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Beyond the Imaginable
Wordsworth and Turner

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Most of us share the assumption that relations do exist between a poet and his age, but *proving* such relations is difficult. It is not even easy to connect the so-called sister arts of painting and poetry in the Romantic era. J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), probably England's greatest painter, was almost an exact contemporary of Wordsworth (1770–1850), yet most observers are more impressed by differences between Turner's pictures and Wordsworth's poems than likenesses. Turner's *Hero and Leander*, for instance, seems about as un-Wordsworthian as a painting could be. Wordsworth seldom writes either of sexual passion or of classical myths, and when he does, as in *Laodamia*, he emphasizes stoic austerity: "the Gods approve the depth and not the tumult of the soul." Visually and narratively overwrought, *Hero and Leander* seems by comparison nothing but a tumult of foamy feelings.

Yet until we seek out what such disparate works may share, we cannot hope to say anything pertinent about the artists' age, about Romanticism. For the role of an individual artist in the history of art is definable only through linkages between his work and the necessarily different yet contemporaneous work of other artists, especially those practicing in other media. The paradox has been neatly summarized by Jean Laude: "Absolutely everything distinguishes a literary text from a painting or a drawing: its conception, its method of production, . . . its autonomous functioning. Nevertheless . . . a text and a painting cannot be disassociated from the synchronic

series to which they are linked."¹ To study one form of art in isolation from others is to deny oneself significant insight into the nature of that synchronic series that defines their "age." For practical reasons, of course, scholars often put aside art in media different from that on which they are at one moment focusing their attention. But institutionalizing this temporary practical necessity into a system, as universities do by dividing themselves into rigidly separate disciplines, cripples humanistic learning—not least by denying scholars diverse perspectives from which to evaluate their methods. The competing claims of traditional "historical" literary criticism and "post-modern" criticism may usefully be examined, for example, by analyzing their explanations of how works of art relate within what Laude calls "the synchronic series."

Historical criticism should keep us aware that works of art are human fabrications, not, therefore, usefully evaluated by methods developed for (or derived from) analyses of natural phenomena.² The beginning point in historical criticism, and the point to which it must ceaselessly return, is the *contingency* of art. Historical study is of something that happened once and that might have happened otherwise, including the possibility of not having happened at all. Only the most vulgar of Marxists and the very crudest of positivists any longer expect historical analysis to uncover "laws" equivalent to those sought in the natural sciences. Because art is the most gratuitous of human accomplishments, it most dramatically displays the history of culture as a story of contingencies. Henry VIII ordered his portrait from Holbein, and the citizens of Athens voted to rebuild their destroyed temple to Athena, but it was just the good fortune of King and citizens (and posterity) that their orders resulted in masterpieces. The citizens of Thebes paid for a large temple, and George I commissioned his portrait (several times), but who cares? This banal point bears repeating, because it reminds us that in describing the significance of "contemporaneous" successes in different arts, we do not describe causal sequences as we do when studying, say, simultaneous geologic phenomena.

A reminder is needed because literary history has too often during the past century treated art, implicitly or explicitly, as if it were explainable in terms of diachronic sequences of cause and effect. Many historical critics have engaged in futile elaborations of spurious genetic "sources." Since even the dullest academic perceives, eventually, that one cannot "prove" *The Faerie Queen* somehow caused *Paradise Lost* or that *Tristram Shandy* is

responsible for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, historical critics have sought for "causes" outside art to sustain the concept of prior-cause—subsequent-result. This begs the very question posed by art's "history," the puzzle of its contingency. Extrinsic events, of course, are not irrelevant: the development of music swerves when a great violinist loses an arm in a train wreck, as does the history of drama when Lorca is murdered by Fascists. But such events explain virtually nothing about the inner dynamics of art. A simple analogy from everyday life is good conversation, which depends less on where it occurs and what initiates it than on how it develops in itself. A primary thrust of so-called postmodern criticism has been to rectify the error of such simplistic historical analyses, to rescue the history of art from methods of crude causality, and to renew our awareness of the importance of lateral and associative affinities in art's exciting but frustrating synchronicities. Traditional academic historians, postmodernism in effect asserts, have been reluctant to confront the implications in art's creativity, its self-causative nature. And the unprofitable search for explanations outside the work of art's intrinsic dynamism has provoked postmodernism's insistence that we recognize art to be always "about itself."

