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# The Poetics of Self-definition and Self-crisis in William Wordsworth's Poems in Two Volumes (1807)

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# **The Poetics of Self-definition and Self-crisis in William Wordsworth's *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807)**

**ZEITOUN  
Jonathan**

**UFR DE LANGUES ETRANGERES (LLCE & LEA)**

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**Membres du jury : Caroline Bertonèche et Sébastien Scarpa**

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## Introduction

William Wordsworth is often referred to as the father of English Romanticism and the poet who truly revolutionised English poetry. What was indeed striking was first the simplicity of his poetic language, the language of ‘ordinary men’, obvious in poems like “*Tintern Abbey*”. His being referred to as the father of Romanticism is also due to the way his poetry laid emphasis on the emotion aroused by nature. Indeed Wordsworth’s poetry, and to a larger extent Romantic poetry, is in many ways a shift away from a series of elevated and elegant poems produced in the early eighteenth-century (which testified to a rather formal and classic handling of nature), to a much more informal approach as far as style is concerned, centred on the spiritual value of nature<sup>1</sup>. Thus one can make a distinction between Romantic poetry and early eighteenth-century poetry, for instance, insofar as the latter is much more based on the imitation and the taste for the Classical world. In fact, such writings as Dryden’s translation of the works of Virgil or Alexander Pope’s translation of Homer are known for the rather formal style in which they are composed, in conformity with the Roman style, and also because they merely depict nature without paying much attention to its effects on man<sup>2</sup>. Romantic poetry, on the other hand, would notably be characterised by the importance given to the poet’s feelings in relation with nature, and by its ability to convey the highest emotions in a fairly colloquial language. I think that these remarks, although they undoubtedly apply to Romantic poetry in general, are particularly appropriate to describe Wordsworth’s poetry. When I read “*I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*” for the first time, I was surprised by the unpretentious

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas, Bush. *English Poetry, The Main Currents from Chaucer to the Present*. London : Methuen & Co. LTD, November 1952. p. 114-115.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83-84.

language used by Wordsworth and by the way he still manages to depict his complex relation with nature in a very expressive manner. Then when I read other pieces from the 1807 *Poems in Two Volumes*, such as “*Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*”, or “*To a Butterfly*”, I noticed again the same characteristics. The second reason why I am very interested in Wordsworth’s poetry is his ability to compose poems that everyone can identify with, since they tackle such themes as nature, nostalgia for childhood or human growth.

The poet was born in 1770 in Cockermouth and died in 1850 in Ambleside. He was the son of John Wordsworth and Anne Cookson. After his mother’s death in 1778, William was sent to grammar school at Hawkshead, where he stayed nine years to finally proceed to St John’s College, Cambridge in 1787. In the summer of 1790 he and a fellow-collegian set off for the Alps. The trip lasted three months and the result three years later was a poem entitled “*Descriptive Sketches Taken During a Pedestrian Tour Among the Alps*”, which makes it clear, as one can understand when reading the following quote, that Wordsworth’s main interest was nature: “The tall sun, pausing on an Alpine spire, / Flings o’er the wilderness a stream of fire” (v. 553-554). Then, Wordsworth went to France in 1791 and fell in love, in Orléans, with Annette Vallon - who in 1792 gave birth to their child, Caroline - before returning alone to England in 1793 because of his lack of money and the tensions between Britain and France. In 1795, Wordsworth received a legacy of £900 and was able to take a house at Racedown in Dorset and settle there with Dorothy, his sister and lifelong friend. At last he was able to devote himself to poetry. In 1797, the Wordsworths moved to Alfoxton House, not far from where Samuel Taylor Coleridge lived. The three of them were often together, the culmination of this poetic friendship being the first publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. Once the *Lyrical Ballads* were published, the Wordsworths moved to Germany with Coleridge and then returned to

England in April 1799. In 1802, after the Peace of Amiens, William was able to travel to France with his sister to visit Annette and Caroline in Calais, with the purpose of announcing his forthcoming marriage to Mary Hutchinson, whom he finally married in October 1802. From 1805 onwards, his career took a different path, and he devoted his work to more introspective poems, some of which, as I will explain later, are at the core of the present dissertation.

Whether one considers his early output or the later works, Wordsworth is universally recognised as belonging to the Romantic Movement in literature. It is also acknowledged that the French Revolution and the subsequent French Revolutionary War between France and the UK had an influence on that very movement. Matthew O. Grenby wrote about the impact of the French Revolution on British literature in one of his articles: “ce fut la Révolution française qui créa le romantisme anglais, plus particulièrement les espoirs contrariés des poètes britanniques que la Révolution aurait fait entrer dans une ère nouvelle de liberté et de Lumières<sup>3</sup>.”

Indeed it is often believed that the protest in France against the “Ancien Régime” was seen by eighteenth-century writers as a sign of a revived faith in man’s dreams. Therefore, the thirst for freedom and justice that characterised the French Revolution was echoed in several poems. As Grenby explains, the references were sometimes direct as in Coleridge’s “*France: An Ode*” (1798), based on his feelings about the French Revolution and in Blake’s “*The French Revolution*” (1791) which deals with the ideas and opinions that led to the rise of the movement. Some, on the other hand, referred to the French Revolution more indirectly, such as Robert Southey, who in “*Joan of Arc*”, an epic poem published in

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<sup>3</sup> O. Grenby, Matthew. « Révolution française et littérature anglaise », *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* N°342. Octobre-décembre 2005, mis en ligne le 15 décembre 2008, consulté le 31 mars 2012. URL : <http://ahrf.revues.org/1919>. p. 2.



1796, expresses his thoughts about the movement under the guise of the story of the maid<sup>4</sup>; or Charles Dickens, who depicts the situation of peasants in Paris and London, with as backcloth the period leading to the French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)<sup>5</sup>. At first sight, the influence of the French Revolution on Wordsworth's poetry seems very subtle. Indeed, as Grenby states, there are not so many direct references to the French Revolution in Wordsworth's poems. One may nevertheless quote from the poem "*French Revolution, As It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement*" (composed in 1805 and published in 1809) where he declares: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive". The influence of the French movement on Wordsworth's poetry, according to Grenby, is to be found precisely in the reluctance on the part of the poet to express any political opinion regarding the French Revolution in a conspicuous manner. Thus, as a way of referring to the changes of the time and to their effects on man, Wordsworth would preferably stimulate in his readers a quest for some sort of new meaning, for "something far more deeply interfused", as though the hope and thirst for freedom aroused by the French Revolution had to be interpreted in a spiritual way, and had to give rise to a new kind of relation between man and nature. Although this interpretation is debatable, I shall explain throughout this dissertation that this very specific relation between Wordsworth and nature, be it a consequence of the changes brought about by the Revolution or merely a characteristic of his writing, is omnipresent in his poetry.

What is also a key point in Wordsworth's poetry is the self, which might be seen as a consequence of the new preoccupations of the Romantics with nature and imagination. Indeed, Wordsworth always envisages nature for its effects on man. Nature is in a way

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<sup>4</sup> Raimond, Jean. *Robert Southey. L'homme et son temps. L'œuvre. Le rôle*. Paris (5<sup>ème</sup>) : Didier, 1968. Chap. 2. p.188.

