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Recommended Citation

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Religion and Renunciation in Wordsworth:
The Progression of Natural Individualism to Christian Stoicism

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English 484
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14 December 2006

William Wordsworth was twenty-three when the French National Convention condemned the deposed Louis XVI to death, and France, under Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety, dissolved into abject violence. The disappointing results of the Revolution and the subsequent events in European politics began to work a change in Wordsworth's personal political and ethical views that would greatly affect not only his own poetry but the entire Romantic Movement. Even still, his eventual apostasy from the radical republicanism of his youth affects the way in which people read Wordsworth's work, igniting both sympathy and resentment. The *Ode to Duty* is generally considered to mark a main transition in Wordsworth's philosophy from individualism to the sort of stoicism he would hold in old age. The *Ode*, as Newton Stallknecht describes it, "contains elements of both romantic individualism and stoicism" (230). Stallknecht suggests that the poem ultimately tends more toward the stoical, confirming Wordsworth's move to a new philosophy which would be fully realized by the time of *The Excursion*'s publication in 1820. This move seems drastic and sudden when the *Ode to Duty* is compared with works with which Wordsworth was composing at the same time such as *The Prelude* and *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*. However, the belief system that develops in his major poems from the period of 1797 to 1807 is actually the foundation of the Christian stoicism that characterizes his later work. Though often reaching a diametrical opposition to its early form, Wordsworth's philosophy forms a coherent, if dynamic, progression from beginning its beginning to its final expression in *Ode to Duty*. Only after that poem was composed would any severance occur, and then it would be by the poet's deliberate act. Through his investigation of a unique form of natural religion, the poet gradually reconciled his withdrawal from those causes whose pursuit had occupied his early adulthood, which allowed him to ease into a removed and disinterested philosophical position in good conscience.

Wordsworth's devotion to causes like the establishment of republican governance is rooted in his own need for freedom of body, mind, and expression. Unable to accept a compromise to his own freedom, he fights such conditions where he perceived others afflicted by them. The philosophical stance that informs his early work and that has been perceived as irreconcilable with his stoicism is best characterized as passionate individualism. The essential point of this position is the unqualified prioritization of individual freedom of will and body. It is strongly opposed to any sort of subjugation of human beings by one another, whether directly or through societal constructions. Attempting to embody the ideals of this system, Wordsworth establishes himself as a Promethean figure, combating oppression from which he is largely free on others' behalf. This position is built upon the radical republican ideology shared by many Europeans after the fall of the Bastille. It begins as a mostly secular philosophy, and the spiritual elements introduced later would facilitate its transition to Wordsworth's final Christian stoicism.

This final stage of Wordsworth's philosophical and religious development is characterized by an extreme devaluation of mortal life and by a corresponding exaltation of heavenly existence for the soul outside the material world. It adopts the idea of pervasive moral law from the Roman Stoics such as Seneca to a Christian context. Operating under this belief system, Wordsworth casts himself as a member of the masses, all equally burdened with their mortality. Fortitude in the face of suffering and a dispassionate contemplation of mortal things are virtuous dispositions to the later Wordsworth. Though this is a great change from his initial beliefs, it is not, even in the original *Ode to Duty*, a rejection of them but an evolution. Only when the poet decided that his earlier beliefs had been entirely misguided did he deliberately create a rift in *Ode to Duty* that marked it for posterity as his divorce from all he had previously been.

The creation of Wordsworth's system of spirituality, which would move him from his individualism to stoicism, originates in the philosophical crisis he experienced after the failure of the French Revolution. Like many of his contemporaries, he had put great hope in France as the harbinger of a continental shift toward republican governance; in the first years of the nineteenth century, he would wistfully recall the moment thus: "'twas a time when Europe was rejoiced, / France standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again" (*Prelude* 1805, Book VI, ll. 352-354). When France fell from that summit into the deepest depravity, the poet began to question his convictions. As each new report from France arrived, the young poet exulted or despaired based on the hopes of the republic. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive," the narrator remembers in *The Prelude*, "but to be young was very heaven" (Book X, ll. 693-694). Such was his feeling of hope and joy in 1794 upon hearing that Robespierre was dead and that the Terror had ended. Once again, his blood was quick with hope: "Great was my glee of spirit, great my joy / In vengeance, and eternal justice, thus / Made manifest. 'Come now ye golden times,' / Said I" (ll. 540-544). The golden times were not to come, alas, at least not as he had imagined. Instead, Wordsworth found his homeland threatened by Napoleon's armies and his own political views in conflict with the great love he bore England. He describes in detail the introspection with which he attempted to understand where his true loyalty lay:

Thus I fared,
 Dragging all passions, notions, shapes of faith,
 Like culprits to the bar, suspiciously
 Calling the mind to establish in plain day
 Her titles and her honours, now believing,
 Now disbelieving, endlessly perplex'd
 With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground
 Of moral obligation, what the rule
 And what the sanction, till, demanding proof,
 And seeking it in everything, I lost
 All feeling of conviction, and, in fine
 Sick, wearied out with contrarities,
 Yielded up moral questions in despair
 (Book X, 889-901)

It may have been chance or a half-conscious retreat to the formative environments of his life, but no sooner had Wordsworth "yielded up moral questions in despair" than he began to receive the first intimations of a belief system that, he felt, might hold the answers to those very questions. This was the period of his contact with Godwin's ideas on justice and virtue, engagement in radical London circles, and his first close association with Coleridge. The last of these would help lead him away from the other two, out of the city, out of the shadow of other men's ideas, and toward the exploration of a philosophy that would produce the greatest works of Wordsworth's poetic career. By 1796, he had resumed his self-questioning, attempting to discover the roots of his moral, ethical, and aesthetic values. He sought out the fundamental attributes of his nature, both within himself and in those places where it had been formed.

Surprisingly, perhaps, given the catalyst of his crisis described in the excerpt above, Wordsworth's journey into his own mind mirrored one taken a few decades earlier by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's works were suffering, at the time, from the repercussions of the failed Revolution. Revolutionaries had treated Rousseau's works, especially *The Social*

Contract, as a philosophical platform and justification for their insurrection; as such, Rousseau's ideas were subsequently condemned for having provoked the disastrous bloodbath that it became. No doubt whatever "shapes of faith" Wordsworth had adopted from *The Social Contract* were among the first to be condemned by his inquisition; however, fragments of the philosophies and the methods of enquiry in Rousseau's *Emile* and *The Confessions* remained with the English poet and remained important influences on his own developing philosophies.

In both *Emile* and *The Confessions*, Rousseau propounds the importance of childhood and the great influence even seemingly insignificant events can have on the formation of a man's character. Wordsworth adopted this idea as a formative and enduring principle of his spiritual system. To him, childhood would become a paradisiacal state where the joy of the universal unity was felt unquestionably, a state from which men were driven by grief, trouble, and the evils of society, never to return unchanged. One particular affliction of society, Wordsworth came to see, was the imposition of creeds and general practice that marginalized the power of wild, free Nature. In this also, he followed Rousseau, whose "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" in *Emile* suggested ways in which a human might come to religious faith simply by natural reactions to the experience of natural phenomena. For Rousseau, this led directly and inevitably to Christianity. Wordsworth took a far more circuitous route to his form of Christianity, but employed the same methods of reason, revelation, and relentless questioning.

Though the faiths that resulted from each enquiry were quite different, one can see the similarity between Wordsworth's crisis cited above and that of Rousseau's Savoyard Vicar:

Although I have often experienced greater evils, I have never led a life so constantly disagreeable as during those times of perplexity and anxiety, when I ceaselessly wandered from doubt to doubt and brought back from my long meditations only uncertainty, obscurity, and contradictions about the cause of my being and the principle of my duties (Rousseau 268).

From this state of uncertainty and despair, both men seek out the fundamental elements of their being and those of the world they inhabit. By casting all of their previously held beliefs into doubt, they maintain only their selves and their perceptions; from these, each pieces together a religion that is at once universally applicable and very personal. As both Rousseau and Wordsworth knew, a man stripped to his barest being is still made of all he has been before. As such, there is no article of either faith applied generally to mankind that does not have its origins in the subjective world of its first convert.

The development of Wordsworth's religion is traceable through his major poems of the decade from 1797 to 1807. Though the narrators of the poems cannot always be interpreted as Wordsworth himself, no matter how small or large their presence in the poem, they almost always represent his personal beliefs. This is one of the reasons Wordsworth is regarded as the progenitor of all modern poetry, which is intensely personal and self-consciously a manifestation of the poet's thought. As Coleridge noted in *Biographia Literaria*:

A similar peculiarity [to the ease-of-identification of Shakespeare's verse], though in a less degree, attends Mr. Wordsworth's style, whenever he speaks in his own person; or whenever, though under a feigned name, it is clear that he himself is still speaking, as in the different personae of the "Recluse." Even in the other poems in which he purposes to be most dramatic, there are few in which it does not occasionally burst forth. (Coleridge 99-100)

The peculiarity noted by Coleridge is particularly visible in passages concerning ideas of natural religion and individual spirituality. This creates a traceable intertextuality between

Wordsworth's poems and allows one to follow the progression of his philosophical and spiritual development. It gives his work a unique continuity necessary to perceive the growth of his religious system, even when it finds its expression in narrators whose relationship to the historical poet are uncertain.