If one visits with literature's sister, the visual arts (not to mention music), it is immediately plain that works of art are necessarily about themselves. Although painting and sculpture frequently—I would say usually—serve nonaesthetic purposes, serve, that is, practical physical, intellectual, spiritual, and ideological needs, they are also to a degree self-sufficient. This becomes obvious whenever a great work survives beyond knowledge of its original "place" and "practical" functions. *Beowulf* might be a case in point for literary critics, but more impressive are the extraordinary Greek bronzes, the Men of Riace, recently recovered from the muddy floor of the Mediterranean, arguably the finest surviving works of ancient sculpture. What the Riace bronzes "are," what they were made "for," even when they were cast, is unknown. But the statues speak eloquently for the preciousness of the human artifice they manifest. My observations of the visitors to the museum at Reggio di Calabria suggest that the bronzes impress all observers of every degree of sophistication with the care, skill, and imaginativeness that went into their making. By their mere being, the Riace bronzes celebrate a possibility of human accomplishment.

Because of the accidents of time, one can only appreciate the Men of Riace in themselves, as what they are now, since this is the only aspect of

them that has so far survived. The careful precision by which a vision of the human form has been given such strong yet fluent embodiment in these bronzes, we examine with a pleased admiration paralleling our admiration for, say, Giotto's paintings in Padua of the stories of Christ and Mary, or Constable's *Haywain*, works about which we know infinitely more. Beyond any "reference," every piece of art manifests uniquely what a human being has done, might do, and, therefore, what one ought to spend time trying to do—or not to do.

Piles of rusting nails and randomly bent pipes on the floors of New York's Soho galleries, along with machine-polished metal and splattered canvases, accompanied by computer-originated magnifications of repetitious comic-book images, speak as loudly about themselves. This art announces its intrinsic worthlessness, advertises its value solely as commodity. Such works declare themselves to be junk, objects not worth the pain of loving craftsmanship—as the joke goes, how can you trash a contemporary art gallery? The joke not merely condemns the artists' philistinism but also praises their integrity, since their art proclaims its meaninglessness, serving a need for conspicuous consumption by silicon-souled Yuppies and their paymasters, banks and corporate conglomerates.

Insofar as many artists in all media during recent decades have felt compelled to present their work as inherently transient, trivial, repetitive, boring, one is justified in categorizing this art under the heading of one of its substyles, "minimalist." Such a term does not, of course, exclude very large or very long works, like an Andy Warhol movie or a Philip Glass opera, but "minimalist" seems appropriate to describe the peculiar synchronic series of our age so far as it epitomizes its distinction from the art of other eras, from the earlier twentieth century back to those unidentified times in which the Men of Riace were crafted.

Because art is always to a degree about itself, the diverse contingencies of individual works constitute, through simultaneous affiliations, a macrosystem, an understanding of which may deepen and enrich our appreciation of individual works composing it. Thus, to stay with my immediate example, recognizing a Glass opera as contributing to "minimalism" helps us to perceive that its length and repetitiveness are not failed attempts at development and complication (as we would judge these qualities in a work belonging to another highly formalistic series or macrosystem, such as Baroque music) but, instead, evidence of a deliberate reductiveness. Or, for a con-

verse instance, in the searing self-criticism from which the assertive potency of Michelangelo's *Bound Slaves* seems to arise, one recognizes a force neither present in nor appropriate to either the Men of Riace or the fiberglass dummies of 1980s surrealism, but a force whose diverse manifestations make up what we call the style of Mannerism.

Pursued rigorously and vigorously, postmodern methods enable us to solve Laude's paradox, for these methods direct our attention away from irrelevant matters of external causality. The historian of art seeks to describe affiliations among contemporaneously created artifacts that are markedly heterogeneous because each is self-caused. To put this complex matter too simply, the historicity of an artwork is to be apprehended only through exploration of all its specific contingencies. This is the only route to a true understanding of the "synchronic series" which each artwork helps to make appear. The series, in short, is not the cause of the individual works of art but the product of them and of responses to them by readers, viewers, listeners. If, then, we would understand Wordsworth's relation to his age, we must turn away from the invitingly broad but deceitful path that begins with a definition of his age. We must begin, instead, with particular works of art radically different from his but created by his contemporaries. Our aim must be to uncover hidden modes of parallelism linking authentically heterogeneous works.