<sup>5</sup> Delattre, Floris. *Dickens et la France : étude d'une interaction littéraire anglo-française*. Paris : J. Gamber, 1927. p. 36-39.

experienced from the inside. If one considers that poetry has to be regarded as self-expression and as the realization of the relation between a poet and his world, then it is no surprise that the self becomes its central matter. But in addition to that, it is really what defines the Romantic authors and the characteristics that bind them together which are responsible, I believe, for the central place of the self in their poetry. One of the defining features of Romantic poetry is the primacy of emotions over reason and a revived faith in the imagination. As a consequence, nature is often considered symbolical by these poets, including Wordsworth who often wrote poems in which natural elements are internalised and interpreted for their effects on the self.

However, one may add that the *Lyrical Ballads* are perhaps not the best illustration of the importance of the self in Wordsworth's poetry. Indeed, it is often acknowledged that his career can be divided into two periods. A first one is marked by his friendship and collaboration with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the result of which is the production of poems notably based on the depiction of simple rural life. A second one is marked by Wordsworth's poetical independence from Coleridge, and therefore by his evolution towards a more introspective and meditative approach to poetry which paved the way for *The Prelude*. Yet, a lot of scholars have described "*Tintern Abbey*" as the sign of this change in Wordsworth's career, notably because it closes the *Lyrical Ballads* by revealing the poet's new interest for issues such as the growth of the human mind. This is probably what Florence Gaillet-De Chezelles meant when she declared: "Avec *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth retrouve sa réelle voix", during a one-day conference devoted to the *Lyrical Ballads* on Thursday, October 20<sup>th</sup> 2011, at Stendhal University. Likewise, Pierre Vitoux describes the poem in question as the source of a change in Wordsworth's main interests:

Quant au poème intitulé "*Tintern Abbey*", le dernier du recueil de 1798, il marque de façon magistrale l'entrée de Wordsworth dans le domaine qui est celui de ses

plus belles oeuvres, l'autobiographie méditative, lente et passionnée, tournée vers une réflexion sur les phases de l'existence humaine dans son rapport avec les formes de l'esprit et de l'Univers<sup>6</sup>.

I think that some of the pieces of the *Poems in Two Volumes* published in 1807, such as "Ode: Intimations of Immortality", "I wandered Lonely as a Cloud" or "To a Butterfly", may be considered as the continuity of "Tintern Abbey", insofar as they are also suggestive of Wordsworth's personal treatment of nature and are based on the description of a mental process that the poet follows, from loss and disillusion to recovery and compensation. It is mostly in those themes that I am interested. Although I shall make some references to other of Wordsworth's works, this dissertation shall largely be devoted to the analysis and discussion of the omnipresence of such poetics in "Tintern Abbey" and in several pieces of the *Poems in Two Volumes*.

Throughout this essay, I shall try to analyse Wordsworth's specific approach to the external world and explain how that very approach causes the poet to face a personal and spiritual crisis, which he eventually overcomes by deciphering the process of human growth and the compensation it brings about.

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<sup>6</sup> Vitoux, Pierre. *La poésie Romantique anglaise*. Paris : Armand Colin, 1971. p.20.

**PART I**

**FROM OBSERVATION TO EMOTION: WORDSWORTH'S**

**OWN TREATMENT OF NATURE**

Understanding how Wordsworth's personal treatment of nature enables him to finally accept what he first deplors in his poems, that is, the effects of growing up on the imaginative powers of the child, is a prerequisite for a proper understanding of the ideas I shall develop in this dissertation. Indeed most scholars agree that it is Wordsworth's personal vision and treatment of nature which are at the root of the progression of his thought towards what he called the "growth of the mind" in *The Prelude*. I shall then first examine and decipher Wordsworth's treatment of nature, trying to show that it is its internalisation which is the source of the "imaginative compensation"<sup>7</sup> that Wordsworth describes in some of his poems and with which I will deal in the next sections.

### **I.A. The Depiction of Nature as it is Experienced by the Poet**

Wordsworth was not really keen on treating nature in a descriptive way, but rather on a spiritual level, even though it plays a prominent role in his life and writings. Trees, birds and flowers are never commonplace elements but rather a source of spiritual wealth. If we take the example of "*To the Cuckoo*", it is obvious that beyond the mere description of the bird, what is important is the emotion aroused by the natural scene. This is why the cuckoo is treated rather as a symbol, which is obvious in the following verses: "O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird, / Or but a wandering Voice?" (v. 3-4).

The cuckoo is so elusive that the poet questions the very possibility of reducing it to a mere bird. What matters for the poet is not to observe the scene with a descriptive purpose but rather to render the feelings it generates and to describe its influence on his mood. This way of describing nature as it is experienced and not just for the sake of description is also mirrored by the frequent alternation between the pronouns "I" (or "me") and "thee" (or

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<sup>7</sup> McDonald, Peter. Porée, Marc. *Anthologie de la poésie britannique*. Paris : Hachette supérieur, 1993, p. 37.

“thou” and “thy”). The poem “*To a Butterfly*” is a good example to illustrate this alternation: “Stay near **me** – do not take **thy** flight!” / ... “Much converse do **I** find in **thee**.” (v. 1 and 3).

The same use of pronouns is to be found in “*To the Cuckoo*”, resulting, as always in the 1807 poems, in a sensuous approach to nature, almost as if it could exist only when it is experienced by man. I may quote several lines to illustrate this use of pronouns in “*To the Cuckoo*”: “**I** hear **thee** and rejoice.” / ... “O Cuckoo! shall **I** call **thee** Bird” / ... “**Thy** twofold shout **I** hear.” (v. 2-3 and 6).

Therefore what I referred to earlier as Wordsworth’s internalisation of nature is exemplified here in the very use of pronouns, since the closeness between the poet and nature is mirrored by the presence of pronouns that refer both to the poet and to natural elements.

### **I.B. The Benevolence of Nature**

Furthermore, what is particularly emphasised in the 1807 poems and to a larger extent in Wordsworth’s poetry in general is the soothing powers of nature. Besides the simplicity of his style and his distaste for the early eighteenth-century Classical and formal verse, what mostly characterises Wordsworth as a Romantic poet is his vision of nature as both soothing and benevolent. In the famous “*Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*”, he was already praising nature’s benevolence and necessity when one has to overcome obstacles and sorrows, as one can see in the following verses (v. 52-57):

... and amid the many shapes  
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir  
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,  
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart,  
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee  
O sylvan Wye!

The benevolence of nature is even more highlighted in the 1807 poems by the use of several devices, one of them being the personification of natural elements. In “*To a Butterfly*”, the insect is called “Historian of my infancy!” (v. 4) and is therefore endowed with a type of power which is rather unusual for a butterfly. In “*I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*”, the personification of the daffodils is not so direct but rather conveyed by the adjectives, adverbs and verbs used to describe them. Wordsworth sees the flowers as “dancing in the breeze” (v. 6) and “Tossing their heads in sprightly dance” (v. 12). The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines “pathetic fallacy” – a term coined by John Ruskin - as the “poetic practice of attributing human emotion or responses to nature, inanimate objects, or animals [...] in which it has always been common to find smiling or dancing flowers, angry or cruel winds ...<sup>8</sup>”, differentiating it from personification, insofar as the latter is more obvious and conspicuous. One may wonder to what extent this definition applies to Wordsworth’s poetry. Some might argue that the examples from “*I wandered Lonely as a Cloud*” given above are not so much pathetic fallacy as mere metaphors to describe natural elements. They nevertheless illustrate Wordsworth’s tendency to praise the treasures of nature in such a way that one would believe he is referring to human beings.

