THE "DARK PASSAGES" IN WORDSWORTH'S POETRY:
A STUDY OF WORDSWORTH'S EXPLORATION OF LIFE'S
BAFFLING PHENOMENA IN RELATION TO THE CHALLENGE
OF IMAGINATIVE ILLUMINATION OF MANKIND.

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to establish the full range and nature of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages of life in relation to the challenge of imaginative illumination of mankind. By concentrating on a thematic study of those poems written between 1798-1814, I have indicated both the scope and the pattern of his exploration of life's baffling phenomena. This study is therefore a search for the essential qualities of that bed-rock humanity which account for Wordsworth's centrality among his contemporaries and among all reflective readers; it is a search for meaning and value, strength and originality, and weight and sanity of thought and feeling encompassed in his poetry. The intention is to show how Wordsworth's imaginative genius offers help and courage to perplexed minds in search of that genuine poetic insight which neither violates the principle of beauty nor affronts empirical reason and the experience of common humanity.

The introductory chapter defines the full extent of Wordsworth's concern with the dark passages of human life as accentuated in his age by the break in continuity of imaginative vision. He recognized that his age had become increasingly sceptical of any realm of thought transcending the boundaries
declared by empirical thought, but he also recognized the need of something steadying and deepening to nourish man's imaginative life. Given the absence of large intellectual and imaginative structures with which the poet could sufficiently identify himself, Wordsworth sought to re-define structures of imaginative perception which could enable him to serve mankind in his calling as a poet.

Nevertheless, Wordsworth had first to confront the darkness of his own mind before he could undertake to establish the principle of imaginative illumination of mankind. In the dramatic lyrics of 1798-1805, especially, the poet turned to the mode of imaginative discovery of self. Chapters II and III deal with the poems in which Wordsworth grappled with complex emotional and philosophical anxieties which pressed in upon him as he pondered on the challenge of his chosen task of providing imaginative illumination for the children of the earth. These poems include "Tintern Abbey," the "Matthew" poems, "Resolution and Independence" and the Fifth Book of The Prelude. The Immortality Ode and the Peele Castle verses are discussed in Chapters IV and V as forming a transition of poetic thought between the early lyrics and The Excursion. These two poems deal with the problem of orientation to the visible universe and they help the poet to recognize more clearly his function as the poet-elegist of his age.

Chapters VI and VIII discuss The Excursion as the culmination of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages of
human life, and the conclusion reached is that the later poems offer no significant advance in the substance of poetic thought in his elegiac contemplation of human experience. The point is that, given Wordsworth's complex combination of an empirically oriented imagination with a deepening elegiac mode of vision, *The Excursion* has to be seen not as a fragment but as the expression of his fullest awareness of the reality of the human condition.

The prevailing critical attitude in this dissertation is that of a view of Wordsworth's poetry as a mental act. I have presented Wordsworth as a poet whose special relationship with language enables him to achieve structures of poetic thought that deserve the closest syntactical analysis, particularly in those poems that are generally considered as dull and obscure.
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INTRODUCTION

I have taken the hint for my dissertation from Keats's description of Wordsworth's genius as "explorative of [the] dark Passages" of human life. The phrase occurs in the seven-page letter to John Hamilton Reynolds in which Keats is preoccupied with "the consideration of Wordsworth's genius" "as a help" in contemplating the puzzles of human life. Although Keats does not offer much more than a hint in my interpretation of the dark passages in Wordsworth's poetry, I wish first to discuss the nature and context of Keats's hint before defining the dark passages. The seven-page letter to Reynolds is so dense in texture and so meditative in tone that it deserves to be quoted as fully as possible:

An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people—it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery: a thing I begin to understand a little, and which weighed upon you in the most gloomy and true sentence in your Letter . . . . You say "I fear there is little chance of anything else in this life." You seem by that to have been going with a more painful and acute zest the same Labyrinth that I have--I have come to the same conclusion thus far. My Branchings out therefrom have been numerous: one of them is the consideration of Wordsworth's genius and as a help, in the manner of gold being the meridian Line of worldly wealth,—how he differs from Milton . . . . In regard to his [Wordsworth's] genius . . . we find what he says true as far as we have experienced and we can judge no further but by larger experience—for axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses: We read fine things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the Author . . . I will return to Wordsworth . . . And . . . I will
put down a simile of human life as far as I now perceive it; that is, to the point to which I say we both have arrived at—Well—I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me. The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think—We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of this thinking principle within us—we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing one's nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression—whereby this Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages—We see not the ballance [sic] of good and evil. We are in a Mist. WE are now in that state—We feel the "burden of the Mystery," to this Point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote 'Tintern Abbey' and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages. Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them—he is a Genius and superior [to] us, in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries, and shed a light in them—Here I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton—from the Paradise Lost and other works of Milton . . . his Philosophy, human and divine, may be tolerably understood by one not much advanced in years, In his time Englishmen were just emancipated from a great superstition—and Men had got hold of certain points and resting places in reasoning which were too newly born to be doubted . . . Milton, whatever he may have thought in the sequel, appears to have been content with those by his writings—He did not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done.2

The main thrust of this long letter is the consideration of Wordsworth's genius as a help to two young and perplexed English Romantic poets. Wordsworth's poetry is the subject of Keats's conscious meditation. A few points stand out in his conclusion: Wordsworth's genius is explorative of the dark passages of his life; Wordsworth is a superior genius because
he can make *discoveries*, and *shed a light* in them; Wordsworth is deeper than Milton because Milton did not think into the human heart as Wordsworth has done. These are pregnant but, nevertheless, undeveloped phrases which call for imaginative interpretation for any critical value to be attached to them. Keats's criticism of Wordsworth, and of other poets, is occasional and unsystematic; this is perhaps as it should be for, as a poet, Keats himself realized that

> One of the most mysterious of semi-speculations is, one would suppose, that of one Mind's imagining into another... A poet can seldom have justice done to his imagination—for men are as distinct in their conceptions of material shadowings as they are in matters of spiritual understanding. 

In spite of the tentative and exploratory views of Keats on Wordsworth, however, Keats's comments raise a few basic, even if somewhat baffling, questions related to the exploration of the dark passages in Wordsworth's poetry.

In Keats's letters (which are generally regarded as a major critical document), his comments on Wordsworth rank second only to those on Shakespeare in quantity but it is noteworthy that while many of the references to Shakespeare are light-hearted quotations, those to Wordsworth nearly always involve Keats in a thoughtful critical position. Although many studies have attempted to establish the extent of the Keats-Wordsworth literary relationship, the subject seems infinitely inexhaustible as the following comments from a scholar who has studied Keats both in relation to Shakespeare and Wordsworth will illustrate:
It is only when Wordsworth's and Keats's poetry are equally familiar, and equally intimate, that we can appreciate the depth and subtlety of Wordsworth's influence on Keats.

In part Keats had, as Goethe said of himself in relation to Spinoza, "discovered himself" in Wordsworth.

I am inclined to be thankful that when I wrote Keats and Shakespeare, I did not know Wordsworth so intimately as I have come to know him since. An acute consciousness of Wordsworth's influence on Keats would have distorted the clear outline of my picture.

More recent studies do not seem to have exhausted the topic, either. Nevertheless, my aim is not to attempt another study of Wordsworth's influence on Keats; it is simply to relate a few clues in Keats's response to Wordsworth's genius to my interpretation of the dark passages in Wordsworth's poetry. This dissertation is therefore on Wordsworth's poetry and although I may allude to Keats's poems and letters, Keats will remain largely a footnote to this study. In his consideration of Wordsworth's genius Keats appears to have glimpsed the complexity of the questions involved and I intend to take the hint further by pinpointing the areas to be explored in Wordsworth's concern with the dark passages. Keats's cryptic comments on Wordsworth's poetic genius demand a recognition of a process of creative criticism. The letters of 1816-1820 reveal Keats's determined interest in sounding the depth and complexity of Wordsworth's poetry, and his brief but persistent comments suggest a unique way of grappling with Wordsworth's poetic themes and attitudes. Keats's approach to Wordsworth takes the form of a process of arduous meditation, like the lifting of mental weights; it is the process of contemplating literature in relation to the problems of "the burden of mystery." Keats came to realize ultimately
that the movement of imaginative consciousness such as is expressed in Wordsworth's poetry is a mental activity which can be understood only by putting oneself in the author's place by sharing the same anxieties about human nature and the condition of human existence in this world. It is this nature of Keats's deeply sympathetic response to Wordsworth's central concerns that has encouraged me to take the hint for my thesis from his description of the nature of Wordsworth's unique genius. I am inclined to consider very highly the views—no matter how brief—of the one English Romantic poet who had the most affinity with Wordsworth as to the fundamentals of poetry and life, and who was yet sufficiently distanced from Wordsworth to have left us a few hints of a generally disinterested nature on Wordsworth's poetry. The generally disinterested nature of Keats's comments ought to be stressed because his method of pondering on Wordsworth's poetry suggests a creative and heuristic response; he does not bring unnecessary theoretical considerations to bear, whereas Coleridge, with his eyes forever fixed on problems of apparently greater importance to him in working out his metaphysical system, sometimes reached rather obfuscating conclusions in his generally theoretical discourse on Wordsworth's poetry. Keats's thoughtful but tentative approach suggests different grounds for working one's way into the core of thought in Wordsworth's poetry. For Wordsworth, of course, every significant poetic activity was an exploration into self-knowledge in relation to the complex nature of his deepening imaginative insight into the nature of man and the condition of his existence in this world. The desire to contribute imaginative insight which is illuminative of man's perplexity in this
world is a central motivating urge in Wordsworth's poetry and for Wordsworth the need to explore the dark passages of life became the highest ideal in poetry; and to achieve this ideal the stress on actual human experience as the basis and material of poetry led Wordsworth inevitably to the exploration of those themes which relate to the general anxiety of humanity: the puzzles of life and the riddles of death. His capacity for drawing a large meaning from actual incidents and things, his process of establishing imaginative significance from his experience in nature and among human beings is connected with the principle of imaginative contemplation whereby objects and situations derive their essential function from their use as metaphors of thought on human life. This imaginative principle has to be understood in order to reach at Wordsworth's mode of exploring the dark passages of life.

There are, of course, other more obvious questions involved in discussing Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages. The first is a matter of definition: What are the dark passages in Wordsworth's poetry? The second relates to the poetics and attitude: How did Wordsworth manage to explore the dark passages and at the same time display a mode of perception and expression whose validity does not affront our reason and common humanity? The first questions calls for a definition which will form a large part of the premise of this thesis, and it is a definition which I will give in this chapter, but the second question relates to the structure of syntax and the movement of thought in the relevant poems, and these aspects will form the burden of subsequent chapters of this dissertation. The dark passages have been described by Keats as the challenge of "misery and heartbreak, pain, sick-
ness and oppression", and the difficulty of seeing "the balance [sic] of good and evil" of our mortal state. He describes the concern with the dark passages as an expression of "anxiety for Humanity" in relation to the "Burden of the mystery." When seen in this light, the dark passages relate to listlessness, despondency and man's mortality—interrelated factors which tend to prevent a young poet from achieving an imaginative view of life, and which tend to deny to life itself any sense of meaning and value. The dark passages are therefore centrally related to the challenge of establishing an imaginative view that is sufficiently illuminative of man's nature and the condition of his earthly existence. From this it follows that there is equal concern with the mystery of life as with the riddle of death; there is equal interest in the creative resources of the human imagination and in the final questions raised by the inexplicable finality of death. The dark passages concern the task of poetry as much as they concern the problems of life and death.

Wordsworth uses many phrases to refer to the dark passages: these include the "weal and woe" of humanity, the "weight of sadness" that is in life, the thought of "man's mortality" and the fear of the "senseless grave." In some poems, however, he is helpfully more specific and descriptive: in "Tintern Abbey" we have "the burden of the mystery," which is further described as "the heavy and the weary weight / of all this unintelligible world;" in the same poem we have "solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief"; in "Resolution and Independence" we have "Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty," then "despondency and madness" and "mighty Poets in their misery dead." In Book V of The Prelude we have "life's
mysterious weight / of pain, and doubt, and fear." In the same book, man's condition, when not sustained by a fortifying imaginative vision, is described as "abject, depressed, forlorn, disconsolate." Other variants include "the weary strife of frail humanity" ("Ode to Duty"), and the "strife and ferment in the minds of men" (The Excursion, Book VII). Finally, there is the immense concern in The Excursion with this mortal existence where

Man grows old, and dwindles, and decays
And countless generations of mankind
Depart; and leave no vestige where they trod.
(Bk. IV, II. 760-762)

Words and phrases which relate to listlessness, perplexity and despondency abound in Wordsworth's poetry, and the following are representative: "listlessness from vain perplexity," "bewildered and forlorn," "solitude / or blank desertion," "that worse evil, vexing thoughts," "the vacant and the vain," "weariness," "fever" "fret" and "restless world." Wordsworth uses these cognate words to describe both a mood and a condition of human existence but the really significant thing is the way he analyses the factors that create the mood and condition by exploring the dark passages of life. His exploration goes beyond the analysis of the dark passages to a quest for an imaginative view which should enable man to see the balance of good and evil of our earthly life. My dissertation will establish that the dark passages in Wordsworth encompass a range of human experience comparable to that described by Ovid in the "Vicissitude of Things" in the 15th Book of The Metamorphosis. Furthermore, I intend to demonstrate that there is a personal dimension as well as a historical (Romantic) contingency of thought which informs the nature of the exploration of the dark passages in Wordsworth's poetry.
These aspects can be seen from the four headings under which I have chosen to group the dark passages as they are explored in Wordsworth's poetry: The challenge of the poetic vocation; the darkness of the age; the darkness of the imagination and the problem of orientation to the universe; the darkness of the grave.

The challenge of the poetic vocation; the young Poet's Dilemma. From the evidence of the poems and letters, no group of poets has talked so much about the challenge of writing imaginative poetry as Wordsworth and his contemporaries did. It is perhaps a measure of their rarely recognized sense of realism that the best of the English Romantic poets were aware of the challenge of the poetic vocation in their own age, and it is understandable that the central figure among these poets should have undertaken the task of exploring the dark passages connected with the challenge of the vocation. For Wordsworth these dark passages were much more complex than the fear arising from the contemplation of the early death of a young poet, as it is generally believed to be Milton's case in relation to Edward King in "Lycidas." The other factors which heighten Wordsworth's sense of dilemma range in nature from practical but important personal concerns to the more general anxieties related to the choice of the vocation of poetry. The complex nature of these concerns is to be seen in "Resolution and Independence" and in Book V of The Prelude, though other poems in which the voice of personal anxiety is heard also produce textual evidence. In these poems Wordsworth defines the alternatives of choice for the imaginative mind and establishes the need of convincing oneself that the challenge of commitment to the
poetic task involves both recognition and acceptance of the
dark passages that go with such a vocation. He expressed this in a
paradox of grim recognition in "Resolution and Independence":

We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.

Wordsworth's courage in the face of such dark passages is the equally
firm recognition that

By our own spirits are we deified.

My interpretation of "Resolution and Independence", Book V of The Prelude and the poems on Burns will indicate the role of social
oppression, solitude and poverty in relation to the dark passages which
create a sense of dilemma for a young poet; I intend also to show how
the dark passages which every thoughtful young poet must confront
become, for Wordsworth, the very material for poetry. Wordsworth's
high conception of the duties and obligations of the poetic vocation
led him to an exploration, in the poems of 1799-1805, of the dark
passages which tend to stifle the creative energies of a young poet.
The issue concerns the need to preserve the essential poetic self
in the face of the practical concerns of everyday existence, such
as "getting and spending," "the dreary intercourse of daily life," the
demands and obligations of a settled domestic life; and the expectations
of family and society generally. These should not be relegated to
biographical studies for they are central to a literary study of
Wordsworth because Wordsworth made them the themes of his poems
written before The Excursion. The whole question of the making of a
poet, the doubts about his own powers in relation to the vocation of
poetry, and the question of the purpose the poet serves in society were all matters that Wordsworth considered cogent enough in his own age to be tackled in verse. My analysis will show that Chatterton and Burns, like the visionary Arab figure in Book V of The Prelude, are metaphors of thought for Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages which create a dilemma for him as he ponders on the grim challenge of his chosen vocation. The Fifth Book of The Prelude has not received the attention which I think it deserves in this connection, and I hope to indicate how Wordsworth's contemplation of the dark passages related to the poetic task casts a long shadow over this poem. It is the same shadow that is cast over "Tintern Abbey", the Matthew poems, "Resolution and Independence" and the poems on Burns. My argument here is that Wordsworth realized that the choice of a poetic vocation meant for him not only a commitment to the highest aspiration of imaginative ideal but also a total commitment to the life of endless hardship, and the poems of 1799-1805 reveal the measure of the inner distance travelled by the poet in the exploration of his inner turmoil. The symbolic figures whom the poet encounters in these poems will be discussed primarily in relation to the significance of the whole imaginative experience to show how the poet heightens the reality of life which he faced through the medium of the reality of vision. My interpretation will concentrate on the poet in these poems in order to show the way in which he confronts the dark passages through the process of imaginative projection of his fears.

To some extent, the intense self-questioning in these poems was caused by what Wordsworth and some of his contemporaries
regarded as the darkness of the age. The darkness of the age, as discussed in Wordsworth's poetry, is rooted in the problems created by the articulated world-view of the Eighteenth Century philosophical thinkers. The various theories about the nature of human understanding raised perplexing questions concerning the powers of the mind in relation to the external universe. The whole matter of imaginative illumination was called into question because perception itself became problematic. This is a matter which I will pursue more fully in the second half of this chapter that is devoted to a description of the intellectual background of the Romantic Age. Perplexity is a central theme in English Romantic poetry and this dissertation will demonstrate that Wordsworth's range of poetic thought sufficiently explores the nature of such perplexity. The challenge of the poetic task in Wordsworth's age took on an overwhelming dimension because of the threat posed by the extreme tendencies of the rationalist tradition which denied creative value to the human heart and so caused a sense of emptiness and of alienation from the universe. This sense of emptiness is one of the dark passages which Wordsworth explores in the poems to be discussed in this study. This exploration of this problem will be seen in the way in which he confronts life's baffling phenomena and re-asserts value for the human spirit against the mechanistic view posited by extreme rationalist theories. I intend to trace this process of imaginative regeneration of the human heart in such poems as "Tintern Abbey," the Fifth Book of The Prelude, the "Intimations of Immortality" and The Excursion, especially. Another factor which contributed to the darkness of the age was what
Wordsworth regarded as the break in continuity of poetic vision. Wordsworth did not believe that the line of poetic vision in English literature developed significantly beyond Milton and he was determined to demonstrate that the continuity of poetic vision must itself be a part of any significant imaginative view of the world. Wordsworth recognized the need for imaginative illumination of the children of the earth in successive generations as a psychological fact of human nature; and he recognized the role of the poet in this task of imaginative illumination. In this connection, I shall show that Wordsworth's concern in most of the poems of 1799-1805 is also with the exploration of the dark passages created by the sense of discontinuity in poetic vision; and that in the poems after 1805 and especially in The Excursion Wordsworth moves beyond this exploratory venture to a thoroughgoing contemplation of the dark passages which each generation of mankind must confront on its own terms.

The third aspect of the dark passages which Wordsworth explores is the darkness of the imagination. It is again the problem of imaginative continuity, not this time from one age to another, but from youth to old age in each person's life. The realm of exploration here is the shadowed depths of consciousness, but the central issue has to do with the need for the maturing mind to seek an orientation to the universe. When the sense of childhood radiance and harmony has been severely threatened and man is no longer in immediate touch with the visible intimations of the vast range of his imaginative potentiality, how can such a
person be remanded to this world of hard reality? How can man cope with these "shadings of mortality" which raise inexplicable questions about the meaning and value of human life and threaten to stifle the creative energies of the mind? How can man deal with the gloomy feeling that "there is little chance of anything else in this life?" The theme of the darkness of the imagination is a large one in Wordsworth but my analysis will concentrate on the "Intimations of Immortality", The Excursion and "Peele Castle," with references to relevant passages in The Prelude. In these poems Wordsworth establishes a sense of continuity as well as a sense of deepening of imaginative vision between childhood and old age. Since my emphasis here is with the problem of orientation to the universe I have chosen to focus much of the discussion of this particular aspect of the dark passages on the "Intimations of Immortality". My interpretation of the Ode will question the general emphasis on mysticism and solipsism and will stress the positive value which Wordsworth attaches to "the light of common day;" for since Wordsworth's unique genius is his ability to explore the dark passages by making discoveries and shedding a light on them, the metaphors of darkness and light call for the kind of imaginative interpretation that can relate them to the nature of Wordsworth's discovery in his exploration of the dark passages. My point is that Wordsworth's exploration of the darkness of the imagination in the Ode is a much more thorough-going description of the process of the growth of the imaginative faculty in relation to the burden of the mystery than is generally realized. "Tintern Abbey," "Intimations of Immortality", and The Excursion will be
discussed to show Wordsworth's capacity to indicate how feelings of littleness and listlessness can be banished through the rediscovery of the sources of imaginative power in the mind of man.

The Darkness of the Grave: The dark passages arising from the shadings of mortality naturally lead in Wordsworth's poetry to the exploration of the darkness of the grave. The view of this world as a place where "restless, and restless generations" "come and go" and leave no vestige where they trod" pressed more and more on Wordsworth in the poems which he wrote after 1805. He explored this dark passage of human life from many angles in many poems and through varied metaphors. Is man's life like a sparrow's flight, from darkness even on to darkness? Is man's life "but a tale of morning grass / Withered at eve?" "Is Man / A child of hope?"

My interpretation of The Excursion and some of the miscellaneous poems and sonnets in which these thoughts occur will stress a uniquely Wordsworthian attitude toward death. I will analyse his use of vegetation imagery in Books VI and VII of The Excursion in order to establish the poet's firm recognition and acceptance of death as a process of organic completion within the natural cycle of life; I also intend to indicate how the exploration of these dark passages leads also to a concept of immortality founded on a supposition of an imperishable element in the mind of man. The argument will be based on the view that Wordsworth's concept of immortality is essentially a search for an imaginative perspective which can lighten the burden of thought provoked by the unmitigated sense of death as a process of organic completion. As my inter-
pretation of the Ninth Book of *The Excursion* will show, his concept of immortality is based on a naturalistic process of a gradation in the nature of the external and internal senses of our being. In this regard, his view of Age as a "VALE of final EMINENCE" will be discussed to establish the profound, egotistical sublime mode of Wordsworth's imaginative ordering of the baffling phenomena of human experience in this seemingly irrational world. The emphasis will be placed on the contemplative mode of Wordsworth's exploration of the practical and philosophical anxieties of our common humanity, but I intend to show that what is important in his exploration is not to be found in any doctrinal answers but in the penetrating and sympathetic nature of his process of imaginative reasoning. His sane and sober recognition of the force of earthly circumstance is to be seen in the searching interpretation of human experience which allows no room for any sentimental falsification of the hard facts of life, or for any form of confident optimism. In general, my interpretation of *The Excursion* will reveal an unorthodox and basically sceptical attitude that is intellectually informed by the empirical heritage of the Eighteenth Century. The Third Book of *The Excursion*, for example, deals with the failure of "The great truths of Religion" to provide a satisfying imaginative view of life for a thoughtful mind in Wordsworth's age; it also deals with the failure of Lockean epistemology to provide a fortifying imaginative view of the world. The way in which Wordsworth steered his course between these extremes to regenerate the human heart and to "give the World another Heart / And other Pulses" would
emerge from my interpretation of The Excursion. The mode of intense poetic thought which Wordsworth developed to move poetry toward the achievement of psychological statement through concentration on the process of soul-creating in confrontation with earthly circumstance will be examined and related to the regenerating force of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages in The Excursion.

This dissertation places equal emphasis on Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages as on his exploration of the nature of the imaginative faculty in relation to the process of regenerating the genial spirits of man in the face of the grim reality of human experience. This demands a recognition of the sceptical attitude toward any facile theory of redemption, but it also demands a recognition of the direction of poetic thought as it culminates in The Excursion. There is a quest for redemption in The Excursion but this redemptive quest does not achieve the prophetic, manifest scheme of Christian redemption which Coleridge hoped for. Wordsworth's quest is for a principle of imaginative contemplation which can offer a fortifying view of life on earth; such a view should transmute certain aspects of human experience -- darkness, solitude, blank desertion, change and death -- which, viewed by themselves, are senseless and inexplicable phenomena that threaten to deprive man not only of his sanity but also of his sense of joy and value in life. The important thing in The Excursion in this connection is not Wordsworth's "theology" or "philosophy" but the interrogative and sceptical mode of his contemplation of the human condition. The Excursion is a poem of discovery because the sense of a sharpening
of our vision into the nature of things is very strong, but the light which the poet sheds on his discovery cannot be easily formulated in final answers. The true nature of the poet's redemptive work is not the search for the paradise without but the search for the inner contemplative paradise. Accordingly, while I will indicate how the poet deals boldly and imaginatively with the sense of crisis and despair attendant on the French Revolution in the case of the Solitary, my interpretation of The Excursion will consider temporary social and political issues as distractions from the poet's primary task of providing imaginative illumination for all ages. In other words, I shall argue that such phenomena as the French Revolution and Rationalist Philosophy failed to provide a cohesive and creative society and that both left society more fragmented and more oppressed and bewildered than ever and the poet sought to achieve a unified vision through imaginative illumination. It is within this context of a return to the line of imaginative vision that I intend to study The Excursion as the most important poem in Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages.

When my interpretation is seen from this context the rationale for my choice of poems should become obvious. My emphasis is on those poems where the poet grapples with the factors which cause the darkness of the inner eye. I have chosen poems which are thematically interrelated and where the movement is from perplexity to imaginative illumination, from darkness to light. In the shorter poems my focus is on the poet in the poems, that is, on the deepening of insight as the imaginative mind achieves a greater sharpening of
perspective into the nature of man and of the universe. The pattern of the argument is based on the movement of the thought from the consideration of "sad perplexity" in "Tintern Abbey" through the exploration of "all that is at enmity with joy" in the Ode to the achievement of joy in discovery in the VALE of final EMINENCE in The Excursion. The desire to follow the movement of imaginative consciousness as closely as possible means of course that my primary and main interest will depend on my analysis of the structure of thought in the poems. My method of interpretation will be equally exploratory, probing into possible meaning and advancing tentative interpretation which will emerge with greater clarity as the study approaches the imaginative heights in the last book of The Excursion.

The fact that I have taken the hint for this dissertation from Keats's consideration of Wordsworth's genius "as a help" has certainly influenced my decision to consider Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages in relation to the problems of imaginative illumination in the Romantic Age generally, and I intend to argue in the second half of this chapter for the centrality of Wordsworth in this regard. While I am aware of the danger of conflating the Romantic poets, I intend to refer to ways in which Wordsworth was regarded as a guiding light by Keats and members of the Keats' circle: Benjamin Robert Haydon, John Hamilton Reynolds, Benjamin Bailey. The point here is that there is often too much of a tendency to speak of the first Romantics and of the younger or second generation Romantics, but the intellectual problems which confronted them were
the same, and it is perhaps more historically accurate to consider them not in the context of two different and isolated historical situations but of one; and I intend to argue that it is because of this shared sense of intellectual and poetic crisis that Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages sharpened the alternatives for the younger poets of the Romantic Age.

Another perspective which I will bring to bear on my interpretation is related to Wordsworth's own personal experience. In doing this, however, I do not wish to replace critical criteria with biographical speculation but rather to refer to biographical details to supplement literary judgments based on the evidence of the text. I intend to adduce evidence from The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth to show how the dimension of personal experience informs and deepens Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages in the poems written after 1805. This is a worthwhile perspective for my interpretation of the dark passages because, although literary sources and analogues may help to place The Excursion, for example, within a literary genre and tradition, they do not sufficiently account for the depth of human experience and for the authentic voice which informs a few passages in the poem. Although the format of Socratic dialogue enables the poet to distance his feelings and experience, it is easy to establish that the astonishing correspondence between several passages in The Excursion and in The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth show that the significance which arises from Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages derives its force of universal application from the fact that the poet speaks
of what he knows and of "what we feel within." And I hope to use such evidence to supplement my conclusion derived from the evidence of the text that the Solitary (as opposed to the Wanderer who is the optimistic alter ego), being the sceptical alter ego of the poet, could not be silenced because the poet would not violate the integrity of his own experience. I shall take this a step further by indicating that what Wordsworth offers in his exploration of the dark passages is not solutions but an imaginative mode of contemplating the good and evil of our mortal state with manly fortitude.

I have already suggested that one context for studying Wordsworth’s exploration of the dark passages of life is to place the poet within the line of vision in literature. When seen from this context a sense of concern with the dark passages in Wordsworth’s poetry is accentuated. For instance, one of the features of European poetry of imaginative vision from Homer to Milton is the sense of a recognisable world-view that is definable as the philosophical background against which the reader can view the themes and values inherent in the poetic thought. A reader from an essentially non-Christian culture may have little sympathy with the Christian frame of reference in Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, but his recognition of such a frame of reference could enable him to appreciate the important themes and attitudes in poems whose concern with the Fall and the Resurrection would otherwise have very little appeal for him. In the poetry of Wordsworth and his Romantic
contemporaries, however, one finds no such clearly recognisable philosophical frame of reference against which to view their poetry though one finds a discernible sense of urgency in the themes and attitudes explored in English Romantic poetry. The overwhelming impression which Wordsworth's poetry conveys to me is that of a sense of perplexity and there is a note of poignant urgency which underlines this perplexity. The full force of Wordsworth's poetry is devoted to confronting this feeling of perplexity and to exploring the implications which it has for the poet in his age. From a philosophical point of view, perhaps nothing expresses a major aspect of the artist's dilemma better than Wordsworth's own description of the poet as "alone / seeking the visible world, nor knowing why." The sense of loneliness expressed here is not sheer literary melancholia, it is an expression of a sense of intellectual crisis; the consciousness of alienation is a reflection of the philosophical anxiety of the age. In his poetry Wordsworth imaginatively explored the themes of the artist's alienation and analysed the cause as accentuated by factors peculiar to his age. It is against this intellectual background that Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages is to be considered.

The theme of loneliness in the universe is related to the change in world-view created by the scientific discoveries and rationalist concepts of the Age of Reason. The change as reflected in poetry is best seen in a comparison of Wordsworth's poetry—and Keats's—with Milton's. For Milton a providential world order with heaven and hell was a prime matter of belief and the noblest theme for poetry, but Wordsworth and his contemporaries stood more or less
outside the orthodox tradition in concepts of belief and theories of human knowledge, and they had to grope for valid and relevant philosophies of their own. *Paradise Lost* has been described as "the swan-song of a passing world of untroubled certitude" and this description is particularly appropriate when we turn from *Paradise Lost* to *The Excursion*. The serious concerns in Wordsworth's poetry are influenced by, and suggest, an emerging world-view which forms a critique of the cosmology in Milton's poetry. There is, for example, both critical questioning and implicit rejection in Wordsworth's decision not to deal with "Jehovah—with his thunder, and the choir / Of shouting Angels"; this decision is based on Wordsworth's firm recognition of the need in the Romantic age to tackle themes of greater urgency, such as the need to explore the dark passages which involve

the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world.

I am not trying here to present Wordsworth and his contemporaries as members of a generation which was world-weary and melancholy and therefore regarded the human situation as hopelessly perplexing, but the pattern of wavering between seeming belief and disbelief, between poetic certainty and philosophic doubt which predominates in their poetry constitutes the kind of intense pre-occupation with life, knowledge and matters of belief which is typical of imaginatively reflective minds in a period of deep intellectual crisis. The depth and scope of the movement of thought in Wordsworth's poetry reflects an index of mounting self-consciousness in relation to the poetic task in the face of such philosophical perplexity. I am referring
here to the complexity of self-consciousness of the poet in the
Romantic age — that intense and more or less exclusive pre-
occupation with imaginative consciousness which remains the clearest
discernible poetic affinity between Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge,
Shelley and Keats. From several points of consideration, Wordsworth's
poetry reveals the most concentrated evidence of imaginative power
confronting the world on the poet's own terms without losing sight
of metaphors of reality which can be shared by people in all
cultures and generations. The epistemological passages in The
Prelude and the somewhat philosophical positions in The Excursion,
together with suggestions of both import in the shorter poems,
reveal Wordsworth's determined aspiration to seek through poetry
a human orientation to the universe. His poetry displays the most
astonishing effects of the efforts of any Romantic poet to
confront and transmute the critical thought of Eighteenth century
epistemological and moral philosophers.14 Although Wordsworth
speaks of the truth of poetry as "general" and "operative", he
does make clear that his notion is of truth "not standing upon
external testimony but carried alive into the heart by passion;
truth which is its own testimony."15 For Wordsworth the meaning
of an experience must derive from the dynamic relationship between
the imaginative sensibility and things as reality. The points
of contact between Wordsworth's poetry and the broad range of ideas
in the Western intellectual heritage are impressive and, when
carefully analysed, reveal a subtle combination of poetic imagination
and intellectual depth, but Wordsworth achieves a deepening and
transmutation of such ideas in a way that is uniquely his; the
uniqueness lies in the peculiar method which Wordsworth developed
of focussing on the creative interchange between the imaginative
mind and the visible external universe. This enables Wordsworth to
achieve a sense of immediacy of experience while presenting at the
same time its human significance as seen through the contemplative
imagination. It is in this sense that Wordsworth's poems represent
the effort of an imaginative mind facing the dilemma of the poet
in the post-empirical age and responding with originality by
grappling with the most basic problems of vision and knowledge without
claiming a dependence on a supernatural agency of illumination.

Part of Wordsworth's imaginative achievement is his
capacity to express in poetic form the experience potentially
common to all in such a way that the process of expressing the
experience of an individual consciousness is presented as a
universal problem of human illumination accentuated in the Romantic
age by various philosophical and literary developments. When the
poet found himself "left alone / Seeking the visible world, nor
knowing why," he was keenly aware of the break in continuity of
imaginative perception. He saw this break in continuity in
personal and historical terms, and he turned to poetry as a mode of
active thought, thereby establishing imaginatively that the continuity
of vision implied a creative contribution to imaginative literature
in each age. He did not wish simply to return to older cosmologies
and to worn-out literary structures, but he sought to establish that
each generation must be able to find a way of seeing the perennial
reality behind the flux of things with "undisordered sight;"\textsuperscript{16} this explains Wordsworth's attack on the rationalistic presumption of his age. The theme of imaginative illumination of his generation is the pre-occupation of the Fifth Book of \textit{The Prelude} and of the Fourth Book of \textit{The Excursion}. Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages leads to a search for a principle of imaginative illumination; he was convinced that the active universe, the very world, which is the world Of all of us,—the place where in the end We find our happiness, or not at all,\textsuperscript{17} must be the external and eternal constant in this struggle of imaginative perception against the endless multiplicity of the flux of things which impinge on the human consciousness. Hence he engaged himself in the paradox inherent in one being within this universe and yet seeking the visible universe. In this search Wordsworth believed in his own peculiar resources and, above all, in the imagination as a source of poetic power over the hard and harsh facts of the world. Again and again in his poetry and prose, Wordsworth detailed those peculiar resources that he was convinced he possessed which enabled him to pursue the poetic mission. The best way into this is to realize how Wordsworth perceived the challenge of the poet in his own age:

\begin{quote}
For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.... The invaluable works of our elder writers...are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}
These are not all the causes and effects of the torpor. In *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* Wordsworth makes it clear that science also played a major role. But the way Wordsworth sees (and proves) himself to be undaunted by all these forces is the measure of his capacity to confront the literary and philosophical problems of his age. He makes the following claim for himself:

> And reflecting upon the magnitude of the general evil, I should be oppressed with no dishonorable melancholy, had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it which are equally inherent and indestructible.19

In the passage under discussion Wordsworth defines at once the cardinal points in the realm of his poetry: the imagination and the visible universe. Through this emphasis on the ennobling interchange between the imagination and the external universe, Wordsworth steered the balance between the sense-impressionists (Locke and Hartley) and the subjective idealists (Berkeley and Kant) whose theories of human understanding were such a weight of heritage on the minds of the English Romantic poets. Wordsworth's equal emphasis on the external universe (as on the mind of man) stresses his recognition, which I have indicated earlier, that there has always been a common world to think about, and that our perceptual experience does tell us of a common, objective world. Wordsworth's position is that the imagination, inspired and properly disciplined, could recognize the existence of a relationship of value beyond the poet's mind. If our perceptual experience does tell us of a common objective world, then there must be a continuity
of perception in the concrete experience of mankind. Wordsworth realized that it is in poetry that the concrete psychological experience of humanity in relation to the visible universe receives its expression, and he seeks in earlier writers a means to validate his own insight, especially since he believes in that "metropolitan temple in the hearts of mighty poets." But although he believes in the continuity of perception in this way, Wordsworth is vividly aware that the problem facing the poet in his age is the need to create new metaphors of thought with which to express the enduring reality of the interchange between the imaginative mind and the external universe. This explains why the concern in Wordsworth's poetry is more with the role of poetry and the poet himself than with a subject in the traditional sense. As Wordsworth put it in The Preface to The Excursion,

with the thing Contemplated, describe the Mind and Man Contemplating; and who, and what he was-- The transitory Being that beheld This Vision.

This concern with both the thing contemplated and the mind and man contemplating was Wordsworth's approach toward the task of locating the creative resources of imaginative power within man in his experience in the visible world. Wordsworth could not accept Necessitarian philosophy which tended to deny to the mind its vital soul and free creative will, and he could not accept the extreme of subjective idealism which tended to deny the evidence of the external senses. His challenge was to establish a sense of creative balance, but first he had to restore a sense of life-giving
forces within the mind of man and in external nature; in other words, he had first to establish the principle of vitality and freedom before he could assert a perception of creative forces in the human mind, or of meaning and value in human experience. When Wordsworth gave up rationalist speculations and "yielded up moral questions in despair," he turned all his attention toward exploring the life-giving force in himself and in the universe; this was a search for the creative principle that would regenerate the human spirit and lead it from dim perplexity to the light of imaginative insight. His method was to turn away from abstract and perplexing speculations to the medium of the heart as the touchstone of all human experience. Instead of pursuing rationalist speculations on theories of epistemology or moral philosophy, Wordsworth resolved to sound the depths of every Art
That seeks its wisdom through the heart. 21

This preference in Wordsworth explains his concentration on the poetry of experience. My study of his exploration of the dark passages of life will similarly emphasize his imaginative interpretation of human experience rather than attempt to formulate ideas to establish his "philosophy."

One of the most distinctive qualities in Wordsworth's poetry is the way in which the intellectualizing observer within the poems isolates those crippling factors which stifle the imagination in order to indicate those life-giving experiences that strengthen it. The strengthening of the imagination and the making of men whole simply as mortal men is a chief pre-occupation in Wordsworth's poetry.
With the loss of faith in the truths of religion, with notions of knowledge and reality challenged by empirical thinkers and with the mechanistic world of iron necessity posited as the only alternative, there was the acute need to create fresh concepts of reality.

The main problem revolved on whether there was such a thing as a free creative spirit; and if the spirit was free and creative, what could validate the insights of such creative freedom? In Wordsworth's poetic account of his release from rationalist speculation in *The Prelude, Tintern Abbey* and *The Excursion*, Wordsworth points especially to the life-giving qualities of human interrelationships and to his imaginative awareness of the vital processes in nature. In the opening passage of *The Prelude*, for example, what we sense most keenly is the renewed sense of life, with the life-processes in external nature awakening or corresponding to the inner life-stirrings within the poetic imagination. We read of living or moving things: groves, streams, a river, the refreshing breeze. This stirs his imagination to a sense of joy and wonder. The images of organic nature help to reassert his confidence in a free creative spirit, for what they suggest is a sense of life, a sense of vitality which promises that "genuine freedom" which he speaks of in *The Preface to The Excursion*. Such genuine freedom releases the imaginative spirit from the dead and spiritless world of Necessity. In its creative freedom, the imaginative will is free to explore the universe with fresh and original insight. This realization of the sense of life and joy is one of the distinguishing aspects of Wordsworth's poetry.
In the opening passages of *Tintern Abbey*, *Intimations of Immortality*, *The Prelude* and *Resolution and Independence*, we have the realization of this principle of life and joy embodied in the fresh and limpid way in which life is presented—as an original, self-sustaining force, which finds in itself its principle and strength, not entirely derived or projected from the poet's imagination. Life is depicted in these poems as a process of intrinsic, self-sustaining actuality, not ruled by relations of extrinsic conditionality.

I am not at all unaware that this sense of life and joy as embodied in some of the poems actually functions as a prelude to a contrast with larger anxieties in the poet's mind, but I wish to establish at this stage one basic fact: that the principle of vital life is a pervasive motive-value in Wordsworth's poetry. In "A Poet!—He hath put his heart to school," it is this principle of inner vitality and inward freedom that is stressed:

How does the meadow flower its bloom unfold?  
Because the lovely little flower is free  
Down to its root, and, in that freedom, bold;  
And so the grandeur of the Forest-tree  
Comes not by casting in a formal mould  
But from its own divine vitality.22

The principle of creative freedom is based on the active principle, on the agent's own ever-fresh self-realization. This sense of the active principle strengthens the consciousness of the poet as to the ultimate foundation of the concept which is most vital in imaginative activity. To Wordsworth original value—and power—lies in the ever-new discovery and realization of the intrinsic character of poetic activity. The very vocation of poetry calls the poet to vindicate value and spirit, to express the value of experience
against the thraldom of the senses.