Wordsworth's early exploration of a natural religion in his poetry is extensively mediated through the figure of the solitary. Though he was beginning his close association with Coleridge and had strong ties with his family members, especially his sister Dorothy, Wordsworth was still very much concerned with his individuality, and his presence in his poems often manifested in the form of the lone wanderer. It was while alone in nature that he could shed what remained of his human prejudices and commune with a force that began to intimate to him truths about his place in the universe, his vocation, and the interrelation of all things. Beside Wordsworth's narrators, many of the characters he encounters also live as vagabonds or wayfarers, some by choice and others from necessity. The idea that these men are somehow more "natural" is one adopted from Rousseau, who proposed, in the face of centuries of cultural development, that man's natural state is solitude and that society is what has corrupted man and left him discontent and unfulfilled. From each of the wanderers Wordsworth encounters, he learns or intuits some truth about nature and the role of man. They act as lessons, guides, or mentors, eventually preparing him for his own role as prophet of a new universal religion.

One of Wordsworth's first important encounters with the figure of the solitary in his poetry is *The Old Cumberland Beggar*. This poem offers a vivid description of a human in the most abject poverty, dependent on a rotation of almsgivers, and seemingly unconscious of anything but his own desire to survive. Ultimately, it becomes a polemic for the continued freedom of the beggar and a testament to the unquenchable dignity of man. Wordsworth would eventually understand this dignity to be the emanation within each man of the pervasive spirit of Nature. Though it differs greatly from successive poems and is very distant from any ideas of stoicism, *The Old Cumberland Beggar* contains important foundational elements for the religion from which Wordsworth's stoicism would arise. The most important of these are the unity of men and the justice that pervades Nature, transcending human conceptions of it.

The extreme solitude of the beggar is reinforced at every turn of the poem, establishing his independence and preparing for his alignment with the extraordinary. "He travels on, a solitary man" (ll. 24, 44) is the refrain, and each location in which the beggar appears seems wilder and more remote. From "surrounded by those wild unpeopled hills," to the "woody lane," and the "mountain solitudes," the beggar moves, both literally and figuratively, at the margins of society. The peculiar habits of this beggar, the refusal to cease his roaming, even as elderly as he is, and his utterly opaque mind are described in almost supernatural terms: "Him from my childhood have I known; and then / He was so old, he seems not older now;" (ll. 22-23). Indeed, by the end of the poem, he has been given a role as an agent of eternity:

My neighbor, when with punctual care, each week
Duly as Friday comes, though pressed herself
By her own wants, she from her store of meal
Takes one unsparing handful for the scrip
Of this old Mendicant, and, from her door
Returning with exhilarated heart,
Sits by her fire, and builds her hope in heaven.
(ll. 148-154)

The title “Mendicant” is capitalized to strengthen the connection to the order of Catholic friars who renounced personal possessions to live on the grace of God and the charity of their fellows. In this role, the beggar connects the community of “the farms and solitary huts, / Hamlets and thinly-scattered villages” (ll. 88-89). He is, both to the alms-givers and the reader, the agent of what Harold Bloom calls “a secular revelation, an uncovering of last things” (Bloom 241). Those “last things” to which Bloom refers are those Wordsworth sees as transcendent. They are collectively the core of existence that would be revealed, unaltered, if all else were swept away: the dignity of man, the pervasiveness of the human spirit, and the power of Nature.

The beggar effectively keeps the townsfolk aware of their own position in the world, largely preventing them from becoming complacent or irreverent. All whom he encounters and, by extension, the poem’s audience, are forced to

Behold a record which together binds
 Past deeds and offices of charity,
 Else unremembered, and so keeps alive
 The kindly mood in hearts which lapse of years,
 And that half-wisdom half-experience gives,
 Make slow to feel, and by sure steps resign
 To selfishness and cold oblivious cares.
 (ll. 81-87)

It is no accident that the people whom the beggar reaches live far from the cities and centers of human depravity. The end of the poem expresses, in a striking invective, the baseness of urban treatment of such men, which consists of virtual imprisonment in factories where they perform menial labor for meager sustenance. The isolated villagers have learned, through their proximity to the wild Earth, their tenuous maintenance of its favor, and their own interdependent relationship, a natural morality. In their environment, the villagers have learned that they themselves are never far from the grievous ills such as a failed harvest, an illness, or a crippling injury. The extreme destitution they observe in the beggar forestalls the resignation “to selfishness and cold oblivious cares” (l. 87). Knowing their dependence on the earth and on each other, they recognize the beggar’s dependence on them and lovingly attend him.

Wordsworth observes this pervasive morality in the villagers but does not yet understand it in the sense he would later, when he could perceive it in nonhuman nature. Already, though, he is willing to call out those self-satisfied people who, not acknowledging their role as part of a universal human community, tend only to themselves and their own. Here Wordsworth’s early liberal political activism can still be seen in strength. Morality is still expressed in purely human, even traditional religious terms, and Wordsworth’s impassioned response is anything but stoical. It is worth quoting at length:

—Many, I believe, there are
 Who live a life of virtuous decency,
 Men who can hear the Decalogue and feel
 No self-reproach; who of the moral law
 Established in the land where they abide
 Are strict observers; and not negligent
 In acts of love to those with whom they dwell,
 Their kindred, and the children of their blood.
 Praise be to such, and to their slumbers peace!

—But of the poor man ask, the abject poor;
 Go and demand of him, if there be here
 In this cold abstinence from evil deeds,
 And these inevitable charities,
 Wherewith to satisfy the human soul?
 No—man is dear to man; the poorest poor
 Long for some moments in a weary life
 When they can know and feel that they have been,
 Themselves the fathers and the dealers-out
 Of some small blessings; have been kind to such
 As needed kindness, for this single cause,
 That we have all of us one human heart.
 (ll.125-146)

Here, Wordsworth condemns the self-satisfaction that accompanies the life of passive virtue. It is not enough, he says, when the soul's satisfaction is measured, to have simply done nothing harmful; one must have been active in the pursuit of virtue. Virtue, to the young Wordsworth, is not something inherent in a man that will remain intact so long as he does nothing to compromise it; rather, it is something that must be achieved and maintained by attendance to the troubles of one's fellow man. If all men have but one heart, each deed that one does for another also benefits oneself as part of the collective. Active human kindness becomes something fulfilling to the soul, almost a need itself. Continuing the apocalyptic vision that Bloom has for the poem, the beggar is established as a sort of arbiter. The narrator challenges those "men who can hear the Decalogue" to examine their own soul and discover if, without accepting the unity of the beggar and themselves, they will be able to weather the end of all mortal things, whether they will have any of the old neighbor's "hope in heaven." It is a lamentable irony that Wordsworth's philosophy would eventually become one of such passivity and self-contentment, nearly completely at odds with the one he expressed so vehemently in these lines.

Given the invective against passivity in the passage above, the last lines of the poem are startling and may seem, at first glance, an appalling self-contradiction on the speaker's part. How could he, after exhorting such compassion from his audience, offer the cold suggestion that, "as in the eye of Nature he has lived, / So in the eye of Nature let him die! (ll. 188-189)? In this apparent turn-about is one of the essential conflicts that Wordsworth's developing religion would attempt to reconcile; the same conflict that would reach its climax a decade later in the *Ode to Duty*. Here, those lines are reconcilable with the preceding lines because they conclude the first assertion of an individual will on the part of the beggar. Wordsworth's own strong individualism will not passively observe the compromise of another's free choice in life. Believing in the paramount importance of the will, the narrator exhorts the audience to "Reverence the hope whose vital anxiousness / Gives the last human interest to his heart" (ll. 170-171). This hope is that he may remain free beneath that eye of Nature and, explicitly, that he not be sequestered in a "HOUSE, misnamed of INDUSTRY," where he might spend his feeble strength in nominally useful work, so that he might not be a burden to others. The beggar, though he expresses nothing for himself, must remain free if he is to perform his offices as Nature's agent. If his will is compromised, not only will he perish unnaturally, but an essential component of the moral framework of the townspeople will be removed, leaving them open to such degradation as is suffered by people of the cities. The preservation of individual will and unmediated connection

with Nature are foundational elements of Wordsworth's religion. He exhorts men, through a connection in the "one human heart" to perceive where these exist most purely and value those people and places above all others.

In *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, the conflict between praise of the eleemosynary impulse of the villagers and the command of the last lines is reconciled by division between the urban and the fringe community through which the beggar passes. The condemnation of the urban "solution" to such vagrants, the consignment to the "pent-up din, / Those life-consuming sounds that clog the air" of the factory, implies the fundamental divide Wordsworth found between the morality of country and city dwellers. The villagers are able to provide for the beggar, and he is able to accept their provision only because they do not encroach on his freedom. They do not "let him die" by withdrawing their aid, but they will allow the Natural course of his life to run without making an attempt to change his lifestyle out of misguided charity or self-interest. They are, thereby, privy to the lessons he imparts: "That none...should exist divorced from good" (ll.74-77). The "Statesmen" to whom the poem is addressed are the ones who need to be told, in no uncertain terms, that their perceived remedies to the problem of the impoverished are in defiance of Nature. Just as Wordsworth has done, the legislators must attune themselves to the simple morality of the villagers so as to better commune with the "one human heart" (l.153) and learn the lessons of Nature's strange agents. This is the Wordsworth's individualism at its most passionate and proactive. He perceives a problem, announces it, condemns it, then illustrates how Nature and those in communion with it enact a greater justice than men corrupted by too deep an immersion in the things man works upon the world.

