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Echoing against Echo: Wordsworth's Theory of Originality

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In one of his famous *Lectures on the English Poets*, William Hazlitt declared: "Mr. Wordsworth is the most original poet now living.... His poetry is not external but internal; it does not depend upon tradition, or story, or old song." (1998, 309) Indeed, in his verse and prefaces, Wordsworth goes to great lengths to appear so, to appear to be "the most original poet now living"; despite the fact that, in his generation, William Blake is certainly the poet who struck his readers as being an utterly original genius. By definition, the concept of originality implies an absence of repetition, but since there can be no such thing as a total absence of repetition, being original, for Wordsworth, consists in repeating what had supposedly never been repeated before: the voice of Nature. Wordsworth's poetics consists in echoing Nature. This makes him an original poet in both meanings of that word: he refuses to parrot his literary predecessors, in order to repeat sounds that have been here since the origins, what he calls in *The Prelude* "the ghostly language of the ancient earth" (II, 328. 1979, 82).¹

Wordsworth creates a poetics that is in every possible way contrary to that of his Augustan predecessors. Rejecting regular, rhymed meter, along with classical metaphors and rhetorical figures, he wishes to echo Nature directly, and not repeat what the Ancients have always said about it. It is not the nymph Echo he hears in the mountains but the mountain echo - with a small e -, the voice of Nature that triggers his own song. Wordsworth's verse translates a direct relation to Nature, one that is not

mediated by “tradition, or story, or old song”, as Hazlitt puts it. In other words, what Wordsworth rejects is the pastoral genre as it was revived by the neo-classics, but not the pastoral as it was first designed by Theocritus who, like him, depicted Nature in the way he experienced it. Wordsworth chooses Theocritus against Pope, and echoing against Echo because it is no heart-broken nymph but himself who repeats Nature’s song, which means that, despite Wordsworth’s rejection of the pastoral genre, Theocritus appears as a model for this original poet.

This paper will first focus on what one could call Wordsworth’s strategy of originality: while many of his poems discredit culture and books as dead knowledge, he shows himself in his verse to be Nature’s favored son, the only one who can translate her voice, and whose poems are literally *inspired* by her winds, birdsongs, and echoes. Then, through the analysis of some prose and verse passages it will aim at shedding some light on the importance of the echo phenomenon in Wordsworth’s poetics and poetic theory. Eventually, a closer look at stanza X from “On the Power of Sound” staging the burial of “fable” in favor of the sound of life will illustrate what is meant here by the phrase “echoing against Echo”, Wordsworth’s choice of a direct relationship with Nature, and the study of an excerpt from *The Prelude* that pays homage – or rather a half-homage – to Theocritus will show the ambiguity of Wordsworth’s relation to this great poetic predecessor.

“No doubt the hackneyed and lifeless use into which mythology fell towards the close of the seventeenth century, and which continued through the eighteenth, disgusted the general reader with all allusion to it in modern verse,” Wordsworth writes in a note to his “Ode to Lycoris” (1947, 423). And indeed, the originality of the treatment of Nature in his verse resides in the rejection of the mythological apparatus his predecessors inherited from Classical Antiquity. In the following excerpts from *The Prelude*, Wordsworth condemns both of their visions in order to emphasize the novelty of his own approach:

My first human love,

As hath been mentioned, did incline to those
 Whose occupations and concerns were most
 Illustrated by Nature, and adorned,
 And shepherds were the men who pleased me first:
 Not such as, in Arcadian fastnesses
 Sequestered, handed down among themselves,
 So ancient poets sing, the golden age;
 Nor such – a second race, allied to these –
 As Shakespeare in the wood of Arden placed,
 Where Phoebe sighed for the false Ganymede,
 Or there where Florizel and Perdita
 Together dance, Queen of the feast and King;
 Nor such as Spenser fabled.
 (VIII, 178-91. 1979, 276)