I have spoken of Wordsworth'sendeavour to grasp the very principle of life which he sees as sustaining this active and visible universe; but Wordsworth does not just look for the abstract principle, he penetrates and creates passages of life in his poetry, and it is in these live passages, as in the active world, that he grasps the principle. Similarly, before examining the single poems I wish to state here that beauty—both as an aesthetic experience and a value-principle—is the most intimate quality which can be apprehended, and that Wordsworth sees beauty as the most palpable form of contact with the principle of life and joy. It is Wordsworth's belief in the principle of Beauty which enables him to grasp the principle of life as a deeply held aesthetic conviction based on his human psychic response rather than as a static and abstract rule of belief. In much of Wordsworth's poetry I get the impression that this principle of beauty both sustains his creative urge and raises questions for the poet concerning the meaning of life; and one of the greatest motivating factors in Wordsworth's poetic endeavour is the need not only to create beauty but also to find through poetry some meaning and some recognisable order for the universe which his imagination perceives as inherently beautiful. A number of important questions do arise here, of course: the first is whether or not Wordsworth was the first poet to recognize the principle of beauty as a source-motivation for poetry; the second is whether Wordsworth's mere awareness of nature's vitality and the sense of imaginative life
and freedom derived from this is sufficient to explain perplexing problems concerning the nature of the universe and man's condition and place in it, or whether his insight is too fragmentary to form a body of ideas which could serve as a view of reality. This last point is closely related to Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages and will receive fuller discussion in subsequent chapters. The first question touches at the very heart of my main point in this chapter: Wordsworth's contribution to the nature of imaginative insight through his recognition of beauty as an eternal quality and principle, and through his perception of the perennial vitality in nature as an active principle of life. The concept of an active principle in life did not originate with Wordsworth for, as Leone Vivante has pointed out,

The consciousness of a principle of inward light...has found in English poetry one of its richest and highest expressions. The concept of an active principle, not entirely derivable from its conditions, has been, under different names, the main object of philosophical studies for over two thousand years.23

Vivante has traced this active principle in English poetry ranging from Shakespeare's to Francis Thompson's. Vivante's method reveals a number of attitudes which I might describe as forming a bias: in the first place, the book deals with too many poets—seventeen in all—and tends to become generalized and cursory; in the second place, Vivante has some difficulty in dealing with the English Romantic poets. This last point is particularly obvious in the fact that Vivante devotes approximately as much space to Shelley as he gives to the discussion of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats combined. He maintains, for example, that Blake and Wordsworth
perceived the active spirit "in Children," and it is revealing that the Preface to The Excursion plays no significant role in Vivante's discussion of Wordsworth. My point is that Wordsworth's consciousness of an active principle is so basic to his concept of imagination that it is of supreme thematic significance. I have claimed above that the recognition of the principle of beauty is Wordsworth's most immediate grasp of the active principle which pervades the universe. Wordsworth is always concerned in his poetry and prose with the principle of life, the principle of beauty, the principle of pleasure and the principle of human affection, and I intend to demonstrate in this chapter that his unique recognition and speculation on the force inherent in the principle of beauty is his most fundamental and distinctive approach to his exploration of all the other vital principles that constitute the psychological unity of his poetry. Wordsworth's recognition of the principle of beauty is expressed in passages that reach at the heart of the problem of vision and perception which confronted the English Romantic poets. In The Prelude, for instance, one of the most cherished hopes of the poet is to instruct future generations on

how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things...
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of quality and fabric more divine.

This is Wordsworth's recognition of the creative power of the mind in its sublime consciousness. It is an assertion of the poet's capacity to make sense of this apparently unintelligible world. This is an assertion of an intellectual and imaginative freedom in the mind of man. The imaginative mind possesses the creative capacity
to clarify the baffling phenomena of human existence by originating a sense of order from within. The mind of man can create imaginative order out of apparent chaos. The assertion that the ideal poet can teach others to realize

how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things

is an affirmation of the paradise within. The relation of this to the exploration of the dark passages ought to be borne in mind: the discoveries which will emerge from Wordsworth's exploration of human experience will be essentially discoveries of the inner imaginative life, and the process of the exploration will become also a search for the light of the inner mind. This realization on the part of the poet led to his deep sense of awe concerning his theme when seen in the context of earlier themes in literature:

Not Chaos, not
Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us often when we look
Into our minds, into the Mind of Man—
My haunt, and the main region of my song.

Here the full force of the darkness of the inner eye is established.

In this realm of imaginative exploration the poet will tread on "shadowy ground;" it is an awe-inspiring task and at the same time the more tantalizing because of its elusiveness, yet Wordsworth takes it upon himself because it is the central challenge of the imaginative mind in his age. The challenge is to seek a unifying imaginative principle which can order human experience and endow it with a sense of beauty, meaning and value. With his firm sense of
reality and of contemporaneity, however, Wordsworth would not retreat simply to the wishful idealism of extreme subjectivity or to obscure claims of supernatural inspiration. The harmonizing principle can be found also in this visible universe, and one does not need to dwell nostalgically on poetic fictions about imaginary lands:

Beauty—\( a \) living Presence of the earth,  
Surpassing the most fair ideal Forms  
Which craft of delicate Spirits hath composed  
From earth's materials--waits upon my steps;  
Pitches her tents before me as I move,  
An hourly neighbour. Paradise and, groves  
Elysian, Fortunate Fields--like those of old  
Sought in the Atlantic Main--why should they be  
A history only of departed things,  
Or a mere fiction of what never was?  

The creative beauty in the mind of man has earlier been indicated, and in this passage the beauty in the visible universe is also indicated; the two considered together form Wordsworth's recognition of a creative interchange between the inner perceiving mind and the external world perceived:

For the discerning intellect of Man,  
When wedded to this goodly universe  
In love and holy passion, shall find these  
A simple produce of the common day. 

I intend to establish in my interpretation of the poems that this firmly held conviction of a creative interchange is an illuminating context for any meaningful interpretation of the dark passages in his poems. His determination to indicate how the imaginative mind could make the realization of paradise "A simple produce of the common day" will be related to the process of exploring the darkness of the inner eye and the discovery of "the light of common day" which
emerges from that exploration in the Ode.

Wordsworth's main aim was to create, through words "which speak of nothing more than what we are," the kind of imaginative beauty that should

arouse the sensual from their sleep
Of Death, and win the vacant and the vain
To noble raptures.29

These words reveal the extent and depth of the anxiety and mental depression in Wordsworth's age. For the poet life is imagination and the loss of the vital continuity in imaginative perception will result in the separation from the harmony of the universe. The relation of each mind, or what he calls the "mind of man" to the reality of the universe demands imaginative exertion so that men may continue to see the inherent nature of things with "undisordered sight." Otherwise "the waters of the deep" may gather upon us. Despite all that has been said about the egotism and revolutionary confidence of the Romantic poets, the impression which I get from reading their early poems and letters is an overwhelming sense of a crisis of confidence in poetry and in the imaginative process. This impression is very strong in Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron (in his early poetry). In Coleridge the whole matter is closely related to his metaphysical speculations and the self-doubt and disillusionment contingent on these tended to desiccate his imaginative spirit and stifle his poetic creativity.30 In the early poems of Shelley, Byron and Keats, the crisis of confidence in poetry tended to produce a morbid sensibility and vagueness of mood and expression.31 In Wordsworth's poetry, however, the confrontation
with this crisis of confidence is a salutary exercise which re-establishes confidence in poetry as a mode of perception and in his own creative imagination. One of the props in this confrontation is the recognition by Wordsworth that there is only one true society, "the noble living and the noble dead." The impression which Wordsworth often gave that he "feared competition only with Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton," must be understood in this light. It is not really competition in the rather pejorative sense of the word but a sober creative desire to make some contribution, as the elder writers did, to the question of human knowledge and imaginative insight; it is an urge on the part of Wordsworth to recover for himself and for his age a way of tackling the problems of imaginative thought through the poetic mode. Although Wordsworth, like Keats after him, seemed to derive his unrelaxing creative urge from the examples of his great poetic predecessors, he realized nevertheless that mere aspiration was not enough; he also realized that he needed to express his imaginative discoveries through new metaphors of reality. He could no longer maintain the conviction of an inward, God-inspired will which sustained Milton in his task of self-election to the status of poet and prophet. Wordsworth realized that the task of attaining the heights of imaginative vision was infinitely more arduous than Milton's somewhat misleading claim of an inward, supernatural source of illumination would tend to suggest. Wordsworth aimed at restoring a sense of continuity in poetic vision but he realized also that the extreme rationalist tendency in his own age had created a crisis of confidence in poetry as a valid and
illuminating mode of ordering human experience—of perceiving reality. In this case, the grand march of intellect became a mixed blessing:

Alas! the Genius of our age, from Schools
Less humble, draws her lessons, aims, and rules.
To Prowess guided by her insight keen
Matter and Spirit are as one Machine.

Here the poetic inversion in "insight keen" and the half-rhymes in "machine" and "keen" defines the poet's sarcastic attitude toward the "Genius" of the rationalist Age which mechanically equates matter with spirit and denies vital functions of creative value to the human spirit. Wordsworth was concerned with confronting this darkness of the age. He realized that the way out of such baffling theories was to rediscover and assert images of thought which could express an imaginative perception of the full reality of our experience. Wordsworth here sought to write from an imaginative principle which would reveal the significance of the baffling phenomena of his own world, and such imaginative principle was the unifying faculty revealing the significance out of the multiplicity of the experience of the mere senses; in this sense Wordsworth was to demonstrate the role of the poet as the discoverer or maker of order out of chaos. The poet was to achieve much more, for the theme of The Excursion is how

the discerning intellect of man,
When wedded to this goodly universe

shall find

Paradise and groves Elysian, Fortunate Fields...
A simple produce of the common day.
This passage defines a shift of priorities in poetic attitude and theme. The shift from the quest for a spiritual and fictitious paradise to the real imaginative experience of this "goodly universe" indicates the locus of Wordsworth's poetry. The preface to *The Excursion* is rich in multifold meaning for all its epic rhetoric. The poet in the preface is concerned with the humanity and concreteness of poetry, with the discerning intellect of man and its creative interchange with the external universe. His emphasis is on the constants or the basic universals in the task of illumination from generation to generation. He is especially concerned with the dignity and responsibility of the poet's imaginative role: that of arousing his readers from their sleep of death.

Metaphorically speaking, this is what Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages amounts to; his role is to provide some guiding light and to regenerate the spirit of man. Wordsworth elsewhere describes the poet as "a man speaking to men" of their own most deeply felt experience; a man who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him" and "in the goings-on of the Universe around him." The poet is a man endowed with the sense of delight and imaginative freedom, qualities which enable him to deal with

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The tendency too potent in itself
Of use and custom to bow down the soul
And substitute a universe of death
For that which moves with light and life instinct
Actual, devine, and free.37
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Wordsworth emphasizes imaginative freedom in the following passage:
Oh! who is he that hath his whole life long
Preserved, enlarged, this freedom in himself?
For this alone is genuine liberty.38

It is the awareness of imaginative freedom which enables the poet
to recognize "how life pervades the undecaying mind." It pre­
serves the poet from the sleep of Death. The principle of Beauty
and the sense of imaginative freedom serve as liberating factors
which stimulate the sharpened sense of the transcending powers of
the mind over the confusions and perplexities of the universe.
This acceptance of the act of the poetic imagination as the source
of human power over the generally harsh and perplexing facts of
life is Wordsworth's bulwark against melancholy fear. It is when
we have isolated all these elements of Wordsworth's poetic genius
that we can fully appreciate the basis of Wordsworth's exploration
of the dark passages.

Wordsworth stresses his recognition of the principle of
beauty and of a principle of imaginative freedom based on the
conviction of an active creative mind as factors capable of
regenerating the faculties of men in every generation. There is
no greater recognition of a basic universal in the concept of
continuity of imaginative vision than Wordsworth's firm belief
in the substantial reality of the ennobling interchange between
the imaginative mind and the outward frame of things. Wordsworth
was motivated by a desire to contribute fresh insight that is
illuminative of man's perplexity in this world. He was therefore
concerned with exploring the dark passages peculiar to his age and
with exploring the general truths of our human condition as seen
through all ages. These two aspects come together in a passage in Book I of *The Prelude*, where the poet speaks of subjecting himself to a "rigorous inquisition" as becomes a man who would prepare for such an "arduous work." He finds the result encouraging because he neither seems

To lack that first great gift, the vital soul,
Nor general Truths, which are themselves a sort
Of elements and Agents, Underpowers,
Subordinate helpers of the living mind:
Nor am I naked of external things
Forms, images, nor numerous other aids
Of less regard. 39

I have already commented in detail on "that first great gift, the vital soul" and its relation to the principle of Beauty as stimulating poetic vitality by rousing the creative faculty from the "sleep of Death." It is what makes possible the liberation of the imaginative spirit and effects a transcending of the bounds of a materialistic determinism; this in turn offers to the poetic imagination a sense of power over the world of circumstance. Wordsworth felt a keen sense of urgent preoccupation with the role and nature of poetry in his age and he measured himself against his deeply held conviction of the need for a sense of continuity in imaginative vision. The strength and originality of Wordsworth's discovery derives from the fact that he was the one poet whose genius in the exploration of the dark passages offered help and courage to perplexed minds in search of that genuine poetic insight which neither violates the principle of beauty nor affronts empirical reason and common humanity. The proof of this claim is the burden of this dissertation.
CHAPTER I

Footnotes


2 Ibid., pp. 138-144.


6 For Keats's confession of his growing realization of the relevance of Wordsworth's preoccupations in poetry, see the letter to Miss Jeffrey, Monday 31 May 1819, in The Letters of John Keats, pp. 343-344, where Keats quotes two lines (ll. 181-2) of the Intimations of Immortality and adds, significantly, "I once thought this a melancholist's dream."

7 See the letter to Reynolds, already cited, on p. 140 of The Letters of John Keats, where Keats speaks of "Milton's apparently less anxiety for Humanity."

8 See Wordsworth's "Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads, with a few other Poems (1798)" and subsequent prefaces and supplementary essays in Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, ed. Paul M. Zall (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1966).
This is taken from Keats's sonnet, "Great Spirits now on Earth are Sojourning" in which Wordsworth is placed at the head of the "Great Spirits." See The Letters of John Keats, p. 10.

The Prelude, II, 277-8. All references are to the 1850 text, unless otherwise indicated.


The "Prospectus" to The Recluse in Preface to the 1814 edition of The Excursion, 11, 33-4.


Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind,
Cannot refer to any standard Law
Of either earth or heaven


The Prelude, III, 154. The emphasis here is on an imaginative quest for order, a search for the discovery of a principle of imaginative illumination.


Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, p. 21. See Bks. VII, VIII, IX, X, XI (especially), and XII and XIII for factors contributing to "torpor" and for how Wordsworth confronted those forces; see also The Excursion, Bks. II, III, and IV.

Ibid.
Compare Whitehead's more eloquent way of phrasing this: "We are within a world of colours, sounds, and other sense-objects, related in space and time to enduring objects..."; "the world disclosed in sense-perception is a common world, transcending the individual recipient," in *Science and the Modern World*, pp. 129, and 132 respectively (emphasis his).

"Effusion" in "Memorials of a Tour of Scotland, 1814."

The emphasis is Wordsworth's.


The Prelude, XIV, 448-454.

Preface to *The Excursion*, 11, 35-41.

Preface to *The Excursion*, 11, 42-51.


See Coleridge's own confession in his poems, especially in "Dejection: an ode".

See Shelley's "Alastor", Byron's "Childe Harold" and Keats's "Endymion".

There are several versions of this though H. Crabb Robinson's version in his *On Books and their Writers* is perhaps the best known. See also Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and *The Prelude* III, 276-293.

It should be obvious by now that I am not studying Wordsworth in the line of Christian, prophetic vision which Blake tried to maintain after Milton. For an illuminating discussion of the specifically Christian line of prophecy from ancient times through Milton to Blake, see "Opening the Seals: Blake's Epics and the Milton Tradition" by

34 See Wordsworth to William Rowan Hamilton, Nov. 22, 1831, where Wordsworth speaks at some length about the arduous task of poetry and the place of the various faculties in the creative process. See especially this: "Milton talks of 'pouring easy his unpremeditated verse.' It would be harsh...to say there is anything like cant in this; but it is not true to the letter, and tends to mislead....," in The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Later Years, Vol. II, p. 586.


36 Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, p. 48.

37 The Prelude, xiv, 157-162.

38 The Prelude, xiv, 130-132.

39 The Prelude, I, 146-156.
CHAPTER II

The Burthen of the Mystery

My concern in this and the next chapter is with those poems in which Wordsworth grappled with complex problems, ranging in nature from practical but important concerns to the personal and philosophical anxieties related to the poetic vocation, which pressed in upon him as he pondered on the challenge of his life-long task. The emphasis will be on those poems in which the distant and impersonal voice of some of his very early poems is replaced by the voice of personal anxiety. Poems such as "Alice Fell," "The Idiot Boy," "The Complaint of a forsaken Indian Woman," "The Female Vagrant" all belong to the former group in which the narrative voice is impersonal and dramatic rather than personal and reflexive. These poems have their main interest in the affecting emotions evoked by the tales; but in the poems which I am about to analyze, the main value is derived from the symbolic significance of the poetic experience with regard to the poet-narrator. The concern in these chapters is with those poems (written mostly between 1798 and 1804) in which the poetic persona occupies a deeply symbolic rather than fictional narrative role; I wish to treat these poems in relation to the distraction and intense self-questioning which motivated the writing of The Prelude as a poem of self-exploration preparatory
to the great task of *The Recluse*. The poet himself tended to regard these short poems as exploratory efforts in which he sought to fix the wavering balance of his imaginative soul;¹ I wish to demonstrate that the mood of preoccupation with practical and philosophical anxieties cast a long shadow over these poems and compelled the poet to explore the dark passages of life even in these relatively early poems. I will also attempt to prove from the analysis of these poems that the dark passages, as my introduction suggests, refer to problems relating to the task of poetry as well as to those relating to death. It is generally assumed that it was only after "Peele Castle" (1805) that Wordsworth developed the sympathetic or humanized imagination, but I have deliberately excluded "Peele Castle" from the first block of poems which I wish to consider because I intend to trace the development of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages in the poems written between 1798 and 1814.

Since my concern in these poems is with poetic themes and attitudes, my critical analysis will operate through concentration on the significance of structural patterns. My analysis will reveal that these poems move through structures of imaginative deliberation which are complex. "Tintern Abbey," the "Matthew" poems and "Resolution and Independence" will be discussed in this chapter while the poems on Burns and the Fifth Book of *The Prelude* will form the basis for discussion in the next chapter.

"Tintern Abbey" (composed July 13, 1798; published 1798) is one of those poems of puzzlement which deserves to be studied in relation to Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages. Much of
the critical controversy surrounding "Tintern Abbey" has centred on lines 22-57 and 107-111 where we have such memorable phrases as "the life of things," "gleams of half-extinguished thought" and "soul of all my moral being." My emphasis will be on the total progression of poetic thought rather than on explicating isolated phrases, for it is only through a careful consideration of the movement of thought in this poem that I hope to establish the full significance of the dark passages in "Tintern Abbey." Though the poem is written in the 18th century tradition of meditation on a landscape, Wordsworth introduces significant devices into the genre which enable him to achieve variety and scope as well as depth of thought and feeling. One of these features is the introduction of his sister into the poem. The address to his "dear, dear friend," who is at his side, provides the opportunity for the poet to combine elements of conventional meditation on a landscape with a searching description of the stages of his own imaginative growth; it also enables him to generalize subtly on the human condition by dwelling on the concerns of two individuals. The poet in "Tintern Abbey" has reached the stage of the awakening of the thinking principle, and the sense of pleasure which he derives from contemplating the landscape is now described as "sober pleasure," and contrasted with what he felt "in the hour of / Thoughtless youth." This earlier stage is vividly portrayed through the direct description of those "coarse pleasures," "glad animal movements," "aching joys," and "dizzy raptures," so that it is easy for the reader to see that it was a time when the senses, especially the sense of sight, held sway. The poet is careful enough to indicate that these youthful pleasures were not depraved
sensations; he is also equally careful to suggest that they lacked that "remote charm / by thought supplied." These two points come together in his description of his sister. Her "wild eyes" and "wild ecstasies" recall the poet's past "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" and contrast with his present soberly meditative mood. That thoughtless stage is not condemned because the poem derives its central impetus from the vital link between the three main stages of imaginative growth: the unreflective past, the soberly meditative present, and the unknown but unflattering future. Some aspects of that vital link are emphasized for example in the following lines:

Nor perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:
For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou my dearest friend,
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I once was

Here the positive values of instinctive, sensuous delight of youth in the wonders of nature are emphasized, and the values of such sensations are emphasized as helping to preserve genial spirits from decay. The mood of the poet is largely retrospective, but the note of anxiety about the future is disturbing in the last two lines. The coarser pleasures of boyhood and the raptures of youth have given way to "sober pleasure," thought and reflection. The stages leading to this deeply contemplative growth are described in the poem. The opening lines of "Tintern Abbey" present a sense of ordered harmony in the Wye valley and the poet asserts that his experience of this ordered harmony, perceived five years earlier, has remained avail-
able to him. It has not been to him "As is a landscape to a blind man's eye." Even in the noise of towns and cities, or in moods of weariness and loneliness, this sense of harmony has continued to remind him of his imaginative capacity for an equally harmonious relationship with other people and with the world around him. The poet says that he may have owed to the "beauteous forms" "another gift of aspect more sublime;"

that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened.

Here the intricate syntax literally enacts the rhythm of thought in the imaginative consciousness. The distribution of tonal emphases is one of the interesting strategic devices in this regard. The prolonged duration of sounds falls on such words as "burthen," "mystery," "heavy," "weary" and "weight", all of which build up in sombre effect and culminate in the polysyllabic "unintelligible." These words are unusually expressive in the context in which they operate; their rounded and prolonged sounds together with the pattern of doubling of words and phrases set up a pattern of harrowing resonance which suggests the depth of the dark passages explored in "Tintern Abbey."

Within a unit of poetic thought covering barely five lines of blank verse, the darkness of the mind is thus vividly enacted and the light of discovery is indicated as the movement of syntax comes to rest effortlessly on the word "lightened." This word with its liquids and unrounded sounds expresses a relaxation as well as psychic tension. It looks back to the "blessed mood" and "heavy and weary weight", emphasizing by implication the blessedness of the mood and the weight
of unintelligibility of the world which is lightened, though not
totally removed.

In the lines that follow, the poet describes this mood
further by pointing out that the memory of the Wye valley, of the
beauteous forms, create in him a mood and a physiological disposition
which conduce to imaginative reflection. Through his experience of
order and harmony of the Wye valley he is encouraged to achieve a
similar imaginative ordering of this apparently unintelligible
world. In a low-tension passage whose unassuming tone has usually
been misunderstood, there is a quiet but nevertheless firm emphasis
on the value of that earlier experience:

If this
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft --
In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight, when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart --
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

It is a passage in which the wavering movement of the verse helps
to convey the sense of restless anxiety; yet the syntactical pattern
of "if . . . yet, oh! how oft" is a characteristic Wordsworthian
phrasing in which the force of "yet" dwarfs the qualification expressed
in "if," so that what we have in the passage is a modest but firm
assertion of the significance of the Wye experience which is finally
stated with such great poetic effect in the regular and emphatic
lines:

How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods
How often has my spirit turned to thee!
These lines express a unit of poetic thought which anticipates the conviction expressed in "all that we behold / From this green earth . . ." of lines 102-109. In lines 49-57, Wordsworth does not necessarily establish a link between the memory of the Wye and the power of intellectual insight; what is important is that he indicates sufficiently the imaginative way of contemplating those anxieties connected with the burden of the mystery of human existence. When we are overwhelmed by the "fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world," or by "the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world," in what way should we confront such anxieties? It is in answer to this poetic thought that the poet offers the description of his own passionate gratitude to the memory of the Wye Valley. The poet describes his earlier instinctive delight in nature as well as the more mature condition of mind that has replaced the youthful response; he describes other gifts which have followed and the extra value which he has found in contemplating the ordered and harmonious experience of the Wye valley:

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts.

This passage has been the basis for extended literary controversy, but when the complex structural pattern of the whole poem is considered, some of the phrasing should fall into clearer perspective. In the final lines of the opening paragraph of "Tintern Abbey," the poet describes a humanized landscape, and this later passage simply-
elaborates on what was earlier suggested; the poet now sees Nature in relation to the condition of human life because he has now realized a sense of interconnectedness between all things and all beings. Nature has acquired a higher significance because it offers the setting for elevated thoughts, for the philosophic contemplation of the universe and of the condition of man in it; also, nature remains a source of beauty and of the creative principle. It is both elements of this realization which give particular syntactic force to the word "therefore" at the beginning of the lines which express the poet's central thought:

Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, -- both what they half create
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

The recognition of the ultimate harmony of this world and of the "one life" that interpenetrates all life leads the poet toward a further recognition of the world as created by the imaginative interchange of the mind and the senses. We are thus enabled to see the poet-perceiver as now an active, creative agent rather than a simple, passive receiver of sensations as in his thoughtless youth. Also, the poet deliberately affirms that this world is all that he needs for his moral and imaginative growth; through his mature imaginative insight, the poet now realizes that the appearance of unintelligibility is largely an appearance because the contemplative imagination is capable of perceiving the world as basically rational, orderly, harmonious
and significant. In the light of this realization, therefore, man's place is in this green earth, in this mighty world of eye and ear, and the prime business is to seek an orientation (or, in Wordsworth's words, to seek to be "remanded") to this world rather than aspire to a transcendental world. This is a conscious rejection of established religious doctrines with their undue emphasis on the after-life. So in the end Wordsworth rejects the world of sheer sensations, even of undepraved sensations, as well as the conventional emphasis on the after-life. In the final analysis, it is this green earth, this mighty world of eye and ear, as it is transformed by the imaginative mind which Wordsworth affirms. The hieratic beauty of external nature does lead to a recognition of an active, creative principle, but external sensations alone, even when undepraved, are not sufficient in themselves; on the other hand, Wordsworth also rejects extreme subjective transcendental idealism whether expressed as a religious doctrine or as a theory of the imagination. The ultimate faith is in

\[
\text{all that we behold} \\
\text{From this green earth; of all the mighty world} \\
\text{Of eye, and ear, -- both what they half-create} \\
\text{And what perceive.}
\]

These lines have much relevance when seen in relation to the search for "a recourse somewhat human independant [sic] of the great Consolations of Religion and undepraved Sensations." Furthermore, the lines have much epistemological significance. Wordsworth takes up the ideas of Locke, which regarded the human mind as a passive agent to be played upon by all impressions, and makes the mind a more positive creative agent. Since John Locke's
time, it had been generally accepted that sensation was the only mode of perceiving the world. Wordsworth emphasizes the reflective powers of the mind. He does not put his faith in any transcendental revelation as expressed by Coleridge; rather his faith is based on the powers of the poetic imagination working with and upon the external objects and sensations to transform what is perceived. This theme, first given significant expression in "Tintern Abbey," is further developed in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*. The question of the mind of man and its operations in relation to the external world became central to Wordsworth's poetry. I have indicated in the introductory chapter that the problem of imaginative insight in the post-empirical age was one of the most perplexing to the Romantic poets, and I believe that Wordsworth's sense of balance -- as suggested in "Tintern Abbey" is one important aspect of his exploration of the dark passages in relation to the problem of imaginative illumination in his age.

This leads us to the consideration of the complex nature of the Wordsworthian mode of poetic thought. The poet speaks of his earlier, unreflective sensations "and their glad animal movements." This last phrase describes the way he had existed almost instinctively on sensations, even though some of those sensations (especially those caused by the sounding cataract, the tall rock, the mountain and the deep and gloomy wood, together with their colours and their forms) were of terror and of unknown and perplexing forces of the universe. The recollection of his earlier thoughtless mood ("Sensations") prepares us for the complementary half of the Wordsworthian imagination ("thought") which the boyish
activities, lacked: "a remoter charm / By thought supplied." Here we see the poet as a complex mind who exists partly on sensation, partly on thought. This is a recurrent imaginative pattern in Wordsworth's poetry; it informs the movement of poetic reasoning for example in the "Intimations of Immortality." And, in connection with "Tintern Abbey," it is quite misleading to talk, as Gérard does, of the irrecoverable nature of the loss of his "idealistic vision." What we have in "Tintern Abbey" is Wordsworth's expression of the workings of his imagination, and of his immense faith in the powers of the contemplative mind in imaginative interchange with the forms and images of external nature. The poet shows (through the power of images of nature to stimulate salutary sensations) that nothing in nature exists in "absolute singleness" but in the context of all past experience and in relation to the present state of the mind perceiving it. The measure of Wordsworth's concern with expressing the growth of his own mind -- of the poetic mind -- is reflected in "Tintern Abbey" in the application which he makes of his growing insight into the nature of the human condition.

"Tintern Abbey" could be regarded as a long, involuted sentence whose chief characteristic is its complex syntax which is designed to carry the weight of a meditative thought. The development of thought progresses fairly clearly through syntactical connective phrases such as "once again," "if this be," "yet, oh!", "and so I dare," "therefore," "now perchance," etc. These function to produce the following points: the poet establishes his recognition of the value of sense perception; demonstrates the creative inter-
change which enables the poetic mind to endow this apparently unintelligible world with order and significance, and he discovers the propitious mood and setting for contemplating the condition of man in the universe. These aspects of imaginative recognition, so dramatically enacted in the poem, provide the illuminating context for the force of the conclusion (expressed in the emphatic repetition of "therefore") in "Tintern Abbey." The first "therefore" (line 102) sums up the experience developed through imaginatively retrospective contemplation of concrete images of the Wye experience. The second "therefore" (line 134) has an even wider context for it derives its syntactical force from all that has gone before in the poem and it is also prospective to what the poet is about to turn our attention. The "exhortation" to his sister is based on the value that is derivable from both: the thoughtless delight in, as well as the thoughtful contemplation of, nature: Nature provides images of excited joy and beauty; she also provides the setting for "lofty thoughts." This two-fold function leads to the following thought:

Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me
And these my exhortations!
The word "portion" carries a great weight of thought and meaning; it implies something allotted by fate to the condition of human existence. "Solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief" could be the fate of the poet's sister because she is not exempt from the reality of the human condition. It is in such words and phrases -- in such structures of poetic reasoning -- that Wordsworth achieves the sharpening of vision into the heart and nature of man and recognises the need of convincing one's nerves of the dark passages in life. The poet does not in "Tintern Abbey" explore these passages at any great length, but he courageously alludes to his own future ("If I should be where I no more can hear / Thy voice . . ."), and discusses his sister's future in relation to these human fears.

In "Tintern Abbey" the poet suggests the mode of contemplating the dark passages in life -- "solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief." The realization that "in this moment there is life / For future years" is dramatically achieved through the intense poetic experience enacted in the poem. It is from this experience that the poet affirms a never-failing principle of joy in the elevated contemplation of life in the setting of enduring objects of nature; he has done this principally by representing familiar objects so as to awaken the minds of others to a like freshness of sensation and thought concerning them. The memory of the beauteous forms of the Wye valley has sustained him in the hours of lonely weariness; it also confirmed his faith in man's imaginative capacity to maintain a harmonious relationship with the world around him and with other human beings. This is one of those "sensations sweet" which pass into the mind with "tranquil restoration."
This state of mind is a source of inward joy which makes a human being a more moral person; that is, it makes him more possessed of imaginative sympathy with other human beings. By the end of "Tintern Abbey" the poet sees value in such experiences and memories for himself as well as for his sister. His past weariness and loneliness are paralleled by his sister's probable "solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief." Though there is a deepening note of anxiety in the intimation of these dark passages, the poet sees hope in the primal sympathy or imaginative love which will sustain his sister. Lines 134-159, which open with "Therefore" and include two "if . . . nor" constructions, carry the weight of this poetic thought. "Tintern Abbey" thus leads to a key concept which is pervasive in Wordsworth's poetry; it is also a concept which helps to account for Wordsworth's thinking deep into the heart of man. Against the selfish pursuits and vain distractions in the towns and cities (lines 24-25, 128-132), Wordsworth posits objects which elevate our thoughts beyond our poor weak selves. Man is essentially capable of drawing inspiration and mental refreshment from the contemplation or "recollection in tranquillity" of "objects" and experiences of imaginative value, such as are enacted in "Tintern Abbey." This is a topic covered at length in The Prelude and The Excursion; but in "Tintern Abbey" Wordsworth gives it a moral dimension. He suggests in this poem that such poetry or imaginative contemplation is capable of re-awakening human sympathies; it is poetry whose contemplative force elevates the imagination and sets the affections in right tune. Against the deterministic philosophy of self-love postulated by Hobbes,
Wordsworth explores the capacity of the imaginative mind to identify itself with objects and persons in a community of feeling and thought. This is what accounts for the quiet but firm and positive tone of the ending of the poem. The lines that make the implied connection include the following:

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

The landscape has a value in itself, but it has been endowed with an even greater value by being connected with the human being, with the affections which the poet feels for his sister. It is the same value of imaginative love or primal sympathy which is also urged on the poet's sister in lines 142-146. As I have indicated above, this concept of imaginative love is pervasive in Wordsworth's poetry: it is mentioned in the "Intimations of Immortality" as one of the deep consolations of life; it is elaborated upon in The Excursion:

"We live by Admiration, Hope, and Love;
And, even as these are well and wisely fixed,
In dignity of being we ascend."
(Bk. IV, 11. 763-5)

It is less discursively stated in "Tintern Abbey," of course, but the thought is there all the same, and there is a passage in Wordsworth's letters which contains verbal echoes of "Tintern Abbey" and functions as commentary on the poem. Wordsworth speaks of the "honest ignorance" "in which all worldlings of every rank and situation must be enveloped, with respect to the thoughts, feelings, and images, on which the life of my Poems depends." He goes on to
make the distinction between the distractions and vain concerns of city life and his own poetic concerns:

The things which I have taken, whether from within or without, -- what have they to do with routs, dinners, morning calls, hurry from door to door, from street to street, on foot or in Carriage . . .; in a word, for I cannot stop to make my way through the hurry of images that present themselves to me, what have they to do with endless talking about things nobody cares anything for except as far as their own vanity is concerned, and this with persons they care nothing for but as their vanity or selfishness is concerned; what have they to do (to say all at once) with a life without love? in such a life there can be no thought; for we have no thought (save thoughts of pain) but as far as we have love and admiration.8

In this letter, as in "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth establishes imaginative love as one of those concepts in which the meaning of life is to be found. Life in the long run must be energy of imaginative love. It is in such concepts that we see Wordsworth's poetic exertions in the cause of human nature; it is here that we find justification for his own claim that his poetry is "in its nature well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and likewise important in the multiplicity and quality of its moral relations."9

Wordsworth placed "Tintern Abbey" at the top of "Poems relating to natural objects and their influence on the mind either as growing or in an advanced state." He also described it as the most "highly imaginative" of poems in this class.10 It is necessary to bear these comments in mind because several themes are indicated in "Tintern Abbey." The concluding sections of the poem (lines 111-159) are generally overlooked in the discussion of "Tintern Abbey" and yet it is in those sections that much of the poetic thought comes together. I have deliberately avoided any unduly long discussion
of the overworked opening section of the poem as well as of those passages which supposedly describe his "mystical" vision; my concern has been with the structure of poetic thought and with the points of imaginative insight as these are brought together in the concluding sections of the poem.

I have indicated Wordsworth's contribution to the knowledge of the imaginative process through his insistence on the creative interchange between the imaginative mind and external nature, and I have also related the significance of this to the epistemological problems of the age by contrasting its sense of balance with the Lockean epistemology on the one hand, and with the extreme of transcendentalism on the other. More significantly, perhaps, I have emphasised Wordsworth's further recognition of the human mind as not only active and creative but as also active and sympathetic, as capable of primal sympathy. In "Tintern Abbey," the poet treats the mind as it is affected by salutary sensations in external nature; he indicates that this leads to inspiration as well as to insight into the nature and the condition of man. He recognises the dark passages to which elevated contemplation leads but he also indicates one philosophical consolation ("healing thoughts," line 144) which an imaginative mind has in pondering on the dark passages; that philosophical consolation is to be found in the concept of imaginative love. In my analysis of other poems I intend to indicate the ways in which Wordsworth explored those dark passages and I hope also to point out what other philosophical consolations he did or did not offer in those poems.
The "Matthew" poems constitute a series in which Wordsworth first made a sustained effort to explore the dark passages of life in relation to the poetic task. In "Tintern Abbey" the allusion to his own unflattering future is muted, but in the "Matthew" poems that human fear is confronted in dramatically symbolic terms. These three poems, all written in 1799 (the year after "Tintern Abbey" was written) and published in 1800, form a coherent thematic block within the "Poems of Sentiment and Reflection." The first of them, entitled "Matthew," is a meditation on the gilt letter of Matthew's name on a tablet listing the names of former schoolmasters. It soon becomes evident, however, that Matthew is a composite figure, and that the real theme of contemplation is the life of man and the life of the poet -- as these are seen to be interdependent. The meditative spirit of this poem is important for any meaningful appreciation of its significance. These poems are written in the traditional balladic metre but Wordsworth finds several resources for irony and drama within this form. In "Matthew," the old man is a representative figure. He was a man possessed of an unusual capacity for joy; he could rejoice in the life that is in him as well as in the goings-on of the universe (11. 17, 22); but he also possessed the capacity for deep thought:

Yet sometimes, when the secret cup
Of still and serious thought went round,
It seemed as if he drank it up --
He felt with spirit so profound.

Here the nature of Matthew's interest is indicated as "serious thought"; his imaginative spirit as "profound." In Matthew we have Wordsworth's idea of the good man and the poet merged in one. This view is
reinforced by what the poet-narrator addresses to the reader:

If Nature, for a favourite child
In thee hath tempered so her clay
That every hour thy heart runs wild,
Yet never once doth go astray,

Read over these lines.

The narrator calls Matthew "soul of God's best earthly mould."

But Matthew has run his race of life and is now as silent in the
grave "as a standing pool." The narrator ponders on the example
of Matthew's life and death. In Matthew we have a figure in whom
Nature "hath tempered so her clay" that he could be described as
"happy soul"; but what remains of this paragon of humanity? This
rhetorical question does not receive any clear answer perhaps
because the real significance in the contemplation of Matthew's
life is to see in what human ways he has become an example of the
happy soul, and that has been established.

The tone of quiet restraint in "Matthew" does not, however,
suggest that the awareness of the price of human consciousness is
toned down; the poet explores this with courage by treating further
of Matthew's experiences in "The Two April Mornings." The title
suggests the loops of time involved in the narrative. The poem
begins, like "Resolution and Independence" and many other poems of
Wordsworth, in a radiant atmosphere and the narrator is in a
buoyant mood. But the old man is not. Matthew's melancholy is
inexplicable because the bright day offers bright hopes; furthermore,
he has every reason to be contented in society:
A village schoolmaster was he,
With hair of glittering grey;
As blithe a man as you could see
On a spring holiday.

The narrator questions Matthew about his sudden reversal of mood, and
the old man stops for a second time and gives a thoughtful response:

'Yon cloud with that long purple cleft
Brings fresh into my mind
A day like this which I have left
Full thirty years behind.

'And just above yon slope of corn
Such colours, and no other,
Were in the sky, that April morn,
Of this the very brother.

Here the poet suggests that impulses of deeper birth have come to
Matthew in the solitude of his heart. The past and the present all
come together for him at one instant of time in one complex
configuration of imagery. Wordsworth's use of natural objects as
his own peculiar metaphors of reality is achieved here with unusual
compression and force. The cloud, the colours, the whole scope of
images perceived on a bright April morning, only evoke an upswelling
of painful memories from Matthew. Here we have, in quiet but
significant poetic icons, a central thought that Wordsworth was to
express more eloquently in the "Intimations of Immortality":

The clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality.
(11. 220-222)

The implication is that man's present mood, no matter the apparently
joyful occasion, is inevitably coloured by the past, and no deeply
thoughtful man can afford to live only in the present; in the case of
Matthew, the configuration of imagery and circumstances which I have
described function to evoke a painful memory within a memory in Matthew's life. This is all related to the death of his daughter:

'Six feet in earth my Emma lay . . .'

The narrator details Matthew's recollection of what the daughter was as well as what she might have become; and we see her even more concretely through a further reminder. Matthew recalls that a further reminder, besides that of natural phenomena, was given him by a girl who happened to cross his path of vision and whose resemblance and general appearance at that time made the pain of his own loss too poignant to bear. She is described in imagery and verse which help to endow her with the quality of gaiety and vitality:

'No fountain from its rocky cave
E'er tripped with foot so free;
She seemed as happy as a wave
That dances on the sea.

This description contrasts very vividly with "Six feet in earth my Emma lay." It helps to explain the irony that follows. Although this girl is an object of pure delight, Matthew does not wish her his:

'I looked at her, and looked again:
And did not wish her mine!'

His attitude is in itself a profound commentary on human life. Such love and pure delight that one may derive from being the proud father of this girl inevitably leads to the extreme of painful depression by the memory of inevitable loss, just as Matthew's loss of Emma still haunts his most delightful moments. The consciousness of human mortality is the factor which Matthew recognizes.

Wordsworth ends "The Two April Mornings" on a note of mythical significance:
Matthew is in his grave, yet now,
Methinks, I see him stand,
As at that moment, with a bough
Of wilding in his hand.

The mythical transformation is achieved through a process of another shift in the loop of time which distances the events and isolates their enduring significance for the poet and the reader. This is Wordsworth's subtle way of re-creating mythical experiences and of quietly restoring a sense of continuity of imaginative vision with his great poetic predecessors. The shift into the present tense, which is syntactically heralded by one of Wordsworth's favourite connectives in "yet now / methinks, I see him stand, / As at that moment," give Matthew (as it gives the old men in Wordsworth's poetry) a sense of ahistorical timelessness, a poetic, or rather mythical, significance which links him with all monitory figures in Literature. Matthew's figure is imaged indelibly in the poet's heart and this is the chief value and significance of the poetic experience. The old man has been imaginatively transformed into a composite figure in the narrator's consciousness, linked mythically with all monitory figures in imaginative literature of all ages. Matthew will live in the poet's memory; he is also consecrated in the poem because the deathless and timeless nature of art elevates him above the physical aspect of dissolution in death.

In the last of these three poems, "The Fountain," Wordsworth spans another loop of time in his contemplation of Matthew's life and brings together some of the themes implicit in the first two poems. There is a minute fidelity to details which one could mistake for sheer literal-mindedness. Matthew's age is given very
precisely -- "seventy-two" -- and the narrator is described as young. This is very significant for it sets one of the contexts for the conversation that follows: the context of age, time and death. The bond between them is that of friendship; they "talked with open heart and tongue / Affectionate and true." We later discover an even more significant bond: they are both poets, each is a singer of songs, a man of mirth. This helpful clue should enable us to place the significance of their conversation. As in the opening stanzas of "The Two April Mornings," the young man is in a buoyant mood, in apparent harmony with nature; he requests Matthew to join him in singing a catch "that suits a summer's noon" or "witty rhymes" which Matthew had composed to mock the church-clock. However, it is no more the mood of summer's noon with Matthew and instead of singing in harmony with the running stream Matthew meditates on the laws that govern the stream and man:

'No check, no stay, this Streamlet fears;
How merrily it goes!
'Twill murmur on a thousand years,
And flow as now it flows.

'And here, on this delightful day,
I cannot choose but think
How oft, a vigorous man, I lay
Beside this fountain's brink.

