

Dwelling upon Time: Memory's changing function in the poetry of Wordsworth

CHARLES I. ARMSTRONG

Wordsworth is widely and justly characterized as a poet of recollection. Few writers have been more consistently preoccupied with the workings and signification of remembering.¹ Not only is memory often the matter of Wordsworth's song, but it is also intimately involved with the genesis of that song, as the famous description of poetical composition as feeding upon "emotion recollected in tranquillity" makes clear. This side of Wordsworth's singular involvement with the phenomenon of memory has been minutely scrutinized, especially in its connection with *The Prelude* and the early poetry, but the subsequent development of the same problematic has been neglected. How does memory function in his later poetry, and does it diverge there in any significant respect from the celebrated instances of recollection in *The Prelude*?²

By confronting the changing function of reminiscence in Wordsworth's poetry, we will in the process gain a deeper understanding of why he famously compares his most ambitious poem,

¹In what remains the best large-scale study exclusively devoted to Wordsworth's use of memory, Christopher Salvesen claims that "a turning of the personal past to full account is an essentially Wordsworthian achievement, something which particularly deserves to be identified with Wordsworth" (*The Landscape of Memory: A Study of Wordsworth's Poetry*. Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., London: 1965, p. 5).

²For pragmatic reasons, I have chosen to utilize the conventional distinction between the "early" and "late" Wordsworth, the watershed falling roughly around 1807, in order to throw light upon a process of change which is, of course, neither sudden nor strictly linear. (For a fine critique of a too adamant division of Wordsworth's career into two phases, see Alison Hickey, *Impure Conceits: Rhetoric and Ideology in Wordsworth's 'Excursion'*. Stanford University Press, Stanford: 1997, pp. 7-11.)

The Recluse, to a gothic church. This metaphor is not simply a straightforward use of a presumably "organic" image in order to show how his poems are interconnected.³ In addition, this famous comparison is linked to two different lines of development in Wordsworth's career as a poet, both of which will be scrutinized in turn: firstly, we will show how his poetry evinces a tendency towards understanding memory in terms of spatial images, in which the most important functions of the psychological process of habit are assimilated by a poetical metaphor of habitat. Secondly, we will observe a progressive tendency away from his early preoccupation with memory as self-reflection (where Wordsworth's main object is his own memory of childhood and adolescence) over to forms of reminiscence which transcend the individual. In the latter case, the individual act of memory becomes increasingly supplanted by an ethics of mourning. As we shall see in conclusion, though, mourning has an ambivalent status and value in Wordsworth's poetry, and there is no satisfying solution or teleological appeasement to his life-long grappling with the processes of memory.

From habit to habitat

Let us first look at the process of spatialization. An early poem such as the "Intimations" Ode clearly utilizes metaphors of spatiality and habitation in order to express the genesis of subjective identity:

Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come

³In the preface to *The Excursion*, the relationship between *The Prelude* and *The Recluse* is said to be similar to that which "the anti-chapel has to the body of a gothic church," while his "minor Pieces [...] have such connection with the main Work as may give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in those edifices" (*William Wordsworth: The Poems*, 2 vols. Edited by John O. Haydon, Penguin, Harmondsworth: 1977, vol. II, p. 36. This collection will also provide my text for all cited poems by Wordsworth, apart from *The Prelude*). For some of the scope and import of this particular metaphor, see Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and 'The Recluse'*. Yale University Press, New Haven: 1984, pp. xi-xxiv.

From God, who is our home:
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; (lines 62-71)

These lines became problematical for Wordsworth, as he strenuously rejected any extraction of a literal endorsement of the Platonic understanding of *anamnesis* from the poem. There is a metaphorical identification here between an abode and the absolute, as well as a figuring of forgetfulness in terms of spatial constriction in the image of the gradually narrowing shades of the prison-house. More importantly, Wordsworth invests the instance of mediation between the alienated present and the blissful sacredness of the past with spatial metaphors. In the early poetry in general, the most frequent metaphor of this kind is that of the heart, as in the Winander Boy episode where we are told that the sky "sank down / Into my heart and held me like a dream" (*The Prelude*, II, lines 179-180).⁴ In any case, an inner repository is created and from its treasure box, or knapsack, choice experiences of the long lost past can be retrieved.

