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A World Half Created: The Imaginative Power of Sound in the Poetry of William Wordsworth

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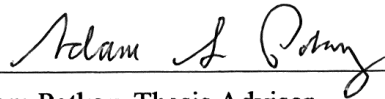
A World Half Created: The Imaginative Power of Sound in the Poetry of William Wordsworth

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William & Mary

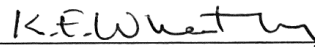
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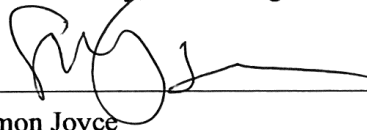
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction: The Influence of Sound Upon Creative Imagination.....	4
I. Historical Context: Understanding Romantic and Wordsworthian Soundscapes	11
II. Natural Sounds and the Imagination in “The Idiot Boy” and “There was a Boy”	17
III. The Deceptive Eye and Stymied Ear in “The Thorn”	27
IV. Friend and Messenger: The Moral Chastening of Wordsworth’s Divine Breeze (<i>The Prelude</i> , Book I).....	38
V. The Reverberations of Sound Through Memory (<i>The Prelude</i> , Book II)	46
VI. Heights of Aural Realization (<i>The Prelude</i> , Book VI).....	55
VII. Conclusion: A World Half Created.....	62
Appendices	
Works Cited.....	66
Works Consulted	70

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Introduction: The Influence of Sound Upon Creative Imagination

The power of sound fascinated Wordsworth throughout his long life. As he writes in *The Prelude*, even in childhood, while on his solitary walks, the poet “felt whate’er there is of power in sound / To breathe an elevated mood, by form / Or image unprofaned” (*Prelude* II.324-26). This “elevated mood” derives from the imaginative creativity which audition inspires within the mind, and the sense of hearing allows listeners to achieve a state of transcendent perception, “unprofaned” by the limitations of “form or image.” With the religious overtones of Wordsworth’s “unprofaned” mental state, the poet suggests that the assumption of this “elevated mood” is something sacred, a state which can be achieved through the sublime, or perhaps holy, “power in sound.” Meanwhile, sight—the sense which allows one to perceive “form or image”—is something which can “desecrate” not only Wordsworth’s “elevated mood,” but his responsiveness to the creative conductivity of sound.¹ That sound has the ability “To *breathe* an elevated mood” recalls the power of the mouth, or human voice, to itself be a source of sound (emphasis mine). Additionally, the Biblical implications of “breath” associate the power of sound with the life-giving power of God, who, when creating humanity, “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a living soul” (*King James Version*, Genesis 2.7). Sound, therefore, is an almost divine force which gives life to the imaginative abilities of the human mind.

In the lines preceding Wordsworth’s meditations upon the “power in sound,” he talks of “difference / Perceived in things where to the common eye / No difference is, and hence, from the same source, / Sublimier joy” (*Prelude* II.318-321). Difference, or variation, in that which one observes is less detectable by “the common eye.” Instead, such difference may be perceived

¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) synonymizes the verb form of “profane” with “desecrate” (“profane, v.”).

when one is ensconced in conditions of solitude or “silent inobtrusive” society, where “manifold distinctions” cause “gentle agitations of the mind” (II.316-18). It is implied that these circumstances allow the perception of “difference,” and a resultant “Sublimar joy,” because they enhance, or are facilitated by, one’s receptiveness to surrounding sounds.² The 1850 version of *The Prelude* changes the youthful Wordsworth’s “common eye” ([1805] II.319) to an “unwatchful” one ([1850] II.300), a revision which reinforces the idea of the eye’s limited capacity for discernment.

Although vision may be a sense inferior to that of hearing, Wordsworth’s poetry continues to explore the interplay between sight and sound. Only after listening to nature and allowing himself to imagine “The ghostly language of the ancient earth” ([1805] II.328) can he “drink in the visionary power” (II.330). This “visionary power” of which he speaks is not quite clear, however. Does he use “visionary” in the sense of innovation and transcendent thinking? Or does he literally mean some sort of power latent in sight?³ Given his belief that an “elevated mood” is one “by form / Or image unprofaned,” the former interpretation seems more likely, and even if Wordsworth uses “visionary” to refer to the act of seeing, it is still a sense subordinated to that of hearing, as the “visionary power” cannot be enjoyed until the poet has completed his

² One instance of the difference discerned by hearing, rather than seeing, comes in the final book of *The Prelude*, in which Wordsworth ascends Mount Snowdon:

The universal spectacle throughout
Was shaped for admiration and delight,
Grand in itself alone, but in that breach
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged
The soul, the imagination of the whole. (XIII.60-65)

The “spectacle” found at the mountain peak is “Grand in itself alone,” but the awe-inspiring effect of the scene is exacerbated by the ear’s ability to differentiate between the silent image and the invisible yet resounding “voice of waters.” In the origin of these sounds, Wordsworth contends that “Nature lodged / The soul, the imagination of the whole,” and so the impact which the memory has on the mind of the young poet owes its power to the discrimination of the ear, not the eye.

³ In his book *Wordsworth’s Poetry*, Geoffrey Hartman uses “visionary” in the innovative sense when he argues that “An unresolved opposition between Imagination and Nature prevents [Wordsworth] from becoming a visionary poet” (39).

auditory communion with nature. Regardless, the passage highlights the limitations of human conception and language; even in our attempts to separate ourselves from a visual understanding of the world, we remain tied to it. The phrase “auditory imagery,” which Yimon Lo applies to Wordsworth’s poetry in an article on “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” is one oxymoronic example of this restraint (Lo 6).⁴ Nevertheless, the visual metaphor seems most accurate in its representation of the poetic techniques used to *illustrate*—there, another visual descriptor—surrounding sounds. In spite of the dominance of the eye, the poet nonetheless persists in his esteem for the ear, especially in its ability to facilitate the imaginative abilities of the mind and encourage the development of an “elevated mood” of sublime thought. Such a prioritization of sound is found throughout Wordsworth’s poems, including “Tintern Abbey,” where he synesthetically describes “an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony” (ll. 47-48).

Wordsworth explores his wariness of the human eye in his prose works, as well, notably in the opening lines of the 1815 “Preface” to his collected volume of *Poems*. Although the powers of “observation and description” are among those “requisite for the production of poetry,” they are ones which a poet uses sparingly, and only when necessary, for their “exercise supposes all the higher qualities of the mind to be passive, and in a state of subjection to external objects” (Wordsworth, 1815 “Preface” viii-ix). How, then, is this “state of subjection” meant to be escaped?