The word "brink" has a double meaning in the context: it denotes the edge of the stream but it also tends to suggest the brink of death which the old man at seventy-two must be thinking about. By contrast with the stream (and the birds), man is reminded of his own mortality, for though his life may, like Matthew's, run merrily for seventy-two years, in the end man must submit to other laws; it is an awareness which troubles man's most intense moments of joy. The
old man is, perhaps, mourning his own humanity as Ferry concludes, but I believe he is doing much more in the context: he is contemplating the laws that govern all natures in order that he may understand his own nature. Wordsworth is more explicit on this in The Excursion:

'Happy is he who lives to understand,
Not human nature only, but explores
All natures, -- to the end that he may find
The law that governs each . . .'

(Bk. IV, 11. 332-5)

For Matthew, the consciousness of what he is is habitually infused through every thought; he realizes the limitations built into the condition of man. He looks back thoughtfully to his vigorous days and contrasts them with his present days -- which place him at death's brink. The gurgling sound of the stream only reminds him of his own loss of vigor. He contemplates his decay and accepts it as inevitable, for after all

the wiser mind
Mourns less for what age takes away
Than what it leaves behind.

It is the burden of consciousness which defines man's essential condition; man is pressed by heavy laws, and he is capable of feeling anxiety for the future; even more disturbing, he possesses painful memories of the past. Matthew, like most of the old men in Wordsworth's poetry, is a pre-figurative image of the young poet's future, for the condition of existence described in this poem is shown to be particularly applicable to the poet, the man of mirth. The poetic thought moves from the contemplation of an individual life to the consideration of the human condition and
back again to the consideration of Matthew's individual life as a poet-figure in his essential solitude:

'My days, my Friend, are almost gone, 
My life has been approved, 
And many love me! but by none 
Am I enough beloved.'

It is easy to misinterpret the meaning of this compressed thought, as the narrator appears to do by his offer:

'And, Matthew, for thy children dead 
I'll be a sone to thee!'

Matthew's response shows that his words carry more profound meaning; both his gesture and his brief reply are significant:

At this he grasped my hand, and said, 
'Alas! that cannot be.'

There is, first, Matthew's recognition of the inevitability of loss; and, secondly, there is his courageous recognition of the essential loneliness of every human being, especially of the poet. This theme of solitude also runs through "Tintern Abbey" and "Resolution and Independence."

In these poems Wordsworth explores the themes of joy, Time, human decay and death and the fear of solitude, and emerges with a grim recognition of the challenge of human existence and of the poetic task. The poet is not unnerved by the sense of reality. Matthew has confronted the hard circumstances of life and his life is approved. The young poet has to confront them too. In my analysis of the complex structure and sophisticated style of the poems, I have tried to show that the "Matthew" poems deal with the exploration of the dark passages. They are poems which represent a process of firm imaginative courage in the subtle penetration into
the mystery of human existence. The "Matthew" poems represent those poems in which Wordsworth explored the dark passages, first indicated in "Tintern Abbey," and emerged with a grim sense of the human reality. These poems communicate deep human feeling without sentimentality or even philosophical consolation, but also without cynicism. Perhaps Wordsworth could not at this time offer any recourse other than the stark sense of the irony of human consciousness in relation to the condition of mortal existence and the poetic task.

In "Resolution and Independence," composed in 1802 and published in 1807, Wordsworth brought together the themes which he had earlier touched on in "Tintern Abbey" and the "Matthew" poems. The mood out of which "Resolution and Independence" grows is typical of the mood in the other earlier poems. What immediately impresses the reader in this poem is the sensuous quality of the lyric verse; the sense of joy in the delight offered by a bright morning in the first fourteen lines of the poem compares most favourably with the poetic effect offered by the first fourteen lines of Chaucer's "Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales. The following lines from "Resolution and Independence" convey something of this effect:

All things that love the sun are out of doors;  
The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;  
The grass is bright with rain-drops; -- on the moors  
The hare is running races in her mirth.  
(stanza 2, lines 8-11)

In these short but limpid lines Wordsworth effectively embodies the sense of joy, beauty and fertility -- the whole atmosphere of life and delight in nature. It is an atmosphere which spreads over all the earth and extends to the sun and the sky. The narrator-traveller
absorbs this wholesome harmony and it puts him in an unreflecting mood:

My old remembrances went from me wholly;
And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.

Nevertheless, the poet's habitual thoughtfulness of mind is quite incompatible with a complete absorption in the luxury of his own sensations. It is a vein of melancholy based on his critical insight into the human condition which prevents him from remaining contented. He may like to think of himself as part of the earthly harmony:

Even such a happy Child of earth am I;
Even as these blissful creatures do I fare;
Far from the world I walk, and from all care;

but "fears and fancies", "dim sadness -- and blind thoughts" suddenly overwhelm him because he is painfully aware that though he may rejoice unreflectingly in the harmony of the universe which he feels around him, his lot is essentially different:

there may come another day to me --
Solitude, pain of heart, distress and poverty.

The link with the dark passages alluded to in "Tintern Abbey" and explored in the "Matthew" poems is quite obvious in these lines. Thus the characteristic pattern and context are established in the first few stanzas: sudden melancholy corresponding to the intensity of joyful experience and the movement from the objective description of natural harmony to the exploration of the subjective mood of the poet. The poet makes a general statement about the sudden transition:
But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might
Of joy in minds that can no further go,
As high as we have mounted in delight
In our dejection do we sink as low.

This helps us to understand both the nature and the condition of this sudden melancholy; more important, it helps to turn our attention to the fact that the poem is neither simply about natural harmony nor simply about the poet's fleeting mood but that it is centrally concerned with the conditions and primary laws of human nature. The sudden melancholy that overwhelms the poet is not only the result but the condition of the greatest intensity of joyful experience.

The implication in "Resolution and Independence" is that it is the law of human nature which compels the narrator-poet to feel a sorrow corresponding to the joy of an earlier experience, because the thoughtful man (the man of more than usual organic sensibility) is ever aware of the reality of the human condition. This is the case of the poet in "Resolution and Independence" as it is the case of Matthew in "The Fountain." The transition from the seemingly unreflecting delight in external nature (stanzas I-III) to the exploration of the resulting inner turmoil and anxiety follows a pattern that is typical (though not generally recognized) in those poems of imaginative meditation in which Wordsworth explores the dark passages. The sudden reversal of feeling is not mere splenetic indulgence; the intense experience of delight leads inevitably to the intense mood of thoughtfulness, and under the inspiration of this higher seriousness the poet is disturbed by the sense of elevated thoughts, as in "Tintern Abbey." In "Resolution and Independence," especially, the poet is helpfully specific about
those anxieties which trouble his spirits -- they are specific human problems: "Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty." These are some of the dark passages in the journey of human existence; they define both the nature and the condition of human life and the price of human consciousness has to be seen in relation to these human fears.

In the next stanza (VII) we see clearly that the note of personal anxiety in relation to these concerns has to do with the consideration of the poetic vocation. The poet would wish to preserve his poetic self and disregard the practical concerns of "getting and spending," as well as other demands and obligations of life, but the memory of the misery of Chatterton and Burns presses too hard upon the poet for that. Chatterton perished in his solitary pride and Burns in his independent-minded pursuit of glory and joy. Their example is too strong to be overlooked:

We Poets in our youth begin in gladness,
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.

By the use of the first person plural, Wordsworth makes it more than suggestive that what is involved is not just the consideration of the misery and fate of two contemporaries, but of all poets -- and, in this particular case, the hard choice before Wordsworth himself. There is, on the one hand, the everyday demands of an ordinary comfortable existence and there is, on the other hand, the threat of misery and defeat involved in the choice of a poetic career. The problem is how to avoid being unnerved by these apparently conflicting pressures; the point is how to accommodate the demands of an ordinary existence to the need to preserve the poetic self so that the choice
of a poetic vocation does not necessarily involve misery and defeat or even untimely death. Here we are given Wordsworth's high conception of the duties of the poetic vocation. In stanzas I-III of "Resolution and Independence" the poet describes the joys of the poetic imagination through his vivid evocation of a Spring morning scene; in stanzas IV-VII he describes the melancholy thoughts that always accompany the contemplation of such joyful experience; so that a frightful impasse is reached at the end of stanza VII as the poet creates a parallel situation by contemplating the contradiction between the youthful gladness and the later despondency and madness of Poets. These are the dark thoughts which the poet must put to himself and the chief significance of "Resolution and Independence" is to be found in the way in which Wordsworth imaginatively explores these dark passages by confronting his own anxieties and achieving an enriched self-awareness which enables him to overcome the weight of depression created by the consideration of the misery of Poets.

Much of the discussion of "Resolution and Independence" often concentrates on the similes and metaphors employed in the description of the leechgather, but since my interest in this thesis is on themes and attitudes my emphasis will be placed largely on the interpretation of the whole poetic experience. I take the position that the poem is not just an affecting tale like "The Idiot Boy" or "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman," but that it represents in poetic or symbolic terms a measure of the inner distance travelled by the poet in the exploration of his own dark depths of consciousness. It is
particularly significant that "Resolution and Independence" ends on a note of enriched self-awareness. I have already observed that at the end of stanza VII there is an impasse when the poet reaches the lowest depth of depression; but the greater part of the poem (stanzas VIII-XX) shows the poet's stern determination not to give himself up to the annihilating power of his sad perplexity. This, however, is not achieved through sheer act of will or through divine intervention but through imaginative insight based on the encounter with the leechgatherer. The structural pattern — including especially the complex syntax — is particularly important in the analysis and interpretation of this poem. It is necessary, for example, to show that the sense of fortitude (of resolution and independence) which the poet achieves is not simply given as a message communicated through any divine means but is derived from the actual poetic or imaginative experience based on an encounter with another human being.

As I pointed out earlier, one important feature of "Resolution and Independence" is the way in which the chief significance of the whole experience is related to the inner turmoil of the poet. The intensity of joyful experience leads to the other extreme of melancholy thoughts, that is, to the inner turmoil. There is a parallel structure to this pattern in stanzas VIII-XX: the encounter with the leechgatherer leads to an imaginative confrontation with the inner turmoil. So that the main impetus of the poem is generated in the poet's discovery of himself as both observer and participant, and the encounter with the leechgatherer becomes, on one level at least, a process through which Wordsworth unflinchingly confronts his
own fears concerning his poetic task. Stanza VIII has received varying interpretations from critics and the main point of controversy is whether Wordsworth was saved from melancholy despair by divine intervention or otherwise. Critics who emphasize what they believe to be Wordsworth's orthodox views have insisted that Wordsworth was saved through divine intervention; but I think one must note the tentative formulation of the crucial lines. Wordsworth's own prose explanation in the letter to Sara Hutchinson of 14 June 1802 is as carefully formulated: "I consider the manner in which I was rescued from my dejection and despair almost as an interposition of Providence." To attribute the appearance of the old man to a divine intervention is to underrate the poet's imaginative projection of his fears and his bold confrontation with them in purely human terms. What Wordsworth achieves in this poem is a method of imaginative salvation which does not exhibit much sense of dependence on other than human aid; Wordsworth does not exactly suggest that a message is sent to him from "above"; the modest phrasing should not mislead us into this conclusion. The structural pattern of the poem is more illuminating than the verbal echoes of conventional language and similes ("Such as grave Livers," "Religious men") which Wordsworth employs to tone down the force of the egotistical sublime. If we consider the structure of stanza VIII very carefully we can easily see the main point which stands out:

Yet it befell that . . .
I saw a Man before me unawares:
The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs.
The syntactical force of "yet" dwarfs the stumbling toward the
search for explanation of causes expressed earlier in "whether,"
so that what is stressed is the evocative power of the imagination.
The narrator-traveller-poet becomes suddenly aware of another traveller.
Wordsworth's own prose commentary emphasises the nature of this
imaginative vision:

'A lonely place, a Pond' 'by which an old man was,
far from all house or home' -- not stood, not sat,
but 'was' -- the figure presented in the most naked
simplicity possible.17

We are given the desolate setting: the lonely place, the pool bare
to the eye of heaven, and the noiseless and sudden appearance of the
man, and finally his great old age; all the daring and elemental
similes and metaphors of stanzas VIII-XI further help to reinforce
the visionary nature of the poetic experience. The state of
elemental and mysterious simplicity to which the old man is reduced
prepares us for the supreme metaphor into which the poet's
imagination finally transforms him. The important stanzas in this
connection are XII-XVII, that is, those stanzas that deal with what
the old man did and said. The poet employs obvious stanzaic as well
as more subtle syntactic divisions to mark the stages of imaginative
transformation. Thus in stanza XII we have the movement away from
the description of the appearance of the old man to the consideration
of what he does and says. The strategic phrase, "At length,"
placed at the opening of stanza XII serves as a syntactical recall
which directs our attention to the more daring imaginative trans-
formation that is about to occur:
At length, himself unsettling, he the pond
Stirred with his staff, and fixedly did look
Upon the muddy water, which he conned,
As if he had been reading in a book.

The meticulous attention to details of movement and gesture on the part of the old man is an element of conscious poetic design. The lines have a ponderous weight about them characteristic of the Wordsworthian syntax of careful selection; this rhythmic pattern also conveys something of the burden of age against which the leechgatherer's every action is viewed. The first two lines with their long duration of sounds and prolonged pauses reveal the pattern of deliberative choice. The repetition of phrases and pronouns relating to the old man, and the somewhat awkward inversion in "himself unsettling, he the pond / Stirred with his staff", all help to focus our attention on the activity of the leechgatherer. But while our attention is thus rivetted, the poet is no longer at our sides; he has travelled ahead of us to take "a stranger's privilege" (1. 82), while his syntax deliberately slows down our reading and thinking and compels us to contemplate the significance of the leechgatherer's ritualistic activities. When we examine the structure of these lines as carefully as we should we will recognize that they represent the beginning of the mythical (not mystical) transformation. First, we are reminded of all the old men in Wordsworth's poetry and more immediately of "the stooping Old Man" who cons the engraven record like a second horn-book;"18 secondly, we are reminded of that universal figure in imaginative literature: the soothsayer or seer. The water is muddy and the implication is that only a diviner could see anything in the muddy pond (here the practical economic search and...
the imaginative quest for insight operate simultaneously on the
denotative and connotative levels respectively). The praeternatural
link of the old man with the elemental forces of the universe, his
"extreme old age," the weight of human suffering which he bears, the
staff, together with his actions, all help to make him a prototype of
all seers and wise men -- such as Tiresias in the underworld. This
prepares us to treat the actual, long-delayed verbal contact between
the poet-traveller and the leechgatherer-traveller as really more signi-
ificant than the casual tone of the conversation would suggest.

The opening of the conversation is so casually put as to
seem even trivial: 'This morning gives us promise of a glorious day.'
(stanza XII, line 48). This is not just the proverbial British
exchange on the weather, for the leechgatherer's "courteous" but
non-committal answer does not satisfy the poet. There is some
irony of situation here which harks back to the first few stanzas of
the poem: it is ironic that the poet should say 'This morning gives
us promise of a glorious day,' for in stanza IV we have already seen
how short-lived such promise may be. When we extend this imagery of
morning and day to cover the life-span of a man, we wonder if the
poet is not in fact trying to ask a question about the future, his
own future! The old man's unstated but non-committal reply tends
to reinforce this view. The poet goes on to enquire about the old
man's occupation and we are informed that

He told, that to these waters he had come
To gather leeches, being old and poor:
Employment hazardous and wearisome!
And he had many hardships to endure:
From pond to pond he roamed, from moor to moor.
In these lines we perceive the essential unity of human feeling and human experience; the analogy between the task of the leechgatherer and the task of the poet begins to emerge. The leechgatherer is an image of commitment to a vocation of endless hardship which offers him the barest reward of an "honest maintenance"; he is a metaphor of human existence, the supreme example of commitment to a "hazardous and wearisome" task.

It is the realization of this metaphorical analogy which accounts for the intensely visionary mood of stanza XVI; in this stanza we see the complex, meandering structure of the poem which reflects the perplexed mood of the poet. There is a perceptible shift in approach between stanzas XV and XVI: a movement away from the thing contemplated to the Being that beheld this vision, and if we follow this structural pattern carefully we cannot fail to realize the ultimate significance of "Resolution and Independence" as a "timely utterance," as an exploration of those dark passages which the poet must confront before he can undertake the immense task of his life. The shift which I have mentioned is evident in the contrast between what is observed and what imagined. There is nothing solipsistic about this stanza; the concrete hold on external reality is maintained, for example, in "The old man still stood by my side"; but we are also given some insight into the workings of "the mind's excursive power" in the several similes in lines 107-112:

But now his voice to me was like a stream
Scarce heard; no word from word could I divide;
And the whole body of the Man did seem
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
Or like a man from some far region sent,
To give me human strength, by apt admonishment.
I speak here of the syntax enacting the movement of the mind's excursive power because the movement of the imagination is from one level of consciousness (outward sensations) to another level (of inward thought) in a single unbroken act of perception and expression; the "stream" imagery reinforces this sense of simultaneity and continuity.

The allusion to the man met with in a dream is not mere fanciful speculation. Wordsworth wanted his poems to be considered as units within a single architectural structure, and it is often helpful to note cross references within his poetry. The other reference in his poetry to one met with in a dream occurs in the only significant instance of dream-vision in Wordsworth's poetry: in Book V of The Prelude (see below). In each case the man "met with in a dream" performs the function of presenting the price to be exacted from a total commitment to the poetic task. In "Resolution and Independence," however, the poet perceives the old man's quiet acceptance and hence he likens him further to a man from some far region sent "To give me human strength, by apt admonishment." All these similes function to turn our minds toward what for the poet is the essential significance of the whole experience. The old man may be, in a way of speaking, like a visitant from another world, but, in reality, he is from, and of, the human world, the real state of man's worldly existence which is the subject matter for the poet.

The sense of growing knowledge, maturing conviction and quiet acceptance which informs the poet's attitude in the last three stanzas is further evidence of my interpretation. At the beginning
of stanza XVII we have the typical imaginative return characteristic of Wordsworth's poems of perplexity: 20

My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills;
And hope that is unwilling to be fed;
Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills;
And mighty Poets in their misery dead.
Perplexed, and longing to be comforted,
My question eagerly did I renew.

This picks up the theme of anxiety expressed forcefully in stanzas IV, V, VI and VII. In stanza XVII, however, the poet is now concerned more generally with "mighty Poets in their misery dead;" the poet has become concerned with larger problems which define human experience generally as well as in special relation to the fate of all poets. The problem is how to confront "the fear that kills" and "hope that is unwilling to be fed." These are the human fears which create such a dilemma for the poet. It is significant that Wordsworth confronts them through the search for human strength; this is what is expressed in the pointed question put to the leechgatherer: "'How is it that you live, and what is it you do?'" The second part of this question may strike us as repetitious (since we already know what the old man does) but the first part ought to strike us as at least surprising. It has this implication: how can you bear the burden of existence when it involves so much present suffering and painful awareness of more to come in the future? The leechgatherer's answer reveals the right attitude with which to confront the poet's anxiety:

He with a smile did then his words repeat;
And said that, gathering leeches, far and wide
He travelled; stirring thus about his feet
The waters of the pools where they abide.
'Once I could meet with them on every side;
But they have dwindled long by slow decay;
Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may.'
The flash of smile from this decrepit leechgatherer shows that, in spite of the grim reality of his miserable material condition, his task is not without joy. The syntactical turn of phrase in the last line which opens with "yet," a word of strategic importance in Wordsworth, conveys the strong sense of determination in the old man; he is resolved to persevere. This passage has implications that reach out beyond this poem. It prepares us as another timely utterance for the central question in the "Intimations of Immortality." The analogy between the poet's task and the leechgatherer's is not pushed by the poet but it is implied in the lines quoted immediately above, especially in these lines:

Once I could meet with them on every side;
But they have dwindled long by slow decay.

The pattern of parallel construction is of particular interest: what is stated about the past in the first half is contrasted with the reality of the present situation in the second half. In the past the gathering of leeches did not require a search for he "could meet with them on every side." No effort whatsoever was required, no search. Now, however, they have dwindled. The process has come about through long and slow decay, but the word "dwindled," so carefully chosen, suggests a shrivelling in time and space. The search for leeches now implies a long and painful journey in time and space. The quest for imaginative insight is just as tough, and compounded by the painful awareness that the poet, like the decrepit leechgatherer, is also subject to slow decay. It is the attitude toward such a tough quest in the face of this grim realization which is indicated in the last line of the passage under consideration:
Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may. There is no easy comfort, but perseverance leads to discovery ("find"). The process of slow decay is not questioned but an attitude toward it is formulated: the firm resolve to persevere, wherever the search may lead. "I could meet with them on every side" is now replaced by the more sober recognition of the need to persevere and find them where I may." In this light, "Resolution and Independence" (like the "Intimations of Immortality") is about what Wordsworth refers to as the "property of fortitude;" and it is understandable that the title of the poem should have been changed from "The Leech-gatherer" to "Resolution and Independence." The significance of the poetic experience goes far beyond the affecting impression that the description of the old man makes upon us. The old man's example offers human strength by apt admonishment because the poet transforms him into an image of the human task, of commitment to a vocation even in the grim consciousness of the price to be exacted.

The process of this imaginative transformation culminates in stanza XIX where Wordsworth dispenses with similes and presents a bold and mythical vision:

While he was talking thus, the lonely place,
The old Man's shape, and speech -- all troubled me:
In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace
About the weary moors continually,
Wandering about alone and silently.

The leechgatherer is transformed into a fixed figure in the poet's imaginative consciousness ("mind's eye"); he is endowed with a timeless quality which is of the very essence of myth.
The timelessness is conveyed through the verbal mode where "pace" and "wandering" reinforce the impression of a never-ceasing process and movement. The final impression is of a mythical figure which is timeless within time. The significance of the poetic experience is summed up in what is imaged in the poet's heart, or rather in what shapes his own attitude: "I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!" This is the last line of the poem. No message is given in any explicit way, but the impressions that the poet carries away from this experience amount to a formulation of an attitude, of a similar attitude of resolution and independence, toward his own dual task of poetry and living. The poet will remember the misery and decrepitude of the old leech-gatherer, but he will also remember the spirit of perseverance, the moral dignity, the strength of character, as well as the smile and flash of glee which the leechgatherer displayed.

In this way we can see how the reality of life is heightened through the medium of the reality of vision. This is what I mean when I say that Wordsworth confronts his anxieties imaginatively and overcomes them. The leechgatherer as an image performs a dual function: he is both the poet's alter ego and a premonitory figure. This second function deserves further analysis. To insist unduly on the "message" that the poet is given is to fail to recognize the most appealing part of the poem: its complex imaginative process. Wordsworth describes the complex totality of a mood which includes both elements of knowledge and of half-knowledge. The leechgatherer is presented as bearing the accumulated weight of ageless insight but what that is remains muted. We reach our conclusions from clues,
and half-stated questions and answers, and from the final impression created by the whole poem. We see the narrator-poet in the imaginative act of sharing that insight, but it is not expressed as an elaborately articulated message. The ultimate significance of the poem resides in the degree of enriched self-awareness gained by the poet in relief from the intense experience described. The leechgatherer's speech is described as "above the reach / Of ordinary men;" it is "a lofty utterance" expressed in "choice word and measured phrase" suggesting a sense almost of ritual solemnity. This is clearly in contrast to the perplexed mood of the poet; perhaps the sense of perplexity which the poet now feels was also experienced by the old man in times long past, then confronted and overcome to give way to the calm of mature acceptance of the reality of the human condition. It is quite clear, however, that such wisdom as the leechgatherer possesses refers to purely human problems and experiences. The weight of thought which lingers on the mind at the end of the poem arises from the power of metaphorical language to lift and transform the leechgatherer from the desolate circumstances of his occupation into a metaphor of poetic contemplation which offers both range and depth of insight. There is a sense of homecoming at the end of the poem because the poet has boldly confronted his anxieties in relation to the harsh reality of life and poetry and he has found this imaginative confrontation illuminating. One of the most remarkable things about "Resolution and Independence" is the bringing together of themes that are explored in other poems of Wordsworth. In order to see this more fully we must turn now to those related poems.
CHAPTER II

Footnotes


3 The Letters of John Keats, p. 59. These lines point to the search for human values "within the pale of the World."

4 Cf. Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," stanza IV.


7 "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," line 185. As this "primal sympathy" or "imaginative love" is a key concept of value in Wordsworth's prose and poetry, I intend to devote more discussion to it in the chapter on The Excursion.

8 The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, pp. 145-146. The emphasis on "selfishness" is Wordsworth's.
9 Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, p. 62.

10 The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, pp. 335-6.

11 There are actually four Matthew Poems for "The Address to the Scholars of the Village of --" (1798, published 1842) belongs here; see my next chapter for a discussion on this poem.


The theme of melancholy is central to this thesis, as it is central to Wordsworth and Keats. The dark passages refer to melancholy thoughts that arise from the contemplation of the challenge of the poetic task in the Romantic Age as well as to those that arise from the contemplation of death. Cf. the 3rd stanza of Keats's "Ode on Melancholy."

14 Sonnet XXXIII of Wordsworth's Miscellaneous Sonnets. This sonnet was composed before 1807 and published in 1807. Wordsworth tackles here the same practical concerns which raise the challenge of value and significance in life and relate to the task of preserving the poetic self -- matters covered in "Resolution and Independence" and other poems under consideration.

15 The Letter of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, p. 366. The emphasis on "almost" is mine, but the qualification is strong enough as it stands, however.

16 Elizabeth Geen, "The Concept of Grace in Wordsworth's Poetry," PMLA, LVIII, 1943, 689-715; Geen maintains that it indicates a "sense of dependence on other than human aid."

17 The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, p. 366. Both points of emphasis are Wordsworth's.

18 "Essay upon Epitaphs -- 1st number (1810)," in Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, p. 103.

19 See footnote one in this chapter.
See especially lines 57-61 of "Tintern Abbey":

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again.

The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, p. 557. Wordsworth quotes this phrase from Aristotle's Ethics. The phrase has even more relevance for "Peele Castle" and other poems written after 1805, but I refer to it here in order to indicate the philosophical direction of Wordsworth's imaginative journey even before 1805.


Compare Wordsworth's description of another monitory figure, the old soldier in Bk. IV of The Prelude: "... in all he said / There was a strange half-absence, as of one / Knowing too well the importance of his theme / But feeling it no longer." (11. 442-5).
In chapter II, I have examined Wordsworth's concern with the dark passages in "Tintern Abbey," the three Matthew poems, and "Resolution and Independence." My interpretation suggests that "Tintern Abbey" is largely concerned with the definition of themes and attitudes related to the dark passages of life, while the other poems provide concrete examples of sustained exploration of the dark thoughts which overwhelm a young poet when he contemplates the challenge of the poetic task in relation to the fate of "mighty Poets in their misery dead." In this chapter, I will discuss the poems and sonnets on Burns, the sonnets to Haydon and Gillies, the fourth Matthew poem, and the Fifth Book of The Prelude to show how Wordsworth further explored the "kindred hauntings" related to the general problem of the "burthen of the mystery" of life and the specific challenge of the need for imaginative illumination of mankind.

The challenge of the poetic task involved the question of happiness, of moral choice, and of economic security; in short, it involved the problem of how to live and how to be the Poet -- which was Wordsworth's ideal. Burns and Chatterton offer examples for the poet's speculative adventure into the dark passages related to the
task of the poetic vocation. Burns and Chatterton are not presented in "Resolution and Independence" as "romantic" figures but rather as contemporary poets each of whose choice presents a hard example for the living poets. There is no condemnation involved, but they are not held up as examples to be emulated either. Wordsworth wrote always with the overpowering idea of the memory of his great poetic predecessors in his mind; there are at least two reasons for this: in the first place Wordsworth believed ardently in the need for maintaining a sense of continuity of imaginative vision in poetry; he therefore sought to measure his own achievement in poetry against that of great original poets of the past; secondly, Wordsworth, like other ambitious poets, occasionally grew melancholy from the thought that even such mighty poets succumbed to death — a thought which made him fear that he might not live long enough to complete his poetic task. These are some of the most anxious thoughts in the poems and letters of Wordsworth. The "fear that kills" arises from the turmoil and anxiety created by these dark thoughts. These are fears which all human beings feel, or should feel, but the poet feels them more intensely in proportion to his greater sensibility and in relation to his special task of illuminating the lives of men. The main problem for Wordsworth was how to preserve the poetic self in the face of such turmoil and anxiety. While for Keats such dark thoughts were sometimes so overwhelming that he could "think poetry itself a mere Jack a Lanthen [sic] to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its brilliance,"¹ Wordsworth displayed in his poetry a steady exploration of these dark passages, and even made them the theme of much of his poetry. Wordsworth's spirit in such poems was one of stern
and determined fight against dejection; this spirit led toward a reaffirmation of faith in poetry as a means of achieving imaginative insight. He recognized that a poetry which was concerned with exploring the dark passages in life presupposed a more complex attitude and process than any kind of pure sensation. The Poet's contemplation of the examples of Chatterton and Burns set the thoughtful tone for his more prolonged meditation on the fate and role of poets.

Apart from "Resolution and Independence," Wordsworth also meditated on the fate of Burns in three other significant poems and in a long prose passage entitled "A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns (1816)." In all these, Wordsworth shows a clear sympathy for, and gratitude to, Burns. In lines composed "At the Grave of Burns, seven years after his Death," Wordsworth expresses both his sympathy for Burns and his gratitude to his memory:

I mourned with thousands, but as one
More deeply grieved, for He was gone
Whose light I hailed when first it shone,
And showed my youth
How Verse may build a princely throne
On humble truth.

Burns is presented here as a symbol of light; he was a light to his generation because those who sought imaginative illumination could find it in the "humble truth" of his verse. The young poet is "more deeply grieved" at the death of Burns because he did learn from Burns. With the death of a man of light a whole generation is threatened with darkness. In the same poem Wordsworth describes the "weight" of "dark thoughts" which oppresses him. In a sequel, entitled "Thoughts: Suggested the Day following, on the Banks of
Nith, near the Poet's Residence," Wordsworth shows himself still exploring those dark thoughts. In a third poem, entitled "To the Sons of Burns, after Visiting the Grave of their Father" (composed partly between June 1805 and Feb. 1805; published 1807), Wordsworth again speaks of the "melancholy and painful reflections" with which he looked at Burns's grave. All these poems are variations on the theme of "mighty poets in their misery dead." The poet is very sympathetic to Burns and the emphasis throughout is on his glorious achievement and on his consecration as a member of that great society of the noble living and the noble dead. The same sympathetic and reverential spirit informs Wordsworth's acknowledgment of the genius of Burns in "A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns." Wordsworth recognized that Burns was also deified as a poetic genius by his own spirit.

The thought of the genius and the misery of Chatterton and Burns, and of the land which let them die of unkindness and neglect was always a cause for anxiety with Wordsworth and his poetic contemporaries. It is not merely the question of the untimely and, in the case of Chatterton, ruthless manner of their death but the grim fact of the misery of their lives. There is Wordsworth's keen recognition of the poetic sensibility which Chatterton and Burns possessed, and there is the equally keen realization of the inevitable conflict between such poetic sensibilities and the dreary and conformist pressures imposed by society. Society will not care for the poet even though his conviction may be absolute that his task is to provide imaginative illumination for that very society. Every original
poet has to reckon with the degree of moral and social oppression which society can impose on poets who dare to chart their imaginative freedom and defy the demands imposed on the freedom of spirit. The theme of social oppression in relation to Burns, especially, is tellingly explored in "Resolution and Independence." Wordsworth describes Burns in all his freedom as

Him who walked in glory and in joy
Following his plough, along the mountain-side

(11. 45-46)

The liquids in most of these words heighten the lapidary quality of the verse and the sense of glory and joy can be felt. And what else does a poet want but the achievement of glory and joy? Wordsworth, being the realist in his poems, adds, significantly, the price that society exacts of the poet in such imaginative independence.

We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.

(11. 48-49)

The slow brooding cadences of these lines contrast with the smooth tripping verses which describe the glory and joy of Burns. Lines 48-49 describe the dark passages which every realistic poet has to recognize and explore. This is why the whole matter is expressed with such a sense of personal urgency. The matter of happiness and freedom, of security from social oppression and economic needs, is no light one with "unromantic" Wordsworth. There is the need to adopt a firm and courageous attitude which can confront the fear of solitude, poverty and the unflattering awareness of "poets in their misery dead." The poems on Burns, like "Resolution and Independence," afford him the opportunity to achieve a measure of discovery into the reality of his
choice. He discovers that there is no easy choice and resolves to persevere and to preserve the poetic self in a kind of iron-willed isolation for, after all, "By our own spirits are we deified."

It is in such capacity to generalize subtly, consistently and dramatically about the challenge of life and poetry that Wordsworth explores the dark passages and thinks into the heart of man. It also explains the centrality of Wordsworth in relation to Keats and other young and perplexed Romantic poets who were often so overwhelmed by the dark passages of life that they could sometimes declare that there was little chance of doing anything else in life except to succumb to despondency and dissolution in death. It is significant that Reynolds, like Keats and others in the Keats Circle, always turned to Wordsworth's poetry when overwhelmed by the burden of the mystery and the challenge of the poetic task. The following quotation from a letter of Reynolds to James Hessey is relevant in this connection:

I am confined to my room . . . leading a life of pain, sleeplessness and bleeding . . . I believe I must take Wordsworth's leech gatherer [sic] into keeping.

Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages related to the challenge of the creative vocation can also be seen in two sonnets to Benjamin Robert Haydon and Robert Gillies. The sonnet to Haydon, with its significant opening line "High is our calling, Friend! -- Creative Art", could be regarded as an open letter to Haydon in which Wordsworth was also addressing all perplexed poets and artists of his generation. The sestet of this sonnet bears directly on Wordsworth's courageous attitude toward the dark passages
which poets and other creative artists have to confront:

And, oh! when Nature sinks, as oft she may,
Through long-lived pressure of obscure distress,
Still to be strenuous for the bright reward,
And in the soul admit of no decay,
Brook no continuance of weak-mindedness—
Great is the glory, for the strife is hard.

The last line, especially, and indeed the whole sonnet, is a variation on the theme explored in "Resolution and Independence" and in the poems on Burns. Against the strife and anxiety, Wordsworth posits the great glory and bright reward (of the spirit) which the creative artist can expect from fulfilling his task of providing imaginative illumination for his generation. Human nature is sensitive and vulnerable and therefore bound to droop, especially when subjected to "long-lived pressure of obscure distress." Into this compact phrase with its loaded adjective, "obscure," we can fill in "solitude, pain of heart, distress and poverty," and perhaps even the dreadful thought of "despondency and madness." In his tough-minded realism, Wordsworth recognizes what "long-lived pressure of obscure distress" can do; human nature tends to "droop" because the human spirit needs the light of discovery into the nature of things as much as vegetable plants need the light of sunshine to sustain their growth. In his equally stern-minded determination, Wordsworth's recognition is "still to be strenuous . . . / And in the soul admit of no decay."

In the sonnet to Gillies (composed 1814, published 1815), Wordsworth again explores the dark passages which the young artist has to traverse:
From the dark chambers of dejection freed,
Spurning the unprofitable yoke of care,
Rise, GILLIES, rise: the gales of youth shall bear
Thy genius forward like a winged steed.
Though bold Bellerophon (so Jove decreed
In wrath) fell headlong from the fields of air,
Yet a rich guerdon waits on minds that dare,
If aught be in them of immortal seed,
And reason govern that audacious flight.

(11. 1-9)

First, there is the "dark chambers of dejection" created by the unprofitable yoke of care." This yoke of care may relate to personal or philosophical anxiety; whatever it is, it is unprofitable because it can only stifle the creative energies of the mind and cause the spirit to "droop" (line 10). The young poet is urged to rise boldly, like Bellerophon on winged Pegasus, and defy whatever threatens to suppress his genius. The image of defiance here is appropriate because the Poet is in quest of godly insight and the Wordsworthian approach toward that achievement is through the exploration of the powers of the imaginative mind. When the young poet has convinced himself that he possesses the complex combination of creative sensibility and thoughtful mind, he should dare and soar as high as his imagination will range. These two sonnets belong to the "late" poems of Wordsworth. They illustrate how Wordsworth resolved his own "kindred hauntings" through poetic reasoning in his early poems and emerged by 1814-15 as the sage and mentor of his generation.

In order to illustrate more fully how Wordsworth confronted those kindred hauntings in his early poems, I will now return chronologically to the last of the Matthew poems and the Fifth Book of The Prelude.

In the "Address to the Scholars of the Village School of -- (composed 1798; published 1842), Matthew, who is a composite figure
of school-master-sage-poet, is a persona for the speculative thoughts on the dark passages related to the theme of imaginative illumination of mankind. The special, privileged relationship between Matthew and the poet is established:

I come, ye little noisy Crew
q Not long your pastime to prevent;
I heard the blessing which to you
Our common Friend and Father sent.

(11. 1-4)

The poet-narrator is set apart as the thoughtful one among a noisy, thoughtless crowd of school-children. He is the bearer of blessings from the dying schoolmaster. The loss of the old man has a special meaning for the poet-narrator, and he emphasizes the sense of finality of death in such a way that the thoughtless band may appreciate what has happened: "his breath was fled," his hand "dropped like lead";

Ne'er will the best of all your train
Play with the locks of his white hair,
Or stand between his knees again.

(11. 13-15)

The impression of death as a state of ultimate atrophy is vividly stamped on the consciousness of all. Death is presented as the end of all sensation, the total deprivation of the vital senses of even the most poetic sensibilities:

he could see the woods and plains,
Could hear the wind and mark the showers
Come streaming down the streaming panes.
Now stretched beneath his grass-green mound
He rests a prisoner of the ground.
He loved the breathing air
He loved the sun, but if it rise
Or set, to him where now he lies,
Brings not a moment's care.

(11. 17-25)
His poetic sensibility is detailed in what he could "see" and "hear" and "love." He was, clearly, a man of more than usual organic sensibility who could rejoice in the goings-on of the world. But now the grass-green mound of nature is all that identifies the remains of his physical existence.

The poet goes on to explore the loss in relation to the living, and he indicates the "solace" which the living can derive from contemplating the loss of such a man whose rich life has reached its fullest completion in the organic cycle of death:

Let sorrow overcharged with pain
Be lost in thankfulness and praise.

And when our hearts shall feel a sting
From ill we meet or good we miss,
May touches of his memory bring
Fond healing, like a mother's kiss.

(11. 51-56)

The old Master has now become consecrated through poetic contemplation and will live in the memory of his school-children. The poem moves from the consideration of the physical aspect of dissolution in death to the consideration (in the dirge section) of the sense of deprivation of the living. The dismaying fact of the schoolmaster's irrevocable dissolution in death is overcome, but more disconcerting is the fact that his death threatens to leave his children (for he was Teacher, Friend, and Father) bereft of the kind of imaginative guidance without which their lives would be dark. His death represents an aspect of a break in the continuity of imaginative vision. And there is the suggestion that the task of maintaining a sense of continuity of vision devolves on the poet-narrator, the thoughtful bearer of blessings who "kissed his [Master's] cheek before he died."
The poet-narrator faces the challenge of becoming the successor; he must provide illumination for the scholars so that their life may not be deprived of imaginative light.

In the Fifth Book of *The Prelude*, the interrelated themes of the dark passages and the task of imaginative illumination of mankind are discussed from a much wider perspective; what is emphasized in this book is the need to provide illumination for the "children of the earth." Wordsworth further describes the dark passages as "life's mysterious weight / Of pain, and doubt, and fear . . ." Although Book Five is entitled simply "Books," the first 165 lines are devoted to problems of continuity of imaginative vision especially in relation to those dark thoughts which tend to stifle the energies of the creative mind. The first few lines are devoted to contemplation on man and his intellectual heritage; there is a lengthy meditation on the influence as well as on the fate of works of intellectual exploration which constitute man's heritage:

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Thou also, man! hast wrought,
For commerce of thy nature with herself,
Things that aspire to unconquerable life;
And yet we feel -- we cannot choose but feel --
That they must perish . . . and yet man,
As long as he shall be the child of earth
Might almost "weep to have" what he may lose.
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The things which man has wrought "For commerce of [his] nature with her self" refer to man's highest imaginative achievements; the commerce is with the highest and most wholesome self. The mind of man is represented metaphorically as a topographical landscape, and the imaginative adventure explores the cosmography of the mind.
Wordsworth, like Shakespeare and others before him, and like Keats after him, is burdened by the awareness of the vulnerability of the works of the arts and sciences ("The consecrated works of Bard and Sage") to the devouring ravages of time. He is, however, not numbed by this awareness; on the contrary he uses this awareness to re-establish the *raison d'etre* of imaginative achievements of man's intellect. The poet realizes that "man / As long as he shall be the child of earth / Might almost 'weep to have' what he may lose." In this awareness Wordsworth offers us both a sense of reality and a sense of human value and needs: the sense of the reality of the human condition is expressed in the first lines of the passage; the sense of human values and needs is expressed in the second half of the passage, characteristically signaled by the "and yet" phrasing. Wordsworth is painfully aware of the vulnerability of man's works and even of man himself to time; but he is also fully aware that the imaginative and essential qualities of great works of human intellect have the capacity to deepen man's life and to illuminate his vision of existence.

For such imaginative illumination of life to persist in each generation it is necessary that there be poets and thinkers who can contribute to and enlarge upon the accumulated perceptions of great minds of past ages. This is part of the significance of the dream-vision in Book V. It is a rare instance of dream-vision in Wordsworth's poetry but, like the dream vision in Chaucer or Dante, it is a mode for the expression of a great imaginative thought. The stages leading to the visionary experience are worth tracing, for they help to account for the progression of thought. The poet-
narrator is sitting by the seashore reading Cervantes's *Don Quixote* when melancholy contemplation overwhelms him ("to height unusual"), and he strolls away musing "on poetry and geometric truth." Then comes the dream-vision:

I saw before me stretched a boundless plain
Of sandy wilderness, all black and void,
And as I looked around, distress and fear
Came creeping over me.

The choice of words here is important. The landscape is a boundless plain and the sense of boundlessness is reinforced by the use of the verb "stretched" which, with its long duration of sound, holds our breath while we literally visualise the expanse of land. This sense of boundless immensity is particularly appropriate because the poet has the whole of England in mind. It is, significantly, a boundless plain (not height) of "sandy wilderness," "black and void," suggesting a sense of emptiness and desolation. There is no recourse for the imaginative spirit here; it is a dreary landscape. "Distress and fear" came "creeping" over the poet-narrator, and the word "creeping" in this context moves the experience from the sense of sight to the more threatening sense of physical touch. This is the symbolic landscape of the imaginative quest and it is here that the poet encounters the uncouth shape upon a dromedary.

This visionary figures is an Arab knight who shows the poet a stone, representing "Euclid's Elements" and the knowledge of mathematics and the sciences; he also gives the poet a shell representing "something of more worth" -- poetry and imaginative vision. The poet hears a loud prophetic blast forewarning destruction to the children of the earth. The Arab figure's "enterprise" is to
bury the symbolic books. To the poet's imagination the visionary figure becomes several things at once: he is

the Knight
Whose tale Cervantes tells; yet not the Knight,
But was an Arab of the desert too;
Of these was neither, and was both at once.