Memory is something more than a mere cache or container, though. Not only does Wordsworth conceive of it as an active and transformative process, in "Tintern Abbey" it has also acquired a certain monumentality, metaphorically becoming a kind of secondary home which represents a reconstructed version of the original divine habitation of childhood or pre-natal experience. Here Wordsworth tells Dorothy how she will follow his example in the interiorization of the past:

When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind

⁴All subsequent references made to *The Prelude* refer to book and line numbers of the 1805 version printed in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*. Edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, Norton, New York: 1979.

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 exhortations. (lines 139-147, emphases added)

In such metaphors of internal dwelling-places, Wordsworth's later understanding of the church as a place of memory will find its bearings. Even when memory is said to "summon fancies out of Time's dark cell" ("To Rotha Q-", line 14), thus procuring an escape from one spatial repository, it is only in order ultimately to lodge those fancies safely within another, less constrictive site.

Memory, then, is a kind of space—or at least it cannot be thought of completely independent from spatiality. In the act of displaying this connection, Wordsworth's poetry bears out the dictum purveyed by Kant and other philosophers, which states that time cannot be presented except via the outer medium of space.⁵ Even in Wordsworth's most theoretically abstract articulations of the act of memory and poetic recollection, one might argue for the ineluctability of space. In such theoretical accounts, time is specifically a matter of *edification*, in the widest sense of the term. Of particular interest, in this respect, is a passage following immediately upon the famous pronouncement on poetry's necessary connection with the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth supplements this demand for spontaneity with another one: it is also imperative that the poet

has thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of all these general representatives to each other we discover what is

⁵Cf. pp. 167-168 (B 155-156) of *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Norman Kemp Smith, Macmillan, London: 1929.

really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature and in such a connexion with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.⁶

Linked with the social engineering mustered on behalf of the improvement of mankind, the phraseology of eighteenth-century associationism pervades this passage. The thought of Hartley and other associationist philosophers also provides a backdrop to Wordsworth's assumption of a widespread prejudice, earlier in the preface, "that by the act of writing in verse an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association."⁷ The preface is written in recognition of a conscious, and possibly contrived, conflict between the *Lyrical Ballads* and the habits of association shared by most of its possible readers. Wordsworth desires a communication of "habits of mind" that have now become second nature for him, but which are alien to his audience. Through a contemplation of the relationship between new feelings, new habits will be constructed.

In the later poetry, this new habit is envisaged as a new *habitat*. These two words share the same etymology, deriving from the Latin verb *habere* which meant to have or to hold. Wordsworth wishes to simultaneously hold on to, and build up a configuration of, memories. Memory is germane to the concerns of the introduction to the *Lyrical Ballads*, since—as the passage cited above shows—the establishment of a habit only comes about through the retentive gathering of "thoughts" which again are "representatives of all our *past*

⁶"Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems*," in *The Poems*, I, p. 871.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 868.

feelings" (emphasis added). Habit is presented here as being made possible by an assembly of memories, and the latent spatiality of this assembly rises to the forefront if we now turn to a passage from a later poem, of 1816:

Preserve, O Lord! within our hearts,
The memory of Thy favour,
That else insensibly departs,
And loses its sweet savour!
Lodge it within us!
[...]
What offering, what transcendent monument
Shall our sincerity to Thee present?
—Not work of hands, but trophies that may reach
To highest Heaven—the labour of the Soul;
That builds, as thy unerring precepts teach,
Upon the internal conquests made by each,
Her hope of lasting glory for the whole.
("Ode: The Morning of the Day Appointed for a General
Thanksgiving, January 18, 1816," lines 161-165, 169-
175).

The language and thought of Protestantism are here superimposed upon the early theory of associationism. Concomitantly, the process of an edification of associations here is converted into something like an internal building project. The true believer selects the true gifts of divine grace, lodges those gifts within, and subsequently builds a "lasting" and "transcendent monument."

This monument, a specifically religious structure rather than the theatrical image of the mind famously evoked by Hume, is the site which the late Wordsworth wants to redirect his readers towards. In the form of a transcendental gothic church, it will be *the* spot of time. The metaphor from the introduction to *The Excursion* gains added meaning from this evidence, and does not only concern how Wordsworth pictures the grouping of the poems of his projected grand poem—how the minor and major works are to combine in one structure. That metaphor is also, through association with

Wordsworth's overall conception of the functioning of churches, an image of overarching synthesis of recollection which constitutes the "Temple" which the poet has "In my mind's eye."⁸ A little later in this essay, a more detailed look at how sacred edifices function in Wordsworth's later poetry will flesh out this understanding of the gothic church of *The Recluse* as a site where both a collection of poems and a collection of memories are compounded.