Thus was man
 Ennobled outwardly before mine eyes,
 And thus my heart at first was introduced
 To an unconscious love and reverence
 Of human nature; hence the human form
 To me was like an index of delight,
 Of grace and honour, power and worthiness.
 Meanwhile, this creature – spiritual almost
 As those of books, but more exalted far,
 Far more of an imaginative form –
 Was not a Corin of the groves, who lives
 For his own fancies, or to dance by the hour
 In coronal, with Phyllis in the midst,
 But, for the purpose of kind, a man
 With the most common – husband, father – learned,
 Could teach, admonish, suffered with the rest
 From vice and folly, wretchedness and fear.
 (VIII, 410-26. 1979, 288)

The second excerpt makes no distinction between the neo-classical pastoral and its original ancestor. But this ambiguity is not merely Wordsworth's – in his *Essay on Criticism*, Pope suggests the identification of Nature with the way the Ancients saw it: "Learn hence from Ancient *Rules* a just Esteem; / To copy *Nature* is to copy *Them*." (I, 139-40. 1966, 68). Wordsworth, who poses as the first real poet of Nature, advocates a new unmediated way of looking at it and experiencing it, and decides the age is done both with Ancient Rules and those who saw fit to apply them, indiscriminately. "Not such", the expression that introduces the comparison in the first excerpt, could certainly

label part of Wordsworth's poetics. As the initiator of a poetic revolution, Wordsworth first pits his originality against his predecessors' tendency to mechanically repeat the Ancient poets.

The two poems, "To the Cuckoo" (1802) and "The Cuckoo-Clock" (1840), despite the forty-years that separate their composition dates – but Wordsworth was a compulsive corrector of his own corpus, and kept revising all his poems all his life – read as a diptych, and even as complementary *artes poeticae*.

TO THE CUCKOO

O blithe newcomer! I have heard,
I hear thee and rejoice:
O Cuckoo! shall I call thee bird,
Or but a wandering Voice?

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

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

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

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

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

And I can listen to thee yet;
Can lie upon the plain
And listen, till I do beget

That golden time again.

O blessed birth! the earth we pace
Again appears to be
An unsubstantial, fairy place,
That is fit home for Thee! (1-32. 1944, 207)²

THE CUCKOO-CLOCK

...And know – that, even for him who shuns the day
And nightly tosses on a bed of pain;
Whose joys, from all but memory swept away,
Must come unhopd for, if they come again;
Know – that, for him whose waking thoughts, severe
As his distress is sharp, would scorn my theme,
The mimic notes, striking upon his ear
In sleep, and intermingling with his dream,
Could from sad regions send him to a dear
Delightful land of verdure, shower and gleam,
To mock the *wandering* Voice beside some haunted stream. (23-33. 1944, 316)

While “To the Cuckoo” is one of many examples of a poem being inspired to the poet by Nature and her song, in this instance, the cuckoo’s, the third stanza of “The Cuckoo-Clock” reads as an allegory of fake Nature-poetry. If the poet, when uninspired, often compares himself to a bird in a cage, here, the neo-classics are compared with a mechanical bird, which “mocks the wandering Voice beside some haunted stream,” they who cannot paint a landscape without its nymphs and satyrs, and therefore merely mimic those for whom the streams were haunted. Thus, the poem “mocks” – no longer in the sense of *imitating* but in that of *making fun of* – his predecessors’ poetics. This criticism, it is true, is quite mild, for implicit, and retains nothing of the violence one finds in the two *Prelude* excerpt previously quoted. Indeed, the very rejection of the whole classical apparatus which defined Wordsworthian poetics when the poet initiated the Romantic revolution in English letters with the publication *Lyrical Ballads*, a joint anonymous publication with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is somehow forsaken by older Wordsworth who eventually gives in to using mythological images.³

Wordsworth’s poetry is bathed in this dichotomy between good – *real* – Nature poetry and bad, full of examples of a healthy for direct relationship with her, as opposed

to a scholarly and distorted one. What immediately comes to mind is the poem “There was a Boy”, which was originally written in the first person and of which a version is included in *The Prelude*. This *Winander Boy* speaks with Nature in her own language and she answers him. Even her silences are deeply meaningful. This portrait forms a diptych with another excerpt, commonly referred to as that of the *Infant Prodigy*, the learned boy who can name and measure Nature but has no true relation with her. Denying her her motherly function, he makes her cry.⁴