With his derisive use of the word “objects,” Wordsworth dismisses the visual in favor of the aural as a means for intellectual liberation (1815 “Preface” ix). Indeed, in lieu of pagan Greek and Roman “idolatry,” Wordsworth admires the freedom of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the

⁴ Lo analyzes Marjorie Levinson’s interrogation of the “interplay of visual and auditory imagery” in the latter’s article “Insight and Oversight: [R]eading ‘Tintern Abbey’” (Lo 6).

writings of Milton and Spenser, which esteem the sense of hearing over that of seeing in order to avoid the worship of visual idols:

The grand storehouse of enthusiastic and meditative Imagination, of poetical, as contradistinguished from human and dramatic Imagination, is the prophetic and lyrical parts of the Holy Scriptures, and the works of Milton, to which I cannot forbear to add those of Spenser. I select these writers in preference to those of ancient Greece and Rome, because the anthropomorphism [sic] of the Pagan religion subjected the minds of the greatest poets in those countries too much to the bondage of definite form; from which the Hebrews were preserved by their abhorrence of idolatry. (1815 "Preface" xxix-xxx)

Wordsworth values the freedom of sound from "the bondage of definite form," or visual constraints. Of Milton, in particular, Wordsworth offers the praise that "he was a Hebrew in soul; and all things tended in him towards the sublime." This Hebrew aversion to idolatry originates in God's commandments to Moses and the Israelites after their flight from Egypt, when God forbids the creation or worship of "any graven image," as "I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God" (Exodus 20.4-5). In continuing to spurn a dependence upon optical stimuli, Wordsworth argues, the poets he cites avoid the restricted artistic creativity, or stymied "enthusiastic and meditative Imagination," to which ancient Greek and Roman writers subjected themselves (1815 "Preface" xxix).⁵

Yet the poet's value for the human ear stems from more than an appreciation of the religious literary traditions which preceded him. Throughout the "Preface," he continues his musings on the creative strength of the imagination, marveling that when it "frames a

⁵ Adam Potkay writes about Wordsworth's attraction to the "*anti-iconic sublimity*" within "the Hebrew Bible and its King James translation" in his chapter on "Audition and Attachment" in *Wordsworth's Ethics* (24-25). He discusses the "Deep that calls to Deep across the hills" (l.433) in the poet's 1794 version of *An Evening Walk* in reference to the "Deep that calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts" in Psalm 42:7 (*KJV*, qtd. in *Wordsworth's Ethics* 24). What draws Wordsworth to the Hebrew Bible, Potkay contends, is its "indeterminacy" and "sublime affront to clear representation" (25). One could argue that Wordsworth's fascination with "indeterminacy" is a precursor to the negative capability of John Keats. Nevertheless, such "sublime affront to clear representation" can be taken as evidence that Wordsworth views sound as something transcendent, defying the bondage of our earthly, visual restraints.

comparison [...] a sense of the truth of the likeness, from the moment that it is perceived, grows—and continues to grow—upon the mind; the resemblance depending less upon outline of form and feature than upon expression and effect” (1815 “Preface” xxxiv). While Wordsworth does spend time on a discussion of imagination and sight operating together in the work of other poets, he draws from his own verse (the 1807 “Resolution and Independence,” “O Nightingale! thou surely art,” and “To the Cuckoo”) when illustrating the cooperation of imagination and sound (303). For instance, Wordsworth observes in “Resolution and Independence” that “the Stock-dove *broods*” (l. 5, emphasis mine). In the “Preface,” he explains the intentionality behind his word choice to describe the action of the stock-dove: “The Stock-dove is said to *coo*, a sound well imitating the note of the bird; but, by the intervention of the metaphor *broods*, the affections are called in by the imagination to assist in marking the manner in which the Bird reiterates and prolongs her soft note” (1815 “Preface” xxiii). The “brood[ing]” of Wordsworth’s stock-dove internally rhymes with the onomatopoeic “coo.” Without resorting to an outright description of the bird’s call, Wordsworth encourages our minds to conjure its sound, demonstrating his belief that sound is more conducive than sight to the facilitation of the creative imagination.

This thesis concerns Wordsworth’s fascination with sound in poetry and its effect upon the active imagination of those who listen to it. For the purpose of clarity, I occasionally use the self-invented phrase “poetic musicality” to describe a poem’s aural sensitivity and the way in which it uses sound to create auditory cohesion, whether or not that be through harmonious means. With these subjects of musicality and imagination in mind, I address works which I believe best convey Wordsworth’s experimentations with sound at the height of his career, namely: the 1798 and 1800 versions of *Lyrical Ballads* and the 1805 *Prelude*, with some reference to the 1807 *Poems, in Two Volumes*. With its autobiographical subject being the

“growth of a poet’s mind,” the *Prelude* contains several episodes in which Wordsworth considers the interplay between aural influences and his imagination. I additionally chose *Lyrical Ballads* and *Poems* because Wordsworth himself references works from these collections when discussing the powers of sound and imagination in his 1815 “Preface.”

The aim of this work is to understand Wordsworth’s complicated views of sound in his poetry: sound as a relic of religious literature, as a moral agent, and—above all—as a provoker of imagination. I am particularly intrigued by Wordsworth’s prioritization and execution of aural imagery (as opposed to its visual counterpart), however I will survey other means of engaging with sound: for instance, the power of rhyme and metrical manipulation. At the center of my thesis lies the question of what Wordsworth means by the “expression and effect” of sound-based imagination—something somewhat opaquely described in his 1815 “Preface.”⁶

Wordsworth recognizes the effect of the art of music upon the art of poetry when he notes that “All Poets, except the dramatic, have been in the practice of feigning that their works were composed to the music of the harp or lyre [...] For my own part, I have not been disposed to violate probability so far, or to make such a large demand upon the Reader’s charity” (1815 “Preface” xvii). Nevertheless, Wordsworth clarifies that while “a supposed musical accompaniment” lends “due force” to some of his verses, for most of his poems, “*as a substitute* for the classic lyre or romantic harp, I require nothing more than an animated or impassioned recitation adapted to the subject” (xvii, emphasis mine). The fact that the voice is “a substitute” for instrumentation implies Wordsworth’s intention that his readers remain attuned to the musical character of his words. Further, Wordsworth describes a creative relationship between

⁶ “When the Imagination frames a comparison, if it does not strike on the first presentation, a sense of the truth of the likeness, from the moment that it is perceived, grows—and continues to grow—upon the mind; the resemblance depending less upon outline upon form and feature, than upon expression and effect” (1815 “Preface” xxxiv).

reader and poem akin to that of musician and composition, in that just as each musical performer brings something new in their rendering of a musical piece, so too does each reader bring something new in their “power to modulate [...] the music of the poem” (xviii). My project concerns sound both in its own terms and in the sense of poetic musicality, yet it is nevertheless worthwhile to understand that Wordsworth does not necessarily engage with musicality in the traditional sense—more in terms of the effect which sound has upon its listeners.⁷ In this thesis, however, I am interested in Wordsworth’s conviction of the ability of sound to inspire a reader’s creative imagination in their interpretation of poetic meaning.

Ultimately, Wordsworth’s belief in the greatness of the human mind, particularly its imaginative capabilities, features prominently in his poetry, especially in concert with his musings on the power of sound to enable such intellectual creativity. Although Wordsworth meditates upon the significance of both sight and hearing, he nonetheless places greater emphasis on the latter in one’s interactions with nature: “this mighty sum / Of things for ever speaking” (“Expostulation and Reply” ll. 25-26). Wordsworth’s fascination with hearing stems from his belief that it is more conducive to the exercise of imagination than sight, as it is easier to use one’s imagination to envision things not immediately present. The susceptibility of these invisible “things” to imaginative thought thus allows them to produce a greater effect on the mind because one’s perception of them remains subject to constant modification. Accordingly, throughout his works Wordsworth draws upon the sense of hearing not only to strengthen his poetic delivery and meaning, but to emphasize the human capacity for creative imagination in our perceptions of the world.