Remembering others

One should be wary, though, of reducing this sanctuary to the state of being merely an allegorical representation of Wordsworth's previously held, and epistemologically informed, theory of personal improvement. To do so would be to overlook that the fact that the very essence of the given of experience—the nature of the first feelings or impressions bound together in memories—undergoes a transformation from Wordsworth's early to later writing. This transformation is particularly characterized by a change of emphasis from personal forms of memory to more inclusive and widely encompassing ones. Although Wordsworth's poetry never adheres completely to any single view, there is a strong tendency in the acclaimed early work—particularly in *The Prelude*—towards privileging the self-reflective instances of memory. Hence the pinnacle to be attained by the most elevated minds is a form of habitual self-consciousness:

Such minds are truly from the Deity,
For they are powers; and hence the highest bliss
That can be known is theirs—the consciousness
Of whom they are, habitually infused
Through every image, and through every thought,
And all impressions; (*The Prelude*, XIII, lines 106-111)

On this point Wordsworth is attuned to the precedent of the German Idealists: an instance of self-consciousness, transcending all dichotomies of subject and object, accompanies all external

⁸Quoted from the first line of "In my mind's eye a Temple, like a cloud."

sense data. For Wordsworth, though, this self-comprehension is not a given, but rather something that has to be continuously recaptured through acts of remembrance.⁹ Furthermore, every individual is in danger of gradually losing the full vitality and import of that self-comprehension due to the progressive diminution of its intensity over time.

According to one possible, though ultimately too reductive, reading, Wordsworth does indeed find such remembering reconstructions of his self increasingly obstructed after *The Prelude*. His pursuit of the "egotistical sublime," as it was dubbed by Keats, thus allegedly loses its urgency and direction as he grows older. In this sense, the following lines from *The Prelude* can be read as being anticipatory of a drawn-out process of depletion:

The days gone by
Come back upon me from the dawn almost
Of life; the hiding-places of my power
Seem open, I approach, and then they close;
I see by glimpses now, when age comes on
May scarcely see at all; (*The Prelude*, XI, lines 333-338)

Taking this dramatized self-reflection at face value can provide too tidy a justification for an unwillingness to seriously grapple with Wordsworth's later poetry, though. To read his entire poetical career as a tale of the rise and fall of personal memory, is to uncritically supply it with a simplistic organic trajectory. For one thing, such a reading is too credulous towards Wordsworth's occasional professions of achieved unity through acts of memory. There is another strand in his writings which owns up to the fact that Wordsworth actually was attempting to grasp that which was just beyond the reach of any memorization. A sense of once having experienced intense belonging and immediacy is the driving force of his "love for days / Disowned by memory" (*The Prelude*,

⁹On the precedence of Locke, Descartes, Rousseau and others, for Wordsworth's understanding of the self as a temporal achievement, see Eugene L. Stelzig, *All Shades of Consciousness: Wordsworth's Poetry and the Self in Time*. Mouton, The Hague: 1975, pp. 13-53.

I, lines 642-43), but the articulations and distinctions which are part and parcel of the workings of the Understanding, as well as of language, necessarily make any later conjuring up of this immediacy into an inherently indirect and shadowy undertaking. Even while defending the worth and necessity of pursuing this goal, the Wordsworth of book II of *The Prelude* cannot omit mention of the insurmountable problems involved:

I 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, to which
With growing faculties she doth aspire,
With faculties still growing, feelings still
That whatsoever point they gain they still
Have something to pursue.
(*The Prelude*, II, lines 331-341)

According to a possible reading of these lines, the impossibility of completely attaining self-comprehension through memories of one's own past is productive—for that impossibility is the guarantee for an infinite desire, an endless process of pursuit and self-expansion.

