

Reading Wordsworth after McGann: Moments of Negativity in "Tintern Abbey" and the Immortality Ode

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Is it not possible, under certain conditions and at certain times, for very important things to betray themselves in very slight indications? ... So let us not under-value small signs: perhaps from them it may be possible to come upon the tracks of greater things. (Freud: 31)

Since the mid 1980s, Jerome J. McGann has been the "most influential critic of Romanticism" (Cronin: 5). McGann's interventions in this field have been decisive in opening and revising the Romantic canon as well as in altering our approach to Romantic texts. Due in large part to McGann many more very different poets from the period are today being read in the historical, contextual manner he has theorised and advocated. As such his work has been and is a salutary source of inspiration for most contemporary Romanticists. Yet one serious problem remains: in book after book, essay after essay, McGann features William Wordsworth in the role of the partly cunning reactionary, partly deluded idealist, who wrongly suppresses particular socio-historical or psychic actualities from the surface of his poetry. In his major work in Romantic criticism, *The Romantic Ideology*, which provided the script and set the stage for Anglo-American Romantic criticism well into the 1990s, one of McGann's central premises is that Wordsworth's poetry enacts "a strategy of displacement" whereby "The poem annihilates its history, biographical and socio-historical alike, and replaces these particulars with a record of pure consciousness" (90). Here it only remains for McGann to add "that Wordsworth's ... is a false consciousness needs scarcely to be said" (*ibid.*).

It is not McGann's assumption of a historically elevated position from which to pronounce a devastating critique of the escapist tendency in Wordsworthian Romanticism's imaginative project that seems to be

problematic. Surely Romantic poetry of the Wordsworthian kind at first sight often appears to wish to be able to transcend rather than articulate its particular material enabling conditions, whether these are upsetting socio-historical events exterior to the poet, or psychic events interior to the poet. The problem is McGann's belief that Wordsworth manages *successfully* to displace and even 'annihilate' whatever causes his anxieties and crises. For McGann Wordsworth remains in a state of naive assurance that there is indeed full compensation in the imaginative idealities projected in the poetic works. However, neither Wordsworth nor his poems were ever as convinced that they had sufficiently stable grounds for asserting such assurance as they are made out to be in the criticism of McGann.¹ To substantiate this claim the following attends to 'moments of negativity' in Wordsworth's poetry; moments in which it anticipates an undeluded and sceptical critique of its own transcendent assumptions and affirmative visions.²

The exploration of these moments of negativity in Wordsworth has been a persistent concern of much twentieth century Wordsworth criticism from A. C. Bradley through Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man to Frances Ferguson, David Simpson and many others. These critics have in various ways developed insights provided by Bradley who in 1900 turned against the Victorian reception of Wordsworth. For Bradley, Wordsworth was not the nostalgic, necessarily solacing and over-emotional lover of nature readers such as John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold had found him to be. Wordsworth was a proto-modern poet who confronted "poverty, crime, insanity, ruined innocence, torturing hopes doomed to extinction, solitary anguish, even despair", and who "did not avert his eyes from it" (Bradley: 124). This understanding of Wordsworth stands in danger of being curbed by McGann's powerful influence insofar

¹ For other critiques of the understanding of Romanticism professed by McGann and other new historicists and cultural materialists, see M. H. Abrams, "On Political Readings of the *Lyrical Ballads*", in his *How to Do Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* (New York: Norton, 1989), pp. 364-391, Peter Manning, "Placing Poor Susan: Wordsworth and the New Historicism", in his *Reading Romantics: Texts and Contexts* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 300-320, and Susan Wolfson, "Questioning 'The Romantic Ideology': Wordsworth", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 44:3 (1990), pp. 429-447. In granting Wordsworth some of the insights the new historicists typically refuse him the essays by Manning and Wolfson have been most useful.

² For a consideration of the role and articulation of negativity in literature, see the essays in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (eds.), *Languages of The Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

as its probable consequence is a less than desirable return of Wordsworth studies to Victorian conditions.