This latter example, of a too well-read boy who ends up being totally and irrevocably cut off from Nature, is yet another way for the poet of discrediting his predecessors, which consists – rather paradoxically, for a poet – in holding books, and written knowledge in general, in deep contempt. The most famous examples of this strategy can be found in yet another diptych “Expostulation and Reply” and “The Tables Turned.”⁵ What follows is the last three stanzas of the latter:

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

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:--
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives. (21-32. 1947, 56-57)

One could suggest an ironical approach to this strategy: not opening books might prevent the reader from realizing that other poets have indeed, before Wordsworth, written a type of Nature poetry that tried to look at the landscape without the veil of the mythological and rhetorical figures inherited from Classical Antiquity, like James Thomson, in *The Seasons* (1726), Thomas Gray in his « Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College » (1747), William Collins in his « Ode to Evening » (1746-8), and most

importantly, Robert Burns who, before Wordsworth, create his own personal myth of the poet-farmer.⁶

To be the original poet he claimed to be, and came to be recognized as, throughout his poems and especially in *The Prelude*, his fourteen-book verse autobiography, Wordsworth portrays himself as Nature's "chosen son", her "favor'd being." As indicated in "The Tables Turned", Mother Nature was his "prime teacher." She is the one who took care of him after the death of his mother when the poet was eight, and even before that, the river Derwent, at the back of his garden in Cockermouth, was the one whose song lulled him to sleep. What follows is just another example of how the poet of *The Prelude* portrays himself as different from other men, and especially other poets, because of this unique bond he shares with Nature:

And less
Than other minds I had been used to owe
The pleasure which I found in place or thing
To extrinsic transitory accidents,
To records or traditions; but a sense
Of what had been here done, and suffered here
Through ages, and was doing, suffering, still,
Weighed with me, could support the test of thought –
Was like the enduring majesty and power
Of independent nature. And not seldom
Even individual remembrances,
By working on the shapes before my eyes,
Became like vital functions of the soul;
And out of what had been, what was, the place
Was thronged with impregnations, like those wilds
In which my early feelings had been nursed,
And naked valleys full of caverns, rocks,
And audible seclusions, dashing lakes,
Echoes and waterfalls, and pointed crags
That into music touch the passing wind.
(VIII, 777-96. 1979, 306-8)

The poet presents himself as one to whom Nature speaks directly, and it is her voice he repeats, which makes him an original poet inasmuch as he does not repeat his predecessors and also inasmuch as he repeats a voice that comes from the beginning of times.

... For I would walk alone,
In storm and tempest, or in starlight nights
Beneath the quiet Heavens; and, at that time,
Have felt whate'er there is of power in sound
To breathe an elevated mood, by form
Or image unprofaned; and I would stand,
Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are
The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
Or make their dim abode in distant winds. (II, 321-9. 1979, 82)

We find again in these lines the “wise passiveness” advocated in “Expostulation and Reply” and this receptive passivity that one should adopt when dealing with Nature is at the very heart of Wordsworth poetics, of his poetry conceived of as an echo to Nature’s voice.

This, of course, brings to mind the Romantic metaphor of imagination, and inspiration, as an Aeolian harp. Wordsworth does use the metaphor in his verse:

Thus much for the one presence, and the life
Of the great whole; suffice it here to add
That whatsoe'er of terror, or of love,
Or beauty, Nature's daily face put on
From transitory passion, unto this
I was as wakeful even as waters are
To the sky's motion, in a kindred sense
Of passion was obedient as a lute
That waits upon the touches of the wind.
So it was with me in my solitude:
So often among multitudes of men. (III, 130-40. 1979, 98)