The mysterious knight rides on ahead of "the waters of the deep /
Gathering upon us," while the poet-dreamer is left to contemplate the prospect of a drowning world and the seemingly mad enterprise of the visionary figure. The poet feels that reverence is due to a being thus employed because the visionary knight is crazed by love and feeling for humanity, for preserving what illuminates man's vision of earthly existence. This is why the poet is convinced that "in the blind and awful lair / Of such a madness, reason did lie couched." The analogy between the visionary knight and the dreamer-poet is implicit in the whole experience: the poet says

Enow there are on earth to take in charge
Their wives, their children, and their virgin loves,
Or whatsoever else the heart holds dear.

As for the poet,

I could share
That maniac's fond anxiety, and go
Upon like errand.

The poet indicates clearly that this is no fleeting thought:

Oftentimes at least
Me hath such strong entrancement overcome,
When I have held a volume in my hand,
Poor earthly casket of immortal verse,
Shakespeare, or Milton, labourers divine!
(11. 161-165)

The whole question of commitment to the poetic task in the face of the challenge posed by the dark passages of life is here resolved --
imaginatively at least. The sense of mission which motivates the visionary Arab Knight and the concrete achievements of Shakespeare and Milton, Euclid and Newton, all function as examples which motivate the poet to commit himself resolutely toward the intellectual and imaginative task of providing illumination for the children of the earth. The poet is urged on in his task by the need to preserve a sense of continuity in the imaginative view of the world. There is a paradox in the passage, but it is a resolvable paradox: the great works of men may be earthly caskets, that is, subject to the ravages of time, but until that time comes there must be poets and other intellectual thinkers who will carry on the task of imaginative illumination of man's spirits from generation to generation. Wordsworth knows that great literature has "voices more than all the winds, with power / To exhilarate the spirit" of mankind. He knows from his own "heart-experience" that there is

Knowledge and increase of enduring joy  
From the great Nature that exists in works  
Of mighty poets.  

(Book V, 11. 593-95)

The question that arises, therefore, is how can the poet, Wordsworth, allow melancholy depression, the fear of the dark passages, or anything else to sway him from the great task of providing imaginative illumination to his own generation?

The poet deals with this in the further identification which is established between the poet-dreamer and the Arab-visionary figure. The poet describes himself as mysteriously keeping pace with the visionary Arab, although the latter travels ahead of him, as well as at his side -- initially at least; similarly,
Wordsworth describes his own notion of the poet as one who "ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides."\(^7\)

The landscape that is described in Book V of *The Prelude* (in the dream-vision section) is not merely fictional; it has a really historical significance, symbolic of Wordsworth's vision of the poverty of deep imaginative poetry in his own days. The connection is not usually made by critics but it seems to me clear that the first 165 lines of Book Five express a central truth about Wordsworth's view of the challenge of the poetic task in his own days. The sections of Book V from 166-605 function as commentary and illustration of the dream vision described in lines 1-165. There is a close thematic link between the sections of Book Five. Wordsworth imaginatively confronts the question of melancholy depression and reasons himself out of this by re-affirming the need of commitment to the hard task of a poetic vocation, quixotic as that may appear to be. He then considers the general imaginative and intellectual atmosphere (Bk. V, 11. 223-363); he does not find it encouraging because it is afflicted by a general evil on the land so overwhelming as to cause even the most dedicated to doubt their own ability to achieve any imaginative illumination of the world or to restore a sense of continuity of imaginative vision through poetry. He describes this evil

> which these days have laid
> Upon the children of the land, a pest
> That might have dried me up, body and soul.
> Bk. V, 11. 227-9)

The poet indicates how converse with external Nature and with great authors preserved him from being swamped by the general evil.\(^8\) The
imagery of drowning, as used in "the fleet waters of a drowning world," describes Wordsworth's position perfectly. It is significant that the dream vision ends with this image; the poet wakes in terror because he realizes the significance of the visionary figure's enterprise. There is a sense of identification here, underlined by the reverential tone: the mysterious journey of the Arab-knight is an imaginative example of the imaginative adventure of the poet in a kindred task. Whether Wordsworth lived up to this maniacal, totally self-denying, vision of the poetic task is another matter; but what is incontrovertible is that the sense of identification between the poet-dreamer and the Arab-knight is very strong in the context of Prelude V; the passage illuminates Wordsworth's views on the great challenge of preserving a sense of continuity of imaginative vision in his age.

Book Five is certainly one of the most difficult sections of The Prelude; some of its passages are quite obscure and highly allusive. However, when the difficult syntax is carefully analysed and the range of literary allusions is rightly understood, our appreciations of the theme of the task of imaginative illumination of mankind is considerably enriched. This section of The Prelude is entitled simply "Books" but as the poet himself frankly concedes,

My drift I fear
Is scarcely obvious. (11. 293-4)

It is not until line 460 (!) that we are given a sustained discussion on books and their influence on growing minds, so that about two-thirds of Book Five are devoted to other not unrelated matters. These include "Contemplation" on the theme of transience as it
affects authors and their works (ll. 1-49); "kindred hauntings" of the poet and the encounter with the visionary knight (ll. 50-156); a discussion on the nature of the "evil which these days has laid / Upon the children of the land, a pest" (ll. 223-263); the "spots of time" in "There was a Boy" and the drowning episode (ll. 426-454). These are indeed seemingly disparate topics encompassed within 605 lines, but my interpretation has attempted to relate most of them to the exploration of the dark passages related to the challenge of imaginative illumination of mankind in successive generations. The whole context of Book Five and of The Prelude support my interpretation.

In the Fourth Book of The Prelude, the poet dedicates himself to the task of poetry. This takes place during his summer vacation. After a series of imaginative renewals with the sources and creative resources of his poetic nature at Hawkshead, the poet again

Conversed with promises, had glimmering views
How life pervades the undecaying mind;
How the immortal soul with God-like power
Inform, creates, and thaws the deepest sleep
That time can lay upon her; how on earth
Man, if he do but live within the light
Of high endeavours, daily spreads abroad
His being armed with strength that cannot fail.
(ll. 164-171)

This is the poet's rediscovery of his true poetic sensibility which the sophisticated follies at Cambridge could not entirely stifle. His mind retains its active, creative spirit and has power to regenerate itself; it has not become entirely frozen (Wordsworth is here falling back on his recognition of the active, indestructible, creative principle which I discussed as important in his epistemology).
The series of rediscoveries lead to the dawn scene during which his dedication takes place:

Magnificent
The morning rose, in memorable pomp,
Glorious as e'er I had beheld -- in front,
The sea lay laughing at a distance; near,
The solid mountains shone . . .
(11. 323-325)

The creative soul that can create this sense of harmony and unity by imaginatively linking the sea and the sky, the earth and the clouds in such meaningful order and beauty need not be afraid of dedicating itself to poetry:

Ah! need I say, dear Friend! that to the brim
My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows
Were made for me; bond unknown to me
Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
A dedicated spirit.
(11. 333-336)

The passive mode of this process of dedication is important. The vows are made for the poet; he is a chosen spirit. The vows are made at the climax of the series of fitful recognitions ("glimmering views"). There is as yet not steady illumination; the quest for individual illumination must go on. The poet has committed himself (or has been committed?) to the task of offering imaginative illumination to others but his journey into self-knowledge must go on and he still has to explore the dark passages in the course of this journey before he can become a guiding light to others.

The encounter with the old soldier presents one occasion for a glimpse into a life of commitment to a vocation. The old man is presented as almost entirely consumed by the effort of his journey:
He was of stature tall, 
A span above man's common measure, tall, 
Stiff, lank, and upright; a more meagre man 
Was never seen before by night or day. 
Long were his arms, pallid his hands; his mouth 
Looked ghastly in the moonlight: from behind, 
A mile-stone propped him; I could also ken 
That he was clothed in military garb, 
Though faded, yet entire. Companionless, 
No dog attending, by no staff sustained, 
He stood, and in his very dress appeared 
A desolation, a simplicity . . . 
(11. 391-402)

This old soldier has travelled through the dark passages involved in 
a life of commitment to a vocation. He is now a representative figure; 
that is, representative of what such a life holds in store. The 
monitory nature of his existence is emphasized in the condition 
of life associated with him: solitude, desolation, simplicity. 
These qualities suggest the arduous hardship of the task. This 
is why, unlike in the buoyant dedicatory passage, Book Four 
of The Prelude ends on a note of thoughtful, sober recognition and 
chastened determination:

    Back I cast a look 
    And lingered near the door a little space, 
    Then sought with quiet heart my distant home. 
(11. 467-469)

In Book Five of The Prelude the poet continues to explore 
what commitment to poetry really means. The question of the need 
for continuity of imaginative vision is asserted but the poet weighs 
his powers against the demands imposed by the task of providing 
imaginative illumination for humanity. Wordsworth's acceptance of 
the role of Poet even in the face of his grim realization of the 
sacrifices to be made is to be seen in his sympathetic identification 
of himself with the quixotic, visionary figure:
Nor have I pitied him; but rather felt  
Reverence was due to a being thus employed  
And thought that, in the blind and awful lair  
Of such a madness, reason did lie couched.  
(11. 149-152)

Not pity, not tolerance; any of these would imply a feeling of presumptuous superiority which the poet cannot afford. There is too much at stake for feelings of presumption or levity; what is at stake is the challenge of human illumination. The poet cannot afford to pity this symbolic figure without seeming to pity himself. The visionary figure is engaged in saving that which can offer illumination to the children of the earth. It may seem like a mad venture but it is not. The Arab visionary is engaged in that which represents the poet-narrator's highest aspiration. We may here compare Wordsworth's view of himself in Book Three. Speaking of the early discovery of himself and of the contradictory expectations of his family and university, he says:

Some called it madness . . .

But leaving this,  
It was no madness.  
(11. 146-155).

Both the poet and the visionary are engaged in a "mad" venture, but their "madness" represents divinest sense to a discerning eye. The parallel between the visionary Arab figure and the poet is now obvious: the former is largely a symbolic and heightened projection of the convictions and anxieties of the latter. This is the significance of the dream vision in Book Five.

Wordsworth's recognition of the need for continuity of imaginative vision was absolute; his sense of dedication to that
task of human illumination was also absolute; but what was not so absolute was his conviction of his own powers of will and imagination. His image of himself in the First Book of *The Prelude* is important in this connection:

Baffled and plagued by a mind that every hour
Turns recreant to her task; takes heart again,
Then feels immediately some hollow thought
Hang like an interdict upon her hopes.
This is my lot . . .

I recoil and droop, and seek repose
In listlessness from vain perplexity,
Unprofitably travelling toward the grave,
Like a false steward who hath much received
And renders nothing back.

(11. 256-269)

Here the poet defines the perplexity of his mind in relation to the difficult task of providing imaginative illumination through poetry. This perplexity of his own mind has to be dealt with. In Book V the poet dramatically projects his fears and confronts them; he defines his choice and resolves to play his role in the chosen task of providing illumination for the children of the earth. Like all the solitary figures in Wordsworth's poetry, the quixotic visionary functions as a monitory character who admonishes the poet and encourages him through apt example to pursue his task even in the face of the dark passages associated with such ventures.

In Book Five, therefore, Wordsworth is neither concerned simply with writing a tract on text-books nor with describing a transitory mood; he is meditating on the dark passages related to the challenge of providing imaginative illumination for humanity. There is something obsessive about Wordsworth's concern in Book V, but to argue that this Book is about "obsessive unconscious thoughts
about a traumatic experience of death which have persisted since childhood in the survivor is to employ a reductive psychoanalytic theory which is not supported by the evidence of the text. And to assert further that

the whole context of Book V, I think, supports this interpretation of a death in the past as the impending revelation is to carry psychoanalysis too far. Any careful reading which dispenses with extra-literary perconceptions will recognize that the Fifth book of *The Prelude* is, like "Tintern Abbey," the Matthew poems, and "Resolution and Independence", concerned with the exploration of the dark passages related to the problem of imaginative illumination.
CHAPTER III

Footnotes

1 The Letters of John Keats, p. 110.

2 See especially Keats's prolonged comments on Burns in the letter to Reynolds, Saturday 11th - Monday 13 July 1818 in The Letters of John Keats, p. 174 ff; see also other letters written at this period during Keats's tour of Scotland.

3 See Reynolds' despondent comments which occasioned Keats's consideration of the genius of Wordsworth as a help against such dark thoughts in The Letters of John Keats, pp. 138-144. Also, the letters of Reynolds and Haydon to Wordsworth indicate how much support these young artists expected and received from Wordsworth.

4 Quoted in The Letters of John Keats, pp. 119-120n.

5 Apart from the Keats' circle, other young artists who looked up to Wordsworth as sage and mentor included Thomas De Quincey, John Wilson ("Christopher North"), William Matthews, Robert C. Gillies, William Rowan Hamilton, Edmund Quillinan, Mrs. Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barret (Browning). Wordsworth invariably urged "resolution and spirits" against the "morbid tendencies" of most of these correspondents. It is significant that Wordsworth always endeavoured to return these young poets to the line of great imaginative poetry, the line of vision as represented by Milton, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Spenser, Dante, Virgil, Homer.

6 This poem belongs to the group generally known as the Matthew Poems though the schoolmaster in this poem is not named.


8 See Bks. XI, XII, and XIII of The Prelude for more on the "general evil."


10 Ibid.; p. 376.
CHAPTER IV

Shadings of Mortality

The "Immortality Ode" and "Peele Castle" are poems which deal with ways of apprehending life and they are closely connected with reflections on the imaginative faculty. They are both products of the working of the imagination as well as descriptions of imaginative growth. Of all the poems published in the 1807 volumes, these two best represent the transition between Wordsworth's early and late poems. It is not surprising that Wordsworth placed them quite close together; chronologically also, they were written within the same period. These poems have a unity of purpose; they move in the direction of the poet's fullest maturity and the emotional tension which exists in them gains its dynamic impetus from the fact that the problem of imaginative vision is seen within a context of time and its effects. Both raise cogent questions which concern the problems of poetic vision and of human life. My approach will be to analyse very closely the pattern of thought in which general significance is derived from the poet's grappling with his urgent personal problem.

The "Ode, Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" was written during the period 1802-1806, and published in 1807. It was placed at the head of the poems published that year and this textual arrangement, together with Wordsworth's
comments in his sketch to Coleridge of his plan for the arrangement of his shorter poems for a collected edition, should challenge us to realize what importance Wordsworth attached to the poem. He referred to it as the "grand Ode" and placed it at the head of "Poems relating to childhood, and such feelings as rise in the mind in after life in direct contemplation of that state." These hints and Wordsworth's later comments of 1815 are useful indications of Wordsworth's attitudes and intentions in the Ode. In a letter to Catherine Clarkson (January 1815), Wordsworth has the following comments:

This poem rests entirely upon two recollections of childhood, one that of a splendour in the objects of sense which is passed away, and the other an indisposition to bend to the law of death as applying to our own particular case. A reader who has not a vivid recollection of these feelings having existed in his mind in childhood cannot understand that poem.

I am aware, of course, that the poet's own comments ought to be taken with the necessary critical caution but I am strongly inclined to regard these hints as helpful suggestions in which Wordsworth trains us how to read the poem in question. His comments on "a splendour in the objects of sense which is passed away" should help us to deal with two dominant critical positions which have been advanced in the reading of the Ode: the first is the metaphysical or "true philosophical Critique" of the Ode (and other poems of Wordsworth) published by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria* in 1817. "At what time," Coleridge asked, questioning the whole idea of the Immortality Ode, "were we dipped in the Lethe, which has produced such utter oblivion of a state so godlike." The other position is less sophisticated and quite simplistic: it is the popular view which regards the Ode...
as "Wordsworth's conscious farewell to his art, a dirge sung over his departing powers." This last position is also applied to "Peele Castle" and I intend to question this attitude in my reading of both poems. Like "Peele Castle," the Ode looks back to earlier poems as well as forward to later poems, and is therefore so central to Wordsworth's poetry that in the course of this discussion allusions to the longer poems will be relevant and almost inevitable. These other poems function as commentary on the Ode and the Ode in turn serves as commentary on the other poems. The contentious and so-called philosophic generalities in the Ode are also given more or less elaborate expression in Wordsworth's other poems and I intend to refer generally to Wordsworth's poetry and prose to show how the puzzling passages in the Ode fall into place once seen in this wider context.

The significance of the Ode must reside in the capacity of Wordsworth's genius to make a discovery about the reality of the imagination and the reality of life, and in the ability to shed a light on this discovery; in other words, the significance of the poem resides primarily in its ability to illuminate man's experience of his life in this world, and it is not fortuitous that the dominant imagery in the poem is that of light which functions at both literal and metaphorical levels. The poem is based on an early experience in childhood: it is the sense of childhood response, of primal joy:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, The earth, and every common sight, To me did seem Apparelled in celestial light, The glory and the freshness of a dream.
These first few lines establish the doubling pattern which the poet uses to achieve emphasis of thought throughout the poem. The sense of a suffusion of celestial light is created by the distribution of celestial light not only over "meadow, grove, and earth" but also over "The earth and every common sight," so that the particular and the general melt into an atmosphere of harmonious splendour. The same iterative pattern is used in the last two lines quoted where celestial light is elaborated into "The glory and the freshness of a dream." The vitality of rhythms helps to convey the childhood sense of joy and harmony, and this in turn contrasts vividly with the gloomy tenor of thought in the second half of the stanza.

In this first stanza the emotional tension which sustains the force of poetic argument is clearly indicated: the first five lines are devoted to describing that sense of childhood response while the remaining lines are devoted to expressing just as forcefully the sense of loss and deprivation. The opposition is signalled by the strategic opening phrases in each section: the sense of childhood experience is thrust into the past in "There was a time" and contrasted with the present situation in "It is not now as it hath been of yore." The poet then proceeds in the rest of the poem to examine human life as a state of exile from an earlier state. The story of human life is told as that of a journey away from the source of primal joy and there is conveyed the impression that the everyday way of existence is largely foreign to man's essential being. The opposition is expressed also in the images which the poem calls up: there is, for example, the happy child (represented by the Shepherdboy who is described as "Child of Joy") contrasted
with the restless, despondent poet. In the first four stanzas we have an interplay of mood and images: on the one hand there is the sense of childhood response to the unity of being and source of splendour and, on the other, the firmness of awareness of loss, alienation and deprivation. It is this conflict which creates the questioning and elegiac mood in the first four stanzas. The mood is expressed in an iterative pattern:

Turn wheresoe'er I may,
   By night or day,
The things I have seen I now can see no more
   (11. 7-9)

But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.
   (11. 17-18)

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?
   (11. 56-57)

This poignant note indicates the force of unresolved tension and the rest of the poem represents Wordsworth's imaginative effort to grapple with the reality of man's earthly condition after the childhood sense of mystery and of glory has been lost. "Peele Castle" presents much the same situation but with the significant difference that the sense of deliberate choice is more obvious in it than in the Ode; however, the sense of change, of the effects of time and circumstances -- the whole sense of inevitability -- is just as poignant here as in the Ode:

Ah! then, if mine had been the Painter's hand,
To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,
The light that never was, on sea or land,
The consecration, and the Poet's dream . . .
   (11. 13-16 ff.)
A Picture had it been of lasting ease . . .
(1. 25 ff.)

So once it would have been, -- 'tis so no more.
(1. 33)

There is the same reference to a past stage emphasized by the repetition of "then" and the contrast with "now." But the images of poetic thought are somewhat different. In the Ode Wordsworth uses a rather theistic metaphor and a language which makes the idea seem more mystical than naturalistic. But, as he himself would say elsewhere, these features form only the letter and not the spirit of the poetic experience. In stanzas V-VIII of the Ode Wordsworth uses an extended metaphor -- the myth of pre-existence -- to describe the experience and loss of childhood joy described in the earlier stanzas, and to deal with the pressures imposed on the mind in relation to the problems of living in this world. The traveller motif is dominant in the poetic thought, and the life of man is seen as a journey from childhood to maturity. Within the extended metaphor Wordsworth achieves points of contact with earlier poets and thinkers by using myths and metaphors which have been traditionally employed in describing the path of man's life on earth. Thus he uses the Platonic myth which has continuing force in Western thought; he also alludes to the seven ages of man described by melancholy Jacques in Shakespeare's As You Like It.

It is, however, the use of the Platonic myth as a framework for expressing a naturalistic experience which has provoked some of the most controversial arguments about the meaning of the poem; this mythical metaphor deserves to be carefully analysed in order to emphasize the essentially non-transcendental mode of poetic
thought and the source of imaginative strength which combine to
give the poem its independent power of life and significance. Words­
worth refers to "classic literature" as the source of the myth
that human beings are born into this earthly existence from an
earlier state of primal joy. But he is also careful enough to
emphasize it as a myth and nothing more:

Though the idea is not advanced in revelation there
is nothing there to contradict it and the fall of
man presents an analogy in its favour. Accordingly,
a pre-existent state has entered into the popular
creeds of many nations; and among all persons acquainted
with classic literature, it is known as an ingredient
in the Platonic philosophy."

What is significant here is that Wordsworth's individual poetic
idea in the Ode has been translated into more or less impersonal
and universal terms by his use of such a myth, though this ought
not prevent us from recognizing the force of original thought in
the poem. The Platonic myth is used for the first time in Stanza
V which introduces the central argument of the poem:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.

Even in this opening line which expresses a grim paradox (for how
can our birth be a sleep and a forgetting?) the Platonic notion
of the prison-house (l. 67) has already been introduced. The
sense of inevitability, even of stern necessity, is conveyed in
the metaphor of "The Youth, who daily farther from the east / Must
travel." In the last two lines of the same stanza the poet makes
a significant switch away from the child to the man; speaking of
the splendid vision of youth, the poet says

At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.
(11. 75-76)
The rhythm here is so even and the tone so quiet and neutral that I find it hard to accept the negative value which is usually attributed to the phrase "the light of common day." (My own interpretation stresses the positive value -- see especially the second half of this chapter). Having sketched the stage of growth, the poet next treats of Man's place in this world. Man is an inmate of this world and "Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own in order to "remand", or to "bind", the soul to the earth. It is in this stanza (VI) that Wordsworth's ambivalence emerges and it is an ambivalence which prepares us for the irony of stanza VIII.

The central question of the whole poem may be stated simply thus: what is the value of life once the primal splendour has faded and man is left with the light of common day? What is man's relation to this earth? The paradox of organic growth is developed in stanzas V and VI, and reinforced in allegorical terms in stanzas VII and VIII. The sense of ambivalence in stanza VI is elaborated upon in the irony of stanzas VII and VIII. The ambivalence of stanza V arises from the fact that the poet seems both to resist and accept growth. It is with "no unworthy aim" that mother Earth tries to make man

Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.
(11. 83-84)

But although the double negative in "no unworthy aim" literally forces the positive on us, the touch of ironic humour in the sketches of earthly activities suggests the rather absurd nature of routine earthly preoccupations. The cluster of activities which clutter the
movement of the verse is expressed in a doubling pattern whose somewhat indifferent and half-mocking tone reinforces the impression of absurdity:

See, at his feet, some little plan or chart
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral.

Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife.
(ll. 90 ff.)

The impression of frenzied activity is conveyed in a parallel pattern where "wedding" contrasts with "mourning," "festival" with "funeral," and where "business, love, or strife" are catalogued without any suggestion of distinction in psychological value. The sense of sardonic humour is compressed into the single word "fit" which suggests both conscious vanity and stage-acting. The full force of this ironic humour is driven home very forcefully in the imagery of the child as an actor who plays various meaningless roles,

As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.
(ll. 106-107)

The child is blindly enacting the inevitable pattern of adult existence. At this stage the poet does not see it as a necessarily desirable pattern and this is very significant, for there is not here in Wordsworth the conventional faith in the "fortunate fall." This is made clear in stanza VIII where the halting mode of thought resolves itself into a series of apostrophes, and the question of the whole complex allegory is pointedly expressed:
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

The direction of thought in Stanzas VII and VIII deserves some close attention. Both stanzas call attention to the child in its earthly journey of life; but while the Poet's tone in stanza VII is sarcastic and detached, there is an increasing sense of anxious concern for the child evident in the barrage of anguished questions in Stanza VIII, and the tone of levity in Stanza VII gives way to the tone of deep human feeling in the last lines of Stanza VIII quoted immediately above. The heavy rhythms of the last three lines reflect the sombre and meditative mood; furthermore, words such as "freight," "custom," "weight," "heavy," "deep" and "frost" with their long sounds all function to reinforce the sense of the darkness of the mind which is being defined.

The Ode is a sufficiently self-contained poem and a careful reading of the structures of thought in the various stanzas should enable us to tackle the criticism usually aimed at the richly metaphorical portions. What is involved in the child allegory is a paradox: the child is a "best philosopher" in the sense that it is naturally close to the source of primal joy; in this sense the child still possesses the truths "which we are toiling all our lives to find." But the irony is that the child does not know this and so it eagerly and absurdly provokes, that is, hastens, "the years to bring the inevitable yoke." The image of the child is that of one in a state of blessedness hastily taking on the toil and
strife of the adult world, that is, playing at the darkness of the
adult world rather than enjoying the celestial light of childhood.
The humour of the two stanzas derives from the fact that it is
the sober voice of experience which reflects so thoughtfully on
the whole process of human growth. Is the child's descent into
the darkness of adult world a fortunate one? If it is not fortunate,
is it inevitable? If it is inevitable, if it is a necessary part
of the reality of the human condition, what is the right attitude
toward it? In what way is childhood the "heritage" (l. 111) of
the adult man? It is in these questions that a clue to a resolution
of the painful impasse at the end of Stanza VIII is to be found.
In his prose reminiscences of childhood, as given later in the
notes to the Ode, Wordsworth also provides an invaluable clue:

I was often unable to think of external things as
having external existence, and I communed with all
that I saw as something not apart from but inherent
in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going
to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall
myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality.
At that time I was afraid of such processes. In
later periods of life I have deplored, as we have
all reason to do, a subjugation of an opposite
character, and have rejoiced over the remembrances.9

The first two sentences of this statement are all too well known
because they are often quoted to prove Wordsworth's solipsism or
mysticism; but the last two sentences which I have underlined are
not often referred to. My emphasis is intended to indicate the
sense of balance in Wordsworth: there is a firm conviction that the
external world is a tangible and solid reality, but there is also
a vivid sense of wonder and reverence -- even of awe -- with regard
to the origins and sources of the human imagination which are almost
anterior to earthly experience. The balance is to be maintained by deploring the subjugation of either the one or the other. The one view would have this world as a place of darkness, of toil and strife, a vale of tears and sorrows; but the other would have this earth as a dreamland or faeryland perpetually irradiated with the gleam, the light that never was on land or sea — this is the "Abyss of idealism." Neither view is satisfactory to Wordsworth, and he therefore deplores the tendency of the subjugation of the one as much as of the other. It is in this light that the above prose passage serves as commentary on the Ode. The thoughtless blessedness of childhood is contrasted with listlessness, mad endeavour and all that is at enmity with joy. The question is, must the primal joy experienced in childhood be replaced with "listlessness," "mad endeavour" and "all that is at enmity with joy?" This is the crucial question which the poet tackles in Stanza IX and in the rest of the poem. If we follow the movement of poetic thought in these stanzas we should understand Wordsworth's process of thinking deep into the human heart.

In the Ode the poet deals with growth in many senses: first, there is the process of growing away from one mode of being into another (that is, from Child to Man); there is also the growing away from one mode of seeing to another (celestial light into sober colouring); finally, there is the epistemological -- from one mode of knowing into another (the glory and freshness of a dream versus thoughts that lie too deep for tears). I have emphasized each aspect as a process of growing into because the poet sees each aspect as an organic process of human growth. This emphasis
is necessary because my position is different from that of critics who argue that Wordsworth wrote imaginative poetry by means of a faculty which depended solely on the visionary gleam or on any other single factor. When in Stanza IX Wordsworth takes stock of what remains for man to take delight in this world we see that what he holds in memory as the guiding heritage of childhood is not exactly the Joy of childhood. What is first enumerated is the memory of childhood, but this is not to be valued simply because it is a memory of days of delight. In stanza IX, in particular, we have to pay very close and sustained attention to the movement of the argument as expressed in the pattern of careful exclusion and deliberate assertion. It is not for the "delight" or the "liberty" of childhood that the poet sings "The Song of thanks and praise." In this movement of deliberative and argumentative process we feel as if we were present at the birth of a thought whose significance will break upon us only if we read creatively and follow the shift in thought which the poet now adopts. The language in this stanza works on us creatively as the poet shapes his experience linguistically and before we are aware of it the thought itself has emerged with convincing clarity.

For what then does the poet raise the song of perpetual benediction?

It is for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realised,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised.

(11. 145-151)
Here we have the feeling that this is it -- at last -- and we realize now why it took so long to come out; that is, we now realize why it took so long for the poet to achieve the careful resolution of a complex thought. The lines which I have quoted represent some of those which Bailey reports to have been "deeply felt by Keats" "who thought the last two lines were quite awful in their application to a guilty finite creature, like man, in the appalling nature of the feeling which they suggested to a thoughtful mind."\(^{12}\) Keats here shows his keen recognition of the central thought in the Ode. In his reference to the nature of the feeling which the lines suggest to a thoughtful mind Keats suggests at once the mental energy required to appreciate the central thought in the Ode.

This attitude is typical of Keats's heuristic method of criticism which I indicated in chapter III. Coleridge, for example, did recognize somewhat the same essential aspects of Wordsworth's genius, but his eloquent philosophical carpings seem to have been better remembered than his praises. In discussing the "characteristic excellences of Mr. Wordsworth," Coleridge suggests that

the ode was intended for such readers only as had been accustomed to watch the flux and reflux of their inmost nature, to venture at times into the twilight realms of consciousness, and to feel a deep interest in modes of inmost being, to which they know that the attributes of time and space are inapplicable and alien, but which yet cannot be conveyed save in symbols of time and space. For such readers the sense is sufficiently plain, and they will be as little disposed to charge Mr. Wordsworth with believing the Platonic pre-existence in the ordinary interpretation of the words, as I am to believe, that Plato himself ever meant or taught it.\(^{13}\)

Even in his praise, Coleridge's comments seem to make the experience
appear more transcendental than the naturalistic spirit of the Ode would permit, but his comment here is generally illuminating. Both Keats and Coleridge are helpful here in their emphasis on "thoughtful minds." Wordsworth himself was much more to the point when he asked later in the Preface to *The Excursion* for "fit audience . . . though few." Wordsworth is particularly difficult in passages that describe the dark mysteries of the creative soul -- such as in the Ode.

The central passage, like the poem itself, deals with an experience in which the developing imaginative experience is itself the substance of the poetic argument. The critical difficulties which arise may reflect the intrinsic problem of the movement of halting poetic thought but other difficulties could arise from largely extraneous and largely irrelevant assumptions about the poem. Such, I think, is the nature of Coleridge's philosophical or metaphysical carpings. Coleridge does recognize the larger psychological relevance of Wordsworth's thought in the Ode, as indicated above, but the eloquent questions which he raises about the period of childhood tend to undercut the sense of organic development which Wordsworth traces. Coleridge raises the following questions:

In what sense is a child of that age a philosopher? In what sense does he read "the eternal deep"? In what sense is he declared to be "for ever haunted" by the Supreme Being? or so inspired as to deserve the splendid titles of a mighty prophet, a blessed seer? By reflection? by knowledge? by conscious intuition? or by any form or modification of consciousness? These would be tidings indeed; but such as would presuppose an immediate revelation to the inspired communicator, and require miracles to authenticate his inspiration. Children at this age give us no such information of themselves; and at what time were we dipped in the Lethe, which has produced such utter oblivion of a state so godlike?14
I have already discussed the objections raised here by referring to the paradox which sustains the allegory. When Coleridge soars on rhetorically and draws metaphysical comparisons between Wordsworth's unsystematic philosophy and the systematic metaphysics of Spinoza, Behmen, Jacobi, Gleim and others, he introduces dogmatic positions which have little bearing on a passage whose significance is essentially psychological; that is, as a description of the working of the growing mind and of the potency of the human spirit. It is this sense of awe at the almost infinite powers of the finite mind that Keats's brief comments challenge us to recognize as the essential thought in the passage. Furthermore, when Coleridge questions the unchristian concept of death in the poem, he seems to reject precisely that unorthodox approach which informs Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages. The point is that Wordsworth's attitude is informed by a frame of reference which is larger than that postulated by Christian dogma; he works toward an affirmation, but it is not necessarily a Christian or Platonic affirmation. As I have earlier suggested, the Ode illuminates other poems of Wordsworth as much as they illuminate it, and references to other passages in Wordsworth's poetry may illuminate the central thought in the Ode.

Before making any more of these references, however, I intend first to discuss the thought of stanza IX in itself more fully. Quite apart from the "obstinate questionings" "fallings from us," "vanishings," Wordsworth also mentions
those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing.

(11. 152-156)

They are valued ("perpetual benediction") because they cause the poet to question the absolute value of the fretful world around him. The poet does not -- or perhaps could not -- attribute any particular meaning to these experiences; he simply describes them as shadowy but nevertheless powerful and salutary influences. They belong to those mysterious promptings which suggest man's perpetual communications with our internal and essential Being; our awareness of them is almost sufficient to sustain us in our journey through the difficult passages of life because such a recognition leads us to a realization of the infinite potentiality of the mind of man. The poet does not indulge in systematic philosophising about these shadowy recollections and first affections but he does emphasize their value, and that value resides in the fact that they suggest a potency of spirit and significance in life which make it hard for us to see our lives as pointless and absurd playing of roles; man's life is of infinitely more worth than the dark thoughts which oppress him would seem to suggest. This realization of value in life is related to eternal truths of the human heart: that is, to

truths that wake,
To perish never:
Which neither listlessness, no mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!

(11. 160-164)
It is in such quiet but assured poetic reasoning that Wordsworth suggests both a value in life and a mode of thought which can lift the human spirit above this world of darkness. This is the poet's process of thinking deep into the heart of man. The whole thought of the Ode is a very complex one. The contemplation of childhood leads the poet to the contemplation of the stages of ordinary human life in its various stages; what the poet depicts is a sense of the absurdity of ordinary earthly activity; but the poet also sees man in his ideal nature because the contemplation of the origins of early imaginative visitings and of first affections leads to a consciousness of a principle in the human mind which is related to immortal and infinite forces. It is this ideal vision of man -- this recognition of immortal and infinite elements that form the heritage of his early Being -- which rescues life from absurdity. The image of human life -- as metaphorically depicted in stanzas VII and VIII -- which ends with custom imposing "a weight, / Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!" is grim and forbidding indeed. But in stanza IX the poet shows clearly that what remains untouched by the deepening frost of custom is "those first affections," those shadowy recollections which foster genial warmth and counter-balance the sense of emptiness which we would otherwise feel. Hence there is in the ending of stanza IX a sense of cheerful affirmation, even of thoughtful optimism, which leads to the chant-like hymn of joyous song in stanzas X and XI.

It is not easy to make sharp divisions between the first affections and the shadowy recollections in the Ode because they are ultimately related to the development of the same human individual; but it is helpful to discuss the first affections as separate
though related to the "obstinate questionings," "fallings from us," "vanishings" and "blank misgivings." The passage in Wordsworth's poetry which most elaborately embodies his thoughts on those first affections is that in Book II of *The Prelude*:

Blest the infant Babe,
(For with my best conjecture I would trace
Our Being's earthly progress,) blest the Babe,
Nursed in his Mother's arms, who sinks to sleep,
Rocked on his Mother's breast; who with his soul
Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye!
For him, in one dear Presence, there exists
A virtue which irradiates and exalts
Objects through widest intercourse of sense.
No outcast he, bewildered and depressed.17

Here Wordsworth is expressing in somewhat paraphrasable argument what the poetic thought of the Ode expresses so cryptically. The phrases which I have underlined suggest the clearest connection between the Ode and this portion of *The Prelude*. "Our Being's earthly progress" describes a major aspect of the theme of the Ode. The difference between the dark passages of adult existence and the blissful state of childhood is pointedly stated in "No outcast he, bewildered and depressed." The problem in the Ode is that Man reaches a state when he feels like a listless exile, bewildered and depressed ("in darkness lost").

In his analysis of the blessedness of the child and of the sense of organic connection between the Child and the Man, Wordsworth does, in Book II, provide us with further insight into those first affections and shadowy recollections which are "the fountain-light of all our day," "the master-light of all our seeing":

No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:
Along his infant veins are interfused
The gravitation and the filial bond
Of nature that connect him with the world.
Is there a flower, to which he points with hand
Too weak to gather it, already
Drawn from Love's purest earthly fount for him
Hath beautified that flower . . . .
Emphatically such a Being Lives
Frail creature as he is, helpless as frail
An inmate of this active universe:
For feeling has to him imparted power
That through the growing faculties of sense
Doth like an agent of the one great Mind
Create, creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds.

(1850 text, ll. 241-260)

In such passages where Wordsworth is grappling with concepts of human understanding and growth his poetry tends to become prosaic, and there is a discernible lack of the sense of immediacy of experience; the verse is evenly meditative in tone and movement, and the semblance of expository philosophic argument is created. The direction of poetic reasoning is from the description of a mode of feeling to an analysis of an epistemological process. The emphasis on the physiological process ("interfused"), and on "this active universe" and what the creative perceiving mind beholds in it, all indicate the firm empirical basis of Wordsworth's thought. This passage is as crucial to the thought of The Prelude as it is to that of the Ode. As Wordsworth himself states elsewhere, the task of tracing "our Being's earthly progress" is like a path

That in its broken windings we shall need
The chamois' sinews, and the eagle's wing.

Nevertheless, the thought of the passage could be restated thus: the child sees value in objects which he perceives because maternal love ("Love's purest earthly fount") is connected with his perception; the warmth and security which he derives from his mother's
love is a happy condition which leads him to the sense of belonging
in the universe; this feeling of kinship is known inwardly through
the upsurge of lively consciousness and outwardly through an
interplay of response and recognition. This filial bond makes the
child feel perfectly at home in the universe -- at home with
himself, with his mother, and at home as an active inmate of this
active universe. When the Child grows into the darkness of adult
life, this sense of harmonious relationship is often lost and the
Man becomes, as in the Ode, a listless exile, bewildered and depressed.
But in those whom the mode of feeling has been preserved and
matured into a wider sympathy, the organic link is preserved, and
those first affections remain the fountain-light of all our day:

Such, verily, is the first
Poetic spirit of our human life
By uniform control of after years,
In most, abated or suppressed; in some,
Through every change of growth and of decay,
Pre-eminent till death.
(11. 260-265, 1850 text)

The "uniform control of after years" here corresponds to the heavy
weight of custom in the Ode; and "change" and "growth" and "decay"
also express the pattern of recognition in the Ode: a movement of
thought from the timeless and "immortal" condition to the mode of
existence that is subject to the inevitable effects of time; that
is, change, growth, and decay. Life itself is seen as a journey through
time and, on one level, it is subject to organic completion in time;
but there is the awareness of an imaginative principle which grows
with time and can illuminate the darkened path through life.
The shadowy recollections and first affections are shown to be the
formative influences of our essential, creative human nature ("poetic

spirit of our human life"). In the gravitation and the filial bond that connects him with the world, we have the human and the non-human brought together; there is a sense of an order of things outside the child, which presses upon his consciousness; he becomes aware of it as a reality outside himself, other than himself but with which he is nevertheless connected. There is thus both a sense of the mystery of things as well as a sense of the mystery of our Being — a sense of largely unrealized power: "fallings from us," "vanishings," etc.

It is this sense of greater reality, together with the unsounded depths of human nature and of the first notions of the life of imaginative love which Wordsworth affirms. It is an affirmation which is essentially human, based as it is on the general experience of the human mind. Man is preserved from listlessness or mad endeavour by a firm realization that this life of our mortal senses has a significance and some relationship to the totality of the universe. Wordsworth says of the shadowy recollections "be they what they may" because in the Ode at least he is not concerned with any systematic philosophical speculation on them; and even in The Prelude he is more concerned with the value of the shadowy recollections and first affections than with their philosophical origins. Wordsworth emphasizes again and again that their value is primarily that they are intimations of human power. This is why he dwells so fondly on those recollected hours which can

almost make remotest infancy
A visible scene on which the sun is shining.
In the Ode the poet is very precise in indicating that it is not delight and liberty -- which after all form only "the simple creed / Of childhood" (ll. 140-141) -- that he values, but a certain desirable mode of perception and relationship. The sense is reinforced by the following passage in Book II of *The Prelude*:

Thence did I drink the visionary power;  
And deem not profitless those fleeting moods  
Of shadowy exultation: not for this,  
That they are kindred to our purer mind  
And intellectual life; but that the soul,  
Remembering how she felt, but what she felt  
Remembering not, retains an obscure sense  
Of possible sublimity, whereto  
With growing faculties she doth aspire,  
With faculties still growing, feeling still  
That whatsoever point they gain, they yet  
Have something to pursue.  

(ll. 311-322; emphasis mine)

The sense of obscurity is similar to that in the corresponding passage in stanza IX of the Ode, but the poet is more prosaic here and therefore helpfully more analytic in this passage. What he presents is a strong sense of awareness of something to be realized. He expresses a feeling, an intimation of something almost anterior to conscious experience but he has difficulty stating exactly what that thing is. Through the pattern of careful exclusion and thoughtful assertion ("not for this" . . . "but that") he does, however, indicate clearly that imagination is not exactly what he is suggesting. Both in *The Prelude* and in the Ode the significance which the poet finds in these childhood experiences is that in them he discovers and recovers the foundations of human life, the basis of stability and the sources of joy.

The range and depth of thought and feeling which inform the verses in stanzas X and XI of the Ode derive their firm quality
of affirmation from the intense meaning which the contemplation of earlier experiences has for the adult Man. The meaning of primal childhood experience dawns upon the poet's reflective mind like the birth of a guiding thought on human life. It is this sense of significance which leads the poet to discover that though we inevitably travel away from childhood it is still possible for us to return imaginatively and see ourselves as children on the shores of immortality. The thoughtful reflection on those first affections and shadowy recollections is an act of mind and will; its imaginative impetus arises from the need and the effort to confront the disturbing facts of human experience, to grapple with the fear of dejection in the disordered soul, to recover the natural human capacity for joy and hope and to establish some true and stable basis for life. This act of mind and will has the power to make

Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence

and these moments into

truths that wake,
To perish never:
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy.

