Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)

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V 'Tintern Abbey' and the Renewal of Tradition

More than any other, 'Tintern Abbey' is the poem for which Wordsworth's predecessors had smoothed the way. But it is here, where he is most uncritically indebted to the past, that his uniqueness is most strongly felt. His fruitful merging of eighteenth-century genres is matched by his renewal of tradition. The culminating landscape-poem, 'Tintern Abbey' is also the poem which completes the shift from nature to the individual; the poet's attitude to an unchanging landscape becomes a way of measuring the change that has taken place within. On the face of it, Wordsworth's subject is meditative retreat—an attempt to lighten 'the heavy and the weary weight of all this uninteresting, execrable world' (II. 29-30) by withdrawing from it; certainly its subdued admission of change and loss makes 'Tintern Abbey' among his greatest elegies. But it is also a poem of rededication, infused with the doctrinal fervour of 'The Pedlar'. In 1802, Wordsworth noted: 'I have not ventured to call this Poem an Ode; but it was written with a hope that in the transition, and the impassioned music of the versification, would be found the principal requisites of that species of composition.' This ode-like orchestration, a building up and falling away of rhythmic power, is central to its quiet passion. Self-exploratory and self-communing, 'Tintern Abbey' proffers a statement of his individual consciousness finds its fullest expression in the consciousness of something beyond the self—'A motion and a spirit' which rolls through all things. Memory allows the poet to experience the essential continuity of the changing self; belief allows him to experience another dimension of relationship altogether, that of the One Life. Landscape serves as the point of reference for Wordsworth's greatest theme, the growth of the poet's mind.

Not a line of it was altered, and not any part of it written down till I reached Bristol',1 Wordsworth recalled of 'Tintern Abbey' in 1843, and there is no reason to doubt him. Established traditions of landscape poetry make it possible to compose a poem as complex as 'Tintern Abbey' during a tour of only a few days.2 To start with, there were the topographical episodes which occupy key positions in the poetry of Thomson, Cowper, and Akenside. All three play a part in shaping 'Tintern Abbey', and all three make the link between landscape and the poetic imagination which is central to Wordsworth's exploration of changing identity. Lyttelton's walk through Higley Park, added to 'Spring' in 1744, allows Thomson to celebrate man—still represented by his patron and friend—at the centre of the natural world. Cowper's 'walk in the country', near the start of The Task, establishes the controlling consciousness and central values of his poem. Akenside's passage of elegiac retrospect in Book IV of the 1774 edition of The Pleasures of the Imagination re-creates the poetic landscape that has shaped his own imaginative growth.3 Coming as it does at the point where Thomson moves from the natural world to man himself—still let my Song a nobler Note assume, And sing th' Inclusive Force of Spring on Man—4 Lyttelton's walk forms a suitable climax to 'Spring'. Thomson displays his patron as the perfect human being: poet, philospher, and benefactor. He is the pensive solitary of pre-Romantic poetry, a lover of nature, and a man who sees into the life of things:

Poe Serenity space
Induces Thought, and Contemplation still.
By swift degrees the Love of Nature works,
And warms the Bosom; till at last sublim'd
To Rapture, and enthusiastic Heat,
We feel the present Duty, and taste

1 L.J. note (PS II. 517).
2 For Wordsworth's movements on his second Wye tour, see J. B. McNaught, Wordsworth's Tour of the Wye, 1909, MLN 1 (1905), 101-2.
3 The existence of these condensed topographical episodes makes it less likely that Wordsworth owed a direct debt to the full-length topographical poems surveyed by R. A. Ashby's Topographical Poetry in Eighteenth Century England (New York, 1956).
4 'Spring' (1744), II. 864-5.
Infused as it is with personal feeling, ‘Tintern Abbey’ mirrors patterns of celebration and reaffirmation established in earlier poetry.

The bond with nature is matched by the bond with another human being. ‘The Seasons’ and ‘The Task’ reveal that Dorothy’s presence in ‘Tintern Abbey’ (‘My dearest Friend, My dear, dear Friend . . . My dear, dear Sister!’) owes as much to literature as to life. Like the joyous natural world, Lytton has paired:

Perhaps thy lov’d Lucrezia shares thy Walk,
With Soul to thine attune’d. Then Nature all
Wears to the Lover’s Eye a Look of Love;
And all the Tumult of a guilty World,
Tost by ungenerous Passions, sinks away.
The tender Heart is animated Peace;
And as it pours its copious Treasures forth,
In vary’d Converse, softening every Theme,
You, frequent-panning, turn, and from her Eyes,
Where meekly Sense, and amiable Grace,
And lively Sweetness dwell, enraptured’d, drink
That nameless Spirit of ethereal Joy,
Inimitable Happiness! which Love,
Alone, bestows, and on a favour’d Few.