⁷ It is worth noting that, although Wordsworth did not play a musical instrument himself, it is evident from comments in his poetry and prose writings that he greatly esteemed the musical arts.

I. Historical Context: Understanding Romantic and Wordsworthian Soundscapes

In order to ascertain how Wordsworth fits in as a contributor to and developer of Romantic soundscapes, I start with a survey of contextual historical and theoretical approaches to sound (and musicality) in poetry. After all, Wordsworth's writings draw from a rich poetic and musical tradition, one which he acknowledges in his critical prose works. Historically, sound in poetry has ranged from the musical accompaniment expected by the ancient Greeks, to innovations of meter and rhythm in the Renaissance, to Romantic aspirations towards a musical ideal of liberation.

Although in modern times we see music and language as distinct arts, for the ancient Greeks, the two were intertwined. As John Neubauer notes in his book *The Emancipation of Music from Language*, the meanings of "music" and "language" were captured in the single Greek word, *musiké* (22).⁸ James Anderson Winn adds in *Unsuspected Eloquence* that a Classical Greek poet was first called a "singer" before being recognized as a literary "maker" later in the period (3). With the advent of instrumental music and improvisation towards the end of the fifth century B.C., vocal (linguistic) dominance of music, as heretofore understood, waned (Neubauer 23). Poetry began to be seen as an art distinct from its musical origins.⁹

Early Christian music, however, preserved the ancient influence of poetry, and perhaps developed it further through its purely vocal delivery of music (Winn 33). Winn credits this melding of poetry and music to the Hebrew oral tradition, asserting that early Christian music had its foundation in the musical practices of Jewish synagogues (35). Wordsworth greatly admired the poetry of Milton, whom he regarded as "a Hebrew in soul" because of his

⁸ Winn refers to this term as "*mousike*" (33).

⁹ Winn attributes this change to the development of written language, which made melody less important as a memory device for "epic recitations and public speeches" (17).

“abhorrence of idolatry” and, consequently, his distaste for the limitations of the eye (1815 “Preface” xxx). The oral origins of Hebrew and early Christian music meant that they were less dependent on the visual stimuli of words and musical notation written on a page and could accordingly contribute to the continued fusion of music and language, at least for a time.

The Renaissance saw the development of musical humanism, a movement which sought to “subjugate music to poetry,” with the “most extreme musical humanists” avoiding heightened harmonic complexities for fear of music overtaking the vocal “expression of the text” (Winn 194, 128). Regardless, according to Winn, the printing press and proliferation of the printed word, along with the implied expansion of literacy, prevented the total domination of purely aural delivery and techniques. Poetry and music were now as much rooted in the sense of sight as they were in the sense of hearing. At the same time emerged the poetic patterns of Modern (Shakespearean) English like the “Chaucerian accentual-syllabic pentameter line as a vehicle of narrative and drama” (Fussell 68). By the end of this period, there was a prevalent tendency towards “strict syllabic limitation” and a renewed emphasis on the “relative predictability of stress positions” in poetic lines (Fussell 69). Despite the influence of this “systematic” poetry, Paul Fussell writes in his book *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, with the late 18th century came the introduction of “an ‘expendable’ line which could *swell* or *diminish* expressively according to the *dynamics* of the rhetorical pressures within it” (71; emphasis mine).¹⁰ Notably, the language which Fussell uses to describe this new form of poetry employs a distinctly musical

¹⁰ Adam Potkay analyzes the burgeoning use of such dynamics in late 17th-century poet John Dryden’s translation of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* (“Lucretius” 13). Dryden describes the progress of Sisyphus’s punishment of futility: “To heave the Stone against the rising Mount; / Which urg’d, and labour’d, and forc’d up with pain, / Recoils & rawls impetuous down, and smoaks along the plain” (Dryden 3:209-11, qtd. in “Lucretius” 13). The haltingness of the caesurae in the line describing Sisyphus’s labor “mimics the slow upward progress of Sisyphus’s stone,” and Dryden demonstrates “its swift and long course downward” through the accelerated tempo encouraged by his subsequent line’s “heptameter of perfect iambs” (13).

diction of dynamics, crescendos, and decrescendos, signifying the start of an aesthetic movement that called for a more free and unrestrained, or idealistically musical, approach to poetry.

In 18th-century Europe, in poetry (and in music) the dominant literary theory of the day was mimesis, the idea that art is like a mirror. Mimesis found its roots in an Aristotelian empirical standard, which encouraged art—in all its forms—to be imitative of the natural world (*The Mirror and the Lamp* 37-38).¹¹ Yet Aristotelian mimetic practices did not seek to mirror natural reality itself, rather a more perfect version of nature, something 18th-century English critics called “nature improved” (35). The writings of Plato, who posited that art imitates universal Ideas, were also a key component of 18th-century mimetic beliefs, reflecting to some extent a “transition from the empirical to the intuitive ideal” (43). The metaphor of the idealized mirror which mimetic artists held to their surroundings highlights the theory’s reliance upon the sense of sight. The world of mimesis which preceded Wordsworth was a world based on a sense of vision that the poet would find idolatrous. Despite the dominance of these mimetic ideas, which had endured since the time of the ancient Greeks, a new conception of art began to develop at the close of the century.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries emerged what M. H. Abrams calls the “expressive theory” of art, in which art is defined by its relation to the artist and not its relation to the outside world—a spurning of mimetic theory. When applied to poetry, this expressive theory meant that verse “embod[ied] the combined product of the poet’s perception, thoughts, and feelings;” in essence, Romantic expressive theorists celebrated the autonomy and spontaneous

¹¹ Or at least, the so-called natural world of idealized perfection which Aristotle and his followers admired—a world defined by uniformity and a beauty determined by the “statistical average,” or “generic” version, of a species or group of objects (*Mirror* 38).

creativity of the human mind (*Mirror* 22).¹² In *Poetry and the Romantic Musical Aesthetic*, James Donelan writes that the 18th century was “the beginning of a new era [... defined by] a belief in the power of the self-conscious, independent mind,” and there persisted a movement towards an examination of the interior, artistic self, instead of the external world (2-5).

As part of this new emphasis on interiority, German and English Romantics began to aspire to the level of music in their poetry, “applauding [... its supposed capacity] to express the emotions of its makers and proposing to make poetry more like it, more sensuous, more affective, more ‘organic’ in its form” (Winn 202). Winn notes a contradiction between the increasing fluidity of Romantic poetry seeking to imitate music and the strict rhythmic and harmonic forms popular among musical composers of the period, including Haydn and Mozart.¹³ As Donelan points out, although Wordsworth, like many other Romantic poets, “knew little of German philosophy and less of music,” he nonetheless grasped, like his German contemporaries, “the materiality of poetry through metaphors of music, and his descriptions of listening to music represent self-consciousness through metaphors based on the phenomenal encounter of the listener’s mind with sound” (Donelan 98-99). The important distinction here is that music as a formal art bore little significance to the Romantic poets. Instead, they sought to mimic—through the sound of their verse—an idealized conception of music as a liberated force of expression that was incongruous with regimented contemporary musical practices.¹⁴

¹² The hallmarks of Romantic expressive theory are summarized to some extent by Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry: “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (1800 “Preface” 183).