I journeyed towards the vale which I had chosen.
It was a splendid evening, and my soul
Did once again make trial of the strength
Restored to her afresh; nor did she want
Eolian visitations – but the harp
Was soon defrauded, and the banded host
Of harmony dispersed in straggling sounds,

And lastly utter silence. (I, 100-7. 1979, 34)

When Hazlitt condemned the poet for the passivity characterizing his relation to Nature, he probably underestimated the real poetics of passivity one can find in Wordsworth's prefaces and how much this behavior is advocated rather than suffered to be a poetic flaw: "He cannot form a whole. He has not the constructive faculty. He can give only the fine tones of thought, drawn from his mind by accident of nature, like the sounds drawn from the Aeolian harp by the wandering gale. - He is totally deficient in the machinery of poetry." (1998, 309) What Wordsworth wishes is to become the new Echo and be the faithful interpreter of Nature's song - "for in all things I saw one life, and felt that it was joy. / One song they sang and it was audible"⁷ - , and this means that passivity is indeed required from the poet, as is made clear in the Preface to the 1815 edition of *Poems*:

The powers requisite for the production of poetry are: first, those of Observation and Description,-i.e., the ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, and with fidelity to describe them, unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer: whether the things depicted be actually present to the senses, or have a place only in the memory. This power, though indispensable to a Poet, is one which he employs only in submission to necessity, and never for a continuance of time: as its exercise supposes all the higher qualities of the mind to *be passive, and in a state of subjection to external objects, much in the same way as a Translator or Engraver ought to be to his original*. 2ndly, Sensibility,-which, the more exquisite it is, the wider will be the range of a poet's perceptions; and the more will he be incited to observe objects, both as they exist in themselves, and as *re-acted upon by his own mind*. (1974, III, 26; my emphasis)

The list goes on but only to mention what we could call corrective faculties, "3rdly, Reflection ... lastly, Judgment", "4thly, Imagination and Fancy ... 5thly, Invention", but passivity comes first, for observation and description should enable the poet to copy the original without modification by "any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer," just like an echo. John Hollander identifies the relationship between mind and Nature in Wordsworth as a mode of echo: "Echoing, for Wordsworth, is so central a figure of representation and plays such an important part in the dialogue of nature and

consciousness that it would require an extensive separate treatment.” (1981, 18) Indeed, echoing, for Wordsworth, is also a metaphor for the mind’s reaction to what surrounds it, as exemplified in these lines from “Personal Talk”:

–sweetest melodies
Are those that are by distance made more sweet;
Whose mind is but the mind of his own eyes
He is a Slave; the meanest we can meet! (25- 8. 1947, 74)

Not only in his theoretical works but also in his verse does Wordsworth conceive of his song as an echo. The poet’s confessed mission is thus to repeat Nature’s sounds, including her echoes, which are many in the region of lakes and hills where Wordsworth spent his life. That is why many poems are triggered by a scene of echoes, which is itself echoed by the poem. “To a Sky-Lark” is one of them. Here is its opening stanza:

Up with me ! up with me into the clouds!
For thy song, Lark, is strong ;
Up with me ! up with me into the clouds!
Singing, singing,
With all the heav’ns about thee ringing,
Lift me, guide me, till I find
That spot which seems so to thy mind! (1-7. 1944, 141)

The poet repeats his own statements in the same way as the bird repeats his song, and “singing” repeats the last phonemes of “ringing” in the way an echo would and in the way the echo in the poem does. “The Idle Shepherd-Boys” is another example among many of natural echoes giving birth to a poem that echoes them in its turn:

The valley rings with mirth and joy.
Among the hills the Echoes play
A never, never ending song
To welcome in the May. (1-4. 1940, 238)

This, the beginning of *The Prelude* calls “A corresponding mild creative breeze” (I, 43. 1979, 30) in a formula that accounts for the part of repetition of Nature that the poet’s verse contains, and also for its part of creation. And indeed, the autobiography strives to overcome this contradiction of a poet who wishes to portray himself as a mere echo of

Nature, her prophet, the one who speaks for her, but also presents himself as telling prophecies to the wind. A poet who cannot merely echo but needs to translate Nature's non-verbal language into speech.