The Ruined Cottage, initially composed in 1798, continues Wordsworth's exploration of human nature at the fringes of civilization. Though the story of Margaret and the experience of standing among the crumbling walls of her house, he takes the principles of individualism and appreciation for the natural order of things from *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, unites them with a private experience of Nature, and forms them into a philosophical system. From this point forward, Wordsworth's poetry would concern itself largely with developing this system and applying it to the world as he experienced it. Many of the issues that would be explored more fully by later poems appear in this one such as the role of individual memory, grief, and fortitude. The poem contains the first portents of Wordsworth's later stoicism in the character of Armytage, the wanderer, who acts as a role model and spiritual guide to the narrator. It is in this poem that he receives the catechism of his nascent faith, learns the first mysteries, and confronts the most difficult issue for any faith: human death.

Before it confronts human issues, however, *The Ruined Cottage* establishes the only setting where true understanding can be reached for the early Wordsworth. The poem begins where *The Old Cumberland Beggar* ended: with a rich description of natural landscapes and the cold comfort of the eye of Nature. Like the beggar, the narrator of this poem is distracted by the toil of his journey. He perceives the high-mounted sun and the "deep embattled clouds" but is more immediately concerned with "the insect host which gathered round my face," "the slippery ground," and with the heat in which he can "find no rest." In both cases, it appears that the men are not appreciative of the beauty they pass through. In the earlier poem, the narrator pleads to allow the beggar to

Be free of mountain solitudes;
And have around him, whether heard or not,
The pleasant melody of woodland birds.
(ll. 176-178), emphasis added)

The beggar sees only the ground beneath his bent head, and the narrator of *The Ruined Cottage* finds his own journey anything but pleasant:

Pleasant to him who on the soft cool moss
 Extends his careless limbs beside the root
 Of some huge oak....
 Where the wren warbles....
Other lot was mine.
 (ll. 10-18)

Though the aesthetic value of the natural world is never obscured in Wordsworth, he translates, in these passages, a suggestion of something more: an intrinsic and inimitable value in merely being among such vastnesses. Whether or not the birdsong is heard, it is emphatically not one of “those life-consuming sounds that clog the air” (*OCB*, l. 181). It is the best and most true freedom to be in the eye of Nature. The immersion in nature and the struggle to the ruined cottage act as a sort of ritual cleansing, preparing the narrator for his true induction into the religion. Prepared in this way, he is able to make the leap of faith that links Armytage’s parable of human love and to struggle with the vines and flowers that overrun the ruined walls. Henceforth, Wordsworth is increasingly able to see the most complicated human issues reflected and often illuminated by the natural world.

The individualism of the narrator is manifest in the progress of his journey; it is what allows him to obtain a deeper understanding of Margaret’s story and the lesson of the ruins. Individualism is, to some degree, both the means and the end of such understanding. That this is a spiritual journey, whether or not the narrator is conscious of it, is suggested by the complete removal of his worldly purpose in toiling thus across the land from the text. It is never clear to what end he travels, but the urgency that prevents him from stopping to enjoy the “soft cool moss” and the warble of the wren does not stop him from spending a long time listening to the tale of Margaret. The prioritization of his affairs is dictated only by himself. Neither his business nor Armytage’s is ever satisfactorily explained, perhaps because of its private and individual nature. The narrator has been traveling some time, it is clear, but no clue is given as to his purpose. He is, as far as the poem is concerned, lost, wandering aimlessly, the perfect candidate for the conversion he is about to receive. Armytage, for his part, has a “pack of rustic merchandise” and a vocation that compels him to roam far and wide; what he sells and to whom is never suggested. More than anything, the business of each seems to be wandering, free from others’ concerns and, thus, able to perceive them more clearly. The narrator is given a strong kinship with the old man, which allows him, after the lesson, to take up the office held by “the venerable Armytage,” and become a priest or prophet in his own right.

Despite the exaltation of the individual, hints of stoicism make an appearance in Armytage’s account of himself. It is not the Christian stoicism of the later Wordsworth, as it fully maintains the individual apart from the collective. Instead, it suggests conservatism in interpersonal investment that may preserve the emotions from disappointment and sorrow. Though his worldly purposes remain mysterious, Armytage clearly has a pattern of travel that puts him, at irregular intervals, in the vicinity of Margaret’s cottage, yet he seems to live day to day with little thought for the future. It is for this reason that, despite his strong relationship with Margaret: “when I appeared / [Margaret] a daughter’s welcome gave me, and I loved her / As my own child” (ll. 96-98), Armytage is unable to provide much support. After each visit he finds: “I

had little power / To give her comfort” (ll. 275-276) and departs again with nothing more than a mutual blessing. He is unable to aid Margaret in any material way because his first duty is to himself, and his first concern is his own survival. He must travel on to the end of his mysterious errand, leaving Margaret to her slow wasting. Sitting later amid the ruins of the cottage, he seems to condemn himself with the powerful lines that Shelley would later turn on Wordsworth as the epigraph to *Alastor*:

Oh, Sir! the good die first,
And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust
Burn to the socket.
(ll. 96-98)

This presents an interesting problem to both narrator and reader. Clearly, Armytage’s heart retains a great capacity for love and sympathy even after losing Margaret and years of wayfaring; it could be the guilt of grief impels him to speak so. This seems reductive, though, for such a powerful proverb. Read in the light of history, it seems a terrible prophecy of Wordsworth’s long life after his own turn to stoicism and utter loss of the passionate intensity of these early poems. In the moment, though, it is a warning from Armytage to the narrator. The old man acknowledges his own failings and mourns the tragedy of Margaret’s virtue. These lines reflect on the Old Cumberland Beggar, making him appear the terrible manifestation of “burning to the socket.” Perhaps this is to what the old wanderer must look forward. Who, after all, has lived more in the eye of Nature than he?

Though he regrets his inability to help Margaret materially, Armytage’s separation from the affairs of others and his connection with Nature seem to make the tragedy of Margaret’s death acceptable to him. Again, it is with a stoicism unlike Wordsworth’s would be, but it shows recognition of the conciliatory potential of such an attitude. Despite his severe self-condemnation, Armytage’s final words to the narrator seem an attempt to clear away guilt or shame, and be reconciled to the harsh, yet ultimately benevolent way of Nature:

My Friend, enough to sorrow have you given,
The purposes of wisdom ask no more;
Be wise and cheerful, and no longer read
The forms of things with an unworthy eye.
She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.
(ll. 508-512)

Where he initially appeared distraught, Armytage now seems reconciled to Margaret’s fate. One wants to believe he sought only to excite in the narrator a sense of the power of human affection for both good and ill and of his own unity with his fellow humans. His amelioration of his own proverb is not enough, however, and the power of those lines persists far beyond the end of the poem. In their light, Armytage’s dismissal of any horror at Margaret’s death in line 512 seems far less powerful than his earlier lament:

She is dead,
The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,
Stripped of its outward garb of household flowers,
Of rose and sweet-briar, offers to the wind
A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked
With weeds and the rank spear-grass.

(ll. 103-108)

This reaction to her fate is far more acceptable to most readers. Though Armytage later discounts it as the “foolishness of grief,” it is a familiar response to death that is easier to swallow than the one with which Margaret’s tale is closed. This casts the peculiarity of Wordsworth’s natural religion, as it is suggested here by a mentor, into sharp relief. In the latter lines dealing with Margaret’s death stoicism already has a strong presence, though it is not mediated through ideas of the soul’s preexistence but rather through ideas of the soul’s unity with Earth and all life. As he progressed in exploration of his faith, Wordsworth would wander continuously between the impassioned and the stoical until, at last, he lodged firmly in the latter in the much lamented apostasy of 1807.

At the time of *The Ruined Cottage*, however, Wordsworth is content to consider the first mysteries into which Armytage inducts him, take comfort from them, but not allow them to impinge upon his own emotion. He is still very much an adherent of individualism, and Armytage’s stoical leaning does not compromise this in any way. Already, however, the conflict between passion and resolution is evident. At one point, “with a brother’s love / I blessed her in the impotence of grief” (ll. 499-500). At another he takes comfort from his first communion with a still mysterious force binding humans to one another and to Nature:

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

(ll. 503-506)

It is a feeling too deep yet for understanding, yet it comforts the narrator and encourages him not to abandon the pursuit of wisdom. Through meditation, his teacher suggests, he will begin to understand the true “forms of things,” things such as fallen stones of the cottage, the overwhelming vines, and the “calm earth”; through such understanding will be revealed the secret spirit and immortality for the mind. There is, as yet, no suggestion of the pervasive moral law that would allow Wordsworth to justify his stoical turn. After the lesson, charged with happiness, Armytage and the narrator wander on to their rustic inn, listening, attentively this time, to the songs of the linnet, the thrush, and “other melodies” that “peopled the milder air”

Taking the lessons of the ruined cottage, Wordsworth set out to reconcile the past tragedies of his own life, some of which still haunted him in a very real manner from across the English Channel. By applying it to his own history, Wordsworth expanded his unique spirituality to a personal religion. The revelations of his religion are recorded in *Lines: Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour. July 13, 1798*. The full title is not insignificant, as it binds the narrator and the poet so closely. These are the lines that result directly from an experience, unmediated by any influences not found in the lyric moment. Whether or not the title suggests the actual manner in which the poem was composed is irrelevant; Wordsworth meant these lines to be read as a revelation occurring to him in a moment of union with Nature. As such, they may be read as a summation of the themes explored in his earlier poems and a foundation for what would follow. Unlike the previous poems, *Tintern Abbey* directly confronts the tension Wordsworth feels between the world of men and the natural world in which he now sees it reflected. He returns to examine the reasons for, in Thomas DeQuincey’s terms, his “turning away from politics to studies less

capable of deceiving his expectations” (183). This “study” discovers Wordsworth’s personal impulses toward a more aloof disposition and describes the progression of his thought to this point, hinting at its ultimate destination.