(ll. 158-159, 160-165)

The meaning of the thoughtful reflection and the realization of the possibility of imaginative return lead to the sense of triumphant homecoming at the end of stanza IX; it is signalled rhetorically by a significant turn of phrase:

Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

(11. 166-171; emphasis mine)

This is both an affirmative assertion and a creative demonstration of the consciousness of imaginative power. It is the process of imaginative return in a moment of thoughtful contemplation which is given here. The imaginative act is made concrete in what we can see and hear and in what we can do. The journey alluded to in "travel" is a metaphorical journey in the realm of imaginative consciousness. What we have here is a concrete example of Wordsworth's exploration of the shadowed depths of imaginative experience. Such exploration enables the poet to confront the feeling of being lost "in darkness."

This lofty passage, with its powerful evocation of the sense of lively activity on the sea-shore, literally and metaphorically achieves a satisfying fusion of past and present in a unity of feeling. Wordsworth here demonstrates creatively and persuasively that the unity of being perceived in childhood is an imaginative act which can be achieved by the poet who has preserved the genial creative spirit in him for, after all, "The Child is father of the Man."

It is with this creative realization that the poet now returns to the images of the opening stanzas of the poem; it is a return to the images of primal joy, for there is no longer the conflict between the visible beauty of the universe and the poet's vexatious mood:
Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
And let the young Lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound!
We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts today
Feel the gladness of the May!

(11. 172-178)

These lines reveal the intricate poetic design in the Ode. In
their pattern of structural grouping, they correspond to the opening
lines of stanza III and share strong verbal similarities even in whole
phrases such as "sing a joyous song," "young lambs bound / As to
the tabor's sound." This passage represents a return to images of
the opening stanzas but there are significant differences: in
stanzas I-IV they had brought joy hardly at all (except by an
act of sheer assertion), and had really led to a full sense of
alienation and deprivation (dramatically and metaphorically narrated
in stanzas V-VIII). Here in stanza X the separation is still there,
even deliberately and rather emphatically acknowledged in the follow­
ing iterative pattern:

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;

(11. 179-182)

but the separation is now recognized as imposed only by time, a
factor which the imaginative mind can conquer. In the opening
stanzas the poet could not yet deal with his "sullen" mood and
"thought of grief," and he could only see himself as a listless
exile in darkness lost; he could not then cope with these dark
thoughts. In the concluding stanzas he has discovered the greater
significance suggested by the power of imaginative return upon
the sources of human strength, and he can now subsume even the thought of grief in the larger view of life. The childhood capacity for a full emotional participation in the life of the natural world through an endless and thoughtless present is no longer the mature man's aspiration; rather he now desires only the kind of imaginative sympathy which comes from the quality of insight that he has attained: "We in thought will join your throng. . . ."

"We in thought" is both a qualified and defiant acknowledgment of the state of things. This emphasis on intellectual contemplation should make us aware of the complex mind of the poet in the Ode. With a turn of thought as significant as that encompassed in "we in thought," we should be aware that a new plane of imaginative contemplation is being defined. The Ode, "Intimations of Immortality," is, therefore, not a "Melancholist's dream;" the Ode neither represents Wordsworth's "sublime sour grapes," nor it is "a conscious farewell to his art, a dirge sung over departing powers." We are thus challenged to search for the larger meaning of the Ode. In the light of my analysis, the Ode is centrally concerned with tracing "the progress of our Being;" that is, it is concerned with the whole process of growth and experience which is common to all human beings, but of which the poet is more fully aware because his task is the exploration of the complexity of self-consciousness within the context of time and space in this world.
CHAPTER IV

Footnotes

1 There is some controversy about this but I follow E. de Selincourt's dating which is not contradicted by the evidence of The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth.

2 The Letters, Middle Years, p. 334.

3 The Letters, Middle Years, Part II, p. 189.


5 Dean Sperry, quoted by Lionel Trilling in The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (New York, 1950), p. 129. Trilling's study of the Ode has been justifiably influential in recent years; I have found his analysis invaluable but my emphasis on the dark passages is different from his concern.

6 "Essay upon Epitaphs" in Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, ed. Paul M. Zall, p. 94. The discussion here as in The Ode is on "the sense of Immortality." I find an interesting sense of continuity of interest which links Wordsworth's later prose writings to the thematic preoccupations in most of the poems.

7 Fenwick Notes to "Intimations of Immortality," Cf. also Wordsworth's more elaborate comments on "Essay Upon Epitaphs" (No. I, 1810) in Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, p. 90.

8 Endymion, Book I, l. 7; "remanded" is Wordsworth's word, in Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, p. 85.

See Wordsworth's "To the Cuckoo" ("O Blithe New-comer! I have heard") for the same conflict and final resolution; and see Balslev's *Keats and Wordsworth*, pp. 45-50, for a discussion of the similarities between Wordsworth's "To the Cuckoo" and Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." For my interpretation of Wordsworth's view of this world as a "vale of soul-making," see the next three chapters, especially my analysis of Wordsworth's "VALE of final EMINENCE."

11 See Trilling's account of this: "what the biographical critics are telling us is that Wordsworth wrote great poetry by means of a faculty which depended upon his relations with Annette Vallon, or by means of a faculty which operated only so long as he admired the French Revolution, or by means of a faculty which flourished by virtue of a certain attitude toward Jeffrey's criticism or by virtue of a certain relation with Coleridge," in *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 130.


13 *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. II, pp. 120-121. Coleridge attributes the state described only to adult stage, while Wordsworth's emphasis is on the period of childhood continued into adulthood.


15 For the best account of the ironic humour in the allegory, see Geoffrey Durrant, *William Wordsworth*, pp. 102-103.

16 This is a bold and perhaps shocking claim which I intend to develop further in the next few chapters. I shall cite the highest authority: William Wordsworth himself.

17 11. 232-241 (1850 text). The last phrase describes the attitude of most of the Romantics toward the dark passages. It is an attitude which forces the poet -- especially the brave poet such as Wordsworth -- to explore the dark passages in order to re-establish a sense of meaning and purpose in life. The emphasis indicated by underlining is mine.

18 The *Prelude*, Book II, 11. 274-75.

19 Ibid., 11. 634-635.
It is to this sober realization that Keats calls our attention by his comments to Miss Jeffrey:

"'Nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass and glory in the flower.'
I once thought this a Melancholist's dream..." in The Letters of John Keats, p. 344. This comment reveals Keats's ever-increasing appreciation of Wordsworth's poetic genius, it reveals some of the qualities in Wordsworth's poetry which gave Keats's response its initial and prolonged impulsion toward the elder poet.


See The Liberal Imagination, p. 129. for an account of this position.
CHAPTER V

Shadings of Mortality

Part II

Wordsworth's concern in the Ode is with the maturing sense of reality, that is, a growing realization of the force of external reality as well as of the reality of the human condition. The childhood mode of perception inevitably develops in the course of human growth into another mode of seeing and understanding the nature of man and of his relations to the universe; and with the poet this also affects his attitude to the materials of his poetry. If we examine Wordsworth's use of pronouns in the Ode very carefully, we should see the way he shifts from the first person singular to the first person plural and back again, even within the same stanza (see especially stanzas V, IX and X). This shift is Wordsworth's way of patterning the movement of thought between general human experience and his own individual experience within the general norm. If we bear in mind what I have insisted upon, that the poet is centrally concerned with tracing the stages common to the development of "our Being's earthly progress," we cannot isolate the loss of childhood "gleam and dream" as the main concern of the Ode. The value of the recollected world of childhood must be seen primarily in the fact that in it the poet discovers the origins and resources of adult man; in other words, the interest in
The splendour of childhood is subsumed in the larger interest which is the development of the human being to maturity.

The Peele Castle poem reveals Wordsworth's attitude to the gleam and the dream more than the Ode does, though I believe the difference is one of style rather than of attitude. In "Peele Castle" there is the same shuttling to and fro between loops of time, between "then" and "now," with the final emphasis resting, as in the Ode, on the way things now stand with the mature poet:

Ah! then, if mine had been the Painter's hand,  
To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,  
The light that never was, on sea or land,  
The consecration, and the Poet's dream;  
I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile  
Amid a world how different from this!  
Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;  
On tranquil Land, beneath a sky of bliss.

A Picture had it been of lasting ease,  
Elysian quiet, without toil or strife.

So once it would have been, -- 'tis so no more;  
I have submitted to a new control:  
A power is gone, which nothing can restore  
A deep distress hath humanised my Soul.  

(11. 13-20, 25-26, 33-36)

Thus in the "Peele Castle" verses Wordsworth speaks of the "poet's dream" and, through the same doubling pattern used in the Ode, makes it synonymous with "gleam", "the light that never was, on sea or land." In his analysis of these phrases Wordsworth is helpfully more explicit than in the Ode. In lines 29-32 the poet carefully attributes "dream," "gleam" "consecration" to "the fond illusion" of the youthful "poet's heart" (line 29; we may compare here "the simple creed / Of childhood" in lines 140-141 of the Ode. The poet almost explicitly suggests that the image of "lasting ease /
Elysian quiet, without toil or strife" could only have been depicted by his silly ("fond") fancy ("illusion"), because such an image does not represent a mature and comprehensive view of human reality. It was natural for the youthful poet to employ his fancy in that way but the mature poet cannot afford to remain satisfied with radiant illusion, even though there is qualified regret for the loss of that youthful radiance: "A power is gone which nothing can restore." The gain, or the view that develops in maturity is emphasized: "I have submitted to a new control . . . A deep distress hath humanised my Soul." This is regarded as a gain because the movement of thought is in the direction of the poet's imaginative and human maturity and, as Wordsworth himself emphasizes elsewhere, the contemplative soul invariably travels "in the direction of mortality." It is not enough that the poet know the radiance of childhood; he must also know terror ("The lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves" — 1. 51) and, above all, the grief or distress which such terror brings to mankind. This is why "the heart that lives alone, / Housed in a dream" is rejected, for

Such happiness, wherever it be known,
Is to be pitied; for 'tis suwely blind.
(11. 55-56)

There could hardly be a more explicit poetic condemnation of what has now become known as "art for art's sake." There is no suggestion that "the gleam, / The light that never was on sea or land, / The consecration, and the Poet's dream" represent Wordsworth's poetic insight. In "Peele Castle," and especially in the Ode and The Prelude, the poet indicates how much he valued the visionary
gleam and the youthful dream; but the poet maintains a certain balance between these and intellectual insight as complementary ingredients of the poetic faculty. This sense of balance has to be understood before we can reach at the Wordsworthian poetic mode; in relation to the Ode, it has to be understood in order that we may recognize the positive value attached to the light of common day. The poet suggests in stanza V that it is essential to and even characteristic of our human nature to have, at one time or the other, a sense of the harmonious union of the self and the universe. This sense of splendour and harmony refers to a condition of being and it is important to note that the poet ascribes it at its most intense to the period of infancy:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
(V, 66)

Furthermore, the home referred to in line 65 is essentially a symbolic home, that is, symbolic of a condition in which the child had felt (not bewildered and depressed as now but) a wholesome sense of belonging. This obviously refers to a period of somewhat undifferentiated state of harmonious existence. There is an aetherial quality about this earlier state of existence, and the celestial imagery (light, heaven, stars) reinforces this impression. The intensity of feeling which the poet confers on that past condition of being necessarily idealizes the past, but it is important to remember that it is essentially a condition of being, not a mode of knowing. The elegiac note in the Ode bemoans this lost condition of undifferentiated but harmonious existence; but the poem is an elegy as well as an ode, and it is also concerned with a celebration; it is much more than a dirge.
My interpretation is that the "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of early Childhood" is primarily concerned with the celebration of growth and self-consciousness. The awakening of the principle of self-consciousness (that is, the thinking principle) inevitably diminishes the pure and timeless state of childhood existence:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy
But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die: away,
And fade into the light of common day.

(11. 66-76)

The stages of growth here are carefully delineated. The period of infancy is described appropriately as a condition of undifferentiated harmony ("heaven lies about us"). The sense of life as a journey is telescoped in the brief portrait of the infant through boyhood to adolescence to the maturity of manhood. The sense of movement within the context of duration and space is conveyed in "who daily . . . must travel . . . on his way," and the extent of this unit of the journey is indicated in the signal turn of phrase in "At length." The sense of splendour ("celestial light") diminishes progressively until it fades with the maturity of manhood. The sense of the diminution of the visionary splendour is effectively enacted in the measured and quiet cadence of the last two lines.

What is not usually realized by critics of the Ode is the fact that the calm suggestiveness of the last line (76) of
stanza V raises a crucial question about the poet's attitude toward man's life on earth. The point is that one mode of existence gives way to another; the celestial light fades into the light of common day. This is the crux of the problem and the poet expresses it in a baffling enough paradox, for how can one light fade into another? I wish now to indicate how though each child starts in radiant splendour and travels step by step into seeming darkness, the mature imaginative view does not present things as darkness but as the light of common day. In other words, I wish to indicate how Wordsworth's attitude toward the thought of grief and the light of common day illuminates our appreciation of his exploration of the difficulties of imaginative orientation to the universe. This is what the Ode explores.

In order to set the full context for the positive value which I ascribe to "the light of common day" in the Ode, I wish first to quote from Wordsworth's "Reply to 'Mathetes' (1809-1810)."

This letter, like the Ode, is concerned with exploring the threat posed by "listlessness," "mad endeavour," despondency and all other factors that are "at enmity with joy." Like the Ode, the Reply is concerned with tracing the stages of human growth in order to assert the principle of imaginative joy in life. Again, as in the Ode, the challenge is that of a search for an imaginative view which can sustain human orientation to this visible universe:

He cannot recall past time; he cannot begin his journey afresh; he cannot untwist the links by which, in no undelightful harmony, images and sentiments are wedded in his mind. Granted that the sacred light of Childhood is and must be for him no more than a remembrance; he may, notwithstanding, be remanded to Nature; and with trustworthy hopes; founded less upon his sentient than upon his intellectual Being.
This Reply, like the Ode, reveals Wordsworth's brave and sane attitude in the quest for orientation to the visible universe. It warns against sheer sentimental nostalgia: "He cannot recall past time" (a phrase which modern criticism has tended to appropriate exclusively to Proust!)\(^{2}\): the poet is equally firm and realistic about the attitude toward the celestial light of childhood: "the sacred light of Childhood is and must be for him no more than a remembrance." The challenge is to be "remanded" to this visible world, to live within the light of common day.

I have already suggested that the value of the imaginative insight achieved at the end of stanza IX of the Ode is to be found in the fact that through it the poet realises that what has been lost in childhood may be regarded as in itself a guarantee of man's relationship to a greater world. This is a recognition of man's "imperial" foundation

\begin{quote}
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, 
Hath had elsewhere its setting, 
And cometh from afar: 
Not in entire forgetfulness, 
And not in utter nakedness, 
But trailing clouds of glory do we come.
\end{quote}

To conceive of the mind of man as something less than imperial leads to "listlessness" and all other melancholy factors which are "at enmity with joy" (This is the situation with the poet in the early stanzas of the Ode). But to conceive of man as having imperial foundations (with the suggestion of grandeur, dignity and splendour) is to be aware of his true nature and his connection with the universe, and therefore of the significance of human life, even including human suffering and death. This becomes a source of quiet philosophical consolation:
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In the years that bring the philosophic mind.
(11. 181-190)

It is a passage which more than any other in the Ode justifies de Selincourt's statement that Keats's Journal-Letter on the vale of Soul-making "might well be taken as a commentary on Wordsworth's Ode on Intimations of Immortality." What Wordsworth indicates cryptically in the passage is elaborated upon in Book IX of The Excursion where the poet uses the same metaphor of journeying in tracing "our Being's earthly progress":

Rightly it is said
That Man descends into the VALE of years;
Yet have I thought that we might also speak,
And not presumptuously, I trust, 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; a place of power,
A throne . . .

The quiet but affirmative tone of the concluding lines of stanza X of the Ode derives its ringing note of conviction from the poet's recognition that the man who is imaginatively aware of the imperial foundations of his childhood can ultimately win through to a philosophic mind; that is, to an intellectual competence in reconciling lost innocence with the world as it is. At the end of stanza X, the intense questioning of the value of life (without the radiance of childhood) is resolved and the poet turns in the concluding stanza to a recognition of the value that is to be found
in the light of common day. To misunderstand the significance of this
last phrase is to misunderstand much that is of value in the Ode.

In this connection, one critic has argued, like many others, that

When the poet "can no longer see," when he squints
at the visible world that has been darkened to "vision"
by the simple "light of common day," it is because
the poet no longer feels compelled as a man to keep
something long since lost alive to the heart by
projecting it into Nature.5

Faced with such mystifying semantic acrobatics, my attitude, as a
student of Wordsworth's poetry, is to return in perplexity and
seek light in the poems itself. And the first thing I discover
is that Wordsworth does not speak of the simple light of common
day. Secondly, if Wordsworth condemns the light of common day,
why should his dedication to poetry take place in the light of
common day?

The morning rose, in \textit{memorable pomp},
Glorious as e'er I had beheld -- in front,
The sea lay laughing at the distance; near,
The solid mountains shone, bright as the clouds,
Grain-tinctured, drenched in empyrean light;
And in the meadows and the lower grounds
Was all the sweetness of a common dawn--
Dews, vapours, and the melody of birds,
And labourers going forth to till the fields.6

So for the imaginative mind this earth has a glory, a bright and
shining light of its own. The mind that can, in creative inter-
change with external nature, suffuse an ordinary dawn scene with
such radiance can establish value in a life lived within the light
of common day. Such a mind can offer human illumination because the
imaginative light that he confers on our every day existence is as
illuminating as the brightest in any cosmology ("empyrean"). This
realization leads to the dedication to poetry:

Ah! need I say, dear Friend! that to the brim
My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows
Were made for me; bond unknown to me
Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
A dedicated Spirit.

If we turn again to the Ode with this context in mind, we
will discover the positive value which the poet attaches to the
light of common day and the visible universe. The movement of
poetic thought in the Ode is from darkness to light, from what is
dim and shadowy and perplexing to what is clear and palpable though
sober-coloured. Wordsworth's reliance on the power of the
contemplative imagination together with his belief in the eternal
principle of beauty as perceived in "this world of earth, air, sea
and sky" and all its spirit-moving imagery" is at the centre of
that weight and sanity of thought and feeling which distinguishes him
as a "complex Mind," "one that is imaginative and at the same time
careful of its fruits -- who would exist partly on Sensation partly
on thought -- to whom it is necessary that years should bring the
philosophic Mind."

In the last stanza of the Ode Wordsworth returns to the
natural imagery of the opening stanzas but this time in a more
affirmative, less questioning tone. The contrast between the
childhood mode of being and seeing and the adult mode is again
obvious. The poet has achieved a deeper and more comprehensive
appreciation of the world of external nature in relation to the
human condition:
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
   Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
   Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
   Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality.

(11. 196-202)

Here the creative relationship between the mind and the external nature is again obvious. Inner reality modifies the perception of outer reality. The imaginative soul is shown as metaphorically wandering in the caverns of its inner landscape; the clouds that gather round the setting sun correspond to the clouds of the inner contemplative mind. These clouds of the mind cast a sober colour because the "auxiliar light" from the thoughtful mind reflects the mood of the heart and is now necessarily sober-coloured. This is the clearest indication that it is not now as it was of yore. The poet is defining another plane of experience. The quiet phrasing of lines 196-202 should not prevent us from recognizing the calm expression of the joy of increase in intellectual consciousness. There is some change and some loss, but what is affirmed is the growth and gain in imaginative insight into the nature of things. There is the unflinching recognition of the inevitability of man's mortality, but there is also a sense of deep satisfaction, a sense of philosophic victory expressed metaphorically in "Another race hath been, and other palms are won." The final tribute is to the human heart (and here we must remember Keats's tribute to Wordsworth's genius!):

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

(11. 204-207)
The spirit of the poem is to be found in the quiet phrasing which ends the poem. After exploring the disquieting thoughts of the human soul "in darkness lost", the poet returns to a reaffirmation of the life lived in the light of common day. Here the poet achieves what he himself demands of language, that "if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, [then it] is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve."

The last stanza of the Ode is Wordsworth's creative demonstration of the way the resources of language should be deployed "to give to universally received truths a pathos and spirit which shall re-admit them into the soul like revelations of the moment." The flurry of images in this last stanza contains a rich suggestiveness which extends almost beyond the Ode. The final tribute to the human heart picks up the theme of the first affection mentioned earlier in stanza IX. Elsewhere, in Book VIII of The Prelude, Wordsworth speaks of the influence of "the common haunts of the green earth" on the heart of man. He describes at length what he himself calls "a dance of images" which once felt "shall break in upon" the contemplative mind with the force of a fresh discovery. These images are associated with past joy and, more particularly, with present renewal, and it is the power of such experience which enables the poet to recreate from his inner mind working on the visible universe a paradise fairer far than Gehol's matchless gardens, or the groves of Arcadia or of Arden. This same thought is developed more fully and expressed with confidence and defiance in
the preface to *The Excursion*:

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields — like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic Main — why should they be
A history only of departed things,
Or a mere fiction of what never was?
For the discerning intellect of Man,
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day.
(11. 47-54)

Here the thought comes to rest as effortlessly as the rays of a Spring sunrise on the phrase, "A simple produce of the common day," and if we understand the significance of the thought here we can appreciate the direction in which Wordsworth was travelling from the Ode to *The Excursion*.

The "Fountains, Meadows, Hills and Groves" of the Ode are Wordsworth's reality metaphors, just as they are his metaphors of reality in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*. They are metaphors of reality because the poet's lofty speculations are based on them while his real theme is the nature of man and his condition in the world; and they are themselves real, they constitute part of the reality of the visible universe. They remind him of the cycles and interconnections of things — of the order and relation of things in this universe. Through their example the poet recognizes in his own consciousness a corresponding power which enables him to see as well as create that changeless beauty that is as rich as the simple produce of the common day.

The quiet and simple way in which Wordsworth presents his thoughts and the subtle way in which even in his highest flight of imagination he always ends in the reaffirmation of a profound
sanity through the use of reality metaphors may sometimes escape us, but it is necessary to recognize how such poetic strategy adds to the significance of Wordsworth's poetry. Wordsworth deals in the Ode with disturbing thoughts which arise from the contemplation of human life from blissful childhood to the period when the adult Man is "in darkness lost"; but the poet does emerge from the dark passage of life; the Ode deals with darkness, with intimations of man's mortality but also with recognitions of the props of imaginative power and imaginative sympathy. The recognition of the props of imaginative power leads the poet to a realization of

How life pervades the undecaying mind;
How the immortal soul with God-like power
Informs, creates, and thaws the deepest sleep
That time can lay upon her.11

The recognition of primal sympathy leads to strengthening love for things that we have seen, so that even the intimation of such a sober truth as man's mortality does not lead to idle tears but to steady sympathies:

And 0, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Forebode not any severing of our Loves!
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
I only have relinquished one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality.

(11. 191-202)

The obscurity and complexity of growth, and of the complexity of self-consciousness of the poet who assesses that growth, are all elements which are important in our interpretation of this passage.
One delight has been relinquished and another is firmly asserted, just as in stanza V one light fades into another. The poet accepts life on its own terms because the mature contemplative imagination recognizes what value is to be found in life. There is implied here the gladness of thoughtless childhood and the sobered happiness of experience. This imaginative insight is an achievement which represents the poet's triumphant exploration of darkness and his emergence back into light.

It is in such passages that we must search for those essential poetic qualities which led Keats to describe Wordsworth as a superior genius who can make a discovery and shed a light upon it. Wordsworth's discovery is that the life of sensation apart from thought is not satisfying to any true poet because the reality of the human condition calls for imaginative thought. He sheds a light upon this discovery by showing himself fully conscious and possessed of those qualities of mind and heart which give to imagination its maturity -- an insight into human life and sympathy with the Kind (that is, human kind), together with an extensive knowledge which can widen the range of the philosophic or contemplative mind to ease the burden of the challenge of life. These are some of the essential points which we must recognize in order to appreciate the full significance of Wordsworth's exploration of the challenge of orientation to the universe. Some of the themes that are not usually adequately recognized in the Ode include human life and the affections, the affections and poetry -- all related to what Wordsworth describes as primal joy and primal grief, with a
philosophic or harmonious ordering of these seemingly discordant aspects in the recognition of primal sympathy or imaginative love. This final vision comes with the maturing of the philosophic mind, which has nothing necessarily to do with having found a philosophy but which refers to a mode of imaginative contemplation in which human experiences and emotions become themselves the objects of poetic thought. It is this more mature and comprehensive view which makes the meanest flower (stanza XI, line 206), unlike earlier with the pansy (stanza IV, line 54), the occasion not of tears or even simply of the memory of loss, but rather of thoughts that are too deep for tears. The concept of active imaginative sympathy -- the concern with life and poetry, poetry and the affections -- is central to both the Ode and "Peele Castle". Wordsworth's earlier poems are concerned with primal joy or terror: on the one hand there is the radiant poetry whose sole concern is with

the might of souls,
And what they do within themselves while yet
The yoke of earth is new to them, the world
Nothing but a wild field where they were sown. 12

This is poetry of the stage when the soul is "not yet tamed and humbled down" by the dark passages of life. This was the time when the poet "held unconscious intercourse with beauty / Old as creation."

This is the poetic stage celebrated in the opening lines of the Ode and Peele Castle, and in the opening books of The Prelude.

Wordsworth makes a careful distinction between these instances of Aeolian visitations and the awful burthen which is the theme of his later Orphelian lyre. The early poetic stage is concerned with
Those recollected hours that have the charm
Of visionary things, those lovely forms
And sweet sensations that throw back our life,
And almost make remotest infancy
A visible scene, on which the sun is shining.

There is also the poetry of terror, the poetry of "visionary dreariness"
as exemplified in Book Twelve of The Prelude; the poetry of The
Borderers and of "Sarum's Plain" also belongs here. Wordsworth
himself best describes the early stages of his poetic development
in Book XIV, for example:

Still, to the very going-out of youth,
I too exclusively esteemed that love
And sought that beauty, which, as Milton sings,
Hath terror in it.

(11. 243-246; emphasis his)

He describes himself metaphorically thus:

A rock with torrents roaring, with the clouds
Familiar, and a favourite of the stars,

and the rest of the argument in the extended metaphor is very relevant
for my thesis.

Wordsworth ascribes to Dorothy and Coleridge the influence
which softened down his "oversternness" and the direction in which
such influence shaped his poetic growth is very significant. First
there is this indication:

At a time
When Nature, destined to remain so long
Foremost in my affections, had fallen back
Into a second place, pleased to become
A handmaid to a nobler than herself,
When every day brought with it some new sense
Of exquisite regard for common things,
And all the earth was budding with these gifts
Of more refined humanity, thy breath,
Dear Sister! was a kind of gentler spring
That went before my steps.

(11. 256-266; emphasis mine)
Then there is this:

Thus fear relaxed
Her overweening grasp; thus thoughts and things
In the self-haunting spirit learned to take
More rational proportions; mystery,
The incumbent mystery of sense and soul,
Of life and death, time and eternity.
Admitted more habitually a mild
Interposition — a serene delight
In closelier gathering cares, such as become
A human creature, howsoe'er endowed,
Poet, or destined for a humbler name.
(11. 282-292; emphasis mine)

These passages indicate Wordsworth's own recognition of the influence and stages of his imaginative growth; it is a growth whose movement is from the wanton stage of "wild Poesy" through the period of visionary dreariness to the exploration of the "awful burthen" of the mystery of life and death. It is this arduous journey toward the exploration of the dark passages that I have emphasized in my analysis of the Ode and Peele Castle. I have argued, for example, that the momentous turning point toward the awful burthen is signalled by the Ode and not by Peele Castle as it is generally maintained. My argument in this connection is that the poetry of the mind that has kept watch on man's mortality and the poetry of the mind that has been humanised by a deep distress are concerned with the same theme of the exploration of the dark passages.

One motif which suggests the attitude that was to dominate Wordsworth's view of the relation of poetry to human life is that of the dreamer. The conflict is expressed very forcefully in Peele Castle:

Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone,
Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
Such happiness, wherever it be known,
Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind.
(11. 53-56)
Here the relation between human life and poetry is involved and the bearing of poetry on life is emphasized. This emphasis extends also to the Ode: the fallings from us, vanishings, and blank misgivings are to be treasured as intimations of the indestructible potency of the human mind, but they need not refer only to dream-worlds, that is, to worlds not realized or not yet made real, for this world of reality -- this world of earth, air, sea, and sky -- with all its spirit-moving imagery and the human emotions of joy and grief form sufficient material for a vision which is compelling enough for the imaginative view of life. This is Wordsworth's larger and more mature view; it is a deep view of life which gives great significance to Wordsworth's quiet but firm emphasis on the light of common day in the Ode or to "A simple produce of the common day" in the Preface to The Excursion. This quiet re-affirmation of the value of the world of external reality and of the power of the mind of man working in creative interchange with it is typical of the sense of enriched awareness which is so pervasive in Wordsworth's poems; it is what saves him from dejection or despondency. He can deal with "closer gathering cares," with grief and man's mortality, and yet emerge with a new sense of exquisite regard for common things because there is an inner assurance based on an acceptance of the world as it is which enables him to end on that note of quiet sanity.

What the lines from Peele Castle and the earlier ones from the concluding book of The Prelude suggest is a growth toward greater imaginative or disinterested sympathy with man as man; that is, a deepening awareness and imaginative acceptance of the actual reality of the human condition. Neither the Peele Castle lines nor those
from The Prelude represent a humanitarian manifesto in the popular or social science sense; rather they express a maturing imaginative view which emphasises man with all his fears and anxieties as the theme and central thought of poetry.

This clear direction of Wordsworth's poetry is more obvious in the Peele Castle and related elegiac verses. In the Ode, the thought of man's mortality signals the turn of imaginative contemplation toward the elegiac mode but it is in "Peele Castle" that the specific nature of the poet's contact with man's mortality is clearly indicated. The contact with man's mortality is more intimate and poignant in the Peele Castle verses than in the Ode; perhaps this is as it should be, for the Ode by its very nature imposes a restraint on the extent to which the personal expression of grief can be accommodated while the elegy is traditionally concerned with the expression of such personal grief. In the Ode the fact of man's mortality is only one aspect of the problems of human orientation to the universe. Both poems do, however, derive their sense of urgency from the fact that the problems which they encompass do exert a shaping influence on the direction of the poet's human and imaginative growth. In reading them we never forget the presence of the poet in the poems, and we realize that their significance should be evaluated primarily in relation to their role in the pattern of imaginative growth which the poet explores.

In the opening lines of "Peele Castle," as in the Ode, the poet confers a sense of indelized quality on the past; there is even a touch of nostalgia:
Four summer weeks I dwelt in sight of thee:
I saw thee every day; and all the while
Thy Form was sleeping on a glassy sea.

So pure the sky, so quiet was the air!
So like, so very like, was day to day!
Whene'er I looked, thy Image still was there;
It trembled, but it never passed away.

The impression of perfect calm, of serenity and tranquillity is vividly conveyed in the light rhythm of the verse and reinforced by such adjectives as "pure" and "quiet" and "glassy." And the sense of the length of such a serene period is given in the iterative pattern in "So like, so very like, was day to day!" The sense of the harmonious relationship, of a perfect blending of all into unity, is conveyed by the poet as he imagines the castle and the sea joined, with the castle sleeping on the "glassy" calm of the sea. While we are tempted to dwell on this serene beauty, the movement of the poetic thought in the following lines (9-12) traverse a transition where such words as "seemed" and "fancied" suggest that the opening impression represents only one aspect of the poet's experience. In the past, he says,

I could have fancied that the mighty Deep
Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things.

He speculates that, had he been himself the painter, then, he would have

planted thee, thou hoary Pile
Amid a world how different from this!
Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;
On tranquil land, beneath a sky of bliss.

He realizes now, however, that such image of "Elysian quiet" would have represented only the golden, almost idyllic, aspect of the shield
of human experience. Since he has been subjected to the immediate pressure of loss and grief, the poet now realizes that he has "submitted to a new control," and that a "deep distress" has "humanised" his creative "Soul." "The sea in anger, and that dismal shore," "The lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves" are all to be commended, not deplored, because they represent the grim truth of the every day reality of human experience. The word "dismal," which is used to describe the shore reinforces the sense of absoluteness of loss earlier expressed in

The feeling of my loss will ne'er be old
(1. 39)

The subject of this elegiac turn of poetic thought is alluded to but not named directly in the poem. However, two other related elegiac poems provide literary context for the subject of elegiac meditation in the poem under discussion. "Elegiac Verses in Memory of my Brother, John Wordsworth" (composed 1805; published 1842) and "To the Daisy" (composed 1805; published 1815) are very explicit poems. In the second poem, the poet is burdened by the disquieting thought of his brother lying in the "senseless grave." In the first he describes himself as "forlorn," though not cheerless. One of his cheerful thoughts is the realization that his verse has power to consecrate the memory of John Wordsworth. In these poems the poet is concerned with exploring the implications of human grief, and his thoughts turn toward the search for the consolations that are left to us in distress. This explains why, in Peele Castle, the poet declares:
Farewell, farewell the heart the lives alone,
Housed in a dream, at distance from the kind!
Such happiness, wherever it be known,
Is to be pitied,; for 'tis surely blind.
(11. 53-56)

The poet has in earlier poems explored and articulated the mystery of his being in relation to his creative resources. He must now explore the mystery of human existence by confronting the dark passages which we all encounter in the journey of life. His task of providing imaginative illumination for humanity has acquired a new perspective. The intimate contact with man's mortality performs a revelatory function: it forces upon the poet's consciousness a deepening awareness of the fact of man's mortality and the poet adopts an exclusive attitude of intense anxiety for humanity. He will now take his central place among men, become more intimately identified with them in a community of spirit, and employ his greater imaginative consciousness to unravel the burden of the mystery of human existence. The movement of "Peele Castle" and related verses is, as in the Ode, toward greater consciousness of the nature of the dark passages and the attitude needed to explore them:

welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here.
(11. 58-59)

In this way, the elegiac verses of 1805 picked up and developed the thought of "man's mortality", and further defined a new referent for Wordsworth's contemplative poetry. Together with the Ode, these poems serve as the midway point in Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages of life: they complete the block
of poems (1798-1805) in which Wordsworth deals with his personal problems in relation to the arduous task of offering imaginative illumination to mankind and in this sense they are concerned with the private voice or character of the poet struggling to become the Poet. But they also suggest most clearly the elegiac direction of the poet's contemplative imagination in his subsequent exclusive concern with the exploration of the dark passages of humanity in general and in this sense they are also concerned with the public voice of the poet. It is in the significance of the direction which Wordsworth's questioning in these poems leads to that we have to continue to search for that value, wisdom, and general sharpening of imaginative vision which the poet communicates. This search leads to The Excursion, of course, for it is there that Wordsworth explores the greatest of the dark passages in direct and mythic terms.
CHAPTER V

Footnotes

1. Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, p. 95.

2. Ibid., p. 85.


4. The Excursion, Book Ninth, ll. 48-56. The emphasis is Wordsworth's. I believe that Keats's vale of soul-making looks back to Wordsworth's vale of EMINENCE and that this throws much light on Keats's acceptance of Wordsworth's emphasis on the years that bring the philosophic mind.


6. The Prelude, Bk. IV, ll. 323-332.

7. The Letters of John Keats, p. 68.


9. Ibid., p. 124.

10. Wordsworth's gratitude to these metaphors of reality is expressed in several passages. Much of the argument of The Excursion is based on them. The following passage from The Prelude is typical of the sense of significance which he attached to them:

   if, in this time / Of dereliction and dismay, I yet / Despair not of our nature, but retain / A more than Roman confidence, a faith / That fails not, in all Sorrow my support, / The bellessing of my life; the gift is yours, / Ye winds and sounding cataracts! 'tis yours, / Ye mountains! thine, O Nature! Thou hast fed / My lofty speculations; and in thee, / For this uneasy eart of ours, I find / A never-failing principle of joy / And purest passion (Book II, ll. 440-451)
And with characteristic defiance of orthodox faith, Wordsworth says

If this be error, and another faith
Find easier access to the pious mind
Yet were I grossly destitute . . .

11. The Prelude, Bk. IV, ll. 165-168.

12. The Prelude, Bk. III, ll. 177-180.

13. Ibid., 631-635.

14
CHAPTER VI

The Dark Passages: The Darkness of the Grave

Our peace is of the Immortal Soul
Our anguish is of clay.

O Darkness of the Grave!

William Wordsworth, "Home at Grasmere."

We may meet again—but I am growing old—and all is dark.

William Wordsworth to Baron Field, Dec. 20th 1828

The last year has thinned off so many of my friends, young and old, and brought with it so much anxiety, private and public—sad thoughts and remembrances which press upon me.

July 29, 1834

What I lament most is that the spirituality of my Nature does not expand and rise the nearer I approach the grave, as yours does, and as it fares with my beloved Partner.

William Wordsworth to Isabella Fenwick,
9th Sept. 1844.
The Excursion provoked a great deal of critical commentary when it was published in 1814. It is interesting that although even the favourable reviews attacked the unorthodox views contained in the poem, recent criticism has tended to neglect the poem because of its orthodox views.\(^1\) A brief reference here must suffice to indicate some of the expectations of Wordsworth's contemporaries. In an article in *The Eclectic Review*, in 1815, J. Montgomery praised the elevating thoughts contained in *The Excursion* but regretted the incompleteness of its Christianity.\(^2\) A later review by John Wilson in Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine* deplored the lack of orthodoxy and, especially, the "utter absence of Revealed Religion" in *The Excursion*.\(^3\) *The Excursion* established Wordsworth as a pagan and a Platonist in the opinion of Blake, who nevertheless still considered Wordsworth the first original poetic genius of the age.\(^4\) *The Excursion* disappointed Coleridge's "confident hopes" of what Wordsworth could achieve. Coleridge's comments, linked as they are with the genesis of the thought which motivated the writing of the long poem, offer an interesting perspective for examining the poem as it stands. Coleridge's elaborate comments are contained in his six-page letter to Wordsworth, dated 30 May 1815.\(^5\) It is an extremely long letter but the main substance as it relates to *The Excursion* was later condensed and repeated in the *Table Talk* from which I quote the following:

The plan laid out, and, I believe, partly suggested by me, was, that Wordsworth should assume the station of a man in mental repose, one whose principles were made up, and so prepared to deliver upon authority a system of philosophy. He was to treat man as man,— a subject of eye, ear, touch, and taste, in contact
with external nature, and informing the senses from the mind and not compounding a mind out of the senses; then he was to describe the pastoral and other states of society, assuming something of the Juvenalian spirit as he approached the high civilization of cities and towns, and opening a melancholy picture of the present state of degeneracy and vice; thence he was to infer and reveal the proof of, and necessity for, a redemptive process in operation, showing how this idea reconciled all the anomalies, and promised future glory and restoration.6

This is Coleridge's imagined plan, or recollections of the plan, for The Excursion and the rest of The Recluse. Wordsworth's anxiety concerning Coleridge's notes for The Recluse7 has tended to give credence to the theory that Wordsworth failed to write a more philosophical poem than we have because he was deprived of Coleridge's intellectual support. Helen Darbishire, for example, has the following comments:

This was what Wordsworth could not do. He had plenty of fertile ideas, but he had no constructive plan; it may be said without flippancy that in the event all that was accomplished of the great philosophical poem, apart from Book I and the magnificent Prospectus, was a Prelude to the main theme, and an Excursion from it.8

My response to Coleridge's plan of The Recluse is not whether Wordsworth could undertake such a project but whether Coleridge himself or any other poet could. The question is not merely Coleridge's love of system versus Wordsworth's dislike of—or inability to deal with—elaborate philosophical system; the point is that Wordsworth could not see himself as sufficiently in mental repose and prepared to deliver upon authority a system of philosophy which embraced a redemptive scheme of salvation.

My position is that Wordsworth was still too preoccupied with the exploration of the dark passages of life to under-
take anything as dogmatic and as optimistic as Coleridge's imagined
plan would suggest, and it is the exploration of the dark passages
which is my main interest in the study of *The Excursion*. The
challenge of literary criticism is to interpret the poem as it is, to
study the poet's aims and achievements. Wordsworth stated his aims
in the Prospectus and in the letter to Coleridge in which he requested
clarification of Coleridge's somewhat perplexing comments in an
earlier letter to Lady Beaumont:

> I have rather been perplexed than enlightened by your
> comparative censure. One of my principal aims in the
> *Exm*; has been to put the commonplace truths, of
> the human affections especially, in an interesting
> point of view; and rather to remind men of their
> knowledge, as it lurks inoperative and unvalued in
> their own minds, than to attempt to convey recondite
> or refined truths.  

Wordsworth's insistence on "commonplace truths, of the human
affections especially...and their knowledge as it lurks inoperative
and unvalued in their own minds" reflects an emphasis which is
different from Coleridge's grand philosophic system that would,
among other things, trace the origins of man, affirm a fall and point
out a manifest scheme of Christian redemption. Wordsworth chose to
grapple with human values and human problems in human terms; he
chose to grapple with the problem of regenerating the human heart in
order to redirect its powers toward a recognition of the positive
values in man's life within this world. The poet of *The Excursion*
is concerned also with exploring the deep pathos of human life—a
meditative as well as human pathos; the poem is therefore on one
important level, a contemplation of the weight of life, a contem-
plation of what Wordsworth elsewhere describes as a "sadness that has
its seat in the depths of reason, to which the mind cannot sink gently of itself—but to which it must descend by treading the steps of thought; The Excursion is, therefore, a highly contemplative poem. Wordsworth himself referred to it as a "conversation" poem, and this description suggests a similarity with the method of the Socratic dialogue with each character representing a philosophical point of view; but Wordsworth has been attacked for employing a genre which did not suit his style. Thus Coleridge mentions as one of the "characteristic defects" of Wordsworth's poetry, and of The Excursion, an undue predilection for the dramatic form in certain poems, from which one or other of two evils result. Either the thoughts and diction are different from that of the poet, and then there arises an incongruity of style; or they are the same and indistinguishable, and then it presents a species of ventriloquism, where two are represented as talking, while in truth only one man speaks.

