

Tao Yuanming and William Wordsworth: A Parallel Study

Lin Chen

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Leroy Searle, Chair

David Knechtges

Brian Reed

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Lin Chen

University of Washington

**Abstract**

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Lin Chen

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Professor Leroy Searle

Comparative Literature

The dissertation conducts a parallel study of a prominent Chinese poet from the early medieval period named Tao Yuanming and William Wordsworth, one of the founding figures of British Romanticism, with the aim to suggest novel connections between and bring together into a constructive dialogue two of the world's major literary cultures that are still to a large extent mutually indifferent, if not mutually exclusive, in today's academic discourse. The chapter design is roughly symmetrical. For the named dialogue to take place, the dissertation sets out to break down the widely current dichotomy of fact and fiction in East-West literary studies by critiquing the hermeneutic approaches predominating in traditional China and the modern West, which seem in a balanced view either excessively literal-minded or to lean too much toward a denial of the factual base of the kind of lyric poetry that is manifestly autobiographical, a poetic

genre in which both our master-writers obviously excelled. The remaining chapters provide novel readings of selected writings by the two poets in order to address some of the problems that are first adumbrated and yet left unresolved in the opening chapter, especially those concerning the authorial stance of Tao Yuanming and Wordsworth in their respective writings. Although discussions of the two writers are kept strictly separate in the body of the dissertation, with each chapter focused on issues of apparently local interest, the chapters do constitute a comparison, albeit of a rather oblique sort, when read together as a sequence. As a juxtapositional comparison, it attempts not only to represent and reproduce for the reader to the extent possible within the bounds of the dissertator's interest and abilities the actual, defamiliarizing experience of reading interculturally, but also to restore considerations of the author to their rightful place and demonstrate the practicality of an authorial approach in the study of literature, especially of autobiographical writing.

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*To my parents, and my wife,  
without whose love, support, and sacrifice  
the completion of this work would be inconceivable*

## Comparing the Incomparable: An Introduction

If you look at them from the viewpoint of their differences, from liver to gall is as far as from the state of Chu to that of Yue; if you look at them from the viewpoint of their sameness, the myriad things are all one.

*Zhuangzi*, Chapter 5<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation, as its very title suggests, conducts a parallel study of a prominent Chinese poet from the early medieval period named Tao Yuanming and William Wordsworth, one of the founding figures of British Romanticism, with the aim to suggest novel connections between and bring together into a constructive dialogue two of the world's major literary cultures that are still to a large extent mutually indifferent, if not exclusive, in today's academic discourse. In an educational culture that seems to thrive on the most radical kind of border-crossing and technological innovation, it is easy to overlook the novelty of the current project, which though crossing a major cultural divide, contents itself with and remains committed to the traditional medium of words. Despite the astounding progress made in recent years in such innovative areas of study as world literature and postcolonial studies, the "disincentives" from both sides of the aisle, which Pauline Yu deplored a quarter-century ago as hampering the study of Chinese literature from a comparative perspective, remain powerful:

Many scholars of Western literatures may briefly lend an interested ear to someone discussing Asian literature but then lapse quickly from a rather patronizing tolerance to an all-too-visible impatience to get back to what really matters. The excuse, and it is a good one, is that the linguistic and cultural differences are so profound as to render futile or meaningless any attempts at

serious comparative study. From the other side, the resistance has entrenched itself equally stubbornly. Hard-core sinologists often refuse to gainsay what they consider the unique difficulty of their own enterprise and cast a suspicious, if not outrightly contemptuous, eye on those who claim to know about China *and* something else as well. Audible sniffs, for example, convey a widespread skepticism, and even hostility, toward those presumptuous scholars not content to remain within the safe confines of a single dynasty, genre, or botanical species.<sup>2</sup>

Being the lesser of the two implied challenges haunting comparative projects like the current one, misgivings about the comparatist's knowledge and competency are relatively easy to dispel.

With absolutely no desire to subject myself to the odious charge of presumptuousness, I call attention to the modesty of what I actually "claim to know": not the entire literary canon, in itself undoubtedly a much contested notion, of traditional China and the modern West, but two of a handful of writers that I happen to have read with special care and of whom I have attained a near-specialist knowledge, some parts of which I deem worth sharing in a relatively accessible kind of academic prose. The greater challenge, one that has unsettled and will probably continue to unsettle even a modest comparatist, so long as he or she ventures beyond a well-established cultural sphere, is the question of comparability. What could possibly justify bringing together two writers born fourteen centuries apart and originating in two literary cultures that have had no significant contact, one with the other, before perhaps the sixteenth century? It is to this question, and the various difficulties it poses, epistemological, ethical, political, and methodological, that I here attempt a tentative answer.

Let me begin with a somewhat facile explanation. First, the enormous temporal gulf separating the two writers should not naturally deter an intercultural comparison of this kind, for

time is one of the problems, both challenging and intriguing, that such comparisons should tackle, not take as settled. Although there is no space here for a full exposition of the question of temporality and its ramifications in intercultural studies, it is not too hard to understand that before globalization—wherever its point of departure is located in world history—configurations of time and place are culture-bound, perhaps as much so as ways of living, systems of trade and government, social roles, religions, traditions in clothing, foods and arts, expectations for behavior, attitudes toward others, etc. The organic metaphor essential to Romantic thinking should be useful in enabling the comparatist to negotiate the apparent temporal disparity between literary cultures like the traditional Chinese and English. Although the pitch, texture, duration, modality, rhythm, and pulse rate of a historical tradition will necessarily vary from one culture to another, an organic process of emergence, growth, maturity, decline, and disappearance seems inevitable. Rather than assuming temporal disparity to be an insurmountable barrier and holding it against the comparatist, the skeptic might just use a little patience and ask as an afterthought what an intercultural comparison, be it not “futile” or “meaningless,” might reveal about the nexus between time, history, and culture. There is little doubt, for example, that describing Tao Yuanming as an “early medieval” writer, as I did in the opening sentence of this introduction, cannot but be a convenient metaphorical interpellation that is, from an alternative perspective, also an act of epistemic violence.

This temporary removal of the temporal barrier should prepare us for the mention of a familiar inducement to compare interculturally: namely “the perception of similitude in dissimilitude,” which Wordsworth cited in passing in the famous preface to his 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* as a fundamental principle by which to explain not just the pleasure of meter but the origin of a whole host of basic human needs and activities, including sex, conversation, taste,

and morality.<sup>3</sup> Familiarity with the writers compared opens up exciting areas of commonality not only in their life ideals, poetic career, and overall cultural importance, but in the subject matter of their writings and their characteristic poetic style. Both of them, for instance, have a unique place in their respective poetic traditions as perhaps the greatest and most famous poet-recluse, although this is less obvious in the case of Wordsworth—whose life project is, by the way, the writing of an eventually abandoned epic titled *The Recluse*—in large part because he is comparatively so much closer to us and thus more vulnerable to the vagaries of criticism. Their most productive and most memorable period as a writer is that surrounding and after their voluntary withdrawal from centers of political and social activity at a critical moment of their life in anticipation of a peaceful, meditative existence committed to writing in their native land. Although the legendary aura Tao's retirement has later acquired in China's collective cultural memory is hardly imaginable in the case of Wordsworth, their trajectory as a poet can be both conveniently conceived as structured around what M. H. Abrams has designated as "the long journey home"—Tao Yuanming's longest and arguably best poetic piece has for its title, as David Hinton renders it, "Back Home Again"—a journey of crisis that has helped unleash their creative energies and partly for which their names are engraved in the book of literary history. In matters of content and style, they both developed a fondness for contemplating the human condition in the context of nature and history. Both used poetry as a means to confront the inescapable human questions of life and death and suffering and a means to seek spiritual consolation. Their poetic legacies in their respective literary traditions both consist in their cultivation, in a grand and revolutionary way, of a distinctively natural style, a masterful artlessness that is paradoxically also supreme art, that wins them the heartfelt admiration of subsequent readers.<sup>4</sup> Aren't these commonalities and correspondences ample proof of

comparability? Might not these and the pleasure that necessarily attends the astute perception of parallels and correspondences in apparently unconnected and dissimilar things amply warrant a comparison, one that would contribute to the ongoing transformation of comparative literature from a Eurocentric discipline to a more global one?

It seems to me how we answer those questions depends on our willingness to recognize their rhetorical force. They force us to gauge the adequacy of the dialectic of sameness and difference as a ground of comparison as comparative literature liberates itself from a comparability based on attested relations of contact and begins to operate in a broader, more tenuous realm of intertextuality where in principle anything could be compared with anything else. Here is what retrospectively we might consider another major “crisis of comparative literature.” In his response to Haun Saussy’s 2004 ACLA report, Jonathan Culler comparing the globalizing of comparative literature to Readings’s account of the contentless yet incontestable concept of excellence as the justification for the co-presence in a modern university of mutually blind and impermeable organizational units poses the problem of intercultural comparison poignantly, namely that

it is likely to generate a standard, or ideal type, of which the texts compared come to function as variants. Comparatists today are eager to avoid this implicit result of measuring one culture’s texts by some standard extrinsic to that culture. Yet the more we try to deploy a comparability that has no implicit content, the more we risk falling into a situation like that of the University of Excellence, where an apparent lack of concern for content—your department can do what it likes provided it does it excellently—is in the end only the alibi for a control based on bureaucratic rather than academic and intellectual principles.<sup>5</sup>

That is to say, the new breed of comparatist faces a real dilemma: comparison is necessarily entangled in a kind of discursive centrism in its imposition of implicit intellectual norms and standards; otherwise, it is vacuous, just as the notion of excellence that administrators use to organize the American university. For Culler, however, and perhaps for any scholar who prioritizes intellectual rigor over political correctness, tough as the choice is, it is still better to impose extrinsic criteria than risk falling into vacuousness.

How to understand this vacuousness? Is it a call to vigilance or an admission of futility when we globalize comparative literature? These questions are difficult to answer abstractly. It will help to consider the hypothetical example through which R. Radhakrishnan works out the problem of comparison. “What happens,” Radhakrishnan invites the reader to imagine,

when a literary critic compares the feminism in Tamil of C. S. Lakshmi, who writes under the pseudonym Ambai, with the feminisms of say, Adrienne Rich, or Virginia Woolf, or Hélène Cixous? . . . despite different historical grounding and location, these writers come up with “comparable” articulations of gender, *écriture*, and possibilities of experiencing the Real beyond the gynocentric versus androcentric divide. But here lies the problem: whereas someone like Cixous achieves this awareness as a function of her interlocution with Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism in general, Ambai’s formulations are the result of her interactions with Indian political economy, Indian nationalist and feminist discourses, and aspects of Hindu Advaitic philosophy. Once the commonality is figured out at the level of “knowing,” it feels as though the real differences between Ambai and Rich at the level of “being” do not matter; where each of them comes from turns into a mere

empirical detail at the service of a more meaningful theoretical enterprise. Even more crucially, what happens to those areas in each work that remain “indigenous” and are not relevant to the common ground area of the comparison? Would these areas be abandoned from critical-theoretical consideration as mere hinterlands whose function is nothing more than prepping and propping up the avant-garde area of comparison?<sup>6</sup>

The ingenuity of this imagined case consists in the almost palpable tension he creates between the attraction of such a project—comparative, postcolonial, gender-based, and potentially interdisciplinary—computed in terms of the research opportunities it opens up and its allure in the current academic job and publishing market, and its structural reductiveness, which will probably only be egregiously obvious to the specialist. The fear is that such a “theoretical enterprise” when it is successful will obliterate the local flavor and commitments of the writers compared, that the comparatist’s search for transhistorical, transcultural norms and standards will result only in literary rules that are hollow or biased and illuminate overlaps that upon closer look mask fundamental and irreducible differences.

It is in view of this very real danger that I regard as “facile” my previous justifications for a comparison between Tao Yuanming and William Wordsworth. Take for example the question of their shared preoccupation with eremitism. Whereas Tao’s resolute withdrawal from the world in 405 is fueled by the contradictory demands of social responsibility and individual freedom, respectively embodied, as Tao’s traditional readers were inclined to think, by the contending value systems of Confucianism and Taoism, Wordsworth’s settlement in the Lakes in the late 1790s is the result of his continuing engagement throughout his early adulthood with the prevailing intellectual challenges and the troubling sociopolitical realities of the age: revolution,

war, industrialization, and so forth. What we have arduously telescoped as a common ground area of the comparison fades out of sight under the microscope.

Things seem to have come full circle. But before throwing up our hands in despair, it is worthwhile to consider the other side of the matter. If the fear of centrism, which, it seems to me, is always politically dubious, and the danger of misunderstanding through decontextualization strongly caution *against* comparison, what compelling reasons are there *for* comparison? Fortunately, we have the answers prepared for us by Susan Friedman in her recent article titled ironically “Why Not Compare?” The reasons, which Friedman significantly calls “imperatives,” are threefold: first, comparison is a fundamental mode of cognition central to all forms of figural and conceptual thought required by literature and “theory,” the latter of which Friedman takes to mean the “cognitive capacity to conceptualize, generalize, and see patterns of similarity in part of a broadly systematic form of thinking”; second, comparison is essential to identity formation both at the individual and the collective levels; third, it is an important way to combat cultural parochialism, to overcome the “resistance to the cosmopolitan”:

Comparison across cultures defamiliarizes what one takes as “natural” in any given culture. This is, of course, a familiar experience of travel: to learn about one’s own society, go to another—a double learning that involves comparison. To learn through comparison that others see things differently is to recognize the constructedness of one’s own frame of reference. Such defamiliarization of “home” through engagement with the “other” is often the cornerstone of transcultural political analysis. In other words, one effect of comparing cultures is to call into question the standards of the dominant precisely because it is unveiled as *not* universal. Scholars who develop narrative theory out of a purely Western

literary archive—without global comparisons of different narrative traditions—are caught, politically speaking, in a hermeneutic circle that confirms Western narrative forms as dominant, universal. A more inclusive comparison of narratives from different sites on the globe can dismantle the false universalism of Western forms.<sup>7</sup>

The decontextualization upon which comparison relies as it moves beyond the particular and local also involves a recontextualization that is potentially illuminating.

These claims turn the popular objections on its head. The positivity of Friedman's argument is such that while fully acknowledging the various abuses of comparison, she nevertheless would like to emphasize that the risks of not comparing outweigh those of comparing, that the bane of comparison is also a great boon, which the comparatist cannot choose to ignore, but must use to the benefit of humanity.

Friedman's moral sentiment is hard to argue against. It is no less compelling than that which motivates the doubts of the cautious and the objections of those who speak for the victims of comparison, some of which we have already looked at. From a nonpartisan point of view, however, that is to say, when trying to weigh the pros and cons of comparison in a way that is not predetermined by our interests and preferences, we arrive at a conclusion that appears rather commonsensical: comparison is in and of itself nothing but a tool, whose value depends on the use to which it is put. Just as in the case of a hammer, which can be made to serve both constructive and destructive purposes, the question of good or bad, illuminating or obfuscating, conversational or colonialist, will not arise with reference to comparison until we understand how and to what end it is done and its real consequences. For this reason, the dispute

surrounding comparison cannot be settled without reference to the particular case, without, that is to say, a careful consideration of the living and historical circumstances within which the question of comparison arises, of the comparatist's motive, method, competence, and the fruit of the comparative performance. Failure to recognize the use-dependent character of comparison and the terms in which we justify or question it is, in my view, the root cause of why the dispute persists, with no sign of an imminent abatement.

Take for example Friedman's third "imperative" to compare, which is based essentially on an idea of cosmopolitanism. It is certainly valid and worth fighting for in a society that has indeed turned excessively parochial and self-centered (I say "excessively" to highlight the fact that parochialism is a matter of comparison, relative only to the norm or standard by which the judgment is made), but it will not be felt as a pressing need, nor conducted with real fervor, in a society that remains largely open and vibrant, or when and where it has to compete with more pressing socioeconomic concerns, like food, shelter, security, right to education, health care, etc. This is so because the goal of that pursuit is only an ideal, a noble one for sure, and as such, it is not fully realizable in the real world as we know it, not even in an age of globalization. Furthermore, what if the "defamiliarization of 'home' through engagement with the 'other'" merely confirms one's sense of superiority rather than undermining it, which is by no means an impossible scenario? To what should the comparatist swear allegiance, the moral and political ideal of parity and friendship, which requires we resist cultural hegemony and help those on the losing side of comparison, or the abstract notion of truth, however it is defined, which is in danger of falling into the wrong hands and being used to fulfil aims that are morally and politically objectionable? Where is the line between moral action and pure scholarship? Is disinterestedness possible with respect to comparison as it ventures beyond the region of cultural

dominance to encompass the rest of the world?<sup>8</sup> Questions like these will perhaps continue to exercise the minds of theorists and practitioners in the field.

Now that we know the problem cannot be solved satisfactorily in total disregard for living and historical circumstances, let me start over and probe a slightly different set of questions. Rather than pondering whether intercultural comparison per se is a worthy procedure, I proceed to comment on the necessity and use of this particular comparative project by unveiling its historical grounding: who is comparing and why? what is at stake in the comparison, and who will benefit from it? (It is interesting to note that the autobiographical turn, for better or worse, is fully in the spirit of what we might call, for lack of a culturally neutral term, romanticism.)

The attraction of the current comparison for me is, without a doubt, tied to my bilingual/bicultural experience as well as an implicit idea of universalism, the assumption that there is such a thing called common humanity, manifestations of which are to be found in every area of human activity, including that of ideas and letters. For that reason, the project will probably appeal to those with a comparable cross-cultural experience or at least an interest in such experience and secondarily to those who aspire to a cosmopolitan perspective. It is overtly and overwhelmingly epistemological, although there is nothing in it that will rid it of important moral and political implications. Epistemologically speaking, it is grounded in my experience of a conflict between my Chinese literary heritage and the various values and ideas that I have during my college years piously imbibed from an exposure to the Western literary tradition. Naturally, the conflict manifests itself in many different areas and ways, but nowhere has it exercised the best portion of my mind longer and more strenuously than in the reading and

understanding of literature, my chosen field of study. I say so with a modicum of disingenuousness, it immediately occurs to me, because the truth—if there is such a thing and to the extent that we are capable of expressing it—may well be the reverse: there is a good likelihood that it is this felt conflict and the resolve to come to terms with it that has determined in the first place my choice of discipline. Whatever the case may be, my reading experience, which straddles the line between the literary cultures of China and the West, naturally forced upon my attention a fundamental difference in how the writing and reading of poetry is conceived and practiced in the two divergent traditions.

One does not need go far in the study of either to encounter some version of this difference. An informed student of Western literature hardly needs reminding, for example, that mimesis is a key concept in Greek poetics. Although Plato and Aristotle in their respective philosophical explorations refrained from a systematic account of the lyric, their shared interest in mimesis did seem to provide a theoretical framework within which later discussions of poetry in the West evolved. For Pauline Yu, the concept of mimesis has spawned three relevant concerns about the lyric in the Western tradition: namely, the widely held assumption of fictionality, which is conclusively supported by the etymology of the Greek term *poiesis*, an interest in the speaker of a poem, and a concern with temporality, which involves both the emphasis on the intensity and brevity of the lyric and the idea that unlike narrative, which builds continuity in time, the lyric takes place in the timeless present.<sup>9</sup> In sharp contrast to the Greek notion that a poem is something made, a constructed object, ancient Chinese developed an equally impressive etymological definition of the poem, as something that “articulates what is on the mind intently,” which is further elaborated in the opening section of the “Great Preface” (*Da*

*xu*) to the *Book of Songs*, the “most authoritative statement on the nature and function of poetry in traditional China”:

The poem is that to which what is intently on the mind goes. In the mind it is “being intent”; coming out in language, it is a poem. The affections are stirred within and take on form in words. If words alone are inadequate, we speak them out in sighs. If sighing is inadequate, we sing them. If singing them is inadequate, unconsciously our hands dance them and our feet tap them.

The affections emerge in sounds; when those sounds have patterning, they are called “tones.” The tones of a well-managed age are at rest and happy; its government is balanced. The tones of an age of turmoil are bitter and full of anger; its government is perverse. The tones of a ruined state are filled with lament and brooding; its people are in difficulty.<sup>10</sup>

From quasi-theoretical propositions like the one quoted above and several others from the early medieval period, such as Lu Ji’s (260-303) “Poetic Exposition on Literature” and Liu Xie’s (ca. 465-523) *The Literary Mind: Dragon-Carvings*, Pauline Yu deduced a qualitatively different poetics, one in which the poem is not only thought of as resulting from the poet’s subjective reaction to external stimuli, but also accorded something that allows it to exert a moral and political influence in the wider world. This “expressive-affective” concept of poetry stipulates that the poetic event is part of the natural and spontaneous interplay between the poet and the universe, the place where the two meet in a mutually affective way; hence, there can be no ground for the genesis of such ideas as *poiesis* and fictionality, nor is there any reason for the traditional Chinese reader to distinguish between the poet and the speaker of a poem. Instead, there arose in the Chinese lyric tradition a rather tenacious “conviction of historicity” that not

just shapes understanding of a poem's genesis but is also the prevailing criterion for the reading process: the poem, in this view, is "a literal comment on an actual historical situation," and insofar as the idea is warranted, the primary task of the reader is "to reconstruct the context of the poem."<sup>11</sup>

Such is one very succinct and articulate account of the differing assumptions, norms, and rules underlying the divergent reading practices prevalent in traditional China and the West, whose presentation, as the author seemed to imply toward the end, is impelled by a sober recognition of the problems with an indiscriminate application to other literary systems in contemporary cross-cultural studies of terms and concepts, like metaphor and allegory, that are rooted in Western culture. In rehearsing this very broad, ineluctably oversimplifying account, my interest is in both the problems of the argument and its implications for intercultural comparison like the present one. It is not difficult to see that Pauline Yu's conclusions, though the result of an act in academic good faith, easily lend themselves to a kind of comparative relativism or an argument for cultural incommensurability that might unsettle the reader committed to the quest for universalist literary values. If a culture or literature can only be read and interpreted and evaluated in its own terms, how is a meaningful "dialogue" across cultures and literatures possible? More specifically, if it is indeed the case that the Chinese concept of poetry differs so radically from that of the West, what is it that justifies our labelling that kind of literary art poetry in the first place? Or if, on the contrary, the shared label is not in any significant way a misnomer in either case, how are we to account for the glaring differences that do seem to come up in the respective critical traditions, of which the author has already given us a wide cross-section? This foregrounding of the paradox of comparison is certainly not to invalidate the quest for differences, which is after all an indispensable and oftentimes extremely valuable move in

comparative study. My point, however, is that a neat inventory of differences between rival poetic systems is but an inviting point of departure; the job is not done until we find or are able to construct a larger transcultural conceptual system where to locate the differences. As Donald Davidson commenting on the problems with conceptual relativism has wisely noted, “different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them . . . what we need . . . is some idea of the considerations that set the limits to conceptual contrast.”<sup>12</sup>

One route that the comparison summarized above opens up is toward a new poetics, one based not in any particular literary system, but in an enlarged vision and a less culturally limited conception of the nature, origin, and functions of literature. This approach requires a treatment of certain preliminary observations as given and a will to account for them to the best of our knowledge. Here again some dismantling is necessary before rebuilding can start. Notably, Pauline Yu tried to explain the difference between Chinese and Western poetics by reference to the contrasting ontologies and cosmologies originating within the respective cultures we are dealing with. Whereas mimesis and its concomitant ideas of *poiesis* and fictionality, so the theory goes, are grounded in the Platonic separation of the visible realm of material objects from the unseen, eternal, unchanging realm of forms, an ontological monism, one that denies the boundaries between inner and outer, poet and the world, constitutes the philosophical grounding for the brand of poetics the Chinese evolved. Appealing as this way of seeing things might be, there is, upon scrutiny, a serious problem. On the one hand, how can mimesis, a concept that signifies the connection and likeness between things—that one thing is an imitation of another, an imperfect one for Plato certainly (with which Aristotle would obviously disagree), but an imitation nonetheless—*explain* the centrality of *poiesis* and fictionality to Western poetics?

Some kind of conceptual distinction, one might argue, is a necessary condition for a mimetic theory of literature, but it can hardly be a sufficient explanation, if to explain is to find out the *cause* of what needs explaining. Besides, it almost entirely ignores important elements of this poetics that would allow it to harmonize with its far eastern counterpart. This might include, among other things, the Aristotelian notion of catharsis, which certainly implies an affective view of literature, or the Horatian emphasis on teaching and delight as ends of poetry, which bears a nontrivial resemblance to Confucian affectivism. On the other hand, a skeptical mindset will also find it difficult to subscribe to the Chinese half of the dichotomy, once it comes to realize that an expressive-affective concept of poetry presupposes a conceptual distinction, muted or marginalized though it possibly is in the native philosophical tradition of the Chinese, between that which needs expressing and that which is then expressed, between that which has an effect and that which is affected by it. If so, what exactly does a monistic worldview have to do with the emergence of an expressive-affective poetics?

Cosmologies and ontologies, therefore, do not make up an adequate explanation. We'd better look elsewhere for an answer. One possible line of inquiry, and a quite promising one, was first explored by Earl Miner almost a decade before Pauline Yu's article, when the former drawing on his unusually extensive grasp of East Asian and Western literatures looked beneath those culture-bound systems of literary knowledge we have called poetics into their generic foundations. The result, though not fully theorized at the point of its enunciation, is both refreshing and rich in implications:

As everyone acquainted with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean literature recognizes, lyric alone was thought for centuries to be the literary norm. That simple, central, ineluctable fact has determined the radical differences between

Asian and Western poetics. In this wider view, the seeming clutter of Western generic and other critical views takes on a decided orderliness.

Mimesis is important to ancient and Renaissance-modern thought because of the importance, at certain crucial moments, of drama, a represented literary kind. The most crucial moment was that of the Greek Academy at the time of Plato and Aristotle, for if they took opposite stands on the worth of drama, they took it to be the norm and therefore literature to be distinguished by mimesis. That development is itself unique.<sup>13</sup> But as a phenomenon, it has counterparts in all cultures.

In brief, a critical system, or a systematic poetics, emerges in a culture after a literary system proper has been generated and when important critical conceptions are made about a then flourishing or normatively considered genre. The coincidence of major critics with the considered genre generates the critical system. . . . As we shall be seeing, only a triadic conception of genre allows for the evidence available in the literatures of the world (although of course “genre” is simply my word designating one of the three kinds).<sup>14</sup>

Miner’s main contention here is that a major critical system is relative to the “literary kind” most esteemed within that system at the time it was being worked out. Thus, while a mimetic poetics, which thrived in ancient Greece and acquired a status of authority subsequently in the West, especially after the Renaissance, is the result of a critical preoccupation with drama at the time of Plato and Aristotle, the predominantly lyrical character of the examples that people in ancient China thought about in formulating their conception of poetry is a determining factor in their

poetics being of the expressive-affective kind. This emphasis on genre marks the beginning of Miner's quest for a poetics that transcends cultural boundaries, one which he would eventually set forth about a decade later in a monograph titled explicitly *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature*. The backbone of this planetary poetics, which is articulated through the critical insights found chiefly in two of the world's most prominent literary systems, the Western and East Asian, is what Miner has here in this early essay termed a "triadic conception of genre," a system of three master literary types—lyric, narrative, and drama—that though derived from the Western parish, are used, warily and self-consciously, as a tool, an extremely powerful one, so it seems, for illuminating both the distinctiveness and the limits of each local variety of literary theory.

This is, undoubtedly, a Herculean project of immense scope and sophistication, but as such, it cannot be without problems of one kind or another. As far as our present inquiry is concerned, one particularly notable set of problems pertain to the implicit strain between Miner's idealistic conception of genres, each of which is, as it were, an idea and distinguishable by a linked set of characteristics, and his effort to negotiate the infinite variety and complexity of the literary evidence out there in the world, for which genres constitute merely a convenient, somewhat arbitrary system of classification. In principle, this attempt to mediate between theory and history may be advisable because, as Miner was keenly aware, "what usually happens with historically based 'comparison' is the discovery of trivial likeness and difference, and . . . what happens with theoretically based 'comparison' is the very identical conclusion each time."<sup>15</sup> Pragmatically, however, it runs immediately into trouble (this in itself is not particularly striking; the problem is at least as old as Plato in the Western intellectual tradition with his setting over of immaterial forms against material items). There is something unpleasantly circular about Miner's

argument: it both presupposes a tacit understanding of the core concepts involved—when Miner maintains, for instance, that east Asian poetics is lyric-based, the presumption is that we know exactly what a lyric is—and requires that we willingly suspend this knowledge and brace ourselves for conceptual reconfigurations. Consequently, the best that Miner’s genre-based poetics could come up with is not so much a usable set of definitions as some version of “différance,” for ideal types hardly ever exist in their purity and perfection in the real world. All the comparatist could do is to describe them comparatively: drama “estranges” and unlike lyric and narrative, its “version of the virtual is *necessarily* fictional” (p. 46, italics Miner’s); lyric and narrative both share drama’s estrangement, but the former is a “literature of *radical* presence” while the latter distinguishes itself from the other two by its “*radical* continuance” (p. 87, italics added). If it all boils down to a matter of comparison, one wonders what specifically made Plato and Aristotle fix their eyes on the dramatic aspect of Greek drama and not its lyrical and narrative components, or what, on the contrary, caused the unnamed Chinese author(s) of the “Great Preface” to ignore poems in the *Shi jing* that are less lyrical than dramatic or narrative? Nor does Miner’s comparative poetics make clear how and why a peculiar brand of literary theory indeed evolved in a particular culture, even if we are willing to accept his thesis that all the world’s critical systems are genre-based. Questions are left unresolved as to why in thinking primarily about lyrics the Chinese critic preoccupied himself with expressivism and affectivism, intentionalism and didacticism, but not, say, with “presence and intensification” (p. 87), terms Miner employed to characterize the lyric, or why it is necessarily Greek drama that made philosopher-critics like Plato and Aristotle settle on mimesis as a theory of literature? Have we found an Aristotelian cause or merely an empirical condition?

These questions suggest that although Miner's generically organized comparison makes a notable stride in intercultural exchange, our mission is not over. In fact, it is still in its incipient stages. To say so is, however, not to diminish the trailblazing efforts of the likes of Yu and Miner, but to illuminate the enormous difficulties involved in their work, for if our goal is to get to the bottom of the questions that really concern us, we must not only thoroughly re-envision the ratio between form and history, theory and practice, but be prepared to walk out of our comfort zone and embrace the intractability of comparative inquiry.

Picking up from Miner's account, we might, for instance, move on to probe the nature of the language employed as a literary medium—in this case, classical Greek and classical Chinese—or examine the historical, political, and intellectual context within which a particular literary theory took shape. Conceivably, this would initiate a new chain of questions, theoretical as well as historical, that can be both intellectually liberating and practically stifling. Might we not, for instance, find an explanation for, say, Western emphasis on fictionality in the influence of mythology in ancient Greece? The dualistic view of the universe is right there, at the very heart of Homer's epics, with the gods intervening shamelessly in human affairs, without Plato evolving a theory of forms. Or might we not look to pre-Socratic philosophy for a historical explanation of mimesis underlying Plato's thought on poetic creativity, which Aristotle then took over and molded into a particularly vibrant strand of Western poetics? This is exactly the point at which the comparatist feels the need to complete a "specialist" turn in his work. The result of that turn is quite unpredictable. Like an open-ended scientific experiment, it is likely to make the comparatist so preoccupied with the specialized topic at hand that it becomes impracticable, not to say unreasonable, to insist on maintaining a comparative focus, for doing so would entail not just an equally rigorous and in-depth interrogation of whatever is on the other side of the

comparative divide, but an almost superhuman ability to answer the need for a constant referencing of each other among the things compared while also trying to restore a fair, flawless image of them prior to their becoming grist to the comparatist's mill. Thus, wherever intercultural comparison begins, the difficulty spike from one of the things compared to another cannot but be immense. In the absence of a universal literary history, how are we to compare in a productive and unprejudiced way without at some point making one of the things compared answerable to the other? How are we to tame, to adopt Benedict Anderson's translated phrase, "the specter of comparisons" without risking turning the whole enterprise into an arbitrary scrambling together of what else should have been mutually independent investigations?<sup>16</sup> More specifically, supposing that the connection between mimesis and mythology can be persuasively established or that it is possible to give an adequate account of how ancient Greek poetics evolved from pre-Socratic thought, are we then bound to explain, as we cross the line, the emergence of Chinese poetics in purely negative terms, i.e. by the lack or underdevelopment of mythology, logic, metaphysics etc. in ancient China? Or are we to turn the tables on Aristotle with an elaborate commentary on his naivety in detaching aesthetics from ethics and politics? And how are we in this comparative give-and-take to maintain scholarly objectivity and not lapse, unbeknownst to ourselves, into some vicious sort of the "clash of civilizations"? Questions like these remind us not only that there is always a centrifugal force in comparison, but also of the high cognitive, epistemological, moral, and political stakes of resisting it.

It is partly in view of the difficulties and stakes noted above, partly on account of a will to attain certainty in literary understanding, that I picked a relatively easy path in this limited and deliberately self-limiting comparative project, in the hope that these self-imposed limitations will somehow prove a more viable though much less travelled route for intercultural comparison than

“comparative poetics.” Given my relentless focus, as the reader will see, on the literary text and the interpretive problems that emerged in critical reception, there is perhaps a true sense in which this alternative approach merits the disciplinary title “comparative literature.”

Indeed the clues to a literary shift in intercultural comparison are already found in the last chapter of Miner’s “comparative poetics,” where reflecting on the problems of relativism, he introduced several feasible strategies for taming it. The second of these is dubbed “judicial,” which he illustrated with a personal example:

Chinese in particular have identified—in the absence of proof to the contrary—the speaker of a lyric with the biographical poet. On the judicial line being proposed, we should choose to suspend, to controvert our western hostility to the Chinese view. The choice is a difficult one for a westerner (as I shall soon admit), but less difficult in some contexts than others. Inquiry of our writers, especially lyric poets, will show that they assume they “put” themselves into their writing. By identifying our prejudice and reflecting on it, we understand, moreover, the basis for our easy synecdoche in saying “Mallarmé” or “Borges” when we mean their literary writings.

This encounter of mine with the Chinese principle is offered because the Chinese view has been a particularly difficult one for me to accept. My critical training engrained in me the principle of the “genetic fallacy.” My prejudice remains, although the passage of time has enabled me to suspend it to the point of acknowledging two things. One is that in Chinese lyrics the distinction between what I have termed the self-stylized poet and the speaker is often a useless one. The second is that counterparts may, after all, exist in a Wordsworth or a

Dickinson, and that in fact we assume the possibility in reading a Mallarmé a Pound, or a Neruda. We may also reflect that the displacement of the poet from the poem need not be taken to be a modern western discovery. The assumption is wholly natural to a mimetic tradition founded on drama, and yet it must be granted that we do not read Sappho or Alcaeus in the same way that we would experience a play by Sophocles in the theater. Using our prejudices requires knowing them. . . .<sup>17</sup>

I quote a bit liberally, because the issue Miner put his finger on here is precisely the entry point to what I have undertaken in the bulk of this dissertation, although it is quite clear that I entered the “judicial” phrase of comparison from its opposite end. In a sense, my reading of Wordsworth in Chapters 3 and 4 can be thought of as enacting in an academically appropriate way Miner’s concession here, something he was only willing to allow after years of intercultural literary study, and turning it into something worthy of greater public attention. Through two carefully-chosen case studies—the “Lines” poems in the first volume of the *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Excursion* now generally held in low repute—they serve to prove, it is my hope at least, that in the case of Wordsworth, a fixation on the poem to the exclusion of the poet as a real human with an active mind and a feeling heart and functioning in real historical time and space necessarily cripples literary understanding. For the general English reader, the critical force of my presentation would probably stem from the clash between the nontriviality of the literary example invoked and the unquestioned presumption of fictionality or aesthetic autonomy so deeply engrained in his or her mind.

But to take this to be all there is about this comparative performance is to blunt its polemical edge and diminish its potential for further development. To start with, in addition to

illuminating the westerner's interpretive prejudices, I also attempted to unveil the partiality of the other in this comparative relationship. From the example of Tao Yuanming (see the first half of Chapter 1 and Chapter 2), it is also clear that a blind adherence to historicity, the evident sway the biographical, political, and ideological have held over the literary in the Chinese critical tradition, also creates unwelcome and from the western point of view, oftentimes superfluous, problems of understanding, some of which persist to this day. To carry out this two-pronged critique, I have therefore chosen a model of comparison that can be best described as juxtapositional, one grounded in ideals of parity, friendship, and harmony, and which achieves its goal through non-intervention and mutual illumination. A sharp-eyed rhetorician will note the implicit shift of target audience in this procedure. This I do not deny; in fact, I am even inclined to regard, after some rigorous self-interrogation, this rhetorical wavering as a manifestation of my divided loyalty between the two literary cultures concerned. But if after all that is being said, my keen-sighted reader still prefers to think that the structural cleavage between the writers juxtaposed is proof that the project fails at the level of comparison, let me repeat with this reminder: namely at the level of comparison, what is at stake is neither the writers studied, nor their similarities and differences, nor my arrangement of the topics covered, but how we read as members of a cultural community, the interpretive assumptions we inevitably bring to bear on a literary text, and the necessity of exposing them.

This is, as is clear from this introduction, precisely what got me to embark on the current project. In the absence of a universal poetics, I travelled gingerly in the opening chapter. Diffident about the possibility of my ever attaining a vantage point from which to sort out once and for all the relationship between two immensely complex literary systems, I thought it safer and wiser to clear the ground first by setting the authority of the poetic text over against the

theories out there, most notably, the polarity of fact and fiction, that are often real sources of confusion. The success, if any, is limited, but the implications of that double-edged critique are heartening, for if it turns out, as Miner's concession attests, that the unity, or near-unity, between poet and speaker in the case of Wordsworth's writings is not an exception, but across the board, something widely accepted by "our writers," the Western reader will have to not only fundamentally rethink their inherited poetics, but reinvent it in accordance with actual practice. Part of what the Wordsworth chapters are set to accomplish is to suggest that this reinvention was already powerfully under way with Wordsworth in the English poetic tradition at least, with his fixation on feelings and the interplay of mind and the world, his concern for the times and society, and his insistence on providing pleasure and moral instruction through poetry. What is this, in an intercultural perspective, if not a prominent Western version of an "expressive-affective" poetics, one shared, consciously or subconsciously, by many of his contemporaries and whoever subsequently fell under their influence—in which group, to augment the short list Miner came up with, I would include *mutatis mutandis* pretty much every major English-language poet in the last two hundred years, but most certainly a Whitman, a Yeats, a Frost, a Stevens—which the likes of the named East-West comparatists, with their eyes fixed on whatever they consider theoretically essential to a literary culture, have largely chosen to ignore.

From an expanded historical standpoint, this affinity with an East Asian mode of lyricism at this moment of English literary history is not coincidental. As early as the early twentieth century, prominent scholars like A. O. Lovejoy had already discerned the connection, perfectly born out by the hyphenated phrase *le goût anglo-chinois*, between England's growing fascination in the eighteenth century with the gardens, architecture, and various other artistic achievements of China and the roughly simultaneous change of aesthetic taste toward naturalness and

irregularity.<sup>18</sup> The historical link proves all the more attractive to me when I recall how the demon of romanticism, in a version as filtered through the nationalist sentiment of Eastern Europe and the Slavic world, would circle back in the early twentieth to inspire the country that had once contributed to its European birth. But that is a whole new story, and like Dostoevsky who ended his world famous murder story on a note of false promise, I feel somewhat relieved to say “our present one is ended.”<sup>19</sup>

## Endnotes to the Introduction

<sup>1</sup> The translation is A. C. Graham's, with minor modifications, from his *Chuang-Tzū: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), pp. 76-77.

<sup>2</sup> Pauline Yu, "Alienation Effects: Comparative Literature and the Chinese Tradition," in *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, ed. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> *Prose*, 1:148.

<sup>4</sup> Compare, for example, the major Northern Song poet and critic Chen Shidao's 陳師道 (1053-1102) comment: "Yuanming does not compose poetry; he merely copies the exquisiteness in his chest" 淵明不為詩，寫其胸中之妙爾 (*Houshan shihua* ["Houshan's remarks on poetry"], cited in *huibian*, 1:42), with Matthew Arnold's remarks in the preface to his *Golden Treasury Selection of Wordsworth's Poems* (London, 1879) that Wordsworth "has no style," that Nature seems to "take the pen out of his hand, and to write for him with her own bare, sheer, penetrating power" (pp. xxii, xxiv).

<sup>5</sup> "Comparative Literature, at Last," *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), p. 244.

<sup>6</sup> "Why Compare?," *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2013), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> "Why Not Compare?," *PMLA* 126.3 (2011): 755, 756.

<sup>8</sup> For the great majority of immigrant intellectuals from the third world, the answer is probably no. Hear, for example, R. Radhakrisnan's verdict: "comparisons are never neutral: they are inevitably tendentious, didactic, competitive, and prescriptive. Behind the seeming generosity of comparison, there always lurks the aggression of a thesis. Am I guilty here of a hasty, universal condemnation of comparison as such? Clearly, not all projects of comparison are fated to be aggressive. My point is simply this: even when they are not overtly anthropological or colonialist in motivation, comparisons are never disinterested" (op. cit., p. 16).

<sup>9</sup> As a supplement to Yu's account of the prominence of fictionality in the modern critical discourse on poetry in the West, one might include this remark from Wellek and Warren's once influential *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942): "The center of literary art is obviously to be found in the traditional genres of the lyric, the epic, the drama. In all of them, the reference is to a world of fiction, of imagination. The statements in a novel, in a poem, or in a drama are not literally true; they are not logical propositions. . . . Even in the subjective lyric, the 'I' of the poet is a fictional, dramatic 'I'" (p. 15). For an example of the persistence and contemporary relevance of fictionality in Western poetics, consider this rather sophisticated explanation in Terry Eagleton's recent book *How to Read a Poem* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), where he defines a poem humorously as "a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end" (p. 25): "Fiction, then, does not mean in the first place 'factually false'. . . . The word 'fiction' is a set of rules for how we are to *apply* certain pieces of writing—rather as the rules of chess tell us not whether to the chess pieces are solid or hollow, but how we are to move them around. . . . Fiction, then, is the kind of place in which the moral holds sway over the empirical" (p. 35).

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), pp. 26, 37, 40, 43. The influence of such a poetics is certainly not confined to China, or the Chinese-speaking world, but extends to the rest of East Asia. Consider, for example, the opening of Ki no Tsurayuki's preface to the *Kokinshū* (ca. 910), a royal collection of classical Japanese poetry:

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The poetry of Japan has as its seed the human heart and flourishes in the countless leaves of words. Because human beings possess interests of so many kinds, it is in poetry that they given expression to the meditations of their hearts in terms of the sights appearing before their eyes and the sounds coming to their ears. Hearing the warbler sing among the plum blossoms and the frog that lives in the waters—is there any living thing not given to song? It is poetry that, without exertion, moves heaven and earth, stirs the feelings of gods and spirits invisible to the eye, softens the relations between men and women, calms the hearts of fierce warriors. (translated by Earl Miner, *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 1968], p. 18)

Earl Miner juxtaposed the two foundational prefaces in his quest for a comparative poetics that would encompass the literatures of the world, especially the Greek and east Asian varieties in several of his published writings, which we shall visit shortly.

<sup>11</sup> “Alienation Effects,” p. 173.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 47 (1973-1974), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Miner would repeat this verdict in *Comparative Poetics*, p. 8: “all other examples of poetics are founded not on drama, but on lyric. Western literature with its many familiar suppositions is a minority of one, the odd one out. It has no claim to be normative.”

<sup>14</sup> Earl Miner, “On the Genesis and Development of Literary Systems,” *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1978-Spring 1979), pp. 349, 350.

<sup>15</sup> Earl Miner, *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), pp. 232-3. Subsequent citations from this book will be parenthetically integrated into the text.

<sup>16</sup> Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998). Anderson’s main title is a translation of the phrase *de demonio de las comparaciones* that appears in a passage in Jose Rizal’s novel *Noli Me Tangere*, trans. Harold Augenbraum (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 54, which is crucial to Anderson’s formulation of a non-Eurocentric model of comparison.

<sup>17</sup> *Comparative Poetics*, pp. 233-34.

<sup>18</sup> A. O. Lovejoy, “The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 32.1 (Jan., 1933), pp. 1-20. For another example, in a parenthetical comment on a famous poem by Li Po, “The Waterfall on Lu Mountain,” the translator Arthur Cooper significantly traced this Chinese origin of Romanticism back to Chinese poetry: “this poem . . . seems to contain the whole spirit of later Chinese landscape painting, which in turn influenced Chinese gardens, and they in their turn our own English gardens and new attitude to nature from the end of the seventeenth century; the English watercolor school of the eighteenth century and the romantic movement itself in Europe” (*Li Po and Tu Fu* [New York: Penguin, 1973], p. 159).

<sup>19</sup> Fyodor Dostovesky, “Epilogue,” *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Jessie Coulson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), p. 465.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Fact or Fiction: That's the Question

In traditional Chinese literature, poetry plays a central role in the presentation of a human life. Although it is true that biographies of eminent literary figures in standard dynastic histories were and still are an important resource for anyone interested in life narratives, especially when little else is extant from the hand of the protagonist of such stories, the perfect form of autobiography in traditional China remains an author's "collected works," which, when read chronologically, became a revealing sequence of incidents, occasions, and changes experienced by the author. In the case of a poet, unsurprisingly, the majority of such works are poems that constitute the author's interior history.

Tao Yuanming, like many others before and after operating in the same literary tradition, is such a poet-autobiographer. His major contribution to traditional Chinese poetry is often said to be the creation of a lyricism that combines superb literary innovation and a powerful personal voice. Although he frequently employs a fictional mode, the vast majority of Tao's poetry takes as its main subject his lived experience that encompasses everything from his affections for the family, love of drinking, the misery of famines, to the joy of harvest. A brief look at the table of contents in a modern scholarly edition of Tao's works will illuminate the extent to which his poetry is involved with his personal history.<sup>1</sup> Statistics show that nearly half of Tao's extant poems carry their biographical birthmark. Of the fifty-nine poem titles, including three *fu* pieces, nine contain references to the time, and eight to the circumstance, of their composition.<sup>2</sup> Seventeen poems are prefaced by remarks that either document the compositional occasion or serve to explain the title. The overtly autobiographical character of Tao's works is a determining

factor in subsequent reading practices. Rather than using biographies in standard histories as a critical scaffolding raised beside the edifice of Tao's poetry to enrich our understanding, scholars and critics often attempt to bring poetic texts into accord with standard historiography, a method which while making useful hermeneutic contributions, is nevertheless willfully misguided. Sometimes political histories and life stories are grafted unto literary texts in such an arbitrary, ill-considered way that a straightforward, consistent appreciation becomes more problematic than necessary. To illustrate the centrality of historiography to traditional Chinese modes of reading and understanding, let us consider the historical controversies surrounding a particular poem. In navigating this rough terrain of hotly contested opinions, I hope to open up a constructive dialogue between traditional Chinese and certain prevailing Western reading practices, a dialogue in which participants from both sides of the cultural divide will consciously avoid all-too-easy discursive polarizations and commit themselves to less crude, more nuanced ways of handling differences.

The example that will claim our attention throughout the first half of this chapter is one with an apparently cumbersome title: "In the Seventh Month of the Year *Xinchou* [401], Returning to Jiangling from Leave, Travelling through Tukou at Night" (cited hereafter in the text as "Travelling through Tukou"). It was, as the title informs us, composed somewhere near Tukou, a town on the Yangtze River in modern Hubei in the seventh month of 401 when the poet held some appointment under the powerful governor Huan Xuan (369-404), who had by 399 gained control of the entire western part of the country. In the absence of reliable historical sources, it is unclear exactly how and why Tao Yuanming joined Huan Xuan's staff. Nor is the

author's mission for the trip certain, although the poem tempts us to believe that Tao might be bearing some sort of urgent message which kept him traveling at night.

### The Dating Method Controversy

The Five Ministers, or commentators, of the *Wen xuan* inserted an interesting note on the title of this poem that ignited a historiographic debate about Tao's dating method that continued well into the twentieth century. Liu Liang's note reads, "The poems Yuanming wrote during the Jin are all dated by reign titles, but those written during the [Liu] Song are merely designated by cyclical signs. Presumably, [Tao] considered it disgraceful to serve under two dynasties, and so changed [his dating method]."<sup>3</sup> Li Shan's note following the title of the poem identified the ultimate source of this argument. It turns out that Shen Yue was the first to suggest a connection between the shift in Tao's dating method and his political commitment. He opined toward the end of his biography for Tao Yuanming that "since his great-grandfather had been a high-level minister during the Jin period, [Tao] was ashamed to serve under a different dynasty. As the imperial accomplishments of the founding emperor [of the Jin, i.e. Liu Yu] became more pronounced, he was no longer willing to serve. All his writings are dated with the month and year. The works written before the Yixi reign period (405-418) are designated with Jin reign titles, while those written from the Yongchu reign period (420-422) onward are merely marked by cyclical signs."<sup>4</sup> Notably, Liu Liang's comment is not a faithful reprise of the historical source text. In restating an inherited position, the *Wen xuan* commentator ventured, unfortunately, to close an obvious temporal gap in Shen Yue's remark by using the umbrella term Jin as a substitute for the less inclusive "before the Yixi reign period." While the historian's account is uncomfortably vague about poems composed *during* the Yixi period, Liu Liang's note brings out

a neat correlation between dynastic change and the change in Tao's dating system, thereby obliquely consolidating a political reading of Tao's writings.