Ultimately, though, the impossibility of such an act of self-remembering undercuts its value as a privileged means towards a founding security or any absolute sense of identity. From this perspective the problem of constituting a self-identity becomes no more successful than, nor strictly dissociable from, the project of constructing a sense of community between different individuals, or even between a human individual and an element of nature. This point is glimpsed by Wordsworth as early as in 1799, when a rare lapse of confidence at the beginning of the second book of the two-part *Prelude* leads him to despair of successfully remembering the experiences of his own past and more passionate self:

A tranquilizing spirit presses now
On my corporeal frame, so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days,
Which yet have such self-presence in my heart
That sometimes when I think of them I seem
Two consciousness—conscious of myself,
And of some other being. (*The Prelude*, II, lines 27-33)¹⁰

This passage ironically undercuts Wordsworth's own definition of the genesis of poetry, as it is precisely the *tranquillity* of the poet that is deemed to be an obstacle to any successful recollection of past emotion. More to the point, in the very "heart" of the inner space of the self the gap between the past and present of memory is here presented as being so great as to almost constitute a complete rupture. Hazlitt finds an ethics on such a temporal division, arguing that the heterogeneity of the self evinced through time is the precondition, and explanation, for acts of identification with other individuals.¹¹ For Wordsworth, the consequences are less clear-cut. However much this discovery of an absolute gap between past and present selves needs to be exposed to modification and sophistication, it will arguably be what prevents his poetry from pursuing any narcissistic implosion. In the following passage from *The Convention of Cintra*, published in 1809, one can detect how far Wordsworth is from languishing in any contracted project of inward self-remembering:

¹⁰In the original two-part *Prelude*, these were lines 25-31 of part two. See David Bromwich's fine commentary on these lines in *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790s*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1998, pp. 137-138.

¹¹Published in 1805, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* attempts to effect "the direct subversion of one of the most deeply-rooted feelings of the human mind, namely that of the essential difference between the interest we have in promoting our own welfare by all the means in our power, and that which we take in promoting the welfare of others" (William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works*, I. J. M. Dent & Sons, London: 1930, p. 9). This subversion is made possible due to a fissure dividing the present and future instances of the self: "so long as there is an absolute separation, an insurmountable barrier fixed between the present, and the future, so that I neither am, nor can possibly be affected at present by what I am to feel hereafter, I am not to any moral or practical purpose the *same* being" (*Ibid.*, p. 11). On Wordsworth's familiarity with this essay, see note 34 on page 286 of James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1984.

Despair thinks of *safety*, and hath no purpose; fear thinks of safety; despondency looks the same way:—but these passions are far too selfish, and therefore too blind, to reach the thing at which they aim [...]. All courage is a projection from ourselves; however short-lived, it is a motion of hope. But these thoughts bind too closely to something inward,—to the present and to the past,—that is, to the self which is or has been. Whereas the vigour of the human soul is from without and from futurity,—in breaking down limit, and losing and forgetting herself in the sensation and image of Country and of the human race; and, when she returns and is most restricted and confined, her dignity consists in the contemplation of a better and more exalted being, which, though proceeding from herself, she loves and is devoted to as another.¹²

The self is directed towards both the outside, and towards moments transcending the present. The final sentence of this passage shows that the self is also distanced and divided from itself, loving a projected instance of itself, due to this self-surpassing tendency. This is, quite literally, fighting talk from an author who, of all things, certainly will not be limited to writing exclusively about the growth of his own mind.

Wordsworth's turn towards that which is "from without" does not only direct itself towards the future, though. Gradually, his poetics of reminiscence (which of course also has future-oriented consequences) will become more and more embroiled in the project of remembering others. In order for Wordsworth to construct a unified vision of a harmonious cosmos, which excludes nothing, a full interiorization of *dead* others becomes a necessity. Hence his poetic project logically devolves from the autobiographical one of self-fashioning, briefly entertained during the writing of *The Prelude*, to a growing emphasis on the seemingly more conventional practices of elegy and mourning which are particularly prominent in the texts devoted to the memory of Hogg, Sir Walter Scott, and others. Indeed, in some cases—most prominently,

¹²Quoted from vol. I, pp. 291-292 of *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, two vols. Edited by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser. Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1974.

perhaps, in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*—an entire tradition is to be ideally reconstituted through an active performance of recollection:

Communities are lost, and Empires die,
And things of holy use unhallowed lie;
They perish;—but the Intellect can raise,
From airy words alone, a Pile that ne'er decays.
("For a Seat in the Groves of Coleorton," lines 17-20)