¹³ This juxtaposition becomes less pronounced in the mid- and late-19th century, with musical composers like Franz Liszt endeavoring to reach the level of a “tone poet” rather than a “mere musician” (Winn 275). The blurring of these distinctions between music and poetry in the former art opens the possibility that, in aspiring towards a state of poetic musicality, Romantic poets paradoxically instigated a movement within music itself to make this imaginary (according to Winn) condition a reality.

¹⁴ As the Romantics diverged from earlier mimetic practices, preferring a more expressive approach to poetry, their imitation of their musical ideal remained an ironic form of mimesis in itself.

The intermingling of musicality and poetics became a dominant Romantic aesthetic. Wordsworth was not the first, nor the only, Romantic to identify music with poetic expression. In his 1818 essay “On Poetry in General,” critic William Hazlitt called poetry “the music of language” and argued that it “express[ed] the music of the mind” (Hazlitt qtd. in *Mirror* 48-49). Abrams asserts that the Romantic value placed upon music, in lieu of painting, was part of the period’s overall rejection of Classical and 18th-century mimesis; although mimesis may be possible to a certain extent within music, the art is not imitative to any overarching degree (50). The most intriguing aspect of music, to the Romantics, was its capacity for expressive freedom, and the desire for unconstrained authenticity explains part of Wordsworth’s decision to adopt “the real language of men” in at least the proper ballads of his *Lyrical Ballads* (1800 “Preface” 184). Wordsworth sought to avoid the “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression” used by earlier, 18th-century poets, and in so doing, he succeeded in recreating the sounds of everyday rural life and language (174-75).

Wordsworth and his collaborator Coleridge viewed art as “a joint product of the objective and the projected,” an idea derived from the latter’s 1818 essay “On Poesy or Art” (*Mirror* 52). The two poets agreed that the perceptive mind is an active, rather than “inertly receptive,” instrument that, in the act of perception, contributes to our construction of the exterior world (58). Wordsworth recognized music’s—but more importantly, sound’s—potential as a force for developing, and facilitating, the ability of the creatively perceptive mind. His appreciation for aurality stems from his respect for the nuanced power of imagination inherent in Milton and the Hebrew Bible. In combining a Hebraic distrust of visual iconography and a reverence for the imaginative potential of the human mind, Wordsworth develops sound as a tool to be used in ways beyond that of enforcing harmonious coherence in a poem. For Wordsworth, sound is the

channel through which poems can generate “expression[s] and effect[s]” which continually “[grow ...] upon the mind” long after the verse has ended. In his works, he invokes the power of sound to heighten his readers’ auditory senses and enhance both the imaginative reverberations of his poetry and our conceptions of a world “half creat[ed]” (“Tintern Abbey” l. 107).

II. Natural Sounds and the Imagination in “The Idiot Boy” and “There was a Boy”

Throughout the 1798 and 1800 editions of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explores the wisdom of childhood, as well as its connection to nature. He suggests that children possess a heightened ability of communing with the natural world, partly through their innocence, but also through their perpetual wonder and instinctive receptivity to their surroundings, in particular: its sounds and its silences. Consequently, the minds of children are more actively perceptive in their engagement with the external world, and in a way, the intellectual maturity which one reaches in adulthood results in the demise of this creative involvement. “The Idiot Boy” and Wordsworth’s fragmentary “There was a Boy” revolve around the interactions of children with nature, especially how those interactions remain dependent upon the power of sound and its imaginative impact. While the former retains a comedic playfulness in its material, with an outrageous adventure and a happy ending, the latter is decidedly more somber and ends in tragedy. The difference in tone between Wordsworth’s poems anticipates the eventual fates of the children they depict. Both boys—Johnny Foy in “The Idiot Boy” and the unnamed Winander youth in “There was a Boy”—enjoy temporary harmony with the natural world; however, only Johnny—who, in some ways, never grows up—succeeds in ultimately maintaining his auditory link to the environment. The Winander Boy, on the cusp of adolescence and eventual adulthood, finds himself subjected to an untimely, and silent, death.

In “The Idiot Boy,” the autistic Johnny becomes lost in the woods after being sent alone, for the first time, on an errand by his mother, Betty Foy. Nevertheless, his midnight ramblings prove to be far from dangerous, as he enjoys a communicative and comforting relationship with the natural environment in which he finds himself—especially with the hooting owls—and mother and son enjoy a joyful reunion at the poem’s end. Wordsworth demonstrates this

intimacy between Johnny Foy and the landscape through the rhyme scheme of his poem, as well as the auditory reverberations it reinforces. The poetic arrangement of “The Idiot Boy” reflects the predictableness of Johnny’s predicament (becoming lost on his first solo errand), as Wordsworth’s design—on the whole—follows a clear pattern, with five-line stanzas in formulaic iambic tetrameter and a largely consistent rhyme scheme of ABCCB.¹⁵ Early in the poem, for example, the narrator asks:

—Why bustle thus about your door,
 What means this bustle, Betty Foy?
 Why are you in this mighty fret?
 And why on horseback have you set
 Him who you love, your idiot boy? (ll. 7-11)

The regular rhyme scheme allows for similar word sounds to ring throughout the piece, often highlighting other forms of repetition. In this manner, Wordsworth establishes the phenomenon of echo as an element of his verse, as well as of nature, in the hooting of the owls and Johnny’s imitative calls: “The owlets hoot, the owlets curr, / And Johnny’s lips they burr, burr, burr” (ll. 114-15). The rhyming of “curr” and burr” connects Johnny and the owls with each other to the extent that their respective sounds become almost indistinguishable.¹⁶ Notably, Betty Foy does not hear her son’s “burrs” again in the poem until she discovers him by the waterfall, but she does hear that

The owlets through the long blue night
 Are shouting to each other still:
 Fond lovers, yet not quite hob nob,
 They lengthen out the tremulous sob,
 That *echoes* far from hill to hill. (ll. 297-301, emphasis mine)

¹⁵ The six-line opening and seven-line closing stanzas are exceptions to this arrangement.

¹⁶ Such communication between children and birds is not unusual in Wordsworth’s poetry. As Elizabeth Helsinger observes of Johnny and other children in the *Lyrical Ballads*: “what these rural children say, or sing, situates their musically repetitive speech closer to birdsong (through it they can converse with birds, beasts, and even the dead) than to what the narrator or his readers think they know of the communicative powers of language” (Helsinger 26).