As I have said, there does not appear to be much connection between many of Wordsworth's poems and Turner's paintings. But if we notice that Turner is a representational artist whose grandest canvases often mystify, obscure, and confuse their representations, it may occur to us that there is a parallel obfuscation in some of Wordsworth's poems, *The Thorn*, for instance. This lyric has provoked much controversy because it permits no assurance as to what exactly it represents. Wordsworth's manner of representing the thorn makes doubtful the processes of perception and conception through which the reader learns about the plant and the specific place and person associated with it. The poem consists entirely of the words of an unidentified speaker, apparently of somewhat limited intellectual abilities and of a superstitious cast of mind. The speaker recounts his observations of a stunted thorn by a small, moss-covered mound on the moor

alongside a tiny pool, next to which a deranged woman often sits moaning, "O misery!" The speaker also reports what the local villagers have told him they believe about the woman and the spot, especially their conviction that she murdered her illegitimate baby and buried it in the mound by the thorn.

Wordsworth explained that this poem originated in his asking himself if he could invent a poem that would make "permanently impressive" for his readers a thorn he had often passed but never noticed until he happened upon it during a storm. Yet Wordsworth's "invention" seems to consist in surrounding the thorn with other features—pool, mound, destitute woman—that obscure it. Making the poem a dramatic monologue by someone such as a "retired sea captain" (as Wordsworth suggested we might think of the speaker) further "conceals" the thorn, for Wordsworth's narrator, whatever his profession, was deliberately chosen to be one to whom "readers . . . are not accustomed to sympathize in feeling . . . or in using such language."⁴ The poet thus seems to put obstacles in the way of the success he desires, until we realize that one way to make the thorn "permanently impressive" for readers is to arouse in them an awareness of how such an object might be apprehended as impressive. Merely telling us that this thorn was of a striking shape, however accurately he might describe it, would be futile, since Wordsworth acknowledges that only the peculiar circumstances of a storm made *him* notice the plant. The poet's task is to create conditions of imagining the thorn that will permit readers to be impressed by it, make it worthy of wonder.

Readers of *The Thorn*, then, are brought to the plant through an unexpected and probably uncongenial mode of apprehension so that they may become conscious of inadequacies in it. They are thereby tempted into imagining a superior mode of apprehending the situation. The awakening of such imaginative effort is encouraged by the narrator's questioning of the villagers' perceptions and beliefs, a questioning that compels readers to reflect back on, to question, the narrator's way of judging and observing. I am not suggesting the poem is mistitled. It is not "about" the narrator, or the villagers, or the deserted woman per se. It is about how what each of these makes of the thorn—and makes of others' imaginings of the thorn's significance—may draw readers into exerting their imaginations. That Wordsworth's apparently perverse technique succeeds, that his "obscurantism" in fact enhances the thorn's impressiveness, is proved by the range of critical controversy his poem has provoked.

Wordsworth prevents the thorn from being subsumed within a single meaning, reduced to a conventionalized signification. He prevents the plant, one might say, from becoming merely the subject of a poem. Forced to have doubts about the villagers' and the narrator's impressions as they appear in the poem, we are led to try to comprehend how and why they might misinterpret. Our evaluating feeds back into intensified imagining of what thorn and pool could have represented for the woman, and her misery thereby may impress itself forcibly on our minds. The poem does not lead us to regress into a superstitious viewpoint; rather, it enables us to imagine for ourselves the elemental sufferings and uncertainties of human life from which can rise superstitious feelings capable of inspiring people to endow natural phenomena with qualities that can powerfully affect others' perceptions.

"There is a Thorn—it looks so old,
In truth, you'd find it hard to say
How it could ever have been young,
It looks so old and grey.
Not higher than a two years' child
It stands erect, this aged Thorn;
No leaves it has, no prickly points;
It is a mass of knotted joints,
A wretched thing forlorn.
It stands erect, and like a stone
With lichens is it overgrown.

"Like rock or stone, it is o'ergrown,
With lichens to the very top,
And hung with heavy tufts of moss,
A melancholy crop:
Up from the earth these mosses creep,
And this poor Thorn they clasp it round
So close, you'd say that they are bent
With plain and manifest intent
To drag it to the ground;
And all have joined in one endeavour
To bury this poor Thorn for ever.