### **I.C. Wordsworth’s Deep-rooted Attachment and Fascination for Nature**

As a consequence of this depiction of nature as a “soothing and morally uplifting presence<sup>9</sup>”, there is very often in the 1807 poems a sense of fascination for what nature has to offer and a vital need on the part of the poet to be surrounded by it. This kind of phenomenon is to be found, for example, in “*I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*” in the form

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<sup>8</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica online. URL : <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/446415/pathetic-fallacy>>. Consulté le 15 février 2012.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.* p.35.

of repetitions: “I **gazed** – and **gazed**” (v. 17), or in “*To a Butterfly*”: “Oh! **Pleasant, pleasant** were the days” (v. 10). In “*My Heart Leaps Up when I Behold*”, it is also the case although it is the anaphoric structure itself which is repeated three times: “**So was it** when my life began; / **So is it** now I am a man; / **So be it** when I shall grow old” (v. 3-5).

As far as repetitions are concerned, one might also take the example of “*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*”, where the sense of fascination is present and emphasised by an elegiac tone: “Then **sing**, ye Birds, **sing, sing** a joyous song! / ... I **hear, I hear**, with joy I **hear!**” (v. 169 and 50). All these examples of repetition are evidence of Wordsworth’s deep-rooted attachment to what his natural environment is made of.

Moreover this very attachment of Wordsworth to nature is also conveyed by the use of imperative forms in several of the 1807 poems, as a way of expressing its absolute necessity and praising its infinite richness. Indeed as I shall explain further on in this dissertation, there is always an urgent need on the part of Wordsworth not to let go of nature’s gifts for fear it would alter the particular and precious “imaginative compensation<sup>10</sup>” which is so difficult to reach. The imperative forms in question appear, for instance, in “*To a Butterfly*”: “**Stay** near me – **do not take** thy flight! / A little longer **stay** in sight! / ... **Float** near me; **do not yet depart!**” (v. 1-2 and 5).

In addition to the use of such forms, Wordsworth sometimes resorts to another device in order not only to show his attachment to natural elements and to underline their benevolence and soothing powers, but also to depict nature as timeless. In “*To a Butterfly*”, one may notice that the verses in which the poet describes and qualifies the insect and its effects on him are very often devoid of any verb, as though Wordsworth’s

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<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.* P. 37.



purpose was to depict natural elements as eternal. I may give several examples from the poem in question, the verses concerned with the lack of verbs being the italicized ones:

Much converse do I find in thee,  
*Historian of my infancy!*  
... Thou bring'st, *gay creature as thou art!*  
*A solemn image to my heart,*  
*My father's family!*

(v. 3-4 and 7-9)

This remark also applies to the poem “*To the Cuckoo*”, as you can see in the following examples: “*O blithe New-comer! / ... Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring! / ... No bird, but an invisible thing, / A voice, a mystery*” (v. 1, 13, 15 and 16). These extracts all illustrate Wordsworth’s tendency to consider natural elements as resistant to the effects of time and to describe them as a never-ending source of wealth for the mind.

### **I.D. The Poetic Metamorphosis of Nature**

As I have explained so far, Wordsworth did not consider nature as his predecessors used to, that is, he truly believed that, even though nature is part of the external world, it has the power to influence our mood and is at the root of profound reflections. This might be the reason why, from 1798 onwards, almost all his poems dealt with his relationship with nature and as I will explain in the next section, with the way this relationship helps him in his attempt at self-definition. But such a progression implies first that nature has to be interpreted on a spiritual level and that it has to be subjected to a poetic transfiguration. Several of the 1807 poems confirm this poetic process which gives life and moral values to natural objects. In this regard, “*I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*” is of great interest, since it involves several elements that illustrate Wordsworth’s internalisation of nature and the

way he depicts the daffodils as capable of leaching into the mind. By way of example, one may quote the following lines:

That floats on high o'er vales and hills, / When all at once I saw a crowd, /  
A host of golden daffodils; / Beside the lake, beneath the trees, /  
... They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude; /  
And then my heart with pleasure fills  
(v. 2-5 and 21-23)

These lines suggest, in several ways, that there is a mental process on the part of the poet which changes mere daffodils into a spiritual presence. Indeed, the external world (the “vales and hills” as well as “the lake” and “the trees”) finds its place in the poet’s mind, in his “inward eye”. Likewise, loneliness (“lonely as a cloud”) is transformed into “a bliss of solitude”, which indicates that the poet does not deplore the fact that he is alone, but that he is rather satisfied with it, for it enables his heart to “fill” with pleasure. This process used by Wordsworth is referred to as the “poet’s touch of gold” by Geoffrey Durrant. In his book entitled *William Wordsworth* he writes: “the wealth which is available for future years is created by the poet’s touch of gold which transforms into brightness and radiance the most commonplace details<sup>11</sup>”. Thus, the “crowd” in verse 3 becomes a “host” in verse 4 and the daffodils that would probably be described as yellow in a more ordinary context are “golden”. On the other hand, Coleridge, in chapter 22 of his *Biographia Literaria*, describes Wordsworth’s treatment of nature as a “disproportion of thought to the circumstance and occasion [...] what might be called mental bombast<sup>12</sup>”, even though he then acknowledges: “This, by the bye, is a fault of which none but a man of genius is

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<sup>11</sup> Durrant, Geoffrey. *William Wordsworth*. Cambridge : University Press, 1969. p.25.

<sup>12</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions II*. Princeton : University Press, 1983. p. 136.

capable.<sup>13</sup>” Whether one considers Durrant’s vision or Coleridge’s remarks concerning Wordsworth’s treatment of nature, they both point out a very important feature of his poetry: the way natural elements which seem insignificant at first sight make their way through the poet’s mind and reappear (for example, when he is lying on his couch, “in vacant or in pensive mood”). In addition, one may interpret a part of Wordsworth’s preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* as a clear explanation of this poetic process I have attempted to describe so far:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, [...] is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.<sup>14</sup>

Such a quotation exemplifies the prevailing role played both by imagination and memory in the “recollection” Wordsworth refers to, since it is thanks to memory and the imaginative powers that natural objects once observed by the poet may resurface later. In the last section of this dissertation, I will examine in greater details the compensations and rewards that the poet is able to enjoy as a consequence of the mental process described in this quotation.

The purpose of this first section was to draw a preliminary exploration by deciphering Wordsworth’s treatment of nature, using several examples from the 1807 poems. As I have explained, Wordsworth’s approach to nature is very specific, insofar as he was not so much interested in describing the landscape as he was in treating it on a spiritual level. I have also examined nature’s benevolence and soothing powers in several

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<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth, William & Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*. Hertfordshire : Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2003. p.21.

of the 1807 poems, and the way it fascinates and influences the poet, leading him to consider natural elements as everlasting. In addition to this, I have tried to explain why these perceptions of nature are at the root of a poetic process which enables the poet to reach a form of emotional compensation.

However, a close reading of poems such as "*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*" or "*To the Cuckoo*" shows that prior to the attainment of that emotional compensation, there is a whole mental process to be followed by the poet, the aim of which is to start by acknowledging what he cannot change, like the simple act of growing up. That very process and its consequences on the poet's mood are going to be at the core of the following section.