The experience (‘The tender Heart is animated Peace’) is almost that of ‘Tintern Abbey’, with its eye made quiet and its living soul. Wordsworth could have found such an evocation of mood elsewhere, but behind his fervent address to Dorothy lies the same imagined communion; Thomson’s ‘and from her Eyes . . . enraptured’d, drink’/That nameless Spirit of ethereal Joy’ becomes Wordsworth’s

"and read

My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. (II. 118-20)

But where Lytton’s Lucinda simply completes a definition of the good life, Dorothy offers a link with the past: ‘Oh! yet a while I may behold in thee what I was once . . .’ (II. 120-1).

‘Tintern Abbey’ is about a saddened self searching for renewal, not just about a shared pleasure in picturesque scenery, and
Dorothy—like nature—serves as a talisman for permanence. Her counterpart in The Task is Cowper’s soberly affectionate tribute to Mrs. Unwin:

And witness, dear companion of my walks,  
Whose arm this twentieth winter I perceive  
Fast lock’d in mine, with pleasure such as love  
Confir’d by long experience of thy worth  
And well-tried virtues could alone inspire—  
Witness a joy that thou hast doubled long.  
Thou know’st my praise of nature most sincere,  
And that my raptures are not conjured up  
To serve occasion of poetic pomp,  
But genuine, and art partner of them all.

The presence of a loved companion endorses the poet’s own presence in a well-loved landscape, and the stability of the relationship is transferred to the poet’s feeling for nature. Cowper’s quiet sincerity becomes Wordsworth’s more earnest praise for Dorothy to remember that he:

so long  
A worshipper of Nature, hither came,  
Unwearied in that service, rather say  
With warmer love, oh! with far deeper seal  
Of hoildr love. (ll. 152-6)

—and his own closing tribute overflow with emotion:

Nor wilt thou then forget,  
That after many wanderings, many years  
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,  
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me  
More dear, both for themselves, and for thy sake. (ll. 155-6)

Dorothy’s presence allows Wordsworth to affirm a central element in the poetically chartered vision: his humanity. The Tintern landscape is more dear not only because he now has a doctrinal reason for visiting it, but because it is interpolated with his love for another person. The younger self of the first Wye tour had been fugitive and solitary; the self of five years later brings relationship with him.

Wordsworth begins his poem where Thomson and Cowper

leave off. The climates of these earlier topographical episodes are the vistas that reappear, infused with new transcendent significance, in the Coleridgean Conversation Poem. At Thomson describes Lyttelton’s kingdom, the eye is ‘match’d’ from Hagley Hall at its centre to the boundaries of his domain, taking in a representative landscape of hill and dale, town and village. There is no merging of man and nature; nature is rather the setting for a human ideal. The scene is impressive—

‘The bursting Prospect spreads immense around’—but does not go beyond its antropocentric implications. Cowper is more subjective, with his lingering. Wordsworthian opening:

How oft upon you eminence, our pace  
Has slack’rd to a pause, and we have borne  
The ruffling wind scarce conscious that it blew …

But although he dwells lovingly on the landscape before him, picking out familiar landmarks (‘our fav’rite elms’) and catching ‘the sound of cheerful bells’, the painstaking detail does not take one into his mind. Church spire and ‘smoking villages remote’ are distant only in the physical sense; nature is re-arranging normalized, and leads inevitably to renewed appreciation. ‘Scenes must be beautiful which daily view’d/Please daily. …’ Wordsworth’s opening description of the Wye valley builds on these earlier passages. But now landscape takes inner life, and imaginative re-creation has taken over:

From the faithful cataloguing of detail in The Seasons and The Task. It is not so much the scene that stands out as the poet’s presence in it:

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length  
Of five long winters! and again I hear  
Those waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
With a sweet inland murmur.—Once again  
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
Which on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.

The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark canopy, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which, at this season, with their upright fruits,
Among the woods and copses lose themselves,
Nor, with their green and simple hue, disturb
The wild green landscape. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Seat up its silence, from among the trees.
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,
Of vagrant dwellers in the howseless woods,
Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire
The hermit sits alone. (ll. 1-23)

The incantatory rhetoric signals Wordsworth's concern with what is apprehended rather than seen: 'Five years have passed... once again I hear... once again I behold... I again repose/her... The misgivings of description and abstraction—cliffs and seclusion, sky and serene—it aimed at the inner eye, while the repetition of green' ('green and simple hue... The wild green landscape... Green to the very door') merge detail into unity, absorbing cottages, hedgerows, and farms into the
realm of nature. The imaginary hermit and the 'vagrant
dwellers in the howseless woods—the charcoal-burners whose presence is not to be denied' ('as might seem') suggest how far we have moved from reality? This peaceful fusion of past
and imagined worlds, outer and inner, enacts the poet's
reconciliation with the landscape he describes. The last word of the passage ('alone') crystallizes the mood of self-consuming
solitude.