Figuratively removing the historical context of his revelation by excluding all mention of the significance of the titular date, Wordsworth cleanses himself from his fear, fervor, and disappointment in the French Revolution. This allows him to focus more clearly on the intimations of the natural world that he began to receive in *The Ruined Cottage*. Exactly five years previous to that date, Jean-Paul Marat was killed in his bathtub: the violent death of a violent man and one of the events which would initiate the bloodiest period of Revolutionary France. Weeks after the death of Marat, Robespierre would be elected to the Committee of Public Safety. Though these events play about the periphery of the poem, inevitably affecting its interpretation, any overt reference to them is markedly absent. July 13 is also the eve of the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Symbolically, the revelations on the bank of the Wye take place in that prelapsarian state. This liberation of the poet and his surroundings from the burden of contemporaneous trouble prepares him for a full embrace of the faith of Nature, to whom he will pledge his devotion by the conclusion of the poem, though it will not be undivided.

Wordsworth requires conditions in which he can make a connection with Nature entirely unmediated by other men before he can interpret his relationship to humanity through that connection. Even during *Armistage’s* tale, interpretation was left almost entirely to the poet, and he reached communion with Nature individually before receiving his mentor’s final advice. *Tintern Abbey* removes not only the historical context of the poem’s composition but all elements that might modify or mediate the poet’s communion with the natural world to simulate the clear mind and conscience that he seeks. Even the abbey makes no appearance in the body of the poem. As Marjorie Levinson observes, “to read the poem by its own lights is to contrast the narrator’s private, abstract, and spontaneous devotion in a natural then psychic fane to the idolatry associated with institutionalized religion, viz, the original uses and meanings of Tintern Abbey” (Levinson 16). Wordsworth is fiercely though subtly individualist in his removal of manifestations of other men’s creeds and potential influences. Civilization is represented only by “hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild” and “pastoral farms, / Green to the very door” (ll. 15-17), an unlikely attribute for a productive or even an inhabited farm. The poet has removed all traces of man that might interfere with his individual relationship to Nature but is ecstatic in his embrace of the “beauteous forms” of the landscape, from the “steep and lofty cliffs” to the “houseless woods”:

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 have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man’s life,
His trivial, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love.

(ll. 25-35)

Confirming his distaste for centers of civilization, the poet realizes that the essence of his new devotion has been with him all along in the core of his being. Only prolonged severance from the freedom of the wilderness and undue concern for the affairs of other men have led him from his natural faith. Yet, he claims, even when he was most distant from wild Nature, thoughts of it comforted him and even guided his actions; this is the assertion of the existence of a natural morality, one of the great obstacles to any sort of natural religion. It is nothing conscious, as the repetition of “unremembered” emphasizes. It is a desire to give to one’s fellows the same pleasure that one derives from Nature and, in doing so, to bring oneself closer to unity with the great whole. Strangely, Wordsworth’s individualism invests him more in the interests of other men than his feeling of sympathetic suffering would. As an outsider, he is able to be the agent of aid and relief, whereas later he would only regard himself as one of the collective oppressed by their mortality. At this point, outside the influence of civilization, Wordsworth has perceived and ideal union of the human and natural world, where positive experiences of a wild environment translate directly into positive actions toward one’s fellow humans.

Though this suggests that concern and action for the sake of one’s fellow man brings one into greater harmony with Nature, it is complicated a few lines later so that it appears more reminiscent of Armitage’s philosophy than any more tangible philanthropy. Here, Wordsworth lauds “another gift, / Of aspect more sublime,” which is the ability to forget, while communing with the beautiful forms of Nature, the concerns of men, the “weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world” (ll. 37-40). Nature previously sent “sensations sweet” through the blood, now she (for so Nature is gendered later in the poem) slows “the motion of our *human* blood” (my emphasis) until:

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.
(ll. 45-49)

The qualification of “human” suggests that the “living soul” is composed of something more enduring: something that remains after the body is laid asleep for the last time. The reverie has become a sort of beatific vision; it is a more complete vision of human immortality through Nature than was glimpsed *The Ruined Cottage*. At the same time, it has definite suggestions of a more passive philosophy, one less concerned with active participation in the world and more with aloof contemplation. The suggestions of human immortality through Nature, especially when Armitage’s suggestion that “enough to sorrow have you given” is recalled, seem to imply that one may joyfully observe the world without investing oneself in tumultuous human affairs.

The conflict between passionate involvement and more melancholy passive observation runs throughout the poem, and, indeed, a few lines later Wordsworth begins to question his vision: “If this / Be but a vain belief” (ll. 49-50), he wonders. Memory, however, interrupts his doubt. Memory and the degree to which it may be manipulated are central to this conflict, as is demonstrated by the title and content of the poem. Increasingly, Wordsworth would find solace and sustenance in the memory of such moments as that recorded in *Tintern Abbey*: “in this moment there is life and food / For future years” (ll. 64-65). In the pastoral and sublime landscapes surrounding him, he has had a vision of Paradise; he has felt his soul free itself from the body and join with the greater “life of things,” if only for a moment. With a faint promise of

a future return to that state, he hopes to be content. In subsequent recollections of this moment, he believes he will be able to return to a consciousness untainted by the affairs of distant countries and unknown men.

In the same breath, though, Wordsworth recognizes that changes he has undergone already may portend changes still to come. He acknowledges that his mind perceives things differently than “when first / I came among these hills,” with the implication that he may yet change further. “Nature then / / To me was all in all” (ll. 72, 75), he remembers. Though this almost seems a purer state of religion, a prelapsarian innocence, Wordsworth does not want nor can he be satisfied with a religion that requires no reflection. In his turn to Christian stoicism, the priority he put on questioning would decrease, but, until the post-1807 severance, it would still make his spirituality very much his own. In the form it takes in *Tintern Abbey*, enquiry and reflection are the rituals of this religion, and the wisdom gained thereby is means of achieving immortality. He does not mourn his fall:

Not for this [lost state]
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur, other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense.
(ll. 85-88)

This recompense is the knowledge of the interfusion of all things, tangible and ethereal, which are pervaded by that spirit, still mysterious, though no longer secret, that survived in the weeds and flowers covering the collapsing walls of Margaret’s cottage. Acknowledgement of this force is the central tenet of the Wordsworth’s religion. It not only unifies all things in the living universe but also unifies the man he has become with what he has been and what he shall be yet. It binds the “coarser pleasures” of childhood with the polemist narrator of *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, the refugee fleeing the world of men, the apostle of the moment recorded in *Tintern Abbey*, and all that he may become. With this knowledge, there seems little keeping him from allowing himself to be “laid asleep in body” and severed from the troubles of the “unintelligible world.

There is something preventing this, however. It is one human connection that prevents the cessation of passion and a complete disconnection from all that Wordsworth has been to this point: his sister, Dorothy. She, to the poet, represents a simultaneous and equally compelling power through his love for her. His love for her prevents him retreating entirely from what he has previously been:

In thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes.
(ll. 116-119)

This “former heart” must be this one described earlier:

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, nor any interest
 Unborrowed from the eye.
 (ll. 76-83)

The reminder, in the high emotion of Dorothy's "wild eyes," of what the poet has been stymies his urge to the life of the recluse. Such passion as Dorothy feels now and Wordsworth did once comes only through life in the world of men. Dorothy reminds her brother, for the moment, that as an intimate of nature, one must exhibit the natural tendencies toward justice and morality and must seek to spread them among others.

Even with this resurgence of enthusiasm for his "former pleasures" as they are manifest in his sister, Wordsworth immediately undercuts any suggestion of permanence in this state of mind: "Oh! yet *a little while* / May I behold in thee what I was once" (ll. 116-117, my emphasis). This seems a grim forecast of the post-1807 rift when this sentiment would be nothing but a wistfully recalled memory and when not even a sister's love could bind Wordsworth to his previous sentiments, though the stoic state attained then would be largely divorced from natural conciliation. For the moment, however, Wordsworth seems well-prepared to remain an active and effective agent of Nature in society. He suggests that Nature will support both him and Dorothy and buoy their spirits, even as they remain amid "evil tongues," "rash judgments," and the "sneers of selfish men" (ll. 128-129) and that their faith in her will remain constant and joyful. Dorothy binds her brother to this world, but, he predicts, she also will, in her turn, ease into the state he feels coming upon himself, "When these wild ecstasies shall be matured / Into a sober pleasure" (ll. 138-139). On the implications of this state, Levinson is again insightful: "The inmate of ['a 'memory locus,' a portable resort and restorative']—priest, poet, hermit—is not, of course, the political enthusiast but the poet of 'the philosophic mind,' the mind that 'keeps its own inviolate retirement'" (24). He is beginning to treat his own decline in passion as the inevitable progression of the religion, preparing himself for the great renunciation that he would announce to the world nearly a decade later. In this prediction, he reveals part of the method of his later stoic philosophy, which uses the memory of past glory as succor for present suffering:

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!
 (ll. 139-146)

Memory is a vessel of comfort and hope to Wordsworth, and he is happy to predict that it will be so with his sister as well. The expressed hope that she will remember Wordsworth's exhortations specifically indicates that he desires her to remember not just the experience of being together on the Wye banks but also the import of his sermon. If she is able, as he shows that he is through the title and throughout the poem, to manipulate memory and to avoid pain,

fear, shame and all the burdens of human existence, then she will be able to take sustenance from it through all her future years.