**PART II**

**A SPIRITUAL CRISIS FOR THE SELF?**

“The things which I have seen I now can see no more.” This is the iambic hexameter that closes stanza 1 of *“Ode: Intimations of Immortality”*. Perhaps this verse is the best way of opening this section, insofar as it exemplifies several of the ideas and concepts that are going to be dealt with. Wordsworth’s personal vision and transfiguration of nature, which I have examined in the previous section, represent the first step that allows the poet to eventually have access to the ‘Intimations of Immortality’ he constantly refers to in some of his poems. Yet, to attain this purpose successfully, the poet has to overcome many obstacles, as though his treatment of nature led to a crisis for the self. Indeed, as a consequence of such a vision of nature, the poet has to face feelings of personal loss and nostalgia for childhood. He then needs to explore and understand the process of human growth if he wants to have a chance to “Feel the gladness of the May!” (*“Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”*, v. 175).

## **II.A. An Intense Nostalgia for Childhood**

Let us first consider the theme of nostalgia in relation to childhood in several of Wordsworth’s poems. In fact, through the use of various devices, he manages to pervade his poems with an intense nostalgia for the past, which is sometimes conveyed by a very mournful tone. One can notice that when Wordsworth praises the richness of nature and its soothing powers, this praise is very often followed by the poet deploring the changes that have occurred through time as far as his grasp of nature is concerned.

### **II.A.1. The use of verbal tenses**

Such a tendency is for example obvious if one considers first the use of verbal tenses. Indeed, one can find several examples of the use of the preterite in Wordsworth’s poems, which, as I will explain, happens to be meaningful. In this regard, I could quote

several verbs from “*To a Butterfly*” such as: “were”, “chased”, “followed” and “feared” (v. 10, 13, 16-17). It is also the case in “*To the Cuckoo*” with verbs such as: “listened” and “made me look” (v. 18-19). In “*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*”, the same sense of nostalgia for the past can be felt at the very beginning of the poem, when in the first verse, the poet laments: “There was a time when ...” By using the past tense at the very beginning of a poem, Wordsworth transports us in a past time when he obviously enjoyed and considered nature in a different way. It sets the tone immediately for the rest of the stanza, and indicates the bereaved mood in which the poet is. The mood in question is stressed in verse 3 by the use of an emphatic ‘did’: “There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, / The earth, and every common sight, / To me **did** seem / Apparelled in celestial light” (v. 1-4). The same use of an emphatic auxiliary is to be found verse 14 in “*To a Butterfly*” and therefore confirms the expression of nostalgia by the poet: “A very hunter **did** I rush / Upon the prey ...” Moreover, in the first stanza of “*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*”, the nostalgia for childhood is mirrored by a strong opposition between past and present time, since a verb in the present tense is often immediately followed by a verb in the present perfect in the same verse. It is the case verse 6: “It **is not** now as it **hath been** of yore” and verse 9: “The things which **I have seen** I now **can see** no more.”

In addition to the use of past tenses, there are many temporal markers to be found in Wordsworth’s poems which also contribute to the expression of a sense of mourning which the poet plunges into. In “*To a Butterfly*”, Wordsworth uses a diction of time in such verses as “...pleasant were *the days*, / *The time when*, in our childish plays” (v. 10-11). Likewise in “*To the Cuckoo*”: “The same whom *in my schoolboy days*” (v. 17), and “So was it *when my life began*” (v. 3) in the poem “*My Heart Leaps up when I Behold.*” Whether one considers the use of the past tense or the temporal markers, it is obvious that

the poet, although clearly rooted in the present, cannot help but remember what once was and regret it is no longer the same.

### **II.A.2. A sense of contrast between past and present**

Moreover, with regard to stanza form, sometimes the poems are composed in such a way that the reader has the feeling of a contrast not to say a breach between the present and childhood. This feeling is corroborated by the perfect symmetry noticeable in “*To a Butterfly*”, since, as you can see below, the poem is divided into two equal parts as far as the number of verses is concerned; the first nine containing only verbs in the present tense, while the remaining nine contain only verbs in the past tense:

Stay near me - do not take thy flight!  
A little longer stay in sight!  
Much converse do I find in thee,  
Historian of my infancy!  
Float near me; do not yet depart!  
Dead times revive in thee:  
Thou bring'st, gay creature as thou art!  
A solemn image to my heart,  
My father's family!

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Oh! pleasant, pleasant were the days,  
The time, when, in our childish plays,  
My sister Emmeline and I  
Together chased the butterfly!  
A very hunter did I rush  
Upon the prey:--with leaps and springs  
I followed on from brake to bush;  
But she, God love her, feared to brush  
The dust from off its wings.

That very sense of opposition between past and present is also to be found in “*To the Cuckoo*”, in which one can notice two verses opposing one another because they do not refer to the same lapse of time, as indicated by the contrasting verbal tenses: “While I am lying on the grass” (v. 5) versus “Which made me look a thousand ways” (v. 19). This



phenomenon is indeed characteristic of Wordsworth's poetry in that it often refers to the past as a way of deploring some elements of the present. Stanza 2 of "*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*" is another of the many examples which illustrate this phenomenon:

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.**

In this stanza, the last verse comes as an anti-climax, since after seven verses of praising the beauty of nature using the present tense, Wordsworth expresses his regret in the last verse, using the only verb in the whole stanza which is in the past tense: a combination between the verb 'to pass' and the adverb 'past'.

Not only does Wordsworth express his nostalgia for childhood through a clever and effective use of verbal tenses, but he also resorts to several other strategies and devices, one of them being to ask questions. By way of example, one may quote from stanza 4 of "*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*": "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" (v. 56-57). The feeling of nostalgia is also conveyed by these questions, all the more strongly since the second of them echoes the assertion in verse 5 of the same poem: "The glory and the freshness of a dream." The gloomy mood of the poet as he realises that things have changed is also stressed when he directly addresses natural elements and uses interjections and apostrophes, as in "*To a Butterfly*": "Stay near me ... / Historian of my infancy" (v. 1 and 4) or in "*To the Cuckoo*": "O blithe New-comer! ... / O Cuckoo! ... / O blessed Bird!" (v. 1, 3 and 29). These addresses show Wordsworth's attachment and affection for nature and at the same time his disillusion subsequent to the changes that have occurred through time. The same feeling is produced

by the inversion of the canonical order of syntax in some verses, such as the reversed use of adjectives or hyperbatons in the following quotes: “Oh! Pleasant, pleasant were the days” (“*To a Butterfly*”, v. 10) and “The Rainbow comes and goes, / And lovely is the rose” (“*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*”, v. 10-11).

Finally, I may also add that Wordsworth’s praise of nature as timeless and as an everlasting source of beauty and richness is one more reason for him to be nostalgic, since he realises that he has grown up whereas the Cuckoo is “The *same* whom in [his] schoolboy days / [He] listened to” (v. 17-18).

## **II.B. The Loss of “New-born Blissess”**

As a consequence of the nostalgia the poet feels for childhood, his writings are pervaded with a sense of mourning due to a broader feeling of personal loss. Indeed what Wordsworth deplors is not so much the fact of no longer being a child but rather the gifts offered to the child in terms of his relationship to nature. This feeling of “something that is gone<sup>15</sup>” is sometimes mirrored by a loss of sensuous experience in the 1807 poems. Verse 9 of the “*Immortality Ode*” is a good example of such a loss: “The things which I have seen I now can see no more.” The verb of perception ‘see’, as it is used in this iambic hexameter, indicates the inability of the poet to feel what he used to experience when he was a child, which is even more stressed by the caesura that divides the verse into two equal parts, one referring to the past and the other to the failure of perception in the present time.