This political reading went essentially unchallenged until nearly five centuries later. Within the limits of extant textual evidence, Siyue, a Buddhist scholar who flourished in the late tenth to the early eleventh century, seems to be the first to cast doubt on what had hitherto been tacitly accepted. The Northern Song scholar's examination of Tao's poems that are designated by cyclical signs showed that nine of them belong to the period 400-416,

Among these is "In the Third Month of the Year *Yisi* (405), Passing through Qianxi, While on a Mission to the Capital, as Aid to the Jianwei General." During the autumn of this year, Tao served as the magistrate of Pengze. After only eighty-odd days in office, he returned his official seal and cord and composed 'Back Home Again.' Sixteen years later in 420, or the second year of the Yuanxi period under Emperor Gong's reign, the Jin was replaced by the [Liu] Song. How could it be that twenty years before the Jin was replaced by the Song, [Tao] was already ashamed to serve under two dynasties and dated his poems with cyclical signs, so as to set them apart? Furthermore, no poem was designated by Jin reign titles. The cyclical signs were, therefore, used simply to record an event at a particular moment. Later scholars gathered together and arranged them in a way not originally intended by Yuanming . . . <sup>5</sup>

The discrepancy Siyue noticed seems conclusive proof that there is no causal connection between dynastic change and Tao's use of cyclical signs in dating his poems. Poems marked by cyclical signs were mostly written before and during the *Yisi* reign period (405-418) whereas virtually no poem in Tao's extant corpus was designated by reign titles.<sup>6</sup> I say *seems* because

while Siyue dealt a lethal blow to the traditional position as formulated by Liu Liang, there is a way in which Shen Yue's claim could still be valid, since it refers not to Tao's poetry alone but encompasses his entire oeuvre. To consolidate Siyue's challenge, it is necessary, therefore, that we take into account the several prose pieces collected in the standard editions of Tao's writings. A quick count shows that only three of them are designated by cyclical signs, and of these only "An Elegy for Myself," generally recognized as a deathbed piece, was composed during the Liu-Song period.<sup>7</sup> As for reign titles, only two prose pieces contain a reference to a Jin title.<sup>8</sup> Now, all things considered, insofar as Tao used cyclical signs to date his writings before the dynastic shift, the dating method is useless as evidence of Tao's political stance. Shen Yue's claim seems valid only when we consider the fact, as Zhu Ziqing has astutely pointed out, that Tao never once used a Liu-Song reign title in his writings.<sup>9</sup>

Other considerations, however, will significantly reduce the weight we can give to this last observation. It is important to note, first of all, that the first two decades of the fifth century appears to be Tao's most creative and fruitful period as a writer, as most of his more or less datable pieces were composed within that time frame.<sup>10</sup> The poet's relatively high productivity before the founding of the Liu-Song era in 420 and the rare appearance of Jin reign titles may combine to discourage ideological over-readings of the absence of Liu-Song reign titles in Tao's oeuvre.<sup>11</sup> Also Tao's avoidance of a Liu-Song reign title in his "Elegy for Myself" cannot be unthinkingly regarded as a deliberate loyalist choice. That one of the two sacrificial pieces written during the earlier dynasty, "An Elegy for My Cousin Jingyuan," is designated by a cyclical sign rather than a reign title should give us second thoughts about what to make of a similar dating method in the later piece.<sup>12</sup>

So why did the controversy persist? The secret, without a doubt, lies in the tacit understanding shared by many traditional readers that rejecting Shen Yue's observation is tantamount to undercutting the argument for Tao's loyalty as a prominent trait of his moral character and thereby undermining his established status as a canonical poet.<sup>13</sup> After a long survey of pre-existing views regarding Tao's dating method, for instance, the Qing scholar Tao Shu (1779-1893) in his collected commentaries on Tao's writings dismissed the Ming critic Song Lian (1310-1381)—who maintained that Tao would not even deign to embed his loyal sentiment in the use of cyclical signs—as missing the whole point of the debate, which concerns not so much Tao's use of cyclical signs as Tao's loyalty as revealed through his avoidance of Liu-Song reign titles.<sup>14</sup>

In the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, this reluctance to keep the dating method out of all discussion of Tao's political stance does seem to come as a surprise. To cut a long story short, Tao Shu speculated that an edition of Tao's writings prepared by the poet himself could be in circulation during his lifetime, and that Shen Yue, whose dates (441-513) are close to Tao's, must have had access to the edition that faithfully reflects the author's editorial decisions. He further speculated that this authorial text, which was likely lost before the Song period, might have a chronologically arranged contents list of Tao's writings. The output before the Yixi reign period, so the explanation went, could simply have been grouped under Jin reign titles whereas the pieces from the Liu-Song period were only marked by cyclical signs.<sup>15</sup> Tao Shu's only ground for believing in the existence of an authorized text is a remark from Tao's "Biography of Master Five Willows," a thinly veiled autobiographical sketch featuring someone dubbed Master Five Willows who "often took delight in writing in which he widely revealed his aims." Although Tao Shu's explanation is perhaps a singular case of fanciful thinking, it might

not be immediately evident that his main error lies in his conflation of the historical Tao with his fictional persona in a prose piece. In treating fiction as personal history, intricately intertwined with each other though they are, the Qing scholar, ironically, was following directly in the footsteps of Shen Yue, who cited the prose piece in full in his *Song shu* biography as an instance of the author's self-representation. The point here is not to cast doubt on the autobiographical character of the "Master Five Willows"—although one could make a case that Tao's displaced self in the fictional piece might, more appropriately, be an authorial warning against an unflinchingly literalist interpretation—but rather to direct attention to the circularity of Tao Shu's argument: he used Shen Yue's literalist interpretation of Tao's writings in order to substantiate the historian's claim about the political implications of Tao's dating method. Tao Shu's unwillingness to allow even the possibility that Shen Yue could be mistaken is an indicator of historiography's dominating influence in the understanding of poetry in traditional China.

#### A Literalist Approach

The dating method controversy is only tangentially involved with the poem in question. A glimpse at the traditional commentaries that accrue to the poem per se will further our understanding of the importance of historicism to the traditional Chinese reader. "Travelling through Tukou" opens with the couplet:

閑居三十載 I have lived in idle retirement for thirty years;

遂與塵事冥 And have become confused with dusty affairs.

where the emphasis is placed on the author's retired life and his withdrawal from the sociopolitical world. While this much is clear and unambiguous, the temporal marker "thirty years" has proven particularly troublesome for many of Tao's conventional readers who attempt

to bring this piece into accord with the chronology of Tao's life and works derivable from established historical sources. Although their explanations differ markedly, a vast majority of them, as we will see, share the historian's relentlessness in their search for chronological certainty and precision. Discrepancies between this poem and Tao's age, whether based on historical sources or extrapolated from internal evidence, as becomes increasingly popular in the twentieth century, are often explained away for no other purpose, it seems, than that a literal, all-too-literal approach remains open.

Li Gonghuan was among the first to comment on the opening line. His note reads: "At the time, Yuanming was thirty-seven, during which time, excluding the year *kuisi* [393] when he served as Provincial Libationer and the period from *yiwei* [395] to *gengzi* [400] when he was Adjutant to the *Zhenjun* General, he lived at home for thirty years."<sup>16</sup> That Tao was thirty-seven at the time he composed this poem is ultimately based on Shen Yue, who claimed that the poet died at sixty-three in 427.<sup>17</sup> With this explanation, Li was able to connect Tao's life and work so seamlessly that the poem's opening line could almost be used to buttress the traditional version of Tao's age. Further considerations, however, will call it into question. The main difficulty with Li's calculations is the implication that Tao's thirty-year retirement started from his year of birth. Nevertheless, not all commentators were conscious that this could be a serious hermeneutical problem. Liang Qichao (1873-1929), for instance, argued, on the basis of his revamp of Tao's traditional chronology, that the poet was merely thirty when writing this poem.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of the process by which Liang arrived at this conclusion, his count presents greater difficulties than Li Gonghuan's in failing to take into account the period in which Tao served in the local government before 401. It is out of the need to surmount such difficulties that traditional readers

after Liang Qichao never seemed to stop churning out ever smarter interpretations and recalculations.

Without a doubt, all Tao Yuanming scholars and editors who care to explain the opening couplet work under the constraint of the author's dates, which, if Shen Yue's biography is accurate, provide too narrow a frame to accommodate a thirty-year retirement. Since there is no way to alter his age, it seems that the only strategy still available to literal-minded readers is to emend the received text. Following the traditional reading that the opening reference to Tao's retirement encompasses all his years before writing the poem minus the time of his service in the government, Gu Zhi speculated that "thirty years" should be emended to "twenty years" because it is easy to get confused with characters 二 "two" and 三 "three" due to graphic resemblance. In order to prove that this emendation is not a random whim of his own, but a familiar case in the fluid history of ancient texts, Gu went on to provide numerous instances, mostly from Confucian classics and dynastic histories, where such confusion did occur.<sup>19</sup> Notably, the main reason for Gu's emendation is not that a retirement lasting thirty years is too long to comfortably fit in a sixty-three-year life span, but that it is simply impossible, considering the result of Gu's research on Tao's dates, which cut the traditional version by eleven years. In arguing that Tao was twenty-seven when writing this poem, Gu renders himself vulnerable to the same hermeneutical difficulty which first arose with Li Gonghuan's explanation. Consequently, the likelihood of a textual corruption became an issue of marginal importance.

Recognizing the same need for a textual emendation, Lu Qinli, however, takes a different tack. Unlike Gu Zhi, whose emendation is required by the controversial chronology he had worked out for Tao Yuanming, Lu seemed to accept Tao's traditional dates in suggesting that the reading 三十 "thirty" is actually a corruption of 三二 "three [times] two." Lu's explanation

shrank the original reading to a far more manageable interval of six years between Tao's first public job as Provincial Libationer at age twenty-nine and his appointment under Huan Xuan starting from 400 when the poet had turned thirty-five.<sup>20</sup> This emendation has the dual advantage of seamlessly binding together Tao's poem and his life, as can be tentatively inferred from his works and standard biographies such as that by Shen Yue, and avoiding the hermeneutical question dogging the idea of a thirty-year retirement. Unlike Gu Zhi, however, Lu Qinli simply took his textual emendation for granted, and did not take time to locate instances in earlier texts to establish the credibility of his reading, as if it need no further justification than a coincidental agreement between the poetic text and the tentative biographical facts surrounding it. Furthermore, Lu's new reading finds no textual warrant from all extant editions of Tao's works. It is after all inadvisable for a textual scholar to emend a text with no other excuse than the need for a satisfactory explanation for a poetic line.

The same charge can be brought against Wang Guicun's suggestion that the reading 三十 "thirty" is a corruption of 己一 "already one"<sup>21</sup> because of graphic resemblance. Like Lu Qinli's emendation, it has the same strength of perfectly fitting the poem into a biographical context by drastically reducing the length of Tao's retirement. Wang looked for evidence internally. Drawing attention to "In the Fifth Month of the Year *Gengzi* [400], Returning from the Capital, Detained by Contrary Winds at Guilin," Wang speculated that Tao spent the next year or so at home before leaving for his job in the seventh month of 401. Although the existence of such internal evidence does allow Wang to advance her claims, they do not conclusively demonstrate the need for what appears to be a whimsical emendation.

None of the previous readings seems entirely satisfactory. Faced with the difficulty of arriving at a biographically unproblematic reading, latter-day scholars such as Deng Ansheng

became more willing to loosen their historicist grip on the received text. Deng suggests that we regard “thirty years” in this poem (and virtually the same phrase in the first “Returning to Dwell in My Farmstead” poem)<sup>22</sup> not as a biographically accurate marker of time, but as an indeterminate reference used to underline the length of Tao’s retirement. To consolidate his claim, Deng like Gu Zhi before him turned to influential texts from the past, including passages from *Shi jing* and *Shi ji*, and poems from close to Tao Yuanming’s era, for examples of the word “thirty” used as a conventional sign of quantity.<sup>23</sup> Although all the literary precedents Deng cited are not beyond a reasonable doubt, his general aim is clear and unmistakable: namely, to question the usefulness of the literalist approach for a proper understanding of this particular poem. In shelving the traditional debate about the biographical underpinnings of a verse, however, Deng may not be fully aware of the broader implications of his argument for traditional criticism. A modest stretch of his point could lead to invalidating altogether the biographical approach, an approach that after all, seems to be grounded in Tao’s own practice as a writer. The stakes, political, moral, and cultural, are huge. How could someone with a national reputation for ingenuousness and spontaneity speak of “thirty years” when the actual reference was six, or thirteen, or even twenty?

The result of this chronological survey of opinions and solutions is a double bind—we are either to accept capricious textual emendations or to say good riddance to the literalist approach—one in which we would have been eternally stuck had Yuan Xingpei not recently made a breakthrough in researching Tao’s traditional dates. Retrospectively, it is Tao’s age capped at sixty-three by Shen Yue that presents the main challenge to the biographical readings of Tao’s works. Yuan Xingpei was the first modern scholar to argue on irrefutable evidential grounds that Tao’s traditional dates should be extended by thirteen years. Since Tao’s age

impinges on our understanding of the opening line, it is worth our time to go over the essential findings of Yuan's study.

The claim that Tao Yuanming had a lifespan of seventy-six years was first made by the Southern Song scholar Zhang Ying (*jinshi* 1163) in his reading notes on Wu Renjie's (*jinshi* 1178) chronology of Tao's life.<sup>24</sup> The single piece of evidence Zhang relied on to refute Tao's traditional dates is the poem "An Excursion to Xie Creek." According to the preface and the first line of this poem, it is the product of an outing Tao took with several of his neighbors on the fifth day of the first month of the year *xinchou* (401) when the author had just turned fifty. This along with the certain knowledge that Tao died in 427 enabled Zhang to extend Tao's lifespan to seventy-six years. Curiously, something as clear and straightforward as this received little attention in the long history of Tao Yuanming scholarship.<sup>25</sup> Possible reasons for the obscurity of this discovery are not far to obtain. Apart from the fact that it conflicts with standard histories, it is also widely discredited or ignored on account of the variant readings in common Tao editions, which, if trustworthy, would immediately rule out Zhang's calculations.

Yuan Xingpei used this as a point of departure for his evidential research on Tao's dates. A chronological examination of the several extant Song editions of Tao's works shows that the earliest editions have *xinchou* and "fifty" in the main text while two of them record *xinyou* (421) and "five days" as variant readings.<sup>26</sup> Only two early editions—by Tang Han and Li Gonghuan respectively—differ from the set pattern of the earliest Song editions. In Tang Han's edition, we witness a crisscrossing of the main text readings and their variants in the earlier editions.<sup>27</sup> It reads *xinchou* and "five days" in the main text and relegates *xinyou* and "fifty" to the secondary position of textual variants. Li Gonghuan's annotated edition of Tao's works follows the main

text readings of Tang Han's edition, but dropped the variant readings. I reproduce Yuan Xingpei's chart below, in order to show the sophisticated textual evolution of this poem.<sup>28</sup>

“Su Shi Harmonizing the Rhymes of Tao”	<i>xinchou</i>	fifty
“Jigu ge edition”	<i>xinchou</i> (also - <i>you</i> )	fifty (also five “days”)
“Shaoxing edition”	<i>xinchou</i>	fifty
Zeng Ji's edition	<i>xinchou</i> (also - <i>you</i> )	fifty (also five “days”)
Tang Han's edition	<i>xinchou</i> (also - <i>you</i> )	five days (also “fifty”)
Li Gonghuan's edition	<i>xinchou</i>	five days

On the basis of this textual study, Yuan was then able to speculate that the textual corruption of this poem may have gone through the following four phases: (1) the earliest texts had *xinchou* and “fifty” only; (2) textual variants were produced when later editors began to emend the text in accordance with standard histories such as the *Song shu*; (3) those textual variants then exchanged their positions with the original (correct) readings; (4) the original readings finally vanished. Although we can never know the actual process of textual transmission with absolute certainty, the data he had scrupulously collected do seem to validate this conjectural history of textual corruption.<sup>29</sup> Notice, however, that Yuan's argument is based on the tacit assumption that the variant readings with which the poetic text is plagued must have been some editor's doing rather than due to graphic fluidity, since they look markedly different from each other. In other words, the reference to “fifty” is authentic, rather than something added by later editors, because, as Yuan reasoned quite convincingly, whereas it is difficult to imagine that an editor consciously dropped “five days” in favor of “fifty,” there is every reason for him to do the opposite, in order, for instance, to bring poetic texts into accord with received historical texts. Regardless of whether the version with “fifty” was intended by the author, its presence in several earliest

editions of Tao's works already justifies the attempt to date the poem to the first days of 401 when the author had just turned fifty.<sup>30</sup>

Admittedly, Yuan's thorough investigation of Tao's birth date is more complicated than there is space here to summarize—after this refreshing study of variant readings, Yuan went on to test his discovery against the rest of Tao's writings, refuting counterclaims whenever necessary to demonstrate how earlier scholars and editors could have grossly misread Tao's writings in using them as proof for their own argument—but, thanks to him, the detour we just took is already enough for us to arrive at a biographically unproblematic understanding of a “thirty-year” residence at home. Composed just two months later than “An Excursion to Xie Creek,” “Travelling through Tukou” should appear under the fiftieth year in Tao's chronology. With an extended lifespan, there is no trouble that the poet could literally refer to a thirty-year retirement without all the rescue efforts of modern editors. In this regard, Yuan Xingpei's endorsement of Gu Zhi's emendation after a critical survey of all previous opinions on the opening couplet becomes all the more surprising:

“Thirty” is a corruption of “Twenty.” That Yuanming became Libationer of Jiangzhou when he was “near the year of establishing oneself,”<sup>31</sup> and resigned and returned soon after, is tied to his twenty-ninth year. At age forty-seven, [Tao] served under Huan Xuan in Jingzhou in the west. From age twenty-nine to forty-seven, he lived in retirement for nineteen years, which period is rounded off to twenty.<sup>32</sup>

This final judgment from a scrupulous textual scholar is a revealing indicator of the vigor and persistence in modern times of the literalist approach in traditional Tao criticism. From our point of view, it clearly violates one of the key principles Yuan laid down in the beginning for his

comprehensive chronological study of Tao's life and works. His Principle #3 stipulates that one may at times collate and organize textual material, including those Song editions on which Yuan's textual research is primarily based, "but all whimsical emendations are absolutely forbidden."<sup>33</sup> In the case of Yuan Xingpei, who certainly managed to maintain methodological consistency in his dealings with printed texts, we probably should not simply dismiss his emendation as an act of negligence. Rather, the irony of Yuan's editorial decision is such that he accepted with no apparent difficulty a numerical inaccuracy that allows the rounding off of nineteen to twenty, but, as it seems, did not even consider the more natural, noninterfering option that "thirty years" could be just such an approximate reference to the period of time Tao had spent at home before he wrote the poem at age fifty. What prevents him from considering this option is perhaps his literalist assumption, on the one hand, that by "thirty years" Tao must have referred to an uninterrupted period prior to his composing the poem, and his unwillingness, on the other, to brook too much of a discrepancy between art and life.<sup>34</sup> Here is an interesting case where a historian's claim held for many centuries after Tao's time as an unshakeable fact was powerfully refuted by someone who in many respects outdid many of his literally minded predecessors with his rigorous adherence to fact and history.

### A Subjective Construct

Having observed the problems that attend a too strict adherence to fact and history in traditional interpretations of Tao's writings, we are prepared to consider the need to restore the primacy of the literary text vis-à-vis history in reading practices while rethinking the connections and discrepancies between life and writing, especially the inevitable changes to life as it makes

its way into the realm of writing. To do that, let's resume our inquiry into the heart of  
 "Travelling through Tukou."<sup>35</sup>

閑居三十載	I have lived in idle retirement for thirty years,
遂與塵事冥	And have become confused with dusty affairs.
詩書敦宿好	<i>Songs and Documents</i> added to my old delight, <sup>36</sup>
林園無俗情	The garden and woods harbored no worldly concerns.
如何捨此去	How is it that I leave all these behind,
遙遙至西荊	To go so far away to Jingzhou in the west?
叩枻新秋月 <sup>37</sup>	Dipping oars under a new autumn moon,
臨流別友生	At the current's edge I said farewell to friends.
涼風起將夕	A cool wind arises as evening comes on,
夜景湛虛明	The night scene is one of bright transparency.
昭昭天宇闊	Luminous is the spreading vault of the heavens,
晶晶川上平	Resplendent the level surface of the stream.
懷役不遑寐	Mindful of my mission, I have no time for sleep,
中宵尚孤征	In the middle of the night I still journey on alone.
商歌非吾事	A song to the note <i>shang</i> is no affair of mine, <sup>38</sup>
依依在耦耕	What I longingly crave for is to "plow in pairs." <sup>39</sup>
投冠旋舊墟	Casting away my cap to return to my old village,
不為好爵縈 <sup>40</sup>	I will not be entangled in a love of rank.
養真衡茅下	I will cultivate genuineness in a thatched hut, <sup>41</sup>

庶以善自名            In hopes of obtaining a good name for myself.<sup>42</sup>

A historicist reading of the poem must begin with an examination of Tao's elaborate title: "In the Seventh Month of the Year *Xinchou* [401], Returning to Jiangling from Leave, Travelling through Tukou at Night." While it plainly bears out the occasional character of the poem, Tao's title begs more questions than it answers. Despite the author's generosity in filling us in on the time (a night in the seventh month of 401), the location (now in Tukou, halfway in his journey from his hometown Xunyang to Jiangling), and the circumstance (Tao was on leave before returning to take office again),<sup>43</sup> it is dubious whether the poet might not in fact want to conceal, rather than reveal, the poem's historical grounding. It beckons the historicist reader to ask, for example, what forced Tao to interrupt his official service in Jiangling before then and to return to his post now (a question like that is not absurd, considering that on another occasion, he spoke at length about how he was dissatisfied with his job and what his immediate excuse for resigning was),<sup>44</sup> on whose staff he was, what his mission was for the trip. Without a definite answer to such questions, we are unable to situate the poem in its particular historical moment. Thanks to Tao's earlier readers, we now know that the poet was serving under the powerful warlord Huan Xuan, who took over the governorship first of Jiangzhou, where Tao resided, in 398 and then of Jingzhou the following year after a series of suspect military maneuvers. Beyond that, little can be said with certainty. However, the bit of history we have amassed is enough to arouse our interest in the ambivalence inscribed in the poem's title: why does the poem situate itself so concretely in its title, and yet in the main text refrain from giving any clue about the social world? Why is it so difficult to reconstruct a tangible historical context for the poem? Such questions will have a direct bearing on our inquiry into the nature of autobiographical poetry vis-à-vis fact and history.

The very literal understanding of the opening line we have previously reached proves especially useful for such an inquiry. Although, according to Yuan Xingpei's chronology, Tao's extended lifespan can easily accommodate a thirty-year retirement, we must still be on our guard against taking the opening line too literally. In fact, if we temporarily set aside the whimsical emendations of "thirty" as suggested by many modern editors, it is clear that the autobiographical data as revealed through the poem's opening lines does not tally with Tao's personal history. First, an examination of this poem in connection with the two immediately preceding pieces in the received edition of Tao's works, titled "In the Fifth Month of the Year *gengzi* [400], Returning from the Capital, Detained by Contrary Winds at Guilin," shows clearly that the author's eremitic withdrawal must have ended the previous year at the latest. As their title informs us, in much the same way as "Travelling through Tukou," they were composed during the author's journey home from the capital Jiankang (modern Nanjing) in the east. Presumably, at this point Tao was already serving under Huan Xuan, although it is unclear when this service began, and in taking the trip to the capital, he might have carried out an important mission. Further, external sources would also allow us to entertain the possibility of an intentional inaccuracy. For instance, Tao's biography in the *Song shu* says, "his parent was old and his family was stricken by poverty, so he arose to become Provincial Libationer. Unable to bear administrative duties, he resigned the job and returned home several days later."<sup>45</sup> This is often read in conjunction with the first few lines of Poem #19 in the "Drinking Wine" series, which read:

疇昔苦長飢	In the past I was afflicted by continual hunger,
投耒去學仕	I cast away the plow to learn [the ways of] officialdom.
將養不得節	To support [my family] I lacked proper means,

凍餒固纏己            Cold and hunger constantly kept me in bondage.

是時向立年            At that time I was approaching the age of thirty,<sup>46</sup>

志意多所恥            In my mind and heart was a deep sense of shame.<sup>47</sup>

Because the wording and content of these lines are sufficiently close to the language of the *Song shu* biography, there is every reason to regard them as referencing the same event in the author's life. Interlinking the two texts then will allow us to claim that Tao's taking up (and quitting) of this—probably his first—appointment was in the late twenties (probably when he was 29 years of age).

Indeed, we could go further than pointing out discrepancies in numbers. The second couplet, which continues the thematic concerns of the first, takes the further step of highlighting Tao's pleasures available at home. In Tao's nostalgic look at his earlier life, this long retirement forms one temporal unit, an idyllically happy period defined by his relationship to books (“*Songs and Documents*”) and nature (“garden and woods”). To what extent do these opening reminiscences reflect the author's personal history? In the context of his recollections in other poems, there seems no reason to distrust Tao's profession of an early love for the legacy of Confucian classics and an eremitic lifestyle. However, it will be a gross error to think that delight in books and nature is all there was. The “Drinking Wine” poem cited above, together with several other of Tao's writings, such as his “Elegy for Myself,” suggests otherwise. So does Yan Yanzhi's (384-456) famous “Funeral Elegy for the Summoned Scholar Jingjie,” the only extant piece of historical (and great aesthetic) value by a contemporary author who was on familiar terms with the later Tao. There, in a style akin to “Elegy for Myself,” Yan expanded on Tao's living condition thus: “In youth he suffered poverty and sickness. His house was without men- or women-servants. He could not fulfill the tasks of drawing water and pounding grain, nor had any

supply of goosefoot or beans. His mother was old and his sons were young. He applied himself to her support and toiled for their wants.”<sup>48</sup>

All these discrepancies point to the common pitfalls of a literalist understanding of autobiographical poetry and the necessity to distinguish it from history. They remind us that a poetry that is firmly rooted in the author’s life is not so much an objective account as a subjective construct, the interpretation of which demands a different methodology as is often applied to the study of historical texts. Whereas history operates mainly on the basis of a mimetic relationship with factual reality, we must conceive of poetry as having a logic of its own, because it operates on a plane that frequently intersects but does not necessarily coincide with that of history. For this reason, the discrepancies found between the factual content of a literary text and actual historical circumstances need not interfere with our appreciation of the former.

“Travelling through Tukou” will illustrate this nicely. The conclusion we have arrived at is that the first two couplets of this poem, when examined against the backdrop of Tao’s personal history, turn out to be a fairly selective recall of his earlier life as a hermit-scholar. While this might appear to be a major defect with grave moral consequences, if we view the poem primarily as a historical document, the problem evaporates when we render to poetry what we owe it by directing our gaze inward. In their immediate context, the incongruities previously noted are not only no flaw, but actually integral to the poem’s overall intentional structure. Suppose the author held fast to biographical accuracy in the beginning by describing the real circumstances of his youth and tracing the vicissitudes of his public career in the manner of a historian, the emotional power of the third couplet—“How is it that I leave these behind, / To go so far away to Jingzhou in the west?,” ostensibly a question Tao put to himself to convey a sense of mild surprise and deep regret at his decision to embark on a journey that took him away from home—would be

virtually nil. In fact, this couplet can only achieve its effect when juxtaposed with the constructed image of a happy retirement at home, a kind of life that features only the pleasure of reading and the unworldly enjoyment of nature. In building up this contrast between then and now, between the gratifying seclusion of the past and the unpleasant displacement of the present, the third couplet actually effects a powerful emotional turn.

Not until the fourth couplet does the poem depart from the idealized world of memory to confront the here and now. In a way, the middle section (lines 7-14) represents the return of the real as adumbrated in the poem's title. Its very existence in a poem by Tao Yuanming testifies to a prevailing view of traditional Chinese literati poetry as a record of lived experience which the author presents as occurring at that very moment. Contrary to this received opinion, it is especially noteworthy that not even at the poem's center, where the focus is the author's real historical experience, does the poet ever allow a glimpse of the external circumstances that might excite interest of a biographical or historical nature. Even in the midst of the real, Tao is still very much inclined toward a generalized diction made up of "oars" and an "autumn moon," water and "wind," "evening" and "night," the resplendent "vault of the heavens" and the shining surface of the "stream." None of these terms is necessarily tied to the very night in the seventh month of 401 or to the particular town named Tukou on the Yangtze in a central province of modern China. Tao's vocabulary is so general that one wonders if it may not be contradicting the intent of the text to fantasize excessively about an external context. Further, the circumstances as described in these lines, strictly speaking, are not confined to a particular moment. Passage of time is suggested by the direct reference to the maneuvering of a boat, by the mention in passing of a valedictory scene, by the abrupt lexical shift from "evening" to "night," and finally by descriptions of the moment Tao was "journeying on alone," but the demand of the poem's

overarching intentional structure is such that these historically distinct moments all relinquish their original historical specificity and immerse themselves in the experiential flow of the poem's central passage.

The last three couplets of the poem (lines 15-20) revert to the meditative mode used in the opening section. The nostalgic tone that permeates the entire opening section regains strength in the concluding lines. Emphasis is again placed on the author's subjective experience rather than external appearance. It is only in these final lines that Tao seems to proceed in the direction of fulfilling the expectations the title generates of the poem's historical context. "A song to the note *shang*" (line 15), the means by which Ning Qi brought himself to the notice of Duke Huan of Qi, makes explicit, though mediated through a literary allusion, the political purpose of the trip. This oblique reference to Tao's activity in a public sphere is further confirmed by the mention of the official "cap" and political "rank" in the next couplet. Ironically, none of these internal references, muted though they are, is greeted with affirmation. In fact, never once does the poet drop a hint about his public involvement without immediately qualifying or deconstructing it. Tao implies that any attempt to court notice from a ruler, à la Ning Qi, is *not* his business. He would "cast away" the official cap, an emblem of one's participation in politics, and would *not* allow himself to be seduced by the promise of rank and position. These insistent signals of his unwillingness to function in the public realm are inversely strengthened by equally insistent appeals to the idealized life of a hermit-scholar. Tao would "plow in pairs," that is, follow the example of those ancient recluse-farmers as recorded in *Lun yu*, would "go back to his old village," and "cultivate genuineness" in a modest hut, that is, foster his natural self even if this means to suffer poverty and hardship.

In this dynamic interplay of affirmations and negations we locate the primary interest of the poem. "Travelling through Tukou" is as much about the author's repeated assertions of an eremitic ideal as about his insistent denials of a historical situation he felt powerless, at least for the moment, to resist. The primary poetic action is certainly the reiteration of the poet's affirmative vision, the assertion of his private will against an unaccommodating public reality. Although the poem concludes with a triumph of his feelings, it is more than the record of a victory. A consideration of the poem's psychological underpinning shows that it is, ironically, Tao's powerlessness to realize his internal vision that gives power to his uttered feelings. The poem enacts a conflict whose obverse is Tao's quietist, nature-loving character and whose reverse is his sociopolitical aspirations and obligations. It is perhaps the very conflict that has struck a sympathetic chord in his audience throughout the ages.

Probing thus far into the poem's emotional core will introduce a fresh perspective from which to consider the question we have brought up about the ambivalence of Tao's title. On the one hand, we are still unsure about Tao's authorial intention with regard to the title, whether he wished to preempt or initiate inquiries into the poem's circumstantial basis. Nor are we clear about what to make of its length and particularity, whether to view it as an inducement or a deterrent to historicist readings. On the other hand, this uncertainty does not prevent us from achieving an adequate understanding of the poem's main subject, which is simultaneously Tao's reluctance to take on his public responsibility and his longing for the simple life of a recluse-farmer and all the comforts of home. No matter what it is that the poet withheld from us and for whatever reasons, we can at least all agree that the title functions as a guarantee of the autobiographical mode, ensuring that the events narrated and the feelings expressed in the ensuing poem are based in history and not merely a figment of the imagination.

Accordingly, a historicist approach is germane to poems such as “Travelling through Tukou,” so long as the reader understands that history plays only a supportive role in understanding literature. To try to answer questions such as “what caused Tao to request a leave during his government service,” “what was his exact job in Jiangling,” “why was he willing to work for someone like Huan Xuan, whose subsequent quest for political power certainly accelerated the demise of the Eastern Jin,” would no doubt enable the reader to situate Tao’s poem in its historical moment and enrich their understanding of the thoughts, attitudes, emotions that are expressed in the poem. On rare occasions, we can even stand the historicist approach on its own head, using it, as I have done, to shed light on the disparity between autobiographical poetry and a background history made up of accidents, occasions, and changes, to reveal how the former grows from the latter in the hand of a creative artist. Despite these uses, it is equally obvious that not knowing this context in any detail would not significantly alter our understanding of the psychological drama that unfolds in such texts. It is in this sense that fact and history are only tangentially involved with autobiographical poetry whose real subject is, as evidenced by “Travelling through Tukou,” the writer’s inner disposition and desire.

### The Clamor of Fiction

If traditional Chinese readers go too frequently to the extreme of a historicism that could potentially violate poetry’s autonomous status and intentional structure, modern Western readers seem to situate themselves too complacently on the nonfactual end of the interpretive spectrum. Hence is born a dichotomizing discourse that still dominates to a large extent China-West comparative literary studies today. We have already met several notable originators of this argument in the “Introduction.” Let us now consider another. Comparing two famous short lyrics

from two distinct literary traditions, one “Writing of what he felt, travelling at night” 旅夜書懷 by the eighth-century Chinese poet Du Fu, the other “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1802” by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth more than a thousand years later, Stephen Owen observed,

We have two different ways of reading poetry. For the reader of Wordsworth, all is metaphor and fiction; the referential instructions to regard place and moment are an embarrassment, an unwanted intrusion. Literary language is supposed to be fundamentally different from the language of diary and empirical observation: its words mean Something Else, something hidden, richer, infinitely more satisfying.

In Tu Fu’s poem, the assumptions through which significance grows are different, and potent consequences follow from those initial differences, which at first seem so slight. The differences shape two fiercely distinct concepts of the nature of literature and its place in the human and natural universe. For Tu Fu’s reader the poem is not a fiction: it is a unique, factual account of an experience in historical time, a human consciousness encountering, interpreting, and responding to the world. And in his own turn the reader, at some later historical moment, encounters, interprets, and responds to the poem.<sup>49</sup>

Notably, Owen’s explicit concern is not so much the “nature of literature and its place in the human and natural universe” as how literature is conceived in two “fiercely distinct” traditions. Emphasis is placed on readers, on their interpretive assumptions and reading habits rather than on the inherent qualities of the literature at their disposal. The difference that as Owen saw it, keeps the understanding of Wordsworth’s audience separate from that of Du Fu’s is essentially one between the polarizations of fact and fiction, between the language of “diary and empirical

observation” and that of metaphor.<sup>50</sup> Whereas the latter regards the literal surface as a veil to a subtext, an obstacle to something “richer, and infinitely more satisfying,” the former approaches literature in a very matter-of-fact way, perhaps naively so in that this reader assumes the literal surface to be all there is. In contrasting “two different ways of reading,” Owen is actually positing certain constants amid a great flux of reading methods and practices that are often distinct from, sometimes even run counter to, each other in different ages and schools, and thus cannot but run into problems of one kind or another.

While it is always good to remain skeptical about sweeping generalizations of any sort, particularly those that might harden into cultural stereotypes, it bears reminding that there is an element of truth in the grand contrast set up in the above quote. While it is always possible to question the validity of the claim that historicism is *the* major approach to the study of literature in traditional China—gosh, how much weight the italic carries, and how easily it can lead to artillery exchanges in certain quarters of the academic battlefield,<sup>51</sup> there is little doubt that that the majority of Tao’s readers cited earlier—note that Tao’s poem, which records “what he felt, travelling at night,” bears a striking resemblance to Du Fu’s piece in its occasion and genesis—did embrace a historicist method by tacitly conflating Tao’s life and writing. Perhaps we need go no farther than revisiting the convoluted history of scholarly engagement with Tao’s writings in modern times to appreciate the partial soundness of the Chinese half of Owen’s account. By comparison, however, his emphasis on the metaphorical character of literature as practiced in the West is more blatantly reductive and more susceptible to dispute. It is true that something akin to fictionality is a crucial component of the Western critical legacy. The distinction between poetry and history was established as early as Aristotle, who, in opposition to Plato, was unequivocal in

elevating the poet to the realm of the ideal: “it is not the function of the poet,” in this Aristotelian view,

to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. . . . The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity.<sup>52</sup>

Against this cultural background, it is no surprise that Owen accepted with a touch of smug self-complacency Wellek and Warren’s judgment that “even in the subjective lyric, the ‘I’ of the poet is a fictional, dramatic ‘I.’”<sup>53</sup> But this is mistaking a half-truth for the whole.

A second look at Wordsworth’s sonnet “Composed on Westminster Bridge” will bring to light the intricacies of the issue at stake. When Cleanth Brooks approached the poem in the mid-1940s, he became an exemplary voice for what Owen characterized as the Western mode of reading. Taking the cue from Donald Stauffer’s criticism that his interpretation of the sonnet contradicts Wordsworth’s autobiographical account in *The Prelude*, Brooks generalized the issue broadly as one pertaining to the relation of criticism to biography. For Stauffer, the question is the incommensurability between Brooks’ reading, with an emphasis on the paradoxical representation of Wordsworth’s sudden awakening to the beauty of the city, and the empirical fact as corroborated by Wordsworth’s major poem that only late and gradually, not until after he was in a true sense poetically mature, could Wordsworth develop an appreciation for the natural dimension of something that is at its root a human construct. In self-defense, Brooks insisted—I

suspect anyone of kindred methodological persuasions would do likewise—that literary criticism and biographical studies are two sharply distinguishable disciplines, each having its own object of knowledge and method of inquiry, like two planetary orbits that occasionally intersect and yet never coalesce. “Is the experience of ‘On Westminster Bridge,’” Brooks countered, “simply a morning out of Wordsworth’s life, a morning to be fitted neatly into his biography? Or, is the experience of ‘On Westminster Bridge’ to be considered *as a poem*—the dramatization of an experience (real or imagined, or with elements of both) in which the poet may make what use he cares to of contrast, surprise—even shock?” The key to hermeneutic success for Brooks is that one does not “confound the protagonist of the poem with the poet and the experience of the poem as an aesthetic structure, with the author’s personal experience.”<sup>54</sup> How powerfully these assertions resonate with Owen’s contention that “it does not matter whether Wordsworth saw the scene, vaguely remembered it, or constructed it from his imagination”!<sup>55</sup>

Clearly, the premise of fictionality is an effective defense against historicist criticism, but this also presumes an incongruity between Wordsworth’s life and writing that could potentially undercut the poem’s authority by removing its grounding in the author’s personal history and resurrect the morally sensitive issue of authenticity. Before we weigh the benefits of one approach against those of the other, we might want to inquire first whether this (Romantic? modern? bourgeois?) cult of imagination is necessary to an apology for Wordsworth’s sonnet? Do we need to detach it from its historical context in order to argue that it is good? Does Wordsworth’s account of his growth in *The Prelude* really contradict the flash of insight achieved in the sonnet?

A quick return to the longer poem shows that Wordsworth was not incapable at an early age of a momentary vision in which the antithesis between nature and the urban world is broken

down. For instance, Book 7, which contains a sequence of snapshots of Wordsworth's life in London, mostly disquieting visions of chaos and "blank confusion," rises to a pitch in rare moments of high intensity when the poet could celebrate the city, not as he found it in the sonnet to be lying still in the full splendor of the dawn, but as it was steeped in "the peace / Of night . . . the solemnity"

Of Nature's intermediate hours of rest  
 When the great tide of human life stands still,  
 The business of the day to come unborn,  
 Of that gone by locked up as in the grave;  
 The calmness, beauty, of the spectacle,  
 Sky, stillness, moonshine, empty streets, and sounds  
 Unfrequent as in deserts; (7.628-36)<sup>56</sup>

Displacement of time aside, the two episodes resonate with each other, not only thematically, in envisioning a naturalized city and expressing similar enjoyment of calm and tranquility, a staple source of delight for Wordsworth throughout the epic, but also stylistically, in reinforcing an easeful cadence through the use of concatenation. It is hard to say, considering the intricate temporal structure of Wordsworth's major poem, whether such transitory responses belong to the period when the poet actually lived in London around 1795 or nearly a decade later when composition of *The Prelude* was fully underway. His historical consciousness so impressively rendered by the overlay and interpenetration of images on a smooth water surface (6.246-64) defies rigid stratification. But even if we settle on the later date, given its chronological proximity to the experience on Westminster Bridge, the whole matter of the sonnet's biographical grounding could be put to rest. Furthermore, there is no reason to presume

Wordsworth's development as a poet to be a continuous process of revelation. Evidently, *The Prelude*, a self-referential poem constructed on the alternating patterns of expectation, frustration, and restoration would not support such a view.

These intertextual connections indicate that to safeguard a text characterized by paradox,<sup>57</sup> which Brooks singled out as a fundamental structural principle of all good poetry, it is not logically necessary to press so far as to disconnect it from and repudiate the relevance of the historical situation in which it is undoubtedly based. Interestingly, by way of introduction, Owen "imagined," or rather invited the reader to imagine, that Wordsworth stands on Westminster Bridge on September 3, 1803 when reciting the poem. Although further textual evidence suggests that the exact circumstances surrounding the sonnet's composition may forever remain something of a mystery, Owen's seems precisely the response the poetic text would generate from the reader by precisely locating the time and place in the title. For Wordsworth's editors and biographers, the poem's date might be a troubling question. There is not only uncertainty about the year—for almost thirty years since its first public appearance in 1807, the poem was dated to 1803, yet in the corresponding Fenwick note, Wordsworth attributed it to 1802, adding further the colorful detail that the composition took place "on the roof of a coach" during the journey to France—but, given his sister's journal entry, which chronicles a markedly similar experience of the sunlit city during the outward journey two months earlier, "September" also becomes suspect.<sup>58</sup> These complications notwithstanding, the available data, which might be explained in terms of Wordsworth's failing memory or our greater faith in Dorothy's diary, do not seem to warrant the standpoint from which it makes no difference whether to view the poem as genetically bound to empirical reality or as merely a mental construct with no historical basis. Verily, for the general reader, it is of no consequence whatsoever whether that moment of

aesthetic pleasure Wordsworth experienced as a person and then registered in a work of art is appropriately ascribed to July or September of 1802 or a year later. It seems, however, to require an element of willful perversity in the reader to ignore simultaneously the various paratextual cues left by the author and the poem's various linguistic elements that necessarily contribute to a sense of the poem's experiential authenticity.

### The Natural Wordsworth

In retrospect, Owen made a daring choice in juxtaposing Du Fu and Wordsworth. The contrast would have been considerably easier and more persuasive, had he picked a different English poet, William Blake for instance, if English Romanticism is the desirable frame. But scholarly adventurousness is one thing; validity and soundness is another. Where, the skeptical reader will ask, lies the difference between the two short lyrics? Certainly the difference is not in the nature of the poem. A bilingual reader might approach one poem precisely the way he or she might the other without misunderstanding either. "Old maps and engravings" and "shipping records," the exact constituents of the London skyline and their visibility from Westminster Bridge, are as extraneous to an understanding of Wordsworth's sonnet as the date of composition, the poet's itinerary, and his anchorage point are to Du Fu's poem. On the other hand, pointing one's finger at culturally specific rules of reading seems no more satisfactory an answer, for complications immediately arise when such rules are placed under scrutiny. Is there one consistent body of rules and principles, the fluctuations of criticism notwithstanding? Can it be right to talk about rules without thinking at the same time about their makers and practitioners? When certain assumptions, say the myth of fiction, are found in certain cases to be merely

inherited and exert nothing other than an obfuscating force against clear understanding, should we hold them nonetheless?

Far less confident than Owen about the dichotomy between fact and fiction or the extent to which one can generalize about culturally specific rules of reading, I confine the following discussion to Wordsworth alone and a controversial development in contemporary criticism of his writings. My main concern is not just to challenge a problematic claim with a formidable counterexample, and to caution against the dangers and unwelcome ramifications of dichotomizing paradigms in intercultural exchanges, but more importantly, to search for a middle ground where apparently unrelated authors and texts can be brought into a fruitful conversation.

It seems to me that a large part of Wordsworth's genius finds expression in his nonfictional writings. Without attempting to be exhaustive, which is almost always an impossibility in human matters, I put forth in support of the claim three basic considerations. Without a doubt, none of these is surprisingly new to students of English Romanticism, but the "film of familiarity," to adopt Coleridge's term, in which each is enveloped, has not yet blunted their controversial edge. For this reason alone, if not for their significance in an intercultural perspective, they are still worth documentation at some length.

First, Wordsworth is a major poet-autobiographer in the English tradition. M. H. Abrams' cautionary remark forty years ago about the "radical novelty" of *The Prelude* when it was first completed still rings true in our era of constant cultural interaction and literary experimentation.<sup>59</sup> Although historical inaccuracies abound in such a life-epic, it remains one of the earliest and perhaps still rare instances in Western literary history that a poet writes so much of his lived experience into his poetic work, and that so much of his posthumous reputation depends on this work. One notable sign of Wordsworth's originality as an autobiographer is his

own confession to George Beaumont on 1 May 1805 that the poem on his own life soon to be completed was “a thing unprecedented in literary history.”<sup>60</sup> In Wordsworth’s uneasiness about the length and subject matter of his autobiographical poem, in his determination to let it stay in manuscript form until the completion of *The Recluse*, which is projected to be the first genuine philosophical poem in the English language according to his plan made with Coleridge’s assistance, a keen-eyed reader like Owen will perhaps still detect signs of “a tradition two millennia in the making,”<sup>61</sup> an eternally binding force for anyone working within its sacred precincts. Granted that Wordsworth’s implicit diffidence might be indication of the weight of custom and tradition, there is also no denying that his knowledge of traditional poetics is heavily mediated and flawed. Take his famous “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* for example. Not only did Wordsworth misquote Aristotle as saying that “[p]oetry is the most philosophical of all writing” instead of “more philosophical than history,” but *pace* Aristotle, also elevated character above action: “the feelings therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.”

Second, very early on in his career, Wordsworth showed a distinct predilection for representation of the real and natural in contradistinction to the surreal and supernatural. The division of labor between himself and Coleridge for the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* seems to be a practical consequence of this predilection. Whereas Coleridge set for himself the task of fabricating a human interest for the supernatural, Wordsworth worked on enhancing the reader’s feelings for “things of every day,” directing attention to the “loveliness and wonders of the world before us.”<sup>62</sup> Regardless of the thrust of contemporary critical opinions, Wordsworth revealed recurrently in his practice, as well as in his theory as set forth in his prose writings, an irreducible earthiness, the result of which is a poetry marked by an authorial commitment to empirical

observation, truthful description, and imaginative sympathy. In opposition to Coleridge's emphatic contention that "poetry as poetry is essentially *ideal*" (*Biographia* 2:45), Wordsworth never abandoned his initial aspiration to an unmediated perception that, once attained, would enable the writer to avoid all falsehood of description. As late as 1815, in a "Preface" where he unabashedly appropriated an essential part of Coleridge's contribution to English literary criticism, including the distinction between fancy and imagination, Wordsworth was unflinching in his commitment to the phenomenal world and nonsubjective experience. "The powers requisite for the production of poetry are: first, those of Observation and Description,--*i.e.*, the ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, and with fidelity to describe them, unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer."<sup>63</sup> It is an awareness of these basic tenets of Wordsworth's poetic theory that allows Jerome McGann to assert magisterially that Wordsworth's program is "anything but supernaturalist; it is in fact a deeply materialist and mundane program. What it seeks to transcend is not this world or concrete experience but the ideologies of this world and our modes of perceiving it."<sup>64</sup>

The third point is closely connected with the second, and may even be thought of as a reflection in style and manner of Wordsworth's naturalistic tendencies in his choice of character and incidents, something Coleridge has singled out in the *Biographia* as a major defect of Wordsworth's poetry. This is the latter's strict adherence to history, his "matter-of-factness" and "*biographical* attention to probability" (2: 126, 129) that are fully operative in his fondness for accidental details. For a more familiar example than those from *The Excursion*, which Coleridge cited to illustrate his point, consider the boat-stealing episode in *The Prelude* and Wordsworth's subsequent deletions. The lines that are cut or significantly altered (1805, 1.376-88) for the 1850 version are uniformly circumstantial information—the location of the cave, whence the child

came upon this secluded place, and under what circumstances he discovered the shepherd's boat—that are merely accidental to the sublime experience to come.

Yet, perhaps no other poem in Wordsworth's entire oeuvre has the poet's commitment to naturalness or historical realism become more of a problem or inspired a fiercer debate in recent years than that commonly known as "Tintern Abbey." The controversy that has developed around this poem since the mid-1980s has turned it into a touchstone for a whole array of questions, not the least of which is how contemporary—note: none of the critical angles to be introduced, some undisguisedly old whereas others provocatively new, operates outside the tradition of English criticism—Anglo-American readers respond to an increasingly "traditional" text. It also provides ample food for thought in an intercultural context. Curiously, to suggest one similarity that may put the reader in a comparative frame of mind, the full title of Wordsworth's poem—"LINES Written a few miles above TINTERN ABBEY, on revisiting the banks of the WYE during a Tour, July 13, 1798"—appears as obtrusively long and particular as that of "Travelling through Tukou." A comparative survey of the professional opinions regarding a single poem will not only advance our search for a position that can best accommodate the complexity of the text at stake, but disclose illuminating patterns of resonance and compatibility underlying reading habits and assumptions as practiced in discrete cultures.

### Reading and Misreading

The publication in 1986 of Marjorie Levinson's revisionary reading of this first of what she called "Wordsworth's great period poems"<sup>65</sup> is a pivotal event in the controversy over "Tintern Abbey." The questions that motivated Levinson's inquiry and ultimately led her to the position she took in her essay arose from a critical examination of the poem's title in relation to

the ensuing text. Two observations in particular beckoned Levinson toward an interpretation that might overturn our traditional understanding of “Tintern Abbey” as a lyric meditation in a natural setting on the course of the poet’s life. First, while the poem’s title situates the lyrical speaker very concretely around Tintern Abbey, the most widely known landmark in the district, the main text of the poem contains not a single mention of it. How to explain this discrepancy? As Levinson widened her search for an answer, a marginal observation by Mary Moorman, one of a handful of Wordsworth’s twentieth-century biographers, which Levinson cited as an epigraph to her essay, gave her a decidedly new orientation in thinking about the poem. Not only did Moorman notice the absence of the titular abbey in the poem as a curious fact; she also drew attention to the absence of a truthful description of the Abbey’s condition as Wordsworth would have found it in the late nineteenth century: “a dwelling-place of beggars and the wretchedly poor. The river was then full of shipping, carrying coal and timber from the Forest of Dean” (p. 14). This—coupled with further historical evidence Levinson has unearthed about the famous ruin and its environs, including Gilpin’s account in his guidebook *Observations on the River Wye* (1792), which Wordsworth carried with him during the tour (pp. 30-31)—is a driving force behind Levinson’s reading of the landscape as described in the poem’s opening paragraph. What was traditionally understood as a description of a pastoral prospect, an uncritical posture seemingly authorized by the poem’s aestheticizing tendencies, suddenly acquires a political significance, especially when we reflect on Wordsworth’s inclusion in an idyllic scene of such potentially unpleasant elements as “vagrant dwellers” and a “hermit.”

No less problematic than the location is the date with which Wordsworth designated his poem. July 13, 1798 becomes very intriguing the moment we come to realize, as Levinson did before us, that it “marked almost to the day the nine-year anniversary of the original Bastille Day

(the eight-year anniversary of Wordsworth's first visit to France), and the five-year anniversary of the murder of Marat, also the date of Wordsworth's first visit to Tintern Abbey" (p. 16).

Levinson pounced on these multiple coincidences inscribed in the poem's title as an occasion to set up her neo-historicist agenda. Believing that the poem took its origin in a recoverable historical moment and a set of empirically verifiable genetic conditions, Levinson evinced from the outset a deep distrust of the poem's explicit stylistic and doctrinal gestures. Unhappy with textually oriented criticism that attempts to explicate "Tintern Abbey" in the blinding light of Wordsworth's heroic uses of transcendence, Levinson took great pains to construct a larger, historicizing frame of reference in search of the real source of the poem's affective power. The historical frame thus reconstructed reveals the poem to be "a multidetermined affair" (p. 18), a comprehensive understanding of which entails not only a sound recognition of the state of the poet's personal life in the mid-1790s and of political circumstances in both France and England, but a thorough knowledge of a wide range of associations and influences, such as the history of English monasticism, the sociology of the poor, the charcoal burning industry, and environmental problems. This network of loosely interconnected historical determinants, Levinson argues, are the invisible energies fueling the poem's affirmative vision, and in bringing them to the surface, Levinson believed that she had contributed to restoring a much-needed sense of urgency to our understanding of the poem. This is what Levinson meant when she likened "Tintern Abbey" to a "palimpsest," whose topmost layer is "less interesting than the subject thereby overwritten" (p. 34).

As an afterthought, a hitherto negligible link in Wordsworth's snake of a title also becomes suspect. For Levinson, Wordsworth's explanation of his position "a few miles above Tintern Abbey," which might imply his possession of a lofty vantage point, "strikes a

disingenuous note,” because the truth of the matter is, as the corresponding Fenwick note informs us, that Wordsworth completed the poem on July 13 on his way to Bristol, that is to say, “a few miles *below* Tintern” (p.32). It is on this prepositional substitution that Levinson based her play on the bifurcated meanings of “overlook,” which implies both an elevated point of view and an act of negligence. The insight into the “life of things,” which Wordsworth seemed to have achieved at times of ecstasy, is at the same time an act of blindness to the socio-historical reality that, according to Levinson, really motivated the poem.

Although in her revisionary reading of “Tintern Abbey,” Levinson’s primary interest may be to unravel the poem’s transformative mechanism, that is, to illuminate the poem’s manifest content by reconstructing the displaced economic, social, political realities of its time and place, traditional critics such as Thomas McFarland and Helen Vendler were quick to spot the sinister undertones of such trenchantly ideological interpretations. A quick look at the logical core of their public outcry against Levinson would open the floodgates of criticism about such familiar issues as the relevance of historicist discoveries to a literary work, the generic distinctions of autobiographical poetry, the value and limits of deconstructive readings in general, of which the practice of a determined New Historicist reader like Levinson is but one strand, albeit a powerful one.