The owlets continue to “echo,” or repeat, each other’s calls, and with the earlier parallels drawn between the sounds of Betty’s son and the woodland birds, readers cannot help but wonder if the distraught mother is actually listening to the calls of her child as he communicates with the young owls. That the aurally observed “owlets” are “not quite hob nob” indicates that at least one party may not be a frequent participant in the avian conversation, but he may not be considered a foreigner for long given the subsequent—and rhyming—observation that “They lengthen out the tremulous sob.”¹⁷ The reverberation inherent in the rhyming format of “The Idiot Boy” supports the poem’s story of a child attuned to the sounds of nature, whose echoes he both enjoys and, in some perhaps inconceivable way, seems to understand.

In a similar vein to “The Idiot Boy,” the structure of “There was a Boy” reveals much about the poem’s subject matter, yet it depicts a child with a more tenuous connection to nature and its music because his mind approaches the rationality of adulthood. Although the unnamed child depicted in “There was a Boy” attempts to commune with the owls inhabiting the “Cliffs / And Islands of Winander” (“There was a Boy” ll. 1-2), the owls recognize him as an imposter and stop answering his hooting calls. The poem ends with an unnamed narrator standing over the Winander Boy’s grave, “for he died when he was ten years old” (l. 32) and remains lost in silence forever. “There was a Boy” is a poem written in blank verse, with iambic pentameter lines that mimic the sound of “natural” human speech. The result of such a form displays the dominance of human influence even in the composition of the poem’s language. There are still moments of echoing, like the “*echoes loud / Redoubled and redoubled, a wild scene / Of mirth*

¹⁷ “Hob nob” describes “A familiar call to reciprocal drinking,” though an abridged version of Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* also directs readers to “habnab,” a term meaning “At random” (Johnson 469, 447). The foundation of “hob nob” in reference to drinking companions suggests a sense of kinship—something which Johnny apparently lacks, at least for the moment. Even so, the phrase’s connection to “habnab” or chance, however, forces us to consider whether there truly exists a division of unfamiliarity between the “shouting” of the “Fond lovers.”

and jocund din” (ll. 14-16, emphasis mine); however, these occurrences are less frequent than in “The Idiot Boy,” especially with the lack of a rhyme scheme.¹⁸ The poem’s copying of human speech parallels the Winander Boy’s attempts at owl hoots, themselves a form of mimicry, and creates a purposefully contrived and unnatural feeling to the piece. At the same time, the oxymoronic pairing of “jocund din” adds to the confusion of the “wild scene.”

For all their differences in their abilities to connect to nature, both Johnny Foy and the boy of Winander make these attempts at natural communion through the sounds of owls. In “The Idiot Boy,” Wordsworth associates Johnny with the owlets: “The owlets hoot, the owlets curr, / And Johnny’s lips they burr, burr, burr” (“The Idiot Boy” ll. 114-15). Not only does the rhyming couplet link Johnny to the birds, the beings are further united in their shared childlike circumstances. During Wordsworth’s time, Karen Guendel observes, people with mental disabilities like Johnny’s “were often thought of as permanent children” due to “their relative dependence on others”; thus, no matter his age, “Johnny is a perpetual child” and the owlets are themselves youthful owls (79). The Winander Boy likewise makes sounds resembling those of the owls, as he “Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls / That they might answer him” (“There was a Boy” ll. 10-11), and he enjoys a temporary union with the creatures when “they would shout / Across the wat’ry vale and shout again / Responsive to his call” (ll. 11-13). The owlets “shout” in “The Idiot Boy,” too, though this time *they* are the initiators of the avian dialogue: “[The owlet] lengthens out his lonely shout, / Halloo! Halloo! A long halloo!” (“The Idiot Boy”

¹⁸ The poem’s tendency towards extensive repetition begins in the opening stanzas of “The Idiot Boy,” in which an owlet “*shouts* from nobody knows where” and “lengthens out his lonely *shout*” (“The Idiot Boy” ll. 4-5, emphasis mine), calling out: “Halloo! halloo! a long halloo!” (l. 6). At the same time, “The moon is up [...] The owlet in the moonlight air” (ll. 2-3). Wordsworth then emphasizes the “bustle” (ll. 7, 8) of Betty Foy’s activity, and his second stanza’s final phrase, “idiot boy” (l. 11), also concludes its sequel (l. 16). Such levels of repetition continue throughout the rest of the poem. In contrast, the thirty-two lines of “There was a Boy” exhibit the same number of repetitive instances, five, that “The Idiot Boy” features in merely its first sixteen: “ye knew him well, ye Cliffs” (“There was a Boy” l. 1), “Press’d closely palm to palm” (l. 8), “And they would shout [...] and shout again” (ll. 11-12), “Redoubled and redoubled” (l. 15), “pauses of deep silence [...] in that silence” (ll. 17-18).

ll. 5-6). The boys' divergent approaches to owl communication, however, indicate the extent of their greater respective relationships with nature and their openness to its auditory beckoning.

Silence plays a significant role in the two poems, and Wordsworth differentiates between *receptive* and *expectant* silence in their resultant effects upon one's imaginative ability to be in touch with nature. Johnny's quietness in "The Idiot Boy" is a receptive one, and when he first sets out to retrieve the physician, the poem's narrator observes: "How quietly [Betty's] Johnny goes" ("The Idiot Boy" l. 101). At the end of the poem, the narrator notes that "Johnny all night long had heard / The owls in tuneful concert strive" (ll. 452-53). The boy's listening silence allows him to more effectively partake in the aural atmosphere of the wood through which he travels. Despite the establishment of the "burring" sound as Johnny's alone, it is not until Johnny is "out of sight" (ll. 105) on the lane that Betty hears him make "the noise he loves" (ll. 110). Importantly, the rhyming couplet in the ensuing stanza likens Johnny's "burr" to the "curr" of the owlets (ll. 114-15), introducing the possibility that it is the owlets, and not her son, whom Betty hears. Alternatively, she could be discerning a conversation between the two parties, as was earlier suggested with regard to the lines describing the "tremulous sob" (l. 300) of the owlets. Johnny's receptivity to the calls of the owlets enables him to communicate, or imagine that he communicates, with nature.

Conversely, the boy of Winander engages in an expectant silence that ends in disappointment. His muteness is an expectant one because he waits for the response of the owls, whose "pauses of deep silence mock'd his skill [of mimicry]" ("There was a Boy" l. 17). With the narrator's description of how the Winander Boy "hung / Listening" (ll. 18-19), Wordsworth forces readers to similarly "hang" in expectation due to the dangling nature of the line's enjambment. Although it might seem that the intensity of the boy's listening, arising from his

expectancy, provokes his mind to imagine the visual scene of “mountain torrents” (l. 21), Wordsworth clarifies that this “visible scene / Would enter *unawares* into his mind” (“There was a Boy” ll. 21-22, emphasis mine). Although A. W. Phinney endeavors to explain that this period of expectant silence allows for a “moment of deeper revelation” prompted by the “sound of the mountain torrents,” the epiphany is instead the boy’s passive realization, only made aware to the reader of the poem (Phinney 68). The boy is so fixated upon the expectation of the sounds he desires to hear that he remains deaf and blind to the greater sublimity of the setting in which he finds himself.