Apart from the weakness of the senses, there are other elements in the 1807 poems that emphasise the feeling of personal loss the poet is subjected to. In “*To the Cuckoo*”, one

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<sup>15</sup>Wordsworth, William & Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*. Hertfordshire : Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2003. p.171.

may notice a contrast between vitality and passivity which mirrors the contrast between past and present: “While I am lying on the grass / Thy twofold shout I hear, / From hill to hill it seems to pass, / At once far off, and near.” These four verses, which compose stanza 2, convey a sense of idleness and passivity that corresponds to the current frame of mind of the poet and that can therefore be opposed to the following verses from stanzas 5 and 6, which, in turn, convey the vitality of the child:

The same whom in my schoolboy days  
I listened to; that Cry  
Which made me look a thousand ways  
In bush, and tree, and sky.  
To seek thee did I often rove  
Through woods and on the green

(v. 17 to 22)

The same distinction between childlike energy and the passivity of the adult poet is to be found in “*To a Butterfly*”, thus stressing once again the grief over the loss of the child’s vigour and vivacity. “Stay near me – do not take thy flight!” and “Float near me; do not yet depart!” (v. 1 and 5) can be opposed to: “A very hunter did I rush / Upon the prey: - with leaps and springs / I followed on from brake to bush” (v. 14, 15 and 16). In the first case, it is almost as if the poet were in an inferior position, where he has to beg the butterfly to stay near him, whereas in the second case, it is the child himself who is in control, stirred by his boundless energy.

Not only does Wordsworth express his sadness subsequent to the personal loss he suffers from through the contrast between the child’s effervescence and the adult’s listlessness, but he also resorts twice to ‘concessive’ turns of phrase in the “*Immortality Ode*”, as is put forward in the italics below:

*Turn wheresoe’er I may,*  
By night or day,

The things which I have seen I now can see no more.  
... But yet I know, *where'er I go*,  
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

(v. 7- 9 and 17-18)

These phrases also stand for the almost powerless situation in which the poet is and lay special emphasis on the fact that the loss in question is irrevocable, which is all the more stressed by the internal rhyme between “know” and “go”.

## **II.C. “The Child is Father of the Man”**

One may wonder why the feeling of personal loss subsequent to the nostalgia for childhood is so omnipresent in the 1807 poems. Perhaps the poet’s awareness of the peculiar powers and endowment of the child is the reason for such mournful feelings.

### **II.C.1. Child Prodigy versus Impoverished Adult?**

In Wordsworth’s poems, the child is often depicted as capable of making the most of what nature offers, thanks to a rather mysterious talent of which he seems to be the only owner. By way of example, we could quote a very famous verse taken from “*My Heart Leaps Up when I Behold*”: “The Child is father of the Man”. This verse, which is also taken up in the epigraph to “*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*”, makes it quite clear that the child holds something which the adult is forever deprived of, that is, the simplicity of the heart and the energy to enjoy the wealth of a sensuous experience of nature. However, another interpretation would consist in considering the “Child” as “father of the Man” in the sense that all the elements and experiences that constitute childhood would remain forever in one’s inner life even when one grows up, only in a different form. Either way, this quotation shows that actions are more spontaneous and easy to achieve as long as we are young, pointing at yet another contrast between childhood and adulthood. Even though

the child is only “A six years’ Darling of a pigmy size!” (“*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*”, VII, 87), he is capable of effortlessly enjoying what “we are toiling all our lives to find” (“*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*”, VIII, 117).

### **II.C.2. A celebration of the way the child sees the world**

Despite the sense of lamentation the reader can feel due to the poet’s grief over the loss he suffers from, it is important not to forget that, beyond the mourning and the loss, there is actually a celebration of the way the child sees the world and, above all, a desire on the part of the adult poet not to let go of this gift. Indeed, if one goes beyond the omnipresence of nostalgia and regret, one can perceive a ray of hope in Wordsworth’s poems, which is to be considered central to his writings, since it paves the way for the poet’s acceptance and final recompense. With regard to this aspect, the last two verses of “*My Heart Leaps Up when I Behold*” are of great interest: “And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety”, as well as the following three taken from the same poem: “So was it when my life began; / So is it now I am a man; / So be it when I shall grow old.” The idea of a rising hope is indeed perceivable in these verses, notably thanks to the use of the verb “wish” as well as the threefold repetition of the structure “So + verb + it.”

In this section, I have tried to explain that, as a consequence of Wordsworth’s treatment of nature as the pillar of one’s relation to the outer world, the poet endures, at some point, a feeling of personal loss when he realises that he, unlike nature, has changed. This leads him to recall how wonderful it was to be a child and to deplore that this very child wants to grow up so quickly. Nevertheless, this crisis of the self is necessary for the poet to go on and renders possible some sort of “imaginative compensation<sup>16</sup>”.

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<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*

**PART III**

**THE PATH TO RECOVERY**

As I have tried to explain so far, several of the 1807 poems rest upon a very specific mental and psychological progression on the part of the poet. This progression comes as a consequence of the poet's own conception of his external world and aims at gradually overcoming a sense of melancholy in order to focus on "something far more deeply interfused" ("*Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*", v. 97). Indeed, the poems in question are often the result of a mental itinerary that the poet follows, from grief and self-crisis to eventual recovery, acceptance and even recompense. "*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*" and "*Tintern Abbey*" are the best examples of this progression and are therefore going to be the source of our interest in the following section.

### **III.A. Deciphering the Process of Human Growth**

If one wants to understand how Wordsworth eventually reaches the "imaginative compensation"<sup>17</sup> I have mentioned, one needs to analyse first how the poet becomes progressively aware of the process of human growth and how that very process gives him the key to find his salvation. Whether it is in "*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*" or in "*Tintern Abbey*", there are several elements that exemplify the poet's depiction and analysis of human growth.

#### **III.A.1. From "new-born blisses" to a "palsied Age"**

Stanza 7 of the "*Immortality Ode*" provides a very insightful analysis of the course of human life, from "new-born blisses" (v. 86) to "palsied Age" (v. 105). In this stanza the child is first depicted at the moment of his birth, when he is "Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses" (v. 89). Then we learn how, "Shaped by himself with newly-learned art", the child has at his disposal "some little plan or chart" (v. 91) which he is going to follow

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<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*

as he grows up. Such imagery gives the impression of a path everyone follows unconsciously, composed of typical ordeals and events, as indicated by the use of words such as “wedding”, “funeral”, “business”, “love” and “strife” (v. 94-95 and 99). In addition to this, the progressive course of human life is also depicted in stanza 5 of the *“Immortality Ode”*, in a very linear way, since the order in which the references to the various steps of one’s life are given conforms to the course of the stanza itself. Thus, verse 58 contains the word “birth”. Then the word “infancy” appears verse 66, followed by the “growing Boy” verse 68, the “Youth” verse 72 and eventually the “Man” verse 76.

In “Tintern Abbey”, the course of time - and the ensuing growth of the mind - is even more obvious and less concealed, since Wordsworth clearly refers to the years 1793 and 1798, the dates of his two visits to the Wye Valley - in a very explicit way as far as temporal markers are concerned:

**Five years** have passed; **five summers**, with the length /  
 Of **five** long winters! and again I hear ... / **Once again** /  
 Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs /  
 ... **The day** is come **when I again** repose ... / **Once again** I see ...

(v. 1-2, 4-5, 9 and 15).