McFarland was obviously upset by the “thrust of Levinson’s analysis” that seems to be “patronizing toward Wordsworth’s intent and . . . achievement,”<sup>66</sup> but his voice is not merely that of a wounded admirer of Wordsworth’s poetry, but of a keen observer of shifting patterns of culture. He managed to demolish Levinson’s argument by invalidating her motivations for deconstructive interpretation. Examining the poem’s date first, for example, McFarland questioned the relevance of the list of historical meanings that accrue to it in Levinson’s writing,

because the text gives few, if any, usable clues that would license such sociopolitical associations.<sup>67</sup> The absence of an abbey in the poem's main text fared no better as justification for adverse reading. To prove Levinson's failure to get things right, McFarland redirected attention to Wordsworth's precise specifications in the title. The adverbial phrase "a few miles over Tintern Abbey," *pace* Levinson, ought not, as McFarland convincingly argued, to be understood as situating Wordsworth on an eminence whence he could look over the abbey (and then with some sort of creative violence, suppress it and everything recalcitrant to his beatific vision), but as a geographical marker that positions Wordsworth at a familiar spot, his latest visit to which dates back five years, in the Wye valley a few miles to the north of the ruined Abbey, where the poet saw "waters," "cliffs," and "wreathes of smoke" in the distance, and "woods and copses" interspersed with traces of an agricultural economy occupying the foreground. Elucidating the title thus spells disaster for Levinson's argument as encapsulated in the ruling metaphor of "oversight"—which she juxtaposed with "insight" as a memorable tactic to spotlight Wordsworth's cancellation of the social—because "if nothing is looked over, nothing can be overlooked" (p.5). As a result, Levinson's motivating questions appear to be either arbitrarily framed or grossly misconceived.<sup>68</sup>

In comparison with McFarland, Vendler's criticism is somewhat of a terse response. Noting what she took to be a clear indication of Levinson's instinctive aversion to "Tintern Abbey,"<sup>69</sup> Vendler did not take much time to address any of the tangible contextual or textual issues Levinson had raised. Instead, her attention is focused on redefining history in relation to interpretation of poetry, especially of the subspecies that is sometimes, not always accurately, referred to as lyric. Vendler's main goal is not to demonstrate *à la* McFarland where specifically Levinson is amiss, but to make a case for how social critics including Levinson grossly

misunderstand the relationship of the lyrical to the socio-historical. For Vendler, the historical dimension of lyric poetry has scarcely anything to do with reconstructing history in all its factual and material specificity, but is rather to be conceived of in terms encompassing both lexical changes—“the history of a single word preceding its use in the given poem, and the transformation of that history, if any, by the new use of the word in that poem” (p. 177)—and such evolutionary themes, when it comes to “Tintern Abbey,” as epistemology, secularized autobiography, and gender relations in nineteenth-century England (p. 179). From this dismissal of Levinson’s understanding of the historical Vendler proceeded to defend Wordsworth’s poem against any imputation, made openly or in the guise of theory, of sociological bad faith, because for Vendler, lyric

unlike the social genres, does not incorporate interaction with a “collective”; it privileges the mind in its solitary and private moments. The poet does not have to make any special effort to place himself in solidarity with “the collective”; the only thing that distinguishes poets from the rest of us is that they have the singular aesthetic and linguistic equipment to trace the nuances of common imagination, thought, and feeling in a way less crude than the norm. The “instrumentality” of their work is both to echo and to refine the sensibility of the age with respect to psychic monitoring of itself and its own language. (pp. 179-80)

When we combine Vendler’s observations, the logic of her critique appears rather simple: if the history pertaining to literary matters is nonmaterial, and if the social is not essential, at least to the species of composition commonly known as lyric, the omission of the socio-historical in “Tintern Abbey” is, regardless of Wordsworth’s authorial intention, neither historical denial nor cancellation of the social.

A trenchant analysis though this is, Vendler does not seem to address the pressing concerns of social critics so much as declaring on them an ideological war that offers no prospect of a peaceful end.<sup>70</sup> Examining her conclusions in the abstract, historicist critics might concede that the lyric is more often than not or even by definition *asocial*, because it privileges the momentary free play of an individual mind, but it does not follow that the lyric necessarily precludes the social. They might also concede Vendler's point in rejecting the idea that notwithstanding an abundance of the social elsewhere in his writings, Wordsworth must still represent it in "Tintern Abbey,"<sup>71</sup> but I suspect they might find her conception of the historical somewhat narrow in scope. Is material history of no consequence at all to a poem that situates itself so concretely with regard to time and place of composition? Vendler's attempt to mystify the lyrical speaker's identity (and thereby to obscure the historicity of lyric) appears to me the weakest link in a logical chain of ideas. That the social status, occupation, and gender of "Tintern Abbey"'s speaker needs to be inferred from minute textual clues<sup>72</sup> rather than just assumed from the outset probably results from Vendler's shift of the problem of reading from the poet (or the poem) to the reader, to the extent that the latter's ability to share the modes of experience as articulated in a poem becomes all that matters in interpreting that poem. In this regard, New Historicism's warning against "an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations"<sup>73</sup> is not just being alarmist. It is perhaps not Vendler's sympathetic understanding of Romanticism's self-definitions (although as the remarks quoted earlier attest, she does position herself remarkably close to Wordsworth in defining lyrical poetry and the poet's role) that undermines her theoretical conclusions, but her attempt to affect blindness with regard to the autobiographical character of an overtly autobiographical poem. Often practiced in honor of the transcendent and universal features of Romantic poetry, such acts of blindness are

often counterproductive, because they can destroy all interest in the historical conditions under which alone those features come to fruition. Seen in a broader context, Vendler's opinion also indicates the enduring power of the aforementioned "myth of fiction," whose most recent champions in the Western critical tradition were the text-only critics of the last century.<sup>74</sup>

These qualifying remarks, however, are not meant to question the overall soundness of the critical responses Levinson has provoked. Although their responses may at times be too uncompromising, Levinson's critics were nevertheless right in formulating the theoretical question that her somewhat pejorative reading of "Tintern Abbey" has raised: namely, how does one know "when something that is not present has been 'suppressed' or 'cancelled'" (Vendler, p. 176). Both recognized the important role absence plays in literary study, yet both kept a wary eye on the potential risks of an unrestrained interest in absence. To avoid misreading, McFarland stipulated that the pursuit of absence "must always follow, not precede, the exact cognizance of the poetic determination" (p. 11), meaning that any search for determinate meaning must begin with the text, and be conducted from the inside out, not the opposite way. Vendler's stand on the issue is essentially the same: "a shadow-presence continually suggested by unmistakable signals, can be a powerful part of a lyric; but a context not suggested within the poem by a continuous shadow-play can scarcely be invoked as a real suppressed or cancelled presence in the poem" (p. 177). Although there is no indication of mutual knowledge in this debate, both critics seemed to agree that Levinson's fatal mistake in contextualizing the poem is her total disregard for what the poem states, an attitude that is made explicit in Levinson's assertion that "by going outside the work, we may produce . . . a closer reading of it" (p. 18). In other words, it is Levinson's violation of the text-first principle (and not just their dissatisfaction with the critical edge of Levinson's deconstruction) that binds McFarland and Vendler together in a joint effort to defend

Wordsworth. An inevitable corollary of such a hermeneutic enterprise is that a large part of the evidence Levinson brought up appears to be post hoc rationalizations, for we cannot accept them as evidence until we give a nod to the historical frame she provided for the interpretation of the poem. For instance, without preconceived notions of erasure, suppression, and/or displacement—concepts that carry the distinctive theoretical baggage of psychoanalysis and deconstruction—the divide between the two appositional segments of the opening lines: “Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters!”<sup>75</sup> would not strike one as an opening for deconstruction. Instead of becoming a sign of something suppressed in Wordsworth’s Cartesian project that is said to inform the whole poem, the semicolon would be significant in no other way than as a mark of transition from an objective statement to a subjective one, a transfiguration that parallels the poem’s larger structural movements.

Now, following the sober guidelines of the text-first critics, let us return to the real issue at stake, and ask if the main text of “Tintern Abbey” does leave any room for a “shadow-play” of the social. Wordsworth’s readers would perhaps all agree that as far as manifest content is concerned, the poem Wordsworth composed is a sustained meditation triggered by the sight of a natural landscape near Tintern Abbey on how the author’s perception of nature has evolved in response to his urban experience during the intervening five years mentioned in the poem’s opening lines, and on how he grew up into the broader, sadder knowledge of maturity. If this is true, it will not be hard to see that any discussion of the poem’s social dimension will have to center on Wordsworth’s representation of this urban experience. Apparently, of these social circumstances Wordsworth chose to offer only fleeting glimpses, using a language so vague and general that it can almost be read as a cautionary gesture against the search for historically specific meanings.

Yet such a language does exist, nay, it may even be said to permeate each of the poem's five verse paragraphs. The most impressive of these knots of social discourse is no doubt the sonorous phrase "the still, sad music of humanity" (l. 92) that the poet claimed he could often hear when his appetitive love of nature had become a bygone story. This rhetorical turn to the powerful insight with which paragraph four concludes is the pivot on which the numerous social generalizations in the poem revolve: we hear, in paragraph two, "the din / Of towns and cities," and "the heavy and weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world" (ll. 26-7, 40-1), that trigger in the poet a meditation on the value of an early communion with nature's beautiful forms; in paragraph three, this experience resurfaced as "the fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world" (ll. 53-4); and in paragraph five, sometimes interpreted as a move toward the social, albeit for some a "decidedly feeble" one (Levinson, p. 38) or "desperately limited" (Simpson, p. 113), Dorothy's future world is envisaged as one made up of "evil tongues, / Rash judgments . . . the sneers of selfish men, / . . . greetings where no kindness is . . . [and] all / The dreary intercourse of daily life" (ll. 129-32). Taken all together, these openings for the social are without exception generalized expressions of discontent. In the larger context of the poem, they seem to serve as a foil for the antithetical representation of humanity in the first, descriptive paragraph, where human phenomena are beautifully harmonized with the surrounding natural landscape.

In "The Politics of 'Tintern Abbey,'" Kenneth Johnston used these social generalizations as climaxed in the "still, sad music of humanity" as a springboard for his political reading of the poem. Unlike Levinson, Johnston was unwilling to apply his formalist rigor and critical acumen in the service of ideological criticism, despite his adopting an essentially historicist approach. For him, the realization that "Tintern Abbey" is "one of the most powerfully *depoliticized* poems

in the language” is no good reason for condemnation, but proves, paradoxically, that the poem is a “uniquely political one” (p. 13).

Although Johnston eventually wandered far from the poem’s ostensible concerns, the various perspectives he introduced to the study of Wordsworth’s representations of humanity do not seem too far-fetched. It is, in the context of this critical survey, useful to read Johnston’s contention that in interpreting the poem, we cannot dismiss all considerations of the abbey, a place densely populated by displaced people and disfigured by the ugly effects of industrialization—for reasons such as the ruin’s central importance for all such tours to the Wye valley in the late eighteenth century and the prominent position it assumes in Gilpin’s account of the Wye tour in the guidebook that Wordsworth took with him to Tintern (p. 9)—as an objection to McFarland’s critique. While it is true that the poem is not set at the ruined abbey, while it is also true that a great deal more than Wordsworth’s actual experience during the Wye tour in 1798 can be subsumed under the social generalizations in the poem, it does not seem just to deny such an experience a hypothetical place in the universalizing “music of humanity.” By the same token, Johnston’s speculations about Wordsworth’s political life during the period of his London residence—his grand plans, formulated as early as 1792 only to be aborted within just a couple of years, for a liberal journal of politics and literature, to be called *The Philanthropist*, his attraction to the Godwin circle composed mainly of ambitious literary gentlemen like Wordsworth and several of his ex-Cambridge friends, and Wordsworth’s possible involvement in the publication of the actual *Philanthropist*, an anti-war, opposition paper that first appeared in 1795—also provide a concrete footing for our understanding of the language quoted earlier of world-weariness and bewilderment, especially the catalog of evils that are presumed to plague Dorothy’s envisaged future.<sup>76</sup> While we may concede that this sort of biographical criticism is

not essential to our understanding of what Vendler has loosely defined as “the private and absolute lyric” (p. 176), not essential in the sense that it is still possible to make perfect sense of the poem’s manifest content without situating it in its historical moment, we must also recognize that when pursued cautiously and without any pre-established code of decision, such contextual investigations can often contribute to a richer, more sympathetic, and more human understanding of both the author and the text.

A central component of this enlarged understanding is the recognition that “Tintern Abbey”’s continuing power does not merely spring from the poet’s achievement of a visionary insight, but rather from our awareness of the psychological cost of that achievement, of what it takes to be able to intuit the presence of “something far more deeply interfused” (l.97), and of what it means to know the constancy of nature’s love for man. It is in the light of this sense of loss and the accompanying awareness of the poem’s elegiac tone that Levinson’s questions in the Afterword,

Of what use is the record of a victory, and of a victory bound to seem nugatory to the modern reader? What does it mean today to know that Nature never does betray the heart that loves her? Who fears that it would, or did, and what did betrayal (and Nature) mean to Wordsworth and his readers anyway? What do these words mean to us? (p. 56)

are not, when read in isolation from her critique, as absurd as Vendler has made them. Although Levinson sounded somewhat demeaning toward the poem’s affirmative vision, she could, if she had been less caught up with must-bes and had focused more with how-sos in exploring “Tintern Abbey”’s historical character, have guided us toward a well-rounded interpretation of the poem as one of aspiration rather than achievement. That this is so is not only born out by the tentative,

negative qualifications found at the poem's crucial transition points: "if this / Be but a vain belief" (ll. 50-1); "Nor perchance, / If I were not thus taught"(ll. 112-3), but also by such parenthetical constructions with which the poem is liberally sprinkled: "Nor less, I trust . . ." (l. 36), "so I dare to hope" (l. 66), "I would believe" (l. 88). To understand that "the record of a victory" can be humanly stirring, we have to heed not just Wordsworth's meditative discourse made up of moods, sublimities, and presences, but the biographical subtext to those grand, magnificent utterances. One important dimension of this subtext is no doubt the social suffering which Wordsworth might have directly experienced, encountered second-hand, and represented in his poetic work, and which he anticipated that Dorothy was necessarily on her way to encounter. It is this recognition of and the failure to account for humanity's existential condition that we may read into Wordsworth's social language found in almost each of the poem's main divisions. Who, cultured in Wordsworth's poetic self-representations as well as, I should now add, the historical context in which those representations are situated, could hear this language without at the same time recalling the account in *The Prelude* of the poet's residence in London, where Wordsworth cried out,

Oh, blank confusion! and a type not false  
 Of what the mighty City is itself  
 To all, except a Straggler here and there,  
 To the whole swarm of its inhabitants  
 An indistinguishable world to men,  
 The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,  
 Living amid the same perpetual flow  
 Of trivial objects, melted and reduced

To one identity, by differences

That have no law, no meaning, and no end

Oppression under which even highest minds

Must labour, whence the strongest are not free. (6.696-707)

and in France, especially that moment of spiritual crisis when dejected by the violent and imperialist turn of the French Revolution, the poet “Yielded up moral questions in despair” (X: 906). In such times of personal crisis and political instability, perhaps nothing can be more reassuring to the poet than to reclaim his faith, uttered as a prayer on Dorothy’s behalf, that “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her.”

## Endnotes to Chapter One

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<sup>1</sup> The modern edition I used for the following count is Gong Bin's *Tao Yuanming ji jiaojian*. I have also consulted Yuan Xingpei's *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu*, which includes, in addition to all the poems found in Gong Bin's edition that are generally recognized as authentic, a poem fragment of obscure authorship, titled "Four Seasons" 四時, at the end of the third *juan*.

<sup>2</sup> The three *fu* pieces are "Lament for Scholars not Meeting with Good Fortune," "Stilling the Passions," and "Back Home Again," all in the fifth *juan*; the nine titles referred to here are "In the Fifth Month of the Year *gengzi* [400], Detained by Contrary Winds at Guilin, While Returning from the Capital," "In the Seventh Month of the Year *xinchou* [401], Returning to Jiangling from Leave, Travelling through Tukou at Night," "In the Beginning of Spring in the Year *guimao* [403], Thinking of the Ancients on my Farm," "Written in the Twelfth Month of the Year *guimao* [403] for my Cousin Jingyuan," "In the Third Month of the Year *yisi* [405], Passing through Qianxi, While on a Mission to the Capital, as Adjutant to the *Jianwei* General," "In the Sixth Month of the Year *wushen* [408]: Suffering a Fire," "The Ninth Day of the Ninth Month of the Year *jiyou* [409]," "In the Ninth Month of the Year *gengxu* [410], Harvesting the Dry Rice in the Western Field," "In the Eighth Month of the Year *bingchen* [416], Harvesting on the Farm at Xiaxun."

<sup>3</sup> *Liuchen zhu wenxuan*, 2:26.494b-495a.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:26.494b (*Song shu*, 93. 2288-89). Notably, however, of the other two biographies of Tao Yuanming in standard histories, only *Nan shi* follows Shen Yue (75.1856-59). *Jin shu* dropped the argument entirely (94.2460-63). Neither is it integrated into Tao's biography by Xiao Tong, although Xiao obviously accepted Shen Yue's argument for Tao's loyalty (see Yan Kejun, *Quan Liang wen*, 20.3068-69).

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Tao Shu, *Tao Jingjie ji zhu*, 3.1-2; *Tao Yuanming yanjiu ziliao huibian* (hereafter cited as *huibian*), 1:24. The translation is based on Wendy Swartz's, with slight modifications (*Reading Tao Yuanming*, p. 83).

<sup>6</sup> Only "An Excursion to Xie Creek" was traditionally dated to 421, a year after the dynastic shift, although an existing textual variant to the cyclical sign used in the preface to this poem puts a question mark after the traditional date.

<sup>7</sup> The other two, "Back Home Again" and "An Elegy for My Cousin Jingyuan," were both composed during the Yixi reign period.

<sup>8</sup> "An Elegy for My Sister Madam Cheng" and "Peach-Blossom Spring"

<sup>9</sup> Zhu Zijing, "Tao Yuanming nianpu zhong de wenti," *huibian*, 1:307-12. Zhu also told us that Wu Renjie and Ding Yan in their respective chronologies had already made this point (*Tao Yuanming nianpu*, pp. 21, 55; hereafter cited as *nianpu*).

<sup>10</sup> Consult, for instance, Yuan Xingpei's detailed chronology in *Tao Yuanming yanjiu* (hereafter cited as *yanjiu*), pp. 243-380, with the proviso that a fair number of the pieces can only be dated approximately.

<sup>11</sup> One should also remember that it does not follow from the uselessness of Tao's dating methods as evidence for his loyalty that contemporary politics was not a concern for Tao Yuanming in writing his poems. See Chapter 2 for a more focused discussion on this issue.

<sup>12</sup> In her comparative reading of the four prominent biographies of Tao Yuanming, Tian Xiaofei brought up the factor of textual fluidity that can potentially further undermine the validity of the traditional argument (*Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture*, p. 91).

<sup>13</sup> See Swartz, *Reading Tao Yuanming*, pp. 84-86, for further development of this controversy during the Song dynasty.

<sup>14</sup> *Tao Jingjie ji zhu*, 3.12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 3.9-12.

<sup>16</sup> *Jianzhu Tao Yuanming ji*, 3.3.

<sup>17</sup> *Song shu*, 93.2290.

<sup>18</sup> *nianpu*, p. 150.

<sup>19</sup> *nianpu*, p. 191.

<sup>20</sup> “Tao Yuanming shiji shiwen xinian,” *Tao Yuanming ji*, p. 266.

<sup>21</sup> *Tao Yuanming qi shi de yanjiu*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>22</sup> Lines 3-4 of this poem reads, “Mistakenly I fell into the dusty net, / and was away [from home] for thirty years,” 誤落塵網中，一去三十年。It presents traditional scholars and critics with a comparable interpretive difficulty. For a useful summary of the textual debate and speculations surrounding this couplet, see *yanjiu*, pp. 326-7.

<sup>23</sup> Deng Ansheng, *Tao Yuanming nianpu*, p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> *huibian*, 1:97.

<sup>25</sup> Tao Shu’s collation notes on existing chronologies of Tao Yuanming mentioned Huang Zhang 黃璋, son of Huang Zongxi (1610-1695), as a follower of Zhang Ying in maintaining that Tao was born in 352, not 365, but did not cite Huang’s specific argument (*Nianpu kaoyi*, p.15). Perhaps the only other supporter of Zhang Ying is someone named Cai Xian 蔡顯, whose argument is cited in full in *yanjiu*, pp. 219-20.

<sup>26</sup> The early editions that Yuan Xingpei consulted are known in Tao Yuanming scholarship respectively as “Dongpo xiansheng he Tao Yuanming shi” (“Master Dongpo Following the Rhymes of Tao Yuanming,” printed in the last years of the Northern Song), the “Jigu ge edition” (printed in the early years of the Southern Song, see *yanjiu*, p. 201), “Shaoxing edition” (also known as the “edition in Su Shi’s handwriting,” printed in 1140), Zeng Ji’s edition (printed in 1192). The two editions with textual variants are the “Jigu ge edition” and Zeng Ji’s edition. For an English overview of pre-modern editions of Tao’s works, see Tian Xiaofei, *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture*, pp. 289-297. For a similar survey in Chinese, see Yuan Xingpei, “Song Yuan yilai Taoji jiaozhuben zhi kaocha” (“A study of the annotated editions of Tao’s works since Song and Yuan times”), *yanjiu*, pp. 199-210.

<sup>27</sup> The printing of Tang Han’s edition can be roughly dated to the mid-thirteenth century, while it is uncertain when Li Gonghuan’s edition was first printed. Yuan Xingpei suspected that the traditional view that Li Gonghuan’s edition was a Yuan reprint of an original Song edition might be inaccurate in that his careful comparison of the respective editions of Tang Han and Li Gonghuan showed that the latter is nothing but an expansion of the former, and hence, it can date back to the mid-thirteenth century at the earliest (*yanjiu*, pp. 203-4). Li’s edition proved enormously influential for later editions of Tao’s works, especially those with “collected commentaries,” for many of which it served as a base text (*Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture*, p. 295).

<sup>28</sup> *yanjiu*, p. 223.

<sup>29</sup> Li Gonghuan’s end note on the poem indicates clearly that he corrected “fifty” to “five days” in conformity with Tao’s traditional date. The note reads, “In the year *xinchou*, Jingjie was thirty-seven. The poem says, ‘at the start of the year fifty years have slipped away,’ which refers to the tenth year, *jiayin* [414], of the Yixi reign period. Put to test against the language of the poem, the preface is mistaken. Here it reads, ‘at the start of the year, five days have slipped away,’ which is then congruous with the ‘fifth day of the first month’ in the preface.” *Jianzhu Tao Yuanming ji*, 2.8.

<sup>30</sup> There is of course another possible combination of the terms we have not considered: namely *xinyou* and “fifty,” which will enable us to fix Tao’s birth date to 372. This is unlikely mainly because it has no textual warrant in what we now know as early Song editions. Notably, however, Liang Qichao endorsed this reading, in order to substantiate his revamp of Tao’s dates. One need not go further than considering Liang’s literal reading of the “thirty-year retirement” to understand how his dating of “An Excursion to Xie Creek” can be problematic. Liang did, however, argue convincingly, to me at least, that “five days” cannot be the correct reading in that the transition would then be rather rough and abrupt into the next line, where Tao lamented his nearing life’s end. See *nianpu*, p.161.

<sup>31</sup> i.e. thirty, from *Lun yu*, 2.4. The phrase is quoted verbatim from the nineteenth poem (line 4) in the “Drinking Wine” series.

<sup>32</sup> *yanjiu*, p. 314.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.247.

<sup>34</sup> Notably, this is by no means the only problematic instance where a thorough application of Yuan’s literalist approach resulted in confusion rather than contributing to hermeneutic clarity. His reading and dating of the famous series “Returning to Dwell in My Farmstead” furnishes a similar example. Yuan understands “farmstead” (literally, “garden and fields”) in the ambiguous title as a literal reference to a specific farm Tao owned, and argues that we should take the mention of “thirty years” in poem #1, line 4 literally on the ground that Tao also mentioned the lapse of “a single generation,” which is traditionally understood as a period of thirty years, in poem #4, line 13. See n24, and *yanjiu*, pp. 326-28.

<sup>35</sup> *jianzhu*, pp. 193-4. My translation is adapted from Davis (1: 83), with frequent modifications. In general, I try to reproduce the word order and the literal sense of the original without sacrificing readability. For a somewhat less literal rendering, with explanatory notes, see Hightower, pp.102-5.

<sup>36</sup> I follow Davis in understanding 詩書 as referring to two central documents of the Confucian canon, mainly because of their appearance as a collocation here, but when used separately, they may well be general designations for poetry and books.

<sup>37</sup> The Six Ministers’ edition of the *Wen xuan* has a variant reading for this line. Instead of 新秋月 “a new autumn moon,” it reads 親月船, which I take to say something like “a boat endearingly close to the moon.” Modern editors mostly prefer “a new autumn moon.” See, for example, Gong Bin, pp. 170-1; and Yuan Xingpei, pp. 193-4 note 4. Here I follow Hightower (p. 103) in stringing together the two separate semantic units of this line with the preposition “under.” This is, however, not to deny the inherent ambiguity of the established image. It is not clear to me whether the actual reference is to the moon hanging above in the sky or its reflection in water that might here be metaphorically described as “knocking at the oars.” Wang Shumin’s suggestion that 新 be read as 親 (loving, close, intimate) gives another twist to our understanding of the line (p. 228).

<sup>38</sup> An allusion to a passage in *Huainan zi* (*jishi* 2:12.844-5), which tells of how Ning Qi successfully brought himself to the notice of Duke Huan of Qi by singing a song to the note *shang* (the second of the pentatonic scale, suited to produce sad music) while striking at an ox-horn as a musical accompaniment.

<sup>39</sup> 耦耕 (“to plow in harness together”) is a direct lexical borrowing from *Lun yu*, 18.6, where it is said that Confucius’s disciple Zilu asked Chang Ju and Jie Ni, two recluse-farmers “plowing together,” for directions for crossing the waters.

<sup>40</sup> The *Wen xuan* text reads *rong* 榮 in the place of *ying* 榮. This alternative reading will allow us to read the line as saying something like “I will not consider love of rank an honor.”

<sup>41</sup> 衡茅 means literally “cross-beam and thatch.” This line, if rendered in full, will read something like: I will “cultivate genuineness inside a cross-beam door under a thatched roof.”

<sup>42</sup> Yuan Xingpei, pp. 193-4. The word *shan* (“goodness”) is better understood in conjunction with the previous line as adept at cultivating genuineness than as referring to the Confucian virtue of doing good deeds.

<sup>43</sup> There is actually a scholarly debate about how to understand the term *fujia* 赴假 in the title. Zhu Ziqing gave a brief summary of early interpretations of his term, and argued that the word 赴 should in fact be read as 銷 (in this context, “to exhaust”). Gong Bin followed Zhu (p.172n1). Yuan Xingpei, however, took issue with Zhu, arguing that the term should be taken literally as “going for leave,” which requires that we understand the title to mean that Tao returned home for leave and then in less than a month, set off again on a long trip to Jiangling (*jianzhu*, p.198)

<sup>44</sup> See the long preface to “Back Home Again” in, for example, *jianzhu*, p. 460.

<sup>45</sup> *Song shu*, 93.2287.

<sup>46</sup> See n 31.

<sup>47</sup> *jianzhu*, p. 278.

<sup>48</sup> *Wen xuan*, 6:57. 2470-1. For a complete English translation of this piece, see Davis, 1:243-9.

<sup>49</sup> *Traditional Chinese Poetry*, p. 15. Snippets of such sweeping generalities, especially those that aim to define the difference between the literary traditions of China and the West in terms of the polarity of fiction vs nonfiction, occur not infrequently in Owen’s published works. In addition to those (to be) cited in the text, the following sample from his seminal *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* also furnishes food for thought: “*Shih* is not a ‘poem’ . . . This difference in definition between a poem and a *shih* has immense consequences: it affects how, in each tradition, the relations between a person and a text will be understood and taught; moreover, it affects how poets in each tradition behave . . . Since the Romantic period many writers of lyric have tried to move toward a ‘poetry’ like *shih*, but when they write about poetry, their concerns show the marks of their struggles with the ancient notion of poetry as something ‘made’—we read of masks, personae, distance, artistic control” (p. 27), or “Modern Western theorists often call language essentially ‘metaphorical:’ the word ‘stands in for’ the thing. The central assumption in Confucian language theory (excluding those early, failed attempts to develop a theory of signs) is that language is essentially synecdochal: an inner whole manifests a necessarily diminished surface, and through that peculiar ‘part’ the whole may be known.” These generally sound, yet in many ways also misleading (especially to the unwary, when interpreted out of proper context) passages deserves more extensive treatment than there is space for in an endnote. Suffice it to say for the moment that in my view, Owen makes short shrift of immensely complex cultural phenomena through the use of an all too easy polarization.

<sup>50</sup> Owen reiterates the point later in a more generalized context: “The differences between Chinese and Western modes of literary reading are centered in the related questions of metaphor and the presumed fictionality or nonfictionality of poems. Presumptions of a fictional text and of a metaphorical Truth run throughout Western modes of literary reading. In the Chinese tradition of reading, the meaning of a poem as a whole is usually not taken as metaphorical (except in a limited number of subgenres) . . . the reader’s first allegiance is to direct presentation of the physical world” (*Traditional Chinese Poetry*, pp.56-7).

<sup>51</sup> Haun Saussy’s relatively recent debate with Pauline Yu, Andrew Plaks, and Stephen Owen surrounding the issue of (the possibility of) a “Chinese allegory” can be one particularly instructive instance. In her influential *Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition*, Yu distinguished the traditional understanding of literature in China and the West along similar lines as Owen, but went further to theorize about problems of reading by situating them within the larger frames of cosmology, ontology, and language theory. According to Yu, the different ways of conceptualizing literature in the literary traditions of China and the West, to highlight the implications of her contrastive account, easily translate into such polarizations as monism and dualism, metonymy and metaphor, allegoresis and (historical) “contextualization.” Taking issue with Yu (and the like-minded critics, such as Owen and Plaks), Saussy launched, as it were, a deconstructive critique of preexisting theories of difference, revealing through counterexamples and critical reflections that those polarized categories are all self-defeating, when pressed beyond

their prescribed conceptual and semantic domain. For Saussy, the notable failure of the search for a Chinese allegory, a centerpiece of the differences between East and West, can be attributed to the way the question is framed. Before we attempt to distinguish conceptions of literature and how they function in discrete cultural communities, it is necessary to first probe deep into the conditions under which to introduce such a language of difference. His critique is too theoretically rich and sophisticated to summarize adequately in an endnote. The interested reader can consult the first chapter of Saussy's *Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* for details of the debate.

<sup>52</sup> *Poetics* 9.1-4, trans., S. H. Butcher.

<sup>53</sup> *Theory of Literature*, p. 25; cited in Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry*, p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. 220.

<sup>55</sup> *Traditional Chinese Poetry*, pp. 13-4.

<sup>56</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I cite the thirteen-book version of *The Prelude* first completed in 1805.

<sup>57</sup> This is the direction in which Brooks' reading of the sonnet proceeds. See *The Well Wrought Urn*, pp. 5-7.

<sup>58</sup> Both the Fenwick note and Dorothy's journal entry are cited in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, 3: 431 n. Such conflicting data leave the Oxford editors to surmise that the poem was "inspired and drafted on July 31, 1802, and rewritten on Sept. 3, when W. was again in London." In a recent edition of Wordsworth's major works, Stephen Gill follows this hypothesis in dating the poem between 31 July and 3 Sept (p. 710 n).

<sup>59</sup> *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 74. It is worth a mention in passing that the circuitous journey, which Abrams has singled out as a controlling idea of *The Prelude* happens to be a central theme in Tao Yuanming's poetry as well, both literally and metaphorically. Almost every poem, "Travelling through Tukou" certainly included, composed on the occasion of a literal journey pivots on the idea of a projected, and in certain cases fulfilled, return to nature, home, and a natural way of living untrammelled by contemporary social and political upheavals.

<sup>60</sup> *Letters*, 1: 586.

<sup>61</sup> *Traditional Chinese Poetry*, p. 224. The context of the quoted phrase is Owen's interpretation of Wordsworth's deliberately involute definition of a poet as set forth in his famous preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Instead of placing the emphasis on the last part of the definition where the poet is said to be "impelled to create [volitions and passions] when he does not find them," as Owen did and regarded as a nod of recognition to traditional poetic theory, I discern no "embarrassment" in Wordsworth's assertion that a poet is "a man speaking to men," all the "hedgings and qualifications" notwithstanding, and because the definition aims at an unmediated poetry, it is perhaps as radically original as it can be at the time.

<sup>62</sup> *Biographia*, 2: 7. Further citations from the *Biographia* are incorporated into the text.

<sup>63</sup> *Prose*, 3:26.

<sup>64</sup> "The *Biographia Literaria* and the Contentions of English Romanticism," p. 243. The nature/imagination dichotomy is a perennial issue of controversy in Wordsworth criticism. In making the assertion just cited, McGann, for example, was self-consciously undermining the critical line as established through the work of Geoffrey Hartman, which seeks to rehabilitate Wordsworth from his own theory and Coleridge's critique with the argument that, contrary to common, that is, careless and unjustifiable, assumptions, Wordsworth is first and foremost a poet of the mind rather than a poet of nature. In "Involute and Symbol in the Romantic Imagination," Thomas McFarland also launched a critique, though mild and friendly, of the tendency of Hartman's argument as embodied in his notion of a "via naturaliter negativa" to diminish the role of nature in shaping Wordsworth's poetry and his conception of what he does in his poetry. My purpose in emphasizing Wordsworth's commitment to the objective world is likewise to downplay, not to repudiate, the role of imagination. In fact, it is worth asking first whether the mind-nature relationship need be an either/or question for Wordsworth.

<sup>65</sup> Hereafter in the text I use parenthetical citation when I cite Levinson.

<sup>66</sup> *William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement*, p. 3. Future references will be parenthetically incorporated into the text.

<sup>67</sup> Kenneth Johnston speculated that Wordsworth may have intentionally “turned [the] clock back twenty-four hours, to avoid setting off the powerful buried charges that would be exploded” if the poem is dated July 14, the original Bastille Day (1983, p.13). It seems to me, however, that for a determined political reader like Levinson, such parapractic fine-tuning, had it been Wordsworth’s intention to muffle the social and political resonance of the date inscribed in the title, is not only futile, but counterproductive.

<sup>68</sup> Anticipating the question of why Wordsworth chose to include in the title so much gratuitous detail, gratuitous in the sense that much of the information—the locale, occasion, and date—is not essential to the interpretation of the poem, McFarland made a decisive turn to Coleridge, who once referred Wordsworth’s biographical/historical accuracy to his “*anxiety* of explanation and retrospect” (*Biographia*, 2:129; cited in McFarland, 1992, p. 6). Drawing on his extensive knowledge of English literary history, M. H. Abrams suggested that the length and particularity of Wordsworth’s title be understood in the context of “Tintern Abbey”’s immediate precursors, namely, those loco-descriptive poems from the eighteenth century, whose titles often carry equally elaborate specifications, and their imitations during the Romantic period (1989, pp. 376, 417 n 19).

<sup>69</sup> See Vendler’s commentary on Levinson’s overshooting remarks in her “Afterward” (p.178). Notably, New Historicist readings are often criticized for their inability to account for the greatness of the literature examined. Hear, for example, McFarland’s verdict, twice repeated in the aforementioned essay: “the fact that its analyses cannot account for or engage the greatness of a poem, is the rock toward which all New Historical criticism is drifting, and in the event must founder;” the “masked core [of contemporary cultural forms including New Historicism] is a kind of coin whose obverse is an unquestioning commitment to left-wing political understandings of the human situation, and whose reverse is an inability to confront the quality of the poem Wordsworth or another poet actually did write” (1990, pp. 16, 25).

<sup>70</sup> Levinson, by the way, is by no means alone in this academic debate. Her supporters are sometimes as vocal as her detractors. Both McGann and Simpson, for example, recognize Wordsworth’s strategies of displacement as a crucial constitutive force in “Tintern Abbey.” For McGann, “‘Tintern Abbey’’s method is to replace an image and landscape of contradiction with one dominated by ‘the power / Of harmony’” (1983, p. 86). Simpson added a further twist to McGann’s understanding, arguing that the displacement that dominates the poetic action of “Tintern Abbey” is not just from man to nature—whose constancy and restorative power are presented as no more than a tentative and partial conviction—but needs “to be traced in the poet’s own alienated language, and in the subjectivity for which it speaks” (p. 113).

<sup>71</sup> Vendler, p. 175. Though in essential agreement with Vendler (see Vendler, p. 189 n2), M. H. Abrams chose a more polite and muted response to what he called “prevailing hermeneutics of suspicion.” In “On Political Readings of *Lyrical Ballads*,” he issued a plea for hermeneutic openness: “a poet is free to write a political poem, but also any kind of nonpolitical poem he or she may choose to write. . . . we respect a poet’s chosen and manifest subject matter, without the theoretical predetermination that it must be an evasion or cover-up of socio-historic realities that the poet could not or would not confront” (p.377).

<sup>72</sup> Vendler’s formalism presents itself most obtrusively in the assertions that “the speaker [of ‘Tintern Abbey’] dramatically imagined here is not a writer, though he is a talker, a traveler, a social observer, and a brother” (p. 174), or that “Levinson’s argument depends on our considering the lyric speaker of *Tintern Abbey* to be coterminous with the historical Wordsworth, a canard that should by now be impossible to anyone writing on lyric” (p. 175). She observed further that “conceding the likelihood of the speaker’s being male, it is still instructive to read the poem as if it were spoken, say, by George Eliot, judging how little would need to be changed of the feelings expressed” (p. 190 n 4).

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<sup>73</sup> McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> See, for example, her contention that “Poetry is fiction, and creates existence (as Stevens said) on a fictitious plane. It is true that the resemblance of the fictitious plane to the actual plane can often be so strong as to be deceiving; but the presence or absence of historical and factual matter does not change the nature and location of the plane we are talking about” (p. 178). Her recognition notwithstanding that there are degrees and gradations of fictionality, Vendler seems unwilling to acknowledge any essential difference between the lyrical “I” and the dramatic “I,” although this gap can sometimes be wider than that between a real historical person and the persona he or she adopts in a lyrical poem.

<sup>75</sup> I cite throughout the text of “Tintern Abbey” as Wordsworth published it in *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798.

<sup>76</sup> So long as this understanding comes with the caveat that these human evils need not, *pace* Johnston, delimit the connotation of the “music of humanity,” which may well encompass such tragic associations “as poverty, disease, war, and all the irrevocable losses of love and life, irreversible, unmerited, and uncontrollable suffering which are inescapable in the human condition” (p. 7).

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Confucian or Daoist: The Problem of Tao Yuanming's Poetic Self Revisited**

Now that the dichotomy of fact or fiction has lost much of its conceptual force as a model for characterizing the differences between traditional Chinese and Western modes of reading and understanding, especially those that flourished during the bulk of the twentieth century, I proceed in this chapter to exemplify an approach to the writings of Tao Yuanming that is not completely defined by the rules of traditional Chinese criticism, but aims to combine the merits of the two critical traditions, both the ethical and political concerns of the traditional Chinese reader and the structural and rhetorical insights of the modern Western critic. For lack of a better term, I will dub this approach “authorial,” in order to highlight the central role of considerations about the writer in the reading of autobiographical poetry. I begin with an historical survey of the major sources of the debate concerning Tao’s character and thought that emerges from the immense body of criticism that has accrued to Tao’s writings over a period of fourteen centuries. This background survey will prepare the ground for a selective reading of Tao’s poetic corpus in which I attempt not only to reveal the textual origins of the differences in the traditional conception of Tao’s character and thought but to illustrate what appears to me the best way of going about those differences. Admittedly, it will take longer than usual to review the major opinions that feed into the debate that persists to this day, but I want to assure the reader that the lessons contained therein will ultimately prove rewarding for unravelling the secrets of Tao’s poetic self. Now without further ado, let the story begin.

### Foundational Stage: The Six Dynasties Period

Tao's obscurity as a poet in his own age is a commonplace among scholars of traditional Chinese poetry. It is widely acknowledged that Tao's poetic talents were largely ignored or, if noticed, judged inferior to the best writers that flourished during the early medieval period.<sup>1</sup> Yan Yanzhi's (384-456) famous dirge for Tao, for example, only finds worthy of eulogizing the poet's exemplary qualities such as his loving kindness as both son and father, his disregard for rank and salary, his indifference to politics and his uncommon ideals, but does not discuss his literary merits, which are grudgingly dealt with in a single phrase: in regard to "writings, [he] is concerned to get his point across" 文取旨達. Since Yan knew Tao personally, it is difficult to say how much of his admiration for Tao's personality is based on a knowledge of the poet's writings. The exclusive emphasis of the piece on Tao's character may suggest that Yan did not care much to evaluate Tao's literary writings.<sup>2</sup>

For early signs of critical awakening to Tao's poetic talent, we must wait until the early sixth century.<sup>3</sup> Zhong Rong's (468-518) oft-quoted judgment in the *Shi pin* 詩品 ("grading of poets") is no doubt the first decisive event in Tao criticism. Notably, in proclaiming that "each time I look at his writings, I think of his virtuousness," Zhong became the first major critic to combine an acclamation for Tao's literary merit with a praise of his character.<sup>4</sup> But the generic demands the critic faced in grading the poets are such that they preclude any extensive discussion of Tao's personality in relation to his poetry, although some of the words he employed to characterize Tao's literary style—"authentic and classical" 真古, "gracious and agreeable," 婉愜, "simple and straightforward" 質直 etc.—are perfectly in tune with the characterological terms that had wide currency in the early medieval period. Thus, it remains

somewhat unclear as to what facet of Tao's personality as revealed in his writings appeals to Zhong Rong.

It is not until Xiao Tong (501-531), the Crown Prince of Liang known in literary history chiefly for his leading role in the compilation of the *Wen xuan*, that a more elaborate account of Tao the man as can be inferred from his literary output becomes available. Of the two Tao-oriented prose pieces from Xiao's hand, a biography and a preface to the poet's *Collected Works*, it is the latter that deserves special attention here, because the composition of the "Preface" alone, it seems to me, requires a comprehensive consideration of the poet's writings.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, in juxtaposing assessments of the man and the writer: "I delight in his writings, and can hardly put them down. When thinking of his virtue, I regret that I am not his contemporary,"<sup>6</sup> Xiao shared Zhong's double-edged appreciation for Tao, but unlike his predecessor who primarily focused on Tao's literary qualities, the emphasis of Xiao's account is more on the distinctive features of the poet's self-representation in his writings. The persona Xiao presents in the "Preface" is that of a unique sympathizer, endowed with a penetrating vision of what lies behind a recluse's choice of disengagement and his behavioral eccentricities. The oddity of the case, however, is that his insinuations about a distinction between the internal and external notwithstanding, Xiao refrained from a full explanation of what exactly lies behind Tao's deceptive appearance.

For sure it is not wholly gratuitous that Xiao prefaces his treatment of Tao with an extended discussion, packed with subtle textual borrowings and complex historical allusions, about the ethos of reclusion, affirming both its virtuousness and practicality regardless of the political circumstances of the recluse's age. His aim is, presumably, to establish the importance of reclusion, its whys and wherefores, for a genuine understanding of Tao Yuanming. In advancing this agenda, Xiao relies extensively on the tenets and teachings of philosophical

Daoism, so much so that Daoist references permeate almost every statement in this first part of the “Preface.”<sup>7</sup> His central message is clear: wealth, position, and honor are trivial in comparison with the protection of personal integrity and the pursuit of spiritual freedom, an exorbitant desire for the former could jeopardize mental calm and personal safety, and thus, only the sagacious understand the significance of withdrawing resolutely from the world, not to be swayed by sensual pleasures that are concomitant to the acquisition of rank and salary. From this Xiao Tong concludes, in a manner that enables him to transition somewhat puzzlingly to a discussion of Tao:

Therefore, the sage and the wise efface their traces. Some harboring order (*li* 釐) paid respects to the emperor; others dressed in coarse garments carried firewood on their backs.<sup>8</sup> Some struck oars in a clear pond, and others abandoned mechanical tools (*ji* 機) at the bend of the Han. Feelings (*qing* 情) do not lie in the multitude of things (*zhongshi* 眾事); it is through the multitude of things that feelings are forgotten.<sup>9</sup>

My uneasiness about these remarks owes a great deal to their ambiguity. Ostensibly, the act of self-effacement as formulated in this transitional passage is nothing but a reprise of Xiao’s claim in the beginning of the piece: “the sage conceals light; the worthy flees the world.” Here, however, Xiao delicately alters the way he wants the reader to approach his assertions, especially with respect to the term *ji* 跡 (“trace”). Formerly, the statement is to initiate an investigation into the motivation behind patterns of disengagement; now, it seems to be Xiao’s aim to distinguish between “feelings” and “matters,” between, as I understand it, the invisible content of the heart or mind and externally observable actions and behavior. In the previous case, the term “trace” would seem to refer to outward appearances, which the sagacious allegedly conceal in order to procure freedom and security for themselves; here, with the feeling/thing dichotomy, our

understanding of the term seems to drift toward the interior—where feelings and thoughts are located—which is now bracketed with the unknown, a depth to which the observer of external actions has no easy access. In other words, what is at issue here is no longer the concealment and protection of the self from perils in the public sphere, but the unfathomable profundity of something within for which outward “traces” might be a deceptive mask.

The hermeneutic shift that I am underlining here and the ambiguity thus created are further substantiated by Xiao’s use of allusions in the same passage. Here for the first time in the “Preface,” Xiao complicates the established image of the other-worldly recluse with a reference to someone who shows no aversion to getting involved in politics, who instead of turning away from the court, actually goes to seek an interview with the ruler. How is this type of behavior to be understood in its discursive context? If a visit to the emperor constitutes an outer action, an observable “thing,” what could be the “feelings” that lurk behind it? Here we are tempted to construe the phrase in conjunction with the first part of the following couplet, “striking oars in a clear pond.” Notice such interpretive crisscrossing is not grammatically uncommon in what has come to be known, generically, as parallel prose. If the subtext here is, as Yu Shaochu has pointed out, the banishment of Qu Yuan (ca. 343 – ca. 277 BCE) from the court and his subsequent wanderings throughout the state of Chu,<sup>10</sup> Xiao would in fact be incorporating a jarring case of reclusion into an otherwise unproblematic passage, for unlike the other-worldly recluse, Qu’s political attitude is not one of self-centered escapism or weary indifference; his historical image is rather that of a frustrated statesman unable to maintain his principled stand against his enemies at court and prevent his country from a catastrophic destruction.

If these considerations already make the passage somewhat puzzling, the conclusion Xiao draws immediately after does not in any way alleviate our sense of confusion. Again the crux of

the matter hinges on one term *qing*. How does Xiao mean? If we ought indeed to take it to mean “inner feelings,” as I choose to do, how is it that they are consigned to oblivion? Alternatively, if we take *qing* to connote worldly or mundane sentiments, which is not unlikely given its semantic indeterminacy, it would make sense to proclaim that one be relieved of such feelings, especially when the aim is to follow the Daoist way. Be that as it may, how is it then possible to retain the distinction Xiao seems to have set up between “feelings” and “multitude of things,” which are probably just as earthbound and unspiritual as such *qing*? It is in this state of mind that wittingly or not, the author leaves the reader before allowing him or her to proceed to the discursive center of the “Preface,” the bulk of which I translate below:

Some suspect that wine is in every single poem by Tao Yuanming, but as I see it, his intention (*yi* 意) does not lie in wine, but merely expresses itself in wine as a trace (*ji* 跡). His writings are not the common kind, his diction refined and elevated; [his writings are] unrestrained and luminous, and surpass ordinary varieties; rising and falling in a congenial manner, and totally without peer! Traversing white waves, they follow the current; touching cerulean clouds, they soar straight upward. The seasonal matters they speak of are referred to in an easily conceivable way; the inmost feelings they expatiate on are far-ranging and sincere. Further, his virtuous intent (*zhi* 志) knows no rest. At ease with the Dao, he worked arduously to preserve his integrity. He neither viewed the labor of farming as a disgrace nor considered lack of funds a fault. If not someone of great worth and genuine intent (*zhi* 志), someone who follows the vicissitudes of the Dao, who is it that could be likewise? . . . I have said that whoever is capable of reading Yuanming’s writings will dampen their dashing and competitive spirit

and dispel the lowliness and vulgarity of their mind. Through them, the avaricious become morally pure, the cowardly prepared to establish themselves. One will not only be able to tread upon the path of benevolence and righteousness, but to disavow rank and salary as well. Needless it is to take a side tour to Mounts Tai and Hua, or seek from afar the “scribe under the pillar” (i.e. Laozi); [his writings] are conducive to moral teaching (*fengjiao* 風教).

The ambivalence inherent in the preceding passage is still at play here. Assertive though he was regarding Tao’s exemplary qualities, Xiao was nonetheless reticent about what it is in Tao’s interior that enables the poet to embody those qualities. Just like the ambiguous term *qing* earlier, the problem of interpretation now hinges on “intent.” As a loose rendering for the theoretically loaded term *zhi* 志 or *yi* 意, “intent” figures prominently in this short passage, once set in opposition to Tao’s alcoholism as a misleading personality trait, twice introduced in juxtaposition with generalizations about the poet’s virtuous character, but in no case did Xiao specify what constitutes Tao’s intent. If Xiao attains a degree of transparency in enumerating such recurring topics in Tao’s writings as farming and poverty, it nevertheless remains unexplained what it is that enables the poet to overcome the galling sense of shame and the discomfort brought about by poverty. This is probably not the kind of questions that bothered the writer of the “Preface,” for whom the essential message is that Tao exhibits admirable qualities, but from the insinuations that are carefully knit into the text, it is equally evident that Xiao did not stop us from raising such questions as the following: is it because the ideal of reclusion is so indelibly inscribed on the poet’s mind, as Xiao’s preliminary remarks seem to suggest, that it almost becomes a part of his nature to disregard the temptations of wealth, position and honor? Or does it signal an attitude of frustrated resignation more or less in the line of Qu Yuan, as

indicated earlier? In the latter case, personal freedom takes priority over social obligation, not according to a subverted hierarchy of values, but merely because time and circumstance render it impossible to fulfill one's political aspirations.

That such questions are not arbitrarily attached to Xiao's observations but grow out of a scrupulous interrogation of them is further born out by Xiao's concluding remarks. Following the hermeneutical orientation that flourishes in the Han, Xiao asserted that the primary function of Tao's writings is didactic, but was again equivocal about how such moral edification can take place without compromising Tao's transcendent personality as insinuated in the introductory passage of the "Preface." In dismissing the need to consult canonical Daoist texts such as *Laozi* or practice reclusion at secluded natural spots like "Mounts Tai and Hua," Xiao did not mean to say that Tao's writings are in any way opposed to the Daoist creed, but merely that they serve the same edifying aims as the aforementioned practices. This being the case, it is a bit unexpected to hear Xiao proclaim that they also conduce to cultivating benevolence and righteousness and to effecting a moral transformation of the world. It is true that blending distinct value systems thus is not out of tune with the general cultural outlook of early medieval China, but we ought not to underestimate the discursive and practical tensions resulting from the mix. In this connection, Xiao's didacticism gives rise to a paradox central to the thinking about reclusion in the period: the recluse is still made subservient to a political agenda in spite of his aversion toward politics. In Tao's case, we want to ask, is Xiao's somewhat paradoxical conclusion something that we as readers artificially ascribe to Tao's writings? Or is it an organic part of what they are, an empirical fact that we can convincingly point to provided we attend to the subtlety of the text? Keeping these questions in mind will add focus to our subsequent exploration of the changes in Tao's historical image.