The Tintern landscape is as much a landscape of memory as it is the picturesque scene described by the topographical
writers whose influence showed itself in the imaginary hermit.
the other, is Milton's powerful lament for his blindness. His stance of endurance in the face of adversity—
I Sing with mortal voice, unchang'd
To hoarse or mute, though fall'n on evil days,
On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues...

reappears in 'Tintern Abbey' as Wordsworth's startlingly misanthropic account of 'The dreary intercourse of daily life'
(evil tongue', 'vile judgements', 'the mere of selfish men', 'presages where no kindness is', ll. 199-203). Both represent themselves not only as visionaries, but as suffering individuals.

The distinction of 'Tintern Abbey' lies partly in recapturing the authenticity of Miltonic elegy, weakened as it had been by the indiscriminate melancholy of the eighteenth century. But it is also the fullest expression of a specifically eighteenth-century genre. Wordsworth's potent intertwining of elegy and landscape could not have occurred without the topographical elegy, or 'revival' poem—the most popular elegiac vehicle of the period, combining as it did Gilpin's feeling for the picturesque with Akenside's pre-Romantic sensibility. Where Goldsmith's Drowned Village (1770) had lamented a changing place, the topographical elegy mourns personal loss. Place becomes a way of contrasting past and present selves. Wordsworth's title ('Lines written... on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye') and his opening ('Five years have passed...') announce his choice of genre. Given the circumstances of the poem's composition, his choice was unsurprising; but long before 1798 he had contemplated a poem on these lines. Behind the opening of 'Tintern Abbey' lies a blank verse fragment, probably belonging to the previous year, which already uses the 'revival' formula to suggest the interplay of inner and outer worlds:

Yet once again do I behold the forms
Of these huge mountains and yet once again
Standing beneath these elms I hear thy voice

1. Coleridge draws attention to the opening of Paradise Lost, Book III, in the 'Ode to the Imagination' (1807).
2. Paradise Lost, viii, 146-66.
3. Samuel Rogers in The Pleasures of Memory (1796) and Robert Southey in 'The Epic Poem', included in his and Lefroy's Poems (1796), both draw on Goldsmith's method to lament change within themselves rather than a village.
Beloved Derwent, that peculiar voice
Heart in the stillness of the evening air,
Half-heard and half created.1

Behind this fragment, in turn, lies a sonnet draft that goes back
to the mid-1790s and the period of Bowles’s influence:

Derwent again I hear thy evening call
Blend with the whispers of those elms that meet
Round this dear lodge nor as the moon I greet
That seems to rock [7] rocks their summits tall
And think how I have watched [7]?

The title Wordsworth gave to his draft (‘On returning to a
Cottage, a favourite residence of the author, after a long ab-
sence’) implies the genre popularized by the eighteenth-
century sonneteer who influenced his early lyric writing.

The special usefulness of the ‘revival’ poem lies in providing
Wordsworth with a means of asserting continuity as well as
change—the continuity of the poet’s developing consciousness.
The formula which reappears in ‘Tintern Abbey’, profoundly
modified by Wordsworthian sensibility, can be seen at its
simplest in Warton’s widely imitated sonnet, ‘To the River
Lodon’:

Art! what a weary race my feet have run,
Since first I trod thy banks with alders crown’d,
And thought my way was all through fairy ground,
Beneath thy azur sky, and golden sun:
Where first my muse to lip her notes begun!

While pensive memory traces back the round,
Which fills the varied interval between;
Much pleasure, more of sorrow, marks the scene.
Sweet native stream! those skies and suns so pure.

No more return, to cheer my evening road!
Yet still one joy remains, that not obscure,
Nor useless, all my vacant days have flow’d,
From youth’s gay dawn to manhood’s prime mature;
Nor with the Muse’s laurel unbestow’d.2

1 Pierpoint Morgan Library: PM v, sgo. 1. The sheet originally formed part of
the early notebook now reconstituted as DC MS. 15; for the draft, see Rethel, p. 116.

2 DC MS. x. Ed. the description of the moon, hooked to and for by the word of the
branches of an ash, Proverbs iv. 72-85. For the date of the draft, see Rethel, p. 116.