And Trilling, whose thoughtful discussion of the Ode I have referred to in Chapter IV, argues that although in the Ode Wordsworth arrived at a new definition of new poetic powers of sensitivity and responsiveness (which are new not so much in degree as in kind), Wordsworth could not explore the new subject matter which their exercise required. The new powers implied a dedication to the mode of tragedy. But the tragic mode could not be Wordsworth's. He did not have the "negative capability" which Keats believed to be the source of Shakespeare's power, the gift of being able to be "content with half-knowledge", to give up the "irritable reaching after fact and reason," to remain "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts." The reference to Keats in relation to The Excursion loses much of
its force when we remember that Keats considered the poem the first of the three things of the Age to rejoice in. Keats recognized the unique genius of Wordsworth in the exploration of the dark passages of life; that is, in the imaginative grappling with those very themes which Trilling believes could only be handled through the dramatic mode of tragedy. As I have suggested in the early chapters of this study, Keats's consideration of the genius of Wordsworth "as a help" and the tribute which emerges from that thoughtful meditation all involved a consideration of most of Wordsworth's poetry, but with The Excursion at the head of them all. So that while critics such as Trilling and Arnold may consider Wordsworth's genius to reside only in the shorter poems, and while Coleridge may express his keen disappointment at The Excursion as it is, Keats's comments challenge us to re-examine The Excursion and to recognize Wordsworth's exploration of the mystery of human life in the poem. Arnold claims that "The Excursion abounds with philosophy, and therefore the Excursion is to the Wordsworthian what it never can be to the disinterested lover of poetry--a satisfactory work." Arnold does not tell us what philosophy "abounds" in The Excursion. Now, Keats was certainly a much more disinterested lover of poetry than Arnold could ever be, so that if Keats could repeatedly describe The Excursion as the first of the three things to rejoice in the Romantic Age when the challenge of studying The Excursion cannot be evaded on questionable aesthetic grounds. Another critic makes an exaggerated claim which is directly opposed to Keats's comments on Wordsworth. In The Limits of Mortality: An Essay on Wordsworth's Major Poems, Ferry makes no significant reference to The Excursion,
and he justifies himself on the grounds of economy even though his book is subtitled "A Study of Wordsworth's Major Poems"; "for purposes of economy I have paid no attention to The Excursion, not even to those parts which were written during the period under consideration here [roughly 1798-1805]." Ferry's concern is with the force of the mystical yearning and the pessimism about its fulfillment; and his conclusion is that Wordsworth's genius was his "enmity to man which he mistook for love". Such extreme opinion contrasts vividly with Keats's view that Wordsworth's "superior" genius [that is, superior to Milton, and to Keats and the Keats circle] resided in his capacity not only to sharpen our vision into the heart and nature of Man but also to think deep into the heart of many by exploring the anxiety of Humanity. For Keats, Wordsworth's mode of imaginative exploration is in itself a help to Humanity. In other words, Keats recognized that the sublime contemplative mode is not incapable of sympathy with man as man; this recognition offers critical insight into The Excursion as a long reflective poem.

Wordsworth himself had quite a bit to say concerning this question of the poetic mode: of dramatic, objective representation as opposed to the contemplative, subjective presentation. In a composite rejoinder to the attacks on the non-dramatic features of his poems, Wordsworth offered the following defence:

When it is considered what has already been executed in Poetry, strange that a man cannot perceive...this is the time when a man of genius may honourably take a station upon different ground. If he is to be a Dramatist let him crowd his scene with gross and visible action; but if a narrative Poet, if the Poet is to be predominant over the Dramatist,--then let
him see if there are no victories in the world of spirit, no changes, no commotions, no revolutions there, no fluxes and refluxes of the thoughts which may be made interesting by modest combination with the stiller actions of the bodily frame, or with the gentler movements and milder appearances of society and social intercourse.  

This is a description of the realm of the contemplative imagination; it is a passage which also establishes the difference between the genuine pathos of humanity and "Jacobinical pathos", that is, between the thoughts that lie too deep for tears and the gross and morbid sensibility typical of Jacobean and gothic drama. Wordsworth's concern is not with terror but with the pathos that is in life. His main interest is to explore ways of moving the human heart to salutary purposes; it is a concern with the process of regeneration in the human heart. The shift in emphasis in the title of The Recluse from "Views of Nature, Man and Society" to "on Man, on Nature and on Human Life" reveals how far Wordsworth had travelled from the conception of The Recluse to the publication of The Excursion. In the end the Coleridgean panorama was abandoned in favour of a concentrated meditation on the mysteries of being in relation to the momentous themes of life, death and immortality. Wordsworth attempted a breakdown on the main themes in the preface and the following receive much emphasis:

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affecting thoughts
   And dear remembrances, whose presence soothes
   Or elevates the Mind, intent to weigh
   The good and evil of our mortal state
   (II. 6-9)
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Other phrases also stand out: "melancholy Fear", "intellectual Powers", "the vacant and the vain" and Humanity's "solitary anguish."

Though Wordsworth lists the themes generally in a confident epic-
sounding tone, my own approach will be to discuss The Excursion in relation to these themes from the perspective of the poet's passionate personal grappling with difficult human problems.

Wordsworth's preference for commonplace truths over recondite truths is understandable because the deep psychological impetus which informs the spirit of the poem is the strong urge on the part of the poet to reconcile himself to the terrible realities of human life. In The Excursion the movement of Wordsworth's thought certainly embraces a range of human experience which extends far beyond the early orbit of the personal and particular which I have discussed in the last few chapters; but, in very many ways, The Excursion is also a very personal poem, and the genesis of thought in many passages can be traced with astonishing correspondence to the situations and thoughts in The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. Dorothy Wordsworth's comments on the reception of The Excursion are relevant here:

I know that the good and pure and noble-minded will in days and when we sleep in the grave be elevated delighted and bettered by what he has performed in solitude for the delight of his own Soul independent of lofty hopes of being of service to his fellow-creatures.18 (my emphasis)

Wordsworth's own advice to a correspondent is also relevant here:

"no man can write verses that will live in the hearts of his fellow creatures but through an over-powering impulse in his own mind."19 Nevertheless, there are certain significant differences between The Excursion and the shorter poems which I have already discussed. In the first place, The Excursion is written in the dramatic or conversational mode in which the characters represent various
philosophical positions. This creates a semblance of distancing of the emotions. Secondly, *The Excursion* bears all the signs of a work to which the years have brought the philosophic mind. There is anguish, sorrow, anxiety and sadness, but there is also the basis for joy in human life. The world of *The Excursion* is a world of pain and joy, and the attitude toward the one is not merely morbid and querulous just as the attitude toward the other is not merely facile and optimisitc. There is in *The Excursion* that depression of spirits which disposes one to look on the dark side of things but the poet looks sufficiently out of himself in his exploration of the dark passages.

Although my concern is primarily with the exploration of the dark passages, it is not easy to discuss them in relation to *The Excursion* without discussing almost all of the nine books of the poem. *The Excursion* is a highly unified poem, and even the seemingly fragmentary portions are closely related to the large theme of the exploration of the baffling questions of human experience. The first book, for example, is nearly always discussed as a self-contained fragment—-and it certainly is self-contained—-but its larger relation to the whole design of *The Excursion* is hardly discussed. Although Coleridge was keenly disappointed with *The Excursion*, he still considered "the ruined cottage" (that is, the first Book) "the finest Poem in our [English] language". It is interesting that Coleridge still referred to the first Book of *The Excursion* in 1815 as "the ruined cottage". By that date Wordsworth had already integrated the tale, with significant revisions and additions, into the first Book of *The Excursion* which he entitled *The Wanderer*. 
This in itself may not be all that significant but a careful examination of the first Book of The Excursion will illustrate the composite nature of the character of the Wanderer and emphasize the qualities of mind which anticipate the larger strategy in the poem. The greater part of the first Book of The Excursion (11. 52–438) is devoted to the illustration of the Wanderer's philosophical attitude toward human suffering. The focus on the creative power of human passion—of the creative resources in the mind of man in the face of human suffering—is affirmed throughout the first book and in the rest of The Excursion. In this connection it is helpful to refer to Wordsworth's own distinction between ordinary or popular passion, on the one hand, and meditative passion on the other. Wordsworth describes the fluctuations of hope and fear in Margaret's mind as falling within ordinary passion but he describes the distress of the Solitary (in Book Two) in his quarrell with his conscience as tending more to meditative passion. This distinction is further elaborated upon in "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface", where he distinguishes between meditative and human pathos, that is, between enthusiastic and ordinary sorrow. Under the principle of meditative contemplation which emerges from this distinction, the story of Margaret for example, is to be contemplated with "no sadness in the nerves, no disposition to tears, no unconquerable sighs, yet with a melancholy in the soul, a sinking inward into ourselves from thought to thought, a steady remonstrance and a high resolve." In other words, the story of the Ruined Cottage as it stands in Book I of The Excursion is important not merely because it is an affecting tale, but primarily because it illustrates the
Wanderer's attitude toward human suffering. Therefore the significance of the story is to be found more in its contemplative rather than in its narrative value. The character of the Wanderer is therefore the most important factor in any interpretation of the story. The story itself is a delineation of the human condition, and the human epic overtones evident in the description of the weeds and other aspects of the ruined condition of the cottage (1. 450 ff) are allusions to the Fall; that is, to the reality of human life in the world.

The Wanderer, I have already suggested, is a composite character. One can discern in him the young poet Wordsworth, as depicted in the first two Books of The Prelude, especially; Wordsworth's sailor-brother, John Wordsworth, as described in the letters, and the prototype of the minstrel. I have stated earlier that one pressing urge in the writing of The Excursion was the need on the part of Wordsworth to reconcile himself to the terrible realities of life. From the evidence of The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth,23 and from the internal evidence of poems such as The Ode, the last Book of The Prelude24 and Peele Castle (see Chapter V), it is only too obvious that the death of John Wordsworth was the most momentous of those terrible realities. And I am inclined to believe that the shock of John Wordsworth's death contributed much toward deepening Wordsworth's concern with the theme of the dark passages of life. The letters of 1805-8 are full of thoughtful reflections by both William and Dorothy on the occasion of John's death. These reflections bear a striking correspondence to the thoughts and themes in The Excursion; for
example, Wordsworth, writing to Sir George Beaumont on 11th February 1805 describes his late brother as "loving all quiet things, and a Poet in every thing but words". Then he exclaims, "Alas! what is human life!" This description and the theme which it raises correspond to the description and theme of lines 76-107 (see below). In his letter to Robert Southey the next day, Wordsworth exclaims in a similar vein of thought!

Oh! it makes the heart groan, that, with such a beautiful world as this to live in, and such a soul as that of man's is by nature.... and ninety-nine of us in a hundred never easy in any road that travels toward peace and quietness! And yet, what virtue and what goodness, what heroism and courage, what triumphs of disinterested love everywhere; and human life, after all, what is it! Surely, this is not to be forever, even on this perishable planet.24

Here Wordsworth is trying to grapple with the dark passages in a very personal sense, and I intend to show in my analysis of Books VI and VII of The Excursion how such thematic concerns are transposed into The Excursion.

Meanwhile, in another letter to Sir George Beaumont, dated 3 June 1805, Wordsworth speaks of his feelings of gloom rather than of joy at finishing The Prelude. He singles out "dejection" and adds: "above all, many heavy thoughts of my poor departed Brother hung upon me." And if we turn to The Prelude itself, we shall find the same thought expressed in verse.

The last and later portions of this gift Have been prepared, not with the buoyant spirits That were our daily portion when we first Together wantoned in wild Poesy, But, under pressure of a private grief Keen and enduring, which the mind and heart, That in this meditative history
Have been laid open, needs must make me feel
More deeply; yet enable me to bear
More firmly; and a comfort now hath risen
From hope that thou art near, and wilt be soon
Restored to us in renovated health;
When, after the first mingling of our tears
'Among other consolations, we may draw
Some pleasure from this offering of my love
(Book XIV, 415-29)

I have quoted this passage at great length because I wish to demonstrate in this chapter that the deepening of Wordsworth's thoughts and feelings from the "pressure of a private grief / keen and enduring" reached its culmination in the exploration of the dark passages in *The Excursion*. Neither the consolation of friendship nor any other consolation could quieten the poet's heart. The creative energies of his mind became stifled by grief and his mind turned more and more on the dark side of life and, especially, on the theme of "the darkness of the grave." 23a

It became necessary for Wordsworth to undertake another "labour of love". What this was is stated by Dorothy Wordsworth in her letter to Lady Beaumont of 11th April 1805:

> It will give you great pleasure to hear that my brother has resumed his old employments, having taken up again the task of his life, though not in the regular way. Till he has unburthened his heart of its feelings with other things, and it does him good to speak of John as he was, therefore he is now writing a poem upon him. I should not say a poem for it is part of the Recluse. I doubt not, when this labour of love is finished, that he will go on with more firmness and devotion than he has ever yet done, and if it please God to grant him life I trust that he will perform something that may mend many hearts.

(her emphasis)
The preoccupation with the dark passages in all these quotations should be obvious by now, and my point is that a sense of personal urgency informs Wordsworth's exploration of the puzzles of life and death in *The Excursion*. An awareness of such a personal dimension may illuminate our understanding of Wordsworth's mode of exploration better than references to literary sources and analogues.\(^\text{25}\) In this regard, it is valid to suggest that even if Coleridge's "Ideas respecting the Recluse" had not been "burnt as a Plague-Garment, Wordsworth's deepening contemplation would have led him inevitably to an exploration of the dark passages of life.

The poem upon John Wordsworth is a fragment integrated into the first Book of *The Excursion*. The very opening words recall the lines from the letter to George Beaumont which I quoted above:

> Oh! many are the Poets that are sown
> By Nature; men endowed with highest gifts,
> The vision and the faculty divine.
> (11. 77 ff.)

One question immediately comes to mind: Why did Wordsworth make the Wanderer such a composite character endowed with all the ideal qualities of an imaginative mind? Coleridge objected to the elaborate characterization of the Wanderer, arguing that the "invented account of his birth, parentage and education, with all the strange and fortunate accidents which had concurred in making him at once poet, philosopher [and pedlar]" did not belong to an elevated poem. "Nothing but biography can justify this."\(^\text{26}\) And yet the very significance of these details is that they help to make the Wanderer a truly representative character. Wordsworth assigns to the character of the Wanderer the task of offering elevating
thoughts both in this world and beyond the darkness of the grave.

The details of his life illustrate the experiences and opportunities which the Wanderer's mode of life enabled him to accumulate. He had felt the sublime consciousness of the powers of the human mind in the presence of nature:

So the foundations of his mind were laid.
In such communion, not from terror free,
While yet a child, and long before his time,
Had he perceived the presence and the power
Of greatness; and deep feelings had impressed
So vividly great objects that they lay
Upon his mind like substances, whose presence
Perplexed the bodily sense.

(11. 131-139 ff.)

These early impressions became the sustaining remembrances of his life and the measure of the value of later experiences. In this way he developed a sense of the inter-connection of things which endowed his own existence with blessedness and love, so that everything seemed infinite; accordingly, feelings of littleness and listlessness were not his. His education in books and in the awful discipline of nature brought him more than usual advantages. He moved in the "fellowship" of Humanity and gathered experience from contemplating the solitary anguish of mortal men:

from his native hills
He wandered far; much did he see of men,
Their manners, their enjoyments, and pursuits,
Their passions and their feelings; chiefly those
Essential and eternal in the heart,
That, 'mid the simpler forms of rural life,
Exist more simple in their elements,
And speak a plainer language.

(11. 340-347)

The poet goes on to list the Wanderer's other advantages and these include the liberty of nature, of solitude and of solitary thought,
and of all the varieties of place and season:

Spontaneously had his affections thriven
Amid the bounties of the year; there he kept
In solitude and solitary thought
His mind in a just equipoise of love.
Serene it was, unclouded by the cares
Of ordinary life; unvexed, unwarped
By partial bondage. In his steady course,
No piteous revolutions had he felt,
No wild varieties of joy and grief.
Unoccupied by sorrow of its own,
His heart lay open; and, by nature tuned
And constant disposition of his thoughts
To sympathy with man, he was alive
To all that was enjoyed where'er he went,
And all that was endured.

(11. 351-366)

This is a highly idealized, though not idyllic, portrait; it is this idealization which prepares us for the role of the Wanderer in the poem, and particularly distinguishes him from both the poet and the Solitary. The description of the "just equipoise" of his mind is important; it contrasts vividly with the doubting disposition of the poet and the thorough-going scepticism of the Solitary. The Wanderer's mind is "unvexed", "unclouded by the cares of ordinary life"; his life has been a steady course not subject to the wild varieties of joy and grief. But Wordsworth had, as my references to the evidence of the letters and poems of 1805-7 have amply demonstrated, experienced the wild varieties of joy and grief, and his heart was heavy with grief of its own. The anguish arising from the loss of his brother had disturbed whatever equipoise of mind he had achieved. "The Wanderer could not have written Wordsworth's poetry; it emerges out of Wordsworth's urgent personal problem; it is the answer to the question: How, in a world that has shown itself to be like this, is it possible to go on
However, the poet shows that the Wanderer is not unacquainted with human grief—in a general sense. His disinterested or rather dispassionate attitude is stressed, but a great deal of observation and reflection on suffering humanity has been a formative element in the Wanderer's character:

for, in himself
Happy, and quiet in his cheerfulness,
He had no painful pressure from without
That made him turn aside from wretchedness
With coward fears. He could afford to suffer
With those whom he saw suffer. Hence it came
That in our best experience he was rich,
And in wisdom of our daily life.
(ll. 366-373 [Wordsworth's emphasis])

Vigorous in health, of hopeful spirits, undamped
By worldly-mindedness or anxious care;
Observant, studious, thoughtful, and refreshed
By knowledge gathered up from day to day;
Thus had he lived a long and innocent life.
(ll. 392-396)

His dispassionate participation is not due solely to the fact that his heart is unoccupied by sorrow of its own but also to the fact that his mode of life has cultivated in him a mind of such fortitude that grief cannot easily destroy his equanimity. He has hopeful spirits—as contrasted with the languid spirits of the Solitary.
The range of his experience and the human wisdom which he has gained from such range of experience is emphasized, and the rest of the poem provides situations where the sufficiency or limitations of his wisdom are to be tested. His vigorous human-heartedness is also stressed as a vital element in the peculiarly open disposition which has built up his being and his being is described as "sublime and comprehensive" because he has through the years cultivated the habit
of reflection; his wisdom is described as that which works through patience "In oft-recurring hours of sober thought" (l. 240).

He is shown to have weathered even the trials of time:

Time had compressed the freshness of his cheek
Into a narrower circle of deep red,
But had not tamed his eye; that, under brows
Shaggy and grey, had meanings which it brought
From years of youth; which, like a Being made
Of many Beings, he had wondrous skill
To blend with knowledge of the years to come,
Human, or such as lie beyond the grave.
(11. 425-433)

In this sketch we are given a sense of the continuity of imaginative growth which enables the Wanderer to maintain that just equipoise which neither ordinary human fears nor the darker thoughts of death--of the darkness of the grave--can disturb.

The weight and sanity of thought and feeling which is encompassed in The Excursion arise from intense pondering on human experience, and in the opening of the first Book of the poem Wordsworth carefully delineates the character whose range of experience in the fellowship of Humanity qualifies him to represent a philosophical point of view that is based on the common sympathies of Humanity. My approach to the story of Margaret is, therefore, to treat it as the first in a series of tales designed to illustrate a principle of imaginative contemplation; the story of Margaret, seen from the point of view of The Wanderer, does not merely provide an illustration of the vicissitude of human life but primarily provides material for contemplating the creative resources of the human heart in response to human suffering. This is the Wanderer's mode of contemplating the dark passages of life. This is why he begins
the story with a prefatory philosophical reflection on the role of nature in the strong creative power of human passion. After reflecting briefly on the inevitability of change and loss in the human condition, the Wanderer declares:

The Poets, in their elegies and songs
Lamenting the departed, call the groves,
They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,
And senseless rocks; nor idly; for they speak
In these their invocations, with a will
Obedient to the strong creative power
Of human passion. Sympathies there are
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,
That steal upon the meditative mind,
And grow with thought.

(11. 475-484)

It was not for nothing that Wordsworth added this passage in the 1814 text; it has a significance both for the tale which follows and for Book IV and subsequent Books of The Excursion. The emphasis is on the concept of a creative power in the mind of man and, especially, on the concept of imaginative sympathy or intellectual love.

The story is occasioned by natural reminders: the quiet pool and the "fragment of a wooden bowl, / Green with the moss of years, and subject only / To the soft handling of the elements."

And the story of Margaret--and Robert--is told with classic economy:

She is dead,
The light extinguished of her lonely hut,
The hut itself abandoned to decay,
And she forgotten in the quiet grave.

(11. 507-510)

The details are graphically filled in but even though it is a deeply moving story, the Wanderer abruptly breaks off and breaks out in a philosophical reflection:
'Tis now the hour of deepest noon.  
At this still season of repose and peace,  
This hour when all things which are not at rest  
Are cheerful ...  
Why should a tear be on an old Man's cheek?  
Why should we thus, with an untoward mind,  
And in the weakness of humanity,  
From natural wisdom turn our hearts away;  
To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears;  
And, feeding on disquiet, thus disturb  
The calm of nature with our restless thoughts?

The Wanderer's mode of contemplating human suffering is not to allow the human mind to feed on disquiet; it is rather to weigh the good and evil of our earthly state, in this case to understand the consolations and the creative resources of the human spirit. The point is made by the Wanderer himself. He plays down the narrative by describing the story as "a common tale":

An ordinary sorrow of man's life,  
A tale of silent suffering, hardly clothed  
In bodily form.  

(11. 637-639)

But such ordinary things of life constitute the most perplexing of the dark passages of life; and they are ample material for the philosophical contemplation of life, especially because it is the law of human nature that

there is often found  
In mournful thoughts, and always might be found,  
A power to virtue friendly.  

(11. 632-634)

This is the justification for telling the story for, were it otherwise,  
weren't not so,  
I am a dreamer among men, indeed  
An idle dreamer!  

(11. 634-636)

The emphasis in the story of Margaret is placed in the exploration of the resources of the human spirit. The Wanderer's attitude toward
the influence of nature as one of the consolations of the human
spirit in time of grief is very important.

Though the story is a poignant one, the spirit in which
the Wanderer tells it produces a salutary tranquility rather than a
morbid impression. Even Margaret in her suffering attains a
period of insight into human nature which enables her to achieve
an equipoise of mind:

I have slept
Weeping, and weeping have I waked; my tears
Have flowed as if my body were not such
As others are; and I could never die.
But I am now in mind and in my heart
More easy.

(11. 769-774)

In like manner the story produces a sobering impression on the
Poet who discovers in reviewing the story that

it seemed
To comfort me while with a brother's love
I blessed her in the impotence of grief.
Then towards the cottage I returned; and traced
Fondly, though with an interest more mild,
The secret spirit of humanity
Which, 'mid her plants, and weeds, and flowers,
And silent overgrowings, still survived.

(11. 921-930)

What is particularly significant here is the way in which the Poet
recognizes the common spirit of humanity which operates almost
imperceptibly as a bond between all human beings; his primal
sympathies operate quietly to lead him to a recognition of the natural
tendencies in human nature. The Wanderer observes this process of
recognition and with great dramatic effect emphasizes the point,
stating that
consolation springs
From sources deeper far than deepest pain
For the meek sufferer. Why then should we read
The forms of things with an unworthy eye?
She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.
(11. 936-941)

This last line suggests much more than meets the eye. There are more deaths in The Excursion than in any other poem of its kind but all the dead sleep in the calm earth. The Wanderer turns from oppressive thoughts of man's mortality to contemplate the condition of man's life; and what he finds in nature is an image of tranquility (11. 941 ff.) In such mood of contemplation he realizes that

What we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
That passing shows of Being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream [that could not live Where meditation was].30

What meditation leads to remains the burden of the rest of the poem; but while the Wanderer finds much value and support in the meditative sympathies of man and in the indestructibility of the principle of life in the human soul, the Solitary scoffs at them and it is in the interplay between these two characters in a kind of Socratic dialogue that the poem derives its narrative dramatic force.

In Book II the Solitary and the Wanderer are sharply contrasted. The Wanderer is described as endowed with an overflowing spirit of human-heartedness:

Rich in love
And sweet humanity, he was, himself,
To the degree that he desired, beloved.
(11. 54-56)

We are also told that not even the noblest of ancient minstrels
Drew happier, loftier, more empassioned, thoughts
From his long journeyings and eventful life,
Than this obscure Itinerant had skill
To gather, ranging through the tamer ground
Of these our unimaginative days.

(11. 20-24)

Here is one instance of the sublime egotism of the poet Wordsworth—the kind of pride, egotism and confidence which Keats shared and which both recognized as necessary for the production of great poems in The Romantic Age. Wordsworth describes his age here, as in Book Five of The Prelude (see Chapter III), as "unimaginative," and yet he goes on to indicate precisely how a sense of continuity of imaginative view of the world could be developed in order to carry on the task of providing illumination for the children of the earth.

To the young poet whose "favorite school / Had been the fields, the road, and rural lanes," the Wanderer is a "light unfailing."

The Wanderer represents the sense of life and love; he also possesses a sense of the awe and reverence in human life. By contrast, The Solitary has forfeited all joy in human nature and, oppressed by the burthen of existence, he is now steeped in a self-indulging spleen. Two of the causes of this development are briefly stated by the Wanderer: the first is the loss of his family which is poignantly described with his earlier joy vividly contrasted with his grief:

Youth's season yet with him was scarcely past,
And she was in youth's prime. How free their love,
How full their joy! Till, pitiable doom!
In the short course of one undreaded year,
Death blasted all. Death suddenly o'erthrew
Two lovely Children—all that they possessed!
The Mother followed:—miserably bare
The one Survivor stood—compelled
To hold communion with the grave, and face
With pain the regions of eternity.

(11. 195-205)
The anguish of this unmitigated grief led to apathy which was, however, broken by the glorious promise of the French Revolution. But this "proud and most presumptuous confidence / In the transcendent wisdom of the age / And her discernment" only led through utter disappointment to a total retreat and hardened apathy. His vale of retreat which is bounded by a dreary plain is described as

Shut out from all the world!
Urn-like it was in shape, deep as an urn.

(11. 331-332)

The poet would like to think that life here would be exempt from the common penalties of mortal life.
Sickness, or accident, or grief, or pain.

(11. 367-368)

But even here there is human grief:

On these and kindred thoughts intent I lay
In silence musing by my Comrade's side,
He also silent; when from out the heart
Of that profound abyss a solemn voice
Or several voices in one solemn sound,
Was heard ascending; mournful, deep, and slow
The cadence, as of psalms—a funeral dirge!

(11. 370-376)

This leads in the rest of Book II and in all of Book III to a discussion on human life and the causes of despondency. The profound expanse of mountain grandeur excites lofty thoughts in the Wanderer:

Some shadowy intimations haunt me here,
That in these shows a chronicle survives
Of purposes akin to those of Man
But wrought with mightier arm than now prevails.
--Voiceless the stream descends into the gulf
With timid lapse;--and lo! while in this straight
I stand--the chasm of sky above my head
Is heaven's profoundest azure; no domain
Forickle, short-lived clouds to occupy,
Or pass through; but rather an abyss
In which the everlasting stars abide

(11. 88-97, Book III)
It is a situation in which both littleness and listlessness of mind are banished. Here the mind can be led in its excursive journey of contemplation until the scale 
Of time and conscious nature disappear, 
Lost in unsearchable eternity! 
(Bk. III, ll. 110-113)

For the Solitary, however, the images in the valley are fraught rather with feelings of depression than with those of delight or exaltation: they are "the sport of Nature, aided by blind Chance / Rudely to mock the works of toiling Man," and they remind him of the ruins of time through all ancient civilisations—Grecian, Roman, Egyptian or Syrian. The Solitary's rejoinder to the claim that these grand objects inspire contemplation is 

What avails imagination high 
Of questions deep --- if nowhere --- 
Can be attained, -- a better sanctuary 
From doubt and sorrow, than the senseless grave? 
(Bk. III, ll. 210-224)

This argument comes to rest on one of the root causes of the Solitary's Despondency: the fear of the senseless grave. This is one of the aspects of the dark passages which Wordsworth's genius explores. Does human life evolve from darkness and end in the darkness of the grave? Wordsworth raises this question in the elegiac stanzas of 1805 (see Chapter V), and with great force in Ecclesiastical Sonnets, Part I, XV and XVI, where, following Bede, he versifies the thought of the Anglo-Saxon Sage who told Edwin that man's life is like the flight of a sparrow, from darkness unto darkness. 34
The thought of the darkness of the grave is one of the main causes of the Solitary's despondency in Book III of *The Excursion*. The Solitary concedes that, like the Wanderer, he too had experienced the dream-like joys of childhood in a bright and breathing world. The problem is that he cannot continue to enjoy the vital beams of present sunshine. He would like to muse on what "from oldest time we have been told / Of your bright forms and glorious faculties, / And with the imagination rest content / Not wishing more." But he can no longer rest satisfied upon earth's native energies as simply a child of earth. His argument gains force from his pointed contrast between his past joys (ll. 421-343) and his melancholy reflection on the reality of the human condition:

> What good is given to men,  
> More solid than the gilded clouds of heaven?—  
> None! 'tis the general plaint of human kind  
> In solitude: and mutually addressed  
> From each to all.  
> (Il. 437-442)

The solitary then goes on, in this bitter language of the heart, to describe Mutability as Nature's bane, and argues persuasively that hope and joy are both so fragile that they are all too easily replaced by fear, doubt and agony. In lines 480-635 the Solitary describes the operation of mutability as applied to his own particular case. He recalls in glowing terms the seven years of bliss when he, with thoughts and wishes bounded to this earth, lived and breathed in gratitude for human joys till

> From some dark seat of fatal power was urged  
> A claim that shattered all—Our blooming girl,  
> Caught in the gripe of death, with such brief time  
> To struggle in—was conveyed  
> From us to inaccessible worlds, to regions
Where height, or depth, admits not the approach
Of living man, though longing to pursue.
--With even as brief a warning--and how soon,
With what short interval of time between.
I tremble yet to think of--our last prop,
Our happy life's only remaining stay--
The brother followed; and was seen no more!

(11. 636-649)

Phrases such as "dark seat of fatal power" and "inaccessible worlds" emphasize the dilemma of man in relation to the forces which govern his life and death.

In this and other passages, the Solitary's sense of futility in the face of the dark passages of life is so moving because his scepticism derives from the urgency of personal experience--unlike the Wanderer's philosophy. The note of authenticity in the Solitary's narrative gains its momentum from the personal experience of Wordsworth to which the Solitary's experience corresponds in almost every detail. In his letter to Catherine Clarkson, dated June 11, 1812, Wordsworth says:

I write with a full heart; with some sorrow, But most oppressed by an awful sense of the uncertainty and instability of all human things.

And Dorothy writing to Catherine Clarkson on 5 Jan. 1813 adds: "the history of the last five weeks have been a time of anguish--sorrow--anxiety--hope and sadness." All this refers to the deaths of Catherine and Thomas, children of William Wordsworth. In her letter to Catherine Clarkson, Dorothy adds significantly: "William has begun to look into his poem the Recluse." This reference is to The Excursion, to which Wordsworth now added the passage, which I have quoted above, describing the death of the Solitary's two children. The passage describing the affliction of the Solitary's
wife, II lines 650-668, also corresponds almost word for word with the maternal grief of Mary Wordsworth on the occasion of the death of Catherine Wordsworth, as described by Wordsworth in a letter to Christopher Wordsworth, dated 18th June 1818:

> neither thought nor religion nor the endeavours of friends, can at once quiet a heart that has been disturbed by such affliction --- She [Mary Wordsworth] suffers more than in the ordinary course of nature from the tender connection and dependence in which this child has long existed with her, or hung upon her maternal care; and I feel that the privation will be a sorrow for life.

Wordsworth himself was to express his poignant grief in a sonnet composed in 1812 and published in 1815, of which I will have more to say in my concluding chapter. I have alluded to these correspondences primarily to illustrate more fully the sense of personal urgency which informs the Solitary's position.

> It is noteworthy that the Wanderer, whose position represents philosophical optimism based on the concept of a superintending benevolence, has not experienced any personal grief as keen as the deprivations of the Solitary. Even the Solitary's wife is taken away from him and he is left miserably bare and deprived, a solitary twig in the storm of life. This is the basis of his scepticism and despondency:

> If she, of life
> Blameless, so intimate with love and joy
> And all the tender motions of the soul,
> Had been supplanted, could I hope to stand—
> Infirm, dependent, and now destitute?
> (11. 681-685)

With all the virtue and goodness, all the triumph of disinterested love, the question remains: Human life, after all, what is it? The Solitary finally turns to the only other means of consolation for an
intellectual mind, to poets and other imaginative thinkers who might serve as friends and companions of his solitary existence and elevate him above his poor weak self. The main burden of his thought is the utter finality of death. Is there nothing beyond this life, beyond the darkness of the grave? Do all the joys and virtues of humanity end in the darkness of the grave? Were we made for this? What consciousness does the human spirit retain of former loves and human interests? Even poets and philosophers fail to offer satisfactory answers to these searching questions on the value and destiny of life:

Then my soul
Turned inward,—to examine of what stuff
Time's fetters are composed; and life was put
To inquisition, long and profitless!
By pain of heart—now checked— and now impelled—
The intellectual power, through words and things,
Went sounding on, a dim and perilous way!

(11. 695-700)

Discussions of The Excursion which emphasize the failure of the French Revolution as the main cause of the Solitary's despondency fail to recognize the true nature of the dark passages which represent the main reason for the Solitary's despondency. The order in which the Solitary himself—and the Wanderer in Book II—lists the causes of his fixed despondency is very important, and this order has to be understood in order to understand the dark passages which the poet is exploring in The Excursion. The Solitary's unmitigated loss is the first and most poignant, cause adduced to account for his despondency. The second cause is also personal: his languor and depression of mind is accentuated
by his want of faith in the great truths of religion. The infallible support of Christians fails him because in the face of his total deprivation it no longer evokes a sufficiently human response from him. He is finally aroused to the great human issue of the French Revolution with all its promise of the dawn of a golden age (ll. 706-912); but even in that seemingly glorious enterprise the Solitary discovers only "the contradictions of which Man / Is still the sport." (ll. 806-807), and he is left as

One by storms annoyed and adverse winds; Perplexed with currents. . . dismayed.

Still perplexed by the burthen of the mystery, the Solitary turns toward the New World (ll. 913-955) but this adventure also leads to melancholy disappointment, for the golden age could not be found there either; so that at the end of Book III human life remains what it was at the beginning like a stream "from darkness".

In Book IV (significantly entitled "Despondency Corrected"), the Wanderer explores the various ways by which support can be found for the calamities of mortal life. His main attempt is to answer the question, How can the human spirit be prevented from drooping when oppressed by "weight / of anguish unrelieved and lack of power / An agonizing sorrow to transmute?" The Wanderer's faith is based on his ability to find "Respose and hope among eternal things", but he realizes the difficult of defining "eternal things". He is compelled therefore to consider first the infirmities of "mortal kind". The first source of this infirmity of mortal kind--and of human sorrow--is that
the endowment of immortal power
Is matched unequally with custom, time,
And domineering faculties of sense
In all
(11. 204-208; Wordsworth's emphasis)

The Wanderer concedes this point, but he points out that the imaginative soul cannot droop if it is fed by images of meditation and reflection. He turns to the peculiar tendencies of rationalism which have threatened both the sanity of the Romantic Age and the sense of continuity of imaginative vision. The return to sanity is to understand human nature and the condition of man through all time, because there are really no extraordinary and superhuman powers that have been discovered by this generation of human beings. The loss of confidence in mankind has arisen from

the unexpected transports of our age
Carried so high, that every thought, which looked
Beyond the temporal destiny of the kind,
To many seemed superfluous.
(11. 262-265)

It is the overweening pride in the transcending wisdom of the age which has caused such chasm of diappointment. Man should explore all natures so that he can understand his own place on the scale of being. If a man explores all nature to the end that he may the better understand human nature and its relation to the universe, he shall not fail to recognize

The vassalage that binds [him] to the earth,
[His] sad dependence upon time, and all
The trepidations of mortality.
(11. 421-423)

Phrases such as "sad dependence upon time" and "all / The trepidations of mortality" remind us that The Excursion is concerned with the
exploration of the dark passages of human life.

The force of the Wanderer's argument is directed however not toward acceptance and endurance only but also toward the process of the regeneration of spirits. The process here, as in The Prelude, is to direct attention toward the source of strength in the human mind. As Wordsworth himself put it to Mrs. Clarkson,

The Soul . . . may be re-given when it had been taken away, my own Solitary is an instance of this.39

What is involved is the task of imaginative regeneration. The movement of argument is from the empirical range of the senses to the extension of imaginative perception into the realm of the spirit. This is why the Wanderer, in the midst of the reality of external things, directs the Solitary's attention to the beauty and harmony, and the joy and happiness of living creatures. He points out that the images of nature have the power of moving the affections of those who have the deepest perception of the Beauty of Nature, and this of course harks back to the Wanderer's own formative years as described in Book II. The Wanderer maintains that he

who thinks, and feels,
And recognizes ever and anon
The breeze of nature stirring in his soul,
Why need such man go desperately astray
And nurse "the dreadful appetite of death"?
If unreligious, let him be at once
Among ten thousand innocents, enrolled
A pupil in the many-chambered school,
Where superstition weaves her airy dreams.

(11. 597-610)

The thought here is very important for our appreciation of the significance which Wordsworth places on the regeneration of the imaginative mind. The same point of view is expressed in two sonnets; in one of these sonnets the poet exclaims with firmness:
Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

In both the Sonnets and in the passage from *The Excursion*, superstition is better than apathy or disillusioned scepticism because a review of patterns of imaginative vision in all human cultures reveals that even in the supposedly superstitious mythologies,

The imaginative faculty was lord
Of observations natural
(11. 707-708)

Superstition was therefore a symbolic representation of a sense of an enduring spirit that was felt in the beautiful region of the human heart. The ancients had a sense of the interconnection and eternity of all things and they had "hopes that overstepped the Grave" (1. 940), so that though bewildered in those days, the "pagans of old time" recognized a sense of value in human life within the light of common day. (11. 925-940).

Book IV of *The Excursion* is often singled out as interesting because of its account of the origins of mythology; surely this account is very interesting but even more significant is the use to which Wordsworth puts his knowledge of such origins. My point is that the origins of mythology is only a preliminary step in the poet's strategy of regenerating the human heart by re-establishing the powers of the imagination. He wishes to reduce the calculating intelligence to its proper level so as to re-assert the imaginative faculty as the supreme faculty which embraces and transcends all other faculties of man and which can suggest value in human life beyond the reaches of the
pure analytic intellect. For Wordsworth, Imagination is, after all, Reason in her most exalted mood. The movement of the verse argument from lines 941-1274 supports my position that what is particularly significant in Book IV is the use to which Wordsworth puts his knowledge or concept of the origins of mythology. The poetic description of the origins of mythology ends on line 940 and the poet signals a turn in his argument on line 941. This turn of argument is indicated by the break in stanzaic structure and by syntactic and other rhetorical devices which force on us the purpose of the poet's long discussion on the origins of mythology:

Now, shall our great Discoverers --- obtain
From sense and reason less than these obtained,
Though far misled? Shall men for whom our age
Unbaffled powers of vision hath prepared,
To explore the world without and world within,
Be joyless as the blind? ---
And they --- whose pains
Have solved the elements, or analysed
The thinking principle---shall they in fact
Prove a degraded Race? ---
Enquire of ancient Wisdom; go, demand
Of mighty Nature, if 'twas ever meant
That we should pry far off yet be unraised.

(ll. 941-959, and following)

In the reference to "sense and reason" and to scientists who have "solved the elements", or "analysed the thinking principle," Wordsworth has the best of the empirical philosophers in mind—such as Newton, Locke, and Berkeley, as I have earlier suggested in my introductory chapters. But in phrases such as "joyless as the blind" and "pry far off yet be unraised, he has the worst tendencies of rationalistic science in mind.

The Wanderer's point is that narrow and cold rationalism fails to recognize that the human soul is composed of a thousand
faculties and has more comprehensive interests than the analytic intellect alone could satisfy, or even account for. That pseudo-scientific rationalism which pores over and presents everything as dead and spiritless really misses the spirit of things and fails to present a truth which can be subjected to the medium of the human heart as the touchstone of experience. Human beings need better lights and guides than those offered by dead and spiritless pseudo-science for even among "pagan" Greeks,

a thought arose
Of Life continuous, Being unimpaired;
That hath been, is, and where it was and is
There shall endure, -- existence unexposed
To the blind walk of mortal accident;
From diminution safe and weakening age;
While man grows old, and dwindles, and decays;
And countless generations of mankind
Depart, and leave no vestige where they trod
(11. 754-761)

The last three lines are part of what constitutes the dark passages which The Excursion is designed to explore, and it is not fortuitous that Keats adapted these lines in two of his odes. For the Solitary the one unmitigated reality is the sense of mortality and futility. He cannot find any consolation beyond the fact that this is a world in which

man grows old, and dwindles, and decays;
And countless generations of mankind
Depart, and leave no vestige where they trod

Yet, the Wanderer's point is that a realization of the sense of continuity of life, a feeling of the imperishable elements of the human soul, together with a belief in a superintending Providence sustained in the pagan Greeks hopes which overstepped the Grave. The Wanderer's argument at this point tends to turn very much on faith in Benevolence and in the freedom of the will. The Solitary
then raises related questions concerning freedom of the will, necessity and Benevolence. The Solitary questions the very absolute bounty which the Wanderer ascribes to providential Benevolence, and the force of his argument (11. 1077-1100) denies all the claims of orthodox beliefs. Even the poet confesses that his doubts have been strengthened rather than allayed:

Back to my mind rushed all that had been urged To calm the Sufferer when his story closed.
(11. 1102-1103)

The Wanderer cannot deal with these objections either, and he turns instead to the empirical level of the senses in relation to the feelings of the heart:

The estate of man would be indeed forlorn If false conclusions of the reasoning power Made the eye blind, and closed the passages Through which the ear converses with the heart.
(11. 1152-1155)

Nature provides impulse and utterance in natural phenomena such as the haunting voice of the solitary raven (and the bleating lamb of Book II). These operate imperceptibly upon man (11. 1151 ff.). The voice of the solitary raven, which, after the bird itself has flown away, "yet from the abyss is caught again, / And yet again recovered," is advanced as one of those instances of the interworking of physical with mental phenomena, of the world of sense with the hidden inner world which is revealed to man at crucial moments of solitary contemplation. The linking of the inner and outer senses is an instance of those imaginative experiences which yield far-stretching views into eternity. The Wanderer then follows up this argument by pointing out further how living things "and things inanimate"
Do speak --- to eye and ear
And speak to social reason's inner sense,
With inarticulate language.
(11. 1205-1207)

And here we see the proof of that claim which Wordsworth made in
a letter to Catherine Clarkson:

Mere error of opinion, mere apprehension of ill
consequences from supposed mistaken views on my
part, could never have rendered your correspondent
blind to the innumerable analogies and types of
infinity, insensible to the countless awakenings to
noble aspiration, which I have transfused into that
Poem from The Bible of the Universe as it speaks to
the ear of the intelligent, as it lies open to the
eyes of the humbleminded.44

Wordsworth here refutes both the orthodox view and the Deistic
analogy, the latter of which argues that the Supreme Being bears
the same relation to the universe as a watch-maker bears to a watch.45

The point is that Wordsworth is not at all concerned with proving
the existence of God necessarily. In the passage of The Excursion
under consideration, the emphasis is on the "shock of awful
consciousness" which the mind receives in a calm season of
contemplation. He is concerned with the imaginative heights which
the mind of man can achieve, and in this metaphor, "the shadowy
heights, / And blind recesses of the caverned rocks" correspond
to the external landscape as well as to the inner landscape of the
mind. For Wordsworth the human heart is the touchstone for the
value of experience, and it is not for nothing that he proclaims
in The Prelude and The Excursion that his theme is

No other than the very heart of man,
As found among the best of those who live. 46

For any argument to have absolute human truth it must be
subjected ultimately to the medium of the heart. The groundswell
of the argument under discussion (in Book IV) can be traced to Book I of *The Excursion* where the creative powers of the human mind are insisted upon. In Book IV the subtle nature of the creative interchange between the human mind and external nature is demonstrated; this is what Blake dismisses as "pagan" philosophy of "fitting and fitted," and Coleridge as "compounding the mind from the senses." This relation of creative interchange between the human mind and the external world is central to Wordsworth's concept of the imaginative process. This process is used by the Wanderer to back up his argument:

> For, the Man—
> Who in this spirit, communes with the forms
> Of nature, who with understanding heart
> Both knows and loves such objects as excite
> No morbid passions, no disquietude,
> No vengeance, and no hatred—needs must feel
> The joy of that pure principle of Love
> So deeply, that, unsatisfied with aught
> Less pure, and exquisite, he cannot choose
> But seek for objects of a kindred love
> In fellow-natures and a kindred joy.
> (11. 1207-1217)

This is the love of nature working imperceptibly toward the love of man. The sensations which the contemplative mind experiences in nature create a state of joy in which a man is likely to be a kindly and more moral person. Feelings of apathy are banished in this state of imaginative restoration:

> Accordingly he by degrees perceives
> His feelings of aversion softened down;
> A holy tenderness pervade his frame.
> His sanity of reason not impaired,
> Say rather, all his thoughts now flowing clear,
> From a clear fountain flowing, he looks round
> And seeks for good.
> (11. 1219-1224)
This argument is based on a fusion of thought and feeling and it emphasises the place of the affections in restoring the languid spirits of the disillusioned sceptic. However, when the Wanderer traces this scale of love in its spiritual ascent his argument becomes more of a hazy expression of a quasi-mystical faith than a persuasive point of view. For his authority he can only say "Trust me" (1. 1235). His optimism that a time will come when man shall cease to deplore the burthen of existence is not shared, just as it was not shared by Margaret in Book I. His faith is not easily shared because it is such a personal faith; it is the faith of one in whom

persuasion and belief
Had ripened into faith, and faith become
A passionate intuition.
(11. 1292-1294)

The Despondency of the Solitary is not removed; nor are the doubts of the poet. This is obvious in the narrative tone:

Here closed the Sage that eloquent harangue, Poured forth with fervour in continuous stream.