(lines 1–22)

In these two opening stanzas there are several phrases—"looks so old," "looks so old and grey," "a wretched thing forlorn," "a melancholy crop," and the mosses' "manifest intent"—illustrating how the narrator's gropingly repetitive manner at once establishes that his "objective description" is in fact a construct of his mind, heavily loaded with emotional connotations imported by him. His repeated hesitant colloquialism "you'd say" tends to draw the reader in as a participant in this construction of the thorn's significance. But when a speaker such as this tells "us" what "we" would say, his assertion has the effect of stimulating us to imagine if we would, indeed, agree with him. Thus we are led to imagine how our judgment might differ from that attributed to us, and we have the beginning of the poem's interplaying of diverse impressions and judgments.

Even such a superficial consideration of some peculiarities in *The Thorn* may help us to understand why in one of his greatest paintings, *Snowstorm: Steamboat Off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and Going by the Lead*, Turner so efficiently obscures his very dramatic subject. The confusingness of the picture in good measure consists in Turner's abandoning representation by means of structures of geometric form, whose principal characteristics are visual distinctness and differentiation. One instantly perceives the difference between a cube and a cylinder, or between a pyramid and a sphere. But Turner's painting is structured primarily by colors, not shapes. Instead of portraying objects so that viewers may readily identify them by their differences from other objects, Turner sets us the problem of discerning his subject through modes of relationship and competing forces that are sometimes scarcely distinguishable. Wind-blown snow is different from the froth of ocean waves, but in Turner's picture we perceive both through similarities in the violence of their movements in a storm and through shifting complementarities of their colors—even through the actions of their meeting, conflicting, interpenetrating. The same is true of other elements in the scene, including the human artifacts, the ship, its smoke, the rockets it fires. The picture, in fact, is a multiplicity of interfaces of colors and movements that reflect, refract, and interfere with one another. In places, what is reflected or refracted is more vivid than its "original," leaving one often unsure what is original and what reflection, what "reality" and what "image."

Turner images an event, a complex event, the dynamism of which is represented through diverse and diversely interacting phenomena. Appropriate



Snowstorm: Steamboat Off a Harbour's Mouth by J.M.W. Turner (N530). Courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London

to the ordering of such representation is the unstable kinesthesia provided by color, for, unlike shapes, colors not only keep changing but also determine, as they are determined by, shifts in associated colors. No color ever exists independent of its environment, its quality invariably being influenced by neighboring colors.⁵ Turner exploits this fact to increase the self-destabilizing intrarelatedness of his painting. All its "confusions," resulting from its lack of simple geometric clarity, have the effect of encouraging viewers toward awareness of how they see, especially of how much of what they perceive is not distinctly registered optically. Thus, the observer's viewpoint for the scene is not immediately apparent; awareness of that uncertainty enhances one's sense of being *in* the storm oneself. Whether or not, as Turner claimed, he in truth made his observations for this canvas while lashed to

the mast of another ship heaving in the tempest,⁶ the effect of the picture is that of putting the viewer in hazard: "If one really allows one's eye to be absorbed into the forms and colors of the canvas, one begins to realize that, looking at it, one is in the centre of a maelstrom: . . . the lurch into the distance is not, as one would expect, *into* the picture, but out of it toward the right-hand edge. It is a picture which precludes the outsider spectator."⁷

Not only is Turner's subject an event, but his representation is itself an event, to be experienced by viewers as dubious in its significance exactly because it is a powerful action in process. The picture is visually baffling, as seeing in the midst of a storm at sea is baffling, so as to force us into perceiving imaginatively, not just registering sensations, but guessing what our fogged vision might reveal were it not obscured. This process compels us to recognize that valuable and meaningful perception requires an active mental shaping of possibilities presented by sensation in the very act of perceiving.