Wordsworth often functions as the norm against which most other poets of the Romantic period appear interesting and appealing to McGann. In an essay on versions of elegy in Romantic poetry, "The Failures of Romanticism", McGann discusses what he calls 'a poetry of failure' as a special "mode of poetry": "Poetry as the expression and even the embodiment of loss and failure" (271).³ This is a radically dark poetry, which McGann typically champions, and it exhibits an "Indurated Byronic sorrow [which] signifies a loss from which there is no redemption" (273). According to McGann, this dark mode of poetry, which is practiced by Byron, Keats and Shelley, derives from such late eighteenth century elegiac women poets as Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson, and gets rearticulated by such later poets as Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon. These poets McGann names sentimental and distinguishes from their Romantic contemporaries. Sentimental "poetical theory and practice [is] firmly located in history", writes McGann,

... indeed, its theory and practice make historicity, with all its nontranscendental features, a defining quality of the poetical. Romanticism feeds upon this theory, but only to raise up cries of resistance, or to build temples in excremental places. Sentimental poetry, by contrast, brings all of its illusions, including its lost illusions, down to earth. (285)

In order to focus and frame his reading of the sentimental tradition, which emphasises loss, the body, disillusion, death, materiality, the real, McGann constructs a Romantic tradition that emphasises the exact opposites of compensation, the mind, illusion, life, spirituality, the ideal. Presenting the normative Romantic tradition against which he promotes the more honest (we may assume) manner of confronting loss and failure in the sentimental tradition, McGann writes,

The usual undertaking of these matters follows a Wordsworthian/Coleridgean line: 'For such loss ... abundant recompence'. According to this view, there is—there must be—a faith that looks through death. The philosophic mind of

³ See also McGann's chapter, "The Loss of Sentimental Poetry" in *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 150-173.

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romanticism works to redeem the harrowing logic of ultimate loss: perhaps even, as in certain Christian and Marxian schemas, to transform it into splendor. But a serious problem lurks beneath these elegant compensatory formulas. We know this from Wordsworth's own poetry, whose best moments regularly betray their conscious commitments. (271; McGann's ellipsis)

Wordsworth is here made to subscribe to an idea of a closed psychic economy in which it is possible to believe in full compensation for loss. He thus comes to represent an almost unbelievably naive position against which McGann can present his counter-tradition of sentimental poets, who consciously recognise and face the "problem" of "ultimate loss" that McGann claims Wordsworth only articulates by accident when his poems "betray their conscious commitments".

McGann is clearly being hyperbolic in his construal of Wordsworth as the norm transgressed by the *therefore* newly interesting sentimental poets. Yet this is exactly the problem. One of the easiest ways to legitimate the retrieval of any of the numerous neglected Romantic poets is to claim that this or that poet or group of poets departs from and transgresses 'the norm'. As always in such undertakings what is posited as the norm has to be a unified and self-identical entity, which at most can contradict itself when it betrays its "conscious commitments" in unintended slips and lapses. However, the unnecessarily high price for this salutary recuperation of a counter-tradition at work in the Romantic period is a misreading and re-mystification of Wordsworth which threatens to become the normative understanding of Wordsworth insofar as McGann's influence has come to assume hegemonic status in current Romantic criticism

When he presents Wordsworth's allegedly closed economy of loss and full compensation in "The Failures of Romanticism", McGann refers to two famous poems and passages by Wordsworth. He quotes a line from "Tintern Abbey" (1798) and he alludes to stanza ten of the Immortality Ode (1804/05) and presents this as evidence that there is, as there must be, abundant recompense in the face of loss in normative Wordsworthian Romanticism. This essay is essentially a testing of McGann's evidence. The use of "Tintern Abbey" will be reconsidered first in order to begin to suggest that on a second look, Wordsworth is not saying exactly what McGann takes him to be saying. Next, a historical frame is provided to situate the discussion of the value of poetry and the imagination in the Romantic period itself, which finally leads to a reading of a passage in the Immortality Ode which, like the passage from "Tintern Abbey",

profoundly problematises and complicates what McGann leaves as an unproblematised given: that Wordsworth's poetic language aims to convince us in the affirmative that it provides full compensation for the losses it registers.