... this only will I add
From heart-experience, and in humblest sense
Of modesty, that he who in his youth
A wanderer among the woods and fields
With living Nature hath been intimate,
Not only in that raw unpractised time
Is stirred to ecstasy, as others are,
By glittering verse, but he doth furthermore,
In measure only dealt out to himself,
Receive enduring touches of deep joy
From the great Nature that exists in works
Of mighty poets. Visionary power
Attends upon the motions of the winds
Embodied in the mystery of words;
(V, 608-21. 1979, 184)

These ambiguous and complex lines also suggest that Wordsworth was more aware of his literary debts than he cares to admit.

Yet, before turning to the discrete homage he pays to Theocritus in *The Prelude*, I would like to suggest an interpretation of stanza X of "On the Power of Sound" (1828) as encapsulating the Wordsworthian poetics I called "echoing against Echo":

The pipe of Pan, to Shepherds
Couched in the shadow of Menalian Pines,
Was passing sweet; the eyeballs of the Leopards,
That in high triumph drew the Lord of vines,
Here did they sparkle to the cymbal's clang!
While fauns and Satyrs beat the ground
In cadence, - and Silenus swang
This way and that, with wild-flowers crowned.
To life, to life give back thine Ear:
Ye who are longing to be rid
Of fable, though to truth subservient, hear
The little sprinkling of cold earth that fell
Echoed from the coffin lid;
The Convict's summons in the steeple knell.
'The vain distress-gun,' from a leeward shore,
Repeated - heard, and heard no more!" (145-60. 1944, 328)

The pastoral scene of the beginning is ridiculed by its very topoi of satyrs and fauns beating the ground in cadence under flower-crowns. It is worth noticing that in this rather late poem, Wordsworth, who by then was not as reluctant in using mythological images as he had been in his youth, still has in mind that his early rejection of that apparatus is part and parcel of his identity as original poet. To this ridiculous vision of Nature, the poet vehemently suggests an alternative: listening to the sound of life. This new nature poetry, like the echoes in this scene, is born of the burial of that former genre, convicted in these lines: it has been repeated over and over again, but should be “heard no more.” Echoing Nature means mocking Echo, the nymph that only ever haunted the English landscape in the fancy of a few well-read poets that could never claim to be Nature poets.

Several ancient predecessors, however, would be entitled to such a claim. For instance, Theocritus, father of the pastoral genre, and therefore shameful grandfather of the neo-classical pastoral, did portray Nature the way he saw and experienced it. And that certainly makes Wordsworth much closer to the Sicilian poet that one might think at first. As Bryan Crockett writes, “It is ... an aversion to the abuse of classical references, a denial of the ‘real sentiment’ that underlies mythology, that motivates Wordsworth to refer to the classics sparingly, not an aversion to the classics themselves.” (1992, 111) And indeed, the following excerpt from *The Prelude* suggests that the poet shares a lot with “the classics”:

Child of the mountains, among shepherds reared,
Even from my earliest schoolday time, I loved
To dream of Sicily; and now a sweet
And gladsome promise wafted from that land
Comes o’er my heart. There’s not a single name
Of note belonging to that honored isle,
Philosopher or bard, Empedocles,
Or Archimedes – deep and tranquil soul –
That is not like a comfort to my grief.
And, O Theocritus, so far have some
Prevailed among the powers of heaven and earth
By force of graces which were theirs, that they
Have had, as thou reportest, miracles
Wrought for them in old time: yea, not unmoved,

When thinking on my own belov'ed friend,
I hear thee tell how bees with honey fed
Divine Comates, by his tyrant lord
Within a chest imprisoned impiously –
How with their honey from the fields they came
And fed him there, alive, from month to month,
Because the goatherd, bless`ed man, had lips
Wet with the Muse's nectar. (X, 1006-26. 1979, 414)

Yet, if one reads the lines carefully, one comes to realize that the expected, the announced homage never comes. "O Theocritus" announces a homage to Comates who survived in his chest thanks to bees who fed him honey in the way the poet says that he only survived his life in the city thanks to the remembrance of his native valley:⁸ Nature keeps her true poets alive. Wordsworth only acknowledges his debt to *her*.