Most viewers say they are unsure of what they see in *Snowstorm* because the picture makes them aware that they may be seeing "inaccurately." This awareness, created by Turner's frustrating of easy perception, energizes a desire to see better, to discern through obscurity. Once we understand this aim in Romantic art, we will come to see that the external obscurities of a work such as *Snowstorm* are means also for bringing into the light of our awareness more subtle, inner, self-obfuscations. Through the experience of struggling to determine what we may be perceiving in Turner's disorienting stormscape, we may come to realize how much of what we normally see is determined not merely by exterior phenomena but also by the way we exert our psychic power upon our perceptions so as to construe ambiguous and transient visual clues. We may thus learn that we have the power to misconstrue, not least through lack of energy or audacity in construing. We remember simultaneously that a storm at sea is an ordinary occurrence, and a thorn an ordinary plant. It is easier to look at common things conventionally than to enter into the uncertainties of imaginative vision. We learn early in life the comfort of reducing the confusing forces of experience to an unambiguous and conclusive interpretation. What we perceive, therefore, is normally limited by our practice of letting perceptions fit our preestablished mental constructs. From such internally patterned limitations, Romantic works of art such as Turner's *Snowstorm* and Wordsworth's *The Thorn* seek to liberate us.

In their different arts Turner and Wordsworth are alike in creating a kind

of doubly dramatic dialogue between perceptions and what both externally and internally shapes them. Turner and Wordsworth create art that represents, within their representations, difficulties in representing. This is why the doubt, "blurriness," unreliability, confusion in the work of both is regularly precipitated not by omission, not by cutting away, not by minimalizing, but by multiplyings, by overlayings, by additions of possibilities. Theirs is an art of maximizing. Dubieties provoked by their paintings and poems result not solely from actions represented but also from instabilities in acts of representation. Perhaps the simplest illustration of this trait appears in Wordsworth's famous lyric *The Tables Turned*, from which one learns by reading the poem in a book that it is wiser to enjoy nature than to seek wisdom reading books:

Up! up! my friend, and clear your looks,
Why all this toil and trouble!
Up! up! my friend, and quit your books,
Or surely you'll grow double.

The sun above the mountain's head,
A freshening lustre mellow,
Through all the long green fields has spread,
His first sweet evening yellow.

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife,
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music, on my life
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
And he is no mean preacher,
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless—
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man;
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things;
—We murder to dissect.

Enough of science and of art;
Close up those barren leaves,
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.⁸

The self-destabilizing quality in Romantic art appears to originate in Romantic artists' awareness that art itself can pose a threat to the imaginative potency giving rise to it. We see the most obvious form of this awareness in Romantic artists' resistance to the deadening conventionality of mind they thought the worst danger in a world of dawning industrial civilization. Symptomatic of this mental passivity was the increasingly sensational and hedonistic art that for Wordsworth revealed a psychic "torpor" against which he inveighed in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, as, in more witty and satirical fashions, did Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* and Thomas Love Peacock in *Nightmare Abbey*. And in other works, both these novelists present characters who are ridiculous because they adhere to novelistic conventions of behavior. Romantic art is shaped to free its audience from conventional, normalized patterns of perception and conception, not just of other objects, but also of itself. Romantic art most frequently bewilders by striving to provoke readers and viewers into expanding, extending, even reconstituting what, unwittingly, they have come to accept as the limits of the imaginable. Just as in Coleridge's words, the artist "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates" what is given him in natural experience "in order to recreate"—to disrupt in order to make anew—so the artist's re-creation—what we call the "finished" work of art—should, the Romantics believed, encourage readers and viewers into analogous half-perceiving, half-creating responses. Turner's seemingly "unfinished" canvases of dynamic instability evidence

this Romantic commitment to arousing imaginative creativity in the audience. Contrary to what handbooks say, Romantic artists were not more imaginative than their predecessors, but they did more consistently strive to arouse imaginativeness in their readers and viewers. That this effort is as important in poetry as in painting can be demonstrated by brief attention to Wordsworth's *Resolution and Independence*, the poem Coleridge thought Wordsworth's most representative work, perhaps because the poem is about imagining.

Resolution and Independence begins with the poet enjoying the revivifying natural world on a brilliant morning succeeding a tempestuous night. The cheerfully self-satisfied poet then suddenly becomes despondent as his mind, from no external cause, plunges him from delight into dejection. Then, perhaps providentially but perhaps not, he happens upon an aged gatherer of leeches, whom he imagines as providing an example for buoying his spirits again. The poem thus presents the poet using the Leech-Gatherer to regain self-confidence.