Art! what a weary race my feet have run,/Since first I trod thy
banks...?’ ‘Though changed, no doubt, from what I was, when
first/I came among these hills...’ (Tintern Abbey’, ll. 67-8)—
Wordsworth’s hours of weariness were hours that he was bound
to have endured when he chose this genre, and his intertwining
of recollection and renewal in ‘Tintern Abbey’ was an in-
herited motif. The impetus towards his early sonnet would
have come from Bowles—imitated also by Coleridge in his own
sonnet of the mid-1790s, ‘To the River Otter’ (‘near native
Brook! wild Streamlet of the West! How many various-fated
Years have past...’). Bowles’s ‘To the River Inchin, near
Winton’, had given Warton’s formula a characteristic intim-
acy of tone:

Inchin, when I behold thy banks again,
Thy crumbling margin, and thy silver breast,
On which the selfsame tints still seem to rest,
Why feels my heart the shivering sense of pain?
Is it, that many a summer’s day has past
Since, in life’s mourn, I carol’d on thy side?
Is it, that oft, since then, my heart has sigh’d,
As Youth, and Hope’s delusive gleams, flew fast?
Is it that those, who circled on thy shore,
Companions of my youth, now meet no more?
What’s the cause, upon thy banks I bend
Sorrowing, yet feel such solace at my heart,
As at the meeting some long-lost friend,
From whom, in happier hours, we wept to part.3

Bowles takes for granted the reader’s recognition of his theme
(Warton’s explicit ‘Art! what a weary race my feet have
run...?’); the plaintive ‘Is it...?’, ‘Is it...?’, ‘Is it...?’
tends no answer (‘What’s the cause...?’). His evasion of the
central elegiac commonplace creates a new sensibility. The
hesitancy goes with a refusal to name any emotion more defi-
nate than a ‘shivering sense of pain’, and where Warton parades
his feelings before the reader, Bowles takes him into his con-
fidince. Appropriately, his consolation is not the Muse’s laurel,

1 Coleridge’s untitled collection of sonnets, p. 5 (CPV 1, 4ff). See also W. K.
Morison in The Poetical W., pp. 115-16, for the parallel between Coleridge’s sonnet
and Bowles’s.

2 T. Warton, Elegies and Descriptive, p. 9.

but relationship—the comfort of friendship renewed ("As at
the meeting of some long-lost friend"). The difference is central
to Bowles's appeal; in Coleridge's phrase, his sonnets "domes-
ticate with the heart."

From Bowles's "To the River Ichin' to Wordsworth's ex-
ploration of the same themes in "Tintern Abbey" is a big
step. Bowles himself provides a stepping-stone with his long
topographical elegy, "Memony, written at Matlock" (1791)—like
"Tintern Abbey", an attempt to suggest the on-going processes
of loss and growth. Behind Bowles's poem lies the elegiac
landscape from Book IV of The Pleasures of the Imagination; the
"Memony" too casts back to the young poet, and its opening lines

MATLOCK, amid thy hoary-hanging views,
Thy gles that smile sequo't like, and thy mock
Which you forsook crag'd all dark o'bocks,
Once more I meet the long-neglected Muse,
As erst when by the mossy brink, and falls
Of solitary wrenbreck, or the site
Of Wycorhale's cliffs, where first her voice she tried,
We wander'd in our youth—Since then the thralls
That wait life's upland road, have chill'd her breast,
And much, as much they might, her wing deprent—
Wan Indolence reign'd, her dead'ning hand
Laid on her heart, and Fancy her cold wand
Drop at the frown of Fortune; yet once more
I call her, and once more her converse sweet,
'Mid the still limits of this lone retreat
I wone; if yet delightful as of yore
My heart she may revisit, nor deny
The soothing aid of some sweet melody"—

—another reminder that Wordsworth's "Wye" is in origin a poor
river, and that its cliffs have behind them the poetry-inspiring
cliffs of Clydendale and Matlock. More important, landscape
is already being used to suggest the potential continuity of
imaginative experience; past and present converge at the poet's
re-encounters the original source of his inspiration. The difference
between "Tintern Abbey" and the "Memony" is that Words-
worth is able to write openly about himself. Lacking a vocabu-
larv of introspection, Bowles has to fall back on clumsy per-
sonomisation and the monolised landscape which is his speciality.
An earlier self becomes "Hope, a golden-tressed boy"; sudden-
ning experience is reflected in the slowly darkening scene;
the possibilities of permanence and endurance are represented
by Matlock's "hoity cragg", and those of tranquillity by the
quietly flowing river:

Like Peace, a hermit in some craggy dell
Retir'd, and biding the loud throng farewel,
I see thee still thy peacefal course pursue,
Making such gentle music as might cheer
The weary passenger that journeys near.

In "Tintern Abbey", by contrast, there is a beautiful under-
statement of similar associations—between the river, with its
"sweet inland murmur" (1.4), and retirement; between the
hermit and peace.