### A Moral Turn: The Southern Song

In the Six Dynasties characterizations of Tao Yuanming I have hitherto summarized and commented on Wendy Schwartz rightly discerned the germ of “two dominant poles in later readings of his personality: Tao as moral figure and Tao as aloof recluse.”<sup>11</sup> Although it would be egregiously mistaken to partition Tao’s reception history into neat blocks and sections according to purely conceptual categories—for taken all together, the revisionary opinions set forth by later scholars, editors, and commentators seldom aim at a radical change in critical evaluation, but more often than not serve to modify, enrich, and refine different dimensions of Tao’s image—it is nevertheless true in regarding the Song period as a watershed in the understanding of Tao’s character. Tang writers devoted most of their attention to developing Tao’s reputation as a freewheeling recluse, and when they did become concerned about the poet’s moral character, they sometimes evinced a degree of misunderstanding regarding Tao’s decision to retire.<sup>12</sup> But their differing attitudes toward the poet’s retirement aside, Tang writers in general seemed content to keep within the parameters set by Tao’s representations in both his poems and biographies in standard histories. It is only during the Southern Song (roughly the twelfth century) that the question of Tao’s moral integrity was again at the center of scholarly opinions pertaining to Tao.

Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the pivotal figure in the neo-Confucian movement, played a key role in the revisionary process. Although his casual and scholarly assessments are not without their own complications, they went further than Xiao Tong in at least two aspects: first, he heightened the contradictions implicit in Xiao’s “Preface” by reformulating them in terms of two distinct value systems. For Zhu, although it seems clear that the doctrinal core of Tao’s writings

is Daoism—something he hammered home twice in the extant record of his conversations<sup>13</sup>—Tao's loyal refusal to serve a new dynasty places him securely in the temple of Confucian ethics.<sup>14</sup> For sure, the argument regarding Tao's loyalty to the Jin does not originate with Zhu, but was, as we have seen in the previous chapter, first put forth in the late fifth century by Shen Yue. It is, however, Southern Song scholars like Zhu Xi who recast the terms within a neo-Confucian framework. Due to his seminal role in reshaping the literati culture of later ages, we would do better not to underrate Zhu's influence on the massive hermeneutical shift in which Tao's loyalty to the old dynasty becomes an integral part of his virtuous character and an indispensable key to interpreting his poems, especially those that are not explicitly concerned with contemporary political issues. This, retrospectively, is a process of canonization in which Tao was turned into a moral hero and put on a par with such indelible cultural icons as Qu Yuan, Han Xin, and Zhuge Liang.<sup>15</sup> Whether this be a move in the direction of increased understanding or gross misconception or something else is a subject that we will look further into later.

Zhu's second contribution to understanding Tao's character develops organically from his preoccupation with those Confucian values he helped to shape and consolidate. While keenly aware of the nature/appearance disparity implicit in Xiao's account, Zhu seemed to have no doubt about the public aspirations Tao cherished as a member of the literati. Rather than regarding him as primarily a recluse marginal to the dominant political culture of his age and yet who happened to write good poetry, Zhu traced the affective power of Tao's writings to the poet's anxiety about his inability to execute his political aims and his eagerness for literary immortality. In response to a question regarding Tao's poems relative to the Tang poet Wei Yingwu (737-792), whose writings resemble Tao's in both style and subject matter, Zhu proclaimed,

Tao[’s writings] are indeed energetic. His language is vigorous, but his mind is at ease. Practitioners of reclusion are generally hot-blooded, impetuous people. Tao had high [public] aspirations but was unable [to execute them], and was also fond of fame.

Elsewhere in the same set of conversations, Zhu argued further,

Tao Yuanming’s poems are often said to be placid and serene (*pingdan* 平淡). In my opinion, he is indeed bold and unrestrained (*haofang* 豪放), but bold and unrestrained in an indiscernible way. “Celebrating Jing Ke” is the only piece that reveals his true nature. How it is possible for a placid and serene person to utter something like that!<sup>16</sup>

Again, in this historical survey of critical opinions, the depth and scale of the insight take precedence over considerations of priority. By the time Zhu publicized these observations, the idea that Tao hid his public aspirations under the façade of indifferent reclusion had already been simmering for a century,<sup>17</sup> but it is Zhu who brought it to a boil by not only explaining the issue in characterological terms, but transposing, perhaps unwittingly, what was essentially an assessment of personality to characterizations of language and style. Again, Zhu cannot claim credit for first noticing the discrepancy between what Tao’s writings appear to be and what they actually can do. Northern Song writers like Su Shi (1037-1101) already evinced a profound admiration for the richness and depth of Tao’s writings without losing sight of their apparent blandness.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Zhu followed in their steps, but surpassed them in seeking a temperamental ground for Tao’s underappreciated literary qualities, thus completing the dialectical progression from a relatively simple, straightforward reading of Tao through an informed inspection of his writings back to an enlightened understanding of the writer.

However, Zhu's critique is not the endpoint of a process we might, with the benefit of hindsight, call Tao's Confucianization. He laid the groundwork, initiated new ways of understanding the poet's personality through revisionary readings of hitherto neglected poems like "Celebrating Jing Ke," but still left a doctrinal gap for later Confucian readers to close. Following Zhu Xi's lead in revisiting familiar poems according to a then flourishing philosophical orthodoxy, Zhen Dexiu (1178-1235) worked tirelessly to establish Tao's eligibility as a Confucian hero. Because the numerous examples gathered together in Zhen's summary account will continue to spark scholarly debates, some of which we will review shortly, I translate the bulk of his argument below.

In my opinion, Yuanming's learning derives straight from classical studies. Its manifestation in poetry is a fact that cannot be covered up. The sorrow of "Trees in Bloom" is [the same as] the sigh over the flowing river; the celebration of "Impoverished Gentlemen" is [the same as] the joy of the bowl and the ladle. The last poem in the "Drinking Wine" series has it: "[Fu] Xi and [Shen] Nong departed long before my time; the whole world today has scarcely any genuineness. / Assiduously the old man of Lu [i.e. Confucius] / Tried to fill and patch and purify it again." This is the extent of Yuanming's intelligence. Is it something that scholars of the dark and the void can aspire to? Despite his disregard for official honor and disgrace, his indifference to loss and gain, his genuine air of wise contentment, if we carefully attend to his words, at times they employ an elegiac tone, and are charged with emotion, [which shows Tao] was not one who had no interest in the affairs of the world. Some only knew Tao's not recording reign titles after the *yixi* period proves that he considered it shameful to

serve two dynasties, but failed to perceive that his mind was constantly on the [Jin] royal house. Verily, he had wished to follow in the ways of the duke of Changsha [i.e. Tao Kan, Yuanming's great-grandfather]. Only because it was beyond his power to do that did he choose to retire and live in isolation. Such words as eating ferns and drinking water, and the metaphor involving the *jingwei* bird, woodchips in its beak, trying to fill the sea, are extraordinarily deep and excruciatingly painful, but readers simply neglected them. If thus is Yuanming's intent, how can detractors of fundamental human relationships and those who keep aloof from the teaching of names compare with him?<sup>19</sup>

This marks the completion of Tao's metamorphosis from a high-minded recluse as inferable from Six Dynasties sources to a Confucian hero, whose apparent quietism, untrammelled behavior, and carefree attitudes are merely a camouflage for his loyal sentiments and despair over the part he could envisage himself playing in ameliorating the impact of the moral and political degradation then rampant in his country. Here, within the generic limits of a short preface, is perhaps a more thorough blending of literary interpretation and personality assessment than can be found in any single piece of traditional criticism pertaining to Tao. The cumulative effect of this constant tapping of authorial sources is such that the conclusions thus established about Tao's personality gain an aura of inevitability. That it turns out not to be the case, that instead of having been lodged securely in an evolving critical tradition, these textually based arguments could fuel a new series of debates, more historically self-aware and more scrupulous in the application of the textual method, and that they not only resurge in the twentieth century but have continued to the present, are surely a most fascinating phenomenon in

Tao's historical reception, a phenomenon that by its very existence attests among other things the astonishing elusiveness of Tao's character.<sup>20</sup>

### The Debate Continues<sup>21</sup>

In an influential review (1953) on the Gu Zhi edition of Tao's writings, Zhu Ziqing, a prominent scholar and critic of the early twentieth century, argues, *pace* Confucian readers since the Southern Song, that Daoism, not Confucianism, best represents Tao's beliefs and values.<sup>22</sup> To prove this, Zhu relies basically on two things: the sum of allusions in the Gu Zhi edition, and his own skepticism about preexisting interpretations that emphasize Tao's devotion to the Jin. According to Zhu's count, *Analects* references notwithstanding, Daoist texts such as *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi* are the most important sources for Tao's writings. For Zhu, the orthodox Confucian tradition has only a superficial influence on the poet, an influence confined, as it were, to Tao's youthful fondness for what came to be known as the Confucian canon as, for example, expressed in the sixteenth poem in the "Drinking Wine" series and his "steadfastness in adversity" 固窮, which is, from the very outset of this historical survey, a centerpiece of Tao's reputation. Further, if we factor in Tao's application to the person of Confucius and the central teachings of his particular school of thought of terms that are of an apparently Daoist derivation such as "authentic" 真 and "pure" 淳—see Zhen Dexiu's "Preface" cited earlier—his relationship to classicism becomes all the more suspect.

Zhu's conclusions are far from uncontroversial. They have opened the floodgates of criticism concerning the comparative importance of Confucian and Daoist elements in Tao's thought, a subject of debate that continues among some of the best Tao Yuanming scholars even to this day. In a somewhat belated reply, Donald Holzman put forward a diametrically opposed

assessment to the effect that despite the frequent use of Daoist terminology, a literary mark of the writer's age, Tao remains, "almost uniquely for the men of letters of his time, a strong traditionalist," although in his engagement with traditional Confucianism, the poet exhibited disaffection with conventional Confucian prescriptions for what occupations are appropriate to the literati class.<sup>23</sup> Holzman did not dispute Zhu's figures, but his own reading of Tao's writings convinced him that Daoist borrowings play only a marginal part<sup>24</sup> whereas the teaching of Confucius is central to Tao's thought. There is no need to repeat Holzman's poignant analysis of Tao's poems that either contain explicit references to Confucian texts, most notably the *Analects*, or engage in an oftentimes ironic dialogue with Confucius on the issue of his choosing an agricultural mode of life traditionally thought to be unsuitable for the Confucian scholar. They are mostly accurate and insightful, and may be regarded as a modern upgrade of Zhen Dexiu's opinions.

It is the ideological parameters within which Holzman conducts his inquiry that can potentially become a point of contention. Apparently, Holzman's argument is grounded in his conception of Confucianism as involving first and foremost a commitment to public service in government and only secondarily adherence to a moral code that works hand in hand with one's social obligation. In this view, Tao's brief flirtation with public service proves him a spiritual disciple of Confucius, and his determination to live as a recluse in his late years entails a covert criticism of Confucian prescriptions regarding a traditional scholar's choice of occupation. Given Holzman's openness in handling Tao's classicist leanings, it is something of a surprise to observe his lack of flexibility in broaching the question of the poet's attitude toward Daoism, which signifies for Holzman either the quest for immortality as practiced by followers of, say, the Heavenly Master sect<sup>25</sup> or the philosophical thought of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* that preaches the

existence of an unchanging, undifferentiated Way underlying the phenomenal world. Tao did frequently reject the thought of achieving corporeal immortality by practicing religion-based life-prolonging techniques, nor is it in question that Tao's philosophical musings on man and the universe is for the most part devoid of transcendentalism, as is memorably set forth in such poems as "Body, Shadow, Spirit" 形影神 and "Drinking Alone during Continuous Rains" 連雨獨飲, but the reader may wonder why Holzman denies the poet the freedom to rework distinctively Daoist concepts and values in accordance with his needs and interests, just as Tao is shown to indulge in in coming to terms with the legacy of Confucius.

A comparison of the antithetical judgments by Zhu Ziqing and Holzman will shed useful light on the nature of the problems arising from this Confucian/Daoist dichotomy. Their specific arguments aside, Holzman's informed opinion does not overlap with Zhu's in how it conceptualizes the terms at issue here. It is not just that despite the intellectual historian's familiar classification, the philosophies of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* differ markedly from each other, but that it would be a gross simplification to regard Confucianism as an entirely coherent and consistent system of beliefs, values, and practices untouched by changing historical conditions and circumstances. Eremitism, for example, a type of behavior presented first in the *Analects* as in conflict with the aim and enterprise of Confucius, later develops into an essential component of the classicist tradition, and is even formulated during the Wei and Jin period (roughly the third century) as a suitable ideal for worthies inauspiciously born into an age of political chaos and disintegration.<sup>26</sup> This being the case, Zhu's passing nod of recognition to Tao's expressions of firmness in the face of poverty makes short shrift of the poet's embodiment of a prominent Confucian virtue, consequently tilting his overall assessment of Tao's thought toward the Daoist side. But truth be told, Zhu's reluctance to accord Confucianism its due place in Tao's thought is

grounded in his sensitivity to the problems of a hermeneutical procedure that aims to extravagantly maximize the moral and political potential of Tao's writings according to a narrowly defined moral and ethical orthodoxy. Dependent on a somewhat reductive definition of the essential concerns of either school of thought, Holzman's counterargument has apparently overlooked a key motivation behind Zhu's critique.<sup>27</sup>

To resolve the terminological complications inherent in modern scholarly opinions, Robert Ashmore took a different tack in a recent book-length study that radically shakes up our customary way of broaching the topic.<sup>28</sup> In his refreshingly original perspective, the real issue is no longer the pigeonholing of Tao's thought according to familiar ideological categories such as Confucian and Daoist, but the very problems of using such categories. In order to create a more accurate understanding of what it is Tao is primarily engaged in, Ashmore proposed to investigate the ideological dimension of Tao's poetry by situating it within the discursive framework of the prevailing intellectual tendencies of the Six Dynasties period. The procedure is reciprocal: both to open up the discussion of Tao's attitude toward textual and cultural authorities from the classical past by inquiring about contemporary exegetical characteristics, and then with a clear idea of medieval models of reading and understanding, to zero back in on Tao's own lyric use of the *Analects*, a canonical text that appears from Ashmore's analysis to be central in every way to Tao's poetic project. The benefits of such a procedure are, to name one thing, a raised consciousness that in the case of Tao's thought, such categories as Confucian and Daoist are misleading because they would have been unrecognizable to Jin dynasty classicist scholars whose intellectual energy is largely devoted to harmonizing Confucian and Daoist canons. In the distinctive brand of thought which Ashmore has aptly termed "*xuan*-inflected classicism,"<sup>29</sup> patterns of behavior formerly thought to be anti-Confucian—repeated refusals of offers of

official post, indifference to worldly affairs, a life of solitude, poverty, and self-reliance—are all integrated into a classicist discourse that addresses the concerns of both the public servant and the unworldly scholar. In a culture that simultaneously embraces such diverse modes of literary self-fashioning, it cannot but seem natural to discover in Tao's poems terms, ideas, and beliefs—the notion, for instance, of a succession of ages of historical decline from a state of uncomplicated authenticity, as is made manifest in the twentieth poem of the “Drinking Wine” series—that are of a Daoist derivation. In questioning Zhu Ziqing's conclusion on such grounds, Ashmore improved upon Holzman's argument by not just confirming his opinion about the centrality of the *Analects* to Tao's poems but at the same time evading the touchy problems arising from the terminological fluidity that may prove the Achilles heel of any dichotomizing theory.

Against the ossification of what increasingly appears to be an irreconcilable conflict, Ashmore's study is a real eye-opener. In light of his reconstruction of the cultural atmosphere of Six Dynasties China, it is clear, for instance, that Xiao Tong's introduction of Confucian values and concerns into a “Preface” shot through with ideas from philosophical Daoism ought no longer to baffle us as an intellectual anomaly. This is so mainly because the formation of such loose and conventional criteria as Confucian and Daoist seldom has any intrinsic value, but is often contingent upon the sociopolitical conditions of a particular age, especially one in which the centrifugal elements in a prevailing intellectual culture can be manipulated in the service of open ideological confrontation with massive practical consequences. The clash between the “teaching of names” and “naturalism” in the early third century, for instance, is one such era-specific phenomenon, which gives rise to the philosophical syncretism known retrospectively as *xuan*-studies. So is the neo-Confucian movement under the leadership of Zhu Xi, the doctrinal

exclusivity of which is, as I will shortly attempt to show, at the root of many interpretive issues pertaining to Tao's writings.

Before I proceed, a comment is in place as to why in my opinion Ashmore's conclusions are no final ruling on the question of what constitutes the principal intellectual feature of Tao's poems. My reasons are twofold: first, while the merits of his historicist method are apparent, Ashmore's investigations scarcely showed any alertness to the perils and limitations that attend historicism. Does the hermeneutical and philosophical discourse known as *xuan* constitute an adequate intellectual frame for the study of Tao's thought? While it can be very revealing to connect an author's thought to the prevailing cultural outlook of the age, we had better not overlook the dialectical character of this relationship and deny the writer a certain degree of intellectual autonomy in coming to terms with the most pressing problems he faced. To what extent, we may ask, is the *xuan*-scholar's syncretist exegesis of the classics relevant to our understanding of Tao's poetics? In contending for Tao's indebtedness to his age, is it enough to just consider *xuan*-styles of canonical interpretation? For a more accurate picture of the cultural milieu in which to situate Tao, is it not better to also consider the outlook on life and nature and patterns of behavior of the lettered class at that time? After all, the *xuan*-movement is not without searing internal disagreement as it unfolded in the early medieval period. The exegetical syncretism of such *xuan*-scholars as Wang Bi (226-249), He Yan (d. 249), and Guo Xiang (d. ca. 312), for instance, contrasts starkly with the freewheeling spirit of Ruan Ji (210-263) and Ji Kang (223-262), whose iconoclastic views on the Confucian tradition, whose espousal of philosophical Daoist ideals and religious Daoist practices, are every inch a strand of the *xuan*-movement as the philosophical innovations of contemporary classicist scholars. In this regard, it is perhaps not

entirely gratuitous that Ashmore's fleeting reference to Tao's "Biography of Master Five Willows" 五柳先生傳 in the "Introduction" treats only the *xuan*-inflected hermeneutical model—as encapsulated in the term *huiyi* 會意 ("a meeting of minds")—that the titular character allegedly follows, while suspending any discussion of his untrammelled qualities, drunkenness in particular, that are equally apparent in this thinly veiled autobiographical sketch.

Connected with this defect in the framing strategy is a general lack of concern at the textual level about Tao's engagement with sources of possibly equal importance as the *Analects*. In order to make a compelling case for the inherently comparative claim that Tao is primarily a practitioner of classicism, albeit of one tinged with the philosophical, exegetical, and ideological innovations of third-century *xuan*-scholars, one must also try to account for the evidence that those opposed to Ashmore might cite as proving the contrary. Thus, it is no coincidence, to name one telling case of absence in Ashmore's study, that not a single mention is made of Tao's most famous prose-piece, the "Tale of the Peach-Blossom Spring" 桃花源記, along with its companion-poem, in which the poet set forth what is commonly understood to be a Daoist vision of human existence: an ethereal utopia where people of all ages enjoy a peaceful rural existence in harmony with nature, without ruler, government, taxation, turmoil, any sort of social restraints or hierarchies that always plague a politicized world.<sup>30</sup> This, by the way, does not prove, as Holzman somewhat grudgingly confessed, that Tao's Daoism, if any, "is the Daoism of the Golden Age:"<sup>31</sup> that is, marked by the longing for an age of innocence and spontaneity set in the remote past and lost through the invention and implementation of social institutions. Nay, if we attend carefully to Tao's language, his debt to Daoist texts is by no means confined to this nostalgic vision of anarchism. Notably, neither Holzman nor Ashmore took care to consider Gu Zhi's findings about Tao's source texts. Are Tao's references, intended or not, to *Zhuangzi* and

*Liezi* as identified in Gu Zhi's commentary—upon which Zhu Ziqing's argument partially depends—all marginal? Should they be negligible simply because Tao did also draw extensively on the *Analects*?

Just consider Tao's preoccupation with the notion of *hua* 化 (“change,” “flux,” “transformation”), a concept so central to Daoist cosmology that we had better not belabor its relevance to the thought of, say, *Zhuangzi*. With no intention to be exhaustive, I produce a concordance for this term, following the order of appearance in received editions.<sup>32</sup> These occurrences will illustrate nicely the extent to which the concept persists in Tao's thought.

a. “Body, Shadow, and Spirit” 形影神:

Plunge yourself in the waves of the great *transformation*,  
With neither joy nor fear. (2.67)

b. “Returning to dwell in the country” 歸園田居:

Human life is like a *changing* illusion,  
In the end it goes to nothingness. (2.86)

c. “Written on the first day of the fifth month to answer a poem by Registrar Dai” 五月旦作和戴主簿:

In the world's *flux*, there is safety and danger,  
To follow out one's intent is no uneven course. (2.121)

d. “Drinking alone during continuous rains” 連雨獨飲:

My bodily frame has long since been *changing*,  
If my heart is alive, what more is there to say? (2.125)

e. “Seeing off a guest at General Wang's banquet” 於王撫軍座送客:

Our feelings change amid a myriad *transformations*. (2.151)

- f. “At the end of the year, answering a poem by Attendant Zhang” 歲暮和張常侍:

Failure and success do not concern me,

My sadness arises from the world’s *flux*. (2.167)

- g. “Mourning for my cousin Zhongde” 悲從弟仲德:

Into obscurity you rode [the carriage of] *change*,

Never till the end of day to take bodily form again. (2.175)

- h. “Passing through Qu’e, when I first became adjutant to the *Zhenjun* General” 始作鎮軍參軍

經曲阿:

For the present I submit to the world’s *flux*; (3.180)

- i. “Returning to my old home” 還舊居:

I constantly fear, when the great *transformation* comes to an end,

My vigor has not yet come to decline. (3.216)

- j. “Suffering a fire in the sixth month of the year *wushen*” 戊申歲六月中遇火:

While my body fades in accordance with *change*,

My spirit still remains at ease. (3.219)

- k. “The ninth day of the ninth month of the year *yiyou* (409)” 乙酉歲九月九日:

A myriad *changes* follow on each other,

Man’s life, is it not laborious? (3.224)

- l. “Reading the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*” 讀山海經:

Being one with things now, without a care,

*Transformed*, there ought to be no regret. (4.419)

m. “Back Home!” 歸去來兮辭:

Thus, riding *change*, I go to my end,

Happy in my destiny, why should I doubt any more! (5.461)

Needless to say, the idea that the world is in constant flux is not unique to Daoism, but rooted in Chinese cosmological thinking that can be traced all the way back to the *Yi jing*. But to develop from this fundamental observation a mentality that conceives of death not as something to be mourned, but something to be calmly accepted, sometimes even to be joyfully celebrated, as the inevitable process of nature, of which mankind is an integral part, is a distinctive contribution of *Zhuangzi*. This transvaluation of death, as it were, is very much in operation in the above-quoted lines. Nine times out of ten, the immediate context is Tao’s philosophical musings on human mortality and how to come to terms with it. Much as Tao would like to bemoan bodily decay and the scourge of death (e.g. b, f, g, i), much as we want to explain away these recurring usages as commonplace notions that had long been in circulation in the early medieval period, much as we hesitate to treat them as deliberate lexical borrowings from a distinct lineage of texts, there is no denying that in more than one instance, especially when the intellect is passionately at work (e.g. a, d, j, m), Tao found a way to tame his tragic sensibility and judiciously reconcile himself with the inescapable in a manner utterly compatible with the teachings of *Zhuangzi*. Building on the evidence listed here, if we go further to incorporate instances where Tao engaged in reflections of a similar sort but in an altered language, when we take into account cases where lexical loans and allusions to *Zhuangzi* are more explicit (e.g. the fifth of “Miscellaneous Poems” 雜詩), when we also look out for other manifestly Daoist themes such as the unspeakable character of ultimate reality, and the mystical transcendence of the self and things, and the evening out of

differences in value, I doubt if a compelling case cannot also be made for the central importance of a text like *Zhuangzi* for understanding Tao's thought.

These considerations do not, however, prove Ashmore wrong. They only serve to qualify the centrality of the *Analects* to Tao's autobiographical project, but in casting doubt on the exclusivity of Ashmore's approach, they also affirm the soundness of his argument that the umbrella terms in which the latest round of debate is couched—Confucian and Daoist—aggravate rather than clear up the confusion surrounding the prevailing tendency of Tao's thought. Also they ensure that a syncretist position that considers Confucianism and Daoism equally important would not work either in that it perpetuates the contrast between two value systems that is the very source of the problem. To find our way out of such ideological difficulties, the best and safest route is through Tao's writings.

#### Back to the Poems

Let me first try to formulate our central question in a way that is uncluttered by the critical baggage inherited from learned readers of earlier times. The one event in Tao's life that shall provide a starting point for and anchor our inquiry is Tao's homecoming in 405, a year in which he resolutely resigned his last post and returned to his farm, this time for good. While the actual way of life Tao chose in the end is not in doubt, there is no agreement as to his motives, which bear heavily on our understanding of a great many poems he wrote in temporary or permanent retirement. In an agrarian society, a recluse can choose to live away from the center of political activity for many different reasons, ranging from infatuation with the simplicity and delight of a rural existence to antipathy toward the inherent ills of politics. In Tao's case, neither seems to make an adequate explanation since, if his poems constitute a reliable basis of judgment,

Tao not only enjoyed the peace and pleasures in the country but had also thrown himself into politics several times in his middle years. The real question, as Xiao Tong has poignantly posed in the “Preface,” is this: how is it possible for Tao to live in relative contentment as a recluse? What, psychologically, sustains Tao’s calm acceptance of poverty and the discomfort brought about by his voluntary unemployment? Is it chiefly to be explained by his pursuit of individual freedom and happiness or by his despair over public affairs and of fulfilling his political aims?<sup>33</sup> Or put differently, did the reclusive Tao manage to consign to oblivion and thereby transcend the world of public affairs he had fled or was he still emotionally invested in the unfolding of, and possibly in the part he could play in, the political drama that was to end with the fall of the Jin dynasty?<sup>34</sup> Of course, the issue need not be as clear-cut as I put, but it is my considered opinion that while both may be powerfully present in the consciousness of the late Tao, it is unlikely that they are always in stable equilibrium. In the absence of other firsthand evidence, Tao’s writings seem to be the only short-cut to a clear picture of this psychological dynamic.

One thing we can point to with a certainty that is not impaired by any shade of doubt is that politics, or Tao’s participation in politics, is consistently kept out of his poems, especially where it has every reason to appear. The piece we discussed at some length in the previous chapter, “Travelling through Tukou,” is a prominent example in this regard. Four years before deciding to withdraw permanently to his farmstead, Tao was not yet prepared to abandon his political aims as were appropriate for a Confucian scholar to pursue. Yet just as the notoriously elaborate title allows us to expect some sort of revelation as to the poet’s mission for the journey or the aims he had personally hoped to fulfill, the concluding part of the poem does precisely the opposite: it induces us to believe that the journey he was embarking on and the promising political career it meant for him actually contradict his aims of life and inmost desires. A salient

linguistic sign of this attitudinal turn, as I have argued previously, is Tao's employment of negation, the result being that Tao's reluctance and nostalgia are played out in counterpoint to his bodily movement that carries him ineluctably toward a western center of political activity.

The same compositional strategy is to be observed in the poem dated to 404, a year before his permanent reclusion, as Tao "Passed through Qu'e, when he first became adjutant to the *Zhenjun* General" 始作鎮軍參軍經曲阿.<sup>35</sup> It begins with the same nostalgic gaze at his youthful love for music and learning and at his contentment in poverty, shifts similarly in the middle lines to a description of the journey, yet, unlike "Travelling through Tukou," where the poet still seemed to enjoy a moment of calm and tranquility in contemplation of a night scene, no sooner has his journey begun here than his homesickness kicks in in all its intensity. The censorship of the journey's explicit purpose is so thorough that rather than recalling rank and honor, as it previously had, the situation Tao found himself in now is conceived of as an unpleasant phase of bodily bondage that belongs in the universal process of transformation that the world is, which shall eventually bring him back home. Admittedly, the self-denial with respect to his engagement in politics is less direct and straightforward as in the earlier poem, yet the negation is no less real, but permeates every expression of remorse, weariness, and nostalgia in the second half of "Passing through Qu'e."

Does this kind of negation prove Tao's antipathy to politics? Probably. Does it thus tip the scales of our inquiry in favor of the pursuit of personal freedom and happiness as the only surviving key to understanding the motivation behind the poetic compositions of the mature Tao? Not yet. On the contrary, if Freudian psychoanalysis is any guide, as appears to be confirmed in this case by our everyday experience, the gestures of denial and disavowal in the examples cited are nothing but a way of taking cognizance of a repressed idea that is making its way into the

conscious mind without disrupting the latter's normal functioning. Because of this, they do not combine to discount the poet, nor invalidate the explicit content of his assertions, but provide a psychological explanation for the strength of Tao's longing for a way of life that is untrammelled by worldly cares. The battle he fought is a precarious one between word and deed, one in which his inmost feelings assert themselves against and are contradicted by his externally observable actions. We empathize with the writer and are touched by his avowal precisely because of our awareness of the difficulty of his position and of the dilemma he faced in coming to terms with politics.

Thus whoever wishes to demonstrate the primacy of individual freedom and domesticity in Tao's psychological makeup will find it necessary to eschew the Freudian paradox about the workings of the human mind. If what is explicitly negated and what is explicitly affirmed are to a certain extent two sides of the same coin, there seems no other way of getting out of the double bind than to find proof of Tao's indifference to politics. Intuitively, such proof would not be easy to obtain since if any, it has to meet not only the requirement that it treats Tao's involvement in public affairs as a matter of interest, but also that the poet exhibit full self-control in speaking about it. But when we know where to look, we are bound to be surprised.

The long preface to "Back Home!" is just such a case in point. Because Tao's tone and style in narrating the circumstances of his appointment as magistrate of Pengze and the reasons for his quick resignation are directly relevant to our assessment of his public attitude vis-à-vis his private aims, I give a full translation as follows.

My family was poor and could not fully depend on plowing and planting for subsistence. Young children filled my house, but in the jar was no store of grain. To make a living I did not have the means. Many of my relatives and friends

urged me to become a local official. Relieved, I felt a stirring in my heart, but had no way to get it. It so happened that there was trouble in the four quarters [of the country]; the feudal lords showed their goodness by their loving generosity. My uncle considered me to be in financial distress; so I was appointed to a small town. At the time the country was still in a state of turbulence; my heart shrank from distant service. Pengze was a hundred *li* from home, and the glutinous rice from the public fields is more than enough to meet my needs;<sup>36</sup> so I sought the post. A few days later, I was moved by a longing to go home. How so? The spontaneity of my nature could not be forced and coerced. Pressing as hunger and cold were, going against myself would make me ill. Whenever I engaged in human affairs, it was always for the mouth and belly that I submitted myself to toil. Thus sad and emotionally distressed, I was deeply ashamed on account of my former life ideals, hoping that in a year, I would gather up my skirt and go away by night. Soon after, my sister, Madame Cheng, died in Wuchang. My feelings required I hurry there; I extricated myself from the post. From mid-autumn to winter, I had been in office for more than eighty days. I availed myself of the situation to follow my wish, and named the piece “Back Home!” The eleventh month of the year *yisi* [405].<sup>37</sup>

As already noted, 405 is a pivotal year in Tao’s chronology, as it marks the beginning of his permanent reclusion, the decisive factor in the construction of his historical image. Of particular interest here is the statement, in which the author’s nature—i.e. what Tao believed truly defines who he is—is pitted against the pressing needs of the body. To surmount the potential threat of a ruptured self, “spontaneity,” the will and freedom to execute one’s wishes, is prioritized over the need to lift himself out of indigence and starvation, which Tao managed to do, now for the last

time, by undertaking what he evasively designated as “human affairs” and by enslaving himself for the sake of his “mouth and belly.” In this comparative judgment, in the manifest turnings of his thought, negation still appears to be a dominant linguistic feature. Yet, this time, it is more of a straightforward statement of a difficult decision than a marker of Freudian repression, simply because elsewhere in the preface, Tao gave the negative element—“hunger and cold” and “human affairs”—such a direct, emphatic, and explicit treatment. Although it is a bit hasty to conclude that at this point Tao was entirely indifferent to public affairs, his preference for individual freedom and domesticity is plain and unmistakable. If previously the source of Tao’s frustrations was his temporary inability to align aim and act, the feeling of resignation as brought forth in the preface and the exhilaration that permeates every line of the ensuing poem take root precisely in a newly regained sense of alignment, in the joy and consolation resulting from the achievement of self-unity.

Nevertheless, we must be wary of dismissing too soon Tao’s public concerns as totally irrelevant after 405. Given the haziness of Tao’s description of the political situation, it would seem that the role the public played in his consciousness is at most marginal. While this may very well be true,<sup>38</sup> we must take the prefatory account with a grain of salt, mainly because the image of a unified self is at the same time an aesthetic construct, whose main function in the poem is to serve as the leading sentiment that is to govern its every movement. If disturbances in the public realm are merely a faint background for Tao’s passionate avowal that is to follow in the lyric proper, to what extent is the year 405 or thereabouts to be understood as the tipping point in terms of the wrestling between the poet’s private ideals and public aspirations?

Two later compositions are especially revealing. The first is the nineteenth poem in the famous “Drinking Wine” series. In the previous chapter, I have cited its opening lines in

investigating the set of problems pertaining to Tao's chronology. Now is the time to look at the poem in its entirety in order to find the key to understanding Tao's political stance. The "Drinking Wine" poems record Tao's general philosophical reflections on life and fate; they do so by intermingling snippets of Tao's country life with commentary on the inevitability of reclusion as his chosen way of life. Although the poems unfold in a way that is not entirely haphazard—Poems 1 and 2, for example, both concern vicissitudes of life, as the destiny of earlier personages attests—the poet seemed to have no preconceived plan for their arrangement, as he informed us in the short preface. Poem 19 gives a retrospective overview of Tao's life until the moment of writing.<sup>39</sup> Its main interest for us lies in the neat temporal structure, akin to that of "Travelling through Tukou," which Tao imposed on an otherwise amorphous mass of biographical material marked by constant geographical displacement as a result of his public service in his middle years. Echoing in the opening lines his proclamation in the long preface to "Back Home!" that he took up a post in the government for no other reason than meeting the needs of his body and family, Tao now conceived of his life as pivoting on the crucial moment of his resolute withdrawal from the political realm, which he vaguely hinted at in the following couplet

遂盡介然分  Then I fulfilled my lonely and uncommon destiny,<sup>40</sup>

拂衣歸田里  Shook my robe and returned to my village fields.

Why did Tao refer to his public experience, which was no doubt a major theme of his active years and part of which he revealed to us in the title of several poems composed during those years, in such a cursory manner? Was he constructing an image of himself as averse by temperament, or at least indifferent, to worldly affairs, an image he could then use to guide future understanding of who he was? This is not unlikely, but must be tempered by other

considerations of equal importance. A main conclusion we have reached in the first chapter concerns the danger of looking for a perfect congruity between life and the representation of life. To develop a three-dimensional understanding of the significance of his omission, we also need to examine it intrinsically. If in a middle couplet Tao was suspiciously quiet about his political activity in the years leading up to his permanent reclusion, he was no less evasive in the same poem about his experience as a recluse, on which he only filled us in elsewhere in his writings. Indeed, it is evident from the concluding lines of the poem—“The world’s paths are wide and far-reaching, / which is why Yang Zhu stopped. / Though no matter of “scattering money,” / My cloudy wine may be relied on”<sup>41</sup>—that the writer’s main focus is not on his public service per se, but on the difficulty of and his resoluteness in completing the act of disengagement. It would thus suggest not only that Tao would like the reader to view him primarily as a recluse but that he also saw himself this way, that the whole meaning of his life derives from his disengagement from public service and his return to a more natural way of life.

The second piece, “In Sacrifice for Myself” 自祭文, will wind the clock forward another decade or so to 427, the year of Tao’s death. Like the “Drinking Wine” poem, the central part of this piece is also a sweeping overview of Tao’s life, as he looked back virtually from his deathbed. A quick comparison of the two pieces will show the shift in the author’s political stance in his late years. The marginalization of political activity that we saw in the poem just quoted is being carried to such an extreme that no trace of it is now to be found. Instead, the sacrificial piece paints a vivid and powerfully stirring portrait of an uncommon personality, as Tao also did, for example, in the autobiographical sketch “The Master of Five Willows,” who could heave a deep sigh of relief for being able to say toward the end of his life that he had lived out his years in accordance with his long-cherished ideals. One may certainly argue that the

writer was putting on a mask here, that his avowal does not quite square with certain well-known facts about his life, that we cannot but think of him as consciously eliding them in order to construct a problematic, if not utterly misleading, self-image by which he wished to be remembered in later ages. These considerations all seem valid to a certain extent—there can be little doubt that Tao was an intensely self-obsessed writer, as is evidenced by the peculiar act of writing a sacrificial piece in commemoration of himself—yet they do not amount to accusations of deceitfulness and bad faith. After all, had he wished, Tao may have easily pulled the rug from under his misguided accusers by withholding certain writings of his that to all appearances constitute the only textual ground for suspecting his sincerity. For an unprejudiced assessment of the situation, we must try to understand his omission in the context of Tao's adaptation of the elegy as a literary genre, which requires the writer not only mourn the death of an important person, but praise and glorify the dead.<sup>42</sup>

All things considered, it seems reasonable to conclude that despite the wide disparity in time and culture, Tao was an intriguingly modern writer, modern on account of his recognition that the self is a composite entity liable to fragmentation in confronting society. In many of his writings, he presented himself consistently as a person temperamentally opposed to the world, proving by the choices he made that if it happens the world enters into a direct conflict with the self, he would favor, though not without some self-sacrifice, his spontaneous nature over his social concerns.

“Tears flowing, I harbor sighs within”

Things, however, are not as crystal-clear as we'd like them to be. Otherwise, it would be incomprehensible how Tao's political stance becomes a long-standing controversy that it has. To

make the tentative argument a conclusive one, it is necessary that we face the main challenge posed by many Song readers who were convinced that in spite of his decision to live as a recluse from 405 onward, Tao's writings were still primarily politically motivated, that his nonchalance a mere façade behind which is hidden his political loyalty. Their single most important piece of evidence, it turns out, is a late poem somewhat misleadingly titled "On Wine" 述酒.<sup>43</sup> For about six hundred years, this obscure poem did not provoke any response from Tao's readers. Even the learned Northern Song scholar Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), remembered in the history of traditional Chinese poetry in part for his obsession with the use of literary sources, admitted failure to understand it.<sup>44</sup> It was not until the early twelfth century, according to our records, that someone named Han Ju 韓駒, also a poet and scholar, felt confident to announce the central theme of the piece. Interpreting it as an authorial response to political events that took place in Tao's post-retirement years, Han Ju set future readers on a journey toward greater success in weaving together an increasingly complex subtext for Tao's obscure allusions. Thanks to their herculean effort, we can now speak with a fair amount of certainty that the poem was primarily inspired by the major events, chiefly Liu Yu's political campaigns and his gradual rise to power, that led to the abdication in 420 of the last emperor of Eastern Jin and the assassination of him the following year, all of which Tao lived to witness. This newfound historical context within which all subsequent interpretations must take place has served many traditional readers as the chief justification for their argument about Tao's so-called "loyalist rage" 忠憤 against Liu Yu, founder of the new dynasty. In this view, the poem's obscurity, rather than being an obstacle for the orthodox political reader, now merely confirms their premise, since as a veiled criticism of contemporary political issues, it cannot but be so. My intention is thus to assess this hermeneutic

position through a more thorough examination of the textual evidence. But first, a full translation, with detailed explanatory notes.

	述酒	On Wine <sup>45</sup>
	重離照南陸	Double <i>li</i> shines over the southern land; <sup>46</sup>
	鳴鳥聲相聞	Singing birds hear each other's tones.
	秋草雖未黃	Although autumn plants have not turned yellow,
4	融風久已分	The gentle breeze has long since gone. <sup>47</sup>
	素礫晶修渚	White gravel glistens on long isles;
	南嶽無餘雲	Over the southern peak, no cloud remains.
	豫章抗高門	Yuzhang took a stand against the lofty gate; <sup>48</sup>
8	重華固靈墳	Chonghua only [found himself] in a sacred grave. <sup>49</sup>
	流淚抱中嘆	Tears flowing, I harbor sighs within,
	傾耳聽司晨	And incline my ears for [the call of] morning's herald.
	神州獻嘉粟	The holy land has offered auspicious grain; <sup>50</sup>
12	西靈為我馴	Nomads of the west have submitted to us. <sup>51</sup>
	諸梁董師旅	As Zhuliang became commander of the troops,
	芊勝喪其身	Mi Sheng lost his life. <sup>52</sup>
	山陽歸下國	Shanyang was assigned an inferior kingdom,
16	成名猶不勤	In perfecting his name, he was not diligent indeed. <sup>53</sup>
	卜生善斯牧	Divining his life, he approved of this herdsman's post,

- 安樂不為君                   And was content and pleased to abandon his rulership.<sup>54</sup>
- 平王去舊京                   King Ping left the former capital;
- 20 峽中納遺薰                   Xia received his surviving fragrance.<sup>55</sup>
- 雙陵甫雲育                   Just as cultivation began on the twin ridges,
- 三趾顯奇文                   The three-footed [crows] revealed wondrous patterns.<sup>56</sup>
- 王子愛清吹                   The prince delighted in pure panpipe-playing,
- 24 日中翔河汾                   In broad day he soared over the River and Fen.<sup>57</sup>
- 朱公練九齒                   Lord Zhu engaged in life-prolonging practices,
- 閑居離世紛                   Living in retirement from the world's troubles.<sup>58</sup>
- 峨峨西嶺內                   Bounded by the high and lofty range in the west,
- 28 偃息常所親                   To lie down and rest is always dear to me.
- 天容自永固                   Heaven's countenance is itself eternal and fixed,
- 彭殤非等倫                   Pengzu and he who dies in infancy are no match.<sup>59</sup>

There is little doubt that the poem's language is meticulously coded. While a literalist reader might not have too much trouble taking on the first three couplets, he will quickly arrive at a dead-end as he forges ahead, especially to the next couplet, which for many is the key to unraveling the poem.<sup>60</sup> Here the image of an ancient ruler's grave is juxtaposed with that of a powerful military leader, enigmatically referred to by a temporary title of his, "[taking] a stand against the lofty gate," presumably, of the imperial palace. Taking the initial term Yuchang to be a proper noun, as the majority of traditional readers did, immediately opens up the possibility of reading the whole piece as an allegory of Liu Yu's toppling of Eastern Jin. The desire for

coherence and transparency, then, plunges the reader into an increasingly self-conscious hunt for an ever-expanding historical basis for the poem. The prospect thus opened up is pretty mind-blowing. As a result, every preceding line (lines 1-6), which appears to be nothing but an innocent depiction of a natural landscape, now acquires an unforeseen political significance. Line 1, for example, rather than being a picture of a tract of land sparkling in bright sunlight, becomes a cryptic reference to the revival of the Jin dynasty during Emperor Yuan's reign (317-322), as the term which I translated as "double *li*" becomes a pun on the name of the ancestor from whom the Jin rulers were said to descend. By the same token, the chirping of the birds in line 2 becomes an emblem of the excellent service and assistance afforded by loyal, conscientious ministers in the early years of the Jin revival. The next couplet, in this reading, would seem not only to serve as the indicator of a seasonal shift, but to insinuate the decline and imminent fall of the Jin. The same can be said of the third couplet. While glittering stones and the unclouded hill would seem to sharpen the contours of a quiet summer scene, now, in light of the following couplet, they merely portend the tragic end of a dynasty. When the poem's focus finally falls on the writer's poetic self—"Tearing flowing, I harbor sighs within" (l. 9)—after a long string of political innuendos and rhetorical maneuvering, we almost feel able to share the excitement, when the discovery was still new, of the Song readers who thought they had established the poem's hidden political foundation.

This wave of optimism that has swept over the opening passage, however, could easily carry the unwary reader into dangerous waters. While it is a precious insight that the motivations for the poem be sought in contemporary politics, the poem is, regardless of the weight of the political readings, no conclusive evidence of Tao's loyalty to the Jin. If we attend carefully to the poem's larger organizing patterns, if we refrain from seeing the poem through the lens of what is

at best a good guess on the significance of a single couplet, a different understanding will emerge. Those structural patterns are chiefly to be observed in the recurring allusions (lines 7-8, 11-12, 21-22), obscure as they are, to Liu Yu's rise to power and its implications for the Jin ruler. These reoccurrences would suggest a tripartite division of the poem. The opening passage (lines 1-10), as they build toward the emotional climax in line 9, are in this reading a skillfully coded description of the circumstances that have elicited a response from the poet, which the poem is; the next eight lines trace in the broadest outline the spiraling of events toward a political crisis, so shamefully resolved that Tao could hardly help but make his own voice heard in various veiled references; the remaining 12 lines comprise the last unit, which review the political situation the poet found himself in and shifted the focus back to his poetic self. All three passages furnish useful material for, but none of them alone is adequate to meet the need of, evaluating Tao's political stance. We must take them together and treat them as an uninterrupted whole.<sup>61</sup>

Notably, in this larger perspective we are confronted with two apparently contradictory images of Tao's poetic self: one, emotionally distressed, who could not stop shedding tears at the turn of events that led to the fall of the dynasty as symbolized by the death of the last emperor—the favorite of political readers in the line of Han Ju as previously cited; the other, enamored of the joy and comfort of a reclusive existence, who voluntarily fled the world's disturbances in pursuit of good health and inner peace, which has been a centerpiece of Tao's stock image that is still very much alive today. Which of the two represents the authentic Tao? This, we remember, is the guiding question that has so far directed our search for understanding. Since they are both an integral part of the poem, we will not obtain a satisfactory answer without revisiting the poem in some detail.

The argument we can easily refute from the outset is that those signs of Tao's emotional investment in contemporary affairs of state—his “tears” and “sighs”—can only be explained by reference to his devotion to the Jin ruler. These signs, as Xiao Tong might have pointed out, are mere outward “traces,” whose underlying significance is not immediately clear. This is not just due to the poet's revelation elsewhere of the personal values he held most dear to his heart, but a conclusion we can draw after a careful weighing of internal evidences. In none of the oblique references to Liu Yu's political ascendancy in the entire poem, it is interesting to note, did Tao evince any readiness to condemn him as a usurper; rather, all things considered, the poet seemed to put the blame exclusively on the last Jin emperor both for not striving to make a good name for himself and for voluntarily abandoning his responsibility as ruler of the country. It is simply inconceivable that a loyal subject would blame the rightful ruler and yet not leave a single word of criticism for the power-seeker who not only forced him to abdicate but murdered him the following year.

Would things have looked more promising, then, for the orthodox political reader if he had, instead, adopted a broader historical perspective in which Tao would be able to fault the last Jin emperor and not jeopardize his own reputation as a loyal subject, a perspective in which the abdicator would be held culpable when his actions are measured against the accomplishments of the dynasty's founders? It is not unlikely if we take the poem's opening couplet to be oblique praise of Emperor Yuan, the founder of Eastern Jin. That Tao did not stop at line 18 but went on to define his own life attitude in such deplorable times raises hope that it is perhaps inadvisable for us to hold our hands up too soon.

The allusion in line 19 to a ruler losing political control over part of the country's former territories and reestablishing power after a mass exodus to the east may appear to be a simple

return to the implicit theme of the opening couplet. Tao's readers have not given sufficient attention to the implications of the allusive network Tao managed to construct in the last part of the poem. The probing question we need to ask here is whether the reprise in lines 19-22 of the political drama that unfolded in Tao's last years has any intrinsic value. Surely the historical precedent cited in line 19 is not meant to be a simple word game in which the writer could display his poetic wit or historical knowledge, nor is it simply an allegory that has meaning explicable only by the political issues of Tao's own times. While an adequate understanding of the passage is dependent on the political context within which it is situated, the poem also provides a larger perspective whereby the political situation, which had struck an emotional chord with the poet, would lose much of its urgency and affective power. In shrouding the distressing present in the mist of an analogous past, Tao might imply that he was now be able to watch this drama in a more detached way, as a simple though probably deplorable repetition of history. History itself furnishes ample evidence that political stability is a rare boon, that dynastic shift an unavoidable evil that seems to originate in the human will to fame and power.<sup>62</sup> In such politically chaotic times, it was clearly the poet's decision to sacrifice his public aspirations for the sake of individual safety and happiness.

We are now in a position to address the issue of Tao's emotional reaction in line 7. From the previous analysis it should be clear that Tao's tears and sighs are signs not of anger, but more naturally, of sadness and mourning. Although in the absence of the poet's own confession, no one can speak with absolute certainty about the exact cause of these feelings, a careful investigation into the allusive structure of the last section of the poem does enable us to make a good guess. In his late years, Tao was generally indifferent to the world, determined to lead a secluded life of his own, but his permanent retirement did not cause him to lose all interest in the

affairs of the world. When these affairs become excruciatingly painful, when they played out in a way that not only contradicts his long-cherished ideals but became unbearably repugnant to him, he did occasionally break his silence on politics as in this poem. This occasional suspension of reticence on the poet's part, however, should not be confused with any vested interest in political issues of the day. What he felt sorry about, what he could not but burst into tears for, was perhaps not so much the fall of a dynasty per se as the moral degradation that it symbolized. Throughout his life, insofar as we can tell from his writings, Tao remained a believer in the existence of a golden age in remote times from which he felt eternally separated. There is reason to believe that this nostalgic vision contributes considerably to his ability to transcend the most pressing concerns of his times. Apparently, Tao had succeeded in convincing the world of the unworldly aspirations he cherished as a recluse, but in order for that image to continue to live on in all its vividness in the memory of his readers, we must recognize how far he had thus travelled, must try to imagine the difficulty of the choice he had made and the grueling sense of failure he might have suffered as a public servant. Of course none of this would have been possible without the cumulative effort of traditional reader-critics. It is no doubt their penetrating, if also often erratic, insights that give me confidence in delving into the depths of Tao's writings.

## Endnotes to Chapter Two

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<sup>1</sup> The sources often cited as evidence of this opinion include, among others, Shen Yue's concluding remarks in "Biography of Xie Lingyun" in *Song shu* (67. 1778-9), Liu Xie's *Wenxin diaolong*, and Xiao Zixian's remarks on literature in *Nan Qi shu* (52.907-9), none of which contains a single mention of Tao Yuanming as a literary master. That Tao's biography in standard dynastic histories starting with the *Song shu* is always included in the section on reclusion may suggest that Tao is known first and foremost as a recluse in his own times.

<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive treatment of Yan's dirge, see Li Jianfeng, pp. 30-59, and Schwartz, pp. 107-09.

<sup>3</sup> Although one might wish to qualify this by adding that in the second half of the fifth century Tao already found notable followers of his literary style in Bao Zhao and Jiang Yan. This, however, does not invalidate the general observation that the heyday of Tao's reputation is quite a few centuries ahead. For a discussion of the latter's imitations of Tao's poems, see Li Jianfeng, pp. 26-27, 59-70.

<sup>4</sup> *Shipin jianzhu*, p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> The differences between the two documents are widely recognized today among scholars of medieval Chinese literature. Of the various explanations that have been offered, I am in essential agreement with Wendy Schwartz, who attributes the differences to generic considerations rather than relying on the somewhat loose distinctions of subjective and objective, private and public. For an advocate of the latter view, see Cao Xu, "Shipin ping Taoshi fawei," *Fudan xuebao* (1988), 5:60-64; also cited in Schwartz, *Reading Tao Yuanming*, p. 114, where the author has also insightfully pointed out that "although Tao appears as a wine-loving recluse in Xiao's biography, it is Tao's principled adherence to reclusion and his resolute, not dissolute, nature that are Xiao's own additions to the narrative of Tao's life" (p. 115). Further, it is not entirely beside the mark to infer the derivativeness of the biography from Xiao Tong's statement toward the end of the "Preface" that "I have roughly edited a version of [Tao's] biography and included it in the collection" 并粗點定其傳，編之於錄. In comparison, the "Preface" may be more of an independent evaluation of Tao Yuanming.