J.A.K. Thomson, as early as 1948, qualified the commonly assumed rejection of Classical Antiquity by the first generation of Romantics when he wrote that "Wordsworth's conviction, which is the source of nearly all his best poetry, that natural objects have a life and almost a personality of their own, has an odd resemblance to the feelings which must have inspired Greek mythology, but never found clear expression in Greek or in any literature known to him before he gave it expression in English." (1948, 225) It is rather ironical that in his quest for originality, Wordsworth returned to the spirit of Classical Antiquity by rejecting its letter. Such a paradox might remind one of Hadrian's prediction in Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* (2000, 245):

Not all our books will perish, nor our statues, if broken, lie unrepaired; other domes and other pediments will arise from our domes and pediments; some few men will think and work and feel as we have done, and I venture to count upon such continuators, placed irregularly throughout the centuries, and upon this kind of intermittent immortality. If ever the Barbarians gain possession of the world they will be forced to adopt some of our methods; they will end by resembling us.⁹

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ANNEXE A: THE WINANDER BOY and THE INFANT PRODIGY

THERE WAS A BOY

There was a boy – ye knew him well, ye cliffs
And islands of Winander – many a time
At evening, when the stars had just begun
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone
Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake,
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth
Uplifted, he as through an instrument
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls
That they might answer him. And they would shout
Across the wat'ry vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud,
Redoubled and redoubled – concourse wild
Of mirth and jocund din. And when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,
Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.
(V, 389-413. 1979, 172-4)

[THE INFANT PRODIGY]

My drift hath scarcely
I fear been obvious, for I have recoiled

From showing as it is the monster birth
Engendered by these too industrious times.
Let few words paint it: 'tis a child, no child,
But a dwarf man; in knowledge, virtue, skill,
In what he is not, and in what he is,
The noontide shadow of a man complete;
A worshipper of worldly seemliness –
Not quarrelsome, for that were far beneath
His dignity; with gifts he bubbles o'er
As generous as a fountain; selfishness
May not come near him, gluttony or pride;
The wandering beggars propagate his name,
Dumb creatures find him tender as a nun.
Yet deem him not for this a naked dish
Of goodness merely – he is garnished out.
Arch are his notices, and nice his sense
Of the ridiculous; deceit and guile,
Meanness and falsehood, he detects, can treat
With apt and graceful laughter; nor is blind
To the broad follies of the licensed world;
Though shrewd, yet innocent himself withal,
And can read lectures upon innocence.
He is fenced round, nay armed, for ought we know,
In panoply complete; and fear itself,
Natural or supernatural alike,
Unless it leap upon him in a dream,
Touches him not. Briefly, the moral part
Is perfect, and in learning and in books
He is a prodigy. His discourse moves slow,
Massy and ponderous as a prison door,
Tremendously embossed with terms of art.
Rank growth of propositions overruns
The stripling's brain; the path in which he treads
Is choked with grammars. Cushion of divine
Was never such a type of thought profound
As is the pillow where he rests his head.
The ensigns of the empire which he holds –
The globe and sceptre of his royalties –
Are telescopes, and crucibles, and maps.
Ships he can guide across the pathless sea,
And tell you all their cunning; he can read
The inside of the earth, and spell the stars;
He knows the policies of foreign lands,

Can string you names of districts, cities, towns,
The whole world over, tight as beads of dew
Upon a gossamer thread. He sifts, he weighs,
Takes nothing upon trust. His teachers stare,
The country people pray for God's good grace,
And tremble at his deep experiments.
All things are put to question: he must live
Knowing that he grows wiser every day,
Or else not live at all, and seeing too
Each little drop of wisdom as it falls
Into the dimpling cistern of his heart.
Meanwhile old Grandame Earth is grieved to find
The playthings which her love designed for him
Unthought of—in their woodland beds the flowers
Weep, and the river-sides are all forlorn.
(V, 290-349. 1979, 166-70)

ANNEXE B: EXPOSTULATION AND REPLY and THE TABLES TURNED

EXPOSTULATION AND REPLY (1798)

"WHY, William, on that old grey stone,
Thus for the length of half a day,
Why, William, sit you thus alone,
And dream your time away?