فقاً لـ Wordsworth and Bowles, the landscape of per-
manence and calm becomes a source of future restoration in the
face of change and uncertainty within themselves. Wordsworth's
acknowledgement of enduring influence ("I have owed to
them, in hours of weariness, sensations sweet..."
II. 27-8) is
ambiguously by the phrasing of Bowles's entreaty:

Nor may I, sweet stream,
From thy lone banks and limits wild depart,
(Where now I seclude my penive theme)
Without some ruld improvement on my heart
Pour'd sad, yet pleasing: so may I forget
The crosses and the cares that sometimes fret
Life's smoothest channel, and each wish prevent
That mares the silent current of Content.

Even the characteristically Wordsworthian transition is there
(Not less, I trust, To them I may have owed another gift..."
II. 35-7). What is lacking is the authenticating struggle to

1 CPW L. 1739 (see p. 86, above).
2 Memony, written at Matlock, October 1791 (Salisbury, 1791), pp. 1-2.
define, and the resonance of underlying emotion, always present in 'Tintern Abbey'. One is left unmoved by Bowles's glib musings about the human state and his muted optimism, while the 'reconciled' conclusion seems as contrived as the sun-illuminated landscape which is his closing metaphor ('Bright burns the sun upon the shaggy scene...').

Th' brief time, and short our course to run, 
Awake, or, in a measured stride, 
(For yet the passing paths of life divide) 
Let us rejoice, seeking what may be won 
From the laborious day, or Fortune's frown; 
Here may we see the sun of life go down, 
Erewhile regardless of the morrow dwell;
Then to our destin'd roads, and speed us well.

The echo of Lyly's has to work over-time. Where Bowles relies on literary association, Wordsworth in 'Tintern Abbey'—a poem at least as dependent on its predecessors—seems to shape his experience without help from the past. The inherited pattern of elegy and reconciliation takes on new life, allowing the shapeless experience without help from the past, the change which absence and experience have wrought in his younger self.

II. Identity and Belief

For all that 'Tintern Abbey' owes to the past, its most important debt is to the poetry written by Wordsworth and Coleridge themselves during the first half of 1798. The Prelude provided the impulse towards a statement of belief, 'Frost at Midnight' provided an imitative model for the kind of poetry which Wordsworth had failed to write, and which Wordsworth himself had never previously attempted—the poetry of inner life. In 'Frost at Midnight', the familiar theme of loss and renewal are subsumed into a new concern with the power of the mind to link past, present, and future in organic relationship. Like Bowles's 'Monody', Coleridge's poem is an elegy for a past self; but another principle of organization is now at work—yet self; but another principle of organization is now at work—yet imagination. Where the meditative-descriptive parallel, but imagination. Where

10 centennial experience or insight, 'Frost at Midnight' centres on a Wordsworthian 'spot of time', a vivid recollection of childhood experience which looks forward to Part I of the 1799 Prelude. Both poems invite entry into the poet's consciousness, and both use the processes of self-realization—their recognition of becoming as well as of changing—to demonstrate the essential continuity of inner life. Coleridge's source, the fireside reverie from Book IV of Cowper's Task ("The Winter Evening"), is a similar attempt to capture the quality, if not the drama, of individual consciousness. For Cowper, the wintry scene outside exists chiefly to heighten the coziness indoors—

How calm is my recose, and how the frost 
Raging abroad, and the rough wind, endure 
The silence and the warmth enjoy'd within.

—but already there is the basis for Coleridge's muting of the outer world to intensify activity within the mind; and, although Cowper does no more than suggest its magic, the mysteriously transformed landscape is to reappear as the central symbol of 'Frost at Midnight':

To-morrow brings a change, a total change! 
Which even now, though faintly perform'd, 
And slowly, and by mist unlike, the face 
Of universal nature undergoes.

In Coleridge's poem, the 'secret ministry of frost' becomes an analogue both for the silent, inner workings of thought, and for the transforming power of the imagination. As the natural world is transfigured, the world of the individual changes its face from one of solitude and self-imprisonment to one of relationship and freedom.

Coleridge's opening, like the start of 'Tintern Abbey',


3 The Task, iv. 308-10.

4 Ibid. iv. 322-3.
suggests a mind turned inward; the external world is merged into the calm of thought:

THE frost perform's its secret ministry.
Unhep'd by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud—and back, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstainer musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with it's strange
And extreme slantness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings on of life
Inaudible as dreams!