<sup>6</sup> Yu Shaochu (ed.), *Zhaoming taizi ji jiaozhu*, p. 200. All citations of this piece are from this edition, and parenthetically documented hereafter in the text. For a full English translation of the preface, as well as a notable interpretation of it, which resonates with mine in several ways, particularly with respect to the meaning of "trace" (see discussion below), see Ping Wang, "Between Reluctant Revelation and Disinterested Disclosure: Reading Xiao Tong's Preface to *Tao Yuanming ji*," *Asia Major* 23.1 (2010): 201-222, and her book, *The Age of Courtly Writing: "Wen xuan" Compiler Xiao Tong (501-531) and His Circle* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 261-277.

<sup>7</sup> Li Jianfeng, for example, identifies the Dao 道 that Xiao singled out in the beginning of the "Preface" as the "natural way of the Daoist school," because its referential object is the life and liberty of the enlightened individual rather than the hierarchical society as envisioned by Confucianism. Li's judgment is primarily based on the following remarks from Xiao's "Preface:" "The sage conceals light; the worthy flees the world. How is this so? In harboring virtue to the utmost, nothing surpasses the Dao; in addressing the urgency of self-care, nothing outweighs the body. Thus, the presence of Dao puts the body at rest; the loss of Dao throws it in danger." See *Yuan qian Tao Yuanming jieshou shi*, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> I follow Yu Shaochu (ed.), *Zhaoming taizi ji jiaozhu*, in choosing to render *li* 釐 (glossed as *zhi* 治 ["to manage or govern"]) rather than *yu* 玉 ("jade"), a textual variant found in the *SBCK* and *SKQS* versions of the "Preface." In both of her published translations of the piece, Wang Ping chose to render *yu* instead of *li* without an explanation for her choice; in the earlier translation (2010, p. 212), she maintains that Xiao is alluding to the famous story of Bian He 卞和 and his jade. Although this might make the text somewhat less problematic, as the reader will see from my

following analysis, it nevertheless does not explain away the problem, for if all the allusions and textual borrowings in this passage are directly concerned with reclusion, what sort of a recluse does Bian He, who is known for presenting a priceless piece of jade to an ancient king of Chu, represent? What kind of a model is he for understanding Tao, to whom Xiao turned immediately after? The second part of the sentence also has a textual variant in *SBCK* and *SKQS*: both substitute *qiu* 裘 (“fur coat”) for *he* 褐, which I translate here as “coarse garments.” It is a difficult decision, not just because both make good sense in their own way, but also on account of the connections some of these strike up with an earlier text. For instance, the phrase “dressed in coarse garments yet harboring jade” 被褐懷玉 from *Laozi* (*SBCK* ed., 70a), where it is used to emphasize the disparity between the nature and appearance of the Daoist sage, provides an incentive for us to adopt the alternative reading, but the appearance of the phrase “putting on a fur coat and carrying firewood on the back” 披裘而負薪 in *Gaoshi zhuan* 高士傳 (“Biographies of Noble Recluses”) should give us pause in emending the text.

<sup>9</sup> Curiously, Wang Ping renders the term *qing* as “true self.” Although it is a little bit of a stretch, Wang usefully points out that the term in its original sense means “the fundamental, essential, and unmodified state of anything” (Wang, 2010, p. 212). For a somewhat more elaborate discussion of *qing*, see Wang Ping, 2012, p. 247.

<sup>10</sup> Yu Shaochu, p. 206. Note also: the fact that Qu Yuan may not be the intended subtext here does not in any way harm my interpretation regarding the ambiguity that is built into these transitional remarks.

<sup>11</sup> Schwartz, p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> The famous poet Wang Wei, for example, criticized Tao in these terms in a letter to persuade a friend to come out of reclusion. See *Wang Wei ji jiaozhu*, 11.1095; also cited in *huibian*, 1:16. For a partial English translation of the letter, see Schwartz, pp. 65-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, 125.1b; 136.9a. Notably, implicit in the latter instance is Zhu’s disparagement, attenuated only by his recognition of Tao’s literary talent, of Tao’s Daoist values in favor of those that underpin the works of neo-Confucian philosophers like Shao Yong (1012-1077).

<sup>14</sup> After reproducing almost verbatim Shen Yue’s judgment regarding Tao’s loyalty to the Jin, Zhu commented thus in a preface: “although Tao could boast of no official rank nor any public accomplishment, the lofty sentiment and untrammelled thought as expressed in his poetry are beyond the grasp of writers in later ages. The superior men of antiquity were thus deeply concerned about the Mandate of Heaven and interpersonal relations, and the great norms and rules governing the ruler-subject and father-son relationships. It is, therefore, only after the establishment of such great [matters] that we may then speak of the loftiness of his conduct and the exquisiteness of his language” (*Hui’an xiansheng Zhu Wengong ji* [“Collected works of Zhu Xi, Master Hui’an”], in *SBCK* 76.12; cited in *huibian*, 1:77).

<sup>15</sup> The eminent Northern Song scholar Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105) is probably the first to regard loyalty as a link between Tao and Zhuge. See his poem “Su jiu Pengze huai Tao ling” (“Overnight in the old Pengze, remembering magistrate Tao”) in *Quan Song ci*, 979. A similar comparison was made a century later by Zhu’s contemporary, the Southern Song poet Xin Qiji 辛棄疾 (1140-1207). See his “He xinlang” (“Congratulating the bridegroom”), in Deng Guangming (ed.), *Jiuxuan ci biannian jianzhu* (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1957), p. 185. Zhu Xi’s preface cited in the previous note is perhaps among the earliest comparisons of Han Xin and Tao Yuanming. Zhu was also instrumental in introducing Qu Yuan into this constantly expanding picture of historical resonance. See his prefatory remarks in *Chuci houyu* 楚辭後語, in idem, *Chuci jizhu* (Taibei: yiwen yinshuguan, 1967), pp. 415-6. These fragmented comparisons were then integrated into a comprehensive statement by the Yuan Dynasty neo-Confucian philosopher Wu Cheng 吳澄 (1249-1333) in his “Preface,” quoted in *huibian*, 1:125., to Zhan Qi’s 詹麒 edition, now lost, of Tao Yuanming’s collected works.

<sup>16</sup> *Zhuzi yulei*, 140.3b; 140.2a.

<sup>17</sup> Apart from poetic celebrations of Tao's character by Huang Tingjian and Xin Qiji, Tao's hidden intent has also been brought to light in venues similar to Zhu's conversational remarks. Huang Che 黃徹, for instance, already insinuated that Tao is stirred by the "aspiration to rehabilitate and save" (*kangji zhi zhi* 康濟之志) the chaotic world.

<sup>18</sup> Two paradoxical statements by Su Shi are often quoted in support of these claims. In a letter to his brother Su Zhe, Su described Tao's poetry as "unadorned but really elegant, gaunt but really plump" (*Su Shi wenji*, vol. 4, p. 2515); he fleshed out the same point in a colophon comparing the Tang writer Liu Zongyuan's (773-819) poetry with Tao's: "we value what is dry and bland precisely because it is only dry [when looked at] from the outside yet from the inside, is fertile; it appears to be bland but is actually tasteful. So are Yuanming, Zihou [i.e. Liu Zongyuan] and their like. If the interior and the periphery are both dry and bland, then how is it worth a mention?" (ibid, 67.2109-10). For a succinct account of Northern Song appreciation for Tao's literary style, see Schwartz, pp. 185-193. For a more extensive treatment of Su Shi's engagement with Tao's poetry, see Li Jianfeng, pp. 272-322.

<sup>19</sup> Zhen Dexiu, "Ba Huang Yingfu ni Tao shi" ("Preface to imitations of Tao's poems by Huang Yingfu"), in *Xishan xiansheng Zhen Wenzhong gong wenji*, SBCK, 2a. "The sigh over the flowing river" was expressed by Confucius at the edge of a river (*Lun yu* 9.17); "The joy of the bowl and ladle" is an allusion to Yan Hui, Confucius's favorite disciple, who happily lived on only "a bowl of rice and a ladle of water" (*Lun yu* 6.11). "Eating ferns" refers to the first of a sequence of poems by Tao "Written after reading Shi ji" 讀史述, which celebrates the virtue of brothers Boyi and Shuqi, who went into retirement when King Wu of Zhou overthrew the Shang (*Shi ji* 61). An allusion to mythological bird named *jingwei* is to be found in Poem no. 10 of Tao's "Reading the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*" 讀山海經 (*Shanhai jing* 3.16b).

<sup>20</sup> That I skip the years separating the Southern Song and the twentieth century is by no means meant to say that nothing of critical importance has been said in those intervening centuries—the same is true of what has been left out in the highly condensed historical survey we have here. However, the omissions do reflect my current belief that regardless of all the fine-tuning and readjustment, the deepening and integration, of previous opinions in later ages, the main ingredients of the traditional understanding of Tao's personality are already there in the foregoing account.

<sup>21</sup> Again, the fruitful conversation involving Zhu Ziqing, Donald Holzman, and Robert Ashmore that I attempt to reconstruct in the following paragraphs is not meant to indicate that it is the only recent critical exchange that is worth a mention. As a matter of fact, a similar debate involving such eminent scholars as Liang Qichao 梁啟超, Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, and Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 predates the one presented here by almost half a century. See Liang Qichao, "Tao Yuanming zhi wenyi ji qi ping" ("Tao Yuanming's art and character"), in idem, *Tao Yuanming* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1923); Chen Yinke, "Tao Yuanming zhi sixiang yu qingtian zhi guanxi" ("Tao Yuanming's thought and its relation to pure talk") in idem, *Jinminguan congkao chubian* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2001), pp. 201-229; and Zhu Guangqian, "Tao Yuanming" (1948), in idem, *Shi lun*, (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2005), pp. 177-192. I choose to review the later debate in order to illustrate the persisting nature of, and the valuable contribution of overseas sinologists to unraveling, the issues involved.

<sup>22</sup> Zhu Ziqin, "Tao shi de shendu," in *huibian*, 1:287-95.

<sup>23</sup> "A Dialogue with the Ancients: Tao Qian's Interrogation of Confucius," p. 95.

<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, what is worthy of notice is, as Holzman poignantly points out, "that there are so relatively few references to Zhuangzi in Tao Qian's works compared with the poetry that monopolized the literary scene during his youth" (p. 91). In other words, it is Tao's immediate literary environment that should give us a more precise

assessment of the role of Daoist philosophy in Tao's thought. Much of this influence, according to Holzman, can be traced to poems pertaining to the drinking of wine, such as "Drinking alone during continuous rains" 連雨獨飲.

<sup>25</sup> Of twentieth century scholars Chen Yinke was the first to bring attention to Tao's religious background. According to Chen, the Tao family for many generations back were believers of the Heavenly Master sect. The author's familiarity with such Daoist texts as the *Mu tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳 ("Tale of King Mu, the Son of Heaven") and the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 ("Classic of Mountains and Seas") showed the extent to which his writings were influenced by his ancestral faith. See "Tao Yuanming zhi sixiang yu qingtian zhi guanxi," p. 228. For a recent defense of Chen's thesis regarding Tao's religious background, see Fan Ziye, *Youran wang nan shan* (Shanghai: Dongfang chubun zhongxin, 2010), pp. 52-135.

<sup>26</sup> For a valuable introduction to Chinese eremitism up to the end of Eastern Han, see Aat Vervoorn's *Men of the Cliffs and Caves*. What Vervoorn said of the founding stages of the eremitic tradition gives much food for thought in examining eremitism during the Six Dynasties, including the case of Tao Yuanming. For a discussion of the early medieval view concerning the distinct roles of the sage and the worthy, see Ashmore, pp. 42-55, 131-51.

<sup>27</sup> In all fairness to Holzman, though, it is not that he is unaware of the problem of Tao's loyalism, but that he simply takes it for granted, on the grounds of his speculations about the timing of Tao's public service and of a problematic interpretation of the poem Tao wrote to his cousin Jingyuan 敬遠 in 403. See "A Dialogue with the Ancients," p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> See Ashmore, especially the "Prologue to Chapters 3 & 4" of *The Transport of Reading*, for his debate with Zhu Ziqing, pp. 102-110.

<sup>29</sup> The word *xuan* (literally, "Dark" or "Mysterious") connotes a form of understanding and textual exegesis that approaches the text not as a container of lexical meaning as it is treated in Han classicist scholarship, but as an instrument for the expression of the author's intent that lies outside the text. For a classic introduction to the development of the hermeneutical and philosophical discourse known as *xuan*, see Tang Yongtong.

<sup>30</sup> Lines 11-2, 21-4 of the companion-poem are particularly revealing of Tao's attitude in this regard:

春蠶收長絲	From spring cocoons they take long silk fibers.
秋熟靡王稅	For harvests in the fall there is no royal tax.
...	
雖無紀歷志	Although there is no time-recording calendar,*
四時自成歲	The four seasons naturally make up the year.
怡然有余樂	In contentment, they possess a surplus of joy,
于何勞智慧	For what are they to work their clever minds?

Notice: this is diametrically opposed to the political theory of such *xuan*-scholars as Wang Bi and He Yan, who, in harmonizing Confucian and Daoist canons, still maintained the necessity of governmental institutions, although paradoxically, they preached "non-action" 無為 as a key principle of government.

\* The issuing of calendars is a prerogative of emperors.

Another expression of a similar attitude is to be observed in the concluding part of "Suffering a Fire in the Sixth Month of the Year *wushen* (408)," where the poet "cast my thoughts back to the time of Tonghu," an ancient ruler under the legendary emperor Yao, when

餘量宿中田	Surplus grain was left overnight in the fields.
鼓腹無所思	And when people drummed their bellies without a care,
朝起暮歸眠	Rising in the morning and returning at evening to sleep. (trans. Davis, 1: pp.90-91)

<sup>31</sup> Holzman, p. 95.

<sup>32</sup> All quotations are from Yuan Xingpei, which I identify by *juan* and pagination. My translation follows Davis, sometimes with major modifications.

<sup>33</sup> That Tao did set out to pursue his political ambition in his middle years is an established fact. Apart from the examples to be cited in the text, champions of Tao's interest in politics have often alluded to or directly cited, as Zhen Dexiu did before them, the tetrasyllabic "The Tree in Bloom" 榮木, a relatively early poem most likely written in the early 390s around the year Tao turned forty, at the end of which the author explicitly expressed his wish to go wherever he could make a name, following the teachings of Confucius. Since the majority of Tao's writings came from the period from the 390s to his death in 427, I limit my inquiry about his political attitude to this period.

<sup>34</sup> Also it is not impossible to phrase this dynamic in terms of the historical personages Tao celebrated in his poems, most notably "Written after Reading History" 讀史述, and to whom he was frequently compared in later criticism. One seemingly useful way of putting the question is: who can better serve as Tao's archetype, Yan Hui (celebrated in "Written after Reading History," no. 5), a notoriously indigent disciple of Confucius, who yet lived in perfect contentment, or Bo Yi (praised by Mencius as "a sage who was pure" in contradistinction to Confucius, whom he considered "a sage who was timely," see *Mencius*, 5b.1), a famous recluse and political dissident in the time of King Wu, the de facto founder of the Zhou dynasty, who would rather starve himself to death in the mountains than serving under the new ruler? Upon second thoughts, however, although these names recur in subsequent criticism as a shorthand for what readers of later ages took to be Tao's primary quality as a person, their prominence in the critical tradition is more a chance event than a considered opinion, because a compelling case, it seems to me, can also be made for comparing Tao to any other historical figure he wrote about in his poems. While such a comparison may shed useful light on Tao's personality, it may just as well misdirect our attention by tempting us to indulge in free association.

<sup>35</sup> The date of the poem was until recently a subject of controversy. Defendants of Tao's loyalty to the Jin, including Wu Renjie, Tao Shu, and Gu Zhi, once found morally offensive Li Shan's note which identified Liu Yu, who toppled the Jin in 420, as the general, on whose staff Tao served when he wrote the poem. Recent scholarship spearheaded by Zhu Ziqing has cleared the controversy and corrected the error. For a summary account of this dispute, see *jianzhu*, pp. 185-6; Gong Bin, pp. 162-5; and Davis, 2.67-8.

<sup>36</sup> Here I follow Yuan Xingpei in rejecting the main text, which reads "the harvest of the public fields is more than sufficient for making wine" 公田之利，足以為酒, in favor of the variant line in the *Jigu ge* edition, the copy text for Yuan's edition. Yuan's main reason for his editorial choice is the incongruity in tone between the original text and the rest of the preface. In attributing his acceptance of the post to the pleasure of wine, Tao would sound less serious than is required by the context where the author repeatedly emphasized his dire need for a livelihood. Yuan suspects that the text takes its present form as a result of the attempt by later editors to render it compatible with Tao's traditional image as a heavy drinker in standard histories.

<sup>37</sup> Yuan Xingpei, p. 460. For another English translation, from which my own is adapted, see Davis, 1.191-2.

<sup>38</sup> Tao's self-proclaimed spontaneity is substantiated and reinforced by the story found in almost every major official biography that Tao gave up his post after refusing to humble himself before an Inspector, a superior official sent from the commandery. See *Song shu*, 93.2287. This historical vignette is sometimes cited as evidence of Tao's insincerity, if not falsity, in designating his sister's death as the immediate cause of his resignation in the "preface." This judgment, it seems to me, is misguided in two respects: (1) it considers primary sources to be inferior in reliability to secondary sources like an historical account, and (2) overlooks the typological requirements of traditional historiography, which in constructing a life story, often seeks the typical and dramatic in accordance with the larger category under which to fit a historical personage.

<sup>39</sup> Lines 9-10 of the poem would allow us to date it, actually the whole series, to 417, twelve years since “Back Home!” See *jianzhu*, p. 278; Davis, 1.101.

<sup>40</sup> The term *jieran* 介然 is often used adverbially to mean “alone,” but it also has the connotation, particularly in this instance, of “steadfast” or “uncompromising,” which sense I am unable to accommodate in my rendering due to considerations of style (see Yuan Xingpei, p. 280). Thus this term not only indicates that the author viewed his destiny as distinct and “uncommon,” but also conveys a slight sense of self-congratulation, a subdued celebration of his success in maintaining a principled stand against participation in public service.

<sup>41</sup> The translation is taken directly from Davis, 1.101. Legend has it that Yang Zhu, a fourth century BCE philosopher, wept at a crossroads because the roads go in contrary directions. The phrase “scattering money” is an allusion to the first century BCE scholar and minister Shu Guang and his niece Shu Shou, who after resigning their post in the imperial capital and returning home, lavished their wealth on fellow townsmen. Tao wrote a separate piece celebrating the story of the two Shus. See Yuan Xingpei, pp.379-80; Davis, 1.142-44.

<sup>42</sup> For a succinct and informative account of the development of the *jiwen* 祭文 (“sacrificial pieces”) and the *lei* 誄 (funeral elegies) from the Han period onward, see Davis 1.230-3.

<sup>43</sup> This obscure poem has served the political readers as the ultimate textual ground for their interpretation of Tao’s other writings, especially *After Old Poems* 擬古, no. 2, 8, and 9, *Miscellaneous Poems* 雜詩, “Celebrating Jing Ke,” *Reading the Shanhai jing* 讀山海經, no. 9 and 10. While these pieces may lend themselves to a political interpretation, if we start from the premise that they are politically motivated, they do not constitute solid proof that Tao’s post-retirement writings are continuing political criticism and hence must be interpreted within a political framework. Insofar as the aforementioned poems are concerned, such interpretations can be seriously misguided mainly because they are uniformly based on the naïve, and I believe, ultimately mistaken assumption that the explicit content of the writings corresponds directly and unproblematically to the poet’s genuine feelings about the political situation out of which they supposedly grew, an assumption that is problematized by the occasion for these writings and their stated purpose as documented in their title (an imitation, a reader’s response, etc). The *Miscellaneous Poems* may be the only exception to which, arguably, the expressivist assumption may apply. Even so, a careful reading of the sequence shows that it not only does not provide any evidential support for political interpretations, but actually proves the contrary. For instance, after recalling a period of political fervor in the opening couplets of Poem 5 in the series, Tao tells us explicitly that as “the years and months slipped away,” his youthful ambitions “gradually have gone.” See Yuan Xingpei, p. 347; Davis, 1.131. For a full English translation of and some brief commentary on “On Wine,” see below, and Davis, 1.108-12.

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Li Gonghuan, p. 141 and *huibian*, 2:203.

<sup>45</sup> Assuming, *pace* Huang Tingjian, that the main text of the poem is not lost, an overwhelming majority of modern readers seem to agree that the wine mentioned in the title is cryptically associated with the wine Liu Yu sent to the exiled emperor in 421 to poison him. The earliest upholder of this reading is Tang Han (cited in Li Gonghuan, p. 144, and *huibian*, 2:204).

<sup>46</sup> “Double *li*” is generally considered as a reference to hexagram 30. According to the *Yi jing*, the image of *li* is fire, the sun, and the ruler capable of “perpetuating this brightness” of the sun and of illuminating “the four quarters of the world” (Wilhelm and Baynes, p.127).

<sup>47</sup> *Rongfeng*, according to Du Yu’s gloss on a passage in the *Zuo zhuan*, is the northeast wind, which is correlated with the element of wood (i.e. spring). This line, along with the previous, suggests that the season referred to in the poem is probably late summer. See *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi*, Duke Zhao, 18<sup>th</sup> year (in *Shisanjing zhushu*, p. 2085).

<sup>48</sup> Yuzhang (literally, “camphor trees”) is both a place name (in modern Jiangxi) and part of the title Liu Yu, the founder of the Liu-Song dynasty, acquired in 406 in honor of his military accomplishments.

<sup>49</sup> Chonghua is the name of the legendary sage-ruler Shun, used here probably in reference to the last ruler of the Jin, Emperor Gong, who after his forced abdication in 420 became Prince of Lingling, an area (in modern Hunan) that encompassed Shun’s burial site. I reject Davis’s translation of these lines—“The camphor laurels match the lofty gate; / Their double flowering confirms the auspicious soil”—in favor of the political reading (see e.g., Yuan Xingpei, p. 296) mainly on the ground that the literal rendering seems extremely contrived. Given the source text Davis cited, “double flowering” can only be understood figuratively as a portent of the revival of the Jin during the Yongjia period (307-12). Line 8 so construed would be made redundant by the poem’s opening line and conflict allegorically with the ones immediately previous to this.

<sup>50</sup> Tang Han’s note on this line says: “In the fourteenth year of the Yixi period [418], a man from the prefecture of Gong 鞏 offered an auspicious grain stalk. Liu Yu presented it to the emperor; the emperor returned it to Liu Yu.” Cited in Tao Shu, pp. 38-39. See also *Song shu*, 27.784.

<sup>51</sup> I follow Davis in understanding the term *xiling* 西靈 as a name for the Qiang, a nomadic people living in the northwest of present-day China, thus avoiding the need to emend the text, as many traditional Chinese readers did. The line will then refer to Liu Yu’s defeat (completing the Eastern Jin’s annexation) in 417 of the Later Qin, a state of Qiang ethnicity, which is another decisive event in the consolidation of Liu’s political power. See Davis, 2.100-1.

<sup>52</sup> Traditional commentators have followed Huang Tingjian in reading *mi* 芑 for *yang* 羊 (or *qian* 芊, a textual variant recorded in early editions), and construed the double line as alluding to Shen Zhuliang’s, Duke of She, suppression in 479 BC of the rebellion led by Mi Sheng, Duke of Bai, against King Hui of Chu. See *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi*, Duke Ai, 16<sup>th</sup> year (in *Shisanjing zhushu*, p. 2178) and *Shi ji*, 40.1718. There is, however, no universal agreement about the intended meaning of these lines. In the absence of conclusive evidence, I readily accept Yuan Xingpei’s judicious suggestion that we take them to refer to some sort of factional infighting during Emperor Gong’s reign. See Yuan Xingpei, p. 297.

<sup>53</sup> Shanyang 山陽 is most likely the title of the last emperor of the Later Han after his abdication. Line 16 is Tao’s adaptation of an “Explanation of the Rules for Posthumous Titles” 謚法解 in the *Yi zhou shu* (the “lost *Book of Zhou*”), which defines *ling* 靈 as an ironic title for a ruler who “was careless in perfecting his name.” These lines are thus interpreted as an oblique reference to Emperor Gong, the last ruler of Eastern Jin, who willingly ceded the empire to Liu Yu in 420. See *Jin shu*, 10.269.

<sup>54</sup> Construal of this couplet is a vexed question. I try to preserve the surface meaning of the text, divesting it of the suggested historical allusions, arbitrary emendations, and flimsy guesswork that have been brought to bear on it by traditional readers. The political criticism implicit in these lines may, as Gu Zhi suggested, be of Emperor Gong’s submissive attitude toward Liu Yu and his abdication: “In Huan Xuan’s times, the Heavenly Mandate has changed. It was extended by Lord Liu for almost twenty years. What is happening today I have always been willing to accept” (*Song shu*, 2.46; cited in Gu Zhi, 3.16b). My reasons for not understanding *busheng* 卜生 as a proper name are twofold: (1) the indirect readings—whether it be Tang Han’s proposal that Bu *sheng* be Confucius’s disciple Zi Xia (Bu Shang 卜商) (cited in Tao shu, 3.39) or Lu Qinli’s proposal that the intended allusion be to the keeper of sheep Bu Shi 卜式, who flourished during the Former Han Emperor Wu’s reign (*Shi ji* 30; *Han shu*, 58, 7a-8b; cited in Lu Qinli, p. 104)—seem rather strained; (2) both of them try to fit two completely separate allusions into a single couplet, which seems incongruous with the rest of the poem, where the pattern seems to be that each couplet treats a single person or event. Having said that, I am aware, however, that understanding *anle* 安樂 non-literally as referring to the last ruler of Shu-Han, Liu Chan 劉禪, who after the fall of his regime in 263 was given the ironic title of Duke Anle, works just as well for line 18.

<sup>55</sup> King Ping (770-19 BCE) was generally taken to be the founder of Eastern Zhou. Tao Shu read *xia* 峽 as a variant for *jia* 郊, that is, Jiayu 郊郛 (modern Luoyang), the capital of Eastern Zhou (3.42-3). The second half of the couplet is notoriously ambiguous. Following Davis (2.103), I reject Gu Zhi's rather strained reading—which was widely followed more recently by such scholars as Wang Shumin, Gong Bin, and Yuan Xingpei—of this line as a direct reference to the sack of Luoyang by Liu Cong 劉聰 (d. 318), a descendent of the Xiongnu of the Han period (Gu Zhi, 3.16b), on account of its inability to maintain the surface meaning of the text. My rendering differs from that of Davis, however, in attributing the “surviving fragrance” to the exiled king. Although this makes the line sound a bit awkward in English, the alternative provided by Davis is, it seems to me, less satisfactory in that it will be difficult to understand the phrase “surviving fragrance” if the exiled king is said to be its recipient.

<sup>56</sup> There is some kind of tacit agreement among modern Chinese readers that these lines indicate the decline of the Jin in Tao's times, but understanding is a bit muddled when it comes to the actual referent of specific terms. For Gu Zhi, the “twin ridges” are of Mount Xiao 嶠 (in modern Henan), while the “three-footed” refer to the bird messengers of the Queen Mother of the West. He interpreted line 21 as an oblique reference to Liu Yu's sack of Luoyang in 417, which resulted not only in the annexation of the capital of the former Jin, but allowed the people living there “to begin to grow”; the “wondrous patterns” in line 22 refer to the documents in recognition of Liu Yu's accomplishments as well as those pertaining to Emperor Gong's abdication, which Liu Yu obtained through his messenger Wang Hong 王宏 in the aftermath of his military victory. See Gu Zhi, 3.17a. Lu Qinli offered a markedly different reading by utilizing a textual variant in line 21, which also reads *yang* 陽 in place of *ling* 陵. The “twin ridges” thus become “dual *yang*,” which Lu interpreted as a cryptogram for *chang* 昌 (“thriving”). Lu tied the two lines together by viewing them both as cryptically indicating the fate of Jin. Because the three-footed crows were traditionally thought to embody the essence of the sun and appear only during auspicious times, they were taken in early Jin times to be a good omen of Jin's replacement of the previous dynasty Wei. In the context of this poem, according to Lu, these birds “become instead a good omen for the Song” founded by Liu Yu. See Lu Qinli, p. 104. I follow Gong Bin in producing a mix of the two existing interpretations. See *jiaojian*, p. 260. I prefer Gu's reading of line 21 chiefly because it follows more smoothly from the above, where the explicit concern is the relocation of the capital in Luoyang, but Gu seemed to have pressed contrivance too far in interpreting line 22, especially “wondrous patterns.” In comparison, Lu's reading, which sees the three-footed crows as a portent of dynastic change, seems to be less forced and more compatible with the main thrust of these lines.

<sup>57</sup> Wangzi Qiao, also known as Wangzi Jin 晉, was the heir-apparent of King Ling of Zhou (571-45 BCE). Legend has it that he enjoyed playing a kind of pipe called *sheng* 笙 and became a Daoist immortal after giving up his opportunity to inherit the throne. See Liu Xiang, *Liexian zhuan jiaojian*, ed. Wang Shumin, p. 65.

<sup>58</sup> Lord Zhu (of Tao) is the name assumed by the Spring and Autumn period minister Fan Li 范蠡 (536-448 BCE), who went into retirement after assisting Goujian of Yue to defeat the neighboring state of Wu. See *Shi ji*, 79.2423.

<sup>59</sup> Lines 29-30 are subject to a wide variety of interpretations. I am in essential agreement with Davis (2.105) that they be understood innocently as expressing the idea, common enough in Tao's writings, that human life is fleeting, no matter how long it lasts, in comparison with Nature. Thus, heaven is not a cryptic reference to the late Jin emperor, a view taken by traditional readers like Huang Wenhuan (*huibian*, 2:206), which for them serves to prove Tao's loyalty to the Jin, nor half of a binomial pair used in juxtaposition with the opening term of the following line, as Tao Shu had pointed out (3.43), but is rather to be understood in the Daoist sense of the “natural” and “spontaneous.” It is not unlikely that “Heaven's countenance” is also meant to be a sign of the Daoist achievement of immortality through “life-prolonging practices” (line 24).

<sup>60</sup> Continuing Han Ju's hermeneutic work, the Southern Song scholar Zhao Quanshan 趙泉山, for instance, singled out these two lines as the “alarm and whip” 警策 of the piece, i.e. something that jilts the mind into consciousness of

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the inadequacy of a literal understanding, something that enable the reader to “mentally go back to the author’s intent” 意逆 in interpreting a text (cited in Li Gonghuan, pp. 142-3 and *huibian*, 2:204).

<sup>61</sup> Yuan Xingpei, for example, goes so far in his revisionary reading as to argue, to my and perhaps everyone’s surprise, that the implied subject of lines 9 and 10 is not the author himself, as all traditional readers seem to have assumed, but the queen bemoaning the abdication of Emperor Gong and his banishment to Lingling. See *Yuan Xingpei*, p. 296. This seems to represent the other extreme, where Tao’s demonstrable political nonchalance is amplified to such an extent that it completely cancels out any interest in politics.

<sup>62</sup> Tao showed a similarly detached attitude in *After Old Poems*, no. 4, where from the vantage point of a “hundred-footed tower,” the visionary speaker of the poem saw pursuers of glory and a good name in ancient times “fight with passion on the battlefield below” and bemoaned the futility of their striving because nothing would be left of them and the political activities he had so passionately engaged in himself. See Yuan Xingpei, p. 326; Davis, 1:122.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **Myself, Nature, and Human Life (I): Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798**

The structural symmetry of this dissertation requires that we now direct attention to the other writer in this parallel study: William Wordsworth. This chapter will probe further issues of poetic autobiography that is merely adumbrated in the second half of the opening chapter. Those issues first arise in the process of reviewing a critical controversy surrounding "Tintern Abbey." My reasons for that review are twofold. Practically, it is evidently to mediate a dispute over New Historicist readings, in order to arrive at an unproblematic understanding, of a poem that lies, it seems to me, at the very heart of Wordsworth's poetic project. Theoretically, it is also an attempt to gauge the usefulness of the method of contextualization for understanding the kind of literary writing that is manifestly autobiographical.

#### A Baffled Response

Notably, however, the context constructed by New Historicism is not the only conceivable context within which a richer meaning can be made of a poem. There are other borders than those separating a poem and its social-historical environs that we can cross in our quest for understanding. In reconsidering the debate in his "Troubling the Borders: *Lyrical Ballads* 1798 and 1998," Peter J. Manning proposed to do just that by situating political readings of "Tintern Abbey" in the original *literary* context, the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, in which the poem first met public eyes. In this context, the lines such as

wreathes of smoke

Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,

With some uncertain notice, as might seem,

Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods (ll. 18-21)<sup>1</sup>

instead of being obscured traces of the process of displacement, as New Historicism has argued, become subtle verbal echoes of the narratives of injustice elsewhere in the collection, especially that of “the female vagrant” in the poem bearing that name.<sup>2</sup> The problem with the readings of what I have called text-first critics is, then, not so much their flat denial of the priority or relevance of the excluded socio-historical facts as their elimination from consideration of other poems in the collection with which “Tintern Abbey” seems intimately connected. For Manning, their appeal to genre as the authoritative guide to reading—i.e. the lyric, insofar as its primary interest is personal, need not contain the social—is problematic because what they seem convinced is a lyric forms the conclusion of a collection where the term strangely “appears within the unstable and paradoxical compound ‘lyrical ballads’” (p. 23).

From a careful consideration of the 1798 volume as a whole and the contemporary journalistic reviews it provoked, Manning then derived these observations, each of which, in one view, serves to multiply confusion about the collection Wordsworth put together at the very beginning of his poetically most active years, and yet in another, as Manning prefers to think, keeps the poems tantalizingly alive for us. First, as the early reviews persuasively show, political readings of the collection are firmly grounded in a sane insight into the nature of the poems in the collection, and thus should not be rashly dismissed as governed by whim. Those early responses further suggest that the collection, though it occasionally induced feelings of admiration, is generally haunted by a sense of incomprehension over the subject matter of individual pieces (most prominently, Coleridge’s “Rime,” “The Idiot Boy,” and “The Thorn”), the incongruity of style among them, and their relations to tradition.<sup>3</sup> This bewilderment,

according to Manning, is aggravated by awareness of poems where the poet impersonating his characters spoke in terms that seem designed to confuse or where he risked a language that seems deliberately to frustrate interpretation, say, the Idiot Boy's utterly nonsensical speech sounds. To clinch his argument, Manning went on to cite Coleridge's critique of the elder poet's early experiments in the belated *Biographia*, not as a worthy attempt to differentiate what Coleridge thought to be unfortunately mixed styles in an effort to salvage Wordsworth's poetic successes from his failures, but, as Manning somewhat condescendingly phrased it, as "the desperate comedy of the critical mind intent to parse the unparseable" (p. 26).

I am not sure when, exactly, in the English critical tradition sheer unintelligibility began to be judged a virtue in itself and not something that has value only in directing intellectual inquiry for the opposite end. Nor do I sympathize with the inclination to mock, if not overtly denounce, critical appraisals of literary works as an injudicious and necessarily hopeless task. It is, nevertheless, beyond a shadow of doubt that Manning's major critical maneuvers fail to address the initial question of how Abrams and Vendler's stipulations as regards the genre of "Tintern Abbey" when examined in a purely literary context are problematic, nor did he succeed in showing what can be gained from seeing things in perspective other than the dubious dissolution of distinct contours into the fuzziness of an amorphous whole. My rehearsal of his overall argument and supporting proofs is, therefore, not to advertise his conclusions, but is guided by a due recognition of the significance of the questions his observations raised or provoked, which can act as a springboard for an extended inquiry into many of the yet unresolved questions concerning *Lyrical Ballads*. These include: "How much," as Manning queried, "is *Tintern Abbey* a component of *Lyrical Ballads*, and how much, presumably as one of the 'few other poems' declared on the title page, is it to be separated from their concerns?" (p.

25). How are we to cope with the fact that the same poet who wrote the lofty “Tintern Abbey,” which received lavish praise in contemporary reviews, also wrote “The Last of the Flock,” “The Convict,” or whichever poem the reader happens to like least?<sup>4</sup> Is the collection a shapeless lump or a carefully planned and organized project, or something of both? To what extent are the added prefaces and the controversies they initiated useful for resolving those issues? How will a healthy awareness of the complications of the voices in the collection add to our understanding of Wordsworth’s development as a poet as well as a person? It is to questions like these that I attempt an answer in the body of this chapter.

Admittedly, the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* is, in many respects, not easy to reckon with. The diversity of thematic interest and rhetorical style the poems exhibit poses a real challenge to anyone trying to generalize effectively and meaningfully about the volume. The “Advertisement” (1798) and the “Preface” (1800, expanded in 1802), written by Wordsworth though, there is sufficient reason to believe, based on ideas that arose in conversations between him and Coleridge, differ considerably in characterizing what it is they are to set before the reading public.<sup>5</sup> While the “Advertisement” presents the poems as an experiment “to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure,”<sup>6</sup> the 1800 “Preface” identifies the “principal object” of the project, twice stated in slightly varying terms, as that of making “the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.”<sup>7</sup> Although these theoretical explanations need not necessarily contradict each other—in fact, Wordsworth did take care to incorporate the view announced in the “Advertisement” of the poems as a language

experiment by explaining immediately after, in highly controversial terms, why the language of the middling and lower orders of society is suited to poetry of the kind that he had ventured to publish—they do reflect the poet’s broad, multifaceted, and evolving conception of what it is the significance of *Lyrical Ballads* principally consists in.

Connected with the problem of Wordsworth’s prefatory explanations are the questions of genre raised by the troubling compound “lyrical ballad.” Obviously, in hitching “lyrical” to “ballad,” which, in terms of our common thinking about it, tells a story tersely by means of action and dialogue, Wordsworth revolutionized the genre, as he announced in the 1800 “Preface,” by privileging the communication of personal feeling over representation of observable action. A lyrical ballad is thus distinctively lyrical insofar as its chief purpose lies in the truthful communication of feeling, whether it be the poet’s own or belong to wholly invented characters. While this understanding applies unproblematically to the majority of the poems in the collection, the existence of a few others entails disconcerting qualifications. What are we to do, for example, with a poem like “Old Man Travelling,” the bulk of which is a memorable sketch of an old wayfarer characterized by “animal tranquility and decay,” one to whom

Long patience has such mild composure given,

That patience now doth seem a thing, of which

He hath no need. He is by nature led

To peace so perfect, that the young behold

With envy, what the old man *hardly feels* (ll.10-14, emphasis added)

unless we take the feelings involved to be the muted sympathies of the reader in learning that the Old Man was in fact travelling to take leave of his dying son in a coastal hospital?<sup>8</sup> If this anomaly can be explained by reference to the fact that the poem predates the plan of *Lyrical*

*Ballads* and presumably, is written for other purposes than that announced in the “Preface,” we certainly cannot say the same of a poem such as “Anecdote for Fathers,” which, composed with the didactic aim, as the subtitle informs us, to show “how the art of lying may be taught,” seems to defy search for the emotional force that will fit it for what we have temporarily agreed is a lyrical ballad.<sup>9</sup> Further, the volume also contains a diverse range of poems that tell no stories, or whose narrative component is so insignificant that it becomes absolutely meaningless to categorize them as examples of ballad? Do these non-narrative poems then constitute the “few others” declared on the title page? It is probably troubling questions like these that prompt Stephen M. Parrish, in studying Wordsworth’s dramatic technique in *Lyrical Ballads*, to say: “no one knows precisely what a ‘lyrical ballad’ was supposed to be; consequently, the ‘few other poems’ of the title page have been difficult to identify.”<sup>10</sup>

If the poems themselves comprise an awkward mix owing to the diversity that makes them difficult to sort out, the various extant authorial statements regarding the origin of *Lyrical Ballads* provide no relief from the sense of confusion already felt. Coleridge’s famous retrospect nearly twenty years after the publication of the 1798 volume gives wide currency to the idea that the poems assembled together there originated in a joint plan that frees each writer to follow the peculiar bent of his own talent. While Coleridge’s compositions were to treat supernatural subjects in a realistic way, with the aim to “procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief . . . which constitutes poetic faith,” Wordsworth would endeavor to “give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural.”<sup>11</sup> This account of divided labor in the making of what was to be a major landmark in the history of English poetry is somewhat contradicted by Wordsworth’s recollection another twenty-odd years later of the circumstances surrounding the birth of what became the “Rime of

the Ancyent Marinere.” According to Wordsworth, his collaboration with Coleridge was confined to the composition of the “Rime” only, with him dropping out shortly after he became aware of the radical difference in style between him and the younger poet. Notably, too, although Wordsworth showed no intention to challenge Coleridge’s earlier retrospect, he left no hint that poems on the supernatural were to have an equal share in the collection as his contribution, the subjects of which were “taken from common life, but looked at, as much as might be, through an imaginative medium.”<sup>12</sup>

“A magnificent effort of expediency”

Is this just an instance of Wordsworth’s characteristic dominance in his relationship with Coleridge, i.e. failing to understand the distinguishing features of his friend’s intellect, he ungraciously appropriated to himself, mentally and in actuality, what started out as a joint project shortly after the disproportion in their poetic output during the annus mirabilis of British Romanticism opened up this possibility? Which poet’s description is the more correct? Aiming to resolve issues such as these, as far as judicious considerations of surviving textual evidence permit, Mark L. Reed found that no “lasting plan for a truly joint volume with such exact goals as both later described was for any length of time a powerful motivating principle in the consciousness of either” poet.<sup>13</sup> The received account—publicized first by Coleridge in the *Biographia* and subsequently, connived at by Wordsworth—of how *Lyrical Ballads* originated is, therefore, the product of later views when both writers came to the tacit agreement, consciously or unconsciously, that “the extent of the meaning of the volume . . . over-rode the necessity—or possibility—of exactness about the precise factual details of its birth” (p. 250). In Reed’s estimation, the short-lived collaboration of the two poets on the “Rime” in mid-November of

1797 is overstressed as a determining factor in the making of *Lyrical Ballads*. Considering the dates as can be plausibly assigned to the poems, not until March of the following year did Wordsworth begin to be preoccupied with a loose assemblage of innovative poems—stylistically unlike anything he composed in the last few months, be it the failed drama *The Borderers* or the blank verse poems (probably still in fragment or draft form) such as “The Ruined Cottage” and “The Old Cumberland Beggar”—that eventually found their ways into *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). The abundance of such poems constitutes the basis of conjectures concerning the formation of an aesthetic plan that included such self-conscious linguistic objectives as Wordsworth publicized incrementally in the next few years. In sharp contrast to the elder poet’s productivity between early March and late May, Coleridge’s involvement in the project in the spring was weak and ill-defined. Despite his interest to see the joint collection through the printing press in accordance with authorial wishes, Coleridge’s actual contributions, with the exception of the “Rime,” are hardly an effort at conscious simplicity, as the “Advertisement” might lead one into thinking, nor do they in any discernible way incline toward the supernatural, whether in terms of subject matter or style. In the meantime, Coleridge was deeply concerned to enact other plans that must have weighed heavily on his mind, e.g. making financial preparations for a German trip he would take together with the Wordsworths later in the year. Consequently, it seems reasonable to argue, as Reed did, that “the primary labour of the composition of the poems and the writing of the theory were in fact mostly the older poet’s” (p. 251).

For the purposes of this inquiry, the significance of Reed’s conclusions is twofold. Insofar as the plan of *Lyrical Ballads* did not begin to take shape until early March of 1798, Reed’s argument enables us to account for some of the troubling discrepancies between Wordsworth’s theoretical justifications and his actual compositional practice. To take an obvious

example, though by all standards a notable achievement as a “lyrical ballad,” “The Female Vagrant,” written in fluent Spenserian stanza, appears to contradict the tendency of Wordsworth’s experiment with language probably because as an excerpt from an unpublished narrative poem now commonly known as *Salisbury Plain*, it predates the composition of the shorter narrative pieces in the volume by possibly as wide a margin as seven years.<sup>14</sup> Something similar can be said of several others, including “Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree,” “Old Man Travelling,” “The Convict,” and certainly “Tintern Abbey,” none of which are written in traditional or lyrically heightened ballad meter. Without a single exception, their dates of composition fall outside the short period between March and May, which witnessed a burst of productivity on Wordsworth’s part. The poet was thus stating nothing but a plain fact in the “Advertisement,” too often ignored in what increasingly appears to be standard generalizations about the literary revolution initiated by *Lyrical Ballads*, that the language experiment applies only to the “majority,” not all, of the collected poems. On the other hand, insofar as some sort of plan did emerge in Wordsworth’s mind as he avidly set to work in the spring and summer of 1798, Reed’s conclusions clear the path for an investigation into the extent to which the 1798 volume, especially Wordsworth’s share in it, can be reasonably thought of as guided by a plan, to which Wordsworth’s published self-justifications might connect only tangentially.<sup>15</sup>

Taking his cue from Reed’s casual remark that the only joint plan weighing on Wordsworth’s mind in the months leading up to the productive spring of 1798 is the masterpoem to be called *The Recluse*, Kenneth R. Johnston supplied a refreshingly original perspective in which to probe Wordsworth’s conscious intention behind *Lyrical Ballads*. For Johnston, the 1798 collection is “a revolutionary document without its requisite revolutionary manifesto—or *with* a manifesto that displaces its revolutionary thrust into matters of poetic methodology.”<sup>16</sup>

Placing his emphasis on the subject matter of Wordsworth's poems, he insisted that the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* be read in the light of the poet's plan for *The Recluse*, a philosophical poem "on Man, on Nature, and on Human Life," upon which its co-planners pinned their hope for Wordsworth's literary immortality.<sup>17</sup> Bent on establishing the continuity between these two temporally contiguous projects, Johnston suggested that we regard Wordsworth's share in the first *Lyrical Ballads* as splitting thematically into two types, each with its own set of stylistic distinctions and each skillfully interwoven with the other. The first type is made up of the five lyrical meditations on natural beauty, all identified with a title, beginning with the word "lines," that elaborately, sometimes exhaustively, documents the situation and context of the ensuing poetic utterances, from "Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree" to "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." The other type are descriptions, ten in all, of the suffering poor, which encompass not just those that date from the compact time frame in which the *Lyrical Ballads* project finally took shape, but several earlier pieces, including "The Female Vagrant," "Old Man Travelling," "The Convict," which have thus far presented serious classification problems. Additionally, there are two pairs of what Johnston called "dialogue" poems—because all of them dramatize, albeit only implicitly in the case of "The Tables Turned," the confrontation of two ideologically distinct voices—placed strategically in the 1798 edition, it seems, to mediate the interplay of the two major thematic types. Insofar as Wordsworth treated the volume's two central themes separately, insofar as he was still seeking a poetically effective means to integrate metaphysical assertions about the meaning of natural beauty on the one hand and tales of human suffering on the other, Johnston argued that we regard the poet's success in *Lyrical Ballads* with smaller poetic forms and conventions as "triumphs of [his] failure" to get on with *The Recluse*, as a "magnificent effort of expediency" (p. 157), whereby Wordsworth spared himself the

daunting task of supplying the necessary linkages for his masterpiece that will be, if carried out as planned, the first philosophical poem in the English language.

Before I proceed to comment on the significance of Johnston's new perspective, a few caveats are in order on where he seemed to have overstated things a little while shrewdly sidestepping some of the old controversies. In attempting to bring the arrangement of Wordsworth's share of *Lyrical Ballads* into accord with the projected theme of *The Recluse*, Johnston's division of the volume seems overly schematic. It not only makes the poems more unified and organized than they actually are, but, in certain cases, has the effect of precluding useful, sometimes essential considerations of the occasional and experimental nature of Wordsworth's writings, considerations that would have sunk into obscurity, had Wordsworth attached no authorial comments to the poems. The second category, which encompasses all narratives of suffering, is particularly problematic because not all poems so categorized fit comfortably under such a heading. The dramatic aspect of "The Thorn," for instance, could easily have gone unnoticed if the poem were not read in the light of Wordsworth's prose explanations. While it is true that the poem derives a large part of its evocative power from the tragedy of Martha Ray, while it is also true that we need not rule out speculations about the biographical/psychological basis of Wordsworth's liking for, nay, his obsession with the topics of painfully suffering mothers, it is, judging by the standards of the poet's avowed intent and the success with which he carried it out, first and foremost an experiment in dramatic form and characterization.<sup>18</sup> To take another well-known case, "The Idiot Boy," again a much-debated poem which modern criticism has largely understood as comic, also has to undergo a kind of directional distortion before it can be regarded as primarily about human suffering. Without a doubt, the poem's principal interest is Betty Foy's distress at the bedside of her severely ill

neighbor as she awaits the return of her idiot son, but her distress is purely psychological and thus, unlike many other stylistically similar tales in the collection, can hardly be read as a veiled attack on existing institutions of society. On the contrary, in tugging at the reader's heartstrings by presenting what Betty Foy felt during Johnny's absence, Wordsworth in this poem brilliantly enacts a key objective announced in the 1800 "Preface": i.e. "to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature," which object he had attempted to attain in poems like "The Idiot Boy" "by tracing the maternal passion through many of its more subtle windings."<sup>19</sup>

One last example will further alert us to the limitations of *The Recluse* as an interpretive framework for the first *Lyrical Ballads*. Toward the end of his article, Johnston conducted a descriptive analysis of "The Convict," another peculiar poem placed in an unassuming corner of the volume, in order to demonstrate the validity of his all-too-neat scheme. Much of what Johnston said about this poem is uncontroversial, actually quite insightful. It is indeed an anomaly in that unlike other tales of suffering in the volume, where the narrator is either entirely absent or plays the very marginal role of setting the scene or initiating a dialogue, the narrating subject and the suffering object in "The Convict" seem to have exchanged their roles, with the former projecting himself obtrusively into the poem, thereby reducing the latter's involvement to that of a silent listener. This role reversal, as Johnston has aptly argued, thrusts Wordsworth into the rather awkward position of having to respond directly and meaningfully to a case of social injustice. Wordsworth's obvious inability to effectively mediate the difference between the suffering of the convict and the narrator's role as a philanthropist and social critic who could do nothing but expressing wishful good intentions in the poem's concluding stanzas is a large part of the failure that Johnston quite rightly thought the poem is, especially when it is juxtaposed

with the humanely stirring “Tintern Abbey” which follows immediately after as the concluding piece in the volume. But viewing it through the tinted glasses of *The Recluse*, Johnston seems to have crossed the lines of critical probability when ascribing the poem’s removal from print after 1798 to Wordsworth’s judgment, which Johnston thought confirms his own, that the poem is a total aesthetic failure. My unease about this argument is grounded in three considerations. First, given the poem’s complicated textual history, we must put ourselves on guard when trying to graft unto “The Convict” the plan for the first *Recluse* poems, since the earliest drafts of the poem clearly predate the plan, suppose the latter did attain a certain level of intelligibility in early 1798.<sup>20</sup> Thus, before quickly treating it as an exception that proves the rule, it is useful and necessary, first of all, to put the poem through a relevance test. Granted that the turn from the scene of natural beauty to that of human distress in the poem’s opening stanzas is abrupt, we wonder at what confidence level we can reasonably think that the contrast bears the imprint of *The Recluse*’s philosophical concerns.<sup>21</sup> Second, it is not so obvious to me that shifting the poem’s focus from the victim to the comforter necessarily results in an artistic failure. On the contrary, the poem contains several delicate touches of feeling in the middle section, where the convict’s suffering in the prison cell is effectively counterpointed with the extravagant luxury enjoyed by the rulers of the world, and where the narrator indulges in sympathetic imaginings of the convict’s psychological torture. This takes me immediately to the third point. If the poem’s aesthetic value is potentially a matter of debate, it will be hasty to assume that Wordsworth kept the poem out of print after 1798 on purely artistic grounds. In the absence of conclusive evidence, it seems to me that a more likely cause for the poem’s fleeting public appearance is Wordsworth’s recoil in the late 1790s from his earlier radicalism, something, as is well known, the poet had grown increasingly willing to disguise around the turn of the century.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, if a literary context does help to situate and illuminate the concerns of “The Convict,” it is probably less the first trials toward *The Recluse* than Wordsworth’s poetry of protest in the mid-1790s.<sup>23</sup>

With these qualifications in mind, we are free to proceed with a more balanced view of Johnston’s argument. On the one hand, in combating the pedagogical practice of reading excerpts from *Lyrical Ballads* entirely in the light of Wordsworth’s theory, we need not go so far as Johnston as to preclude all considerations of Wordsworth’s authorial comments, for in poems like “The Thorn,” he did appear to have made a conscious effort to put the reader in “a complex feeling of delight” by “tempering the painful feeling which will always be found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions.”<sup>24</sup> Nor can we deny that in depicting distressful scenes, Wordsworth did show a keen interest in new channels of expression and metrical innovation that would allow him to execute his didactic and rhetorical purposes. From another standpoint, there is also a good likelihood that the predominance of tales of suffering bears out Johnston’s interpretation that they actually embody, albeit frequently in disguised form, Wordsworth’s tragic vision of contemporary society, one marked by massive political, social, and economic dislocations. Thus it is appropriate that they be read in the light of the longer, more straightforward narrative forms adopted in the first *Recluse* poems, such as “The Ruined Cottage,” where the poet-listener, overwhelmed by the sadness of Margaret’s story, could do nothing but “[bless] her in the impotence of grief.”