The two boys in each of the poems eventually meet different fates that are seemingly tied to their respective abilities to aurally connect with nature: Johnny becomes one with the natural world and the Winander Boy dies. “There was a Boy” begins with an address to the landscape surrounding Lake Windermere: “There was a Boy, ye knew him well, ye Cliffs / And Islands of Winander” (“There was a Boy” ll. 1-2). Deceptively, upon a first reading, “ye” seems directed at the reader. That the poem is directed to nature itself, instead of the human reader, seems to subordinate humanity to the larger world. Further, the past tense reference to the land’s acquaintance with the Winander Boy implies that it knows him no longer. The breaking of the bond between the Winander Boy and nature starts when the owls recognize the foreignness of his bird calls: “it chanced / That pauses of deep silence mock’d his skill [of imitation]” (ll. 16-17). Wordsworth highlights the counterfeit character of the boy’s sounds when he describes how “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” (ll. 7-10). The comparison of the boy’s method of imitation to an “instrument,” a man-made contraption, adds to the divide separating the Winander Boy from the owls.

There exists no such disconnect in “The Idiot Boy.” Johnny’s sounds become indistinguishable from those of nature to the extent that his mother has difficulty locating him; unlike the boy of Winander, Johnny needs no instrumentation to make the sounds of nature, and his are no mere mimicry—they are all his own. As Betty Foy searches for her son, “The roaring water-fall she hears, / And cannot find her idiot boy” (“The Idiot Boy” ll. 370-71). The narrator reveals that Johnny is indeed near the waterfall she hears; however, his burring and the murmuring of the running waters have become indistinct. Wordsworth expands the union between Johnny and nature when he likens the boy to the moon: “The moon that shines above his head / Is not more still and mute than he” (ll.90-91). Significantly, Johnny’s muteness differs from that of the adult narrator in “There was a Boy” in that the former retains his receptivity to natural aural stimuli. Furthermore, Johnny’s childlike state of mind prevents him from succumbing to an adult state of self-consciousness and preserves his ability to form a union with nature.

The influence of the eye has little significance in “There was a Boy,” but the deceitfulness of vision does play a role in the events of “The Idiot Boy,” particularly those surrounding Betty Foy.¹⁹ Betty depends on the sound of Johnny’s “burr” (l. 19) to identify him; when she loses the sound of her son in her search for him, her eyes convince her that she sees Johnny where he is not. When Johnny leaves Betty’s sight at the beginning of his journey, his mother can still discern her son’s location because of his sounds: “And Johnny makes the noise he loves, / And Betty listens, glad to hear it” (ll. 110-11). Yet, as Betty sits by Susan Gale’s

¹⁹ Importantly, in “There was a Boy,” “the visible scene [...] With all its solemn imagery” (l. 21-23) enters “*unawares* into [the boy’s] mind” (l. 22, emphasis mine) and has no influence, deceitful or otherwise, on him. Although the boy’s visual senses take in the scenery surrounding him, his mind remains immune to its effect, “unaware” of its solemnity. Additionally, the boy’s mind seems unable to visually process his surroundings, as the “heaven” which he observes is an “uncertain” one (l. 24). The boy’s insensitivity to visual stimuli makes his inability to hear the sounds of nature all the more tragic—his is a dark and silent world.

sickbed, “fully many a sound she hears” (“The Idiot Boy” l. 150), but she can no longer distinguish Johnny’s burrs. When she goes to search for her son, the confusion caused by Johnny’s apparent silence results in visual disorientation: “In tree and tower was Johnny seen, / In bush and brake, in black and green, / ’Twas Johnny, Johnny, every where” (ll. 219-21).²⁰ Unable to hear Johnny, Betty is tricked by her eyes into believing that she sees her son everywhere. When she is finally reunited with her child, “Betty a drunken pleasure quaffs, / To hear again her idiot boy” (ll. 390-91). Betty’s ability to perceive her son’s sounds allows her to finally locate him and overcome the illusions which her imagination conjured from misleading visual stimuli.

Johnny’s closing lines, though cryptic, hint at the reason for his salvation: his receptivity to nature and its auralty. The narrator records that Johnny “all night long had heard / The owls in tuneful concert strive; / No doubt too he the moon had seen” (“The Idiot Boy” ll. 452-54), but the boy does not perceive these details, at least in the same way as the narrator. He instead tells his mother that “The cocks did crow to-who, to-who, / And the sun did shine so cold” (ll. 460-61). Wordsworth’s choice of onomatopoeia in these lines recalls the opening of Coleridge’s *Christabel*: “’Tis the middle of night by the castle clock, / And the owls have awakened the crowing cock; / Tu—whit! Tu—whoo!” (*Christabel* ll. 1-3). Although “The Idiot Boy” was first published in 1798, before *Christabel*, the two poems seem to have been written contemporaneously, at least in part. The possible reference to *Christabel* brings attention to other gothic, or perhaps mock-gothic, imagery in “The Idiot Boy.” At one point, Betty worries that “him that wicked pony’s carried / To the dark cave, the goblins’ hall, / Or in the castle he’s

²⁰ These lines resemble those of Coleridge’s ancient mariner, whose “rime” is also part of *Lyrical Ballads*: “Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink” ([1800] *The Ancient Mariner, A Poet’s Reverie* ll. 117-18). Betty Foy sees “Johnny, Johnny, every where,” nor any son to hold.

pursuing, / Among the ghosts, his own undoing” (“The Idiot Boy” ll. 237-240). All of these terrible suppositions occur to Betty because she cannot hear anything: “’Tis silence all on every side; / The town so long, the town so wide, / Is silent as the skies” (ll. 254-56). Unlike his mother, Johnny remains aware of the sounds which surround him. His confusion between owl calls and rooster crows reflects his tendency to blend nature into a single entity that is unified by the senses, particularly that of hearing. The seeming disorientedness of his highly imaginative recollection of the night’s adventures continues in his synesthetic description of the “cold” sun, or moon, combining touch and sight. Nonetheless, even this apparently unrelated illustration of the moon relates to sound, as the celestial body is earlier emphasized in the poem for being “still and mute” (l. 91).²¹

Johnny’s safe return home raises the question of why Wordsworth spared this boy and not the child of Winander. Johnny’s mental state ensures that he forever retains his childlike ability to commune with nature and all its stimuli. Interestingly, the Winander Boy “died when he was ten years old” (“There was a Boy” l. 32), an age at which children begin to mature and think of adulthood, closing themselves off to the imaginative flights of fancy encouraged by frolics in nature. One could take the Winander Boy’s death literally, yet the possibility remains that his death is a metaphorical one—a description of the end of childhood and all its youthful imaginings.²² Essential to those episodes of imaginative engagement with nature, Wordsworth

²¹ Guendel comments on Johnny’s seeming confusion, likening it to the “lunar epiphany” which Wordsworth experiences on Mount Snowdon in the final book of *The Prelude*: “Just as Johnny inverts sun and moon, night and day, so Wordsworth turns the world upside down, making himself a new one” (Guendel 83, 81). Helsinger similarly acknowledges the poetic power behind Johnny’s words—“Johnny is a poet, albeit one who does not know it”—but both critics fail to acknowledge the influence of nature’s sounds upon the hero of the poem and his cryptic moment of profundity (Helsinger 27).