I

"Tintern Abbey" is about what it means to be in time: a revisit to a formerly visited spot in nature compels the speaker to measure what is lost against what is gained as time passes. The poem makes use of one of Wordsworth's most characteristic artistic techniques, what Carlos Baker terms "the double-exposure technique" (106). As Baker explains, Wordsworth used the technique to explore his major theme of personal growth by juxtaposing "two widely separated periods of time in such a way that we are made dramatically conscious of the degree of growth that has taken place between Stage One and Stage Two" (ibid.). The poem suggests that the speaker has lost an immediate, direct, sensuous relation to nature such as that experienced in early youth. Yet Wordsworth will not lament this loss, because something is gained from it. What is gained is the experience *as such*, the memory of it, which on the one hand can serve as a substitute for nature when the speaker is away from nature, and on the other hand makes evident the power of consciousness to function in the immediate absence of the world. In "Tintern Abbey", according to Baker, "As [Wordsworth] overlooks the scene once more, with the mental landscape of the past still in his purview, he is made doubly aware of a sense of loss (the past will not return) and a sense of compensation greater than the loss (the new maturity and insight which the advancing years have brought)" (107). Although they disagree in their evaluation of Wordsworth's poem, Baker's reading is consonant with McGann's. They are both confident that Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey" receives "abundant" compensation for the losses registered in the poem.

Yet McGann represses the undercurrent of sceptical doubt that qualifies Wordsworth's affirmations and manifests itself in certain moments of negativity in the poem. McGann cites a crucial phrase from the poem to illustrate his idea that in Wordsworth there is full compensation, but he leaves something out of the quotation, which can be seen to qualify and negativize the affirmation that encapsulates it. Wordsworth registers the loss of his earlier self and the immediate relation to nature he experienced on his first visit to Tintern Abbey:

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That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur: other gifts
Have followed, for such loss, *I would believe*,
Abundant recompence. 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. (Gill: 134, ll. 84-94; emphasis added)

In “The Failures of Romanticism”, McGann deliberately erases the crucial italicised phrase that Wordsworth deploys to destabilise the naive notion of full compensation in the closed economy of loss and gain implied in the passage. Commenting on this and other moments of negativity in the poem, Susan Wolfson astutely points out that “to phrase a spiritual economy ... with a tentative auxiliary ... is to deplete the store of recompense. Wordsworth’s rhetoric of affirmation in ‘Tintern Abbey’ indulges a form of negative assertion” (439). To suggest that we are merely dealing with minor and relatively insignificant details—or with an instance when Wordsworth inadvertently betrays his “conscious commitments”—would be to profoundly misread him. As Christopher Ricks points out and amply demonstrates in his attention to minute, particular details in Wordsworth, “So simply lucid is Wordsworth’s speech that it can constitute a temptation: we may not pay sufficient attention to the very words, since we are so confident of what they are saying” (127). In a certain sceptical readerly mood, the “I would believe” admits the illusory or at least tenuous ground on which Wordsworth builds his hopes for full compensation. If we recover McGann’s repressed passage and bring the proper weight to bear on the tentative modal auxiliary ‘would’ in “*I would believe*”, then we understand Wordsworth to be saying that in fact he does not believe that he has had or ever will receive “abundant recompence” in the face of loss, absence, death.

Wordsworth almost, but not exactly, says the opposite of what McGann wants him to be saying. McGann wants Wordsworth to be writing in the indicative and to be stating a held fact, whereas all Wordsworth can do is to write in the optative thus expressing a wish, which may or may not be fulfilled. “I would believe” comes close to

implying, 'I would if I could', or 'I would but I don't'. Following this line of thought we begin to sense the oxymoronic nature of the sheer idea of "abundant recompence" and to raise the question of whether a representation—be it in the form of mental imagery held in memory or verbal poetry—under any circumstance can be said to substitute adequately for what it represents, and not rather function as a reminder of loss, a complex sign of absence as much as presence. McGann's construal of a binary opposition between a Wordsworthian, optimistic and compensatory vision and its dark, sentimental, Byronic counter-vision begins to dissolve as we recognize that Wordsworth encompasses both what McGann calls the sentimental and what he calls the Romantic elegiac current. If Wordsworth's negations are never absolute nor, by the same token, are his affirmations.