#### The Evolving Lyrical Voice of 1797-1798

However, Wordsworth’s social, humanitarian concerns in these early trials with narrative forms are not the only important point of reference upon which an understanding of *Lyrical*

*Ballads* can be developed. The attentive reader will also find Wordsworth actively engaged in a search for poetically practical ways to cope with the rampant human suffering observable in England in the 1790s. The poet's effort in this regard is especially marked in the poems beginning with the title word "lines," which constitute Johnston's first generic type, and which, I hope to demonstrate shortly after, eventually led Wordsworth beyond the still-hazy *Recluse* plans of early 1798 into the yet unexplored terrain of *The Prelude*, which witnessed its first flowering in the following year. Elsewhere, in his study of *The Recluse*'s relation to Wordsworth's poetry, Johnston had traced the curiously self-perpetuating dynamic between the poet's "commitment to a public epic of secular redemption . . . and his fascinated exploration of his own genius as creator of such a poem."<sup>25</sup> Following in Johnston's footsteps, I supplement his argument by presenting the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 as the missing link in what Johnston had identified as *The Recluse*'s first dialectical movement.

The five "lines" poems are particularly worthy of comment not only because of their being the earliest genuinely lyrical poems of the mature Wordsworth, but also because we are not yet fully clear about the meaning of their arrangement and their relationship with other poems in the same collection. In spite of the considerable progress we have made in recent decades in deciphering some of these poems individually, especially of the first and last,<sup>26</sup> they have hardly ever been read as a thematically connected sequence and rarely in the light of Wordsworth's larger concerns, traditional, poetic, and personal. Previous studies on the organization of the first *Lyrical Ballads*, even if they do not claim a seamless organic unity, tend to construct more or less arbitrary, even fanciful, connections that leave the reader wondering how much interpretive value their findings really have.<sup>27</sup> Surely, there is no denying the existence of certain obvious groupings in the collection, such as the two pairs of dialogue poems on which Johnston's two-

pronged scheme pivots. But the search for internal coherence among the narrative poems that goes too far beyond the identification of obvious thematic pairings as “The Dungeon” and “The Convict” is a risky business. Too often the findings will appear to be post hoc rationalizations once we become aware of the massive reshuffle the narrative pieces underwent in subsequent printings of *Lyrical Ballads*. Their high susceptibility to rearrangement proves conclusively that the detection of sequences and categories for the 1798 volume as a whole has at most a very limited relevance for our understanding of the narrative poems.

Against the constant reshuffling of narrative pieces throughout their print history, the five “lines” poems stand out as a curious exception. Their order in the much expanded *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800 is the same as in the 1798 volume, with the sole difference that by 1800 Wordsworth had decided to split into two consecutive poems “Lines” no. 4 in the 1798 volume: those “Written Near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening.” Then, in the editions of 1802 and 1805—*Lyrical Ballads* ceased to be printed in separate editions after 1805—while the split poem was moved to volume two, the sequencing of the other “lines” poems remains untouched. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the “lines” poems still appear largely in the order they were given in the 1798 volume even when the “lyrical ballads” were first dispersed into Wordsworth’s collected works. In the *Poems* of 1815, which arranged and classified poems under three distinct sets of categories—psychological, generic, and biographical—that have greatly multiplied confusion over Wordsworth’s poems for his readers, the order of the five lyrics, with the single exception of “Tintern Abbey,” is still that in which they first met the reading public. The print history of the poems in question should suffice as an inducement to study them no longer as discrete items, which, as we will see, is the cause of much of New Historicism’s misunderstanding of “Tintern Abbey,” but as a strategically constructed sequence. If the shape of

the *Lyrical Ballads* is in any meaningful, substantial way worthy of our attention, it is most likely to be observed in this subset of poems and their interaction with the surrounding ones in the first *Lyrical Ballads*.

In the restricted context of the 1798 volume, it will become clear that the major thematic interest of the Yew-tree poem lies in Wordsworth's struggle with the moral questions that must have colored his thought in the mid-1790s, the chief among which is: how is it possible for a talented young man, pure in heart and with high aspirations, to live a life of undamped hope in a depraved and vicious society, where to succeed, he must be prepared "against the taint / Of dissolute tongues, 'gainst jealousy, and hate, / And scorn, against all enemies" (ll. 15-17), and above all, must brace himself for the injury the aforesaid vices might inflict on his moral being? The builder of the Yew-tree seat is such a young man. Unable to find his rightful place in the human world, he resorted immediately to denouncing it and chose to live out his years in seclusion on his own estate. Thus begins the portrait of a misanthropic recluse. As is sometimes noted in the critical discussion of this poem, the recluse's main tragic flaw is his incapacity for love, a moral failing that keeps him from attaining arguably the most essential of all social virtues: benevolence.<sup>28</sup> Thus, although those for whom, "warm from the labours of benevolence, / The world, and man himself, appeared a scene / of kindred loveliness" were not entirely absent from his mind, he could only think of their sense of fulfillment from active social participation as an unapproachable ideal. While modern readers are generally familiar with the cause of the recluse's isolation from the world of men, his inability to develop redemptive feelings of love for natural beauty has received less attention. The young man's chosen place of retirement where, supposedly, these memorial "lines" were left for the contemplation of passers-by, is replete with

images of solitude and sterility: a stone pile “with mossy sod / First covered o’er, and . . . this aged tree”; “a stragglng sheep / The stone-chat, or the glancing sand-piper; / . . . barren rocks, with juniper, / And heath, and thistle” (ll. 9-10, 23-6). In this desolate natural spot, the recluse, instead of learning to reconcile himself to the imperfections of the world and reduce his disappointment, merely found “an emblem of his own unfruitful life” (l. 29). Thus ends the tale not so much of a young man’s failure to develop communal feelings from a youthful fondness for nature, as those familiar with Wordsworth’s account of his growth in *The Prelude*, especially the moral crisis he faced in revolutionary France, might have expected, as of a social misfit who, having failed to enact his idealism in the world of men, also found himself unable to build a healthy bond with, nor find consolation in, nature.<sup>29</sup>

It should be noted, in passing, that the Yew-tree poem and the two preceding pieces by Coleridge, especially the “Rime,” though written in diverse poetic styles, harmonize on this double failure with regard to man and nature. A quick comparison shows that the placement of the opening poems in the 1798 volume is not accidental. The “Rime” heads the list not just because, according to the two contributors’ respective late life recollections, it gave the first impetus to a plan for *Lyrical Ballads*, nor simply, as Averill has suggested, because it can shock the reading public into consciousness of the “disorienting nature” of the collection, just as the old Mariner managed to captivate the initially unwilling Wedding-Guest in the beginning of the poem.<sup>30</sup> It is an apt introductory poem because it first sounded the alarm on the central theme of man’s alienation from nature and other human selves. The pivotal event of the Mariner’s horrid experience at sea is, as is well known, his apparently motiveless murder of an albatross. This act of violence on the Mariner’s part, as Coleridge informed us in the revised “Argument” of 1800, defies “the laws of hospitality,” and is thus, we can reasonably argue, an expression of his

contempt for the life he shares with things of nature. The validity of this interpretation is born out not only directly by the Mariner's initial disgust with the "slimy things" (ll. 121, 230) in the sea, but indirectly by his blessing the water-snakes in Part 4, which immediately lightens his torment and sets him on a course of redemption. However, it is a lesson he learned a little too late, at a time when he found himself irrevocably estranged from his shipmates, who had already suffered the outrageous dictates of fortune, and who afterward throughout the sea-trip would curse him with their stony eyes. From this estrangement the Mariner is never to fully recover but is condemned to a life of eternal wandering in search of a fit audience for his woeful tale, the telling of which only helps to alleviate his sporadic outbursts of anguish. The Mariner's extravagant narration closes on a didactic note that points revealingly at the ideological context within which the whole narrative is to be interpreted. Admonishing the Wedding-Guest, the Mariner affirmed that "He prayeth well who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast."

He prayeth best who loveth best,  
 All things both great and small:  
 For the dear God, who loveth us,  
 He made and loveth all. (ll. 645-50)

suggesting that only this religion of love can redeem a fallen man from the curse of alienation.<sup>31</sup>

Religion again plays a prominent role in the following piece also by Coleridge, "The Foster-Mother's Tale," an excerpt from his play *Osorio* that was rejected in late 1797 by the producers at a London theatre that he hoped would perform the play. The excerpt moves a step closer to the Yew-tree poem both thematically and formally. Written in blank verse, it relates the tale through the Foster-Mother's mouth of a "very learned youth" (l.41) who, though taught by a Friar, was unable to embrace orthodox views of nature and society and develop values essential

to human experience. Knowing not how to pray in earnest, he led the existence of a wild animal as a boy and cherished hopes, when grown up, of being a savage hunter, “a naked man” wandering “up and down at liberty” (ll.63-4). Harboring heretical and unlawful thoughts, he displayed no concern for the old woodman Leoni, who fostered and doted on him and took risks to save him from imprisonment. In a word, the fragment explores the dangers of a completely natural, that is, secular education and of man’s degradation to a state of nature totally devoid of religious import.

This quick excursus to Coleridge’s compositions will bring us back to the Yew-tree poem with a fresh perspective on Wordsworth’s motivation.<sup>32</sup> It now appears that the poet did not simply intend it to be an emotionally touching appraisal of the recluse’s way of life, but was also earnestly seeking to overcome his dual failure of love in the cultural vacuum left by the removal of religious props. Of Wordsworth’s poetic reflections two implications are particularly important because they bear directly on our understanding of his poetics and his development as a poet. The first concerns his estimation of the role of imagination, and the visionary experience it renders possible, in the repair of the recluse’s moral constitution. In contrast to his own impassioned utterances in the Simplon Pass and Mt. Snowdon passages in longer versions of *The Prelude* and to Coleridge’s celebrated metaphysical definitions in Chapter 13 of the *Biographia*, Wordsworth at this early stage of his career could only doubt the efficacy of the imagination in man’s moral regeneration. The “visionary views,” on which the recluse’s “fancy feed[s]” (l. 41), instead of lessening the degree of his disappointment, only help to sharpen consciousness of his isolation and increase his melancholy. The attitude implied here significantly enhances the soundness of Jonathan Wordsworth’s speculation that the opening sentence of the concluding paragraph—“if thou be one whose heart the holy forms / Of young imagination have kept

pure”—were most likely a later addition that dates from the time when *Lyrical Ballads* was being readied for the press.<sup>33</sup> Apart from the various pieces of textual evidence that have caught the attention of criticism, such as the fact that the lines in question contain the first occurrence of the word “imagination” (l. 45) in Wordsworth’s poetic corpus, or that the surviving notebook drafts of the poem contain no such lines, we may now try to clinch the argument by pointing to the obvious discrepancy in the space of just a few lines between the aggravating effect “fancy” had on the recluse’s moral recovery and the view of “imagination” as a tribute to a young man’s moral development. In this abrupt attitudinal shift lies the germ of an ideological revolution that was to bear fruit in Wordsworth’s poetry in the years to come.

The significance of the moralizing paragraph does not just lie in the usage of theoretically loaded terms like “fancy” and “imagination.” More importantly, it lights the path toward Wordsworth’s preoccupation in the years ahead with problems of self-representation, problems that are merely tangentially touched upon in the central section of the Yew-tree poem, but are now put in the spotlight as Wordsworth resumed his meditation on the moral of the tale just told. Talking again, as in the opening paragraph, directly to the reader, the poet poured forth a powerful series of moral admonitions, attacking first of all “pride,” which from his vantage point,

Howe’er disguised in its own majesty,  
 Is littleness; that he, who feels contempt  
 For any living thing, hath faculties  
 Which he had never used; that thought with him  
 Is in its infancy. The man, whose eye  
 Is ever on himself, doth look on one,  
 The least of nature’s works, one who might move

The wise man to that scorn which wisdom holds  
 Unlawful, ever. O, be wiser thou!  
 Instructed that true knowledge leads to love,  
 True dignity abides with him alone  
 Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,  
 Can still suspect, and still revere himself,  
 In lowliness of heart. (ll.46-60)

At first sight, the passage does nothing but spin out a moral that is perhaps in everyone's mind as they follow through the tale. It is no surprise that "pride" and the resultant egotism ("the man, whose eye / Is ever on himself") are singled out as the main cause of the recluse's moral failings, for the reader is amply prepared earlier in the poem by the mention of the unhappy man's inability to accept "neglect" in the world, of his "rash disdain" for the evils found in it, and above all, of "the food of pride" that "sustained his soul" as a recluse. But things look a bit different when we take seriously what the passage actually says. Discrepancies inevitably arise when we begin to wonder, for instance, how accurately the recluse can be said to have "contempt / For any living thing." As already noted, the real cause of his disappointment is his failure to enact his "lofty hopes" and make a name for himself in the world of men. As far as "any living thing" is concerned, he seemed to take a morbid pleasure in the companionship afforded by such things of nature as image his gloomy state of mind at a natural spot still loved by bees and where he taught a tree "to bend its arms in circling shade" (l.11). Was Wordsworth still talking about the unhappy man here? Certainty recedes as we scroll further down. The remaining part of the paragraph seems to raise more questions than it ostensibly answers. Language originating in philosophies of the mind creeps into the picture in the guise of an apparently unalarming reference to "faculties."

If the recluse's incapacity for love is his main failing, one wonders what "faculties" Wordsworth would like him to cultivate as part of a moral remedy. What "thought" should he think or how should he develop his "thought" so that his "knowledge" would eventually lead to "love"? In what sense is he "the least of nature's works"? What does this appositional phrase imply about Wordsworth's conception of man vis-à-vis nature? If "the wise man" is a man of dignity and capable of love, how is it that he would view the recluse's way of life with "scorn," something the poet retracts immediately by indicating that such an attitude contradicts his "wisdom"? Does not this cut a deep rift in the wise man's moral being, a rift just as unwholesome as the recluse's feelings of alienation? No less puzzling is the concluding sentence, where semantically opposed verbs are juxtaposed and kept in a precarious balance. If it makes sense to advise the unhappy man to "suspect" himself and tame his pride, why does Wordsworth also stress the need to "revere" oneself, and most surprising of all, "in the silent hour of inward thought." Has not the recluse had enough, nay too much, of an introspecting, melancholy mind? What, after all, is the message the moralist wanted to hammer home?

Surely, the presence of small discrepancies and minor ambiguities need not devalue the Yew-tree poem as a literary performance. It is, no doubt, unjust to require the language of poetry to have the kind of definiteness and referential clarity that mark the language of science or philosophy. Nor do I mean to suggest that the questions just raised must be a mystery that eternally, to adopt a Keatsian phrase, "teases us out of thought," but the ending of the poem does disclose two things, one more obvious than the other, yet both of central importance to our search for meaning in Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*: the more obvious point is that in attempting to bring drafts of the poem to a satisfactory close, Wordsworth was confronted with a tangle of moral problems so tough and taxing that he knew not himself, at least in the spring of

1798, how to resolve other than by casting forth a series of rhetorically remarkable yet conceptually perplexing moral assertions. The less obvious point is that the difficulty Wordsworth faced in thinking through his problems has much to do with his unsaid sympathy for the unhappy man, in whom he had discovered a congenial spirit and unto whom he had projected his own unpleasant feelings.

This latter point will be much clearer after a quick look at how Wordsworth in completing the poem altered to advantage its factual base. In the corresponding Fenwick note, Wordsworth revealed that the poem was “composed in part at school at Hawkshead,” perhaps during the latter part of his school-time in 1786 or 1787, and that “the individual whose habits and character” are described in the poem was

a gentleman of the neighbourhood, a man of talent and learning, who had been educated at one of our Universities, & returned to pass his time in seclusion on his own estate. He died a bachelor in middle age. Induced by the beauty of the prospect, he built a small summer-house on the rocks above the peninsula on which the ferry-house stands . . .<sup>34</sup>

The information provided here alerts the reader immediately to the commonality of life experience between Wordsworth and this “gentleman of the neighbourhood,” who we now know is the Rev. William Braithwaite of Satterhow (1753-1800).<sup>35</sup> Like this person “of talent and learning,” Wordsworth had also proceeded from Hawkshead Grammar School to St John’s College, Cambridge, and like him, had also retired to the Lake District years later. We also know with some degree of certainty that this person withdrew to his country estate sometime between 1780, in which year he earned his M.A., and 1785. But it is difficult to find out what exactly caused him to retire to his native place. Although Wordsworth’s account of Braithwaite’s

feelings at the time of his withdrawal need not be entirely fictional, given our knowledge that Braithwaite did fail to secure a living after graduating in 1776 until the late 1780s, we must nevertheless not underestimate the poet's willingness to sacrifice factual accuracy in executing his poetic aims. No surviving biographical evidence suggests that the would-be clergyman sustained himself in prideful solitude while living in retirement. Instead, the evidence still available seems to make it difficult to identify the historical Braithwaite with the unhappy man whose life is outlined in Wordsworth's poem. In the 1790s, that is, in the years leading up to Wordsworth's completion of the poem, Braithwaite's life was very much that of a devoted cleric actively engaged in local business. One of his main activities in this period is his improving the landscape of his native place: building a "small summer-house," of which Wordsworth spoke at length in the IF note, on the high, rocky hill above the Ferry Inn overlooking Lake Windermere, and planting on it trees, shrubs, and acorns on a scale that would be wholly inconceivable for someone morbidly obsessed with images of sterility and solitude in nature and dying, eventually, of melancholia.

The evidence seems compelling that the Yew-tree poem is not so much a biographical sketch as a veiled confession,<sup>36</sup> the self-portrait of a poet desperate to rescue himself from a spiritual crisis after losing faith in the millennial hopes of the French Revolution, Godwinian rationalism, and above all, the strength of his intellect. It is only by fixing attention on the autobiographical dimension of the Yew-tree poem that we can come to an understanding of the moral overshooting and perplexity inherent in the poem's hortatory ending. Here, contrary to the reader's anticipations, the solution Wordsworth finally settled on does not ask the reader simply to develop a non-discriminatory love for nature or to take up the practice of benevolence.<sup>37</sup> Instead, the poet calls for a profound reconfiguration of the self that, presumably, shall render it

again socially active and receptive to the influence of nature. Wordsworth's language in the last paragraph seems to suggest that a youthful sensitivity to natural beauty is the foundation upon which this new self is to be built, but the ultimate aim of this self-renewal is, as the very ending of the poem indicates, the attainment of a balanced personality founded upon the cultivation of humility and proper self-esteem through a healthy habit of introspection.

But how is one to achieve this goal? It is not accidental that the Yew-tree poem draws a vaguely worded moral in the end without ever showing how it might heal the recluse's damaged spirit and broken heart (note: Wordsworth did not begin to address the reader until after he had, as it were, poetically dispatched the recluse in line 43), for it is primarily a venue for Wordsworth to wrestle with questions that touched the deepest chord of his heart at the time, questions such as "if melancholy be the lot of a recluse that I have made myself, how am I to cheer myself up and become active again," "On what ground can I erect my future happiness," and "how will it, once attained, change my outlook on life and the world." Asking such imagined questions for Wordsworth shall put us back on track in analyzing the string of lyrics that constitute, as I argued, a continuous sequence in *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>38</sup>

Building upon what we, in many ways, can now regard as Wordsworth's self-interrogation in the first "lines" poem, the next two, both dating from the "early spring" of 1798—"Lines written at a small distance from my House, sent by my little Boy to the Person to whom they are addressed" (hereafter shortened to "Lines to my sister") and "Lines written in early spring"—paint images of the poet and his surroundings that seem calculated to dispel the gloom pervading the Yew-tree poem. Take "Lines to my sister" as an example. In it, as if to free himself from the trap of the recluse's melancholy, solitary existence, Wordsworth not only

presented himself as a devotee of nature, but situated the renewal of his feelings for natural beauty within a framework of quasi-familial relationships involving himself, his sister, and the boy messenger. Basking alone in an outdoor scene, where “the red-breast sings from the tall larch” (l. 3), Wordsworth immediately set out to execute the first wish that pops up in his mind: namely, that Dorothy (and the son of Basil Montagu named Edward in the poem) would join him immediately and lay herself open to the influence of the universal love that at the present moment “From heart to heart is stealing, / From earth to man, from man to earth” (ll.22-23). In acting thus, he effectively demonstrates, though without actually saying it, how a personal feeling of love that wells up inside as a response to natural beauty can spontaneously transform into a “social” impulse to share with fellow humans. But he did so, not by appending a drab moral message he could not fully articulate as in the ending of the Yew-tree poem, but by seamlessly integrating into the poem’s emotional structure his newly acquired faith in the pervasive, all-redeeming power of nature “that rolls / About, below, above,” and by which his soul and his sister’s, the speaker affirms, “shall be tuned to love” (ll. 33-4, 36). In the next spring lyric, “Lines written in early spring,” we hear the same cheerful tone and the same moral message. It resonates with the preceding “lines” not only in speaking at length of the joy reverberating through nature in springtime, but by reaffirming the quasi-metaphysical optimism with which the speaker linked his own soul to the “fair works” of nature. Nevertheless, Wordsworth improved upon himself here by taking the human concerns of the earlier poem beyond the narrow circle of his immediate relations and making it truly social. In inserting the mournful refrain: “what man has made of man” (ll.8, 24) amidst “lines” that otherwise appear to be uniformly playful, Wordsworth finally allowed himself, as Johnston has astutely observed, to “echo or hint at the larger cultural, political, and philosophical implications behind the *Lyrical*

*Ballads*,”<sup>39</sup> implications that surface more obtrusively in the woeful tales previously discussed. Considering the problems of alienation he had wrestled with in the Yew-tree poem, Wordsworth had indeed travelled very far in being able to regard nature with deep appreciation and remain cheerful in the face of widespread human suffering.

Retrospectively, these “lines” poems do appear to be structured as a crescendo rising toward the climactic “Tintern Abbey,” or to put the case in a more factually accurate manner, “Tintern Abbey” does seem to be the point of convergence for the preceding “lines” poems, each of which empties itself like a tributary into the mighty river of the crowning piece of the 1798 volume. The various human ills, for instance, that had driven the builder of the Yew-tree seat into unhappy retirement—calumny, jealousy, hate, scorn, and hostile rivalry—bear a striking resemblance to the ones that the speaker of “Tintern Abbey” imagined to await him and his sister in the world of men, and which he thought a metaphysical faith in nature would help them withstand. “The holy forms / Of young imagination” (ll. 44-5) that can supposedly keep the reader’s heart pure become “lovely forms” stored in the “mansion” (l. 141) of Dorothy’s mind. The rhetoric of interconnection between human viewer and natural scene in “Lines to my sister” develops into the rhapsodic vision, twice repeated in “Tintern Abbey,” of the One Life that rolls through all things, while the scenes of social injustice that had caused the poet to lament in the second spring lyric are submerged in “The still, sad music of humanity” that he could now frequently hear and recognize as having the power “To chasten and subdue” (ll. 92, 94). In fact, so long as we know how and where to look, no major movement in the grand symphony of “Tintern Abbey” from the picturesque opening through the meditative middle section to the conversational ending is completely shorn of the thematic interest of the preceding “lines” poems. The evidence is overwhelming that during the Wye tour in early July, which saw the birth of

“Tintern Abbey” in the poet’s mind, a key preoccupation for Wordsworth was to generate a lyrical statement that would not only enhance the internal coherence of the lyrics already written but sum up definitively what his past life had taught him, what he had come to realize about his mortal existence, nature, and society, and how he might most powerfully impart to the reader what he held dearest to his heart. Therefore, to return to Manning’s critique of Abrams and Vendler in the beginning, while it is crucial to point out how much of “Tintern Abbey”’s conclusive effect would be missing if it is read in total isolation from other “lyrical ballads,” it is nevertheless a far worse error, because methodologically misguided, on New Historicism’s part to seek the poem’s meaning in the discrepancies between the picturesque opening and its sociopolitical background.

#### Coda: An Anomaly

Let me close with a brief analysis of the only “lines,” those “Written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening,” that so far has been left undiscussed. The reasons for skipping it are as follows. At first sight, the poem hardly seems to follow from any of the preceding “lines,” to the extent that it may actually be thought to thwart their cumulative effect. Wordsworth’s authorial stance here is particularly revealing. He neither hides himself behind another’s story, nor addresses the reader publicly as a moralist, as in the Yew-tree poem; nor does it contain some version of “a man speaking to men,” as in the two spring lyrics or “Tintern Abbey.” In “Lines at Evening,” Wordsworth cast himself primarily as a poet, “a youthful bard,” looking at the life of poets. This lack of continuity in the evolution of authorial stance is not surprising, especially when we consider the poem’s compositional history. Drawing on a sonnet-draft from possibly as early as 1789 and significantly revised sometime before March 1797, it is the first

completed of the “Lines” poems. This might explain why it is structurally so unstable and why it holds such a tenuous position in the said lyric sequence. Not only did Wordsworth, following Coleridge’s recommendation, divide it in two after 1798, but moved both segments to the second volume in the much expanded later editions of *Lyrical Ballads*. These circumstances will definitely make us cautious in probing the web of interconnections involving the “Lines” poems, especially the relations of “Lines at Evening” to the concluding “Tintern Abbey”; nevertheless, they do not and should not keep us from seeking to explain, as far as sound criticism allows us to go, the poem’s placement in the overall structure of the first *Lyrical Ballads*.

That Wordsworth might have meant this lyric to be read in the light of the four others already mentioned is strongly suggested by his adding the initial word “lines” to its original title, presumably to bring it formally into accord with the other four, at some point after 29 March 1797, probably during the days leading up to the publication of the 1798 volume.<sup>40</sup> Guided by this authorial hint, we will begin to see that the transition from the generally cheerful spring lyrics to “Lines at Evening” may be less abrupt than it initially appears. The poignantly mournful closure of “Lines written in early spring” (“what man has made of man”) seems to pave the path for the somber mood of the following lyric. Here the most pressing problem Wordsworth confronts is the deeply upsetting discontinuity of human experience imaged in the transience of a beautiful evening scene that he was first struck with, as the IF note informs us, “during a solitary walk on the banks of the Cam” back in his student days, something he deliberately elided here, in order to position himself along a particular line of English poetry, by switching the scene to the Thames near Richmond. Neither the life of a poet nor the peace or happiness he enjoys at the present moment lasts; his visions and powers come and go, just as the sunset glow, “A little moment past, so smiling” (l. 6), quickly gives way to the darkness of night. These sad thoughts

may well have led to a resurgence of the gloom and doom that spreads over the Yew-tree poem. But the drive of “Lines at Evening” is not to indulge melancholy but to bless, an impulsive orientation that, as the three earlier “lines” poems attest, became typical of Wordsworth after 1797. The poet managed to do so by providing three increasingly complex possibilities of reconciliation with the inevitable discontinuities of a poet’s life: suffering, death, oblivion. The first and the most crude of these is for the poet to remain defiant and blind, to “nurse his fond deceit,” although “he must die in sorrow” and “though grief and pain may come to-morrow” (ll. 13, 14, 16). Knowing that this is but an act of willful blindness, the poet turned to enunciate fond wishes on behalf of other poets: that they may share the “lovely visions” that have come to him, that their minds “for ever flow, / As thy deep waters now are flowing” (ll. 23-4). This broadening of horizons, this turn toward the social—though not entirely ineffectual, to the extent that similar visions and powers may indeed *momentarily* keep the minds of poets flowing steadily in deep channels—is still “vain” if not self-deceiving, because individually, no poet can be happy and at peace forever, perhaps just as the river, so calm and fair now, must go through cycles of glory and gloom. The only solace available to the poet, it seems, is to relish the ideal conditions of the here and now,

. . . yet be as now thou art,

That in thy waters may be seen

The image of a poet’s heart,

How bright, how solemn, how serene!

and possibly, through it earn for himself, a latecomer, membership in an eternal community of like-minded poets, equally blessed with visions of natural beauty yet vulnerable as well to the whims of fortune, whose thoughts and feelings and his own, taken all together, constitute along

the river of time a linked succession of echoing voices, which, as the image of a suspended oar impressively suggests, is probably his best hope for peace and transcendence.

Such heart did once the poet bless,  
 Who, pouring here a later ditty,  
 Could find no refuge from distress,  
 But in the milder grief of pity.

Remembrance! As we glide along,  
 For him suspend the dashing oar,  
 And pray that never child of Song  
 May know his freezing sorrows more.  
 How calm! how still! the only sound,  
 The dripping of the oar suspended!  
 —The evening darkness gathers round  
 By virtue's holiest powers attended. (ll.25-40)<sup>41</sup>

It may be of advantage to gather together here, by way of conclusion, the various threads of the previous analysis that serve to illustrate how Wordsworth's ruminations on the life of poets in "Lines at Evening" can be regarded as a precursor to the crowning achievement of "Tintern Abbey." Without aiming to be exhaustive, I name three perceivable linkages in content and style: (1) in the transitions (most notably, "Vain thought," l. 25) of the earlier "lines," in the backward and forward movement of Wordsworth's thought in his quest for solace, we notice the inklings of a mode of rhetorical progression that will eventually enable him to build from

strength to strength and give an odal flow to the language of “Tintern Abbey”; (2) Wordsworth successfully combined the affirmative and the elegiac in “Lines at Evening,” creating a complex interplay between a surface appearance of confidence about the meaning of natural beauty and a shadowy undercurrent of anxiety and self-doubt, that will be part and parcel of “Tintern Abbey”’s tonal distinctiveness, although the drive to bless asserts itself in the latter with far greater success; (3) thematically, the various discontinuities of human experience that Wordsworth finally reconciled himself to in the earlier piece also lie at the very heart of “Tintern Abbey”—where it is the speaker’s primary task to bridge the yawning gulf between an earlier self, wild, innocent, self-indulgently cheerful, and the present self, socially enlightened and knowing how to cope in the world of men, and to extend this sense of personal continuity to the future experience of a younger relative—the only difference being that in the latter poem, Wordsworth does not project himself as a poet thinking about the life of poets, but simply a man reflecting on his own life, his relationship to nature and society, whose voice the reader will only be able to hear, or rather overhear, when “in the silent hour of inward thought,” he has learned to “still suspect, and still revere himself, / In lowliness of heart.”

## Endnotes to Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> For Wordsworth's poems published in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), I quote James Butler and Karen Green (ed.), "*Lyrical Ballads*" and *Other Poems, 1797-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992; hereafter cited as Butler and Green), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> These internal connections, by the way, have been partially anticipated in Johnston's 1983 article on "The Politics of 'Tintern Abbey,'" although they are there mediated by recurring references to an external source—William Gilpin's guidebook, *Observations on the River Wye* (published 1781), which Wordsworth took with him during his Wye tour—which Johnston utilized to link what he perceived to be two more or less distinct sets of poems in *Lyrical Ballads*: descriptions of suffering humanity and mediations on natural beauty. We will discuss at great length this basic division shortly.

<sup>3</sup> Here, it seems to me, Manning greatly exaggerated the confusion caused by *Lyrical Ballads* by unscrupulously applying a limited range of skeptical commentary on individual poems, most notably, "The Rime," to the whole collection. As regards the general impression the 1798 collection made on contemporary audience, I find it more truthful to say the opposite. In general, early reviewers were quick to notice the experimental nature of the poems in terms of language and style, as announced in the Advertisement, and more often than not, responded in favorable terms. See, e.g., *Monthly Mirror* 6 (Oct. 1798): 224-25; *Analytical Review* 28 (Dec. 1798): 583-87; "Domestic Literature," *New Annual Register* for 1798 (1799): 309-10; "Poetry," *Monthly Magazine* 6 (Supplement, January 1799): 514; [Francis Wrangham.] *The British Critic* 14 (Oct. 1799): 364-69. These positive responses, I believe, constitute the background to Dorothy's affirmation in a letter dated 10 and 12. September 1800, that "The first volume sold much better than we expected, and was liked by a much greater number of people" (letter to Mrs. John Marshall, *WWL* I:124-28). It is possible to argue further that there is also next to zero confusion in generally hostile reviews regarding the unconventionality of the majority of the literary pieces in the collection. They differ from the favorable reviews primarily on the doctrinal issue of whether poetry can accommodate the real language of the middling and lower orders of society. See, e.g., *New London Review* 1 (January 1799): 33-35; [Charles Burney.] *Monthly Review* 29 (June 1799): 202-10. All reviews cited, here and elsewhere, are from *The Romantics Reviewed*, ed. Donald Reiman (1972).

<sup>4</sup> Quoting lines 66-112 of "Tintern Abbey," Southey said of the poem: "In the whole range of English poetry, we scarcely recollect any thing superior" (*Critical Review* 24 October 1798). Charles Burney praised it as "reflections of no common kind; poetical, beautiful, and philosophical" (*Monthly Review* 29 [June 1799]: 202-10), though simultaneously regarding with suspicion the unsociable sentiment of the poem.

<sup>5</sup> As evidence that these assertions are the product of joint effort, to the extent that the younger poet could regard the 1800 Preface as "half a child of my own Brain" (letter to Robert Southey, 29 July 1802), one might cite Coleridge's letter to Humphry Davy, 9 October 1800, where, transcribing Wordsworth's opinion regarding the incompatibility between *Christabel* in recently completed form and the purpose of *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge echoed the elder poet's stipulations as regards the experimental character of the poems, i.e. "to see how far those passions, which alone give any value to extraordinary Incidents, were capable of interesting, in & for themselves, in the incidents of common life"; and William Sotheby, 13 July 1802: "the P[reface arose from] the heads of our mutual Conversations &c--& the f[irst pass]ages were indeed partly taken from notes of mine." See Coleridge's *Letters*, 2:830, 1:631, and 2:811.

<sup>6</sup> *Prose*, 1:116. Hazlitt's recollection in *My First Acquaintance with Poets* (1823), by the way, echoes the Advertisement in regarding the collection as primarily a language experiment (not enough critical attention, by the way, is paid to the qualification Wordsworth introduced in advertising his 1798 collection, i.e. the language experiment applies only to the "majority," not all, of the poems, which would drastically reduce the confusion regarding Wordsworth's use of language in the poems), although we must be aware that Hazlitt's memory was possibly colored by later comments of both poets. Coleridge, there, was reported as saying: "the *Lyrical Ballads* were an experiment about to be tried by him and Wordsworth, to see how far the public taste would endure poetry

written in a more natural and simple style than had hitherto been attempted; totally discarding the artifices of poetic diction, and making use only of such words as had probably been common in the most ordinary language since the days of Henry II.”

<sup>7</sup> *Prose*, 1:122-23; restated on p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> That Wordsworth may indeed have intended the reader to seek the poem’s emotional value in their own response finds ample support in the poem’s textual history. According to the Fenwick note, the poem originated as “an overflowing from *The Old Cumberland Beggar*” (quoted in *Poetical Works* 4:447-48). It is highly likely that Wordsworth added the concluding revelation of the old man’s purpose (ll. 15-20, discarded after 1805) when he was gathering materials for the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. As an afterthought, the description in the first paragraph does seem to be awkwardly juxtaposed with the revelation in the second, which, rather than having an aesthetically pleasing shock effect, seems to reduce the credibility of the previous characterization of the Old Man’s state of mind. One is inclined to conjecture that Wordsworth deleted the added paragraph from 1815 onward when in a new literary context, it was relieved of the duty, as it were, to assume the role of a “lyrical ballad”?

<sup>9</sup> I am primarily indebted to Mark L. Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years* (Harvard U. Press, 1967), for my knowledge of approximate dates of composition of Wordsworth’s writings.

<sup>10</sup> *The Art of “Lyrical Ballads,”* p. 83. All future references to this book are documented parenthetically in the text.

<sup>11</sup> *Biographia*, 2:6-7.

<sup>12</sup> The Fenwick note to “We Are Seven,” quoted in *Poetical Works* I:360-61.

<sup>13</sup> “Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the ‘Plan’ of the *Lyrical Ballads*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 34 (1965): 249. Hereafter page references to this article will appear in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Reed, 1967, p. 24. A conservative estimate would date the poem to 1793, certainly no later than 1794, as a central part of the unpublished “Salisbury Plain.” Cf. *ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> I will not keep Coleridge’s poems out of consideration not only because, as we will see, they provide a revealing inflection on Wordsworth’s contribution, but because of his emphasis on the unity of their poems. In their joint letter to Cottle on 28 May 1798, Coleridge famously insisted that the poems in the collection be thought of as “*one work, in kind tho’ not in degree, as an Ode is one work,*” like “stanzas, good relatively rather than absolutely” (Coleridge’s *Letters*, 1:412).

<sup>16</sup> “The Triumphs of Failure: Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798,” *The Age of William Wordsworth: Critical Essays on the Romantic Tradition*, Ed. Kenneth R. Johnston and Gene W. Ruoff (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p. 135; cited hereafter in the text. We might note in passing that unlike the collection’s modern readers, the early reviewers of *Lyrical Ballads*, as Manning has aptly pointed out (*op. cit.* p.24), were very shape-eyed in terms of their understanding of the political implications of Wordsworth’s poems. Moderate critics like Charles Burney had already noted that the ballads are mostly “tale[s] of woe.” See, e.g. *Monthly Review* 19 (June 1799), p.209 and *Monthly Mirror* 11 (June 1801), p.389.

<sup>17</sup> By early spring of 1798, Wordsworth had completed approximately 1300 lines of poetry that were intended for *The Recluse*. Mostly in draft form, they constitute four poems: *The Ruined Cottage*, “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” “A Night Piece,” and “The Discharged Soldier” which eventually found its way into the Book IV of the 1805 *Prelude*. Notably, Wordsworth identified the subject of these recent compositions, in two letters he sent to his old college friends: James Tobin on March 6, and James Losh on March 11, as pictures or views of “Nature, Man, and Society” (*Letters*, 1:187-190). For a particularly insightful reading of the first *Recluse* poems as a single work in the immediate context of Wordsworth’s friendship with Coleridge and of his literary career prior to their composition, see Kenneth Johnston, “The first *Recluse*, 1797-1798,” in *Wordsworth and “The Recluse”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 3-52.

<sup>18</sup> This is essentially Parrish's argument. For him, prior critical appraisals of the poem are wrongheaded in two opposed ways, either failing to differentiate between poet and narrator by focusing on the tragedy of Martha Ray—Johnston's argument potentially falls into this camp—or, like Southey and Coleridge, holding Wordsworth accountable for using a loquacious narrator that degrades the poem. To correct these deep-seated misinterpretations, Parrish maintained that we view the poem more accurately as “a pathological study, a poem about the way the mind works. The mind whose workings are revealed is that of the narrator, and the poem is, in effect, a dramatic monologue—that is, loosely, a poem in which the events related are meaningful not in themselves but as they reveal the character of the person who relates them” (op. cit. p. 99). For a brief listing of analogous uses of the topos in Wordsworth's writings, see Parrish, p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> *Prose*, 1:126. One might add, as has been noted in critical literature, that Wordsworth's refusal to rise free from the world of real events is another issue on which his poetry and prose explanations seem to agree and can be mutually illuminating. In lines 322-356 of “The Idiot Boy,” for example, the narrative temporarily breaks off (“Oh reader! Now that I might tell / What Johnny and his horse are doing!”) to indulge a series of romantic/supernatural possibilities open to the narrator in trying to bring the tale to an end, and concludes with a mock lament of the muses' withdrawal of inspiration. The lament is entirely ironic in that the narrator “takes no heed; / Of such we in romances read” (ll. 364-5), as born out by the tale's ending. Cf. The “Prologue” in *Peter Bell* (in many ways a companion piece to “The Idiot Boy,” though unpublished until 1819), which makes even more clear Wordsworth's renunciation of the supernatural.

<sup>20</sup> De Selincourt traced poem's origins further back to 1793 (See *Poetical Works* 1:374n). Reed dated “The Convict” to early 1796, sometime after the completion of “Adventures on Salisbury Plain” in March and before Wordsworth started work on *The Borderers* in October (1967, pp. 26, 344-345). Judging by the position of the poem's two final stanzas in a surviving manuscript, Landon and Curtis think it “can be probably dated between late autumn of 1795, when the Wordsworth arrived at Racedown, and spring of 1796” (p. 774). In whichever case, there is no doubt that it predates by a clear margin the plan for *The Recluse*, which could not have emerged seriously in Wordsworth's mind until after Coleridge's arrival at Racedown in June 1797.

<sup>21</sup> For a helpful discussion of the poem in its various manuscript and published forms, including speculations about Coleridge's participation in the revision process, see Parrish, pp. 192-95.

<sup>22</sup> Many Jacobus have commented on the possible influence of William Godwin's proposal for penal reform on the last line of the poem. See, e.g. Jacobus, p. 186. I suspect that hostile responses to the poem might also be a contributing factor in its removal from subsequent printings of *Lyrical Ballads*. See, e.g. Charles Burney's criticism in *Monthly Review* 29 (June 1799), pp. 209-10: “What misplaced commiseration, on one condemned by the laws of his country, which he had confessedly violated! We do not comprehend the drift of lavishing that tenderness and compassion on a criminal, which should be reserved for virtue in unmerited misery and distress, suffering untimely death from accident, injustice, or disease.” Perhaps by 1800, Wordsworth had come to recognize more thoroughly the immaturity of his radicalism or the damage the poem might do to his public image. By the way, the fate of Coleridge's “Dungeon,” a companion piece in many ways to “The Convict” in the 1798 volume, might also shed useful light on the elder poet's political stance. Although Wordsworth retained it in the much expanded edition of 1800, he eventually decided to cut it from the 1802 and 1805 re-printings of *Lyrical Ballads* perhaps as an anomaly, which had by then lost its literary companion, and the removal of which might strengthen the thematic unity of the collection.

<sup>23</sup> The version of *Salisbury Plain* completed in late 1795, now often referred to as “Adventures on Salisbury Plain,” is especially relevant. In adding the sailor's story to that of the female vagrant, Wordsworth set himself the task, as he told his lifelong friend Francis Wrangham (in a letter dated 20 Nov 1795), of exposing “the vices of the penal law” (*Letters*, 1:145). Coincidentally, neither poem was rated highly by the poet. In 1801 Wordsworth complained that the diction of “The Female Vagrant,” itself a revised excerpt from the earliest completed version of *Salisbury Plain*, “is often vicious, and the descriptions are often false, giving proofs of a mind inattentive to the true nature of the subject on which it was employed” (*Letters*, 1:270). Moorman, basing her judgment on John Wordsworth's

casual dismissal of “The Convict,” has pointed out that by 1801 the poem was possibly “regarded as something of a joke by the family” (Moorman, 1:507; see *Letters of John Wordsworth*, p. 104). For Landon and Curtis, Wordsworth’s evaluation of “The Convict” “can be judged from his readiness to hand it over to Coleridge [in 1797] to help him fulfill his commitment to the editor of the *Morning Post*” (p. 774).

<sup>24</sup> *Prose*, 1: 150.

<sup>25</sup> “Wordsworth and *The Recluse*: The University of Imagination,” *PMLA* 97.1 (Jan. 1982), p. 60. For a more elaborate treatment of this subject, see the first part of Johnston’s *Wordsworth and “The Recluse.”*

<sup>26</sup> For comments on possible traces of Coleridge’s involvement in the composition of the poem’s third and last verse paragraph, see Jonathan Wordsworth, 1969, pp. 206-7n; Parrish, pp. 67-70; Jared Curtis, “Wordsworth, Coleridge, and *Lines, left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree*,” *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 87 (1986-1987): 482-88. For studies on the literary sources and the genre of the poem, see Jonathan Wordsworth, 1969, pp. 196-97; Geoffrey H. Hartman, “Wordsworth, Inscription, and Romantic Nature Poetry,” *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, pp. 389-413. For a particularly informative account of the poem’s Godwinian background, see Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth’s “Lyrical Ballads”* (1798), pp. 15-37.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, James H. Averill, “The Shape of ‘Lyrical Ballads’ (1798),” *Philological Quarterly* 60 (1981): 387-407. Averill’s argument seems entirely motivated by Coleridge’s claim that the poems in the volume are like the stanzas of an ode (Coleridge’s *Letters*, 1:412). Reed, by the way, had long ago cast a cool eye on the literal validity of Coleridge’s remark. Noticing the rhetorical aspect of the claim, Reed suspected that it “expresses the mutual confidence of each poet in the congruence of his thought and aims with the other’s, or their mutual fears about their appearance before the public in such a pronounced attempt at financial profit, or perhaps their pleasure in having succeeded at discovering a practical means (not necessarily long before) of creating a literary monument to their friendship” (1965, p. 247).

<sup>28</sup> Jacobus, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> That Wordsworth eventually found a way to overcome this vicious cycle of feelings around the time of *Lyrical Ballads* is a more or less familiar story. The following fragmentary entry (dated probably between January and March, 1798) in the Alfoxden Notebook

Why is it we feel  
So little for each other but for this,  
That we with nature have no sympathy,  
Or with such things as have no power to hold  
Articulate language?  
And never for each other shall we feel  
As we may feel till we feel sympathy  
With nature in her forms inanimate,  
With objects such as have no power to hold  
Articulate language. In all forms of things  
There is a mind. (PW, V:340; cited in Jacobus, p. 49)

supplies an important link for the striking transition from the tragic view of “The Yew-tree Lines” to the faith in the One Life of all things, which Wordsworth was to develop shortly after during the most fruitful period of his relationship with Coleridge, and which was given the most confident and powerful utterance in “Tintern Abbey” and *The Pedlar* (see, especially, lines 204-216, in the text reconstructed by Jonathan Wordsworth, 1969, p. 179, and his comparative commentary, pp. 236-7).

<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 392

<sup>31</sup> This traditional, moralistic interpretation of the “Rime” is now a subject of much contention. I take Coleridge’s oft-quoted response to Barbauld’s criticism of the poem’s moral deficiency to be the first word of reassurance that the poem is dominated by a “moral sentiment” despite the poet’s authorial intention to produce “a work of such pure imagination” (*Table Talk*, 2:100). For a thoughtful account of the problems that dog moralistic readings of the poem, with a particular focus on the troubling questions raised by the Gloss Coleridge added in 1817, see Frances Ferguson, “Coleridge and the Deluded Reader: ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,’” *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Paul Fry (Boston & New York: Bedford St. Martin’s, 1999), pp. 113-30. Notwithstanding these complications, the traditional interpretation still appears to me largely valid. This is so not just because of biblical references the poem abounds in, from the Mariner’s religious exclamations (e.g. ll. 119, 156, 226, 475, 490, 514) and attempts at praying (e.g. ll. 236, 280, 447, 474) to the use of religious concepts and symbols (e.g. ll. 137-38, 152-53, 413-4), but because it can satisfactorily answer the two major objections raised by the no-moral critics: (1) the malignant effect the Mariner or his story had on the audience (the pilot, his son, and the Wedding Guest) seems to contradict his concluding message; and (2) the seemingly unjustifiable punishment of his shipmates vis-à-vis the Mariner. To answer both objections, it is particularly useful to know that the poem is, as Harold Bloom has described it, “in the tradition of the stories of Cain and of the Wandering Jew” and also “a late manifestation of the Gothic Revival” (*The Visionary Company*, p. 207). Although Coleridge offered no clear explanation of the Wedding Guest’s reaction, we can reasonably think that the Mariner’s choice of an audience is dependent on the latter’s susceptibility to his manipulation. As for the second piece of counterevidence, it is first of all a matter of debate whether the “life-in-death” (as the specter-woman on the skeleton-ship is identified in Coleridge’s gloss) the Mariner suffered is a better destiny than death. Regardless, the sailors’ fate is not as accidental as the results of dice-playing. Though not guilty of murder, they exhibit no integrity in their dealings with the Mariner (see, in particular, ll. 89-98) and lack a coherent belief system (ll. 63-4, 127-28), a sin—in the context of a religious tale—of which the Mariner is wholly innocent, for throughout the poem he thinks within the confines of Christianity.

<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to note here that the revisions made to lines 10-19 of the Yew-tree poem for the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* strengthen thematic ties with and smooth the transition from “The Foster-Mother’s Tale,” thus fanning speculation about Coleridge’s involvement in the process of both composition and revision. The changes and additions now seem to suggest that the youth’s subsequent failure in the world of men be explained by reference to his secularized education and his natural affinity for nature. The youth was now nursed by “science” (revised from “genius”) and “led by nature into a wild scene / Of lofty hopes,” into a world that thought it “owed him no service,” and in which “he was like a plant / Fair to the sun, the darling of the winds / But hung with fruit which no one, that passed by, / Regarded” (see Butler and Green, p. 48n).

<sup>33</sup> Op. cit. p. 207n. Cf. Parrish, pp. 67-70.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Butler and Green, p. 341.

<sup>35</sup> The landscape and the person are both described in Thomas West’s *Guide to the Lakes in Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire* (Kendal, 1802), pp. 55-56; cited in Owen (ed.), *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, pp. 127-28. My knowledge of the topography and Braithwaite’s life is primarily indebted to T. W. Thompson, *Wordsworth’s Hawkshead*, ed. Robert Woof (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 257-64, 294-99.

<sup>36</sup> This reading is strengthened by possibly the only other authorial comment on the yew tree: in an unpublished draft for Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes* (cited in *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, p. 128), “the remnant of a decaying yew tree” “yet to be seen,” and the “seat from which the solitary humour of the framer may not unfairly be inferred . . . the boughs had been trained to bend round the seat and almost embrace the Person sitting within allowing only an opening for the beautiful landscape.” As already noted by Robert Woof, it does seem likely that Wordsworth “inferred the character of his recluse from the characteristics of the yew tree seat” (Thompson, p. 264 n1)

<sup>37</sup> Jacobus, for instance, has maintained that the poem is a record of “Wordsworth’s realization that withdrawal is no answer; like Godwin, and like Coleridge in ‘Reflections on Entering into Active Life,’ he insists on the need for active participation in the social struggle” (p. 32).

<sup>38</sup> Let it be said in passing that the placement of Coleridge's "Nightingale" immediately after the Yew-tree poem also appears to be a strategic decision. In contesting the traditional poetic identification of the nightingale as "a melancholy bird," Coleridge's "conversational poem" can be regarded as an oblique response to Wordsworth's piece, especially in terms of how to develop wholesome views of nature. These early lines in the poem will strike the reader as particularly resonant with the Yew-tree poem:

A melancholy Bird? O idle thought!  
 In nature there is nothing melancholy.  
 —But some night-wandering Man, whose heart was pierc'd  
 With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,  
 Or slow distemper or neglected love,  
 (And so, poor Wretch! fill'd all things with himself  
 And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale  
 Of his own sorrows) he and such as he  
 First nam'd these notes a melancholy strain . . . (ll. 14-20)

Here, not only is the moralistic tone reminiscent of Wordsworth's poem, but Coleridge also echoed the elder poet in tracing the gloomy view of nature to the listener's gloomy state of mind.