The process by which the poet transforms images of the old man is introduced through the descriptive technique employed in the poem's opening, which modulates from the past tense in the first two lines into the present tense until the turn backward at the opening of the third stanza. This temporal sliding anticipates the later shifting back and forth between "is" and "seems," while tense and mode shiftings are complicated by typically sly Wordsworthian manipulations of prepositions. In line 1 the wind does not roar, but "there was a roaring *in* the wind," a slightly unusual phrasing, echoed in line 11 by the hare "running races in her mirth," a commoner usage whose oddity is emphasized by its parallel with the stranger, earlier line, so that we are tempted to "see" the joyousness attributed to the hare as embodied in the mist she kicks up from the "plashy earth." Such interplay unobtrusively attunes our mind to the poet both responding to and imposing upon externalities. The early lines, moreover, associate "in" with "all," the latter appearing in lines 1, 7, 8, 14, and 21. "All" is one of Wordsworth's favorite words, often, as here, employed to reinforce a sense both of the whole, the integral quality, of a situation and of the multiplicity of elements constituting that totality. Possibly because we are told "all the air is

filled with pleasant noise of water," and "all things that love the sun" are abroad, it has seemed unsurprising to most readers that "the sky rejoices in the morning's birth," which is really quite an extraordinary phrase. The vital completeness of the scene, comprehending so many diverse elements, makes appropriate the unfolding of different moods within it. The buoyancy first evoked is dramatically changed by the poet's abrupt, unexternally motivated imagining of "another day" of "solitude, pain of heart, distress and poverty," so that one tends unthinkingly to accept his assertion that "gladness" *causes* "despondency and madness," however odd such logic might seem in another context, particularly one less superficially joyous.

Again unexpectedly and without discernible cause, the poet encounters in stanza 8 "a Man" who "seemed" the "oldest" of mankind. The remainder of the poem consists of superimposings of the poet's fantasies of the Leech-Gatherer upon his physical presence (rather as the poet had attributed feelings to the hare). The first superimpositions are similes, notably the doubled one of the rock that seems a sea beast:

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
 Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
 Wonder to all who do the same espy,
 By what means it could thither come, and whence;
 So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
 Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
 Of rock or sand reposes, there to sun itself;

 Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood,
 That heareth not the loud winds when they call;
 And moveth all together, if it move at all.

(lines 57-77)

This use of similes, and of similes on top of similes, characteristic of much Romantic lyricism, especially Shelley's, is a literary analogue to Turner's flooding our vision with transient and unstable details that defeat any reductive exactness of sight. Wordsworth compels his readers to see both the old man in his commonplace actuality (although to poet and reader *un-*usual) and as a figure shaped and reshaped by the imagining poet—a figure the old man himself probably would not recognize. Reflexive doubling of vision is redoubled in the final stanzas, not merely by the dual possibility of

stanza 16, one "in a dream" OR "a man from some far region," but also in the repetition of the poet's fantasy in stanza 19, a reiteration emphasized by the verbs "returned," "renew," "repeat," and "renewed" again. Nor are readers given any determinate relation of the vision in 19 to that in 16; they must imagine such connections as best they can. This reiterating has brought some readers to consider that resolution and independence are not, in fact, qualities instantaneously attained, that they are valuable, if difficult to achieve, attributes because they must be continuously rechieved.

Whatever one chooses to make of the situation, it has been created in a fashion designed to catch us up in the developing process of the poet's imagining. This is why we are jolted by the last stanza's final reversion into reflexive consciousness with the poet's remark, "I could have laughed myself to scorn." The phrase foregrounds a latent absurdity of the situation, an absurdity hinted at in the Leech-Gatherer's smile at the poet in line 120. There is something ridiculous in Wordsworth wandering about the moors imposing fantasies on an unpretentious old man. Because the human imagination is powerful, it can sometimes make an imaginer ridiculous. Imagination "distorts" what it works on—as we know that *Resolution and Independence* distorts the facts of the actual encounter that gave rise to the poem.⁹ So it is necessary at the conclusion of a poem dealing with imaginative power and its joyous or gloomy consequences that Wordsworth gently shock readers back to awareness of the activity of their own minds responding to his poem. He does this by posing uncertainties about the poet's experience and, more significantly, about what he has *made* of the experience. The last two lines distance readers from the poet. The moral he draws, while comprehensible, is dubious enough and at least potentially so inadequate to what has gone before that we pause to question his summation, which means we withdraw from the poet, take a position from which we may reassess our interpreting experience throughout the preceding 138 lines. We thus become aware of our reading for our own purposes of the poet's "reading" for his purposes of the Leech-Gatherer.