"Where are your books?--that light bequeathed
To Beings else forlorn and blind!
Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed
From dead men to their kind.

"You look round on your Mother Earth,
As if she for no purpose bore you;
As if you were her first-born birth,
And none had lived before you!"

One morning thus, by Esthwaite lake,
When life was sweet, I knew not why,
To me my good friend Matthew spake,
And thus I made reply:

"The eye--it cannot choose but see;

We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.

"Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?

"--Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may,
I sit upon this old grey stone,
And dream my time away."

THE TABLES TURNED (1798)
AN EVENING SCENE ON THE SAME SUBJECT

UP! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

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

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

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

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

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

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:--
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives. (1947, 56-57)

NOTES

¹ All the *Prelude* quotes included in this article are taken from the 1805 version.

² For the first version of this poem, see *Major Works*, 207.

³ See, for instance, "Composed when a probability existed of our being obliged to quit Rydal Mount as a residence" (1826) where the reference to the myth of Narcissus is explicit. The fact that the poet resorted more and more to mythological conceits as he grew older, but also more religious, seems to suggest that his early rejection of them was founded on poetic principles, rather than religious ones.

⁴ See Annexe A for the two excerpts. Notice how the lines mimic the voice and silences of Nature, in the same way as the boy mimics the owls, for instance in the enjambment "... a pause / Of silence." These lines are so typically Wordsworthian that one may suspect the poet of writing his very name in them - as John Donne was famed to do - in the expression "redoubled and redoubled", which evokes his initials, *W.W.*

⁵ For the full text of the two poems, see Annexe B.

⁶ Wordsworth is most reluctant to acknowledge his literary debts. In "The Peddler", he has his eponymous hero "repeat / The songs of Burns" (quoted by Jonathan Wordsworth, 1969, 182), but that is about as far as he is willing to go, although Grasmere's poet did work hard to the rehabilitation of the memory of his Scottish predecessor, as proven by a few poems of homage. The treatment of one of Gray's sonnets in the second preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, as noticed by James E. Swearingen (1974, 505) can be interpreted as symptomatic of a systematic refusal to acknowledge literary influences: quoting the entire poem, Wordsworth considers the part where

Gray expresses his feelings as “the only part of this Sonnet to be of any value” (2000, 602) as opposed to the one dealing with the description of Nature.

⁷ From Nature and her overflowing soul
I had receiv'd so much that all my thoughts
Were steep'd in feeling; I was only then
Contented when with bliss ineffable
I felt the sentiment of Being spread
O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still,
O'er all, that, lost beyond the reach of thought
And human knowledge, to the human eye
Invisible, yet liveth to the heart,
O'er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings,
Or beats the gladsome air, o'er all that glides
Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself
And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not
If such my transports were; for in all things
I saw one life, and felt that it was joy.
One song they sang, and it was audible,
Most audible then when the fleshly ear,
O'ercome by grosser prelude of that strain,
Forgot its functions, and slept undisturb'd. (II, 410-34, 1979, 86-8)

⁸ See, for instance, *Tintern Abbey*, l. 22-31 (1944, 260).

⁹ Nos livres ne périront pas tous ; on réparera nos statues brisées ; d'autres coupoles et d'autres frontons naîtront de nos frontons et de nos coupoles ; quelques hommes penseront, travailleront et sentiront comme nous : j'ose compter sur ces continuateurs placés à intervalles irréguliers le long des siècles, sur cette intermittente immortalité. Si les barbares s'emparent jamais de l'empire du monde, ils seront forcés d'adopter certaines de nos méthodes ; ils finiront par nous ressembler. (1974, 314)

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