<sup>39</sup> 1987, p. 149. But one need not follow Johnston slavishly in thinking that these expressions of lament necessarily indicate Wordsworth's failure to integrate his social commentary and his metaphysical faith in the meaning of natural beauty, especially because that would sound as if one should reasonably ask for more than what Wordsworth had already accomplished in these lyrics, the last of which represents by common consent Wordsworth's highest lyrical achievement. Wordsworth had already done so in poems like the early versions of *Salisbury Plain*, rather unsuccessfully, and his failures in this regard could have taught him that it is perhaps infeasible to try both in the same poem, and least of all, in the kind of lyric congenial to his talent.

<sup>40</sup> For a reading text of the first complete version that was copied into Cottle's MS. book on 29 March, 1797, see Butler and Green, p. 274-5. For a photograph of this late draft, see Healey, p. 400.

<sup>41</sup> Wordsworth's on-the-page note identifies William Collins' (1721-1759) *Ode on the Death of Mr. Thomson* (1749) as the poem referred to in these final stanzas. This allusion to Collins (and through him to Thomson [1700-1748], the author of *The Seasons*) was made more explicit in 1802 when Wordsworth separated the last three stanzas from the original and gave them the title "Remembrance of Collins." Stein has suggested that Wordsworth was also echoing Milton's "Penseroso" in the last couple of lines (see *Wordsworth's Art of Allusion*, p. 22). Of the many other literary sources scholars have noted, William Lisle Bowles is particularly worthy of notice. Reed seems to be the first to discuss his *Fourteen Sonnets* (1789; 2d ed. retitled *Sonnets written chiefly on picturesque Spots during a Tour* [1789]) as a major influence (Reed, 1967, pp. 23 n. 10; 305-6; Cf. Jacobus, pp. 86-7; Stein, pp. 30-33).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Myself, Nature, and Human Life (II): Wordsworth's *Excursion* of 1814**

Of the various claims regarding the first *Lyrical Ballads* in the last chapter, one, though merely implied in the actual analysis of the poems, is crucially important to my two-pronged argument: namely, Wordsworth's increasingly confident exploration of his inner experience and his developing worship of nature as a sort of spiritual prop and counterforce against the evils of human society amply warrant the substitution of "myself" for "man" as a central theme of his masterwork that the author hoped would put him on the all-time honor roll of English writers. This, taken abstractly, might sound rather banal to the student of English literary history, for is it not a commonplace gesture for studies of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth English literary history to characterize the period as one in which everything pointed toward the author, the poet who, as Wordsworth ardently declared in the 1802 Preface, is a "man speaking to man . . . a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him."<sup>1</sup> "Is not this," a student of Romanticism might ask, "an essential part of what the period term Romanticism connotes?" Have we, after all the laborious weighing and measuring, culling and pondering, of textual evidence, print history, and evaluative criticism, come around merely to confirm a cliché? The answer, in this case as well as in others of a similar sort, can only be a yes and no. Yes, because my overall argument does seem to align well with standard characterizations about the period, so perfectly, in fact, that there is a good reason to consider mere reiterations of such a received opinion wasted breath. Besides, I do not wish to deny certain platitudes their use value, especially those which, though critically or historically unsound, are nevertheless often crystalized bits of wisdom that make up the cultural

literacy that we need in order to function properly in a civilized society. Yet we can't be reminded too often that clichés come into being only after all the nuances and subtleties are sandpapered off, when history itself becomes at best a depleted body of facts and objects, at worst a massive refuse dump, so abstract, which is to say, so dehumanized, that it loses all power to instruct or inspire. It is this second outlook on literary-historical matters that continues to motivate my effort to investigate a seemingly hackneyed topic.

The fact of the matter is that for the Romantics, and Wordsworth in particular, this turn toward the self, this relentless probing into the depths of the author's inner being, is much less a given, as after-the-fact simplifications might encourage us to think, than the happy result of a hard-won battle, in which even the mastermind and the vanguard, groping in the dark of the historical present without the light of prophetic wisdom—and this, in spite of the political fervor of the age and the somewhat allied visionary tendency of contemporary writings—were merely half-conscious of, if not entirely blind to, the full significance of their undertaking. New literary forms were tried, new subject matter brought into the scope of literary production, new modes of understanding in regard to imaginative activity announced and explored, yet with the influx of the new and revolutionary, conventions were still to be reckoned with; with its sound emphasis on reason and generality, order and morality, tradition was yet unwilling to relinquish its status of authority, and understandably so, when its replacement spoke with a voice pitched too high and paraded around in too flamboyant costumes. This is not only the larger literary-historical milieu in which the Romantic quest for the inner self thrived, but the background against which we are to understand the complications of the quest and how those complications turn into impediments in subsequent reception of Wordsworth's writings and his distinctive input into the tradition.

### The Poet in the “Prospectus”

The two concluding verse paragraphs of “Home at Grasmere,” first published with *The Excursion* (1814) as a “Prospectus” to *The Recluse*, most conveniently illustrate Wordsworth’s ambivalence toward self-assertion and self-representation.<sup>2</sup> The “Prospectus” has so far repaid careful study in two major ways. The first is typified by the reading of M. H. Abrams,<sup>3</sup> who construed the poem primarily as a landmark for displacing or extending classical and Christian topoi and materials into modern secular forms. Central to this reading of the “Prospectus” is the invocation of Milton and the classical tradition at the opening of the second verse paragraph, where Wordsworth grandiosely proclaimed that he would overlook all externalized forms of power, “all strength, all terror, single or in bands, / That ever was put forth in personal forms” in past literature, in order to look inward, “into the mind of Man, / My haunt and the main region of my song” (ll. 980-81, 989-90). The second approach is exemplified by Kenneth R. Johnston in his architectural study of Wordsworth’s writings toward *The Recluse*.<sup>4</sup> Johnston’s chief contribution is his explanation of what the “Prospectus” reveals about the difficult evolution of the *Recluse* project. He shed useful light not only on the internal tensions in Wordsworth’s handling of the universal themes in the “Prospectus” and other *Recluse*-related writings such as “Home at Grasmere,” especially those that spring from the contrast between the confident splendor of the passages pertaining to “the mind of Man” and natural beauty and the unremitting negativity of the “human Life” lines, but also on the significance for *The Recluse*’s development of the autobiographical shift toward the end, where the poet pledged to

describe the mind and man

Contemplating; and who and what he was,

The transitory Being that beheld  
 This Vision, when and where, and how he lived,  
 With all his little realities of life (ll. 1036-40)

The irony of this is that what Wordsworth intended to use as a “Prospectus” to *The Recluse* actually ends as a prospectus to *The Prelude*. For Johnston, this means that although “Wordsworth tried to keep the *Prelude-Recluse* relationship sequential, or one of cause and effect,” the relationship all too often and too easily “collapsed into an identity” (p. 99).

This is precisely what is going on in the “Prospectus,” but in a much more profound way than Johnston seemed to be aware or willing to admit. The truth is that if we read the “Prospectus” in the context of Wordsworth’s autobiographical writings, it will be clear that the universal is hardly ever completely disconnected from the personal. Take for example the opening verse paragraph. Wordsworth made his double emphasis on the general and the personal immediately clear in the very first sentence, which basically says that while—or although, the underlying logic is unclear—his mind is fixed on man, nature, and human life, the poet would write about the “sweet passions traversing my Soul” (l. 960). The question that concerns the vigilant reader is: how do the “sweet passions” relate to the universal themes enumerated in the opening line? Was Wordsworth trying to suggest that the passions always attend his meditations on man, nature, and human life? or is it that for the poet the distinction simply does not exist? (Note: here, Wordsworth’s syntax also mirrors the suspense thus created. While he allowed the triadic formula to occupy the privileged position of the opening line, he also took care, it seems, to question its authority by making it part of a sub-clause). Will the remainder of the paragraph settle our doubts? Moving on, Wordsworth wrote, “I sing”

Of truth, of grandeur, beauty, love, and hope—

Hope for this earth and hope beyond the grave—  
 Of virtue and of individual power,  
 Of blessed consolations in distress,  
 Of joy in widest commonalty spread,  
 Of the individual mind that keeps his own  
 Inviolate retirement, and consists  
 With being limitless the one great Life— (ll. 964-71)

Here the poet set forth a loose assortment of things—moral qualities, affections, mental states, and the like—that he pledged would constitute the true subject of his major work. Their ostensible effect is certainly to tilt the balance in favor of the universal and against the personal. On closer inspection, however, each and every item in this long catalogue of things seems to reflect values, habits, and attitudes that are distinctly Wordsworth's, which the rest of humanity do not always share. Resonances abound with Wordsworth's other major poems in the early 1800s: "truth . . . grandeur, beauty, love, and hope," for instance, bear a striking verbal, though not necessarily semantic, resemblance to "From love, for here / Do we begin and end, all grandeur comes, / All truth and beauty" (*Prelude*, 1805, XIII, 149-51);<sup>5</sup> "Hope for this earth and hope beyond the grave" and "blessed consolations in distress" recall the mature optimism in the conclusion of "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," where Wordsworth claimed to have found ample recompense for the lost glory "In the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering; / In the faith that looks through death" (ll. 188-90);<sup>6</sup> "virtue and intellectual power" enjoys a moment of literary preexistence, first, in the two-part *Prelude*, where Wordsworth sang of youthful energy: "Ah, is there one who ever has been young / And needs a monitory voice to tame / The pride of virtue and of intellect?" (II, 17-19), and then in the full-length poetic

autobiography of 1805, where the author queried “If virtue be indeed so hard to rear, / And intellectual strength so rare a boon” (XII, 176-77) in the most humble walks of life; lastly, cries of joy felt within and projected outward onto the face of the earth and happy intuitions of the “being limitless the one great Life” with which “the individual mind . . . consists” are perhaps too familiar Wordsworthian motifs to require evidential support.

These examples of verbal echoing show compellingly Wordsworth’s willingness to disguise his poetic self by casting values of private origination as time-transcending, universally valid ones of which we all partake. Although it is extremely difficult to pinpoint exactly when this depersonalizing tendency began in Wordsworth’s poetic development, a comparison of the several extant versions of the “Prospectus” reveals that the poet became increasingly prone to it in the dozen years or so leading up to the poem’s publication in the Preface to *The Excursion* (1814). Consider, for example, the evolution of Wordsworth’s voice. Significantly, the poem’s earliest surviving manuscript (MS. 1) contains not a single use of the first person plural. “We” and its grammatical variants began to creep into the poem probably around the time when the poet decided to incorporate it into “Home at Grasmere.” But even there, in the earliest full text of 1806 (MS. B), the first person plural has only a shadowy presence (being used merely four times [in ll. 988-89, 1005] as opposed to nineteen uses of the first person) and a rather localized reference, for it denotes almost invariably William and Dorothy who had chosen to reside in Grasmere as their permanent home, and only once (in ll. 859-74) did Wordsworth try to extend its range of reference to his close circle of friends and relations composed of brother John, the Hutchinson sisters—the elder of the two, Mary, he was to marry in October 1802—and Coleridge.

Another index of Wordsworth's growing predilection for generality is his increased use of metaphysical language. The major addition in the MS. B version of the "Prospectus," for example, expands what was originally a causal metaphor—"when minds / Once wedded to this outward frame of things" (MS. 1, ll. 38-39)—half hidden in a grandiose declaration of secular humanism into an elaborately worded "spousal verse" in which the author "would proclaim—"

Speaking of nothing more than what *we* are—  
 How exquisitely the *individual Mind*  
 (And the *progressive powers* perhaps no less  
 Of the *whole species*) to the *external world*  
 Is fitted . . . (ll. 1003-09, italics added)

and vice versa. Further evidence is found in the additions made to the final published version (MS. D). Feeling not just "sweet passions traversing my Soul," Wordsworth could now "oft perceive"

Fair trains of imagery before me rise,  
 Accompanied by feelings of delight  
 Pure, or with no unpleasing sadness mixed;  
 And I am conscious of affecting thoughts  
 And dear remembrances, whose presence soothes  
 Or elevates the Mind, intent to weigh  
 The good and evil of our mortal state. (ll. 2-9)

Here the effort toward generalization and introspection are equally pronounced. As the poet became more specific about his own psychology, he did not forget to emphasize the generality of

his thinking and feeling. Significantly, consciousness of what goes on inside him “soothes / Or elevates” not Wordsworth, but “the Mind” engrossed by moral questions that concern us all.

Of course there is nothing peculiar or puzzling about the simultaneous presence of these apparently opposing tendencies in the “Prospectus,” for Wordsworth is both a poet of solitude and a poet of community, someone both generally confident about the quality of his inner experience and poetic talent, of “something within, which yet is shared by none” (“Home at Grasmere,” MS. B, l. 898) and genuinely concerned about history, society, and politics. But we are yet to grasp the full significance of this double emphasis to our reading of Wordsworth. The impact, it seems to me, is twofold. On the one hand, it would sharpen our eyes to Wordsworth’s effort toward social and historical effect in his poetry, which we might otherwise be too inclined to regard as the triumph of the personal imagination. *The Prelude*, for example, is not only a history of Wordsworth’s mind coming to consciousness of its own powers but also an attempt on the poet’s part to accommodate the mind in various communal and social settings: Cambridge, London, France, etc. On the other hand, it would reveal the extent to which Wordsworth’s generalizations, poetic as well as theoretical, are self-reflexive (his revolutionary ideas about poetry in the “Preface,” for example, especially his controversial advocacy of low and rustic life, are more profitably read as explanations of and justifications for his own poetry, or rather a particular kind of *his* poetry, than as general stipulations about what poetry is and should be).

In the remainder of this chapter, I will devote full attention to *The Excursion* as a crucible for some of the above observations. Being the only completed part of the projected three-part *Recluse*, *The Excursion* is particularly pertinent as a test case not only because in it Wordsworth chose to enlarge the distance between life and art by speaking dramatically, but because it has provoked so many difficult questions some of which still remain controversial today. My implicit

argument is that notwithstanding the total eclipse it once suffered, the bulk of *The Excursion* should still be read as a generally successful dramatic reconstruction of Wordsworth's meditations in his middle years on some of the same old questions that are found everywhere in his poetry: nature, revolution, rural existence, community, human life etc. Once we see this, it will be no longer necessary to bemoan the *Recluse's* incompleteness or to blame the poet for not being able to fulfill his promise, for, it seems to me, Wordsworth had composed all he could or cared to and all that mattered, and there is little, if anything, left undone. But this is going beyond what I can persuasively say at present. Let us return to the instructive though somewhat tedious business of combing through the history of *The Excursion's* reception

#### An Epic Failure?

This history, as we will see, is fraught with seemingly irreconcilable differences of opinion, ranging from heartfelt hatred to ecstatic admiration. It typically begins with Francis Jeffrey's most damaging verdict "This will never do" with which his *Edinburgh* review opens, and is framed at the other end by the complete neglect in which *The Excursion* lies even to this day.<sup>7</sup> But even so, it will be a gross mistake to assume that the poem's reputation has been one of continual eclipse since its date of publication. Although the immediate general public response was far from warm and the sales sluggish, *The Excursion* was not short of enthusiastic contemporary readers, especially those best qualified to judge, such as Charles Lamb, who called it "the noblest conversational poem I ever read," and the young Keats, who famously declared it to be one of "three things to rejoice at in this Age," and in whose *Endymion* the influence of the much admired Book 4 is strongly felt.<sup>8</sup> With the rise of Wordsworth's fame in the 1830s, *The Excursion* became his acknowledged masterpiece; beloved by preeminent Victorian writers such

as Ruskin and George Eliot, it supplied quotations that stand as epigraph to the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843 and *Adam Bede* in 1859.<sup>9</sup> It is only toward the end of the nineteenth century that the critical tide began to turn against *The Excursion*. As late as 1896, for example, Emile Legouis, in the introduction to his epoch-making study of Wordsworth's youth, still found it necessary to combat "our common tendency to form a judgment of the whole of Wordsworth's moral and political work from the later specimens of his art and to regard *The Excursion* as the masterpiece of the structure."<sup>10</sup> A. C. Bradley, in his essay on "Wordsworth" (first delivered in a series of lectures given at Oxford in 1903, and published in 1909), played a constructive role in elevating *The Prelude* to the center of the Wordsworth canon, but this was done, it should be noted, not necessarily at the expense of *The Excursion*. Although for Bradley "there are dull pages in both," the two major poems both "contain much of Wordsworth's best and most characteristic poetry."<sup>11</sup>

So how did interest in *The Excursion* fall away toward the end of the nineteenth century? In the introduction to her recent book-length study of the poem, Alison Hickey tallied two allied forces behind the negative turn of *Excursion* criticism.<sup>12</sup> The first of these is the "golden decade-anticlimax" narrative, initiated by Matthew Arnold in the preface to his 1879 edition of Wordsworth's *Poems*, and popularized by H. W. Garrod and Willard Sperry in the early twentieth century. This is the view that contends for a bipartite division of Wordsworth's poetic career into an early liberal, humanistic period of greatness and a subsequent conservative period of decline to which, wherever the poet's falling-off point is located, *The Excursion* is most often ascribed. Notably, Arnold praised Wordsworth's shorter pieces as his best work and showed a clear bias against the two major poems, especially *The Excursion* (he was convinced that Wordsworth's "Poetry is the reality, philosophy the illusion"). The other contributing factor is

the issue of Wordsworth's "apostasy," his defection to orthodoxy, which aroused bitter opposition among his younger contemporaries like Byron, Shelley, and Hazlitt, and was negatively judged by modern critics such as E. P. Thompson and Carl Woodring.<sup>13</sup> To these allied counterforces noted by Hickey a third, somewhat late in coming yet no less effective in marginalizing the poet's work after his period of greatness, may be added: namely, the new mode of criticism that tries to understand Wordsworth's poetry in phenomenological terms, i.e. in terms of how it negotiates the distinction between mind and the external world. We find the germs of this criticism in Bradley, who, finding in a variety of Wordsworth's writings a "hostility to sense," "an intimation of boundlessness, contradicting or abolishing the fixed limits of our habitual view" (op. cit., p. 131), argued, pace Arnold, that Wordsworth's native bent is not to simplicity, but to sublimity. This criticism came to fruition in the mid-twentieth century, and culminated in Geoffrey Hartman's comprehensive study of Wordsworth's poetry in 1964, where utilizing *The Prelude* as a paradigm case, Hartman argued most cogently that Wordsworth's treatment of nature is paradoxical: i.e. although the poet remained generally faithful to nature, the underlying drift of his best poetry is toward transcendence. In the light of this privileging of the autonomous imagination, it is not difficult to understand that Hartman found *The Excursion*, which marks Wordsworth's flight from the immediacy of the senses, "massively depressing," a "betrayal of possible sublimity" that is "impossible to forgive."<sup>14</sup>

Apparently, there is no real consensus about what constitutes Wordsworth's distinctive achievement: while an Arnoldian critic tends to hold Wordsworth answerable to the joy in nature he offers us, to simplicity of sentiment and style and his morally uplifting humanism, twentieth-century advocates of the Bradleyan view remain undaunted in contending for their problematic Wordsworth characterized, paradoxically, by a strong tendency to sublimity and a noticeable

reluctance to accept the autonomy of the creative spirit.<sup>15</sup> Yet these contrasting approaches to Wordsworth do not necessarily translate into a contrast in how they evaluate *The Excursion*.<sup>16</sup> Both play a role in marginalizing the poem. Arnold's disapproval is representative. Motivated to promote Wordsworth's fame by sorting what he judged to be the poet's inferior work from his best, Arnold reserved his most sustained objections for *The Excursion*, dismissing it as "a tissue of elevated but abstract verbiage, alien to the very nature of poetry" (p. 49).<sup>17</sup> In saying so, however, Arnold actually said nothing new. He was merely repeating an opinion that originated among Wordsworth's contemporaries. Since they still carry a lot of weight with the modern reader, and not always without a good reason, we will next consider what they had to say about the poem. Why specifically did they judge it an unsatisfactory work?

Unlikely as it seems, Arnold's strictures against *The Excursion* are a mere throwback to Jeffrey's review where the poem was disparagingly characterized as "a tissue of moral and devotional ravings, in which innumerable changes are rung upon a few very simple and familiar ideas" (p. 459).<sup>18</sup> Of these Jeffrey even ventured a brief summary: "a firm belief in the providence of a wise and beneficent Being must be our great stay and support under all afflictions and perplexities upon earth—and that there are indications of his power and goodness in all the aspects of the visible universe, whether living or inanimate—every part of which should therefore be regarded with love and reverence, as exponents of those great attributes" (p. 460). Less apparent than these shrill accusations and often overlooked, however, are the surrounding qualifications that dramatize the critic's uncertainty in the very moment he seemed to be carried away by his condemnatory rhetoric. Those several "simple and familiar ideas," Jeffrey noted, are often accompanied by "long words, long sentences, and unwieldy phrases –

and such a hubbub of strained raptures and fantastical sublimities, that it is often extremely difficult for the most skillful and attentive student to obtain a glimpse of the author's meaning – and altogether impossible for an ordinary reader to conjecture what he is about" (p. 459). If so, the "attentive student" wonders what Jeffrey's ground is for believing that the poet's ideas are "simple and familiar." His subsequent confession that "The doctrine which the work is intended to enforce, we are by no means certain that we have discovered" (p. 460) right before summarizing it as quoted above deepens suspicions about his credibility as critic. Jeffrey's point is no doubt to denounce the obscurity of Wordsworth's language, which makes him diffident about his understanding of the doctrine embedded in the poem, but his equivocations prompt us to think just the opposite, which reflects poorly on the critic: namely, that his confident strictures could at bottom be but the boastful stings of an incompetent reader. Indeed, if we look carefully, this ambivalence is engraved in the very texture of Jeffrey's rhetoric, forming a powerful undercurrent that can easily disrupt its complacent surface with a slight change in our perception of the poem's treatment of its didactic content. There is a fine line the poet has to be wary about, according to Jeffrey, between "moral and religious enthusiasm," which admittedly are "poetical emotions," and "interminable dullness or mellifluous extravagance," between "laudable zeal for the efficacy of his preachments" and "the ardour of poetical inspiration," between "all sorts of commonplace notions and expressions" and "the mystical verbiage of the methodist pulpit" on the one hand, and "divine truth and persuasion" (p. 459) on the other.<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey was obviously committed to shoving Wordsworth to the losing side of the distinction, but the ambiguities and contradictions that we detect in his writing leave us unsure how far we can go with him without running the risk of misunderstanding the author.

Hazlitt's take on *The Excursion* is rather different, although there is a tendency in modern criticism to lump him and Jeffrey together as two of the most outspoken critics of the poem.<sup>20</sup> There is little doubt that Hazlitt was just as keenly aware of Wordsworth's predilection for metaphysical speculation as Jeffrey, but instead of blaming him for recommending a "peculiar system," he seemed to regret that *The Excursion* was not consistently philosophical; rather, Wordsworth "has chosen to encumber himself with a load of narrative and description, which, instead of assisting, hinders the progress and effect of the general reasoning," to "introduce particular illustrations . . . which add nothing to the force of the general truth, which hang as a dead weight upon the imagination, [and] which degrade the thought and weaken the sentiment" (pp. 11, 12). Hazlitt's exact reference is unclear. It is uncertain whether he was turning the spotlight on the epitaphic tales told by the Pastor in Books 6 and 7, or included within the range of his reference Margaret's tale in Book 1, the Solitary's in the next couple of books, or other narratives in the remainder of the poem. Yet, one thing is sure: the critic was absolutely convinced that the main subject of *The Excursion* is the author's "general sentiments and reflections on human life" (p. 11), of which the narrative and descriptive parts of the poem are mere illustrations, and that his successful communication of those "sentiments and reflections" is the ground of the poem's strength and also, curiously, its weakness. That Hazlitt saw things in this interestingly paradoxical way evidently has something to do with his double perspective on Wordsworth's distinctive capabilities. For Hazlitt, Wordsworth was the leading poet of the age on account of his exceptional "powers of feeling" that enable him to give "a weight of interest" to "the common everyday events and objects of Nature" and "the most insignificant things" in human life, but in comparison with the master-poets of the past, "Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, who evidently possessed both kinds of imagination, the intellectual and moral, in the

highest degree,” Wordsworth was “certainly deficient in fanciful invention: his writings exhibit all the internal power, without the external form of poetry” (p. 19).<sup>21</sup> This understanding of Wordsworth’s achievement also underlies Hazlitt’s measured criticism of Wordsworth’s egotism and his discontent with the poem’s dramatic form. Judging by the golden standard of Elizabethan drama, Hazlitt found that *The Excursion* lacks all the apparatus of drama, “all change of character, all variety of scenery, all the bustle, machinery, and pantomime of the stage, or of real life”; the “dialogues introduced . . . are soliloquies of the same character, taking different views of the subject. The recluse, the pastor, and the pedlar, are three persons in one poet” (p. 11); indeed, everything is grist to the mill of Wordsworth’s all-devouring mind and nothing interesting for its own sake. These are sweeping generalizations; there is no way to miss the passion and authority with which Hazlitt made them, but in the absence of a detailed analysis, we cannot dispel the suspicion that Hazlitt’s dissatisfaction with *The Excursion* is probably no less determined by his conception of what kind of a poet Wordsworth was and had always been than predicated on what the poem is like.

Finally we turn to Coleridge, whose early intimacy with Wordsworth and direct involvement in the *Recluse* project make him an indispensable figure in any historical account of Wordsworth’s reception, *The Excursion* not excluded. Yet, notwithstanding his traditional image as Wordsworth’s best and most informed reader, Coleridge was not always consistent in speaking about the poem. In fact, his opinions sometimes contradict each other so bewilderingly that the true cause of his well-known disappointment is rather difficult to come by. On the surface, Coleridge’s observations in the two letters of 1815, to Lady Beaumont (April 3) and to Wordsworth (May 30) respectively, are not incompatible with Jeffrey’s, despite Coleridge’s furious condemnation of the latter’s malignant reviewing style: (1) recognizing that there is not

“any flagging of the Writer’s own genius,”<sup>22</sup> Coleridge nevertheless thought *The Excursion* a falling-off from the height of *The Prelude*, which he had praised in ecstatic terms in the poem “To William Wordsworth” (might we not trace narratives of Wordsworth’s decline back to Coleridge?). This is in keeping with Jeffrey’s description of *The Excursion* as “weaker, and tamer, than any of Mr Wordsworth’s other productions; with less boldness of originality; and less even of that extreme simplicity and lowliness of tone” [p. 458] found in the “lyrical ballads”; (2) for Coleridge, Wordsworth labored too hard on “doctrines and words, which come almost as Truisms or Common-place” to the “generality of persons” (IV: 564), which recalls Jeffrey’s hasty observation that the doctrinal plot of *The Excursion* all comes down to “a few very simple and familiar ideas.” Although we cannot rule out the possibility that Coleridge’s measured disapproval was due in part to his familiarity with Wordsworth’s characteristic modes of seeing and feeling (“familiarity breeds contempt”), it is clear from the oft-cited letter to Wordsworth, which contains the most detailed description of the plan Coleridge had expected the elder poet to execute in composing *The Recluse*, that his dissatisfaction is actually relative to his exorbitant expectations. The doctrinal plot of *The Excursion* might have struck Coleridge as too tame or too “Common-place” but it did so largely because it failed to deliver what he wanted: a tripartite philosophical poem whose main themes and sections are: (1) a meditation on “the faculties of Man in the abstract,” with the purpose to prove that “Senses [are] living growths and developments of the Mind & Spirit”; (2) a historical narrative of redemption that “takes the Human Race in the concrete,” in which “Fallen men [are] contemplated in the different ages of the World,” and which offers a strongly Christian way forward; (3) “a didactic swell on the necessary identity of a true Philosophy and true Religion.”<sup>23</sup> The outline implies that as in the

case of Hazlitt, Coleridge had no objections for Wordsworth's fixation on truth; his main criticism was rather that Wordsworth failed to present truth of the right sort.

The general picture of Coleridge's assessment becomes blurred, however, when we take into consideration his comments in the *Biographia*, where not only was there no relating of *The Excursion* to the plan outlined above, but Coleridge said something that seems to contradict the conclusion we have just reached. Apparently, in enumerating the characteristic defects of Wordsworth's poetry in the *Biographia*, Coleridge was heavily indebted to contemporary opinions.<sup>24</sup> His objections, for example, to Wordsworth's choice of a pedlar as his mouthpiece, with which he instanced the second defect, the poet's excessive attention to fact and probability, were but a rationalized restatement of Jeffrey's strictures at the end of his review. The third defect, which concerns Wordsworth's "undue predilection for the *dramatic* form," which would cause either "an incongruity of style" or "a species of ventriloquism," can be read as a generalized version of Hazlitt's insight.<sup>25</sup> But Coleridge went further than his contemporaries by laying out the principles that inform his observations. For him, it is a gross solecism to speak through the mouth of someone from as low a social class as that of a wandering pedlar for two important reasons: (1) Wordsworth mistakenly set truth before pleasure as the "*immediate* object" of his poem, which by virtue of being a poem, must please before it is able to instruct (Coleridge obviously forgot that in the 1815 letter, he had expected Wordsworth to elaborate on truths that might well be infinitely more dry and extravagant than those that did make their way into *The Excursion*); (2) Coleridge firmly believed that had he chosen to speak "in his own person," Wordsworth would have succeeded in establishing credibility with the reader; however, by deciding to ventriloquize through a character like the Wanderer, and what's more, by inventing a biographical account in order to force the reader into belief, Wordsworth unwisely

violated standards of dramatic propriety, and destroyed what Coleridge had elsewhere astutely described as “that willing suspension of disbelief” in the reader (II: 6), without which the poet could hardly achieve his didactic purpose.<sup>26</sup> There is no denying that many of these public comments are sensible and conducive to further productive discussion. Yet Coleridge’s lack of consistency regarding the appropriateness of a poem that aims primarily at truth fuels suspicion that Coleridge was, somewhat unwittingly, trying to justify his intuitive dissatisfaction under the guise of philosophical inquiry.<sup>27</sup>

### Progress and Problems

Two interlinked sets of questions emerge from this excursus to noticeable contemporary responses. It is legitimate, first of all, to inquire how successfully Wordsworth had carried out the didactic purpose of the poem (That the poem has one or was intended to have one is not in doubt. In the Preface of 1814 to *The Excursion*, Wordsworth announced without equivocation that “his endeavours” were “to please, and he would hope, to benefit his countrymen” [p. 39], and again, in the verse appended to the Preface as a “Prospectus” to *The Recluse*, Wordsworth hoped that the projected poem, of which *The Excursion* is a part, would “arouse the sensual from their sleep / Of Death, and win the vacant and vain / To noble raptures” [ll. 60-62]).<sup>28</sup> Has the poet overstretched the ordinary reader’s tolerance for moral instruction? Are his ideas either too abstract and obscure or too familiar and commonplace to interest the reader? What constitutes the doctrinal plot of the poem? Contemporary critics seemed to have mostly ignored Wordsworth’s somewhat paradoxical instruction in the Preface that it is not his intention “formally to announce a system . . . if he shall succeed in conveying to the mind clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings, the Reader will have no difficulty in extracting the system for

himself" (p. 39). The statement cuts both ways: it leaves open the possibility that his various ideas do upon scrutiny constitute a system, but insinuates just as powerfully that the answer to the question about the consistency of his ideas is only relative to the reader's perspective. This immediately brings to our attention the set of questions concerning Wordsworth's manner of presentation. Hazlitt, and Coleridge following him, had pontificated on the impropriety of Wordsworth's ventriloquizing through several unsuccessfully individualized characters, with the result that the main action of the poem might seem to be but a series of uninteresting sermons, illustrated with a variety of hermeneutically problematic, dramaturgically unimpressive stories. Although, as we have seen, this observation was perhaps grounded more in the critic's understanding of Wordsworth's poetry in general than in a careful analysis of the poem, it bears asking whether the identities of the major characters in the poem do collapse into one. In other words, is *The Excursion* an extremely long and insipid monologue?

The questions being clear, we will now plunge into the maze of more recent *Excursion* criticism. The mid-twentieth-century revival of Romantic studies is, as we have seen, the point in history at which the poem's reputation sank to its nadir. Retrospectively, however, it is also when the poem began to make a slow but steady comeback, among literary professionals at least.

Judson Lyon spearheaded the modern reappraisal with his now somewhat neglected monograph on *The Excursion* (1950). Lyon believed that the poem was chiefly motivated by Wordsworth's "pressing need to reconcile himself to the terrible realities of life" that he faced in the years leading up to the poem's publication in 1814.<sup>29</sup> These realities include the death at sea of the poet's brother John in 1805 (which "caused him to reconsider the philosophy of joyful optimism" that the poet had developed in a work like *The Prelude*), the "horrors of the Napoleonic Wars" and the disquieting political situation at home, and the "deaths of his two

children in 1812” (p. 64). For Lyon, *The Excursion* is in a very important way the result of Wordsworth’s meditation on these “tempestuous agonies” of his past life, of his decision to benefit readers by sharing the “dramatic story of his own mind,” of how he triumphed over all the destructive forces against mental equilibrium and became a “stronger and better man” (p. 65). These biographical details are an important background for Lyon’s subsequent analysis of the poem. On the one hand, they allow him to contend for a more author-friendly notion of drama in understanding *The Excursion*’s dialogic form. Readily admitting Wordsworth’s deficiency in dramatic power, Lyon nevertheless maintained that “the ‘drama’ of *The Excursion* consists entirely of thought and feeling; the measure of its success is the ease with which we come to understand the point of view of each character” (p. 65). On the other hand, they open up a more balanced and more refined perspective on the relationships among the four main characters, in which “the Solitary represents the metaphysical *terminus a quo* and the Wanderer the *terminus ad quem*, with the Poet falling somewhere between the two and the Pastor presenting a detached special point of view” (p. 68). The central problem of the poem is, on this view, not whose philosophical position or life attitude is right, the Solitary’s “cynical apathy” or the Wanderer’s “meditative calm,” but how it is possible for a thoroughly wise man (later allied with the Pastor) to rescue from apathy a misanthrope to whom we occasionally feel somewhat sympathetic. Given this perspective on things, it is really no surprise that the weight of Lyon’s interpretation falls on the philosophical complexity of the Wanderer’s speeches as a tailored response to the Solitary’s extravagances (pp. 78-79, 87-88) and the intended regenerative function of the Pastor’s epitaphic stories (see pp. 84-85). The ultimate aim is to show, as Lyon’s “Conclusion” makes clear, that we cannot continue to dismiss *The Excursion* “as the dull and pompous preaching of an aged poet in his decline,” for it only betrays our inability to tackle a difficult

poem that “came from the pen of a more profound, more serene, and wiser Wordsworth,” who yet had retained much of what we have praised him for all along: his conviction in nature, “dislike for rank, privilege, wealth,” compassion for “individual hardships caused by” the political upheavals of the age, his moral enthusiasm for “rural life,” “belief in human progress” (p. 139), and so on.

Retrospectively, Lyon probably said the best that can be objectively and rationally said about *The Excursion*. His endorsement of the sententious voices in the poem is unmistakable (although, truth be told, he also carefully distinguished between these voices and that of Wordsworth, who, as Lyon saw it, is most akin “in philosophical position” to the Poet, “renouncing the extravagances of the Solitary, but making some important concessions to him, and admiring the position of the Wanderer, but unable to achieve it wholly himself” [p.68]). It is probably this pro-authority stance that prevents Lyon’s ground-breaking work from winning more than a passing nod in more recent appraisals of *The Excursion*. What a major strand of these reappraisals did or tried to do was discredit every form of authority in and outside the text. In this process, the Wanderer and the ideological position he represents inevitably become the target.

A few examples will give us an idea of how this campaign against the Wanderer, especially in the first book of *The Excursion* titled, not coincidentally, “The Wanderer,” developed into a fashion toward the tail-end of the twentieth century. It began tentatively in the 70s, when academic critics were still generally willing to credit the Wanderer’s authority. In their view, the story of Margaret is really a didactic drama in which an old storyteller helps a young narrator (and through him the unenlightened reader) to cultivate a mature perspective on human

suffering.<sup>30</sup> When reviewing this Wanderer-narrator relationship in 1972, Reeve Parker presented essentially the same interpretation, though in more detail and supported with more in-depth analysis. But in trying to bring his argument to a close, Parker came face to face with a “masterly paradox” that unsettles the accepted understanding of the Wanderer: while it is true that the old storyteller is intellectually superior to Margaret whose “inflexibility of hope” eventually proved her ruin, while it is also true that his self-restraining wisdom “constitutes a reproof to the luxury of grief,” we nevertheless cannot help but be touched by the “nobility of her heroic, blind devotion and sacrifice” which seems to define the limitations of his equanimity.<sup>31</sup> The reader is naturally perplexed in the face of this dilemma, but as an index of his critical ingenuity, Parker maintained that this perplexity only proves Wordsworth’s achievement because the author has anticipated our perplexity by creating a narrator that embodies it. It is not difficult to see that even from the beginning, the weakening of the Wanderer’s position was accompanied by, nay it entails, a reconfiguration of the narrator’s role in the poem.

Forward to the mid-80s, these problems intensified when brought under the meticulous scrutiny of readers like Susan J. Wolfson. Essentially agreeing with Parker that the Wanderer is “a character whose principles are to be pondered for their limitations as well as for their wisdom” (p. 99),<sup>32</sup> Wolfson went on to undermine the Wanderer’s authority further both from within and without: from within by forcing wedges between the old teller’s calm present and his restive past—as recorded in his biography, the wanderer thirsted after excitement and adventure as a child, which, as it later turned out, nothing else could gratify than a lifelong itinerancy. Thus, it became a mystery for Wolfson how he managed to control the “turbulence . . . / Of his own mind” (ll. 305-6) and the “fever of his heart (l. 324), and evolved into the non-sympathetic spectator on human affairs that he was at the end of his itinerant career; thus, his occasional

admonitions to the narrator in the first book can be read as a cover-up for but are simultaneously undercut by his past vulnerability—and from without by widening the breach between teller and listener already opened up by Parker and by strengthening the narrator’s position as a “questioning presence” in the “rhetorical play” of the text. The young narrator, in Wolfson’s eyes, not only is perplexed by the Wanderer’s teaching, but since it contrasts so sharply with his spontaneous emotional reactions to Margaret’s sorrow, momentarily “resists” (p. 114) it, hence making the conclusion of “The Wanderer” rather inconclusive, the narrator’s initial divergence from the Wanderer unreconciled.

The last critic along this line of inquiry we will consider is Alison Hickey. Still pondering the wanderer-narrator relationship at the beginning of her book-length study of *The Excursion* (1997) already cited, she took some of Wolfson’s ideas to their furthest extent. As the most recent critic on this subject, Hickey not only outperformed her academic predecessors in magnifying all the “gaps and strayings” (p. 14), every accident and errancy of figuration, she could detect in the poem, but coated her analysis in a deconstructionist terminology that while it gives her claims an air of theoretical sophistication, makes it difficult to verify their empirical soundness. An even greater emphasis is placed on the narrator’s role as an internal counterweight to the Wanderer’s instruction. Although she occasionally evinced a touch of uncertainty about “whether the Poet’s difference from the Wanderer is one of degree or kind” (p. 36),<sup>33</sup> she seemed most of the time rather confident to characterize their relationship as a “meaningful opposition . . . between two modes of imagination. The Poet’s desires are figurative as the Wanderer’s, but they are metonymic rather than metaphorical, loaded with conventional associations that he cannot see and that he fails to cash in on” (p. 37). Unlike the Wanderer who shows repeatedly a “tendency toward transcendence or permanence” (p. 40), the narrator

“noticeably evades the act of metaphoric substitution, the jump from immanence to transcendence . . . instead moves metonymically from object to object without seeing through to signification” (pp. 32-33), and like Margaret, “has a proclivity toward descendent disembodyment” (p. 41). Because of these fundamental differences in personality, perspective, and narrative function, there is, just as Wolfson has pointed out, no reconciliation at the end of “The Wanderer.” The narrator, “silently resistant to interpretive leaps” (p. 40), can have no share in the old man’s nature-inspired transcendent wisdom.

This relatively recent strand of revisionary criticism gives me mixed feelings. While it whets interest in an unjustly neglected text by combating traditional monologic readings, their interpretations oftentimes seem predetermined and contradict the overt intention of the text. Insofar as Book 1 is concerned, questions concerning the Wanderer’s limitations and his divergence from the narrator are overblown, and can find little evidential support in the poem. Take for example the Wanderer’s oft-cited admonitory speech after noticing the emotional impact of Margaret’s tale on the narrator:

My Friend! enough to sorrow you have given,  
 The purposes of wisdom ask no more;  
 Be wise and cheerful; and no longer read  
 The forms of things with an unworthy eye.  
 She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.  
 I well remember that those very plumes,  
 Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,  
 By mist and silent rain-drops silver’d o’er,  
 As once I passed, did to my heart convey

So still an image of tranquility,  
 So calm and still, and looked so beautiful  
 Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,  
 That what we feel of sorrow and despair  
 From ruin and from change, and all the grief  
 The passing shews of Being leave behind,  
 Appeared an idle dream, that could not live  
 Where meditation was. I turned away  
 And walked along my road in happiness. (1.967-84)

The Wanderer is evidently not recommending that one impede the spontaneous flow of sympathies in all circumstances, nor is it his purpose to “discipline” or “reproach” the listener for responding emotionally to the story, as Wolfson seemed to suggest (p. 113). Rather, his is the humane way of cautioning against excessive indulgence in grief after the tragedy has already happened (to put it crudely, it’s no use crying over spilt milk), of trying to heal a wounded heart by diverting attention to the beauty and eternity of nature. Ironically, the rhetorically sensitive critic finds the Wanderer’s speech unconvincing or morally suspect only when he or she ignores the particular rhetorical context within which the Wanderer’s remarks are to be understood.

Never has the Wanderer assumed nor wanted others to assume a pose of equanimity in the very unfolding of a human tragedy. Instead, he showed frequent signs of attachment and weakness as both listener (1.716-19, 811-15) and teller of Margaret’s story (“Why should a tear be in an Old Man’s eye?,” 1.628).<sup>34</sup> His celebrated ability to “suffer / With those whom he saw suffer” (1.399-400) in no way precludes powerful emotional responses to suffering. The quoted passage, it is true, contains the Wanderer’s recollection of how once he found consolation and

“happiness” in the tranquil images of nature, but it also betrays the imbalance within, the “uneasy thoughts which filled [his] mind,” that he needed to redress. His triumph over anxiety powerfully suggests that the quietude of mind the Wanderer finally attained is really not a natural quality of his, nor something to be imposed on others, but a mechanism against emotional excess to which he is fully liable. Hence, he distinguishes himself from the narrator only with his richness “in our best experience . . . in the wisdom of our daily life” (1.401-2) and the resulting capacity for self-restraint.

To substitute continuity for discontinuity as a model for understanding the Wanderer-narrator relationship, however, is not to diminish or treat as nonexistent the problem of the narrator. While it is relatively easy to refute claims that the narrator is willfully impervious to the Wanderer’s teaching—how could he who “Looked upon this Guide with reverential love?” [2.33]—it is still worth asking whether there is some figurative sense in which the narrator can be rightfully said to “resist” it. A careful consideration of the interpretive issues provoked by the poem’s opening verse paragraph will allow us to focus in thinking through such questions.

’Twas summer, and the sun had mounted high:  
 Southward, the landscape indistinctly glared  
 Through a pale steam; but all the northern downs,  
 In clearest air ascending, shew’d far off  
 A surface dappled o’er with shadows, flung  
 From many a brooding cloud; far as the sight  
 Could reach, those many shadows lay in spots  
 Determined and unmoved, with steady beams  
 Of bright and pleasant sunshine interposed.

Pleasant to him who on the soft cool moss  
 Extends his careless limbs along the front  
 Of some huge cave, whose rocky ceiling casts  
 A twilight of its own, an ample shade,  
 Where the wren warbles; while the dreaming Man,  
 Half conscious of the soothing melody,  
 With side-long eye looks out upon the scene,  
 By that impending covert made more soft,  
 More low and distant! Other lot was mine;  
 Yet with good hope that soon I should obtain  
 As grateful resting-place, and livelier joy.  
 Across a bare wide Common I was toiling  
 With languid feet, which by the slippery ground  
 Were baffled; nor could my weak arm disperse  
 The host of insects gathering around my face,  
 And ever with me as I paced along. (1.1-25)

One thing critics seem to agree on about this passage is that it turns on the stark contrast, signaled by the sad, despairing extremity of “Other lot was mine,” between the narrator’s restlessness, as he “toil[ed]” across the landscape described in lines 1-9, and the repose of the “dreaming Man” in his comfortable retreat. Yet they differ sharply about what to make of the narrator’s idealized dreamer. Readers like Parker who are convinced that “The Wanderer” is really about the education of the narrator (and through him the reader) tend to stress the narrator’s naivety, his deficiency as a reader of nature and human life. As Parker saw it, there is

an “essential distinction between reposeful equanimity and the idleness of a yearning for careless relief from pain. That distinction makes the Wanderer the special dreamer he is, and establishes the condition toward which the narrator must strive” (p. 103). This reading seems valid when we consider, first of all, our general respect for the Wanderer’s authority induced both by the narrator’s reverential report of his history and by the good example he himself set in telling Margaret’s tale, and then the Wanderer’s disapproval of “idle” dreaming in the rest of the first book: once before he resumed telling Margaret’s tale (1.667), once in his concluding admonitory speech to the narrator (1.982). Doubt begins to occur, however, when we look at the matter from a different perspective. For readers like Wolfson (pp. 111-2), there is compelling evidence that the Wanderer is not only not substantially different from but may be regarded as the finest embodiment of the imagined dreamer: like the dreaming man, who “on the soft moss / Extends his careless limbs,” he is first discovered “upon the Cottage bench, / Recumbent in the shade, as if asleep” (1.35-36); his catharsis of his self-enfeebling sympathies for Margaret (1.972-84) and the warbling linnets, singing thrushes, “and other melodies” (1.991) at the conclusion of “The Wanderer” powerfully recall the dreaming man’s “sidelong” and “half conscious” orientation toward the scene, and the “soothing melody” of the warbling wren in the opening description. As a further counterweight to the first reading, we might quote a positive use of “dream” toward the end of the Wanderer’s biography where he is described as being able to develop his own religion like “a dreamer of the woods” (1.440). A noticeable corollary of this second interpretation is that in seeking the dreamer’s repose, the narrator unwittingly elevates his understanding to the achieved wisdom of the Wanderer.

Neither reading is without its own difficulty, and neither can be easily reconciled with the other. If the narrator is really so naïve and simple-minded as Parker has made him, how is it that

he is also capable of such metaphysical insight as described in the account of the Wanderer that follows? If it is true, on the contrary, that his understanding is indeed qualitatively the same as that of the Wanderer as the second reading seems to imply, the stark story of Margaret's decline and death, which constitutes the most touching part of the book, would be shorn of the instructive value it is traditionally thought to have. Noticing this ambivalence about the narrator, Hickey shrewdly combined the two opposing readings into something of a paradox: namely the narrator can be both a Keatsian character of "Negative Capability" and an obtuse reader of "a positive incapability."<sup>35</sup> However, this is only a more intelligible reformulation of the problem, not an explanation of it. If we look for the latter in Hickey, we will come immediately face to face with the wishy-washy logic of deconstruction that characterizes her analysis: "it is precisely this fluctuation between negative capability and idiocy that enables *The Excursion's* unsystematic imagination to emerge. The Poet's shifting status is the delicate fulcrum on which the movement of the verse depends" (p. 32). The deficiency of such a conclusion, as Sally Bushell has sharply put it, is that it "slides over the problems of the text rather than confronting them."<sup>36</sup>

To confront such problems, we must persist in asking how it is that the narrator's language seems to accommodate two seemingly irreconcilable interpretations, and what is the root cause of its fluidity. Taking our cue from Bushell, we find that the answer lies largely in the complex compositional history of the poem that eventually became "The Wanderer."<sup>37</sup> The crucial fact here is that the history of the Wanderer in its earliest version was only part of the 1798 expansion of a poem begun in 1797, commonly known as "The Ruined Cottage," whose main focus is Margaret. That history was separated from Margaret's story in 1799, and became a separate poem in 1802. It was not until 1803-1804 that the two were recombined into an 883-line

poem which formed the basis of “The Wanderer.” What prompted Wordsworth to separate the account of the Pedlar and the story of Margaret in 1799 is not hard to guess: the two are “poetry of radically different kinds,” as Jonathan Wordsworth rightly observed, “Where the original poem anticipates *Michael*, the additions belong rather with *The Prelude*. Excited by new philosophical ideas, Wordsworth was for the first time going back into his childhood as a source of inspiration. The resulting poetry has almost no bearing on *The Ruined Cottage* proper.”<sup>38</sup>

Knowing the bare outline of the poem’s history and noticing the incongruity, not only in subject matter but in mode of presentation, between its two separately developed sections will significantly improve our understanding of the problem at stake. It turns out that the ambivalence of the narrator’s language is an index of the ambivalence of his role in the poem, and is caused by Wordsworth’s effort to yoke together a poem, in which a presumably naïve narrator *shows* how he was instructed by the Wanderer on the ideal response to human suffering, and the surplus material, which describes the Pedlar’s development from an almost omniscient point of view. As a result, the first-person speaker of the poem acquires the double function of both “Author” or “Poet”—as Wordsworth called him in the “Summary of Contents” he wrote and interposed between the Preface and the main text of the poem—who stays outside the narrative most of the time, and a mere Poet-character, the youngest and least developed of several in a “dramatic poem,” who slips in and out of dramatic engagement but rarely takes center stage.<sup>39</sup> Although it is not always clear in which capacity the “I” speaks, his two roles do not necessarily contradict each other. Both might be operative in the poem’s ambivalent opening. It may well be that the main function of “Other lot was mine,” a pivotal remark on which the whole passage revolves, is to signal a turn from the speaker’s longing for the dreamer’s repose to his weariness, but we cannot rule out the possibility that the emphasis falls with equal force on “was,” whereby the

speaker implies that he is no longer the naïve youth he “was” as he toiled across the “bare wide Common,” but can speak from the vantage point of the present about what has appeared to him to be the limitations of his past. This is perhaps putting the case a bit too strongly for the second reading, but it reassures us that even if the problem of the narrator is real, it need no longer perplex us.

#### “A psychomachia”

From the perspective of the whole poem, the first book is only a prologue to the remaining books in which actual excursions take place. In the second book, the Wanderer and the narrator are relocated from the comfortable surroundings in southwest England to the austere topography of the Lake District, where they meet the third and central character of the poem: the Solitary. This change of location is significant, for it parallels the shift in mood from the sentimentality of Margaret’s tale to the gravity of the philosophical debate in which the Solitary’s stubborn skepticism is pitted against the Wanderer’s natural wisdom (and later also against the Pastor’s Christian humanism), with the narrator acting alternately as youthful lover of nature and rural life (2.369-89; 4.354-75, 508-37), bemused interlocutor (3.336-63), and silent observer. The question that keeps the reader occupied throughout these middle books is, as Hartman put it: “can [the Solitary’s] mind be restored to health?” (p. 300). The drama of this middle section of the poem is for the reader the drama of the weighing of the various arguments, sometimes illustrated with apt tales, for and against the Solitary’s despondency. Failure to see this, especially the Wanderer’s therapeutic motives, will reduce the poem to a tedious string of poetic sermons and moral harangues. To this error Wordsworth’s contemporaries, whose opinions we have selectively analyzed, and their followers in later ages were particularly liable.

Following, or perhaps somewhat misled by, the various authorial hints throughout the text, they were generally so prompt in identifying with the Wanderer's point of view that none seemed willing to treat the Solitary's rebuttals seriously.