Furthermore, if we recollect the emphasis early in the poem on the mind's self-generating polarities, the possibility of scornful laughter may alert us to darker implications in the uncertainty of the poem's conclusion. The last lines leave uncanceled Wordsworth's earlier vision of a fate of "dependency and madness," a destiny analogous to the grim one threatening in Turner's depiction of the distressed steamer laboring in a destructive

vortex—a destiny frequently invoked by the painter under the rubric of "Fallacies of Hope." But hope can exist, one must remember, only in conditions of incertitude; hope does not pertain to situations of absolute assurance, for good or ill. So Wordsworth restoring his confidence to go forward does so in a fashion that may strike a reader as a misreading of the message embodied in the Leech-Gatherer's story. The indefinite ending of *Resolution and Independence* is characteristic of Wordsworth's poetry, which is filled with conditional constructions, a grammatical equivalent to Turner's destabilizing colors. And Wordsworth, contrary to his cultural reputation as a benignly optimistic nature poet, never flinches from the dark aspects of natural existence. He consistently recognizes death as the inevitable end for every mortal creature. Indeed, as more than one critic has observed, epigraphic forms and language are one of Wordsworth's favored means for displaying what he believes to be poetry's most significant functions. The aphoristic democraticness of his definition of the Poet in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, "a man speaking to men," for example, is somberly elaborated in his later "Essay on Epitaphs":

An epitaph is not a proud writing shut up for the studious; it is exposed to all—to the wise and the most ignorant; it is condescending, perspicuous, and lovingly solicits regard; its story and admonitions are brief, that the thoughtless, the busy, and indolent, may not be deterred, nor the impatient tired; the stooping old man cons the engraven record like a second horn-book;—the child is proud that he can read it;—and the stranger is introduced through its mediation to the company of a friend; it is concerning all, and for all;—in the churchyard it is open to the day; the sun looks down upon the stone, and the rains of heaven beat against it.¹⁰

Here the democratic idealism of language is situated literally in nature. The inscribed words are "subject to the soft handling of the elements" (to use Wordsworth's phrase from *The Excursion*) and illustrate concretely how the cultural is fitted to the natural. Human memorial stone and inscription belong in the world of sun and rain, the imaginative power there embodied appearing as a fulfillment of natural processes rather than as an assertion of the human against nature, or as an aspiration for what will transcend nature. By recording one human being's mortality, the epitaph

affirms humanity as significant to itself precisely because as individual beings each of us is transient. Hence the epitaph is "concerning all, and for all," to be read, however, in diverse ways and for diverse purposes. The unity of humankind is constituted of infinite differences. The epitaph "lovingly solicits regard" because it appeals to what is most common, that is, most elemental, in humanity, thereby linking together our diverseness. Readings of the epitaph, therefore, are imaginative in the broadest sense, readings onto, into, or over a text of elemental experience to recover some of the awesomeness intrinsic to the brevity of individual human lives.

Two subsequent sentences clarify Wordsworth's sense of the importance of the epitaph as defining how and to what result we may read imaginatively:

In an obscure corner of a country church-yard I once espied, half-overgrown with hemlock and nettles, a very small stone laid upon the ground, bearing nothing more than the name of the deceased with the date of birth and death, importing that it was an infant which had been born one day and died the following. I know not how far the reader may be in sympathy with me; but more awful thoughts of rights conferred, of hopes awakened, of remembrances stealing away or vanishing, were imparted to my mind by that inscription there before my eyes than by any other that it has ever been my lot to meet with upon a tomb-stone.

The succinct anonymity of the inscription on the tiny, forgotten stone assures that the significance of this simplest but most moving of epitaphs is created by the imagining mind. The trivial memorial is the least sublime of objects but profoundly evocative of "rights conferred . . . hopes awakened . . . remembrances stealing away." These possibilities may come to us as startling, for we have taught ourselves not to believe that one can imagine so much from so little. The poet's awareness of this difficulty emerges in his doubt that his experience can be conveyed to others. As with the thorn and the Leech-Gatherer, one notices here, too, that we are not allowed directly to "see" or to "read" the tombstone ("there before *my eyes*"): we can only read Wordsworth's reading of it. The slow-moving, monosyllabically ordered final phrase then makes us dwell on a comparison of experiences, subtly reminding us that none of our experiences, however unique, is isolated.