II

To understand more fully where McGann's understanding of Wordsworth's poetry derives from, and to see more clearly what is at stake in recuperating certain moments of negativity in this poetry, it is necessary to recapitulate the way in which poetry was aggrandised and evaluated as a kind of substitute religion in the Romantic period and after. Normatively Romanticism has been said to centre on the idea that imaginative literature can somehow correct the wrongs of the world; that the failures of the real can be amended at the ideal level of human consciousness through the redemptive intervention of the imagination. Imagination is the mental, quasi-divine faculty that is mobilized in Romantic aesthetics in order to compensate in ideality for the short-comings of reality.

In a letter from 1807 Wordsworth says that his vocation is to create poetry, which at some future date will "console the afflicted, ... add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier, ... [and] teach the young and the gracious of every age, to see, to think and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous" (De Selincourt 1969: 146; 150). This captures what McGann takes Wordsworth's poetry to exemplify and articulates some of our culture's most deeply entrenched ideas about what imaginative literature is and is supposed to do: console in times of distress, add sunshine on a rainy day, and provide a means to cultivate the faculties of seeing, thinking, and feeling to realise our full human potential. In the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth similarly writes:

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Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge.... [The poet] is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. (Gill: 606)

As Raymond Williams points out, for Wordsworth poetry ideally embodies and transmits to the reader “certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development of society towards an industrial civilisation was felt to be threatening or even destroying” (36). Indeed, especially in the nineteenth but also in the twentieth century, Wordsworth’s poetry was often valued for its therapeutic effects, its capacity to function as a refuge, antidote and source of humane value in an increasingly urbanised, industrialised, capitalised, and ultimately godless modern world of science and cold calculation.

A few lines from Keats can be taken to sum up the Romantic idea of poetry’s humanising agency. In one of his last poems, the unfinished meditation on the sources of artistic inspiration and creation as well as the role of the poet in the modern world, the *The Fall of Hyperion* fragment composed in the summer of 1819, Keats asks:

‘... sure not all
Those melodies sung into the world’s ear
Are useless: sure a poet is a sage,
A humanist, physician to all men [?]’ (Barnard: 440, ll. 187-90)

One of the contexts necessary for understanding Keats’s desire to know whether poetry is “useless” is the philosophical movement of utilitarianism, which had its origins in late seventeenth century Britain and received its classical formulations in the work of Jeremy Bentham. As M. H. Abrams points out, the utilitarian thinkers “attacked poetry for being an outmoded luxury trade, or a functionless vestige of a primitive mentality” (326). In the face of a material-minded public that espoused such ideas about poetry, the Romantics invested their poetry with absolute value by promoting it as the humane agent for secular redemption, something all humans need for their emotional and mental well-being. Thus Shelley claimed, in response to Thomas Love Peacock’s utilitarian theory of poetry in “The Four Ages of

Poetry”, that “Poetry is ... something *divine*” and that poets are the “unacknowledged legislators of the world”.

A famous incident from the period relates how John Stuart Mill was saved from a state of depression and mental breakdown by reading Wordsworth’s poetry in 1828. Mill famously describes this in his *Autobiography* (1873) in terms of a quasi-religious conversion experience. Mill had been engaged in the utilitarian project of reforming and improving society and its institutions in order to increase the material well-being and therefore the happiness of the largest possible number of humans. “But the time came when I [awoke] from this as from a dream”, Mill recognises, and continues:

It was in the autumn of 1826. I was in a dull state of nerves ... unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement... In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: ‘Suppose that all your objects in life were realised; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?’ And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered ‘No!’ At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation upon which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for. (Stillinger: 80-81)

Yet, having reached this low point, Mill discovers Wordsworth’s poetry:

This [depressed] state of my thoughts and feelings made the fact of my reading Wordsworth for the first time (in the autumn of 1828), an important event in my life.... What made Wordsworth’s poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure.... I needed to be made to feel that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me this. (88)

Mill’s understanding of Wordsworth’s power to give mental relief was prefigured by Wordsworth himself in the movements of his major poems. As Mill puts it with reference to the Immortality Ode, “I found that

[Wordsworth] himself had had similar experience to mine; that he also had felt that the first freshness of youthful enjoyment of life was not lasting; but that he had sought for compensation, and had found it" (89).