By contrast, the narrator had said in deep and solemn tones of the Solitary:

Here closed the Tenant of that lonely vale His mournful narrative—commenced in pain In pain commenced, and ended without peace.
(Book IV, 11. 1-3)

The introduction of the Pastor in Book V is designed to resolve the impasse. The travellers depart from the vale of meditation, which the narrator describes appropriately as the "fixed centre of a troubled world", to travel "near the tribes / And fellowships of men," as indicated in the preface. This is both a
literal and a metaphorical descent, and the metaphorical is truly symbolic: it is the descent from abstract though lofty meditation to the reality of the dark passages as experienced among human beings. And their first encounter is in a churchyard where they read

The ordinary chronicle of birth,
Office, alliance, and promotion—all
Ending in dust.
(11. 172-174)

This leads to the Solitary's observations on the animal vivacity of the sexton, Death's hireling:

Did you note the mien
Of that self-solaced, easy-hearted churl,
Death's hireling, who scoops out his neighbour's grave,
Or wraps an old acquaintance up in clay,
All unconcerned as he would bind a sheaf,
Or plant a tree.
(11. 233-238)

This observation enables the Solitary to proceed to offer further evidence in support of his sceptical position:

Much, yesterday, was said in glowing phrase
Of our sublime dependencies, and hopes
For future states of being; and the wings
Of speculation, joyfully outspread,
Hovered above our destiny on earth:
But stoop, and place the prospect of the soul
In sober contrast with reality,
And man's substantial life.
(11. 243-250)

The Solitary goes on to argue that instead of this life of doubt and weariness, pain and death, which ends with one bound up like a sheaf and cast into the darkness of the grave, it were far better

to graze the herb in thoughtless peace
By foresight, or remembrance, undisturbed!
(11. 329-330)

Neither Philosophy nor the "more vaunted name [of] Religion" can
preserve man from "painful and discreditable shocks / Of contradiction", or shelter him from the evil and sorrow which dominate the human condition. The poet is swayed by the general tenor of the Solitary's philosophical complaint about the vicissitude of things, and the rest of the poem is devoted to this philosophical problem; the Pastor's contribution to the dialogue brings to it a more balanced perspective than it has had in the last few books and it is an error of interpretation to regard the Pastor as a spokesman for a point of view necessarily. The description of the Wanderer and the Pastor is very interesting: they are described through tree imagery and in this and subsequent books tree imagery becomes the dominant metaphor of thought in The Excursion; I hope to establish the full significance of this presently.

The Wanderer and the Pastor are described as Nature's favourite specimens:

Nature had framed them both, and both were marked
By circumstance, with intermixture fine
Of contrast and resemblance. To an oak
Hardy and grand, a weather-beaten oak,
Fresh in the strength and majesty of age,
One might be likened: flourishing appeared,
Though somewhat past the fulness of his prime,
The other--like a stately sycamore,
That spreads, in gentle pomp, its honied shade.

(11. 453-461)

The sycamore is a shade tree, and there is perhaps the hint of a suggestion here that both the despondent and the optimistic points of view can seek umbrage within the Pastor's comprehensive view of life. The nature of the appeal to him tends to support this suggestion:
The mine of real life
Dig for us; and present us, in the shape
Of virgin ore, that gold which we, by pains
Fruitless as those of aery alchemists,
Seek from the torturing crucible.
(11. 630-634)

The "torturing crucible" in this case is the mind—the minds of the Wanderer and the Solitary which have been subjected to the harsh anvil of philosophical speculation on the human condition. The Pastor is intimately acquainted with the solid facts of human experience in the valley—a valley which is a symbol of the human universe—and the concrete basis of his references might be more convincing than the abstract generalities of the Wanderer's optimistic philosophy or of the Solitary's extreme Despondency. It is very significant that the appeal is to the Pastor's experience, not to his theology. The questions put to the Pastor emphasize the theme of the dark passages of life. "Is Man a child of hope?" "Are the pains and penalties of miserable life doomed to decay, and then expire in dust?" What the perambulators request from the Pastor is stated by the Wanderer:

Accord, good sir! the light
Of your experience to dispel this gloom:
By your persuasive wisdom shall the heart
That frets, or languishes, be stilled and cheered.
(11. 481-484)

The Pastor does not share the Wanderer's confidence because man cannot weigh and fathom his own nature, or perceive it "with undistempered and unclouded spirit":

That speculative height we may not reach.
The good and evil are our own; and we
Are that which we would contemplate from afar.
Knowledge for us, is difficult to gain—
Is difficult to gain and hard to keep.
(11. 489-491; Wordsworth's emphasis)
Man's contemplation of his own nature is clouded by doubts and anxieties which arise from the contradictions inherent in human nature. Even the Faculty of Reason often fails man and brings on "darkness and delusion" (1. 511). The Pastor's view brings to the contemplation of life a double perspective; life can be seen as

A forbidding tract of cheerless view ---
An unillumined, blank, and dreary, plain,
With more than wintry cheerlessness and gloom
Saddening the heart;

(11. 529-539)

or as a

fair and tempting, a soft scene
Grateful to sight, refreshing to the soul.

(11. 523-524)

The first story which the Pastor tells refers to the living, and it narrates of the austere dignity and enduring spirit of the childless couple for whom

each evening hath its shining star,
And every sabbath-day its golden sun.

They are an example of those most in touch with the sources of the wisdom of human experience. The Solitary, however, maintains that

rare, at least,
The mutual aptitude of seed and soil
That yields such kindly product,

(11. 878-880)

and he advances the misery of the recently deceased Pensioner as an example of the cruelty and lack of consolation that is in life. The Pastor then goes on to make observations on the place of the affections in human life:

To a mysteriously-united pair
This place is consecrate; to Death and Life,
And to the best affections that proceed
From their conjunction.

(11. 902-906)
The Pastor emphasizes the bond of humanity as the common impulse which makes the churchyard "a visible centre of a community of the living and the dead; a point to which are habitually referred the nearest concerns of both", so that even the destitute Pensioner received the common sympathy of humanity in this connection. (ll. 902 ff.).

He then proceeds to elaborate on the common sympathies of humanity and the sources of humanity's regard for the dead:

> And whence that tribute? Wherefore these regards? Not from the naked Heart alone of Man ---
> 'tis not in the vital seat
> Of feeling to produce them, without aid
> From the pure soul, the soul sublime and pure;
> With her two faculties of eye and ear.
> (11. 978-987; Wordsworth's emphasis)

The Poet here presents a highly philosophical, even metaphysical position. He speaks of the senses and motions of the soul and establishes a linkage between the empirical senses and the inner senses. The poet is not interested in a mere dogma of faith or in mystical intuition, for he seeks to establish his concept of immortality on the extension of the empirical and physiological experience. Wordsworth's own prose comments in a letter to the Reverend Francis Wrangham, dated 5 June 1808, are particularly relevant here:

> in Gilbert Burn’s collection there may be too little religion; and I should fear that you like all other Clergymen, may confine yourself exclusively to that concern which you justly deem the most important, but which by being exclusively considered can never be thoroughly understood. I will allow you that Religion is the eye of the Soul, but if we would have successful soul-oculists, not merely that organ, but the general anatomy and constitution of the intellectual frame must be studied —— My meaning is, that piety and religion will be best understood by him who takes the most comprehensive view of the human mind, and that for the most part, they will strengthen with the general strength of the mind.51

(emphasis mine)
It is the same position which is insisted upon by the Pastor in the passage from Book V of *The Excursion*. The concept of immortality is founded on the consciousness of an imperishable element in the human being; that is, in the awareness or experience of a correspondence between the external senses and their vital functions with the senses and motions of the human soul. Human affections (founded on the heart) and the recognition of an indestructible element in man (founded on the soul) are two factors which foster and maintain our sense of life. And Wordsworth characteristically establishes not only a sense of continuity of life but also of continuity of vision; he finds in the wisdom of all ages a recognition of the principles of affections and Immortality, and their interrelationship:

And by the care prospective of our wise Forefathers, who, to guard against the shocks The fluctuation and decay of things, Embodied and established these high truths In solemn institutions:—men convinced That life is love and immortality, The being one, and one the element.  

(11. 996-1003)

The texture of thought here, and in the remaining thirteen lines of Book V, is very dense, but Wordsworth has fortunately provided a gloss in the "Essay upon Epitaphs"; it is a passage which deserves to be quoted as fully as possible:

Add to the principle of love which exists in the inferior animals the faculty of reason which exists in Man alone; will the conjunction of these account for the desire to be remembered after death? Doubtless is it a necessary consequence of this conjunction; yet not I think as a direct result, but only to be come at through an intermediate thought, viz. that of an intimation or assurance within us, that some part of our nature is imperishable——if we had no
external testimony that the minds of young children meditate feelingly upon death and immortality, these enquiries, which we all know they are perpetually making concerning the whence, do necessarily include correspondent habits of interrogation concerning the whither. Origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative --- it is to me inconceivable, that the sympathies of love towards each other, which grow with our growth, could even attain any new strength, or even preserve the old, after we had received from the outward senses the impression of death, and were in the habit of having that impression daily relived and its accompanying feeling brought home to ourselves, and to those we love; if the same were not counteracted by those communications with our internal Being, which are anterior to all these experiences, and with which revelation coincides, and has through that coincidence alone (for otherwise it could not possess it) a power to affect us --- were we to grow up unfostered by this genial warmth, a frost would chill the spirit, so penetrating and powerful, that there could be no motions of the life of love; and infinitely less could we have any wish to be remembered after we had passed away from a world in which each man had moved about like a shadow.52

What Wordsworth has done in the passage at the end of Book V, and in the prose gloss, is to derive the origin of all religion from the universal need of the human heart; he has also supplied an intellectual principle for that need; finally, he establishes a coincidence, or rather identity of thought and feeling, common to all imaginative beliefs. With this imaginative concept of death and immortality firmly established, Wordsworth then goes on to grapple in Books VI and VII with the many shapes of death.
CHAPTER VI

Footnotes

1 The orthodoxy of The Excursion is still a factor for the general neglect of the poem.

2 Dorothy Wordsworth makes an interesting comparison between Montgomery's article and his private views to Wordsworth; see D. Wordsworth to Catherine Clarkson, 16th March 1815, The Middle Years, p. 213.

3 John Wilson, BlackWoods Edinburgh Magazine, No. 21, Vol. IV (December, 1818), 257-263.


5 The Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, Vol. IV, 1815-1819, 570-576. Wordsworth's letter to which Coleridge replies is reprinted on p. 570 of this volume. See also Coleridge's letter to Lady Beaumont on p. 564 of this volume.


7 "My Ideas respecting your Recluse were burnt as a Plague-Garment and all my long letters to you and Sir George Beaumont sunk to the bottom of the sea!" in The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth; The Early Years, p. 607.


10 Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, p. 185.

12 *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 152.

13 The *Letters of John Keats*, pp. 78, 79, 327-329. In this last reference Keats speaks of his reverence for the "sublimer muse" of *The Excursion*.


18 Dorothy Wordsworth to Catherine Clarkson, Dec. 1814, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*, 2, p. 182. See also p. 247 of this volume.

19 The correspondent was Mr. Faber. The quotation is from William Wordsworth to Isabella Fenwick, 5th October 1844, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years*, p. 1230.


23 See especially the Letter to the Beaumonts, and to Southey, of 1805.

23a This phrase occurs in "George and Sarah Green" (1808) and in *The Excursion*, the "ecclesiastical" and "miscellaneous" sonnets. In the Ode it has an appropriately Platonic connotation.


28. This passage was absent in the 1799 manuscript text as transcribed by Dorothy Wordsworth to Mary Hutchinson. See The Early Years, pp. 199-209.


30. I have substituted the original version here because it is more precise than the revised and more orthodox version of 1845. See Lyon, op. cit., pp. 25-27 for the variant readings.

31. See p. 329 of The Letters where Keats says of himself, "my Solitude is sublime" and p. 372 for this: "This Pride and egotism will enable me to write finer things than any thinge else could."

32. This passage bears an astonishing correspondence to Wordsworth's observations on his wife's grief following the loss of Catherine and Thomas Wordsworth. That grief provided material for The Excursion, Maternal Grief, and "Surprised by Joy--impatient as the wind."

33. Cf. the lake scene at the end of The Excursion, and the poem entitled "A Night-Piece".

34. See Sonnets XV, XVI, and XVII of Ecclesiastical Sonnets. Sonnet XVI is a close paraphrase of the Anglo-Saxon passage.

35. Cf. Sonnet XXXIV of Ecclesiastical Sonnets entitled "Mutability".

36. "Surprised by joy--impatient as the wind".
The challenge of Immortality was the greatest of the
dark passages for both Wordsworth and Keats. See pp. 245, 501 of The
Letters of John Keats for the younger poet's agonized cry on this theme.

It is significant that the loss of faith in the great
truths of religion is what leads Keats to the consideration of
Wordsworth's genius as a help and to the recognition of the elder
poet's exploration of the dark passages.

Wordsworth to Catherine Clarkson, Jan. 1815, in The
Letters: The Middle Years, Part II, p. 188.

For a similar emphasis on imaginative regeneration, see
the process described in The Prelude: "So feeling comes in aid / Of
feeling, and diversity of strength attend us, if but once we have
been strong." Book XII, 11. 269-271, and ff.

Sonnet XXXIII of miscellaneous Sonnets; compare also
Sonnet XXII of Ecclesiastical Sonnets.

See "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; see
also "The Fall of Hyperion". Alwyn Berland's brief article, "Keats's
Dark Passages and the Grecian Urn," in Kansas Magazine (1956) pp. 78-
82 is useful here though Berland does not trace the genesis of the
dark passages to Wordsworth.

Compare Wordsworth's passionate questioning of "The
great Cause and ruler of things in his letter to Sir George Beaumont,
March 12th 1805, in The Letters of Dorothy and William Wordsworth:
The Early Yeárs, p. 556: "Why have we sympathies that make the best
of us afraid of inflicting pain and sorrow, which yet we see dealt
about so lavishly by the supreme governor, etc. etc."

Wordsworth to Catherine Clarkson, January 1815, in The
Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, 2,
p. 188.

This analogy is used in William Paley's Natural Theology:
Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity (1802).


William Blake, "Annotations to Wordsworth's Preface to
The Excursion", in Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V.
Erdman, New York, 1965, p. 656: "You shall not bring me down to
believe such fitting and fitted I know better and Please your Lordship".
For Coleridge's statement, see Specimens of the Table Talk of the
late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. H.N Coleridge, 2 vols. 1835, ii,
I have chosen not to pursue the rest of this extended analogy because of its racist connotation.

There is significant correspondence between the claims advanced in the preface and the themes explored in *The Excursion*. The point is noteworthy because there is a tendency among critics to dismiss *The Excursion* on the grounds that Wordsworth abandoned the plan announced in the preface.

"Essay upon Epitaphs" in *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 730. See also Sonnet XLI of Ecclesiastical Sonnets.

The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, I, 251. See also Wordsworth to Walter Savage Landor, January 21, 1824, in *The Later Years*, I, 134. Wordsworth's emphasis is on an imaginative view of life which is comprehensive of all the faculties of man.

"Essay upon Epitaphs" in *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, pp. 728-733. It is important to bear in mind that Wordsworth himself calls attention to the unity of thought in *The Excursion* and the "Essay upon Epitaphs". See also the letter to Walter Savage Landor (footnote 51), where Wordsworth quotes "Virgils 6th Aeneid" as a source of universal authority.
Hazlitt described the life-stories in Books VI and VII as a dead weight upon the poem, and the significance of these narratives has not been sufficiently recognized. Yet Wordsworth himself was always very careful to indicate the spirit and range of his poetic interest. In a letter to R.P. Gillies, dated Dec. 22, 1814, he said:

the range of poetic feeling is far wider than is ordinarily supposed, and the furnishing new proofs of this fact is the only incontestible demonstration of genuine poetic genius.

If we bear in mind the poet's emphasis on the comprehensive range of human thought and feeling, we will be able to see that the supposedly irrelevant narratives are an integral part of the dark passages which Wordsworth explores in The Excursion. The Solitary, speaking of the theme of the dark passages through all ages, alludes to the ancient story of Prometheus, the woes of Tantalus and his race, and the dark sorrows of the line of Thebes; he then goes on to argue that the human condition is still the same, even in this rural setting:
and here the tragic Muse
Shall find apt subjects for her highest art,
Amid the groves, under the shadowy hills,
The generations are prepared; the pangs,
The internal pangs, are ready; the dread strife
Of poor humanity's afflicted will
Struggling in vain with ruthless destiny.
(11. 551-557)

In this passage, the closed syllables and harsh consonantal sounds in "dread," "strife," "struggling" and "ruthless" literally enact the weight of anguish in the contemplative mind. Humanity is depicted as caught in the throes of an uneven struggle.

The detour in Book V in which the Pastor delays the stories and turns to a discourse on mortality and immortality is a tactical preparatory act designed to establish fortifying thoughts and principles which may function as shock-absorbers for the dark passages which are to be explored in Books VI and VII. This strategic tribute to the spirit of man is necessary for the understanding of those heart-mysteries which enable men to bear up even in the face of overpowering fatality. The Pastor's intention is to dwell on narratives whose subjects are consonant with love, esteem and admiration for the spirit of man but he must also satisfy the Solitary by dwelling on "a more forbidding way". It is to this more forbidding way that the preparatory discourse particularly relates.

The first tale is about a rejected lover whose morbid sensibilities derived from the fact that in his adversity he allowed his mind to turn so much upon his peculiar internal feelings that he shunned all the wisdom of the ages concerning human affections and the consolations and restorative processes that are available in
Nature. When he did eventually turn to those means of human support, he was gradually restored to flourishing health and his jarring thoughts were restored to harmony. This would seem to justify the efficacy of the regenerative process recommended by the Wanderer to the Solitary in Book IV, but the Solitary's point about an overpowering fatality is borne out even more forcefully in the Pastor's description of the death of the man:

But yon dark mould
Will cover him, in the fulness of his strength,
Hastily smitten by a fever's force.

(11. 195-197)

This terse account is actually a grim reminder of the overpowering fatality which is the central cause of the Solitary's Despondency.

The next story is of the miner whose perseverance in his work finally paid off. The Wanderer tries to apply this to life in general: that those who in adversity show a similar perseverance shall perceive "In this blind world the guiding vein of hope [in a superintending providence]." But this analogy is hardly persuasive for two reasons: first, the miner hardly enjoyed the fruit of his achievement, for we are told simply that "giddy and restless" he "vanished" soon afterwards and only the indelible track of his ten years' toilsome journeys remains. The miner's "giddy and restless" disposition after he had achieved his ambition only confirms what the Solitary and the Pastor have said in Book V about the "painful and discreditable shocks / Of contradiction" to which human nature is subject. Secondly, the Pastor bluntly dismisses the Wanderer's analogy as "superfluous" (1. 262) and goes on to tell a story of the young prodigal which illustrates qualities diametrically opposed to
those of the persevering miner. The Prodigal is even more representative of frail humanity; he is described as Nature's "Favourite,"

Lavishly endowed
With personal gifts, and bright instinctive wit ---
Of fine demeanor, and by dance and song,
And skill in letters--every fancy shaped
Fair expectations.
(11. 304-310)

But, like all frail humanity, he is also described as

Distracted in prospensity; content
With neither element of good or ill;
And yet in both rejoicing; man unblest;
Of contradictions infinite the slave.
(11. 370-373)

This indeed makes him very representative of the nature and condition of man. The Wanderer's optimism is effectively silenced. The tales of the miner and the prodigal represent the two aspects of "getting" and "spending". In both man is shown as "an outcast with himself at strife / The slave of business, time or care."

He is thus removed from his essential imaginative self and is therefore bewildered and depressed. These tales offer the Solitary another handle of despair with regard to the weight of sadness that is in human life and he asks for stories of men who took refuge in renouncing this world. The request leads to the fourth tale of the "flaming Jacobite" and "sullen Hanoverian" who "slunk" (1. 454) from the world to the deep solitude of "untravelled Wilds," and found hope and tranquillity through a development of affection and mutual disregard of transitory things. The word "slunk" underlines the degree of their disillusionment with the human condition. Their sole monument is a reminder to "Discerning mortal" to remember that
Time flies, and it is his melancholy task
To bring, and bear away, delusive hopes,
And reproduce the troubles he destroys.
(11. 515-517)

The Solitary turns this position with pointed force to plead the case of

those among our fellow-men,
Who, offering no obeisance to the world,
Are yet made desperate by "too quick a sense
Of constant infelicity," cut off
From peace like exiles on some barren rock,
Their life's appointed prison.
(11. 530-535)

The Solitary here raises the question of free will; he denies that man has freedom of choice and asserts that an overpowering Destiny and blind Necessity dominate man's life. He then cites the legends of Prometheus, Tantalus, and Niobe, all of which he describes as

Fictions in form, but in their substance truths,
Tremendous truths, familiar to the men
Of long-past times, nor obsolete in ours.
(11. 545-547)

Here Wordsworth is quietly establishing a sense of continuity of imaginative vision with the great poets of all time.

The Pastor concedes the point so persuasively argued by the Solitary, and admits that through all stations and ages human life abounds with mysteries and dark passages but that in his own system of belief, which admits of a controlling Providence, this world of suffering is a proving ground (11. 558-674, see especially the word "proved" in line 566) for the native grandeur which "lurks" within the human heart. The Pastor then interrupts the sequence of the tales to give a description of the churchyard:
Green is the Churchyard, beautiful and green,
Ridge rising gently by the side of ridge,
A heavy surface, almost wholly free
From interruption of sepulchral stones,
And mantled o'er with aboriginal turf
And everlasting flowers.

(11. 605–610)

Here we are reminded of

That secret spirit of humanity
Which, 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies
Of nature, 'mid her plants, and weeds, and flowers,
And silent overgrowing, still survived.

(Book I, 11. 926–930)

The passage in Book VI, like that in Book I, is a description which presents the Churchyard as an image of tranquility. The dalesmen trust the memory of their departed lives to oral record and the silent heart, and this is described as a deep and general humility in death. Here and in Book VII greenery takes on more than the force of imagery. The Churchyard is described as "green", "beautiful and green," and "mantled o'er with aboriginal turf / And everlasting flowers". Nature has become the shroud of humanity, and human beings will henceforth in The Excursion be identified by the flowers and trees which represent them; so that the catalogue of trees which we find in Books VI and VII is not a mere epic convention, but a myth-making process in which each tree becomes legend-laden. It is not for nothing that the Pastor begins each story by pointing at a tree or a flower with whom the dead are connected. He refers to his flock as "nature's unambitious underwood, / And flowers that prosper in the shade." (Bk. VI, 11. 653–654).

The first story after this is of a woman who,
While yet a child,
She, 'mid the humble flowerets of the vale,
Towered like the imperial thistle, not unfurnished
With its appropriate grace.
(11. 686-688)

We are told that she was seized by two passions, which obtained
"Rule over her, and vexed her daily life until
A sudden illness seized her in the strength
Of life's autummal season.
(11. 741-742)

She is another example of the contradictions that even Nature's
favourite children are subject to. The next story is of Ellen,
identified with the ash-tree and the elm--THE JOYFUL TREE--which now
stand as memorials to her. She is described as one

Who, at her heart's light bidding, once had moved
In virgin fearlessness, with step that seemed
Caught from the pressure of elastic turf
Upon the mountains gemmed with morning dew,
In the prime hour of sweetest scents and airs
Serious and thoughtful was her mind.
(11. 819-825)

And yet the very turf now roofs her grave. She was another of
Nature's favourite children, the queen of the gay sports of Twelfth
night around THE JOYFUL ELM. Her suffering is described with
intense feeling and the Pastor even identifies himself with Ellen,
or rather shows her to be a symbol of suffering humanity:

those blithe notes
Strike the deserted to the heart; I speak
Of what I know, and what we feel within
(11. 859-861)

Her grief arose from loss of, first, lover and, then, child, and she
is reduced to sheer vegetable existence:

The green stalk of Ellen's life was snapped,
And the flower drooped; as every eye could see,
It hung its head in mortal languishment.
(11. 1000-1003)
In her deep distress she could not find consolations in the great truths of religion (1. 999) but with time she did find some human consolation in reading elevating books. Ellen's story, like Margaret's, is one of those that forces the listener to a recognition of the common sympathies of man and to a recognition of the grandeur of the human heart.

The next story is of Wilfred Armathwaite who is identified with the hawthorne:

In that green nook, close by the Churchyard wall,
Beneath yon hawthorne, planted by myself
In memory and for warning, and in sign
Of sweetness where dire anguish had been known
Of reconcilement after deep offence  
(11. 1080-1084)

We are told that he perished under the weight of remorse; his is the example of the dark thoughts which deprive man of repose and joy.

The last story in Book IV is about a mother whose spirit "yet survives on earth". The story turns more on the living than on the dead, and the focus is on the enduring domestic affections and natural pieties of a widower and his six daughters. The living are described as flowers, the children as "budding", the father as "full-blown"; it is the story essentially of the consolations to be found in human terms in the bonds of primal sympathy and natural affection; the living are bound to the dead and to each other.

Strains of power
Were they, to seize and occupy the sense;
But to a higher mark than song can reach
Rose this pure eloquence. And, when the stream
Which overflowed the soul was passed away,
A consciousness remained that it had left,  
Deposited upon the silent shore  
Of memory, images and precious thoughts,  
That shall not die, and cannot be destroyed.  
(11. 22-30)

This tribute leads to a request for another tale about the  
"grassy heaps" which lie in view. It is a tale of a priest and  
his family. They are now identified only by natural vegetation:  
the "grassy heaps" and the "tuft of trees." The story is that  
of a man who found prosperity in change of situation and enjoyed  
deep domestic happiness for forty years; but  

Suddenly then they disappeared; not twice  
Had summer scorched the fields; not twice had fallen,  
On those high peaks, the first autumnal snow,  
Before the greedy visiting was closed,  
And the long-privileged house left empty—swept.  
(11. 246-251)

It is not so much the fact of death but the harsh manner in which  
it occurred, as seen through the order in which it occurred:  

the old grey-headed sire  
The oldest, he was taken last ——  

All gone, all vanished! he deprived and bare.  
(11. 258-262)

Here is another example of a solitary twig in the storm of life;  
and here is another story which raises the theme of human suffering.  
The Pastor tries, however, to mitigate the harshness of this story  
by emphasising the enduring power of the old man:  

yet a little while  
And this Survivor, with his cheerful throng  
Of open projects, and his inward hoard  
Of unsunned griefs, too many and too keen,  
Was overcome by unexpected sleep,  
In one blest moment. Like a shadow thrown  
Softly and lightly from a passing cloud,  
Death fell upon him, while reclined he lay  
For noontide solace on the summer grass,  
The warm lap of his mother earth.  
(11. 278-287)
The effort here is to direct attention to the quiet repose which the old man found in the end.

But even the usually optimistic Wanderer is "deprest / By tender sorrow of our mortal state" and he requests a more soul-cheering story about a hermit-Priest who subsumed keen domestic anguish in prayer and stern self-denial. The Pastor concedes that the hermit was widely and deservedly known as the WONDERFUL but then goes on to point out that virtue is subject also to death and oblivion:

Into its [chapelry's] graveyard will ere long be borne
That lowly, great, good Man. A simple stone
May cover him; and by its help, perchance,
A century shall hear his name pronounced;
With images attendant on the sound;
Then, shall the slowly-gathering twilight close
In utter night; and of his course remain
No cognizable vestiges, no more
Than of this breath, which shapes itself in words
To speak of him, and instantly dissolves.
(11. 351-360)

So even the virtuous are not exempt from death and oblivion, the agents of Mutability.

The next two tales are of crucial importance to the spirit of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages; they anticipate the concluding thoughts in Book IX of The Excursion. The first tale is about a dalesman who is referred to simply as "a gentle Dalesman". Like other characters he is identified with, or rather by, a tree—a pine tree. Deprived of the sense of hearing, "he grew up / From year to year in loneliness of soul;" and, upheld by the solace of his own pure thoughts, he duteously pursued the round of rural labours, living a life of pure disinterested love.
His extraordinary resources of spirit are described (ll. 439-462) and we are told that these inner resources raised his introverted mind beyond its natural elevation, and he was never oppressed by the mortal frailties of languor, peevishness or vain complaint. His death is then described:

At length, when sixty years and five were told,
A slow disease insensibly consumed
The powers of nature; and a few short steps
Of friends and kindred bore him from his home —
To the profounder stillness of the grave.
(ll. 463-468)

There is implied here a distinction between the powers of nature and the powers of spirit; this distinction relates to the notion of inward senses as the cardinal point in Wordsworth's concept of immortality. The common sympathies of our humanity are insisted upon in the tale of the Dalesman. His inner dignity bestowed upon him an outward dignity so that others felt not pity and condescension towards him but sympathy and reverence; and the pine tree with which he has become identified "Hath now its own peculiar sanctity".

The next tale is about a blind man but it is prefaced with an apostrophe to Light—which recalls several passages in Milton:

Soul-cheering Light, most bountiful of things!
Guide of our way, mysterious comforter!
Whose sacred influence, spread through earth and heaven,
We all too thanklessly participate,
Thy gifts were utterly withheld from him
Whose place of rest is near yon ivied porch.
(ll. 481-487)

The paradox is that though the blind man was deprived of this (greatest of gifts), his whole countenance was nevertheless alive with thought and instinct with spirit; his voice
Discoursed of natural or moral truth
With eloquence, and such authentic power,
That, in his presence, humbler knowledge stood
Abashed, and tender pity overawed.  
(11. 510-515)

This tale affords the Wanderer the opportunity to expound on his philosophy:

proof abounds
Upon the earth that faculties, which seem
Extinguished, do not, therefore cease to be
And to the mind among her powers of sense
This transfer is permitted.
(11. 519-523; Wordsworth's emphasis)

The relation of this to the dark passages of life is further developed:

to the imagination may be given
A type and shadow of an awful truth;
How, likewise, under sufferance divine,
Darkness is banished from the realms of death,
By man's imperishable spirit, quelled.
(11. 525-530)

Here the burthen of the mystery of human existence is lightened. The agonized cry of "O darkness of the Grave!" is confronted and subdued in the realization of the imperishable spirit of man—in the realization of a sense of continuity of man's essential element.

Much of the "weal and woe" in Wordsworth's poetry derives its impetus from the fear of the darkness of the grave; and beyond death itself is the challenge of the darkness of the grave which is the most difficult of the dark passages which Wordsworth explores in The Excursion, as well as in the so-called Ecclesiastical Sonnets. In this connection, it is perhaps not surprising that Keats should recognize Wordsworth's genius in the exploration of the dark passages of life. The question of Immortality and of the darkness of the grave raised many questions for both Wordsworth and Keats. Wordsworth's grappling with this problem is seen in both his letters
and poems. In the letters of 1805 Wordsworth's thoughts turn almost exclusively on the questions of the value of human life, Death, the darkness of the grave and the concept of immortality. In the letter to George Beaumont, of March 12, 1805, Wordsworth raises a number of interrelated questions:

Why have we a choice and a will, and a notion of justice and injustice, enabling us to be moral agents? Why have we sympathies that make the best of us so afraid of inflicting pain and sorrow, which yet we see dealt about so lavishly by the supreme governor? Why should our notions of right towards each other, and to all sentient beings within our influence differ so widely from what appears to be his notion and rule, if everything were to end here? Would it be blasphemy to say that upon the supposition of the thinking principle being destroyed by death, however inferior we may be to the great Cause and ruler of things, we have more of love in our Nature than he has? The thought is monstrous and yet how to get rid of it except upon the Supposition of another and a better world I do not see.

(Wordsworth's emphasis)

Keats's letters raise the same questions! In a letter to Charles Brown, dated Saturday 30 September, 1820, Keats is concerned with the thought of death and "the sense of darkness coming over me." He goes on to ask pointedly:

Is there another Life? Shall I awake and find all this a dream?

He goes on to attempt an answer which, like Wordsworth's, is based on a supposition:

There must be we cannot be created for this sort of suffering. These questions are not, of course, peculiar to Wordsworth and Keats; but my interpretation is that the skeptical attitude of both poets toward these final question, and their determination to search for a recourse which does not affront our reason and common humanity, reveal points of affinity between them — which Keats recognized,
but of which critics are not always aware. The point is that the questions of death and immortality were among those dark passages which Keats realized he had yet to explore, but which he realized that Wordsworth had already explored. Keats's prose statements, especially in the long journal letter on the vale of soul-making, represent how far he could grapple with those themes while he recognized Wordsworth's method of exploration in poetry based as it is on a movement from the empirical to the transcendental "as a help".

For Wordsworth the concept of immortality had to be established through logical thought based on the logical extension of man's sense experience and on the value of that empirical experience rather than on mere mystical intuition or dogmatic avowal of faith. This is the conclusion and demonstration established at the end of the story of the blind man and his inward senses:

Unto the men who see not as we see
Futurity was thought, in ancient times,
To be laid open, and they prophesied.

(11. 531-533)

The concept of immortality has been established through the process of thought based on the realization of the imperishable element in the mind of men. The challenge of the darkness of the grave has been confronted. The attempt here is to establish a thought in the mind which can provide a better account of the origin and tendency of human life than is offered by the Solitary in The Excursion or by the Sage in the Court of Edwin in one of Wordsworth's Ecclesiastical Sonnets. Having confronted the fear posed by the darkness of the grave, the poet then introduces a puzzling figure in lines 540 and following of Book VII:
it chanced  
That, near the quiet churchyard where we sate,  
A team of horses, with a ponderous freight  
Pressing behind, adown a rugged slope,  
Whose sharp descent confounded their array,  
Came at that moment, ringing noisily  
(ll. 540-545)

It is a figure that we cannot make much sense of but which viewed  
in the context of the extended description and in the context of  
the theme of man's mortality we gradually recognize as the Death-  
figure. This somewhat humorous description with all its Chaucerian  
cadence builds up to something more awful:

Here,' said the Pastor, 'do we muse, and mourn  
The waste of death; and lo! the giant oak  
Stretched on his bier—that massy timber wain;  
Nor fail to note the Man who guides the team'  
(ll. 546-549)

We have earlier received a glimpse of this figure in the person of  
the churlish Sexton in Book V (ll. 232 ff.); but here the figure  
is endowed with several evocative qualities, as the description  
shows:

He was a peasant of the Lowest class:  
Grey locks profusely round his temples hung  
In clustering curls, like ivy, which the Bite  
Of winter cannot thin; the fresh air lodged  
Within his cheek, as light within a cloud;  
And he returned our greeting with a smile.  
(ll. 550-555)

The imagination operates here on two levels: first, there is the  
myth-making process in which the poet turns an ordinary character into  
an awful symbol of Death—the Harvester or Destroyer; secondly,  
there is the mythological allusion in which the figure that is  
described evokes a response which has its origin in literary mythology.  
The mysterious figure that guides the wain is all too familiar as a
figure of death—to those who have read Homer and Virgil and
Chaucer—but Wordsworth tries to show this allegorical (or mythological)
figure as ordinary as possible by identifying it with "a peasant of
the lowest class". The vegetation imagery has its significance in
that it represents the dominant metaphor of thought in these later
Books of The Excursion. The Solitary sums up the impression left
by the vivacious appearance of this figure:

A Man he seems of cheerful yesterdays
And confident tomorrows; with a face
Not worldly-minded, for it bears too much
Of Nature's impress,—gaiety and health,
Freedom and hope; but keen, withal and shrewd.
His gestures, note,—and hark! his tones of voice
Are all vivacious as his mien and looks.
(11. 557-563)

The Solitary's observations touch on the central philosophical
problem of the poem. In Book V (11. 462ff.) the question had been
put to the Pastor to resolve: Is Man / A child of hope? Is Man
doomed to decay and then to expire in dust? The description of the
Death-figure emphasizes precisely those qualities in him which man
is not assured of: confident tomorrows, gaiety and health, freedom
and hope, joy and vivacity. Man's possession of these is only for
a fleeting period. The Pastor cannot do much more than agree with
the Solitary's observations:

You have read him well
Year after year is added to his store
With silent increase: summers, winters--past,
Past or to come; yea, boldly might I say,
Ten summers and ten winters of a space
That lies beyond life's ordinary bounds,
Upon his sprightly vigour cannot fix
The obligation of an anxious mind,
A pride in having, or a fear to lose.
(11. 564-572; Wordsworth's emphasis)
Like the beasts and birds in grove or pasture, his is the perpetual cheerfulness of soul. He is described as "from trepidation and repining free"; that is, he is free from

The obligation of an anxious mind,
A pride in having, or a fear to lose.

He is free from the weal and woe of humanity—free from our hopes, and fears and dark perplexity. The lumberman-Death-figure is an oddity as well as an object of some reverence. The Vicar's mixed feelings make this clear:

but in truth ——
I feel at times a motion of despite
Towards one, whose bold contrivances and skill,
As you have seen, bear such conspicuous part
In works of havoc; taking from these vales,
One after one, their proudest ornaments.
Full oft his doings leave me to deplore
Tall ash-tree, sown by winds ----

(11. 588-596)

The list of trees is again given, and it is important to remember that this list corresponds exactly with the catalogue of trees with which the favourite children of this vale have earlier been identified in Books V, VI and VII; so that Wordsworth is skillfully weaving a strand of thought whose significance is to be understood on both the concrete and the metaphorical. The tall ash tree, the light birch, the oak, the household fir, the JOYFUL ELM may still be standing but the dales-people who have been identified with these trees have already been cut down. It is this "thinning" of people which raises so many dark questions. The thinning of people is the problem which Wordsworth explored both in his letters and poems. In a letter to Henry Nelson Coleridge, dated July 29, 1834,
Wordsworth had the following thoughts, occasioned by the death of S.T. Coleridge:

The last year has thinned off so many of my friends, young and old, and brought with it so much anxiety, private and public --- sad thoughts and remembrances which press upon me.

The phrase "thinned off" is particularly relevant to my interpretation of the passage in *The Excursion*. The connection between dead people and dead trees had been made earlier by Dorothy Wordsworth, whose observations usually provided much material for Wordsworth's poems.

In a letter to Catherine Clarkson, dated July 19th 1807, she writes:

On arrival here at Grasmere our spirits sank and our first walk in the evening was very melancholy. Many persons are dead, old Mr. Sympson, his son the parson, young George Dawson, the finest young man in the Vale, Jenny Hodgson our washer-woman, old Jenny Dockwray and a little girl Dorothy's age who never got the better of the hooping cough which she had when we went away. All the trees in Bainriggs are cut down, and even worse, the giant sycamore near the parsonage house, and all the finest firtrees that overstepped the steeple tower.

The correspondence here with the tales of mortality under discussion from Books II, V and, especially VI and VII is indisputable. Apart from *The Excursion*, Wordsworth was to explore the same dark passages attendant on the thinning of friends in a poem entitled "Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg", from which I quote the following relevant stanzas:

The mighty Minstrel breathes no longer,
'Mid mouldering ruins low he lies;
And death upon the braes of Yarrow,
Has closed the Shepherd-poet's eyes!

Nor has the rolling year twice measured,
From sign to sign, its steadfast course,
Since every mortal power of Coleridge
Was frozen at its marvellous source.

Our haughty life is crowned with darkness ---
It is the thinning of people which raises such dark questions. As Wordsworth puts the matter in one of his Ecclesiastical Sonnets, is it true that

Man is as grass that springeth up at morn,
Grows green, and is cut down and withereth
Ere nightfall?5

And Death itself, what is his victory? The Pastor's observations offer an answer:

But, green, in age and lusty as he is,
And promising keep his hold on earth
Less, as might seem, in rivalship with men
Than with the forest's more enduring growth,
His own appointed hour will come at last;
And, like the haughty Spoilers of the world,
This keen Destroyer, in his turn, must fall.

