, quiet mind—has, in effect, learned the narrator’s lesson that “true knowledge” of nature “leads to love” (56). The recluse, on the other hand, is subdued by nature, perhaps also by ego, but not by humanity, a difference first intimated by a revision to the manuscript. “Those beings, to whose minds, / Warm from the labours of benevolence, / The world, and man himself, appeared a scene / Of kindred loveliness” (36-39) were initially described as “Those kindred beings to whose favoured minds / . . .” (DC MS 11, 28v). Wordsworth’s revision differentiates the recluse from the people he recalls, reemphasizing that he is “no common soul” (13), as well as emphasizing that “benevolence,” rather than being “favoured,” was the reason they but not he can see the world’s loveliness. The kinship is not between people; rather, the landscape is as beautiful to the recluse as the world and “man himself” are to those who work benevolently on behalf of their fellow man.

Wordsworth’s favored theme, the growth of his own mind and powers, so brilliantly explored in “Tintern Abbey,” “Intimations Ode,” and *The Prelude*, is less assuredly expressed in “Lines.” But the ideal journey from immature intensity to mature receptiveness and generosity of soul—to a perception balanced in receiving and giving—is intimated, albeit in reverse, in the contrast between hearing/feeling nature’s impulse and self-centeredly viewing prospects. Had “Lines” ended with the second paragraph, as is suggested in the manuscript (Butler and Green 479n), with the recluse moved to “tears” (42) by the distant scene’s beauty and returning to the comfort of “visionary views” (41), then it could indeed be read as an inscription concerned primarily with answering its own question of “Who he was / That piled these stones” (8-9). Wordsworth’s revisions and moralizing third paragraph altered the tone, themes, and structure of “Lines,” making the poem work against the act of reading and for hearing and seeing gestures acted out. By differentiating a receptive state from the viewing of a landscape and transferring the former experience to the narrator, Wordsworth denied the recluse the sublime as he was coming to understand it, the mind vacant save “one soft impulse” signaling the vitality of nature and inducing a sense of One Life. The third paragraph, with its overt lessons for the traveler, made it possible to read traveler and recluse as analogous figures and helped to transform the narrator from the recluse’s foil to the traveler’s teacher and the poem from inscription to dramatic monologue. In using the word “vacancy,” then, the narrator is not insulting the picturesque traveler, but simultaneously inviting and testing him. He invites him to stay, rest, be patient, and allow the music of the place to bring forth that tranquil and receptive state in which the life of things reveals itself. And he is testing to see

whether the traveler understands this concept or if, like the recluse, whose presence here was due to pride and impatience with his fellow man, he is mentally too restless to quietly feel her impulse. The abrupt and long pause after “vacancy” suggests that the narrator has found his student.

NOTES

¹“Wordsworth, Gilpin, and the Vacant Mind” draws from “Wordsworth’s Dramatic Anti-picturesque: Burke, Gilpin, and ‘Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree,’” forthcoming in *Romantic Circles*, where in light of key manuscript revisions I demonstrate the anti-picturesque discourse Wordsworth presupposed of his reader and the evolution of the poem from an inscription profiling a poet to a dramatic monologue critical of Gilpin’s and Burke’s theories of nature. It originated in a paper delivered at the Conference on Revolutionary Romanticism: 1790-1990, at Bucknell University, April 6, 1990, and in graduate seminars at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The published *Lyrical Ballads* are cited from *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed. Owen, 2nd ed; the manuscript of “Lines” are cited from *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, ed. Butler and Green; variants of “Lines” are from *Wordsworth’s Poetical Works*, I, ed. de Selincourt; Other Wordsworth poems are cited from *Poetical Works*, ed. Hutchinson, rev. de Selincourt, unless otherwise indicated. The 1805 *Prelude* is cited from *The Thirteen Book Prelude*, ed. Reed. The epigraph, from Wordsworth’s fragment, is from Butler and Green 324.