'Sea, hill, and wood . . . Sea, and hill, and wood'—the repetition is lulling, but not sleepy. Coleridge's surroundings are 'Inaudible as dreams', but his younger self achieves the vividness of a present reality; the numberless goings on of life! have been displaced by memory. At the start of 'Tintern Abbey', evidence of human activity ('These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts . . .') is similarly merged into a 'wild given landscape' whose inhabitants are visible only in 'smoke/Sent up, in silence, from among the trees' (ll. 18–19). The silence that 'disturbs/And vexes meditation' in 'Frost at Midnight' suggests both the heightened awareness of midnight solitude, and the way in which silence has itself become the most important sign of mental life. In Hazlitt's phrase, it is a 'busy solitude' . . .

In 'Frost at Midnight', the suppressed paradisian disquieting quiet—signals the suspension of ordinary sensorial perception. In 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth's unexpected yet persuasive abstracts translate the Wye landscape into an internal one:

Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion . . .

and the Renewal of Tradition

Coleridge's 'Inaudible as dreams' is paralleled by Wordsworth's 'forms of beauty' that 'have not been to [him],/As is a landscape to a blind man's eye' (ll. 24–25). Both poets transfer the language and associations of ordinary perception to an unfamiliar context in order to evoke another kind of perception altogether—that of the mind's eye. The conventions of descriptive poetry are subtly disrupted to create the mental landscapes which are the real subjects of both 'Frost at Midnight' and 'Tintern Abbey'.

The major achievement of the Conversation Poem is its fusion of subjective experience and philosophic statement. Feeling and meaning interpenetrate, and the discursiveness of The Task gives way to a kind of poetry that is both more economical and more profound. In 'Frost at Midnight', the random reflections of Cowper's fire-gazing become the basis for a poem about the power of the imagination to bring mind and nature into creative relationship. The point of reference for its movement to and fro in time is the 'stranger', the sooty film on the grate—described by Cowper with the mock-seriousness which allows him to comprehend the ordinary within his Miltonic idiom:

Nor less amused have I quenched watch'd
The sooty films that play upon the bars
Pendulous, and foreboding in the view
Of superstition propheyng still
Though still deceived, some strangers near approach.

To Coleridge, the restless play of the film becomes a metaphor for the mind's unceasing activity. But the projection of his own being onto other things has troubling implications. Is adult consciousness self-reflecting, self-imprisoned, no longer a means of effective entry into either the world of the imagination or the world beyond the self?

Only that film, which flutter'd on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing,
Mesmerizes, its motion in this shush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me, who live,
Making it a companionable form,


2 The Task, i. 291–5.
"Tintern Abbey"

With which I can hold commune. Idle thought!
But still the living spirit in our frame,
That loves not to behold a lifetime's thing,
Transmutes into all it's own delights,
It's own volition, sometimes with deep faith,
And sometimes with fantastic playfulness.
Ah me! assayed by so much curious toys
Of the self-watching subtilizing mind,
How often in my early school-boy days,
With most believing superstitious wish
Presagous have I gaz'd upon the bars,
To watch the stranger there! and oft beholde,
With unsold life, already had I dreams
Of my sweet birthplace, and the old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot fair-day,
So sweetly ... 1

The recollection of 'the hot fair-day' releases Coleridge's imagination into the free flow of memory. The vivid 'spoot of time' experienced by the child is in contrast to the adult's mental processes ('the self-watching subtilizing mind'), and his daydream paradoxically brings a fuller encounter with reality.

The adult's mind experiences itself: the child's imagination relives the whole stretch of the fair-day ('From morn to evening ...').

Wordsworth's poem is similarly concerned with the function of memory as a means of regeneration for the imprisoned self ('in lonely rooms, and mid the din/Of town and cities, II. 26-7) and as a means of enrichment for the depleted imagination. Landscape replaces hearth as the focal point for the fluctuations of consciousness and oblivion, analysis and reverie, on which the larger rhythms of "Tintern Abbey" depend. It is a focal point constituted not so much by the scene before Wordsworth as by the 'picture of the mind' within:

Though absent long,
These forms of beauty have not been to me,
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye...


And now, with gleams of half-extinguish'd thought,
With many recognitions dim and fast,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again ... (II. 23-5, 59-69)

The Tintern landscape, Wordsworth implies, lives most fully and most permanently in the mind's eye; and it is this hinterland—the area lying between experience and recall, past and present—that his poem explores. Nature becomes a catalyst for the continuities of memory, and Wordsworth's present serves, like Coleridge's, as a means of plumbing the past. Both poets confront the gulf between adult self-consciousness and a younger, more vitally absorbed self, and both lament the passing of uncomplicated response. Just as Coleridge has lost the child's mental freedom—his independence of the actual—so Wordsworth has lost a feeling for nature: 'That had no need of a remote charm, / By thought supplied' (II. 88-9). 'Frost at Midnight' and 'Tintern Abbey' are alike in mourning that loss of participation which is to be the subject of a later, and greater, elegy—"Tintern Abbey".