Mill found relief from his depression through reading the Immortality Ode and from recognising that Wordsworth had experienced a similar crisis, but had found relief from it and regained his strength. The kind of hope invested by Wordsworth in the consolatory and humanising power of his poetry would seem to have been realised by Mill when he read Wordsworth in 1828 at a time when Romantic ideas about poetry and the aggrandisement of art as redemptive were being disseminated in and adopted by the culture at large through such reading experiences as Mill's or that other Victorian sage, Matthew Arnold, who in "Elegiac Verses" (1850) asked, "where will Europe's latter hour / Again find Wordsworth's healing power?" (Bryson: 188).

III

It should now be possible to see more clearly the origins of the understanding of Wordsworth that McGann presents in "The Failures of Romanticism" and elsewhere: Stuart Mill's is a major nineteenth-century celebration of what McGann calls Romanticism's "elegant compensatory formulas". More recently, Helen Vendler, Michael O'Neill and Duncan Wu have reasserted the transcendent 'healing power' of Wordsworth's Immortality Ode. According to Vendler, "Arnold was uncannily accurate in speaking of Wordsworth's 'healing power': the Ode is self-therapeutic" (78-9), and for O'Neill, the poem is concerned with the "curative properties of expression" (48). Likewise, in his investigation of the extent to which "the force that exerted most influence on [Wordsworth's] poetic life was grief" (309), Duncan Wu maintains that Wordsworth in the Ode held that "grief could be transcended" and that this position was in need of "no justification" (202), even as Wu admits "a perceptible tendency in his poetry towards scepticism" (309).

Yet, this understanding of the Immortality Ode is premised on a blindness *vis-à-vis* certain moments of negativity that pull in the other direction. A number of critics have pointed to the ways in which the Ode undermines its own affirmations. In one of the fullest examinations of the Ode, Jeffrey C. Robinson describes a 'classroom experiment' of spending an entire semester reading the work. Through close textual analysis that emphasised the poem's 'questionings' and by means of a variety of

contextual placements as well as attention to the stages of composition and revision, Robinson's students were led to revise their initial sense of "Wordsworth's generally consoling intention" to become "tangled in Wordsworth's own confusions of loss and gain" (63). Also responding to the complexities of the poem's 'questionings' of its own certainties, Peter Manning has shown how it "exploits the resonance of Christian faith without committing itself to belief, to the conviction that would lessen its human uncertainty" (80), and, more recently, Fred Hoerner has argued that in the Ode the "loss that breaks the heart rekindles a dialectic of joining and questioning, presence and absence" rather than a "retreat away from suffering and into consolation" (656). It is with reference to these and other more full explications of the negative thrusts in Ode that I focus in the following on one unsettling moment of negativity in the poem.

The first three stanzas of the poem that cured Mill's depression capture the total movement of the poem, a full reading of which can only be sketched here:

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.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
 By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

 The Rainbow comes and goes,
 And lovely is the Rose,
 The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare;
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
 The sunshine is a glorious birth;
 But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

Now, while the Birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young Lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief:

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A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong.
The Cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep,
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
And all the earth is gay,
Land and sea
 Give themselves up to jollity,
And with the heart of May
 Doth every Beast keep holiday,
Thou Child of Joy
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy Shepherd-
boy!

A three-step dialectic of remembered joy, its loss, and its subsequent retrieval is being articulated. The movement begins by recalling a state of plenitude and joy experienced in childhood (“The glory and the freshness of a dream”). But this plenitude is registered as past and lost (“there hath past away a glory from the earth”). This loss leads to, yet is not presented as the direct cause of, the speaker’s thought of “grief”, which marks the climax of the speaker’s crisis (“To me *alone* there came a thought of grief”). In the final movement strength is regained despite irretrievable loss, grief finds relief, and the crisis is overcome. The poet, as Mill puts it, has “sought for compensation, and [has] found it”. The means to overcome the crisis, most readers recognise, is poetic utterance (“timely utterance”). This utterance yields “Echoes” that signal a re-established positive correspondence between the subject and the object which counters the negative state of being isolated in thought; “No more shall grief of mine the season wrong; / I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng”.