²In “Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry,” Hartman acknowledges that knowing the form and origin is not critically important, but he is interested in discerning just them and identifies its “special genre” as “inscription” (207). He takes his cue from Charles Lamb, who read or heard Wordsworth read the poem at Coleridge’s home at Nether Stowey, July 14, 1797, the visit when Sara accidentally poured boiling milk on Coleridge’s foot and inadvertently gave him the time to respond to Wordsworth’s “Lines” in the form of “This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison.” In a letter to Coleridge, Lamb referred to “Lines” twice as an “inscription,” which Hartman defines as “anything conscious of the place on which it was written, and this could be tree, rock, statue, gravestone, sand, window, album, sundial, dog’s collar, back of fan, back of painting” (207). This form of inscription (text literally inscribed on or in a support other than a sheet of paper) Hartman believes was “accompanied by a special form which we shall call the *nature-inscription*, whose popularity seems to have been proportional to that of eighteenth-century gardens” (208). Hartman’s analysis of the epigram—which is what inscription means—from Greek through Renaissance literature is deeply informed and ingenious. Like Abrams in “The Structure of the Greater Romantic Lyric,” he looks for the origins for the distinct Romantic lyrical voice. He seeks to illuminate the specific context of “Lines” to show that “Wordsworth was able to liberate the genre from its dependent status of tourist guide and antiquarian signpost: he made the nature-inscription into a free-standing poem, able to commemorate any feeling for nature or the spot that had aroused this feeling” (208). I suspect that Hartman was more successful at defining “nature-inscription” than Wordsworth was in transforming “Lines” into one. In this light, note that “Lines” was

classified in 1815 as a poem of "Sentiment and Reflection" and in 1845 transferred to "Poems Written in Youth." It was never included in "Inscriptions." Hartman is right to suspect, though, that "Lines" was experimental and anticipates great things to come.

³Without identifying the recluse as author, Nicholas Roe infers the recluse to be an "inarticulate visionary" caught between his awareness of his failings and his inability to change, "who has withdrawn from 'the world' to exist in a limbo between the potential politics [he] had once seemed to hold and an alternative communion he cannot attain" (231).

⁴The inscription-commentary format is exemplified in Epitaph 1 that Wordsworth translated from Chiabrera many years later. The first six lines are in the voice of the deceased and the second six in the voice of a narrator identifying the speaker: "Francesco Ceni willed that, after death, / His tombstone thus should speak for him" (7-8).

⁵The spot, identified as "Station 1" in Thomas West's *Guide to the Lakes, in Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire* (first ed., 1780), "now goes by the name of 'The Station,' according to Wordsworth in 1843 (Notes to Isabella Fenwick, qtd. Owen 127). Information about the "Rev. W. Brathwaite," who built the seat and "purchased the ground including this station, and erected an elegant and commodious building thereon, for the entertainment of his friends, called Belle-Vieu," is in the 8th edition of West, 1802 (qtd. Owen 127). The model for the recluse was not much of a recluse in reality, nor was the seat "far from all human dwelling" (2). Nor was this "desolate part of the shore" a landscape, as Sheats supposes: "Even as the poet concedes what this landscape lacks, he names what the reader desires: a conventionally picturesque landscape that is humanized by man or by the diminutive society of Virgilian bees" (155). The seat and its immediate environs are not *experienced* as a landscape, any more than Coleridge's lime tree bower is, desolate or otherwise. The seat or spot, which Wordsworth refers to as a "bower" in 1800, positions one to view landscapes, scenes, prospects, and views, which, properly speaking, are *out there* and whose details, because of the distance between eye and object, are subordinate to the whole, to forms, colors, and lines. Bowers constitute an intimate space that yield details pleasing to the senses of touch, smell, and hearing, senses for which stimuli, though often overlooked, needs to be close at hand. The eye too can find pleasure in the "minute particulars" of the bower, such as "the shadow of the leaf and stem above / Dappling its sunshine!" ("Lime Tree Bower" 50-51). Gilpin rarely uses "prospect" but uses "landscape," "scene," and "view" interchangeably. According to Trusler, "landscape" "is expressive of home scenes" and "prospect" is expressive "of more distant ones" (13), and "view" is of a scene more distant and extensive still (169).

⁶Wordsworth's second inscription "supposed to be found in and near a Hermit's Cell" (1818): "PAUSE, Traveller! whosoe'er thou be / Whom chance may lead to this retreat" (1-2).