The poem ends with these tensions unresolved but with Wordsworth's own somber predictions for the future of his philosophy looming large. He declares outright his participation in a new worship of Nature, describing how, though he was "unwearied" in his previous service, he finds his new devotion more perfect. This has a close analogy in Dante's *Paradiso*, where, in order to experience Paradise, Dante must give up his passionate, sensual, earthly love for Beatrice. Just as Dante, Wordsworth must be cleansed of his passionate involvement with Nature and treat it with "far deeper zeal / Of holier love" (ll. 154-155) before he can return to perfect union with Her. Only Dorothy, it seems, still holds him back.

Tintern Abbey portends a crisis of Wordsworth's involvement with society and a natural stoicism similar to the one with which he invested Armytage in *The Ruined Cottage*. However, in the years after his experience on the Wye, his relationship to Nature would change in such ways that stoicism based in his devotion to her no longer provided the succor he desired. To fill this void, Wordsworth would adopt more traditional Christian ideas to the stoic framework, creating the philosophy that he would ascribe to in his later years. In *Michael*, he presents issues that seem to debunk some of the exultant beliefs discovered in *Tintern Abbey*. Through the story of a natural man's life and ultimately unhappy end, Wordsworth raises questions about the ability of a natural lifestyle and faith to withstand the incursions of the civilized, corrupt world of commerce and contracts. After perceiving the failures of Nature to protect "the heart that loved her," the objects that once carried only memories and messages of comfort and enduring life begin to recall human failures and tragedy. This taint would spread as Wordsworth's melancholy grew, until, by 1804, the "vision splendid" would "fade into the light of common day" (*Ode: Intimations*, ll. 73, 76).

If one treats the poetry of Wordsworth's spiritual development as the Bible of his natural religion, *Michael* is certainly his *Job*, describing the troubles inflicted on a benign natural man by forces outside his control. *Michael*, the speaker says, "though it be a history / Homely and rude, I will relate the same / For the delight of a few natural hearts" (ll. 34-36). The narrative that follows is largely free from editorializing, inviting the readers to test whether their hearts are "natural" enough to appreciate the story and to feel the same "passions that were not my own." Wordsworth is beginning to limit his influence to those who share his lifestyle or his belief. The story of Michael and Luke is told both to test the affections of its audience, to please those "natural hearts," and to instruct those "youthful Poets, who among these hills / Will be my second self when I am gone" (ll. 38-39). This is more missionary work, as it were. Confident now of his place and duty with regard to his faith, Wordsworth has come fully into the role of a prophet. He teaches his yet-unnamed successors to understand and speak "the language of the sense," and to revere Nature as the vehicle of poetic and ethical inspiration. From their position as Nature's agents in society, they will be able to illuminate the conflict of men and Earth and reveal the potential for amelioration. Like the story of Job, however, the tale of Michael is a test of faith, demonstrating at once the power of Nature and the limits of its mercy. Unlike the Christian God's, Nature's domain is bounded; it has no power over the ever-expanding corruption of civilization.

Though *Michael* is not overtly polemical, Wordsworth's letters from this period show that he was not averse to using it for such a purpose. In a letter to Charles James Fox, the English statesman, the poet cited *Michael* as an exposé of the "rapid decay of the domestic affections among the lower orders of society" caused by industrialization, increasing taxes, and

the “solutions” to the problems of poverty previously condemned in *The Old Cumberland Beggar*. Michael and family belong, he says, to a class of people who hold “an almost sublime conviction of the blessings of independent domestic life.” To these people, confinement, the charity of strangers, and, most of all, removal from their ancestral lands is undesirable almost to the point of being deadly. “If it is true,” he continues, “as I believe, that this spirit is rapidly disappearing, no greater curse can befall a land.” This is an impressive statement for one who had witnessed the debacle in France less than a decade before, and Wordsworth was doubtless conscious of his hyperbole. Nevertheless, it speaks to a shift in his political activism, moving away from the radical left to a more moderate position that seeks to effect change through the extant government, rather than changing the body of that government. Though he combated them on a smaller scale now, the forces against which Wordsworth stood were no less powerful than previously, and his disappointments were not yet at an end.

This change, while it confirms that Wordsworth had not yet fully forsaken political activism, shows such a reduction in the scope of that action that it seems to be a step in an inevitable step in the progression to stoicism. *Tintern Abbey* revealed Wordsworth’s deep commitment to Nature and to his sister, but it hardly suggested a lifestyle. In the period of *Michael*’s composition, it seems, he was attempting to discover how best to devote himself in his new faith and what situation could accommodate the lifestyle he wished to adopt. It is not difficult to read Wordsworth’s letter to Fox as self-serving, in as much as it requests the preservation of a lifestyle that he would like to adopt for himself. The tone of the letter does not warrant such a reading, but there is no doubt that Wordsworth experienced a strong fellow-feeling with men such as Michael, whose

little tract of land serves as a rallying point for their domestic feelings, as a tablet upon which are they are written which makes them objects of memory in a thousand instances when they would otherwise be forgotten. (348)

Loving the Lake District as he did, Wordsworth sympathized with these men and was impelled to act on their behalf. Certainly, he did not want the ill-effects of the industrializing England to invade his beloved country, but he also felt the growing threat of invasion by Napoleon’s army which might destroy all to which he had utterly devoted himself. From this, he began to forsake his distaste for the traditional authority of the King, now seeking only protection for those things he held dear. This is a change that, though it made little difference in the success of Wordsworth’s activism, anticipates his adoption of traditional spiritual authority for protection from sorrow.

Wordsworth’s admiration for Michael’s lifestyle as the epitome of natural fortitude and piety is expressed repeatedly throughout the poem; the shepherd is exalted as an even purer devotee of Nature than the poet. This makes his failure and misery ever more appalling. The “utter solitude” which is the inherited estate of the shepherd contains no trace of other men and may be reached only by a turning from the “public way” up the “tumultuous brook of Greenhead Ghyll” (ll. 1-2). Many lines before Michael himself is introduced, his environment is described in detail. The description suggests the level of his involvement with Nature: “The mountains have opened out themselves, / and made a hidden valley of their own. / No habitation can be seen” (ll. 7-9). Without suggesting anything extraordinary, Wordsworth uses terms that hint at a harmonious relationship wherein land and tenant give and receive from one another and reinforces the extreme solitude in which the shepherd dwells. This seems Wordsworth’s ideal condition, an ideal he knew he could never fully attain, having been corrupted by the affairs of

cities and the grim tutelage of worldly affairs. He reveals how this has translated to a strong sentiment for Michael's ilk, and the desire for their good revealed in his letter to Fox:

[This tale] was the first
 Of those domestic tales that spake to me
 Of shepherds, dwellers in the valleys, men
 Whom I already lover; not verily
 For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills
 Where was their occupation and abode.
 (ll. 21-26)

These men are closer to Nature, Wordsworth's deity, than is he, her priest and prophet. They have never suffered his concern for non-personal affairs or his subsequent disillusionment. Having been pure in their devotion since birth, they do not search for or consider their faith as Wordsworth does. He perceives in them the perfect natural men unconsciously embodying perfect naturalness of religion. Seeing one of them destroyed as Michael is inevitably perforates the poet's faith, damage that would eventually need to be filled by Christianity.

When Michael appears, it is as a paragon of natural virtue and fortitude, recalling the condition of Job before his trials. He is aged yet able, his body and mind are perfectly honed for his duties, and he has developed an uncanny communion with the land that sustains him:

An old man, stout of heart, and strong of limb.
 His bodily frame had been from youth to age
 Of an unusual strength: his mind was keen,
 Intense, and frugal, apt for all affairs,
 And in his shepherd's calling he was prompt
 And watchful more than ordinary men.
 Hence had he learned the meaning of all winds,
 Of blasts of every tone
 (ll. 42-49)

The almost supernatural connection Michael has with his land is a result, one feels, of nearly eighty years spent in the same environment. The great bond described in the letter to Fox has grown between the shepherd and the land; he seems to draw strength from the very ground, and not only physical strength. The hills preserve, in various forms and seemingly insignificant objects (such as the unfinished sheep-fold will later be to the narrator), the memory of all the "hardship, skill or courage, joy or fear" that Michael has experienced tending his flock among them. The importance of memory in Wordsworth's universe has already been shown, and here it acts much the same way it does in *Tintern Abbey*. Emotionally significant landscapes preserve a record of their devotees, sustaining them spiritually in times of need. Elsewhere in *Michael*, a darker aspect of these land-linked memories is shown in the unfinished sheep-fold which witnesses the broken pact of the shepherd and his son, Luke. Though all of Michael's works are performed in solitude, the mementos in the hills "link" his acts on behalf of his sheep and, by extension, of his family, with "the certainty of honourable gain." Michael, having lived always in a state of unity with Nature, cannot be other than honorable. One might argue that it is easy to be so in solitude, as Satan argues about Job's prosperity, but Michael's honor holds up even when his nephew's claim threatens everything for which he has striven. Then, Michael does not

dissemble but endeavors to divine how best to pay what is asked of him without compromising his son's birthright.