Poetic utterance is what finally allows the speaker to feel and sense that “all the earth is gay” and to participate, although vicariously, in this rejuvenated life. This movement captures the larger and highly complex movement of the poem from loss toward the possibility of compensation. Towards the end of the poem, in lines alluded to by McGann in “The Failures of Romanticism”, Wordsworth acknowledges his loss, but presents the thoughts of suffering, which are evoked by loss, as adequate recompense for what is lost:

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 years that bring the philosophic mind. (Gill: 302, ll. 180-189)

This affirmative statement that compensatory “strength” can “spring” out of “soothing thoughts” of “suffering” (the formal rhyme spring/suffering which is underscored by enjambment almost enacts the semantic message to suggest both the sense of ‘to originate out’ of and ‘to escape from’ suffering) may be read in the light of what was said earlier in stanza three, in particular in these lines:

To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong.

In the same moment that the thought of grief is noted, Wordsworth goes on to state that he has found relief and regained his strength through what he calls “timely utterance”.

“I again am strong” seems an unnatural word order compared to the more straightforward ‘I am strong again’. The inversion of the more straightforward word order may be explained by the need to find a rhyme-word to chime with the stanza’s first rhyme-word, ‘song’. The fact that ‘song’ and ‘strong’ rhyme indicates that uttering this rhymed song is what makes Wordsworth strong. In *The Verbal Icon*, William K. Wimsatt points out that rhymes “impose upon the logical pattern of expressed argument a kind of fixative counterpattern of allogical implication” (153). And as Roman Jakobson explains, “Rhyme necessarily involves the semantic relationship between rhyming units.... Whatever the relation between sound and meaning in different rhyme techniques, both spheres are necessarily involved” (45-6). Thus, Michael O’Neill concludes about these textual movements in Wordsworth’s poem, “The rhyme ..., kept apart for five lines, suggests that strength lies in song, and Wordsworth’s ‘timely utterance’ suggests the curative properties of expression” (48). The rhymes on grief/relief and spring/suffering accomplish the same thing:

giving rhythmic utterance to something painful is a way towards relieving the mind and overcoming crisis. The song makes the speaker strong, gives relief from grief. The making or uttering of the poem compensates for the losses it is about. In essence, this is what the poem is about for John Stuart Mill, Helen Vendler, Jerome McGann and Michael O'Neill, despite their significant ideological and methodological differences. However, we should not take leave of the poem carrying only an affirmative understanding of it as simultaneously asserting and affirming a "therapeutic success" (Vendler: 79) through "the curative properties of expression" exemplified and instanced by the magic of rhyme.

If what has been said concerning the importance of the rhyme of 'strong' and 'song' and 'grief' and 'relief' is granted, what are we to make of the fact, which O'Neill and all other readers of the Ode neglect to mention, that 'song' and 'strong' also rhyme with 'wrong'? Is this the poem's subtly 'alogical' (Wimsatt) way of implying that its overt assertions of "the curative properties of expression" may be 'wrong'? That it is somehow 'wrong' to search for consolation, relief, and strength in poetic utterance? Is the song in other words saying that it is wrong to seek compensation in "thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering"? On a straightforward reading the line "No more shall grief of mine the season wrong" could not be clearer in its rejection of despair. Yet the rhyme nonetheless imparts enough of a questioning note of scepticism into this resolute affirmation to suggest that even as the poem is saying one thing in an affirmative mode it is doing another thing in a negative mode.

Despite the fact that it relates to the French context, which was never exactly parallel to the English when it comes to the force of Neoclassical doctrines of decorum and positions on rhyme (because the English had to take account of a native blank verse tradition much stronger than anywhere on the continent), the following may be read as an account of the apparently irrational and inexplicable use of rhyme in the Ode:

In upholding the essentially Cartesian view that Truth expressed itself as clear and distinct ideas, neoclassical French theorists of poetic language, of whom Boileau is the best known, recommended the suppression or, at least, the strict control of language's more irrational potentialities. One of the chief problems here was deciding on the function and status of rhyme. Rhyme was a necessary feature of regular French verse: it provided essential phonetic reinforcement to the verse line and guaranteed formal unity. But at the same time rhyme was, from a semantic point of

view, potentially a subversive agent. If not strictly disciplined, it could neglect its duty as an element in a logically structured discourse and assert itself as a feature in its own right, establishing through phonetic similarity with other words (rhyme or otherwise), an oblique or irrational connection which might run counter to the proposition of which it was, in theory, part.... With the Romantics, words were permitted to regain some of their opacity which had been refined out of them by the demands of rational discourse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Scott: 15)

To transpose these insights to the English context, reference might be made to John Dryden's *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* (1668). Before the essay's truly significant discussion of the use and relative merits of rhyme and blank verse in drama, Dryden sums up received wisdom concerning "the sweetness of English verse". This, he says,

is improved by the happiness of some writers yet living; who first taught us to mould our thoughts into easy and significant words,—and to retrench superfluities of expression,—and to make our rime so properly a part of the verse, that it should never mislead the sense, but itself be led and governed by it. (Arnold: 16)

Dryden here recognises, even as he resists, the potential of rhyme to mislead the sense, to undermine the logic of sense making. Considering the influence of the *Essay* on subsequent English literature and taste, this statement not only reflects received wisdom concerning the relation of rhyme to sense, it certainly generates the idea that the two are, as Pope was later to put it, to echo one another with sense or 'reason' being the source, and rhyme or 'language' being the faithful, mimetic echo. This corresponds to the Neoclassical idea that language is a dress for thought, something which fits more or less adequately, but which is ultimately a mere ornament to the sense and not, as the Romantics will come to believe, something that embodies thought, and crucially, something which need not always make sense in the same way Pope desires. As Pope writes to introduce *An Essay on Criticism* (1711),

'Tis hard to say, if greater Want of Skill
Appear in *Writing* or in *Judging* ill;
But, of the two, less dang'rous is th' Offence,
To tire our *Patience*, than mis-lead our *Sense*. (Audra and Williams:
239, ll. 1-4)

One way of keeping "Writing" from "mis-lead[ing] our Sense", and thus of controlling the autonomous force of language while still retaining rhyme, is to promote and use closed couplets. In couplets the distance between rhyme-words and thus language's potential to produce aberrant meanings is kept to an absolute minimum to meet the Popean *dictum*: "The *Sound* must seem an *Eccho* to the *Sense*" (Audra and Williams: 281, l. 365).

Romanticism's resistance to and departure from the closed couplet may be a departure from the desire to control the potential of rhyme to produce 'unintended' meanings and a move to liberate what David Scott calls "language's more irrational potentialities". In other words, it may be said that there is a paradoxical intent to produce unintended meanings to be located in certain Romantic poems such as the Ode rather than what McGann postulates when he accounts for Wordsworth's few "best moments" when the poetry betrays its "conscious commitments" and apparently says more than it means.

If only we knew what Wordsworth's thoughts, intentions, commitments were when he allowed his language to indulge in such apparently contradictory and mind-bafflingly irrational rhymes! Then we might have said with McGann that the rhyme of song and wrong is an unintentional accident of language and not something we should take as essentially Wordsworthian. But we do not know why he made that fatal rhyme. Indeed, the odds are that these rhymes are far from accidental. In his diary, Thomas Moore paraphrases Wordsworth's conversation on the relative merits of English and Italian with regard to rhyming: "In struggling with words one [is] led to give birth to and dwell upon thoughts, while, on the contrary, an easy and mellifluous language [like Italian is] apt to tempt, by its facility, into negligence, and to lead the poet to substitute music for thought" (O'Donnell: 41-2). In the same place, Moore reports Wordsworth speaking of "the immense time it took him to write even the shortest copy of verses,—sometimes whole weeks employed in shaping two or three lines, before he can satisfy himself with their structure" (O'Donnell: 256n35). Surely Wordsworth was conscious and committed when he utilised the irrational powers of language in rhyming song, strong, and wrong in the Ode. Yet whether or not the rhyme is finally seen as an accident, it is there on the open page, and thus susceptible to being interpreted as an untimely sign of the poem's own subversion of the naively affirmative understanding of it as merely medicine for a depressed state of mind.