Combined with the edification, or spatialization, of the self of memory, which we initially sketched, the shift towards acts of community in remembering others, rather than remembering personal encounters with nature, arguably leads Wordsworth to the pursuit of something like an architectonic of pure mourning. The symbol of the church comes to be predominately associated with the achievement of community through reminiscence. So central is this association to Wordsworth's late conception of the church, that the poem titled "A Place of Burial in the South of Scotland" even celebrates the presence of a *churchyard* where "No vestige now remains" (line 6) of the actual church itself. Without the re-membering of the dead, the organic body of the church would not be a fully unified community of all possible members. It is a requisite of Wordsworth's ideal church that it be a "visible centre" for such a realized unity of the "community of the living and the dead."¹³ A conventional expression of this unity can be found in "Ode: 1815," where the burial of the deceased heroes of the battles with the French is envisaged in the following terms:

Be it not unordained that solemn rites,
Within the circuit of those Gothic walls,
Shall be performed at pregnant intervals;
Commemoration holy that unites
The living generations with the dead; (lines 63-67)

¹³ *Essays on Epitaphs*, I, p. 56, in *The Prose Works*, II. See also page 66 of the second essay on epitaphs. Wordsworth's community of the living and the dead is given an early expression in *The Prelude*, X, 967-969, and is also propounded in *The Convention of Cintra*: "There is a spiritual community binding together the living and the dead; the good, the brave, and the wise, of all ages" (*The Prose Works*, I, p. 339).

The last two lines make a strong statement: commemoration actually "unifies" the living and the dead. Due to his pressing need for such unification, Wordsworth is even led to grant, in a poem on the monastery at St. Bees, a qualified defence for the Catholic practice of paying others for prayers and vigils for one's dead. This ritual, he writes, has a natural source in "passion's sharpest agonies," and it beneficently aims to "fix a wiser sorrow in the heart" ("Stanzas suggested in a Steamboat off Saint Bees' Heads," lines 74, 76).

The boundaries of mourning

Despite the importance of mourning to Wordsworth's late poetry, it cannot be said that he achieves any settled or satisfying conception of its process. In fact, he displays a profoundly ambivalent and vacillating stance with regard to mourning, asking of interpersonal memory both that it may preserve and rid one of the deceased. This mixed stance comes about through a confrontation with the Christian scenario of recompense in the afterlife. In its most radical consequence—insofar as the deceased, if a believer, is thought of as being born again in heaven, come what may—the Christian view actually renders human commemoration superfluous. Indeed one might ask, with the Pastor of *The Excursion*, "wherefore murmur or repine? / The memory of the just survives in heaven" (VII, lines 387-388). And—as the consoling voice of the poem "In due observance of an ancient rite" states—even if one mourns, "soon, through Christian faith, is grief subdued: / And joy returns, to brighten fortitude" (lines 13-14). Even if the temptation is there, Wordsworth cannot accept such a divine mechanization of catharsis wholeheartedly. This is a general trait of the time: romantic art takes upon itself the responsibility for presenting the absolute, and thus the successful interiorization and spiritualization of the sensual is considered to be an active, human process.¹⁴ It does not occur by itself. Both philosophy

¹⁴Salvesen suggests that a reading whereby Wordsworth "had, by the time he completed *The White Doe*, worked through, by way of memory, to an attitude of passiveness in time, after which memory had no real function, and so poetry no real aim, is one very possible interpretation of his development" (Salvesen, p. 183). My point is that Wordsworth's poetry avoids such a state of

and the divine (here Hölderlin's gods function similarly) are in need of the transformative powers characteristic of art.

In Wordsworth, poetry transforms and elevates through memory. This process, whereby the dead are saved through the preservative recollection undertaken by those remaining, is the characteristic work of the poet. The latter, as the ecclesiastical sonnet called "Apology" states, is one of the "*good* Spirits free to breathe a note / Of elevation" (lines 6-7). And even were the need for that work of elevation absent, the process and problem of overcoming grief could not be avoided. At times, Wordsworth seems to recommend what one might call a pure therapeutics of detachment on this issue: the living have to free themselves from the fetters of memory, in order to live fully. In the words of Freud, "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again."¹⁵ For Wordsworth, this act of liberation finds its justification in something beyond the individual: only by freeing oneself from the memory of the loved person, can one live in harmony with the joyful essence of nature. If one acts otherwise, mourning risks becoming a ghastly business draining all the resources of life. In "The Brothers," one of Wordsworth's earliest meditations upon the value of mourning, the priest and the other inhabitants of his secluded valley embody the calm quiescence which follows upon a completed process of commemoration. For the inhabitants of the valley, internalization of the dead is a swift and almost painless affair, wherein the "thought of death sits easy" (line 182).¹⁶ Leonard's painful and laboured mourning for his brother, on the other hand, supplies a stark contrast to their untroubled naïveté.