Stoicism in the line of Armitage's is not far from Michael and his family. The residents of the cottage called "the Evening Star" live austerely, "neither gay perhaps, / Nor cheerful, yet with objects and with hopes, / Living a life of eager industry" (ll. 120-122). They live contentedly without the strong passions excited by strange landscapes or unexpected events. Wordsworth's admiration for such a lifestyle again forecasts his own dispassionate turn, and the tragedy visited upon Michael and his family is a symptom of the problems Wordsworth deplors in his letter to Fox. When Michael is forced, by dint of a contract with his nephew, to engage with the world outside his domain, the son he loves so well is wrenched away. The loss of the son results in the loss of everything for which the shepherd and his forebears have striven. Though Michael loves his son, it is the discontinuation of the union between his family and the land that he fears will prevent him lying "quiet in my grave" (l. 232). He wants most of all, as befits a natural man, that the land should remain free from the influence of men less intimate with it than he and his son: "the land / Shall not go from us, and it shall be free" (ll. 244-245). In the interest of preserving the land so that his descendants may live as independently as he does, Michael dispatches Luke to their prosperous kinsman, but not before sealing the covenant of the sheep-fold.

Michael's announcement of the pact is full of forebodings, indicating that even he, a perfect partner of Nature, has doubts about its power to combat the infectious ills of the city. "Heaven forgive me, Luke," he says, "if I judge ill for thee, but it seems good / That thou should'st go" (ll. 380-382). Later, "whatever fate / Befall thee, I shall love thee to the last, / And bear thy memory with me to the grave" (ll. 15-17). It seems Michael is aware of the dangerous lures that exist outside his ken, but he is confident that the pact made with the laying of the cornerstone will suffice to bind Luke to the land that is his right and duty. He invokes the natural morality that Wordsworth discovered " 'mid the din / Of towns and cities" in *Tintern Abbey*, with the hope that Luke will take strength from it in a similar manner:

When thou art gone away, should evil men
Be thy companions, think of me, my Son,
And of this moment; hither turn thy thoughts,
And God will strengthen thee: amid all fear
And all temptation, Luke, I pray that thou
May'st bear in mind the life thy Fathers lived,
Who, being innocent, did for that cause
Bestir them in good deeds.
(ll. 404-412)

Perhaps it is Michael's "premature" calling of Luke to his duties for the land (l. 187), an overestimation of the strength of his bond, or an underestimation of the corrupting power of the "dissolute city," but Luke fails his father's trust, and the pact is broken. In this direct conflict between natural man and the taint of civilization, the latter triumphs as the letter to Fox suggests it increasingly will. Because Michael is bound by the infernal contract to "an evil man," a relative to whom the bonds of family and land do not extend, his steadfast strength and toil are unable to pay the terms of the outside world. It is the intrusion of such affairs into his happy isolation that ruins Michael and ultimately sends him to his unquiet grave. Wordsworth's letter

is an invective against such intrusion on territories that have hitherto been pure and beloved by their occupants.

Throughout the episode of the sealing of the covenant, Michael's love for his son and his love for the land vie in a manner that may reflect Wordsworth's feelings for Dorothy. Each man is confronted with the choice of remaining alone in happy union with Nature or risking contact with civilization so that a family, Michael's descendants or Wordsworth's sister, may share the remaining days of that state. As Wordsworth ended *Tintern Abbey* with the decision to remain with Dorothy and not yet give himself fully to Nature, Michael determines that the land must remain undivided, even at the expense of exposing his aide and beloved child. The conflict is anguished:

so-yes-yes-
 I knew that thou could'st never have a wish
 To leave me, Luke: thou hast been bound to me
 Only by links of love: when thou art gone,
 What will be left to us!—But I forget
 My purposes.
 (ll. 398-402)

Fatherly passion contends in Michael with a sense of duty to the land and his ancestors. Wordsworth has been diligent in describing Michael's great love for Luke and successfully translates his dilemma. The associations of the shepherd's conflicted loves with his own may have been too much for Wordsworth as he realized that he too had chosen a path from which there was no return to the bosom of Nature.

The power that he had put all his hopes in was compromised, but Wordsworth would soon have greater need than ever for a redemptive religion; he would satisfy this need with Christian ideas. As was demonstrated by the collapse of Michael's lifestyle from the taint of other men's influence, natural stoicism could not offer a long-standing peace while under the growing shadow of commerce and industrialization. Realizing the futility of political efforts for the preservation of natural man's innocent state, Wordsworth renounced his hopes for salvation through the "secret spirit of humanity" he had communed with in the ruined cottage and on the Wye, a spirit he saw diminishing all around him. Requiring a belief system that would comfort him with thoughts of transcending the increasingly dismaying world, he turned to Christianity. He had never pronounced his natural inclinations irreconcilable with the religion of his countrymen, and he found it possible to perceive God's agency in the good things he found in the world, while the bad could be blamed on the corrupting actions of men. Memory would continue to link him to the joys he had felt but also, as with the oak that marks all that remains of Michael's life, to the sorrow of human existence.

Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood marks Wordsworth's change from his natural religion to more traditional notions of God. While acknowledging the change he is undergoing, the poet retraces the progression of his beliefs and marks the reasons for their transformation. *Ode* acts in manner similar to *Tintern Abbey* in subsuming all that has come before it, reexamining it, and refining from it an essential truth. The tone of the poem alternates between deep melancholy and exultant joy as the narrator considers what has passed away from him and from the earth and what remains ahead and behind. Memory is no longer solely an agent of happiness; natural objects now reflect mutability and the dismay of the temporal world. Now, the poet turns to eternity for consolation, and looks past the

death of the body to an unearthly paradise much different from the “calm earth” where he once believed Margaret had found peace. Though it is decidedly Christian, *Ode* is not stoical, crying passionately against the woes that make a child a man.

Ode is deeply nostalgic for the early form of Wordsworth’s natural religion wherein natural objects spoke of great value and power in each life. Though one is tempted by the poem’s subtitle to read the lost era of the first stanza as childhood or early youth, the information given in the earlier poems renders this irreconcilable. He describes the time thus:

a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparell’d in celestial light,
The glory and freshness of a dream.
(ll. 1-5)

This cannot be Wordsworth’s childhood, for he has already revealed that in that time he did not perceive anything divine or “celestial” in Nature. Prior to *Tintern Abbey*, Nature had “no need of a remoter charm, / By thought supplied, nor any interest / Unborrowed from the eye” (*Tintern* ll. 81-83). The “glory and freshness of a dream” also recalls the ecstatic state of being “laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul” (ll. 45-46). The lost era described in the first stanza is actually the very state that was achieved on the banks of the Wye in 1798. His recollection is doleful, but he is reinvigorated by “A timely utterance” (l. 23). What utterance, exactly, is unclear, but it is likely given by the only other articulate being in the stanza, the “happy / Shepherd-boy” (ll. 35-36), a child who recalls him to a state before anything divine or transcendent was necessary for his happiness.

For Wordsworth, the innocence of the child is the often-lost essence of the man. He uses his own lines as epigraph to the poem “The child is the father of the man / And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety.” The wish is for a state akin to Michael’s, where a man’s life is lived from birth largely free from reflection or regret, in harmony with Nature, and with a simple fearless faith. Ultimately, of course, Michael’s life ended with regret and sorrow, and the narrator seems to recall this at the end of the third stanza:

—But there’s a tree, of many, one,
A single field which I have look’d 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?
(ll. 53-59)

The tree in question can easily be read as the one that grew beside the door of Michael’s cottage, and the field as his ancestral land from which the cottage became literally “something that is gone.” This turns these lines into a lament for the injustice wrought upon the solitary shepherd through the influence of a society that he wanted no part of. Michael’s dream of preserving and passing his property to his descendants was destroyed by Luke’s corruption, and the glorious “feelings and emanations” (*Michael* l. 210) that Luke’s presence had lent to Nature vanished.

Having vicariously experienced Michael's loss, Wordsworth has himself lost any belief that natural piety is a sustainable state for an individual man in the world of men.

The driving conflict of the poem, between what Wordsworth called in an introductory note the "abyss of idealism" and his present state of cynical weariness, is mediated through a previously unspoken belief in the preexistence of the soul, described in increasingly Christian terms. Even as the speaker takes solace in recalling the unthinking and innocent joys of childhood, he laments their later corruption by the duties and anxieties of adulthood. The course of a man's life, the poet complains, too often leads him far from the shallow and natural bliss of childhood, a continuation of the bliss of the soul before birth, to the point where he is disconnected from his own essence, which is all that can lead him back out of the sad mortal world. In earlier poems, while Nature occupied the position of the deity in Wordsworth's religion, life was praised as an opportunity to receive joy through the interconnection of living things and to improve the collective life of the world. Now, though, Nature is placed in a cooperative relationship with a more anthropomorphic God. Vines and flowers once comforted the poet with ideas that each human life was part of a pervasive spirit throughout Nature and, thus, could never truly die as long as Nature endured. Now, the deity is a God removed from Nature in an "imperial palace," one of only two images in the poem described in terms of artificial constructions (the other is the "prison house" of age and experience). Even the terminology confirms that in *Ode* there is a distinct rift between God and Nature, a change in Wordsworth's religion that prepares it for its final evolution into stoicism by decreasing the meaningfulness of a man's life on earth and increasing the desirability of life outside Earth.