The double pull of the language of the Ode can be understood in terms of a distinction between Romantic 'ideology' and Romantic 'work', which McGann introduces in *Romantic Ideology*. "The grand illusion of Romantic *ideology* is that one may escape ... a world [in which, as Shelley writes in the *Defence*, 'man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave'] through imagination and poetry. The great truth of Romantic *work* is that there is no escape, that there is only revelation (in a wholly secular sense)" (131). The presence of a certain negativity at the core of the language of what has been read as one of the most affirmative poems by Wordsworth suggests that we should not uncritically repeat the therapeutic reading of Wordsworth. This moment of negativity in the Ode resonates with McGann's description in *Romantic Ideology* of Romantic poetry's "greatest moments of artistic success", which, he continues, "are almost always associated with loss, failure, and defeat—in particular the losses which strike most closely to those Ideals (and Ideologies) cherished by the poets in their works" (132). Yet McGann insists on problematising the idea that the greatness of Romantic poetry is connected with its capacity to lead to an authentic critique of its own dominant ideology. He writes that Romantic poetry's "greatest moments usually occur when it pursues its last and final illusion: that it can expose or even that it has uncovered its illusions and false consciousness, that it has finally arrived at the Truth". This is essentially what the Ode has been taken to achieve in the key-rhyme dwelled upon above. Yet, McGann continues as he turns the tables upon such an argument: "The need to believe in such an achievement, either immediate or eventual, is deeply Romantic (and therefore illusive) because it locates the goal of human pursuits, needs, and desires in Ideal space" (134). However, nothing seems further removed from the truth than this confusion of real, material textual space, the space of the poetic *work*, with an Ideal space, the space of Romantic Ideology. Wordsworth's implied critique of the compensatory potential of poetic language may not qualify as the Truth, but it is certainly not a critique that happens in an Ideal and therefore illusory space, it happens right before our eyes.

Wordsworth is not simply the affirmative poet McGann turns him into, nor is he the opposite. He is both and in a sense neither. This duality is reflected in Wordsworth's fundamental ambivalence regarding the force of poetic language. In one of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* from 1810, for instance, Wordsworth famously presents words as in possession of a power to give or to take away life:

If words be not ... an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift [which has] the power to consume and to alienate [the reader] from his right mind. Language, if it do[es] not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve. (Owen and Smyser: III, 84-5)

Likewise, in a letter from 1829 he writes, “words are not a mere *vehicle*, but they are *powers* either to kill or to animate” (De Selincourt 1979: 185). As he puts it in Book Five of *The Prelude* (1805),

... Visionary power
Attends upon the motions of the winds
Embodied in the mystery of words;
There darkness makes abode, and all the host
Of shadowy things do work their changes there,
As in a mansion like their proper home;
Even forms and substances are circumfused
By that transparent veil with light divine;
And through the turnings intricate of Verse,
Present themselves as objects recognised,
In flashes, and with a glory scarce their own. (Gill: 450, ll. 619-629)

Words are a mystery partly because they are at once the loci of darkness and shadows and the media of divine enlightenment and momentary insights. Wordsworth contains and encompasses, in a radically unstable conjunction, both what McGann identifies as the sentimental-materialist strain in Romantic period writing, and the opposite, more idealist-transcendentalist strain of what is more traditionally understood as Romanticism. The interplay and tension between these surely needs to be considered if we are to account for the full force of his work.

From the Freudian perspective of my epigraph we know that mistakes, slips and errors are never just that. They are tremendously important details that open almost limitless possibilities for interpretation. As Freud warns, “let us not under-value small signs: perhaps from them it may be possible to come upon the tracks of greater things”. Wordsworth’s rhymes are such “small signs” that may lead to “greater things” such as the nature and value of Romantic poetry, and to the claim that in order to read the Ode in the right manner—and not only this poem, but any

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Romantic poem—a constant awareness of the duplicity of language, language as both, at once, animating and killing, medicine and poison, must be present in the mind of the reader. In Wordsworth and in Romantic poetry, every affirmation of “abundant recompence” carries within itself the seeds of its own undoing in the shape of a sceptical and hesitant “I would believe”.

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