⁷In *The Poetry of Experience*, Langbaum, examining many of Wordsworth's poems in light of the dramatic monologue, makes no

mention of "Lines"; nor does Don Bialostosky, who examines Wordsworth's "poetics of speech" in his *Making Tales*. Parrish, whose *Art of the Lyrical Ballads* looks at "The Ballad as Drama," discusses "Lines" mostly in light of Coleridge's influence on the third paragraph. W. J. Keith, though, in *The Poetry of Nature*, recognizes the poem as an "experiment" containing the "seeds of a later poetic form, the dramatic monologue" (16, 17).

⁸Wordsworth's "There is Creation in the Eye" echoes this passage, but "Nightingale," composed in May, 1798, follows more closely themes in "Lines" and "Tables Turned."

⁹Sheats calls "verdant herb" a "pompous and euphemistic Latinitism" (155), deliberately parodying the loco-descriptive poetry of the day. He may seem to be excusing bad poetry as brilliant parody, but spoken, these lines do carry a sarcastic tone, followed by three good lines, where "diction becomes plain and literal" and "syntax and rhythm develop the ampler cadences of spontaneous feeling" (156). Wordsworth may have had Richard Payne Knight's *The Landscape, A Didactic Poem* (1794) in mind, which begins: "How best to bid the verdant Landscape rise, / To please the fancy, and delight the eyes" (1-2).

¹⁰"Old Man Travelling," also in blank verse, has a six-syllable line, but it begins the poem, making its presence as a variant line far less dramatic. Lines 23, 50, and 112 in "Tintern Abbey" are broken, creating short lines to end and start paragraphs, but as effective as these are in differentiating the parts of the poem, they are not heard as dramatic breaks in thought and tone as are the seven missing syllables in line 8 of "Lines."

¹¹Sheats reads the paragraph differently: "In the opening description human experience is stripped to its fundamental Lockean elements: a meeting between an otherwise vacant mind and a single simple idea of sensation. Other and higher faculties, memory and the private and social affections, appear in part two where they are once again reconciled to a central confrontation between mind and nature. In the third part, finally, we hear a voice that . . . relies on the nominal but universal abstractions generated by the reason. After erasing Locke's tablet of the mind, Wordsworth subjects it to a controlled and therapeutic reconstruction, ensuring that the language of reason is solidly grounded in sensation and feeling. Although the poem has been viewed as an attack on Godwinian rationalism, it is therefore antirational in neither spirit nor effect. Wordsworth seeks to validate, and not to supplant, the reason, and he does so by locating its authority not in the power of demonstration, which sanctions departure from sensation and feeling, but in intuition. . . . we see that this poem in fact tends to reconstruct the 'right reason' of pre-Enlightenment culture, the reason that in *Paradise Lost* guided the fallen Adam to humility and love" (160).

¹²These examples of usage for "vacant" are in the OED and are drawn from Johnson's letter to Boswell of December 8, 1763, in Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* and *Rambler* No. 111 (1751). In both instances, Johnson recognizes such openness as natural while cautioning diligence.

¹³Wordsworth may also have had Burke's comments on "Privation" in mind: "All *general* privations are great, because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude* and *Silence*" (65). In this regard, it is interesting to note that Wordsworth first used "vacancy" in line 2 of "Septimi, Gades" (1794) to describe Septimi's look of wonder or "fear" (4), emotions Burke associates with "astonishment" (54), and that his first use of "vacancy" after "Lines," in line 37 of the Preface to the *Excursion* (1798), is also associated with "fear and awe" (38).

¹⁴Burke's *Enquiry*, section on "Power": "some great power must be always precedent to our dread of it. But this dread must necessarily follow the idea of such a power, when it is once excited in the mind" (64). In his draft for an essay on the sublime and beautiful (1811-12), Wordsworth struggles to clarify his ideas of resisting and participating in power before arriving at this concise definition: "When power is thought of under a mode which we can and do participate, the sublime sensation consists in a manifest approximation towards absolute unity" (Wordsworth, *Selected Prose* 270).

¹⁵The image of "gazing" on a scene till emotionally overwhelmed appears derived from Southey's "Inscription for a Cavern that overlooks the River AVON," published in early 1797: "Gaze Stranger here! / And let thy soften'd heart intensely feel / How good, how lovely, Nature!" (14-16).

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