Since it presupposes the preexistence of the soul, *Ode* is not concerned with reconciling human death, which palliates much of the anguish of existence; this perspective brings the poet close to a stoicism rooted in empathetic endurance of universal suffering. The soul discussed in this poem no longer seems the "living soul" of *Tintern Abbey* that recognized a deep connection with all other life in the universe but something removed from the life of things on Earth:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath elsewhere had 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:
(ll. 60-66)

This is a significant change from the concept of the soul as part of a universal spirit that survives the death of the body in the "plants, weeds, and flowers" of the ruined cottage. This alteration in Wordsworth's conception of the soul facilitates his stoic turn by reducing the significance of earthly life. Hitherto, the individual has been exalted since each man has but one life to live before being subsumed by the great whole; now that the soul is something that endures as an individual after escaping the flesh of a mortal man, its life in the body and the deeds it accomplishes there are greatly reduced in importance. In such a philosophy, aloofness and dispassionate treatment of other men's affairs is far more acceptable morally.

Though Wordsworth does not regret his early passion for the things of Earth, his adoption of a Christian cosmology allows him to express discontent with the things of Nature for the first

time. He recalls his progression from boyhood to manhood and the accompanying philosophical changes with regard to Nature. These culminate in disenchantment:

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.
(ll. 72-77)

Here Wordsworth recounts the progression of the years between *Tintern Abbey* and the *Ode*, acknowledging the role he played as priest of Nature's religion and confessing that he no longer feels the supernatural emanate from earthly things as he once did. Having discovered belief in a separate eternity, he even suggests that his earlier devotions were seduced away from God by Nature:

The homely nurse [Earth] 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.
(ll. 82-85)

The depreciation of the value of earthly life for Wordsworth is clear in the description of man as "Inmate" of the Earth, a soul imprisoned for a period in a mortal shell. Still, Wordsworth emphatically does not regret his earlier, more passionate devotion to Nature. As the first stanza proves, the ending of that period in his life has left him wistful and periodically despondent. Now more than ever, he finds natural objects to be vehicles for memory and insight, especially on the condition of the body's mortality. Though "nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower" (ll. 182-183), those glories can still be experienced through memory and vicariously through children such as the "best philosopher" of the middle of the poem, probably Hartley Coleridge. Just as the oak survived the "great changes" to Michael's estate to memorialize the good life of the shepherd, natural objects still transcend the boundaries of mortality. The poem concludes with an idea recalled from *The Old Cumberland Beggar*:

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.
(ll. 205-208)

This single human heart is an enduring aspect of Wordsworth's belief system. The connection of this "one human heart" with Nature varies throughout the corpus of poems, but the idea of a fundamental link between all men remains constant. It was first introduced as an exhortation to activism and charity to one's fellows, but it would become a foundational element of the stoic philosophy, which would assert that moral law pervades the universe through such connections. The constancy of this conceit casts the dynamism of the rest of Wordsworth's religion into stark relief. In *Ode*, where the transience and tragedy of human existence is emphasized repeatedly, the heart is a link between sufferers: "We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains

behind” (ll. 184-185). In this context, where the importance of mortal existence is much decreased, the sympathy between men equalizes their relative suffering: as all men suffer for their term as adults on earth, if one man suffers more, it is no great thing, and probably hastens his return to the “imperial palace” of eternity. The “meanest flower” recalls this to Wordsworth. It is transient: beautiful, then wilting, and then subsumed by the earth to bloom in the next spring.

Though composed between 1802 and 1804, *Ode* was not published until 1807, the year that history marks as Wordsworth’s true turn from his vigorous, passionate individualism to the stoic philosophy that informed his dreary and mundane late work. It has already been shown that Wordsworth’s adoption of stoicism was far from a sudden change, but rather the last evolution of a natural religion developed over a long period. However, the other poems published in 1807, particularly *Ode to Duty* and *Elegiac Stanzas* offer further insight into the evolution of the poet’s thought and belief. *Ode to Duty* is the poem posterity marks as the fulcrum of Wordsworth’s philosophical change. The terminology and imagery of the poem are much more overtly Christian than those of any major poem of Wordsworth’s published previously or contemporaneously. When Wordsworth’s natural religion with its strong belief in the deep interfusion of all living things began to lose its splendor, that belief was adapted to a Christian context. Where the unity of all life served to teach morality to the townsfolk of *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, the Wordsworth of *Tintern Abbey*, and Michael, in *Ode to Duty* it is the Christian God who enforces it. No longer is morality a virtue taught by connection with the beauty and benevolence of Nature; now it is a divine law. This philosophy is directly adapted from the Roman Stoics to a Christian context, as the smug Latin epigraph adapted from Seneca suggests: “Now I am virtuous not by deliberation, but by habit, having been brought to such a point that I can not only act rightly, but cannot act except rightly” (Perkins 292). Though the poem itself confesses that Wordsworth may not have always acted “rightly” by the definition he now gives that term, the epigraph establishes the sentiment that would govern Wordsworth’s enduring self-righteousness.

The importance of *Ode to Duty* for understanding Wordsworth’s philosophical evolution is rooted in its placement of the seemingly disparate philosophies side-by-side. The first stanza is close to the stoic. Duty here is characterized as the force that overcomes temptation, fear, and error and “calm’st the weary strife of frail humanity” (l. 8). The strife which Wordsworth invested himself so passionately in combating in his early years is apparently overcome at once by the obedience of man to the “Stern Daughter of the Voice of God,” Duty. It is not clear, at this point, whether the calming is a result of the speaker’s devotion to Duty or of all men’s. In the later stanzas, though, when he requests that Duty dominate his own actions, he implies that performing his own duty will allow him that “repose that ever is the same” (l. 40). If he performs in accordance with God’s moral law, the poet suggests, he will find relief from the continual disappointment of his hopes, and be free of concern for affairs not his own.

The second stanza introduces to the poem the impassioned individualism of the early Wordsworth from which his indignant activism sprang and lauds it, even as it recalls how it failed him and led him into error. There is a certain nostalgia for the past state described, but the poet is careful to limit it to what was done in accordance with Duty:

There are who ask not if thine eye
Be on them; who in love and truth,
Where no misgiving is, rely
Upon the genial spirit of youth:

Glad hearts! without reproach or blot;
 Who do thy work and know it not:
 (ll. 9-15)

This account of their deeds is reminiscent of that with which he described the erring self-satisfied in *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, though it is largely a reversal of the sentiment expressed there:

—Many, I believe, there are
 Who live a life of virtuous decency,
 Men who can hear the Decalogue and feel
 No self-reproach; who of the moral law
 Established in the land where they abide
 Are strict observers; and not negligent
 In acts of love to those with whom they dwell,
 Their kindred, and the children of their blood.
 Praise be to such, and to their slumbers peace!
 (OCB, ll. 125-133)

This passage recalls clearly how dramatic the change in Wordsworth's philosophy has been. Whereas in *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, the men described in this passage were subsequently taken to task for being self-satisfied and passive in the face of human suffering, in *Ode to Duty*, their satisfaction and attendance only to their own is exalted as an ideal state that the "glad hearts" who misplace their confidence can only hope to be guided into. In his exhortation for the salvation of such men as he once was, Wordsworth at once justifies himself and suggests the continuity of aspects of his individualism with his current philosophy: "Oh! if through confidence misplaced / They fail, thy saving arms, dread Power! around them cast" (ll. 16-17). What has come before is not irreconcilable with the state he has entered, but he regrets that he has periodically placed his faith in things less benign and constant than Duty and the God who commands it.

Wordsworth confesses what he now perceives as his error in not heeding the "timely mandate" of Duty, which he suggests might have guided him directly to virtuous obedience to God rather than through the circuitous route he feels himself to have taken. He suggests, in tension with the suggestion of the epigraph, that he did not always perceive the right way on his own: "being to myself a guide / Too blindly have reposed my trust" (ll. 28-29). This may be read as both a self-rebuke for his faith in the French Revolution and in a Nature divine in and of herself. The former had produced Napoleon, whose European conquest was a threat to England at the time of the poem's composition. Faced with the possible loss of all he held dear on earth, Wordsworth was horrified and guilt-stricken that something he had supported in thought, word, and deed might be the agent of that loss. The feeling that he had misplaced his faith in a divine Nature is a result of the failing of its power to move him as recorded in *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* and his own growing inability to cope with the idea that earth contained all there was to life.