Wordsworth was twenty-three years old when he first visited the Wye Valley in Monmouthshire in 1793. He came back there in 1798, five years later, after he had been to France and had met Annette Vallon. France had been continuously at war with Britain since 1793, and had become more violent, which disappointed many of its early supporters. It was one particular man filled with hope who came there in 1793 - a man in his “boyish days” (v. 74) -, then another man who came back in 1798, and eventually probably a third man who ‘reclected the scene in tranquillity’ when he composed these ‘lines’; hence the use of the present perfect in the greater part of the poem. Thus, the two visits are depicted



as corresponding to two different stages in human life, and to a larger extent, in the growth of the mind. The first corresponds to childhood, or at least to a period characterised by a childlike grasp of the external world, as can be seen in the following verses taken from stanza 4, verses 67 to 76:

Though changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first  
I came among these hills; when like a roe  
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides  
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,  
Wherever nature led; more like a man  
Flying from something that he dreads, than one  
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then  
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,  
And their glad animal movements all gone by)  
To me was all in all.

The use of the preterite is here symptomatic since the poet is referring to his first visit to the Wye Valley in 1793. He depicts how he behaved back then in such a manner that it is obvious he considers his view of nature was that of a child or at least of a man in his “boyish days”. The verbs and similes used in the verses I have just quoted illustrate a very primitive relationship to nature which is experienced only via the senses – senses which emphasise the naïveté of the child as he discovers and enjoys the gifts of nature. On the other hand, Wordsworth goes on to describe a second stage in human life, embodied by a different man - one who, on revisiting the Wye valley in 1798, has “felt a presence that disturbs [him] with the joy of elevated thoughts” (v. 94-96).

### **III.A.2. Wordsworth's awareness of man's mortal limits**

Furthermore, the “*Immortality Ode*” is built in such a way that we might think that Wordsworth's main purpose in describing the process of human growth is to deplore it. Indeed, if I were to divide the poem into three parts, stanzas one to four could be

interpreted as the wording of a feeling of personal loss, stanzas five to eight as an attempt at explaining such a loss (by resorting to an analysis of how the child grows up to become a mature man) and stanzas nine to the end as the acceptance and the reconciliation of the self. It would be easy to think that, since it comes after the poet's lament over the loss he suffers from, the analysis he makes of the process of human growth is only present in the poem to be bemoaned. Such a feeling would actually be justifiable since it is encouraged in several ways. First one can notice the poet's use of theatrical imagery to describe the growth of the child in stanza seven, which stresses the idea that the joy and innocence proper to childhood are unfortunately only temporary: "The little Actor cons another part; / Filling from time to time his 'humorous stage' / With all the Persons, down to palsied Age, / That Life brings with her in her equipage" (v. 103-106). The same idea is stressed in stanza five, since we are told that "Heaven lies about us in our infancy" (v. 66) but that when a man grows old, he "perceives it die away, / And fade into the light of common day" (v. 76-77), not to mention verses 67 and 68: "Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy".

### **III.A.3. Acceptance and reconciliation: Wordsworth's key to salvation**

However, if one compares stanza seven and stanza eight of the "*Immortality Ode*", one can notice that Wordsworth's analysis and description of the process which governs human growth, though marked by the poet's awareness of man's mortal limits, is not fundamentally aimed at deploring its effects. This is probably what Alec King suggests in *Critics on Wordsworth: Readings in Literary Criticism* when he explains:

The heart of the poem ["*Immortality Ode*"] is a double vision of childhood, the childhood that we see being busily lived through by children and which we ourselves lived through, and the childhood which we carry within us

like a memory, and which while grounded in our earliest years stays with us into adult life for good or evil.<sup>18</sup>

Wordsworth describes these two childhoods in a very different way in stanza seven and stanza eight, regarding style and imagery mostly. On the one hand, childhood is described as experienced by “A six years’ Darling of a pigmy size” (VII, 87) who is compared to a “little Actor” (v. 103) in a very colloquial language (“See, at his feet, some little plan or chart” v. 91), while on the other hand, a second childhood is referred to in a very dignified and metaphorical way (VIII). The child is a “Mighty Prophet”, a “Seer blest” (v. 115) whom the poet repeatedly apostrophizes: “Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie / Thy Soul’s immensity; / Thou best Philosopher who yet dost keep / Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind” (v. 109-112). Therefore, one may say that Wordsworth’s central aim when he portrays the various steps of human life is merely to give an explanation of the generic process that everyone inevitably follows when they reach maturity: “The Youth, who daily farther from the east / *Must travel*” (V, 72-73). This hypothesis is also confirmed if one pays close attention to stanza six. Beyond what it says about a form of glory which is irrevocably lost for the adult (“Forget the glories he hath known” v. 84), this stanza exemplifies the concept of the world as a “Mother”, who has to accompany her “Foster-child” even if he grows up and regardless of his forgetting “that imperial palace whence he came” (v. 85).

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<sup>18</sup> Cowell, Raymond. *Critics on Wordsworth: Readings in Literary Criticism*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1973. p.93.

### **III.B. “Imaginative compensation”: the Ultimate Reward**

In the mental itinerary the poet follows to attain the recompense that ensues from his feeling of personal and imaginative loss, I have just described how he first builds up an awareness of this process of human growth, thus showing how he finally understands why the loss he suffers from is inevitable and universal. This mental itinerary is retraced quite clearly in the “*Immortality Ode*”. In the last three stanzas of the poem, after eight stanzas in which Wordsworth has successively expressed the reasons for his loss and mourning, the poet finally perceives the ‘intimations of immortality’ he announced in the title of his poem.

#### **III.B.1. The necessity for Remembrance**

One may wonder, when reading stanza eight of the “*Immortality Ode*”, whether there is still the least hope for compensation since the passage in question ends on a fairly gloomy note: “In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave / ... The years to bring the inevitable yoke / ... And custom lie upon thee with a weight / Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life” (VIII, 118, 125, 128-129). Nevertheless, from the opening words to the end of stanza nine, the poet goes on to show his relief in a very assertive and sustained form, the aim of which is to describe the compensation he has gained:

O joy! That in our embers  
Is something that doth live,  
That nature yet remembers  
What was so fugitive!  
The thought of our past years in me doth breed  
Perpetual benediction

(IX, 130-135)

These verses may be considered as an explanation of Wordsworth’s belief that, since man suffers the weight of the ‘prison house’, he has to turn to remembrance to recapture the

past. According to Wordsworth, once man understands that the 'prison house' life locks him into as he grows up is actually the source of 'intimations of immortality', it is easy to forget the sorrow and to look back on oneself to seek for compensation: "We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind" (v. 180-181). Wordsworth insists that celebration is all the more appropriate since once man has overcome his feeling of loss and understood the process by which the growth of his mind is governed, he *forever* has at his disposal the "shadowy recollections" (v. 150), the "truths that wake / To perish never" (v. 156-157).

In "*Tintern Abbey*", Wordsworth also expresses the compensation that age brings in one's relationship to the external world, insofar as he explains why, apart from the immediate pleasure brought by the observation of the Wye Valley, that very observation has a lasting value:

The picture of the mind revives again:  
While here I stand, not only with the sense  
O present pleasure, but with the pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years.

(v. 62-66)

### **III.B.2. Reviving the Past**

A few words should be said on the importance of the past in "*Tintern Abbey*", and to a larger extent, in many others of Wordsworth's famous poems. Indeed, as Denis Bonnacase and Marc Porée suggested in *Lyrical Ballads de Wordsworth et Coleridge: La différence en partage*, the past is not considered as 'past' by Wordsworth and needs to be reactivated because it is a source of self-definition in the present: "Il n'y a donc pas d'extase fulgurante, mais un lent devenir de l'émotion [...] et la teneur de «*Tintern Abbey*»,

son grain distinctif, réside dans sa nature méthodique. Tout y est réflexif et récupérateur<sup>19</sup>.”