In this regard, the strand of revisionary criticism we have been reviewing deserves special praise for noting the Wanderer's limitations in the second book and beyond, although occasionally it shows a tendency to overstate. The most striking instance, according to Wolfson, of "Wordsworth's willingness to show the Wanderer's interpretations as not just occasionally perverse or limited but sometimes wrong" (p. 124) is the Wanderer's mistake in assuming the Solitary dead upon hearing a funeral dirge, sung actually in behalf of the old pensioner, in the valley below into which he and the narrator are about to descend (2.402-4). For Wolfson, this illustrates the extent to which "Wordsworth shows *view* to be *point of view*, and emphasizes the *self*-reflecting configurations of what one sees," hence unsettling "the absolute claim of any one speaker" (p. 124) in the poem. Guided by a similar subversive spirit, Hickey supplemented Wolfson's view by elaborating the partiality of the Wanderer's seemingly unprovoked attack on Voltaire's *Candide* (2.494-512) and its destructive influence on the Solitary's spiritual condition. For Hickey, following David Bromwich, this reflects badly on the Wanderer, because it shows him abandoning "his usual accommodating mode" in favor of "an inflexible authoritarianism that was fairly well hidden until now," as he comes into direct contact with something "that radically threatens his own interpretive system" (p. 59). In her textually informed and reader-centered study of *The Excursion* (2002), Bushell piled new evidence on the old by reading the Solitary's subjective account of what has led him to his present state (3.488-998), which cannot fail to elicit an emotional response, as a device used by Wordsworth to challenge the severe moral judgment passed on the Solitary in the Wanderer's preparatory narrative (2.164-334). Rather than simply

enforcing the subversive reading, however, Bushell deserves credit for performing an impressively deft balancing act in her conclusion. “Ultimately,” wrote Bushell,

Wordsworth does not want us to simply dismiss the earlier version, or to view one account as ‘true’ and another as ‘false’. The way in which he presents the narratives demands that both co-exist in the reader’s mind and that there is no single (or simple) way either of viewing or of representing a life. The poem presents the reader with different ways of seeing which are held in counterbalance with each other and with the reader’s own position. . . . the comparison of the Solitary and the Wanderer’s narratives reminds us of the subjectivity of the narrators (p. 169)

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the Wanderer’s “subjectivity,” of how specifically his “view” turns into a mere “point of view” in Book 2 and beyond, and loses the absolute force it seems to have in the first book, let us first inquire what his view is.

As the Wanderer is “chiefly an idea,” as Wordsworth informed us in the Fenwick note to *The Excursion*, “of what I fancied my own character might have become in his circumstances,”<sup>40</sup> no account of the character’s view will be complete without consideration of his relation to the writer. A brief comparison will demonstrate that the Wanderer is in many ways a mirror for the Wordsworth as revealed in his various autobiographical writings. Central to the mental development of the Wanderer and the protagonist of *The Prelude* is the influence of nature. Both took great delight in beautiful and grand forms of nature. In response to these forms, deep feelings arise in the child, which in turn strengthen the child’s grasp of primal impressions that will become the term of comparison for his subsequent experience. Because Wordsworth experienced human life as a degenerative process, a continual decay of our natural strength and

responsiveness, his celebration of that “active power to fasten images / Upon his brain” (1.163-64), which the Wanderer attained in growing up, and which Wordsworth was to call the imagination in *The Prelude*, is really a celebration of the adult’s quest for partial restoration of the child’s primal communion with nature, a quest for “a power,” as Parker astutely remarked, “evolved as a strategy in response to loss” (p. 100). In childhood, both were enamored of storybooks and the pure laws of mathematics. Both attained at a somewhat later age a mystical experience of the one life within us and abroad that “rolls through all things” (“Tintern Abbey,” l. 103), that “*active* principle:--howe’er removed / From sense and observation” that “subsists / In all things” (9.3-5). Both went through that further phase of development, which Wordsworth labored very hard to trace in the eighth book of *The Prelude*, a phase in which moral and philanthropic feelings gradually emerge from the youthful love of the natural world (although in *The Excursion*, Wordsworth chose not to include it as part of the Wanderer’s history, but transposed it to the end of the old man’s exhortation to the Solitary in the fourth book).<sup>41</sup> Even in old age, the Wanderer resembles the mature Wordsworth in their understanding of life. Like the Wordsworth of the Immortality Ode, who found “strength in what remains behind” and reconciled himself with the inevitable decay of human life, the Wanderer spoke “of Age, / As of a final Eminence, though bare / In aspect and forbidding, yet a Point / On which ’tis not impossible to sit / In awful sovereignty” (9.52-56). So far the similarities.

But there are also telling differences. The most obvious one is their way of life, by virtue of which the Wanderer is far richer in knowledge of other human selves, especially rural dwellers, of “Their manners, their enjoyments, and pursuits, / Their passions, and their feelings; chiefly those / Essential and eternal in the heart” (l. 371-73), than Wordsworth could possibly be. As a member of the lower classes, following the lowliest of trades, he is in a more profound and

more effective way living evidence of the fundamental equality of men, something that Wordsworth always hoped to accomplish in his writings. This obvious difference of trade will then explain their widely different reaction to the political upheaval in France. While it cost the poet dearly to rescue himself from the moral crisis as recorded in the French books in *The Prelude*, the Wanderer's involvement with the revolution is only a negligible episode in his life. Although he "shared at first the illusion" (4.274) and millennial hopes kindled by the political situation in France, his rejection of the illusion seemed rather effortless. Listening attentively to the exhortatory voice of Nature (4.279-95), he soon came to realize, and without much of a struggle, the justness of the resultant suffering that those who got entangled in the cataclysmic event had to endure. Furthermore, unlike the familiar Wordsworth of the "golden decade," who presented his life in exclusively secular terms, the story of the Wanderer's growth is framed explicitly in religion: in childhood, he was "taught / Stern self-respect, a reverence for God's word, / And an habitual piety, maintained / With strictness scarcely known on English ground" (1.130-33); and "he remembered in his riper age / With gratitude, and reverential thoughts" (1.431-32) the influence and the care he received from the church. First composed in 1803-1804 when "The Ruined Cottage" and "The Pedlar" were recombined into one poem (MS. E), these lines are by no means a haphazard addition; rather, they mark a stage at which Wordsworth began to question the sufficiency of an exclusively natural education and was pondering the necessity of religion as a new foundation for life, which came to fruition in *The Excursion*. In short, the Wanderer is an idealized version of Wordsworth, his most audacious creation of a naturally wise man—in the line of the old Cumberland beggar and the poor leech-gatherer—sharing the best portion of his knowledge and experience, and sheltered from the worst that had or could have happened to Wordsworth.

These real or imagined misfortunes Wordsworth reserved for the Solitary, who represents the antithesis of what the Wanderer stands for in the poem, which is to say, the best that Wordsworth believed or wished to believe. Issuing from a similar social and religious background, the Solitary followed, however, a very different life trajectory than the Wanderer. Retiring from his first job as a military chaplain, he was for seven years blessed with a happy family life, only to be shattered at the end by the sudden death of literally everyone he held most dear, his beloved wife and two children. From the despair over the lost ones he was afterward roused by the false hope presented to him by the political turmoil in France, into which he recklessly plunged as a means to divert attention away from his personal disasters. Disillusioned by the failure of the Revolution and the subsequent search for a new life in America, the Solitary finally retreated into the remoteness of the Lake country where he “wastes the sad remainder of his hours” (2.327). When we meet him at last in the lonely vale, the Solitary was very much a pathetic figure like Margaret. Bereaved and disconsolate, he was similarly torn between tormenting memories of past happiness and the harsh realities of his present life. The “cool Recess” (2.436), discovered inadvertently by the narrator and the Wanderer before they ran into the Solitary, and the interior of the Solitary’s “small apartment”—upon entering which the narrator exclaimed, “What a wreck”

We had around us! scattered was the floor,  
 And, in like sort, chair, window-seat, and shelf,  
 With books, maps, fossils, withered plants and flowers,  
 And tufts of mountain moss; and here and there  
 Lay, intermixed with these, mechanic tools,  
 And scraps of paper,—some I could perceive

Scribbled with verse: a broken angling-rod  
 And shattered telescope, together linked  
 By cobwebs, stood within a dusty nook;  
 And instruments of music, some half-made,  
 Some in disgrace, hung dangling from the walls. (2.674, 686-92)

—are in a similar state of dereliction as Margaret’s garden (1.753-64) and house (1.856-77), as the Wanderer found them during several of his visits; his life is equally hopeless. The disorderliness of the living space reflects the inner turmoil and weariness of the inhabitant.

Yet the Solitary poses a thornier problem to the Wanderer than Margaret. If Margaret is primarily an object of pity, whose tale is, in the context of the first book, illustrative of the Wanderer’s equanimity,<sup>42</sup> the Solitary is both a despondent man that the Wanderer felt obliged to cure, and a rational skeptic whose life experience is the most powerful and deadly weaponry against the Wanderer’s most cherished convictions. A glance at several important episodes in Book 2 and Book 3, which contains the Solitary’s extended account of his own history, will bring to light his divergence from the Wanderer and possibly explain why the recluse, though “touched / With manifest emotion” (4.1075-75), remained unconverted by the other’s “eloquent harangue” (4.1272) in the poem’s doctrinal center: Book 4. We must remember, first of all, that the Solitary was not incapable of the kind of deep introspection and religious piety that are the trademark of the Wanderer. Wallowing in domestic happiness, the Solitary often poured forth during his solitary wanderings “Strains . . . of acknowledgement”

To an Authority enthroned above  
 The reach of sight; from whom, as from their source,  
 Proceed all visible ministers of good

That walk the earth—Father of heaven and earth,

Father and king, and judge, adored and feared. (3.576-81)

Unfortunately, these moments of spirituality did not last. The mortal blows that befell his family afterward quickly turned his meditations on an “earthly Providence” (3.573) into fantasies of some “fatal Power . . . that shattered all” (3.646-47). His subsequent experience, as recounted by the Solitary in Book 3, can be read as a failed attempt to reconcile with the personal tragedy he suffered. The political agitation at home caused by the revolution in France temporarily diverted attention from his loss, but when he again retired into himself, memories of his loved ones came back to haunt him, the effect being so unsettling that he felt “the infallible support / Of faith” (1.873-74) was denied him. The psychological crisis the Solitary found himself in at that point is not entirely unlike that of Wordsworth as presented in the French books of *The Prelude*, but the Solitary was more unfortunate in not being able to regain strength in a final withdrawal to Nature, which had put Wordsworth on a path toward recovery. Truth be told, even as a recluse, the Solitary still retained his sensitivity to nature (“in more genial times” he had not only lived in contentment but responded emotionally and imaginatively to the surrounding world [3.288-335]), nor was he completely unaware of nature’s curative powers: he valued, for example, the twin peaks visible from his window, which speak “A language not unwelcome to sick hearts / And idle spirits” (2.743-44). But he saw too clearly and felt too strongly the ubiquity and profundity of earthly ills, even in places like the vale he had chosen as his hermitage “That seems by Nature framed to be the seat / And very bosom of pure innocence” (2.650-51), that the pleasure he took in nature could not ease his doubts and fears about nature and humanity. For the Solitary, the old pensioner’s suffering at the hands of the heartless housewife is proof that nearness to nature and humble life are no guarantee of innocence or moral integrity. On the

contrary, they could actually hamper the growth of human sympathy just as structurally, the “twin peaks” passage (2.721-52) might be seen to hamper, because it delays, the Solitary’s sharing of a sorrowful tale. That this is not stretching a point is confirmed by the Solitary’s response to the strange vision he had as he stepped out of the mist shrouding the mountain where the missing pensioner was accidentally found after a stormy night. Dazzled by the view of “a mighty City” wrought by “earthly nature” (2.870, 881), the Solitary felt his heart

Swelled in my breast.—“I have been dead,” I cried,

“And now I live! Oh! wherefore do I live?”

And with that pang I prayed to be no more!—

—But I forget our Charge, as utterly

I then forgot him:—there I stood and gazed; (2.910-14)

These remarks by the Solitary are doubly ironic. At the level of the recollected event, they have the unwelcome implication that to be responsive to natural sublimity is to indulge in momentary forgetfulness about human suffering. The Solitary’s spiritual renewal takes place at the expense of the pensioner. This unfortunate conjunction of circumstances suggests that nature and humanity, reality and imagination, rather than constituting a smooth continuum that Wordsworth has thought rests upon a principle of love, actually work at cross purposes. Narratologically, the Solitary performed a repetition of that morally dubious conjunction by recounting the disruptive vision as part of the pensioner’s story. In so doing, however, the Solitary also seemed to permit the “nobility” of his character, albeit of a Satanic sort, to shine out, for we cannot rule out the possibility that the Solitary’s death wish at the height of his vision is as much a cry of desperation as a cry of determination to reject visionary grandeur in favor of the depressingly flawed humanity that he found in the vale that “lay low beneath my feet” (2.906). After all, the

Solitary is not without remnants of human sympathy, which has several times inadvertently revealed themselves, as in his comforting the sorrow-stricken boy the first time we meet him (2.528-37) or in his expressed affection for the pensioner (2.783, 827-30).

For the discovery of irony in Wordsworth's treatment of that mountain vision and some of the disparities between the poem's two lead roles, I am chiefly indebted to Edward E. Bostetter, who, in his 1963 study of Romantic ventriloquism, performed probably the earliest and most thoroughly Solitary-centric analysis of *The Excursion* to date.<sup>43</sup> Bostetter saw the Wanderer and the Solitary as two conflicting surrogates for Wordsworth in the poem, with the former representing the optimism that had rested "on the unstable, precarious foundations of the poet's personal security and sense of well-being, his purely subjective happiness at the time in which he began the poem" (p. 68), and the latter representing the poet's doubts and fears about what he so fondly believed or wished to believe. Thus, "the colloquy of the Solitary and the Wanderer" in the middle books and beyond is not simply, as Lyon would have it, one between a perfectly wise man and a sick man, but "in one sense a psychomachia, a soul debate in which the Solitary presents the questions that threatened Wordsworth with despair, and the Wanderer the only possible answers to those questions" (p. 68). But the debate held little suspense for Bostetter. The Solitary obviously got the upper hand, not only because his "view of the treachery of nature, the helplessness of man, the inevitability of suffering" (p. 75) is, on close analysis, the more compelling one, but because Wordsworth the optimist had long been defeated by Wordsworth the skeptic. Yet for certain obvious reasons the poet could not bring himself to openly admit the affinity between himself and the Solitary (significantly, Wordsworth named Joseph Fawcett, the dissenting preacher and Godwinian, as the main prototype of the Solitary in his revelations to Miss Fenwick),<sup>44</sup> hence making it necessary, Bostetter implied, that Wordsworth ventriloquize

through a character like the Solitary, because only then could the poet feel less inhibited to address his inmost doubts and fears (we have gone to the other end of the spectrum on the issue of ventriloquism).

With his generally pro-Solitary reading, Bostetter seemed to have performed for *The Excursion* what Blake did for *Paradise Lost*: being fully aware of the poem's explicit endorsement of the orthodox voice, the critic nevertheless ventured to claim that the poet is of the unorthodox character's party without knowing or acknowledging it. This is certainly right if we know how to read in the spirit of Blake's devils, but only "if." Bostetter seemed unwilling to tease out the negative implication of that qualifying clause. Take for example the Wanderer's priggish description of the Solitary at the opening of Book 2. It probably is intended to throw ironic light upon the Solitary's version of his life in Book 3, but when we find the irony several times confirmed in the Solitary's own speeches, when we hear him admit, rather touchingly, "to me, who find, / Reviewing my past way, much to condemn, / Little to praise, and nothing to regret" (3.276-78), or when we see him "meditate on follies past; / And . . . inwardly retrace / A course of vain delights and thoughtless guilt, / And self-indulgence" (3.565-69), what is our ground for thinking that this really is Wordsworth's attempt to malign the Solitary so that he could be "set up and knocked down at will" (Bostetter, p. 69)—it is important to remember that the Solitary stood his ground till the very end, though somewhat softened—and not that Wordsworth, having adopted the Solitary's ungracious outlook in contemplating the unknowable and inexplicable in human life, somehow felt, in moments of deep introspection, that he could not entirely shirk responsibilities for his disillusionment? By the same token, there is no perfect way of knowing that the Wanderer's extended reply in Book 4 is really contrived, consisting of "the only possible" rather than the best and most effective answers to the Solitary's questions.

The Wanderer's call for belief, for instance, in "a Being / Of infinite benevolence and power, / Whose everlasting purposes embrace all accidents, and converting them to Good" (4.14-17) may well strike a modern intellectual like Bostetter as upholding the "optimism of 'What is, is right,'" "a 'magical view' of the universe" (p. 76) that defies philosophical exploration. But the critic would have been more persuasive had he not taken for granted that the Wanderer's reply is, or is meant to be, a philosophical one. It never occurred to Bostetter, it seems, that for the Wanderer, intellectual inquiry is probably part of the Solitary's problem, that probably for him, what the Solitary really needs is not so much a reasoned debate that would be intellectually satisfying as something, call it faith, hope, or some sort of spiritual balm, that would enable him to overcome his longing for death, which surges twice in Book 3 (ll. 281-87, 996-98) with an almost Keatsian passion.

These reflections on Bostetter's Solitary-centric reading suggest that in registering the Wanderer's limitations, we can do better than simply identify with his rival. The reason is simple: relativity cuts both ways. If the introduction of the Solitary calls into question the Wanderer's authority as established in the first book, recognition of that authority and the Wanderer's benign motives should stop us from seeing the Solitary as Wordsworth's real representative in the poem. After all, the Wanderer's seemingly interminable speech in Book 4 is not a pointless exercise: quite appropriately, he mentioned faith and strict adherence to duty as a remedy for excessive mourning, and prescribed physical exercise and a voluntary application of fancy as a means to combat apathy (admittedly, though, he was less successful in advocating nature as a place where hopes for humanity dashed by the failure of history can be restored, which will reopen discussion in the remainder of the poem). This productive rivalry between the poem's two major characters requires that we find a more complex and accommodating perspective in which to examine the

poem, one that neither exalts the Wanderer's authority to the point of being blind to the Solitary's concerns, nor is only intent on detecting every form of irony, real or imagined, in total disregard for the poem's teleological structure, but combines the strength of both and prevents each from being carried to its extremity. For such a perspective, we need not search much farther than the opening remarks of the Pastor in Book 5.

Taking over more than halfway through the poem the Wanderer's self-imposed duty to restore the Solitary, who now revived his pessimistic view of human life, especially rural life, with such force that even the narrator, who generally sympathized with the Wanderer, felt obliged to give him his due (5.365-85), the Pastor proffered a double perspective akin to that which we have found necessary to adopt when trying to come to terms with the ambivalence of the narrator's language. Acknowledging the subjectivity of our viewpoint and the fallibility of human nature, the Pastor, however, maintained that

. . . for the general purposes of faith  
 In Providence, for solace and support,  
 We may not doubt that who can best subject  
 The will to Reason's law, and strictliest live  
 And act in that obedience, he shall gain  
 The clearest apprehension of those truths,  
 Which unassisted reason's utmost power  
 Is too infirm to reach. But—waiving this,  
 And our regards confining within bounds  
 Of less exalted consciousness—through which  
 The very multitude are free to range—

We safely may affirm that human life  
 Is either fair or tempting, a soft scene  
 Grateful to sight, refreshing to the soul,  
 Or a forbidding tract of cheerless view;  
 Even as the same is looked at, or approached. (5.510, 512-25)

What makes this passage particularly useful as a model of comprehensive understanding is its ironic (in the sense of being able to sustain an inner split) handling of the conflicting perspectives that inform the previous debate between the Wanderer and the Solitary. Here faith and doubt, the beatific outlook of those who act in strict obedience to “Reason’s law” and the fractured viewpoint of the ordinary person, exist peaceably together. Both can be true to the Pastor, because his mind is capacious enough to accommodate their differences. Both are presented in a spirit of impartiality. If the view of the faithful like the Wanderer is supremely desirable, the Pastor implied through his repeated use of superlatives (who can best subject . . . shall gain / the clearest apprehension) that it is more an ideal to strive for than a realistically attainable goal. If the other perspective, of which the Solitary is only capable of the negative half, is “less exalted,” the Pastor seemed to have no doubt about its genuineness and suitability to the “multitude.” His role in the remainder of the poem is essentially mediatory: on the one hand, he admired (but refused to claim) the moral high ground and transcendent vision of someone like the Wanderer and willingly acted as his helper to further his therapeutic aims; on the other hand, he was not incapable of “That sympathy which you (i.e. the Solitary) for others ask; / And . . . could tell, not travelling for my theme / Beyond the limits of these humble graves, / Of strange disasters” (6.583-86). Thus, there is a real sense in which the Pastor replaced the Wanderer as the last major surrogate for Wordsworth in the poem (significantly, his “authentic epitaphs” [5.653]

mark the poet's return to the narrative mode of the "lyrical ballads," to the time period in which the *Recluse* project was first hatched and took wing). Although he does not necessarily represent the final triumph of Wordsworth's optimism—Wordsworth was, after all, too honest an autobiographer to exorcise his doubts and fears—the emotional realism of his epitaphic tales and the exemplary happiness of his family do seem to make the last and most adequate antidote to the Solitary's despondency, and allow the poem to conclude on a hopeful note.

Was Hazlitt right then in regarding the major characters of *The Excursion* as different persons in one poet? It depends. We will feel inclined to answer in the affirmative if our focus is on the compatibility between Wordsworth and his poetic creations. Much has already been said, and much can still be said, about their similarities in background, outlook, way of life, and manner of speech. The various textual transpositions from such nondramatic writings as *The Prelude* and "Home at Grasmere" to *The Excursion* might serve as additional evidence. Those who disagree, on the other hand, who consider *The Excursion* a successful dramatic poem, tend to focus on Wordsworth's differences from the characters, each with his own philosophical position and distinctive way of thinking and feeling. They may also study the textual changes introduced by Wordsworth in the compositional process to heighten dramatic distinction of character. The difference here is oftentimes not a difference of substance, but one of perspective, of how we understand the term "dramatic" and where we draw the line between the lyric and dramatic mode of expression.

I want to close by reading a short passage from Wordsworth's 1802 additions to the "Preface," which will suggest that the glaring divergences in *Excursion* criticism on the issue of ventriloquism are in fact rooted in and reflect Wordsworth's indecision about dramatic

composition. In enumerating the defining qualities of a poet, Wordsworth did not forget to ascribe to him

a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than any thing which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves; whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement.

But, whatever portion of this faculty we may suppose even the greatest Poet to possess, there cannot be a doubt but that the language which it will suggest to him, must, in liveliness and truth, fall far short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those passions, certain shadows of which the Poet thus produces, or feels to be produced, in himself. However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a Poet, it is obvious, that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself

slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs . . .<sup>45</sup>

Convolved though his train of ideas are, Wordsworth was essentially asking: how is it possible for the poet to represent the things he has no experience of, such as the feeling of others? (This would be a non-question for a chameleon poet like Shakespeare, especially as imagined by Romantic writers like Hazlitt). Wordsworth's answer is strangely ambivalent: on the one hand, he wanted to assert his confidence in the poet's power of empathetic imagination, which, ideally, will enable him not only to negotiate the experiential divide between separate individuals, but occasionally "to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings" with others. On the other hand, Wordsworth was too much a poet of nature (understood very broadly as the antonym of artifice), too honest a believer in truthfulness of expression, to allow that simulated feelings, the poet's mastery of dramatic technique notwithstanding, can fully match, "in liveliness and truth," and substitute for "passions produced by real events." It is this ambivalence, it seems to me, that might explain why *The Excursion*, as the only completed part of the misleadingly projected three-part *Recluse*, is both a poem "On Man, on Nature, and on human Life," as the poet confidently asserted in the "Prospectus," and a poem of Wordsworth himself.

## Endnotes to Chapter Four

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<sup>1</sup> *Prose*, 1:138.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to lines 959-1048 of the earliest full text of "Home at Grasmere," MS. B, from which my "Prospectus" quotations are drawn, unless otherwise noted. The dating of the "Prospectus" is a particularly thorny issue, not least because it is complexly interwoven with the problems of "Home at Grasmere" which is itself a major textual crux in the Wordsworth canon. The range of possible dates for composition remains broad, from early 1800 to late 1806. For a summary account of the questions relating to the dating of the "Prospectus," see Beth Darlington (ed.), *Home at Grasmere: Part First, Book First, of The Recluse* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Wordsworth Press, 1977), pp. 19-22. Although a later date will hardly affect the substance of my argument, I accept early 1800 as the likeliest time in which the bulk of the "Prospectus" was composed. For a persuasive argument in favor of the early date, see Jonathan Wordsworth, "On Man, On Nature, and On Human Life," *Review of English Studies*, NS 31 (1980), especially pp. 26-29.

<sup>3</sup> 1971, pp. 17-70, 463-79. Abrams used the "Prospectus" as an interpretive device to open up an enormous range of Romantic texts. For another notable commentary, see Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 108-14.

<sup>4</sup> 1984, pp. 95-99.

<sup>5</sup> All *Prelude* quotations in the text are drawn from Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (eds.), *William Wordsworth: The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979). The sequence of lines quoted here were composed as part of and originally belong in the last book of the short-lived five-Book *Prelude* which dates from January-early March 1804. For a brief account of the history of the expansion of the two-part *Prelude* (1799) to the quickly abandoned five-Book version, see *ibid.*, p. 516-17. It should probably be mentioned in passing that these various verbal resonances might also serve as supplementary evidence that the "Prospectus" is almost in its entirety the work of 1800, though slightly revised and expanded at a later period.

<sup>6</sup> Significantly, lines 965-67 are missing in the earliest surviving copy of the "Prospectus," designated as MS. 1 first by de Selincourt and Darbishire in *Poetical Works*, 5: 372 (This copy cannot be precisely dated, although it seems reasonable to assume that the poem at this early stage was more a separate effusion than a part of something larger). See *Home at Grasmere*, p. 257. Judging by their verbal affinity with the Immortality Ode, which Wordsworth was unable to bring to an optimistic conclusion until after 1804, these lines could hardly predate 1804.

<sup>7</sup> One measure of this neglect is the total absence of an easily accessible and affordable reading text for classroom use (except early versions of Book I, which contains Margaret's tale commonly referred to as "The Ruined Cottage"), not even one in the anthologies of Wordsworth's or Romantic poetry that have mushroomed over the last few decades (For details of the poem's British publishing history, especially in the nineteenth century, see the "introduction" to the recent Cornell edition of *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye, pp. 19-24). Despite the revisionary effort of *The Excursion's* recent academic champions, notably Judson Stanley Lyon, Russell Noyes, Alan G. Hill, Kenneth Johnston, William H. Galperin, Alison Hickey, and Sally Bushell, with some of whose various readings of the poem I will occasionally engage in my own analysis afterward, a new consensus is yet to emerge about the poem's place in the Wordsworth canon. For more elaborate discussions of the *Excursion's* reputation in the nineteenth century that have greatly informed my own, see Judson Stanley Lyon, *The Excursion: A Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 1-6; Herbert Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's "Prelude"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 271-75.

<sup>8</sup> The publishing details provided by W. J. B. Owen, in his "Costs, Sales, and Profits of Longman's Editions of Wordsworth," *Library*, s 5-12 (1957), p. 97, show that the 500-copy first printing of *The Excursion* was not exhausted twenty years later. The quote from Lamb's letter (August 9, 1814) can be found in Edwin W. Marris (ed.), *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975), 3:95. The Keats quote is drawn from his letter to

Haydon of 10 January 1818; see Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), *Letters of John Keats* (2 vols; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1958), 1:203. Apart from *Endymion*, we should probably also point to Shelley's "Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude" as another notable case of *The Excursion*'s influence on second-generation Romantics.

<sup>9</sup> For details of these Victorian writers' reaction to *The Excursion*, see Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), especially pp. 145-46, 149-50, 216-17. As a further indication of the poem's importance during the Victorian period, at least two reviewers praised Tennyson's *In Memoriam* in 1850 for being similar to *The Excursion*. See Stuart F. C. Niermeier, "In Memoriam and *The Excursion*: A Matter of Comparison," *The Victorian Newsletter*, 41 (1972), pp. 20-22; quoted in William Galperin, *Revision and Authority in Wordsworth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> *The Early Life of William Wordsworth* (London, 1897), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1909), pp. 128-29.

<sup>12</sup> "Introduction: Wordsworth's Doing and Undoing," in *Impure Conceits: Rhetoric and Ideology in Wordsworth's "Excursion"* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), especially pp. 1-6. To Hickey's interpretation of the poem (hereafter referred to as Hickey in the text) I will return after this broad survey of *Excursion* criticism.

<sup>13</sup> For the Arnold quote, see his essay "Wordsworth," in *Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960-77), 11 vols., 9:48. Further references will be incorporated into the text. As a further index of the continuing influence of these forces over the first half of the twentieth century, at least three other studies can be added to the two correlated lineages of texts Hickey traced in the introduction to her book. The Arnoldian perspective on Wordsworth's poetry clearly survived into the mid-twentieth century in the work of Helen Darbishire (*The Poet Wordsworth*, 1950) and John F. Danby (*The Simple Wordsworth*, 1960). For a synoptic view of this mid-twentieth century resurgence of the simple Wordsworth, see M. H. Abrams, "Two Roads to Wordsworth," reprinted in *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), pp. 149-51. As a precursor of Thompson and Woodring's readings, we might add G. M. Harper who saw the poem as an outgrowth of the failure of the poet's revolutionary hopes (see his chapter on *The Excursion* in *William Wordsworth: His Life, Works and Influence* [London, 1929]).

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 292. It should be noted that Hartman (op. cit., pp. 349-51) saw himself as operating along the same lines as and improving upon the positions of John Jones (*The Egotistical Sublime*, 1954), Harold Bloom (*The Visionary Company*, 1961; rev. ed., 1971), and Paul de Man (in "Structure intentionnelle de l'image romantique," *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 14 [1960]; rpt. in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 1984), all of whom had helped to unveil the sublime Wordsworth and the complexity of his dealings with nature.

<sup>15</sup> These differing perspectives on Wordsworth's poetry have been key issues of contention in more recent times. William Galperin's reinterpretation of Wordsworth's career (*Revision and Authority in Wordsworth*, 1989) is noteworthy for its refined position on the question of continuity and authority in Wordsworth's poetry. For Galperin, the "golden decade-anticlimax" narrative is an apparently biased Arnoldian construct that elides the multifaceted complexity of Wordsworth's poetic corpus. It is the unfortunate result of an autocratic interpretation—as opposed to an "allocratic" one as practiced by Victorian readers before Arnold, who were reluctant to segregate the earlier and later Wordsworth" (p. 5)—that sees Wordsworth's poetry through the lens of a narrowly defined humanism. This humanistic Wordsworth was fruitfully explored during the Romantic reassessment in the 1960s spearheaded by M. H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, and Northrop Frye, and ironically, even survived in the praxis of poststructuralism and marxism in the 1970s and 80s. Recognizing the validity and inevitability of some division of Wordsworth's career yet rejecting the valorization of the early Wordsworth over the later, Galperin proposed that we regard the poet's career as a process of continual self-reflection and self-criticism, guided by "a principle of revisability" (p. 3) that will show us that "the alleged 'anti-climax' in the aftermath of Wordsworth's Great Decade was not a betrayal of the poet's radical or romantic vision" but a result of the poet's "exercise of poetic authority—yielding a revision of the

earlier poetry that by turns anticipates and supersedes our contemporary, revisionist approaches to romanticism. . . . Thus, the conservative personae of the later poems . . . actually recall the authority of Wordsworth's earlier humanism. . . . Wordsworth does not 'become' an orthodox Christian in his later phase. Instead, his orthodoxy cancels the authority it supersedes so as to cancel *all* authority, including, of course, the authority of orthodoxy itself" (p. 2).

I sympathize with Galperin's broader, more egalitarian understanding of Wordsworth's career, but have issues with his deconstructionist reading of poems like *The Excursion*, where scrupulous attention is often paid to details in the text only to support preconceived notions of what the poem ought to say or do in the context of Wordsworth's corpus. In "rush[ing] to meet theory in a new hybrid way," Galperin still seems, willy-nilly, "vulnerable to theory" (p. 4). Although this is no place for a full explanation of my objections, one example will illustrate my point. In order to undermine the centrality of *The Prelude* as the bedrock of the humanistic Wordsworth, Galperin read the Poet's resignation of his role to the Wanderer in Book I of *The Excursion* as a figure for Wordsworth's abandonment of "a romantic orientation" (p. 32), which for Galperin was in itself an aberration from tradition and orthodoxy. I don't intend to confront the difficult question of which Wordsworth, the Romantic or pro-Christian, is more worthy of critical attention, but I doubt the legitimacy of Galperin's interpretive move, of his implicitly identifying the Poet in *The Excursion* and the hero of *The Prelude*, and his seeing the Poet as Wordsworth's new representative engaged in a critical debate with his former poetic self, all of which is done in total disregard for the dramatic form of *The Excursion*.

<sup>16</sup> Harold Bloom's rejection in a work whose subject is "the dialectic of nature and the imagination in Romantic poetry" of nearly the entire *Excursion* as "an involuntary epitaph for the poet of the Great Decade, the man who wrote *Tintern Abbey* and *The Prelude*" exemplifies the readiness with which those negative strains of the Wordsworth criticism intermingle during the mid-century revival of Romantic studies (*The Visionary Company*, rev. ed. [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971], pp. viii, 194).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. e.g., E. P. Thompson, "Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon," in *Power and Consciousness*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien and William Dean Vanech (London: University of London Press, 1969), pp. 175-76 (also quoted in Hickey, p. 4): In *The Excursion*, "Wordsworth fell back within the forms of paternalistic sensibility. If there is a moral, it is not that he became a poorer poet because he changed his political views, but that his new 'good views' were not held with the same intensity and authenticity. They are too dutiful, too much the product not of the poet but of his inner moral censor; he wrote, not out of belief, nor out of the tension between beliefs, but out of a sense of what he *ought* to believe. Good views seldom make good poetry, whether these views are those approved of by the Anglican church or the vanguard of the working class"; and Hartman, 1964, pp. 293-94: "Though *The Excursion* is predicated on the possibility of natural visionary experience . . . and though such experience is given as proof of the argument that man's imagination can bind itself fruitfully to the world, Wordsworth shies from entering the area of his greatness. By removing himself as much as possible from the immediacy of his senses, and especially of the eye, he omits the sphere where imagination may seize on the seen and make it a haunting image, a 'questionable shape.' He reverts to lecturing on a venerable discipline, that of the Platonic-Christian journey from visible to invisible . . ."

<sup>18</sup> Page references in the text are to Jeffrey's 1814 review as reprinted in *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, Late Carey & Hart, 1853), pp. 457-69.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wordsworth's discussion of the affinity between religion and poetry (they both fall beyond the purview of reason, and incline toward the infinite and eternal; but both operate through "words and symbols" and neither can live "without sensuous incarnation") and the errors of understanding that might cause in "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" of 1815. See *Prose*, 3:64-66.

<sup>20</sup> Hazlitt's review, "Character of Mr. Wordsworth's New Poem," appeared in three parts in *Examiner*, 21 August 1814, pp. 541-2; 28 August 1814, pp. 555-8; 2 October 1814, pp. 636-8 (rpt. in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 1930, 19:9-25, from which my quotations are drawn). It should be mentioned in passing that my review of these contemporary opinions is dictated not so much by chronology as by insight or the level of

understanding the critic exhibits in regard to Wordsworth and *The Excursion*. Also, I have chosen to leave out in my review a great many other issues raised by Jeffrey or Hazlitt either because they are outmoded, well known or easily refutable, or because they result obviously from the critic's blindness, animosity, or partiality. Those issues include Wordsworth's affectation, mysticism, prolixity; his tendency to extravagance and puerility; his excessive self-indulgence and self-righteousness, his fondness for solitary musings, his choosing the pedlar as his mouthpiece, his strictures against Voltaire and apostasy, his idealized representation of rustics and passion for simplicity and humble life, etc.

<sup>21</sup> Hazlitt was consistent in his views regarding the essential characteristics of Wordsworth's poetry. In the brief sketch of the poet in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), he was very much still of this balanced opinion, attributing Wordsworth's pre-eminence among his contemporaries to his powers of sentiment and association: "No one has shown the same imagination in raising trifles into importance . . . He exemplifies in an eminent degree the power of *association*; for his poetry has no other source or character . . . Each object has become connected with a thousand feelings, a link in the chain of thought, a fibre of his own heart" (*The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 1930, 11:88-9), while also grumbling about his limitations in the choice of subject and style.

<sup>22</sup> To Wordsworth (30 May 1815), Coleridge's *Letters*, 4:564.

<sup>23</sup> Coleridge's *Letters*, 4:574-75. Although it is not difficult to see that Coleridge's plan is too abstract, and too firmly rooted in philosophy, to suit Wordsworth's talents or perhaps good poetry of any kind, not enough attention has been paid to the obverse of the matter: i.e. the interpretive value of Wordsworth's various departures in *The Excursion* from Coleridge's expectations. For an excellent attempt to elucidate the incongruity between Wordsworth's thought and Coleridge's, especially regarding the role of nature and the senses, and orthodox Christianity, see Judson Stanley Lyon's now somewhat neglected *The Excursion: A Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 80-81, 90-104, 113-19.

<sup>24</sup> For an excellent study of Coleridge's debt to contemporary reviewers in his Wordsworth criticism, see John O. Hayden, "Coleridge, the Reviewers, and Wordsworth," *Studies in Philology* 68.1 (1971), pp. 105-119.

<sup>25</sup> *Biographia*, 2:135. Cf. *Table Talk*, 1:307 (21 July 1832), where Coleridge elaborated the same criticism: "Can dialogues in verse be defended? Wordsworth undertaking a grand philosophical poem ought always to have taught the reader himself as from himself; a poem does not admit argumentation—though it does admit development of thinking. In prose there may be a difference; though I must confess that even in Plato and Cicero, I am always vexed that the authors did not say what they had to say at once in their own persons. The introductions and little urbanities are to be sure delightful—I would not lose them—but I have no admiration for the practice of ventriloquizing through another man's mouth."

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hazlitt's remark in the *Examiner* review (op. cit., XIX: 20): "We go along with him, while he is the subject of his own narrative, but we take leave of him when he makes pedlars and ploughmen his heroes and the interpreters of his sentiments."

<sup>27</sup> The argument that Coleridge was really against the inculcation of moral truth, but not the kind of metaphysical or abstract truth he outlined in the 1815 letter to Wordsworth is possible, but only so when we ignore Chapter 14, 2:12-13, where it is clear that truth as a crucial category in Coleridge's conception of literature can be both moral and intellectual. So the contradiction remains. For discussions of Coleridge's strained relationship with Wordsworth around the time of the *Biographia*, which perhaps should also be factored in when considering Coleridge's response to *The Excursion*, see H. M. Margoliouth, *Wordsworth and Coleridge 1795-1834* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 183-84.

<sup>28</sup> All quotations from *The Excursion* (1814) including the Preface and "Prospectus" follow the 2007 Cornell edition edited by Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye. Note: the lines quoted from the "Prospectus" appear first in MS. D. of "Home at Grasmere," which dates to no earlier than 1806. See *Home at Grasmere*, p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> *The Excursion: A Study*, pp. 63-64. Further references are incorporated into the text. Apart from this “single most important purpose,” Lyon also regarded Wordsworth’s disapproval of mechanism and rationalism, which overlap with Coleridge’s developing concerns, as the other major impulses behind *The Excursion* (see pp. 62-63, 65-66). The compositional history of *The Excursion* is extremely complex. To make a long story short, we can at least say that with the exception of the first book, which results from Wordsworth’s reworking the existing material for *Ruined Cottage/Pedlar* (completed in March 1804), and the possible exception of Book 2 and the first 330 lines of Book 3, which date possibly to 1806, the bulk of what eventually went into *The Excursion* falls well beyond the time frame of Arnold’s golden decade. For a brief account of the stages of the poem’s manuscript history, see “introduction” to the 2007 Cornell edition, pp. 17-19, 426-28.

<sup>30</sup> For de Selincourt and Darbishire, the Wanderer is the ideal mediator of Margaret’s heartrending tale; hence “it is in the light of his faith that we are to read it” (*Poetical Works*, V: 378). Jonathan Wordsworth broadened the perspective by throwing the Poet and the reader into the interpreting process: “Both Poet and Pedlar are shown as responding to the story that is being told; and by emphasizing their initially different attitudes, and bringing them finally to something like agreement, Wordsworth is able to persuade the reader to accept the standards he imposes” (1969, p. 92). For compatible opinions from the 70s, see, for example, Paul Sheats, *The Making of Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1785-1798* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 137-39; Philip Cohen, “Narrative and Persuasion in *The Ruined Cottage*,” *JNT* 8 (1978): pp. 195-97.

<sup>31</sup> “‘Finer Distance’: The Narrative Art of Wordsworth’s ‘The Wanderer,’” *ELH* 39 (1972): p. 110.

<sup>32</sup> “Questioning Dramatized: *The Excursion*, Book 1 and Beyond,” *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 93-130.

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that critics adopt a range of titles to describe the narrator’s role: for Parker and William Howard (“Narrative Irony in *The Excursion*,” *Studies in Romanticism* 24 (1985): 511-30), he is “the narrator”; for Wolfson “the Author,” perhaps following Wordsworth’s 1814 “Summary of Contents”; and for Galperin “Poet” and “Poet-narrator.” I follow Hickey in this paragraph in calling the narrator the “Poet.”

<sup>34</sup> This is where the Wanderer broke off for the first and only time in telling Margaret’s story. This passage (l.628-34) evidently prefigures the quoted passage in wording and sentiment: the same cautionary gesture toward “an untoward mind,” and the same instructive contrast between “calm of nature” and “our restless thoughts.” It serves my analytical purpose equally well, and should probably be read alongside the quoted passage.

<sup>35</sup> The comparison with Keatsian “negative capability” is half anticipated by Wolfson, p. 115. In the context of *The Excursion*’s reception history, this cannot but sound like a quasi-refutation of the traditional view embraced by Wordsworth’s contemporaries, Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Keats, who confined his talent to the “egotistical sublime.” Does Wordsworth really need “negative capability,” i.e. to be made more like Shakespeare and Keats, as we are taught to see them, to be considered a great poet in modern times?

<sup>36</sup> *Re-Reading The Excursion*, p. 170.

<sup>37</sup> For details of this history, see the preface to “*The Ruined Cottage*” and “*The Pedlar*,” ed. James Butler (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. x-xii.

<sup>38</sup> 1969, p. xiii.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Bushell’s distinction between “the Poet as a character” and Wordsworth: while there are points in the text where the narrator “seems unable to adopt a ‘Wordsworthian’ understanding of what is shown to him,” at other times, especially at the beginning of Books 2 and 6, he is “used as a mouthpiece for the author” (p. 170). A few pages later, she complicated the situation a bit in noting that at two points we feel “an explicit sense of the Poet as writer . . . The first of these is in his telling of the Wanderer’s tale in Book 1 where he states ‘I will here record in verse’ [l.106] and the second is at the very end of the poem when the Poet speaks of what ‘My future Labours may

not leave untold' [9.795]" (p. 174). In general, Bushell made a compelling argument that the narrator of the poem functions as a surrogate for the reader, a device Wordsworth used to fulfill his didactic aim.

<sup>40</sup> Jared Curtis (ed.), *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), p. 79; rpt. in the Cornell edition of *The Excursion*, pp. 1215-16.

<sup>41</sup> Since 4.1201-1271 draw upon *The Ruined Cottage* MSS. B (20<sup>v</sup>-21<sup>r</sup>, 46<sup>r</sup>-49<sup>r</sup>) and D (67<sup>v</sup>-69<sup>r</sup>) (see James Butler [ed.], "*The Ruined Cottage*" and "*The Pedlar*," pp. 120-23, 260-67, 372-74), it is thus not without justification that we regard the Wanderer's exhortation to the Solitary as a supplement to his history in the first book.

<sup>42</sup> Notably, De Quincey accused the Wanderer of failing to offer substantial help. He wondered why the Wanderer "did not ever try the effect of a guinea?" Supposing this, however, to be a remedy beyond his fortitude, at least he might have offered a little rational advice, which costs no more than civility" (from his essay "On Wordsworth's Poetry" originally published in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, Sept. 1845, and revised for volume 6 of *Sketches, Critical and Biographic* [1857], in Jordan, *De Quincey as Critic*, pp. 409, 407; also cited in Wolfson, p. 110n). For sympathetic readers like Lyon, such "practical objections . . . bear no critical weight" (p. 75).

<sup>43</sup> See Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), pp. 70-71 (future references to Bostetter are to this work and will be documented parenthetically in the text). The same argument recurs, with slight alterations and often without acknowledgement, in the work of subsequent readers like Wolfson (p. 121) and Hickey (p. 67).

<sup>44</sup> For more extended discussions of Wordsworth's use of Joseph Fawcett as a model for the Solitary, see M. R. Adams, "Joseph Fawcett and Wordsworth's Solitary," *Publications of the MLA* 48 (1933): 508-28; Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 25-27. For a similar case of ventriloquism, see the discussion of "Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew tree" in the last chapter.

<sup>45</sup> *Prose*, 1:138. Famous as Wordsworth's definition of the poet is, this passage has rarely become an object of serious study in the mountain of literature on English Romanticism. Bushell (pp. 182-83) is the only important exception I know. However, she refused to apply her understanding of it to *The Excursion*, because she thought it supports a nondramatic reading of the poem like one put forth by Hazlitt.

### **The Return of the Writer: A Conclusion**

This dissertation sets out to examine the problems with one influential strand of comparative discourse that attempts to grasp the differences between the poetic traditions of China and the West in terms of the polarizations of fact and fiction. With no intention to deny or minimize the gap separating traditional Chinese and Western modes of reading and understanding, it is, however, a purpose of mine to demonstrate in the body of this dissertation the viability of what might be called an authorial approach to the reading of literature, one that while giving due consideration to all that is intrinsic to the literary work, refuses to sideline its creator. The dissertation is, in this regard, a critique of the various anti-authorial approaches that flourished in the last century in the West. For sure, there is no lack of critics in the Anglo-American world of these forms of anti-authorialism, be it the aesthetic will-to-impersonality that originated in the English poetic tradition most prominently with Keats in the early nineteenth century and was to re-emerge with T. S. Eliot and others early in the twentieth, New Criticism, Russian Formalism, or the “Death of the Author” movement of the 1960s as championed by Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida. But consensus is still lacking as to the exact place of authorial considerations in the reading of literature. In the meantime, whereas criticism and scholarship on poetry have attained an unprecedented level of diversity and sophistication, the actual teaching of poetry in the classroom remains, by and large, handicapped by models and methods that still seem to encourage an unmediated, uninformed engagement with the “words on the page.” Given such realities, practical as well as theoretical, I close with a few observations about why the interpretive method adopted throughout this dissertation is particularly suited for unlocking the kind of literary writing that our two master-poets obviously excel at.

To begin with, it is no happenstance that the vast majority of the poems I have singled out for special commentary are either overtly autobiographical or quasi-autobiographical. The centrality of the writer in such writings requires that the focus of reading be on the writer, on his thoughts and feelings as a real personality rather than a fictional character. This is so because in the reading of autobiographical literature, the familiar distinction between the writer's literary self and biographical self, between his "persona" and his actual personality, is oftentimes a false one. What we need, instead, is an expanded conception of the self, one that can accommodate the palpable discrepancy between art and life, internal and external, the imaginative and the historical. For sure, it would be a gross mistake to embrace the naïve faith of the biographical positivist, for whom the writer is primarily a recorder of his own life, for there is a real sense in which the writing of an autobiography is a kind of wish-fulfillment, where what the writer actually said or did as an historical person is really secondary to the kind of personality he wished to be. But we would have gone too far to register only the constructedness of the writer's self-image and refuse to take into account the bond that necessarily obtains between the writer and his autobiography, for are not the writer's desires, dispositions, and mental states as revealed in his writings an essential part and a defining feature of who he is? Is not his literary self-*representation* at the end of the day *his* literary self-representation? Why deprive the writer of his agency in the name of a critical dogma that perversely exalts to the exclusion of others such things as fictionality, imagination, literary autonomy, and/or the reader's interpretative freedom? We should know that it is ultimately we who will bear the loss of refusing to give the autobiographer his due, because in doing so, we are also renouncing our right as readers to enjoy the benefits of an authorial reading in which knowledge of the writer's autobiographical art and of his personality necessarily inform and illuminate each other.

One thing that the various individual readings enclosed in this dissertation are set to accomplish is precisely to exemplify this interpretive method by tracing the poet-autobiographer's presence in his autobiographical poetry. To do that, we need to resist the piecemeal approach to the study of poetry, one that treats individual poems erroneously as discreet, free-flowing items up for grabs in an objective space as if the be-all and end-all of each is to provide an opportunity for readers to test the strength of their perceptual and associative faculties. A truly authorial method requires that we examine a poet-autobiographer's writings in volumes and sequences, possibly as a unified corpus, a single immense body of work, in order to observe on a larger canvas and attain a higher level of understanding than is possible under a model of reading whose operations are bound to be fragmentary and haphazard. Take Tao Yuanming for example. How else but from a wholesale reading through the poet's writings around and after his famous eremitic turn in the year 405 can we know that the poet's favorite self-image is one of a scholar-recluse unconcerned by the political affairs of the world rather than that of a loyalist whose avowal of love for a peaceful rural existence is but a camouflage for his political discontent? Or consider the case of Wordsworth. How would it be possible for us to see and appreciate the poet's growth and achievement in "Tintern Abbey," had we refused to examine it in the context of the first lyrical ballads and other contemporary writings? On what other basis than a continuous intellectual engagement with all the major writings that contribute to the unifying though ever-evolving vision of *The Recluse* can we possibly evaluate the insight first suggested by Hazlitt that the dramatic setting of *The Excursion* is but a form of ventriloquism, that what the epic amounts to as a whole is a kind of self-critique with respect to the poet's earlier beliefs?

The extraordinary fruitfulness of these readings, there can be no doubt, is a function of the autobiographical character of the writings to which they have been applied. Yet caution is needed when we extend this authorial method to the whole body of literature, because a large part of what we commonly think of as literature today belongs to the genre of narrative fiction, which does seem to relate to the writer only in a very tenuous way. For a balanced understanding of the uses and limits of the authorial approach, let us briefly consider, by way of conclusion, Northrop Frye's often neglected schema as set forth in the first essay of his famous *Anatomy of Criticism* more than a half-century ago. There he usefully divides historical criticism into two basic categories, fictional and thematic. For Frye, whereas fiction, which includes the epic, the drama, the romance, and the novel, is well suited to formalist readings, because its focus is primarily intrinsic, the principal interest of thematic literature, of which lyrics and essays are the best representative, lies in the relation between the author and his audience, writer and reader. But the neatness of Frye's scheme has not made him blind to the inherent problems of all system-building. As a matter of fact, no sooner had Frye marked one mode off the other in advancing his grandiose system than he began to notice the fundamental arbitrariness of the distinction:

clearly there is no such thing as *a* fictional or *a* thematic work of literature, for all four ethical elements (ethical in the sense of relating to character), the hero, the hero's society, the poet and the poet's readers, are always at least potentially present. There can hardly be a work of literature without some kind of relation, implied or explicit, between its creator and its auditors. When the audience the poet had in mind is superseded by posterity, the relation changes, but it still holds.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction is arbitrary because every work of literature, regardless of its genre, always has an element of both. Insofar as it always has a thematic interest, the authorial approach need not be confined to the reading of literature as exemplified by the writings of our two literary masters. Nonetheless, insofar as authorial considerations are explicitly called for in the reading of thematic literature, especially the kind that is overtly autobiographical, let us not in such cases hesitate to hail the return of the writer. It is unthinkable, after all, that the study of a human art turn a blind eye to its human creator. I hope that the kind of literary exchange conducted in this dissertation has already made this abundantly clear.

## Endnote to the Conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 53.

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