Like these later elegies, both poems hold out possibilities for imaginative renewal. In 'Frost at Midnight', the sleeping child provides an assurance of future contact with the natural world. Coleridge's London school-days are to be reived in the Berkeleian landscape which at once teaches, and is, the divine imagination:

I was rear'd
In the great city, pent mid clusters dim,
And saw notcough lovely but the sky and stars.
But thou, my baby! Shalt wander, like a breeze,
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity did teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself. 2

This is not only a powerful image of communion, but an image of freedom and unconstraint; the adult is liberated in the

2. Ibid., p. 84 (CPW I. 242, II. 51-60); see p. 66, above.
breeze-like, inspirational wanderings of his child. In "Tintern Abbey", it is Darcy, who gives access to experience from which the poet himself is now debarr’d; if Hartley offers freedom, she offers intensity:

in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister!... (ll. 117-22)

Through these younger selves, 'Frost at Midnight' and 'Tintern Abbey' affirm a new bond—not only between past and present, but between present and future, anc, indirectly, with nature itself. Coleridge's closing lines of 'Dejection' are among the most tenderly evocative he ever wrote:

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redheats sit and sing
Betwixt the twigs of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree while all the thask
Smokes in the sun-shaw: whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or whether the secret ministry of cold
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet moon,
Like those, my babe! which ere tomorrow's warmth
Have capp'd their sharp keen points with pendulous drops,
Will catch thine eye, and with their snowy
Suspend thy little soul; then make thee shoot,
And stretch and flutter from thy mother’s arms
As thou wouldst fly for very eagerness.

The quietness of the icicles accentuates an implied responsiveness; and as they shine in the moon, the child, bird-like, flutters towards the icicles—his untrammeled movement re-storing contact with the natural world. The word 'flutter', used earlier of the scotty film moving on the grate, is a reminder that the activity which previously mirrored only the mind's restlessness ('sole unquiet thing') now signifies an imagination vividly

in touch with something other than itself. In 'Tintern Abbey', the communion envisaged is a peculiarly Wordsworthian one—

Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain winds be free
To blow against thee... (ll. 135-6)

—but Dorothy's struggle with the elements, like the Old Cumberland Beggar's, suggests harmony, hers is to be a mysterious and un-selfconscious sharing in the forces of nature.1 Where the younger Wordsworth of five years before had been 'haunted' by the surrounding country, his sister, like Lucy, is offered the possibility of fusion: 'And beauty born of murmuring sound/Shall pass into her face...' (Three years the gree'). In 'Tintern Abbey', Coleridge's child has been freed by nature: Dorothy is absorbed into its very life.

But Dorothy's presence in the closing movement of 'Tintern Abbey', also allows Wordsworth to pick up a motif that has been present throughout: 'The will, and music of humanity'. Where 'The Pedlar' had refused to admit problems, 'Tintern Abbey' evokes the painful perplexities of human existence, and hence the need for consolation—the 'Abundant recompense' of the One Life and the humanized imagination. Wordsworth's record of the changing significance which nature held for him has behind it his account of the Pedlar's visionary education. But the account has been modified to fit its new context. The young Pedlar had been overwhelmed by the intensity of his inner life. His world was at once solid and ghostly, made up of the visionary imagery—mountain, sky, and water—which Wordsworth uses throughout his poetry to express 'the presence

1. A.e. a jotting in the Allsford Notebook:

and beneath the star

Of evening let the steep and lonely path
The steep path of the stony mountain side
Among the stillness of the mountains near
The passing of thy breath.

(G.B. MS. 1.1 PW v. 341. ll. 40)

It has been suggested that these lines are linked with the composition of 'Tintern Abbey', but they may equally represent work on 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', along with other death fragments in the Allsford Notebook (see Lyric Ballad 1936 ed. W. J. B. Owen, pp. 139-30 and n.).
& the power "Of greatness", the universal mind is perceived with unique and ambiguous intensity:

many an hour in caves forlorn
And in the hollow depths of naked crags
His fate, and even in their fixed linings
Or from the power of a peculiar eye
Or by creative feeling overborne
Or by predominance of thought oppressed
Even in their fixed and steady linings
He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind . . .

Perhaps deliberately, perhaps because he was in the last resort unclear himself, Wordsworth begs the question of whether the divine mind is actually manifested in nature. What emerges, however, is not so much an uncertainty about whether the One Life is perceived or created, as the power and weight ('overborne', 'oppressed') of the child's experience. Such experience can have no place in 'Tintern Abbey', a poem that celebrates the attainment of vision at the expense of participation. Rather, Wordsworth draws on the Pedlar's adolescent 'Visibleness' ("many a time he wish’d the winds might rage/When they were silent") and his response to those aspects of nature which reflect his own disquietude:

I have heard him say
That at this time he scan’d the laws of light
With a strange pleasure of disquietude
Amid the din of torrents . . .