There is almost a sense of circularity in Wordsworth’s poetry, insofar as man’s experiences in the present are compared to the past - often to deplore the changes that have first occurred through time to eventually accept them -, but also to enjoy their lasting effects, because in “future years”, he writes, they will be the subject of “shadowy recollections”.

This circularity can be felt if one compares the first and last stanzas of the “*Immortality Ode*”. The poet’s grief over his loss of sensuous experience in the first stanza (“There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream” ... “It is not now as it hath been of yore” ... “I now can see no more” v. 1 and 9), can be confronted to a kind of reactivation of the senses in the last stanza (“I *feel* your might” ... “a sober colouring from the *eye* / That hath *kept watch* o’er man’s mortality” v. 190 and 198-199). That very reactivation urges the poet to celebrate and praise with a revived faith the “Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves” (v. 188), which are now written with capital letters. The same celebration of nature due to the reactivation of the senses is to be found in “*Tintern Abbey*”, notably in verses 103 to 107:

Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains; and of all that we *behold*  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
Of *eye* and *ear*

Ultimately, what Wordsworth explains is that, when a man is all grown up, even though ‘Earth’ has accomplished her natural and universal mission, resulting in man’s imprisonment and the loss of his ‘new-born blisses’, a recompense is still possible. Provided that man decides to use the imaginative powers that life generously offers to all her ‘Inmate’ men, he can look back in time with them and recall ‘that golden time again’.

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<sup>19</sup> Bonnecase, Denis et Porée, Marc. *Lyrical Ballads de Wordsworth et Coleridge : La différence en partage*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2011. P.248.

## Conclusion

There is no denial that Romantic poetry questioned and challenged the conventions and beliefs of the Augustan Age, rejecting rationality and reason to turn to emotion, passion and faith in the creative process. Wordsworth completely falls into this category if one considers how his poetry manages, in a fairly colloquial language which he defends in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, to celebrate nature and its importance in the definition and growth of the inner self. Therefore, one might want to draw a parallel between what defines Wordsworth as a Romantic poet and the main characteristics of Transcendentalism, insofar as both movements shared more or less the same belief regarding nature. According to them, there is a kind of vital need to connect with nature, which is the only way to find inspiration and reach self recovery. Perhaps this common denominator comes as a consequence of the rejection by both movements of eighteenth-century rationalism and the treatment of man as a passive receiver of the outer world's activity. Indeed, both Romantics and Transcendentalists believed that there is a spiritual link between the external world and the human mind which needs to be explored and preserved.

It is very interesting, if one wants to go a little further into the matter, to examine in more details the theme of Romantic imagination, since the analysis of the poems I have based my work upon and all the books I have read have led me to believe that for the Romantics, poetry is beyond art: it is the fruit of the imagination. For Coleridge, imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify"<sup>20</sup>. The process described here by Coleridge is, I believe, exemplified in each of the poems I have mentioned in this dissertation, whether it is in Wordsworth's praise of the benevolence of

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<sup>20</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions I*. Princeton : University Press, 1983. p. 304.

nature, or in his ability to recollect his emotion 'in tranquillity' and thus to derive profound and spiritual meaning from his observation of the external world.

After reading such poems as "*Tintern Abbey*" or "*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*", one might wonder to what extent Wordsworth is a 'man speaking to men'. Is it possible and compatible to touch or affect every man and to describe so extensively one's own feelings at the same time? "*Tintern Abbey*" is indeed often taken as an example of this kind of contradiction, for even though it takes the form of what Coleridge called a 'conversation piece' - that is to say a poem which is characterised by its fairly informal tone and style -, it is nevertheless the complex expression of a very personal mood. Keats's characterisation of Wordsworth's approach to poetry as an 'egotistical sublime' therefore points out that contradiction: the poet who claims to be a 'man speaking to men' actually places his own self at the core of the act of writing. Nevertheless I do think that Wordsworth's willingness to write poems which everyone can identify with lies as much in the themes and ideas he tackles as in the language he uses. Indeed, although centred on himself in the greater part of the poem, the poet attempts to enlarge his mood and ideas to include his sister Dorothy at the end of "*Tintern Abbey*", which, even though it is a device to picture himself in his sister's memory, still testifies to an attempt to apply his ideas to others: "For thou art with me, here, upon the banks / Of this fair river; thou, my dearest Friend, / My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart" (v. 115-118). The same attempt appears in the "*Immortality Ode*", stressed by a shift from "I" and "me" to "our" and "us" at the end of the poem.

However centred on the self some of his poems might be, Wordsworth remains, I believe, a man of genius who managed, through brilliant texts that are famous worldwide and that will certainly continue to be read and praised for a long time, to tackle some universal themes with which human beings shall forever identify.



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## **APPENDIX**

## Appendix 1: “*To a Butterfly*”

STAY near me--do not take thy flight!

A little longer stay in sight!

Much converse do I find in thee,

Historian of my infancy!

5 Float near me; do not yet depart!

Dead times revive in thee:

Thou bring'st, gay creature as thou art!

A solemn image to my heart,

My father's family!

10 Oh! pleasant, pleasant were the days,

The time when, in our childish plays,

My sister Emmeline and I

Together chased the butterfly!

A very hunter did I rush

15 Upon the prey:--with leaps and springs

I followed on from brake to bush;

But she, God love her! feared to brush

The dust from off its wings.

## Appendix 2: “*To the Cuckoo*”

O blithe New-comer! I have heard,  
I hear thee and rejoice.  
O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird,  
Or but a wandering Voice?

5 While I am lying on the grass  
Thy twofold shout I hear,  
From hill to hill it seems to pass,  
At once far off, and near.

10 Though babbling only to the Vale,  
Of sunshine and of flowers,  
Thou bringest unto me a tale  
Of visionary hours.

15 Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring!  
Even yet thou art to me  
No bird, but an invisible thing,  
A voice, a mystery;

20 The same whom in my school-boy days  
I listened to; that Cry  
Which made me look a thousand ways  
In bush, and tree, and sky.

To seek thee did I often rove  
Through woods and on the green;  
And thou wert still a hope, a love;  
Still longed for, never seen.

25 And I can listen to thee yet;  
Can lie upon the plain  
And listen, till I do beget  
That golden time again.

30 O blessèd Bird! the earth we pace  
Again appears to be  
An unsubstantial, faery place;  
That is fit home for Thee

### **Appendix 3: “*My Heart Leaps Up when I Behold*”**

My heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;

So is it now I am a man;

5 So be it when I shall grow old,

Or let me die!

The Child is father of the Man;

I could wish my days to be

Bound each to each by natural piety.

## Appendix 4: “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”

1

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.

2

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.

3

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:  
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!

4

Ye blessed Creatures, I have heard the call  
Ye to each other make; I see  
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;  
My heart is at your festival,  
My head hath its coronal,  
The fulness of your bliss, I feel - I feel it all.  
Oh evil day! if I were sullen  
While the Earth herself is adorning,  
This sweet May-morning,  
And the Children are culling  
On every side,  
In a thousand valleys far and wide,  
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,  
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm: -  
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!  
- But there's a Tree, of many, one,  
A single Field which I have looked upon,  
Both of them speak of something that is gone:  
The Pansy at my feet  
Doth the same tale repeat:  
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

5

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
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;  
The Youth, who daily farther from the east  
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,  
And by the vision splendid  
Is on his way attended;  
At length the Man perceives it die away,  
And fade into the light of common day.