²² In his article on “Wordsworth’s Winander Boy and Romantic Theories of Language,” Phinney fixates upon the effect of the boy’s death upon the narrator and reader, but he does not consider how the consequences of the poem’s events affect the boy himself: “Just as the silence of the owls is replaced by the sound of mountain torrents, just as the absence of the boy is replaced with a heightened awareness of the landscape in which he lived and died, so the intervention of the stony epitaph creates the space in which the significance of the boy’s life and loss are to be

implies in these two poems, is the power of sound. Notably, of Betty Foy's decision to send her autistic son on an independent errand, the narrator of "The Idiot Boy" remarks that "The like was never heard of yet" ("The Idiot Boy" l. 50). Wordsworth uses the phrase in the same manner as "unimaginable": the "like" was never conceived of before. To hear is to imagine, and in no period of time is one more receptive to the sounds of nature and the imaginative wonderings they inspire than in childhood. The Winander Boy's expectant silence, a result of his developing maturity, prevents him from discerning and participating in the actual state of his natural environment. Meanwhile, Johnny's childlike mindset protects him from the insensitivity of adulthood; he is free to let his imagination wander and allow the "expression and effect" of the sounds he hears to "[grow] upon the mind" (1815 "Preface" xxxiv).

traced" (Phinney 69). The importance of the boy, for his own sake, should not be overlooked—or underheard—especially as in earlier versions of the poem, the boy and the narrator are one and the same.

III. The Deceptive Eye and Stymied Ear in “The Thorn”

The poems of the Winander Boy and Johnny Foy demonstrate Wordsworth’s respect for the imaginative potential inherent in a childlike receptivity to sound. In “The Thorn,” another work in his *Lyrical Ballads* collection, Wordsworth considers the limited aural responsiveness of adulthood, or more specifically, old age. At the center of the piece lies the narrative of a retired trading ship captain, who, “being past the middle age of life, had retired [...] to some village or country town of which he was not a native” (“Note to ‘The Thorn’” 287). The mariner’s imagination becomes captivated by the mysterious history of a sorrowful local woman, Martha Ray, and the poem becomes an account of all that he knows of her. Despite the captain’s fervency, however, the veracity of the story becomes increasingly dubious in the meandering circuitry of the sailor’s words and in his seemingly empty repetitions of already dwelt-upon observations.

Before contemplating the aural implications of the poem’s content, it is first necessary to appraise the acoustic effects of verse form in “The Thorn.” In his 1800 note to the poem, Wordsworth explains his aim of mimicking the convoluted storytelling style of his narrator, a man who has “become credulous and talkative from indolence” during the retirement of his advanced years (“Note” 287). In order to accomplish this imitative outcome, through which readers can understand “the manner in which such men cleave to the same ideas; and [...] the turns of passion, always different, yet palpably different, by which their conversation is swayed,” Wordsworth thought it “necessary that the Poem, to be natural, should in reality move slowly; yet [...] it would appear to move quickly.” In other words, the poet intends for “The Thorn” to progress slowly with the deceptive appearance of speed.

It is “by the aid of the metre [sic]” that Wordsworth aims to achieve his desired sound effect (“Note” 287). The 1800 version of “The Thorn” is divided into eleven-line stanzas, with three lines of tetrameter followed by one line of trimeter, a subsequent line of tetrameter, then a repetition of the pattern in the next four lines, and a closing tetrameric couplet. Additionally, the poem’s rhyme scheme follows a pattern of ABCB D EFFE GG, as in the opening verse:

There is a thorn; it looks so old,
 In truth you’d find it hard to say,
 How it could ever have been young,
 It looks so old and grey.
 Not higher than a two years’ child
 It stands erect this aged thorn;
 No leaves it has, no thorny points;
 It is a mass of knotted joints,
 A wretched thing forlorn.
 It stands erect, and like a stone
 With lichens it is overgrown. (ll. 1-11)

Although Wordsworth’s stanzaic form is too long to be that of a ballad and too short to be a sonnet, elements of each can be observed. The first quatrain (ll. 1-4) recalls the alternating rhyme and metrical pattern expected by a typical ballad stanza, something noted by Corinna Russell in her article “A Defence of Tautology” (Russell 108). However, Adam Potkay notes in his book *Wordsworth’s Ethics* that Wordsworth “rarely employed [the ballad stanza] in its standard form. He more often modified it for his purposes” (*Wordsworth’s Ethics* 109). Meanwhile, the rhyme scheme of the second stanzaic quatrain (ll. 6-9) in “The Thorn”—divided from the first by an interposing fifth line—takes after the organization of a Petrarchan sonnet. Finally, the closing couplet of Wordsworth’s stanzas evokes the heroic couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet, albeit in tetrameter rather than pentameter. Consequently, Wordsworth’s innovative melding of forms is at once an instance of poetic experimentation and a surprising disruption of readers’ expectations. The mix of forms proves unpredictable, and it speaks to the bewildering nature of

the sailor narrator's tale. The mariner draws his information from a variety of questionable sources—notably hearsay—and binds them all together in such a way that the truth of Martha Ray's past becomes difficult to discern. The erratic verse form leads to confusion, causing readers to become lost within the swiftly moving narrative of the poem

Wordsworth controls readers' perceptions of his poetic tempo to a greater extent through his organization of tetrameter and trimeter lines. Potkay comments upon Wordsworth's use of a modified ballad stanza in "Lines Written in Early Spring." Like "The Thorn," this lyrical ballad features a series of tetrameric lines that are brought up short by a line of trimeter, which lends "notes of mystery" to the poem. In these lines of trimeter, Wordsworth introduces "successive mysteries"—like "What man has made of man" (l. 8)—with the result "that as we come to the end of each stanza, we have a rhythmic as well as semantic sense of something missing" (*Wordsworth's Ethics* 110). As in "Lines Written in Early Spring," there is in "The Thorn" always "something missing" in the narrative of the sea captain. His information is reliant upon unreliable gossip, and the sailor himself divulges his lack of knowledge:

I cannot tell; I wish I could;	A
For the true reason <i>no one knows</i> ,	B
But if you'd gladly view the spot,	C
The spot to which she goes;	B
The heap that's like an infant's grave,	D
The pond—and thorn, so old and grey,	E
Pass by her door—'tis seldom shut—	F
And if you see her in her hut,	F
Then to the spot away!—	E
I never heard of such as dare	G
Approach the spot when she is there. (ll. 89-99, emphasis mine)	G

The swiftness of the tetrameter and trimeter lines—much shorter than the pentameter often employed in long poems—distracts readers (and listeners) from the plodding pace and suspect

nature of the narrator's account. Yet even with these apparent attempts at subterfuge, the audibly insistent interruption of Wordsworth's trimeter lines nonetheless reminds readers that *something* remains missing.