Wordsworth never manages to fully and exclusively embrace any one of these alternatives, indeed his later poetry will often em-

superfluousness by committing itself more and more to an ethics of remembering other people (partially in identification with the church's medieval role in mourning), combined with its submerged retaining of ancient forms of nature worship.

¹⁵Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," p. 166, in *General Psychological Theory*. Edited by Philipp Rieff, Collier: New York: 1963.

¹⁶For a contrast of the differing views on time held by Leonard and the priest, see Salvesen, pp. 143-147.

brace both at once. This is the stumbling block encumbering what Eugene L. Stelzig has called his "presentment of the self as a unity in time, an organic process of personal growth."¹⁷ For as well as desiring an overcoming, or dismissal, of the work of mourning, Wordsworth's poetry *also* seems to advocate a never-ending process of mourning, where the continued retention of the deceased, or of tradition, is akin to the necessary and continuous act of creation whereby God keeps the universe in existence. One can sense an uneasy compromise between these demands of both remembering and forgetting in "Yarrow Visited," where the morning sun is greeted as a

Mild dawn of promise! that excludes
All profitless dejection;
Though not unwilling here to admit
A pensive recollection. (lines 21-24)

The church, as the paradigmatic place of mourning, is involved in a double bind, according to its conflicting debts to the earth and the beyond. Hence as a collective monument of memory, a church—such as the chapel evoked in "To the Lady Fleming on Seeing the Foundation Preparing for the Erection of Rydal Chapel, Westmoreland"—must "exalt the passing hour; / Or soothe it with a healing power / Drawn from the Sacrifice fulfilled" (lines 25-27, emphasis added). On the one hand, nothing must be sacrificed, in order for nature's devotees to live fully in the sanctity and immediacy of nature's embrace. On the other hand, since "Heaven upon earth's an empty boast" ("After-thought," line 9), all must be subjected to the internalizing sacrifice of the sensual at the threshold of the divine.

¹⁷Stelzig, p. 17. The two stances to mourning represent positions related to what Esther Schor identified as being Wordsworth's "two faces of grief," or his two genealogies of morality: "The elegiac genealogy curbs its salvific powers by framing its narratives within natural limits. The organicist genealogy, conversely, employs the mediations of elegiac imagery to strain against natural limits, toward transcendental powers" (*Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning From the Enlightenment to Victoria*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1994, p. 149). My stance differs most importantly from Schor's in that I see the transcendental stance as ultimately entailing a transcending of grief *per se*, a transcendence which makes the mourning process superfluous.

These contradictory imperatives of memory are perhaps most urgently presented by Wordsworth in the poem "Maternal Grief." The lines of this poem were first intended to be spoken by the wife of the Solitary of *The Excursion*, and even when it was denied its place in that work—and thereby also its place in *The Recluse*—its original connection with that work was nevertheless preserved by Wordsworth's mentioning it in a note dictated to Isabella Fenwick. Thus the work is connected in an even more intimate fashion with the planned cathedral of *The Recluse* than those other freestanding poems of Wordsworth's *oeuvre* which are said to function as its "little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses."¹⁸ "Maternal Grief" is an interior haunt, placed, as it were, somewhere on the border between the nave (*The Excursion*) and these more external appendages of Wordsworth's cathedral. Thus it confounds the logic of exclusion and inclusion which would help demarcate the architecture of the planned poem, and we shall presently see that it also resists the boundaries set by the principles of mourning upon which Wordsworth implicitly wanted to rear that edifice.