In 'Tintern Abbey', the fevered Pedlar reappears as a figure both fleeing and searching, finding in nature the fulfillment of an urgent but undefined need. But his turbulence is located firmly in the past,

when like a roe
I bounded o’er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led; more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then

1 'The Ruined Cottage', MS. B. PW v. 367, II. 80-1.
2 Ibid.; PW v. 368, II. 100-1.
3 Ibid.; PW v. 368, II. 225-6.
5 The passages are quoted on pp. 93-4 above.
6 Ibid. note to 'The Thorn' (PW ii. 513).
again with 'such, perhaps, / As may have had no trivial influence . . . ' (ll. 32–33), and only embarking on his central claim with an unsparing negative transition:

Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the bethroned of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weigh
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lighten'd;—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid aside
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (ll. 15–50)

Even when he is well under way, Wordsworth continues to explain ('that blessed mood . . . that serene and blessed mood'); but by now his repetitions have become a means of both mirroring and holding in check an underlying emotion. When painstaking definition is transcended by the steady excitement of seeing into the life of things, his achievement outdoes the triumph of the sun-touched landscape in 'The Pedlar'. God-given revelation is replaced by a more arduous intuition; in 'Tintern Abbey' there is a burthen of mystery to be lightened, an unintelligible world to be understood. Ectatic participation ('Thought was not. In enjoyment it expired') gives way to a carefully authenticated process, a recognizable state of mind and body. Breath, blood, sleep—the familiar terms mark the shift from physical to mental activity accessible, as the earlier 'vision of the living God' is not. The eye made quiet by harmony and joy seems as much a shared experience as sleep.

It is characteristic of 'Tintern Abbey's' ebb and flow that the confidence of its first meditative climax should give way to misgiving ('If this / Be but a vain belief', ll. 50–1); characteris-

cic, too, that Wordsworth's confident declaration about the past ('Not for this / Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur,' ll. 86–7) should be undercut by its elegiac tone. This is the context for Wordsworth's most successful poetic statement of his belief in the One Life. 'The Pedlar' had side-stepped the question of subjectivity ('He had a world about him—'twas his own'); 2 in 'Tintern Abbey', the more subjective poem, belief is more completely endorsed. Like Wordsworth himself, the reader is disturbed by 'the joy / Of elevated thoughts'; discovering them unexpectedly in the midst of uncertainty. Again the moment of insight is casually introduced—with 'And', this time, instead of 'Nor':

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (ll. 94–103)

Beside its counterpart in 'The Pedlar' ('in all things / He saw one life . . . '), the passage is deliberately uncategorical. The sentiment of being 3 becomes 'a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused'—something elusive as well as impressive. The earlier momentousness had been unqualified, but now Wordsworth is 'disturbed', the One Life is perceived with an effort ('far more deeply interfused'). This is more subtle writing than that of 'The Pedlar', and when Wordsworth chooses to use the earlier antiphonal rhetoric it is correspondingly more effective. Vigorous archetypal life ('all that leaps, & runs, & shouts . . . ') 4 is replaced by a new concept of being, shared by sea, sky, air, and the human mind. It is only now that Wordsworth introduces the assertive language of power, the motion that rolls through all things. Most of the work is done by the verse itself, with its assured rhythms and the inclusive

1 Ibid.; PW v. 316, l. 200.
3 Ibid.; PW v. 315, l. 240.
4 Ibid.; PW v. 315, l. 347.
repetition of 'all'. But Wordsworth's rhetoric contains an added dimension of meaning. The crudely animal life of 'The Pedlar' has been transformed by adjectives that suggest the perceived qualities of the world, of sun, ocean, air, and sky—'setting; 'round', 'living', 'blue'—and, in doing so, suggest also the all-embracing presence and ever-present vitality of the human mind itself; 'and in the mind of man', 'All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts' reaches out to suggest not simply the existence of mind in all things, but the irradiation of all things by the mind.

The central impulse of 'Tintern Abbey' is that of The Prelude—an attempt to make permanent the vision that is threatened by the processes of change and growth recorded in the poem:

I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all, and I would give,
While yet we may, as far as words can give,
A substance and a life to what I feel:
I would enshrine the spirit of the past
For future restoration.¹

Already by the end of 'Tintern Abbey' Wordsworth has projected himself and Dorothy forward to a time when separation, experience, and mortality turn the present into the past. His anchoring of identity to landscape enshrines the source of 'future restoration—that vision, at once philosophic and humanized, transcendent and accessible, which is central to his greatest poetry.