Our lives are fleeting because we live in time, but time alone makes possible the most humanly precious dimensions of comparison: remembrance and hope. The brevity of the infant's life memorialized thus may increase the magnitude of its implications for *our* lives. This can occur only because we can imagine—imagine more than we are usually taught we are able to. The unseen epitaph may deeply affect us because Wordsworth's reading of it encourages us to realize how awesome is the plainest, simplest, briefest human existence—if we will allow ourselves to endure imagining it.

ter" of Keats's ode. The one major book-length study, a splendid work received just in time for inclusion in this note, is Susan J. Wolfson's *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986). The biographies by Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), and Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (Boston, 1968), contain extensive commentary on the relationship. A great many "echoes and borrowings" from Wordsworth are cited in the annotated editions by Douglas Bush, *John Keats: Selected Poems and Letters* (Boston, 1959); Miriam Allott, *The Poems of John Keats* (London, 1970; 3d impression, with corrections, 1975); and John Barnard, *John Keats: The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth, 1973; 2d ed., 1976). The most comprehensive and useful collection of Wordsworthian echoes is a recently completed work by Beth Lau, "Keats's Reading of Wordsworth: An Essay and Checklist," *Studies in Romanticism*, forthcoming.

1. *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers, 1816-1878*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), 2:143-144.
2. Aileen Ward, *John Keats: The Making of a Poet* (New York, 1963), 157.
3. See Bate, *John Keats*, 264-268; Gittings, *John Keats*, 167-168; and Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: A Biography*, vol. 2, *The Later Years, 1803-1850* (Oxford, 1965), 316-318.
4. *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. Willard Bissell Pope (Cambridge, Mass., 1960-63), 2:173-176.
5. Throughout this essay, Keats's letters are quoted from *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, Mass., 1958).
6. Charles Clarke and Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (London, 1878), 126.
7. For Woodhouse's comment, see Keats's *Letters*, 1:389.
8. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London, 1930-34), 5:47-48.
9. *Ibid.*, 5:163.
10. Haydon's *Diary*, 2:171.
11. Clarke and Clarke, *Recollections*, 149.
12. See Keats's *Letters*, 1:388.

Chapter 10. Beyond the Imaginable

1. Jean Laude, "On the Analysis of Poems and Paintings," *New Literary History* 3 (1972): 471.
2. This point is cogently asserted by Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Un-*

real (Cambridge, 1981), 15. The most thoughtful discussion of the larger issues involved in the difference between humanistic and scientific scholarship with which I am acquainted is provided by Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1961), especially the introduction to vol. 1.

3. A moderate example: In *New York Times*, 25 February 1985, p. C 20, there was a favorable notice of the work of John Armleder, "who converts ratty old furniture into sculpture by dashing paint across it and . . . hanging it askew."

4. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, rev. ed., 5 vols. (Oxford, 1952-1959), 2:512, where de Selincourt is citing from Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The preceding quotation, from the aging poet's many comments dictated to Isabella Fenwick, appears on 511 of this standard edition, from which all my citations from *The Thorn* (2:240-248) and *Resolution and Independence* (2:235-240) are taken.

5. Julia Kristeva has called attention to studies proving that "all colors . . . have a noncentered or decentering effect, lessening both object identification and phenomenal fixation." "Giotto's Joy," in *Desire in Language*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1980), 225. Rudolph Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: The New Version* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974), 235, observes that "in no reliable sense can we speak of color 'as it really is'; it is always determined by its context."

6. Recent scholarship makes it appear that the sensational story is probably apocryphal; see Luke Herrmann, *Turner* (Boston, 1975), 234.

7. John Berger, *About Looking* (New York, 1980), 147-148.

8. I cite here the version from the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, as reprinted by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones in their edition (London, 1963), 105-106, so as to call attention to the importance of different versions of Wordsworth's shorter poems as well as his longer ones. De Selincourt's edition, of course, uses for its texts the poet's final versions.

9. De Selincourt and Darbishire, *Poetical Works*, 510-511, cites Dorothy's account in her Journal (3 Oct. 1800) of the meeting in which she notes that the man lived by begging.

10. "Essay upon Epitaphs, I," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1974), 2:59; the subsequent quotation is from "Essay upon Epitaphs, III," 2:93.

Chapter 11. Two Dark Interpreters

1. Thomas De Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis, 'Confessions of an English Opium-Eater' and Other Writings by Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Aileen Ward (New York