(11. 625-631)

There is an allusion here in the Pastor's Christian comment to the tenth sonnet of Donne, "Death, thou shalt die." This is the ironic consolation that the Pastor can find. Death and Mutability, like all things, shall be conquered (at the Second Coming?).

The last two tales are told in further illustration of this:

So fails, so languishes, grows dim and dies ---
All that this world is proud of.

The theme of "sic transit gloria mundi" is that (re-) explored by this Romantic poet working through the images of things to create the poetry of things in relation to the perennial problems of human life. The concluding thought is that everything will yield to Desolation; meanwhile,

nature's pleasant robe of green,
Humanity's appointed shroud, enwraps
Their monuments and their memory.

(11. 996-999)
Even Death itself appears less formidable—by being described in familiar terms and shown as subject also to the touch of Desolation.

The Wanderer goes on to press home his point by answering the formidable argument earlier raised by the Solitary about this vale of suffering where countless generations suffer and die:

The vast Frame
Of social nature changes evermore
Her organs and her members, with decay
Restless, and restless generation, powers
And functions dying and produced at need, —
And by this law the mighty whole subsists.

(11. 999-1005)

This is hardly more than stating the obvious: man is subject to organic decay, just like plants and animals, and the human species is capable of cyclic regeneration like all other organic species. There is "ascent and progress in the main" but this is so little, so imperceptible that it is

   disproportioned to the hopes
   And expectations of self-flattering minds!

This general ascent and progress refers to the cumulative imaginative insight into the nature of man, his condition in this world, and the laws and conditions of the entire universe. I suggest that it is what Keats was to recognize in the Letter to Reynolds as "the great march of intellect"; and in the Hyperion poems Keats was to use this Wordsworthian concept in the account of the generation of gods.6

Book VIII is dedicated to a programme for cultivating in all people the liberty of mind which could save them from blank forgetfulness and lead them to a recognition of reverence for the dust of man. The point has of course been maintained by the Wanderer and, to some extent, by the Pastor, that there is an imperishable
element in the soul of man which survives decay. The Wanderer's argument in Book VIII is that only when people have cultivated the gift of intellectual insight can they grapple adequately with the momentous themes of Life, Death and Immortality—themes which involve such dark passages of thought. Book IX elaborates on the concept of the active principle as the fullest support for the belief in the imperishable element of the human being. This book is subtitled, appropriately, "Discourse of the Wanderer"; it opens abruptly and the conversational format is largely dispensed with, as the first three lines will show:

'To every form of being is assigned,'
Thus calmly spoke the venerable Sage,
'An active Principle.'

We are told how pervasive this is; it subsists in all things:

howe'er removed
From sense and observation, it subsists
In all things, in all natures.

(11. 3-5)

Its vital significance is insisted upon:

This is the freedom of the universe;
Unfolded still the more, more visible,
The more we know; and yet is reverenced least,
And least respected in the human Mind,
Its most apparent home.

(11. 16-20)

The foundation for this claim has been laid throughout The Excursion and especially in Book IV where the Wanderer had insisted on the creative principle in man. Here in Book IX the Wanderer again emphasizes this sense of an active principle in Man as the support and hope of: "meditated" action—that is, as opposed to mad endeavour, or despondency and apathy:
The food of hope
Is meditated action; robbed of this
Her sole support, she languishes, and dies.
We perish also; for we live by hope
And by desire; we see by the glad light
And breathe the sweet air of futurity;
And so we live, or else we have no life.
(11. 20-26)

The Wanderer then goes on to speak of the sense of continuity in imaginative growth between the period of childhood and age, asserting that the active principle is most lively in childhood:

Those blooming Boys, whose hearts are almost sick
With present triumph, will be sure to find
A field before them freshened with the due
Of other expectations;—in which course
Their happy year spins round. The youth obeys
A like glad impulse; and so moves the man
'Mid all his apprehensions, cares, and fears,—
Or so he ought to move.
(11. 29-36)

The whole passage is shot through and through with phrases of expression and metaphor of thought which occur in the Ode:

Ah! why in age
Do we revert so fondly to the walks
Of childhood—but that there the Soul discerns
The dear memorial footsteps unimpaired
Of her own native vigour.
(11. 36-40)

The poet is here tracing "our Being's earthly progress", as in the Ode and The Prelude (see chapter IV).

The link between youth and age in this connection is emphatically asserted:

Do not think
That good and wise ever will be allowed,
Though strength decay, to breathe in such estate
As shall divide them wholly from the stir
Of hopeful nature.
(11. 44-47)
The phrase "good and wise" tends to suggest a more moral emphasis here than in the Ode but the theme is basically the same in both poems: it is a concern with the mode of cultivating the imaginative powers of intellectual insight from the intimations of childhood. The more moral phrasing in *The Excursion* has become necessary because this poem is designed to deal with the problem of both imaginative and spiritual insight. The need to preserve a sense of imaginative continuity between childhood and old age is emphasized here as in The Ode but what is especially emphasized in this poem is the maturity of vision in old age:

Rightly it is said
That Man descends into the Vale of years;
Yet have I thought that we might also speak,
And not presumptuously, I trust, 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; a place of power ——
(11. 48-55; Wordsworth's emphasis)

The phrase "though bare in aspect and forbidding" recalls Wordsworth's description of the old men in his poems: the leech-gatherer, the Discharged soldier, the uncouth figure on a dromedary, and the old Cumberland Beggar; we can now appreciate more fully why they function, as I have demonstrated in chapter III, as symbolic figures that help the young poet in his exploration of the problems of human illumination.

The application of the concept of inward senses to the problem of old age is also given a very sharp focus here, though the concrete basis for this concept has earlier been given in the stories of the deaf dalesman and the blind dalesman. In their case
the deprivation of outward senses resulted in the strengthening of the inward senses and they acquired extraordinary powers of sensibility and mind beyond their natural ken. Similarly, those who have cultivated the active principle and therefore preserved the creative freedom of mind, acquire greater, not less, imaginative and spiritual insight with age. The raptures of youth inevitably decline because of the weakening in the powers of the bodily senses and the unequal struggle with the dreary intercourse of daily life, but those who have preserved their essential self—who have not cut off their heart from all sources of her former strength—invariably acquire greater powers with age. These are men to whom the years bring the philosophic mind. The passage in Book IX of The Excursion therefore announces the discovery of new and greater powers of imaginative insight into life. In old age when the bodily senses have become less active, man can perceive directly with the mind's eye, that is, with the senses of the soul, as he perceived directly with the bodily senses in childhood. It is noteworthy that for Wordsworth, the senses of the soul take over, enlarge upon and consolidate the powers of the physical senses; the senses of the soul are shown to survive death and it is on the basis of this that Wordsworth builds his satisfactory imaginative concept of death as a step towards immortality as well as an organic completion in the cyclic process of life.

The metaphor in which Wordsworth elaborates on his concept of age as a vale of final eminence clarifies the thrust of the close-textured argument. Age is described as
a place of power
A throne, that may be likened unto his,
Who, in some placid day of summer, looks
Down from a mountain-top,--say one of those
High peaks, that bound the vale where now we are.
Faint, and diminished to the gazing eye,
Forest and field, and hill and dale appear,
With all the shapes over their surface spread:
But, while the gross and visible frame of things
Relinquishes its hold upon the sense,
Yea almost on the mind herself, and seems
All unsubstantialized,--how loud the voice
Of waters, with invigorated peal
From the full river in the vale below,
Ascending.

(11. 55-69)

This is a passage in which the confidence of maturity—the egotistical sublime or pride and egotism—of Wordsworth stands out unequivocally. The metaphor of the Plains of ordinary existence versus the Heights of imaginative insight is pushed home with supreme egotistical effect:

For on that superior height
Who sits, is disencumbered from the press
Of near obstructions, and is privileged
To breathe in solitude, above the host
Of ever-humming insects, 'mid thin air
That suits not them.

(11. 69-74)

Here the contemplative mind placed on its sublime ascent has scaled the heights of intellectual insight while the rest of men, like insects, are still on the plains of the noisy world, still preoccupied with over-anxious cares of getting and spending. An old man who has preserved the freedom of his creative mind and a contemplative person who lives in the calm solitude of thought both benefit from the weakening of the bodily senses:

What more than the severing should confer
Fresh power to commune with the invisible world,
And hear the mighty stream of tendency
Uttering, for elevation of our thought,
A clear sonorous voice, inaudible
To the vast multitude; whose doom it is
To run the giddy round of vain delight,
Or fret and labour on the Plain below.

(11. 85-92)
The distinction here between the meditative calm of Age (or of the habitually contemplative mind), as opposed to the fretful labour of everyday existence takes us back to "Tintern Abbey," the Ode, the Fifth Book of *The Prelude*.

Wordsworth is not interested in the theory of the Fall and a manifest scheme of Christian redemption as Coleridge would have him expound, but in the concept of the regeneration of the imaginative soul. His concern is with the active powers of the imaginative intellect: with how they could be cultivated and preserved and strengthened throughout life. There is a tendency toward vagueness and lack of real solidity in the Wanderer's talk about hearing "the mighty stream of tendency", but the distinction between the life of endless agitation and that of calm, imaginative repose is clear. The grave and seasoned note reflects the philosophical conviction which has been achieved through experience. Man is capable of achieving the contemplative tranquillity of true maturity when his outer perceptions are linked to inner perceptions through imaginative growth. The demand placed on growth—on a sense of organic continuity—here is important for our understanding Wordsworth's conception of the philosophic mind.

The poet is not thinking of a momentary, transcendental or mystical vision but of a state of mind which we could all cultivate and preserve always with us. To maintain this we must preserve those fine passages to our essential being, "Through which the ear converses with the heart." This is within the reach of every mind that has preserved its essential self:
But, if to such sublime ascent the hopes
Of Man may rise as to a welcome close
And termination of his mortal course;
Them only can such hope inspire whose minds
Have not been starved by absolute neglect;
Nor bodies crushed by unremitting toil;
To whom kind Nature, therefore, may afford
Proof of the sacred love she bears for all;
Whose birthright Reason, therefore, may ensure.
(11. 93-101)

If the mind is deprived of the means of cultivating its essential creative self because the man is employed as a mere instrument or because it cannot grapple with the burthen of existence, then life and hope and action become meaningless; the man tends to droop unsupported by any inner preserving strength. But

'tis known
That when we stand upon our native soil,
Unelbowed by such objects as oppress
Our active powers, those powers themselves become
Strong to subvert our noxious qualities:
They sweep distemper from the busy day,
And make the chalice of the big round year
Run o'er with gladness; whence the Being moves
In beauty through the world.
(11. 123-135)

The rest of the Wanderer's discourse elaborates on this point by pointing out the mode of contemplating the dark passages of life. His point is that the vast majority of people are deprived of the opportunity of cultivating an imaginative view of life which should equip them to deal with the burthen of human existence. If they were not so deprived they would be able to weigh the balance of good and evil of human life, and would understand and accept the human condition as it is. They would, for example, know that

The sleepless ocean murmurs for all ears;
The vernal field infuses fresh delight
Into all hearts.
Gifts nobler are vouchsafed alike to all; 
Reason, and, with that reason, smiles and tears; 
Imagination, freedom in the will; 
Conscience to guide and check; and death to be 
Foretasted, immortality conceived 
By all. 

(11. 212-214; 221-226)

It is characteristic of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages of life that even his most optimistic character does not gloss over the hard facts of human nature: man is subject not only to joy but also to grief, to smiles but also to tears, to life but also to death. This is the reality of the human condition and even the Wanderer cannot afford to avert his eye from half of that reality. It is interesting, for example, that the Wanderer does not speak of the Resurrection, and his concept of the joys of another level of existence is merely based on a logical extension of the joys of this world (11. 225 ff.). The concept of immortality is therefore a thought in the mind based on the supposition that the imperishable element of the human being is not subject to mortal death. The Wanderer claims that moral and intellectual qualities are not hidden from "common understanding" and that truth and virtue are not left "difficult, abstruse, and dark / Hard to be won only by a few." He points out that

The primal duties shine aloft--like stars; 
The charities that soothe, and heal, and bless, 
Are scattered at the feet of Man--like flowers. 
The generous inclination, the just rule, 
Kind wishes, and good actions, and pure thoughts-- 
No mystery is here! 

(11. 238-243)

The last line suggests an explicit rejection of orthodoxy. The mind of man--of every man in every age--is the touchstone of the deepest thoughts and feelings. The emphasis is placed on the common
sympathies of humanity and on the fears and anxieties of all human beings. The concept of primal sympathy—of imaginative love of humanity—is stressed as the sustaining bond of people through all time and space.

The Wanderer's position is one which can afford to see life as "A few short hours of each returning day," that is, as a submission to the law of our condition. His aim is to encourage man to accept both the joy and grief that characterize the nature of human existence, and to accept them with a hopeful equipoise of mind. He sees the truth of the Solitary's concern with the darker passages of life but he deliberately chooses to focus "upon the brighter scene" (1. 256); and it is because the dark passages exert such a weight on the troubled mind that the Wanderer's music is finally drowned by the weal and woe intoned by the Solitary. It is very significant that the Solitary has the last word in this philosophic dialogue; it is significant because the Wanderer's discourse in *The Excursion* is designed to achieve the regeneration of the spirits of the Solitary. Two passages toward the end of Book IX show that the Solitary's scepticism is shared by even the Pastor's wife:

She tells the poet this:

I love to hear that eloquent old Man
Pour forth his meditations, and descant
On human life from infancy to age

While he is speaking, I have power to see
Even as he sees; but when his voice hath ceased,
Then, with a sigh, sometimes I feel, as now,
That combinations so serene and bright
Cannot be lasting in a world like ours,
Whose highest beauty, beautiful as it is,
Like that reflected in yon quiet pool,
Seems but a fleeting sunbeam's gift, whose peace
The sufferance only of a breath of air!

(11. 459-473)

This undercuts whatever impression the Wanderer's eloquence may have produced in the course of his long discourse. The thought that "combinations so serene and bright / Cannot be lasting in a world like ours" is pervasive in Wordsworth's poetry. In the last chapter I have discussed this with reference to "Peele Castle" where the distinction is made between the bliss and tranquillity of art, and the toil and strife of human life. The anxieties and vicissitudes of human life are contrasted with the serene and bright combinations of the Wanderer's eloquence. The Wanderer can colour life's dark cloud with radiant rays of eloquence but his combinations have no power to endure. The Solitary uses the analogy of a fire that burns for a brief while to describe his view of the sum of things:

The fire, that burned so brightly to our wish,
Where is it now? -- Deserted on the beach --
Dying, or dead! Nor shall the fanning breeze
Revive its ashes. What care we for this?
Whose ends are gained? Behold an emblem here
Of one day's pleasure, and all mortal joys!

(11. 550-555)

Nothing is resolved in The Excursion beyond this telling point. Even the concept of a blissful immortality remains largely a supposition based on a process of thought in the mind. Wordsworth does not advance a historic or orthodox basis for the belief. The nature of hope in The Excursion is muted, and the agonizing sorrow of death is hardly transmuted. Nothing offers a shield of tranquillity—except to the Wanderer. The attempt to establish a satisfactory
imaginative concept of death does not quite satisfy because the unmitigated finality of death resists all efforts in this direction. Behind the facade of Christian phraseology there is a deep vein of scepticism which runs through *The Excursion*. *The Excursion* does indicate ways of imaginative regeneration for the heart of man; it also establishes a value for human life based on the common sympathies of our humanity. But the rest is silence. Nor is this surprising; for even as late as 1844, the author of *The Excursion* could still say of himself:

> What I lament most is that the spirituality of my Nature does not expand and rise the nearer I approach the grave, as yours does, and as it fares with my beloved partner.

So the Solitary has the last word in this philosophical argument because in his exploration of the dark passages the poet has not found argument of sufficient force to silence the sceptic completely.

In *The Excursion* the poet endeavours to soften and diversify the views by metaphors and images drawn from rural life. In the end he shifts the action to the quiet of the lake. This is a return to nature from oppressive thoughts; it is not, however, an evasion or an escape for on those perplexing problems of the dark passages of life there is nothing more to be said: all philosophical positions have been explored without any resolution of the central problems. The return to nature from oppressive thoughts is one which all great writers make, as Wordsworth was aware:

> and, as we clomb,
The Valley, opening out her bosom, gave
Fair prospect, intercepted less and less.
O'er the flat meadows and indented coast
Of the smooth lake, in compass seen: — far off,
And yet conspicuous, stood the old Church-tower,  
In majesty presiding over fields  
And habitations seemingly preserved  
From all intrusion of the restless world  
By rocks impassable and mountains huge.  
(11. 570-579)

What they see is not just the beauty and bounty of creation. It is a vivifying experience and the dominant imagery in the passage is that of light, suggesting a moment of imaginative illumination. Unlike the Solitary's sardonic analogy of the dying fire and human joys, the experience of a rapturous moment at sunset reveals an aspect of discovery which is fortifying to the spirit of man; the dark passages of life seem to be overwhelmed in this rich and suggestive passage:

rays of light—
Now suddenly diverging from the orb  
Retired behind the mountain-tops or veiled  
By the dense air—shot upwards to the crown  
Of the blue firmament—aloft, and wide:  
And multitudes of little floating clouds,  
Through their ethereal texture pierced—ere we,  
Who saw, of change were conscious—had become  
Vivid as fire; clouds separately poised, --  
Innumerable multitude of forms  
Scattered through half the circle of the sky;  
And giving back, and shedding each on each,  
With prodigal communion, the bright hues  
Which from the unapparent fount of glory  
They had imbibed, and ceased not to receive  
That which the heaven displayed, the liquid deep  
Repeated; with unity sublime.  
(11. 592-608)

Here the poet lives up to his aim in the preface to describe "the thing / contemplated" with "the Mind and Man / contemplating". The last two lines of the passage place the emphasis on the sense of unity and interconnection in the universe: a unity spreading out from the oceans and reaching out and embracing
the sky. It is described as "unity sublime" but it is necessary to bear
in mind that the sublimity of the mind is what creates this sense
of unity sublime. The vision is a result of the creative inter­
change between the mind of the poet and external scenery, and the
product of this creative interchange has a sense of majesty, beauty,
simplicity and awe which overpowers and elevates the human spirit
and subsumes it to a larger unity of which man is only a part. In
the description of the lake experience," things are lost in each
other, and limits vanish, and aspirations are raised;" man is
raised above his poor weak self—for a moment—and he can stand on this
vale of meditative height and recognize that his reasoning alone
cannot sufficiently account for the sense of ordered unity and
harmony which he perceives at this moment. Skepticism is not
necessarily erased in the face of such experience but it is
tempered down by the sense of awe. The lake passage is one which
invariably connects the loftiness of imagination with a humility
of mind:

From that exalted station to the plain
Descending, we pursued our homeward course,
In mute composure, o'er the shadowy lake
Under a faded sky. No trace remained
Of those celestial splendours.
(11. 756-760)
CHAPTER VII

Footnotes

1 See Dorothy Wordsworth to Catherine Clarkson, November 11th 1814 in The Middle Years, II, 165. She quotes from and comments on Hazlitt's review which appeared in the Examiner, 28 and 28 August 1814, and 9th October 1814.

2 There is a strong current of affinity here between Wordsworth's view of man's life in this universe and Keats's view as contained in the long Journal Letter on the vale of soul making.

3 Cf. Wordsworth to Samuel Crompton, November 14, 1844: Mr. Gough, of Kendal, whom I had the pleasure of knowing, was the person from whom I drew the picture --- he was an extraordinary person, highly gifted --- the sadness which the contemplation of blindness always produces was in Mr. Gough's case tempered by admiration and wonder in the most affecting manner.

4 Sonnet XVI.

5 Sonnet XXXI of Ecclesiastical Sonnets.

6 Keats attributed Wordsworth's "superiority" to Milton—and to Keats and John Hamilton Reynolds—to two things: Wordsworth's peculiar genius of thinking into the heart of man and the great march of intellect.

7 Wordsworth's vale of Eminence and Keats's vale of soul-making bear an interesting relationship to each other.

8 In "A Slumber did my spirit seal", death is merely an organic completion into the cyclic process of life. The Excursion introduces another element into Wordsworth's thinking on death.

9 See also Sonnets VI, XIV, and especially XVI ("To a Snowdrop") of Miscellaneous Sonnets; see also Poem no. XXVII of "Poems of Sentiment and Reflection".

10 See Wordsworth to Walter Savage Landor, January 21, 1824.
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation has been to establish the range and nature of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages. I have endeavoured to show that Keats's recognition of the genius of the elder poet as "explorative of the dark passages" of human life is a useful pointer to what we should consider in much of Wordsworth's poetry, for Wordsworth's main purpose is to explore the human mind and the human situation. Nevertheless, as my introduction suggests, I have discussed Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages against the background of the historical reality of the Romantic Period in order to indicate how the exploration of the tragic predicament of mankind also involved the consideration of the validity of the rationalist and revolutionary theories of the age. "Tintern Abbey" is the poem usually discussed in direct relation to the dark passages in Wordsworth but I have established Wordsworth's deepening preoccupation with the theme in the poems written after "Tintern Abbey" by tracing the movement of thought from the "sad perplexity" of "Tintern Abbey" to the ascent into the imaginative heights of discovery in The Excursion. The word "discovery" is in order here because I have treated the dark passages in relation to the problem of imaginative illumination of mankind, so that the pattern of movement has been from the darkness of dim perplexity to the light of sober recognition.
Although I have undertaken a formal analysis of the text to prove the objective validity of my views, I hope that the principal contribution of this dissertation will be found in the fresh perspective of interpretation of theme and meaning. I have tried to make clear what has been considered obscure in some of the poems, and have established thematic relations where they have not been sufficiently recognized; but I have tried not to confine Wordsworth's free and varied insights within a system of thought that is too abstract, too neat and too rigid. Accordingly, I am reluctant to make too many deductions in this conclusion. My approach has been to follow the poet in the inner psychological and philosophical grappling with human experience and this can best be seen in my presentation of the central imaginative developments in the poems which I have studied in the body of the dissertation. I have emphasized Wordsworth's imaginative and intellectual independence throughout this study and have insisted on his contemplation of experience rather than his formulation of a philosophy; few theoretical conclusions are to be expected from such a view. The direction of poetic growth examined in this study has been toward the elegiac mode, that is, toward the poetry of imaginative contemplation for the sake of satisfying the human need for illumination. It is in this context that the "explorative" or contemplative nature of Wordsworth's genius is to be seen for, as Coleridge pointed out,

> Elegy is the form of poetry natural to the reflective mind. It may treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject for itself; but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself.

What I have tried to emphasize all along is the nature of imaginative insight which emerges from Wordworth's contemplation of the nature of
man and the facts of human experience. My approach has therefore concentrated on the vital movement of intelligence and imagination in the course of the poet's penetration of experience.

I have treated Wordsworth as a conscious artist who recognizes that poetry is an art developed out of personal experience in confrontation with the "burthen of the mystery" of human existence in this world. I have not adhered uncritically to any of the established critical theories and I would like to think that my actual involvement with literary theories has been judicious and selective. One prevailing attitude has, however, influenced my study: that of a view of Wordsworth's poetry as a mental act, and my analysis has therefore been aimed at capturing the essential significance of the poet's experience and the consciousness manifest in such experience. In this regard, I have been concerned in my study with the imaginative consciousness shaping the poems as well as with the textual analysis of the poems themselves; that is, with both the poet as subject and with his poems as various manifestations of the experience of that subject. I have, therefore, treated the poet as aware of his own subjective nature and of the physical world that surrounds him, and I have shown him to be grappling in his poems with a conflict between the inner and external worlds that he must reconcile into a coherent structure of experience. In other words, my emphasis has been on the author's positive consciousness of his imaginative experiences as those experiences are potentially accessible to all human beings. My analysis has drawn upon a large body of Wordsworth's poems but I have tended to treat the separate poems as so many individual manifestations of the same developing consciousness in relation to the
burthen of the mystery and the challenge of imaginative illumination of mankind. This deliberate concentration on the poetic perceptions that combine in patterns of a deepening imaginative consciousness in relation to the need to discover an imaginative view of life developed from the cumulative and overwhelming impression which repeated reading of Wordsworth's poems made on me. My preference for developing such a method of interpretation has, I hope, justified my reluctance to deal more exhaustively with the technical aspects of formal, objective criticism, such as the analytic comparison of stylistic elements of form and dictional peculiarities of each of the poems as artistic objects.

There are, of course, disparate styles and varying degrees of poetic intensity in the poems which I have discussed. Poems such as "Tintern Abbey", "Intimations of Immortality", "Peele Castle", the "Lucy" poems and "Resolution and Independence" have generally been recognized as representing Wordsworth at his best: as representing simplicity approaching austerity, exactitude, directness and felicity, and hence the absence of ornament and elaborate contrivance. I have therefore taken many of these aspects of style for granted and have concentrated instead on their larger relevance in a pattern of deepening contemplation of human nature and the condition of human life. I have however tried to grapple with the difficult syntax of these poems, particularly in such poems as the "Intimations of Immortality" and the Fifth Book of The Prelude where difficult and obscure passages of important imaginative thinking have usually been neglected or given simplistic interpretations which fail to reach at the core of meaning inherent in the poetic experi
inherent in the poetic experience.

The Excursion has, of course, been the target for sweeping attacks of dullness and orthodox sermonizing and, since I have discussed this poem as the culminating point of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages of human life, I intend now to refer to its poetic characteristics. Perhaps the first thing to bear in mind in any discussion of The Excursion as a poem in this connection is that Coleridge, even in his disappointment with the philosophical system of thought encompassed in this long poem, took the trouble to point out that the author of The Excursion achieved several flashes of the high level of imaginative powers peculiarly Wordsworthian. And Lyon, whose study of The Excursion remains the most exhaustive, has argued persuasively that "The Excursion cannot be dismissed as the dull and pompous preaching of an aged poet in his decline---Wordsworth himself was intellectually and emotionally involved in almost every line of it, much as he was in The Prelude." Lyon's is a balanced and judicious critique of the poem; he has, for example, recognized that Everything considered, The Excursion cannot be called a thoroughly satisfactory poem. The characters lack conviction and fail to hold our sympathies--the style, while it provides an excellent vehicle on the whole, occasionally lapses into verbosity and rhetoric.

The studies by Lyon and Potts, together with the hints given by Coleridge, Hazlitt and Keats, make it clear that we cannot deny The Excursion the painstaking attention which its author deserves. Wordsworth himself recognized the difficult and abstruse nature of the poem and in defending the style of The Excursion he appealed to the difficult nature of
the subject matter and the varied demands of the different parts of
the poem. 7

The Excursion is essentially a long reflective poem; to
consider it too rigidly as an epic or a narrative poem is to do
injustice to the form of the poem, as I believe Kroeber has done in
his brief study in Romantic Narrative Art. 8 There is obvious stylistic
disparity between the narrative, the speculative, and the exhortatory
parts of the poem, but I have tried to show how Wordsworth sees in
such essentially philosophical problems so much that is concrete and
human and fit for unified poetic treatment. My study has demonstrated
that Wordsworth's use of vegetation imagery in Books I, VI, and VII
enables him to achieve concreteness and austerity of expression com­
parable to his earlier achievement in the poems of 1798-1807. The
fact is that The Excursion contains such a variety of material that the
corresponding styles afford examples of all Wordsworth's styles. Over
against the concreteness and classic lucidity of the narrative passages
in Books I, VI and VII, we have the rhetorical flourishes of abstract,
speculative passages in Books IV, V and IX. The greatest weakness of
the poem is perhaps that of a lack of a firm and clear structure; even
some of Wordsworth's later poems, such as "The River Duddon Sonnets"
where story is replaced by the geographical movement of the river, are
more artistically successful in this regard. The Excursion does have
a structure, as my dissertation has attempted to show, but the structural
principle is founded on unity of purpose and idea so that it is thematic
unity which organizes structure rather than the obvious formal unity of
architectonic structure which formal art demands. There is, however,
careful artistry in *The Excursion*; perhaps there is too much conscious artistry in the poem, which suggests that the poet, confronted with the demand for an appropriate medium for his complex and difficult subject matter, went to school to various literary models. The literary form of *The Excursion* is different from that of the lyrical ballads, odes, and elegiac pieces of 1798-1807. The sense of dynamic immediacy of experience in the early poems is generally replaced by the meditative and speculative tendencies of *The Excursion*. In this poem the poet deliberately enters the realm of speculative contemplation and question and debate tends to replace the stark expression of experience. The delicate tension between feeling and thought characteristic of the earlier poems shifts in favour of thought in the Socratic dialogue of *The Excursion*. The literary difficulties to be surmounted in this form are many and rather unavoidable. Wordsworth tried to transform his personal anxieties by distancing everything through a dramatic conversational medium, but the attempt to parcel out these issues among the various dramatic agents led inevitably to the charge of ventriloquism which Coleridge was the first to make. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that this device of dividing himself into a cast of *personae* for a dramatic conversation has been recognized as

the most difficult metamorphosis of elegy—*The Excursion* became, we may suggest, the enabling pattern according to which future poets would attempt, now from one angle, now from another, to reveal the central issue of the life of man.

One way of appreciating the demands imposed upon the style and the general treatment of the themes in *The Excursion* is to place
the poem in the Wordsworth canon with reference to the earlier and later poems. The use of nature imagery in *The Excursion* and in *The River Duddon Sonnets* offers interesting points of comparison. One obvious fact about the imagery of *The Excursion* is that its function is frequently decorative and ornamental, and its relation to the idea of event in hand is seldom close or functional. The poet tends too often to leave the impression that he is straining too consciously for grand and elevated epic effect. Some of the similes are too long and they appear almost independent and detachable. The use of stream imagery in *The Excursion* will illustrate my point. There are two prominent instances in Book III of *The Excursion*. The first occurs where the wanderers probing deeper into a mountainous countryside at first hope to trace a "streamlet to its source", where

The mountain infant to the sun comes forth
Like human life from darkness.
(11. 34-35)

It is only later when we realize that the proposed journey is designed as an exploration into the diurnal life and death experiences which form the cyclic pattern of human life that we can appreciate the comparison in the simile. The second occurs toward the end of Book III. It is an extremely long and difficult simile, covering twenty-three lines, and extending from line 968 to 991, where the Solitary compares human life to a stream. I quote the last six lines only:

Such a stream
Is human Life; and so the Spirit fares
In the best quiet to her course allowed;
And such is mine, - save only for a hope
That my particular current soon will reach
The unfathomable gulf, where all is still!
(II. 986-991)

The force of apathy and the desire for tranquillity make the simile rhetorically effective and the argument persuasive; but while it achieves this skillful effect, the poetry does not gain in concrete
particularity or in imaginative intensity. In *The River Duddon Sonnets*, however, this stream imagery is used to produce more imaginative effects. In this sonnet-series, the river itself functions as a concrete structural principle which shapes the movement of feeling and contemplation. The literal movement is from the source of the river to the point where it empties itself into the vast body of water. The parallel between this literal movement of the river and the metaphorical journeying of the human soul through many earthly vicissitudes to the vast sea of eternity is very convincing (even though the vast sea of eternity remains an abstract concept); and the concluding realization expressed in:

Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide;  
The Form remains, the Function never dies;  
While we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,  
We Men, who in our morn of youth defied  
The elements, must vanish,  

is not only rhetorically persuasive but has a certain quality of inevitability derivable from the poetic coordination of concrete imagery and speculative thought, of experience and reflection based on the evidence of that experience. But when similar sentiments are expressed in a disembodied manner as when the Wanderer speaks discursively of communing with the Forms of Nature, his sentiments lack poetic conviction - by which I mean that they are not carried alive into the heart by the passionate conviction arising from the immediacy of experience.

The early poems which most invite comparison and contrast with the style and theme of *The Excursion* are the "Lucy" poems. I have already alluded to them as forming a block of poems which define
Wordsworth's attitude toward death as a process of organic completion within the cycle of life. In this sense they are markedly different from *The Excursion* where Wordsworth covers another arc of poetic thought by raising speculative questions which transcend the sense of finality created by the physical act of death. The Lucy poems are elegiac ballads and they combine the finest qualities of the elegy and the ballad. As in the best tradition of the ballad, the strongest feelings are evoked in these poems and the sense of finality of the reality of death is created; what happens is not blurred in its grim effect by alien images or by pointless speculation. In "A Slumber did my spirit seal," the stark fact is that Lucy is in her grave, her cycle of life has been completed; she "neither hears nor sees" now:

Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

The fact of death is stated with great poetic effect in a quiet tone conveyed through measured and controlled cadence. The fact of death is not overemphasized or sentimentalized. In "She dwelt among the untrodden ways," it is the same fact of a puzzling but natural and therefore inevitable happening that is expressed. Lucy has "ceased to be" and the only sentiment is not a complaint but the quiet elegiac recognition of "oh, The difference to me!" It is the consideration not of what happens to Lucy beyond this world (as would be the case in *The Excursion*), but of the impact of her loss on the living poet: his recognition of the human condition in relation to the puzzle of life and death.

These characteristics of quiet poetic intensity and austere
unadorned expression are not, however, restricted to the early poems. Two "late" sonnets, "Surprised by joy--impatient as the Wind," and "Why art thou silent! Is thy love a plant," together with the "Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg," are poems which show that Wordsworth was still capable of poetic intensity expressed in a simple, direct style. In its spare and austere expression of deep personal feeling and thought, "Surprised by joy--impatient as the Wind" conveys the unmistakable sense of authenticity in Wordsworth's preoccupation with the dark passages. The muted questions in this sonnet reveal the poet's paradoxical attitude toward death (best represented by the dialectic in the positions of the Wanderer and the Solitary of *The Excursion*). On the one hand, there is the tendency to regard death as a transition to "That spot which no vicissitude can find," but the sense of a "grievous loss", of unmitigated reality, is also expressed since the experiencing mind that endures this loss recognizes that:

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my heart's best treasure was no more;
That neither present time, nor years unborn
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.
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In "Why art thou silent! Is thy love a plant" (1835) the same deep sense of personal grief is expressed in a fluctuating rhythm which corresponds to the turnings and recoils of anguished feeling and thinking. But while this sonnet corresponds to the other in its rhythm and immediacy of experience, its images correspond more to that of the "Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg (1835)", which I have already discussed in the chapter on *The Excursion*. Both poems are dominated by vegetation imagery. In both man's life and vital
feelings grow like a plant which flourishes for a brief time and are unseasonably blighted ("every mortal power of Coleridge/Was frozen at its marvellous source"), or grow to full fruition, then are gathered up or allowed to wither. In both the sense of desolation in the heart of those who have to endure the "thinning" of friends and relations is conveyed through images of dreary darkness,

more dreary cold
Than a forsaken bird's-nest filled with snow
'Mid its own bush of leafless eglantine.

In this connection, The Excursion functions both retrospectively and prospectively, pulling together all the themes foreshadowed in the 1798-1807 poems, and anticipating the variations on these themes in the later poems and sonnets. The Excursion is, in this sense, a compendium of the central ideas, closely interrelated, which had occupied, and would later occupy, Wordsworth's thoughts and efforts in many poems. My interpretation of The Excursion has attempted to show how Wordsworth's sense of imaginative illumination grew out of his confrontation with the potent factors of disillusionment and despair.

With all its stylistic defects The Excursion contains passages which reveal deep emotional and intellectual involvement on the part of the poem, and I have suggested the correspondence in theme between these and those in the much-admired shorter poems. I have also suggested the larger imaginative perspective which makes the dialectic method of Socratic dialogue an appropriate form for the distancing and confrontation with these questions. In this connection I feel that the weight of literary allusions in The Excursion suggests greater
thematic significance than is generally realized, and I have pointed out that the allusions are not mere classical embellishments but deliberate points of imaginative contact between Wordsworth and the ancient poets and sages who examined the dark passages in their own light, from their own historical reality. I have interpreted *The Excursion* as the most significant poem in which Wordsworth embodies his most mature recognition of truth in human affairs through the speculations of poetic thought. The process of thought in this poem is intended to lead toward the discovery of the immutable truths of human nature and of the condition of man in this universe, and the search for light is aimed at discovering a fortifying imaginative principle for contemplating the reality so recognized. When the poem is seen from this point of view, we can understand how Wordsworth attempts in *The Excursion* to transmute all the terrors, all the early miseries, regrets, vexations and anxious questionings which gave rise to the early poems which I have discussed as well as to even earlier poems such as "Salisbury Plain," *The Borderers*, and fragmentary verses with the ominous titles of "Incipient Madness," and "Argument for Suicide". The tone in the very early poems is querulous and tends toward literary melancholia or what he himself describes as "Dejection taken up for pleasure's sake," but in *The Excursion* all those earlier sentiments are fused into a "deep and genuine sadness" which is the theme of poetic exploration. This is why I have treated *The Excursion* as the culmination of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages of human life. The main object is to show how despondency can be over-
come, how the imaginative mind can boldly confront all that is at
enmity with joy and re-assert a creative and never-failing principle of
joy founded primarily (I might say exclusively) on the meaning and value
that is derivable from human life. This main object is demonstrated in
the poem in the attempt to reclaim the despondent Solitary. The very
qualified success in this direction is obvious in the fact that the
ultimate outcome of this intention is not told anywhere else in
Wordsworth's poetry though it is promised in epic-sounding tones in the
last lines of The Excursion:

To enfeebled Power,
From this communion with uninjured Minds,
What renovation had been brought; and what
Degree of healing to a wounded spirit,
Dejected.....
And whether aught, of tendency as good
And pure, from further intercourse ensued;
This - if delightful hopes, as heretofore,
Inspire the serious song, and gentle Hearts
Cherish, and lofty Minds approve the past -
My future labours may not leave untold.
(Book IX, II. 783-796)

I have demonstrated in my interpretation that the author of The Excursion
could not undertake such a cheerfully optimistic task without violating
the wholesome skepticism of his personal and poetic temperament. I am
inclined to regard "The River Duddon," the "Ecclesiastical" and
"Miscellaneous" Sonnets, and "Evening Voluntaries" as constituting not
so much a significant advance but an extended variation on the positions
already considered in the exploration of the themes of the darkness of
the grave and the concept of immortality in The Excursion. Karl Kroeber
has argued that in the later poems, and especially in "Laodamia" and
The White Doe of Rylstone, Wordsworth moved more and more into a purely
"imaginative [that is, visionary] rather than naturalistic order" to express "imaginative intuitions" of a transcendent reality" peculiar to "subjective vision." These poems may therefore be more successful as intense expressions of "a more thoroughly Romantic conception of poetic truth" in mythical shape, but the rhetorical clarity of the discursive meditations of The Excursion should not be overlooked, either; for it is a strong asset of the poet-elegist's function of exploring the common anxiety of humanity by establishing a pattern of imaginative discovery that is accessible to all. Furthermore, my interpretation of The Excursion has established that there is a pattern of mythical vision in the generally misunderstood "narratives of rural life." Perhaps a thematic approach such as I have adopted is more rewarding than the generic approach referred to because the complexities of The Excursion are a reflection of the complex theme of the dark passages explored so exhaustively in the poem.

In general, I hope my study of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages has introduced another dimension to the consideration of the poet's genius. Having been mystified in my undergraduate days by wistful talk of Wordsworth's "mysticism" and "nature worship", and having recently been bemused by a number of books and seminar papers that subsume Wordsworth's poetry in a thorough-going psycho-analytic exegesis based on the "totem and taboo" and other theories of erotic repression, I have attempted to offer an interpretation which could make the poet accessible to readers even in cultures where people may never have heard of, or cared about, the Apocalypse or Freud. My emphasis has been placed on the value and meaning derivable from Wordsworth's
courageous discovery in the process of exploration of the dark passages of human life. Both the pattern and the direction of thought have been important in my analysis of the text because I do believe that his poetic thought can be analysed if we study the concrete evidence in the poems themselves. In this connection, I have attempted to present Wordsworth as a poet whose special relationship to language enables him to achieve structures of thought that deserve the closest attention even in those poems that are generally considered as dull and obscure.
CONCLUSION

Footnotes

1 S.T. Coleridge, Table Talk, October 23, 1833. Keats's famous but generally misunderstood phrase on the "egotistical Sublime" mode of Wordsworth's poetry should be compared with this Coleridgean definition of the elegy.

"Wordsworth himself tends to train the reader to regard every poem of his as a product of an intense process of thought; see especially his comments on the need for a "corresponding [mental] energy" which he demands of his readers in "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" in Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth, P. 185. I have also indicated in my general introduction that my approach is also influenced by the nature of Keats's groping toward the core of Wordsworth's thought. For an analysis of the critical theory that embodies this approach to literature, see Sarah N. Lawall, Critics of Consciousness. Massachusetts, 1968. My contact with this theory remains largely peripheral.

3 Coleridge's disappointment with The Excursion as a philosophical poem was accentuated by his recognition of the evidence of poetic genius in the poem. He conceded thus: "As proofs meet me in every part of The Excursion, that the Poet's genius has not flagged, I have sometimes fancied......," in The Letters of S.T. Coleridge.

4 The Excursion: A Study, op.cit., P.139.

5 Ibid., P.140.

6 Abbie Findlay Potts, The Elegiac Mode: Poetic Form in Wordsworth and Other Elegists. Ithaca, New York, 1967; for William Hazlitt's generally favorable review of The Excursion, see The Examiner, August 21, 28, and October 2, 1814. He praised, without sufficiently defining, "the philosophy" of the poem.

Karl Kroeber, Romantic Narrative Art, Madison, 1960. Kroeber devotes exactly nine pages to The Excursion and his approach begs many questions; but his book is an invaluable study of the patterns of narrative in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Centuries.

S.T. Coleridge in Biographia Literaria, chapter XXII, P.106

Abbie Findlay Potts, The Elegiac Mode, P.200. Her book is a compendium of knowledge on the origins and development of the elegy, and on Wordsworth it is as stimulating as her study of The Prelude (1953). My approach is both more limited and less generic but my belated contact with her book has encouraged me and confirmed the need for my study.

For a detailed analysis of these stylistic defects see Lyon's The Excursion: A Study, chapter V.

The sense of poignancy here derives from the fact that Wordsworth is not merely contrasting the privileged vitality of youth with the ultimate dissolution in death; it derives from the poet's final recognition that even "the soul of more than mortal privilege" (The Prelude, XIV, 77) cannot solve the riddle of death. It is in this light that Wordsworth's immense concern with 'man's mortality' should be seen.

I have explained in the introduction why these poems do not fall directly within the orbit of my approach. For an excellent generic discussion of the Lucy poems, see Potts, The Elegiac Mode, chapters III and IV.

Even Lyon tends to treat the wide range of allusions as mere literary embellishments; see chapter V of The Excursion for his analysis of the style of the poem. The failure to recognize such thematic significance is particularly apparent in Lyon's two-page discussion of the stories - see PP. 84-85 of his book.


The Romantic Narrative Art, p. 112.
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