6

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;  
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,  
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,  
And no unworthy aim,  
The homely Nurse doth all she can  
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,  
Forget the glories he hath known,  
And that imperial palace whence he came.

7

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,  
A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!  
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,  
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,  
With light upon him from his father's eyes!  
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,  
Some fragment from his dream of human life,  
Shaped by himself with newly-learnèd art;  
A wedding or a festival,  
A mourning or a funeral;  
And this hath now his heart,  
And unto this he frames his song:  
Then will he fit his tongue  
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;  
But it will not be long  
Ere this be thrown aside,  
And with new joy and pride  
The little Actor cons another part;  
Filling from time to time his 'humorous stage'  
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,  
That Life brings with her in her equipage;  
As if his whole vocation  
Were endless imitation.

8

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie  
Thy Soul's immensity;  
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep  
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,  
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,  
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind, -  
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!  
On whom those truths do rest,  
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,  
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;  
Thou, over whom thy Immortality

Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,  
A Presence which is not to be put by;  
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might  
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,  
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke  
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,  
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?  
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,  
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,  
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

9

O joy! that in our embers  
Is something that doth live,  
That nature yet remembers  
What was so fugitive!  
The thought of our past years in me doth breed  
Perpetual benediction: not indeed  
For that which is most worthy to be blest;  
Delight and liberty, the simple creed  
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,  
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast: -  
Not for these I raise  
The song of thanks and praise;  
But for those obstinate questionings  
Of sense and outward things,  
Fallings from us, vanishings;  
Blank misgivings of a Creature  
Moving about in worlds not realised,  
High instincts before which our mortal Nature  
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:  
But for those first affections,  
Those shadowy recollections,  
Which, be they what they may,  
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,  
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing;  
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make  
Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,  
To perish never;  
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,  
Nor Man nor Boy,  
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,  
Can utterly abolish or destroy!  
Hence in a season of calm weather  
Though inland far we be,  
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea

Which brought us hither,  
Can in a moment travel thither,  
And see the Children sport upon the shore,  
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

10

Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!  
And let the young Lambs bound  
As to the tabor's sound!  
We in thought will join your throng,  
Ye that pipe and ye that play,  
Ye that through your hearts today  
Feel the gladness of the May!  
What though the radiance which was once so bright  
Be now for ever taken from my sight,  
Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
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.

11

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,  
Forebode not any severing of our loves!  
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;  
I only have relinquished one delight  
To live beneath your more habitual sway.  
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,  
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;  
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day  
Is lovely yet;  
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun  
Do take a sober colouring from an eye  
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;  
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.  
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

## Appendix 5: “*I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*”

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
5 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.  
→Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
10 Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.  
→The waves beside them danced; but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
15 A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company:  
I gazed---and gazed---but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:  
→For oft, when on my couch I lie  
20 In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

**Appendix 6:** *“Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798”*

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length  
Of five long winters! and again I hear  
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
With a sweet inland murmur.—Once again  
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
Which on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.  
The day is come when I again repose  
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view  
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,  
Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,  
Among the woods and copses lose themselves,  
Nor, with their green and simple hue, disturb  
The wild green landscape. Once again I see  
These hedgerows, hardly hedgerows, little lines  
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms,  
Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke  
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,  
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,  
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,  
Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire  
The hermit sits alone.

Though absent long,  
These forms of beauty have not been to me  
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:  
But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,  
And passing even into my purer mind  
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too  
Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps,  
As may have had no trivial influence  
On that best portion of a good man's life;  
His little, nameless, unremembered acts  
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,  
To them I may have owed another gift,  
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,

In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world  
Is lighten'd:—that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on,  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul:  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.

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

And now, with gleams of half-extinguish'd thought,  
With many recognitions dim and faint,  
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,  
The picture of the mind revives again:  
While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years. And so I dare to hope  
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first  
I came among these hills; when like a roe  
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides  
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,  
Wherever nature led; more like a man  
Flying from something that he dreads, than one  
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then  
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,  
And their glad animal movements all gone by,)  
To me was all in all.—I cannot paint  
What then I was. The sounding cataract  
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,  
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
Their colours and their forms, were then to me  
An appetite: a feeling and a love,

That had no need of a remoter charm,  
By thought supplied, or any interest  
Unborrowed from the eye.—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 recompense. 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,  
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,  
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize  
In nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being.

Nor, perchance,  
If I were not thus taught, should I the more  
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:  
For thou art with me, here, upon the banks  
Of this fair river; thou, my dearest Friend,  
My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures in the shooting lights  
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while  
May I behold in thee what I was once,  
My dear, dear Sister! And this prayer I make,  
Knowing that Nature never did betray  
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,  
Through all the years of this our life, to lead

From joy to joy: for she can so inform  
The mind that is within us, so impress  
With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,  
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,  
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all  
The dreary intercourse of daily life,  
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb  
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold  
Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon  
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;  
And let the misty mountain winds be free  
To blow against thee: and in after years,  
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured  
Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind  
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,  
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place  
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; Oh! then,  
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,  
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts  
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,  
And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance,  
If I should be, where I no more can hear  
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams  
Of past existence, wilt thou then forget  
That on the banks of this delightful stream  
We stood together; and that I, so long  
A worshipper of Nature, hither came,  
Unwearied in that service: rather say  
With warmer love, oh! with far deeper zeal  
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,  
That after many wanderings, many years  
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,  
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me  
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake.



**MOTS-CLES** : Nature, nostalgie, perte, développement de l'homme, récompense.

### **RESUME**

Ce mémoire a pour objet l'étude personnelle et détaillée de certains poèmes du recueil *Poems in Two Volumes* de William Wordsworth, publié en 1807, ainsi que du poème « *Tintern Abbey* » qui clôture les *Ballades Lyriques* de 1798. Ces poèmes, dont certains font partie des plus célèbres et des plus étudiés de l'œuvre de Wordsworth, illustrent parfaitement la conception de la nature chère au poète, et la façon dont cette conception lui permet d'atteindre un état de paix spirituelle. Au fil des pages se trouvent des micro-lectures de poèmes tels que « *Tintern Abbey* » ou « *Ode : Intimations of Immortality* » dont le but est d'analyser le cheminement psychologique mis en évidence dans ces poèmes. Il s'agit d'expliquer comment une conception du monde extérieur très spécifique et personnelle à Wordsworth (et aux poètes Romantiques en général), lui permet de surmonter une crise spirituelle marquée par la nostalgie de l'enfance et par un sentiment de perte, pour finalement comprendre que cette crise n'est qu'un rite de passage vers une récompense spirituelle marquée par la réactivation du passé.

**KEY-WORDS**: Nature, nostalgia, loss, human-growth, imaginative reward.

### **ABSTRACT**

This study is based on a personal and close reading of a few poems taken from William Wordsworth's 1807 *Poems in Two Volumes* and of "Tintern Abbey", the last poem of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. These poems, some of which belong to the most studied and famous of Wordsworth's writings, perfectly illustrate the poet's own conception of nature, and the way that very conception allows him to reach a sort of spiritual well-being. This dissertation contains a lot of micro-readings of such poems as "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" or "Tintern Abbey", the aim of which is to explore and decipher the psychological progression retraced in those poems. The purpose is to explain how Wordsworth's own treatment of the external world – shared by the Romantic poets at large - allows him to overcome a spiritual crisis marked by a sense of nostalgia for his childhood and a feeling of personal loss and to explain how he realises that the crisis in question is just a prerequisite for an imaginative reward.

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