In the ultimate version of *Ode to Duty*, the one revised by Wordsworth after 1807, the qualifying stanza that follows the expression of a longing "for a repose that ever is the same" is omitted. This alters the poem so drastically as to create a rift in what had hitherto been a continuous philosophical progression. Whatever Wordsworth's professed reason for the omission, the stanza's removal changes the poem from one containing strong elements of both

the preceding and succeeding philosophical standpoints to one that is fully lodged in the latter. As Stallknecht observes, in *Ode to Duty* “the doctrine of self-realization and stoical duty are fairly well-woven together. The clearest instance of this harmony lies in stanza six...which Wordsworth deleted after the first edition” (230). By deleting this stanza, Wordsworth goes a good way toward severing the link between his natural religion and the Christian stoicism he adopts in this poem. The stanza is as follows:

Yet not the less would I throughout
Still act according to the voice
Of my own wish; and feel past doubt
That my submissiveness was choice:
Not seeking in the school of pride
For “precepts over dignified,”
Denial and restraint I prize
No farther than they breed a second Will more wise.

More than any lines that survived the post-1807 edit, this stanza is in keeping with Wordsworth’s early individualism; unlike other stanzas of the poem, it contains no qualification, renunciation, or apology for holding such views. The “voice / Of my own wish” is in conflict here with the “Voice of God,” but Wordsworth refuses to believe that unquestioning adherence to codes of “denial and restraint” is virtuous in itself. With this stanza included, the poem is far from an unqualified acceptance of Christian stoicism. There is still a vital vestige of the young Wordsworth here, who cannot accept the edicts of God without being certain that he did so through his own volition.

The last lines of the stanza reveal how the preceding philosophy transitions to the new. “Denial and restraint,” two of the cardinal virtues of this Christian stoicism, are things that he accepts even while continuing to believe many of the tenets he established in the evolution of his natural religion such as the unity of man and the value of individual will. In this light, the following stanza seems to hold more in common with previous expressions of the source of a morality mediated through Nature. Though it is still the “Stern Lawgiver” that is the source of morality, the insistence upon the individual’s choice in accepting it from the omitted stanza gives Nature a more independent aspect. Being independent, Nature is benevolent, choosing to adhere to a morality which is the construction of a human God. In these conditions, Wordsworth’s earlier devotions to Nature and the self appear far less contradictory. In fact, they form a smooth, if steep, transition to the stoicism he had arrived at in 1804. It was only in the following year that Wordsworth would be desirous of a complete severance from the roots of the rich religion he had developed.

The death of his brother, John Wordsworth, in a shipwreck would be the event which catalyzed William’s utter rejection of the natural religion that he had developed through his major early works represented later by the deletion of the original sixth stanza. In *Elegiac Stanzas*, Wordsworth announces this severance in no uncertain terms. The continuity represented by the original version of *Ode to Duty* is rejected, and a cold introversion takes the place of all previous relations to the world. Just as his love for Dorothy once helped Wordsworth continue to hope and strive for the world of men, his love and grief for John causes him to reject both men and Nature, by whom he feels betrayed. The poem begins with a description of the beautiful peace that Wordsworth observed during his stay in the Peele Castle area in years prior to the loss of John. He states that in those years he would have painted the castle more in the

manner which he perceived Margaret's ruined cottage, that is, a symbol of enduring life and the interfusion of all things:

Ah! then, if mine had been the Painter's hand,
To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,
The light that never was, on sea or land,
The consecration and the Poet's dream;
(ll. 13-16)

The declaration that the light he once perceived in "never was" shows how far removed this poem is from *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, written only one year before. In that poem, the "celestial light" (*Ode*, l. 4) once perceived by the speaker was described as having faded away "into the light of common day" (l. 77). In *Elegiac Stanzas*, he declares that it never existed at all, that all his faith in Nature was misplaced, nothing more than a "Poet's dream." At that earlier time, he feels he was attempting to exist "amid a world how different from this" (l. 18), the true world of "toil and strife." The poet's submission "to a new control" does not appear as a continuation of the progression traced by the earlier poems but as an utter forsaking of the old in favor of it.

The lost vision of a benignant Nature he contrasts with Beaumont's painting of the ruined castle beside a roiling sea and a blackened sky, showing how he was in error in his individual pursuit of the benevolent in earthly forces. Beaumont's, he suggests, is a more accurate and edifying image of the relationship between man and Nature. This new understanding is a result of "a deep distress" which "hath humanised my Soul" (l. 36), the death of John. By saying that he has become more human through his distress, Wordsworth implies that his previous condition was somehow less human. Where once he believed that Nature was the source of a good man's "little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love" (*Tintern*, ll. 34-35), he now sees the power of Nature as destructive of the human and exacerbating the sorrow of a soul's mortal term. The man who once believed so strongly in the benevolent power of Nature has been completely changed:

Not for a moment could I now behold
A smiling sea, and be what I have been:
The feeling of my loss will n'er be old;
This, which I know, I speak with mind serene.
(ll. 37-40)

This, though it is more decisive a change, is reminiscent of Wordsworth's announcement of his more philosophical approach to his devotions to Nature in *Tintern Abbey*. He seems to have a similar sentiment to the one expressed as: "for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense" (*Tintern*, ll. 87-88). Just as he once found purity and relief from the "heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world" (ll. 39-40) in the sublime landscapes around the Wye, he now finds strength and fortitude to bear it in the enduring stone walls of Peele Castle.

Accompanying his rejection of his old philosophy is a profession of his new priorities, stoic virtues that cannot disappoint and can save a man from other disappointments. The adoption of these for himself and exaltation of them for his audience reveals how firmly he believes in the protective power of stoicism. For the first time, he admiringly personifies something artificial as a representation of human virtue, something unnatural and ultimately transient but able to bear its existence with implacable dignity:

And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,
 I love to see the look with which it braves,
 Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,
 The lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.
 (ll. 49-52)

The condition of the castle is the condition to which Wordsworth now aspires. He wishes to endure with “fortitude and patient cheer” the vexations of life, to be cased, himself, by the unfeeling armor, and to be such an exemplar of stoic endurance until his soul is set free once again. He remains confident that “Not without hope we suffer and we mourn” (l. 60). This hope is for the return to the “imperial palace” from which the soul descended: an eventual relief from the woes of human life.

The penultimate stanza contains the clearest pronouncement of Wordsworth’s divorce from his earlier individualism, truly marking the end of an era. He no longer wishes to live removed from the conditions in which other men suffer and, by extension, no longer wishes to act as their benefactor. Rather than raise others up to the happy understanding of the world he achieved in *Tintern Abbey*, he descends to suffer amongst them, with a bitter attack on the beliefs he once held:

Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone,
 Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
 Such happiness, wherever it be known,
 Is to be pitied; for ‘tis surely blind.
 (ll. 53-56)

With this, Wordsworth has truly separated himself from all that informed his early works. This, far more than any part of *Ode to Duty*, is the true breaking point in his philosophy and belief. From that poem all the way back to *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, a contiguous system is present, one that was only severed in the later poem by editing. Sadly, as none of the poetry produced in the Christian stoic period could match that of *Tintern Abbey* or *Michael*, Wordsworth divorced his own history and rejected his previous ideas. While he would continue work on *The Prelude* and Margaret’s story which would later appear in *The Excursion*, everything touched by the later Wordsworth would be reduced in its glory and fade toward the commonplace.

Recognizing the continuity and progression of Wordsworth’s thought through *Ode to Duty* provides valuable illumination for both the texts where it is evident and texts written contemporaneously. Wordsworth’s induction, catechism, and eventual disenchantment with a unique natural religion are more foundational elements of his poetry than results. Though only *The Prelude* purports to do so, the major poems of Wordsworth’s great period all have the “growth of a poet’s mind” as a subject. Accepting the poet’s editorial severance of the progression in *Ode to Duty* prevents fuller understanding of this growth. Both his early natural individualism and his later Christian stoicism have elements to strongly recommend them; irreconcilability is only forced upon them later by a grief-stricken poet and unquestioning readers. Wordsworth’s poetry provides a singular opportunity to understand unity between religions of apparently very different aspects that should not be ignored, whatever the poet’s wishes might have been.

Though Wordsworth still had many years of prolific writing ahead of him, the denial of his philosophical evolution brought the period of his most moving and profound works to an end. Often, the works most deeply engaged with the development of his natural religion are also the works that speak most clearly and meaningfully to his readers; when he ceased to develop his ideas on life and mortality, his poetry also stagnated. Generations of readers and poets have not forgiven Wordsworth for abandoning hope, for allowing himself to “burn to the socket” having despaired of effecting change on the world. And one does indeed wonder what might have been if Wordsworth had not so emphatically denounced the natural religion of passionate individualism he cultivated so thoughtfully. Might he have continued to reconcile his conflicting notions, perhaps eventually reaching a balance between the natural and contrived acceptable to his wide contemporary audience? If so, the course of England’s political and social history might have been noticeably altered. Wordsworth’s apostasy from his early causes and beliefs had vast, visible effects on the poetry of following generations. For example, no matter what he might have thought of Shelley’s poetry, the continued flourishing of his own might have inspired his successor’s to even greater levels and perhaps even stymied the despondency that marked Shelley’s last great poetic effort. Such speculation is useless, of course, and the course that Wordsworth’s poetry did take provides myriad important lessons of its own. It reminds us of the fallibility of even the greatest men, the dismay with which genius greets mortality, and the power of human tragedy. Most importantly, it reminds us that religion of any sort is something to be approached with an inquisitive mind, never something to be accepted blindly. Systems of belief must be very personal if they are to be at all meaningful. Ultimately, only the individual can choose what he believes, and, no matter how vehemently he may deny it, any well-considered religion will always be individual if not individualist.

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