"Maternal Grief" starts off with the citation of the speech of an ailing mother who has lost her daughter. We are presented with her struggle to cope with this loss, by comprehending it within a Christian view of the afterlife, as well as her struggle to care for a young son who survived his twin sister. In this latter motif, there is a thematization of the struggle between factuality and introjection: the mother has to concentrate so much of her psychic resources on the process of interiorizing her lost one, that the actual presence of the dead daughter's twin brother represents a problem. He is neglected, due to the mother's excessive emotional investment in the process of mourning. At length, a *rapprochement* between mother and son takes

¹⁸*The Poems*, II, p. 36. The note dictated to Isabella Fenwick deserves to be quoted in full, as it also interestingly brings up the threshold between fact and fiction, public and private: "This was in part an overflow from the Solitary's own description of his own and his wife's feelings upon the decease of their children [*The Excursion* III, lines 650-79], and, I will venture to add *for private notice only*, is faithfully set forth from my Wife's feelings and habits after the loss of our two children within half a year of each other" (*The Poems*, I, p. 1045).

place, but it grants no real closure to her process of mourning, and is manifested by the two of them wandering together in "walks whose boundary is the lost One's grave" (line 68).¹⁹

These walks are more of a sharing of the predicament of the grave, than a solution to it: mother and son share a fascination with the boundary between life and death, between the inside and the outside. The sharing of this boundary is not, however, strictly *within* its confines, since the son (as a twin of the deceased) bears it within his very being. He is, partially at least, a walking instance of death-in-life, due to the overlap between his and his sister's identity, just as the mother's virtualized and displaced desire, preoccupied as it is in the process of mourning, displaces her from partaking fully in the land of the living. Indeed, the mother dies of grief in the differing version of this story provided by *The Excursion*.

On the threshold between life and death, mother and son establish something like a minimal community in "Maternal Grief," a small-scale image of the collected congregation of the living and the dead that will be joined in mourning commemoration within the larger bounds of Wordsworth's transcendental architecture. It is evident, from the ending of the poem, that mourning does not end: if the mother "does not miss / Dear consolation" (lines 70-71) in her trips to her daughter's grave, she nevertheless blends "with that solemn rite / Of pious faith the vanities of grief" (lines 72-73). In the final lines, we are told that her sorrow, "As now it is, seems to her own fond heart / Immortal as the love that gave it being" (lines 80-81). In the original context of *The Excursion*, this grief was no doubt to be subsumed and transcended as a moment of weakness or self-indulgence.²⁰ Maternal grief was, most likely, meant to be clarified and replaced by a more stoic and *paternal* grief. But this explanation is never given in the poem itself: as it stands on its own, relatively

¹⁹This and all subsequent line numbers given directly in the text refer to "Maternal Grief."

²⁰See the Solitary's description of his wife's ultimately lethal grief: "her pure glory, / [...] fell / Into a gulf obscure of silent grief, / And keen heart-anguish—of itself ashamed / Yet obstinately cherishing itself: / And so consumed, she melted from my arms; / And left me, on this earth, disconsolate!" (*The Excursion*, III, lines 672, 674-679).

independent of *The Excursion* as a whole, "Maternal Grief" contradicts the latter work. The cell, or oratory, or aisle, or whatever liminal site this excised poem might be said to inhabit within the sacred architecture of *The Recluse*, drifts apart and does not obey the logic of the more encompassing edifice. We find the contended point—where to draw a line to mourning, or where to fix the boundary between the sacred and its exterior—expressed with extreme lucidity, at the beginning of the mother's speech in "Maternal Grief." She turns to God and implores Him:

Death, life, and sleep, reality and thought,
Assist me, God, their boundaries to know,
O teach me calm submission to thy Will! (lines 11-13)

No resolving delineation of these boundaries is provided—neither here, nor elsewhere in Wordsworth's poetry. His poetry can be said to enact a persistent fascination and puzzlement before such boundaries.

In the process, his architecture of the absolute—the projected site of *The Recluse*—is torn asunder by its internal cracks. No secure basis is given for the differentiation between what is internal and what is external to its structure, for any principle of articulation through which his life's work could be organized. Likewise, Wordsworth's poetry hesitates between different understandings of recollection: memory, as we encounter it in his verse, goes through a wide variety of guises and is neither pure temporality nor fossilized space, neither simple self-recollection nor exclusively the mourning of others, neither a beast of burden nor a blessing—but all and none of these. This richness, and Wordsworth's unremitting confrontation with its inherent aporias, has contributed to make his poetry so eminently, but also disturbingly, memorable.

University of Bergen