What is this "something" that is missing from the poem? Wordsworth makes the case that concrete knowledge of Martha Ray's circumstances are denied to his maritime narrator by a deceptive eye. Much of the sea captain's speculation is drawn from useless, or misleading, visual evidence. For example, his inclusion of precise measurements appears to lend credence to his story, but closer inspection shows that these are empty data: they reveal nothing. Of the pond by which the thorn grows, the narrator shares that "I've measured it from side to side: / 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide" (ll. 32-33). He intends for his audience to believe that Martha Ray "drowned [her baby] in the pond" (l. 216), but his only real evidence for such an allegation is that the mound is large enough—overly large, in fact—to cover the body of an infant. Russell observes that "Those features of the poetry of 'The Thorn' which, alongside its use of repetition, are most frequently singled out as compromising its literary status, are moments when the speaker appears most anxious to be particular" (Russell 113). Rather than a negative reflection upon the poem's creator, however, this tendency to—as Russell puts it—"[reduce] the literary to the mathematical figure" could be taken as greater indication of the narrator's undependability. After all, Wordsworth did take efforts to distance himself from the sea captain in his note to the poem; the two should be considered two separate entities ("Note" 287).

Wordsworth reveals the shortcomings of the narrator's sight and imagination in the episode during which the mariner takes his telescope up to the mountains "To view the ocean wide and bright, / [...] Ere I had heard of Martha's name" (ll. 182-84). Eventually, a storm sets in, with the result that "I could see / No object higher than my knee" (ll. 186-87). Although the

narrator claims that he set out to “view the ocean,” he does not bemoan his inability to see the water, but rather that “No screen, no fence could I discover” (l. 189). His moment of slippage reveals his actual, intrusive intent to spy upon his neighbors and calls into question his claim of initial ignorance regarding Martha Ray’s story. Not only is the narrator’s vision obscured by the oncoming storm, his eyes mislead him when instead of shelter from the rain, he comes across Martha Ray: “I thought I saw / A jutting crag [...] Instead of jutting crag, I found / A woman seated on the ground” (ll. 192-98). Thomas Ashton suggests an additional level of significance to the scene and the mariner’s telescope when he asserts that the narrator is morally and imaginatively deprived: “The narrator of *The Thorn* is without passion and suffering; his telescope indicates this and at once suggests that Wordsworth uses dramatic monologue as an ironic telescope to impress us with moral shortcoming” (Ashton 174). The sailor finds it impossible to envision his surroundings and circumstances without the use of his eyes, which blind him to both truth and ethical clear-sightedness.

The deceptive imagination of the eye is perhaps most apparent in the closing stanzas of “The Thorn.” Here, the delusion of the narrator becomes more and more obvious, especially in his contention that “Some say, if to the pond you go, / And fix on it a steady view, / The shadow of a babe you trace, / [...] And that it looks at you” (ll. 225-29). There is no baby in the pond—there is no confirmation that Martha Ray even had a baby. Nevertheless, as the sea captain allows his visual imagination to wander, he contrives even more ludicrous surmises. The “vermilion” (l. 45) blossoms adorning the mossy heap at the beginning of the poem morph into “drops of that poor infant’s blood” (l. 221), and the “stormy winter gale” (l. 24) becomes evidence of an angry spirit: “the beauteous hill of moss / *Before their eyes* began to stir; / For full fifty yards around, / The grass it shook upon the ground” (ll. 236-39, emphasis mine). Ashton

calls on readers to realize that “we are manipulated by being told *what to see*” (Ashton 184). The frantic illusion which arises from the sailor’s vision-based imagination recalls Wordsworth’s tirade against “frantic” writings and the “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation,” becoming part of the poet’s greater campaign against the eye (1800 “Preface” 177).

At times in the poem, the maritime narrator expresses a distrust of the ear. If we are meant to question the truthfulness of the sea captain’s vision-based story, then his skepticism of the ear indicates Wordsworth’s intention that we look to sound for answers. Midway through the poem, the sailor shares that “For many a time and oft were heard / Cries coming from the mountain-head [...] I cannot think whate’er they say, / They had to do with Martha Ray” (ll. 170-76). The narrator refuses to use imagination here to the same extent he does with sight and the false auditory stimulation of gossip. Although the source of the “Cries” could be the wailing of a wind that winds its way amongst the mountains, the narrator’s failure to identify the “Cries” as such suggests an alternative origin. One could reasonably assume that the “Cries” are those of Martha Ray, particularly because they originate from the mountains. When the sailor encounters the solitary Martha Ray on the mountain, he decides not to ask her the reason for her cries: “I *saw* her face, / It was enough for me; / I turned about and heard her cry” (ll. 199-201, emphasis mine). He callously ignores her vocal lamentations and decides to depend on the sight of her face for his determination of her misery. Because the sailor denies himself the exercise of an imagination provoked by aural stimuli, readers are deprived of potential clarity, and we are left in a metaphorical darkness.

The power of sound—beyond that rooted in Martha Ray’s haunting cries, if they even belong to her at all—is most deeply felt in the tautological and generally repetitive workings of the poem. Wordsworth writes in his note to “The Thorn” that people possess a “consciousness of

the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language. During such efforts, there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character” (“Note” 288). In this passage, Wordsworth presents this phenomenon as something beautiful, but it can become tedious. Such is the case with the sailor—his story is unsatisfactory because it lacks truth and is almost pure speculation, a condition made more prominent because the narrator continually repeats himself. In the first stanza alone, readers are told on two separate occasions that the thorn “looks so old” (l. 1, 4) and “stands erect” (l. 6, 10). Coleridge felt similarly in his *Biographia Literaria*, observing that “in a poem, still more in a lyric poem [...] it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discourser, without repeating the effects of dulness [sic] and garrulity” (*Biographia Literaria* 239). This “dulness and garrulity,” though could be taken as a necessary illustration of the sailor’s character and a key clue that he is not someone the audience should believe entirely.

Wordsworth differentiates between repetition that is truly tautological and that which seems to resemble tautology but is actually more profound: “the mind luxuriates in the repetition of words which appear successfully to communicate its feelings” (“Note” 288). Not only does the poet claim that “repetition and apparent tautology are frequently beauties of the highest kind,” he attributes this beauty to “the interest which the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passion, but as *things*, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion.” The words, or “*things*,” could be said to “[grow] upon the mind,” a foreshadowing of Wordsworth’s comments on aural stimuli in his 1815 “Preface” (1815 “Preface” xxxiv). In spite of the narrator’s sometimes wearying tendency to indulge in “dull and garrulous” communication, there are moments when his passionate repetition takes on additional meaning.

In response to the outsider's queries about why Martha Ray "repeat[s] that doleful cry" (l. 88), the narrator acknowledges his ignorance. Nevertheless, he calls upon his listener to

gladly view the spot,
 The spot to which she goes;
 The heap that's like an infant's grave,
 The pond—and thorn, so old and grey,
 Pass by her door—'tis seldom shut—
 And if you see her in her hut,
 Then to the spot away!
 I never heard of such as dare
 Approach the spot when she is there. (ll. 89-99)

The following stanza in the 1800 version of the poem describes the location of the thorn as a "place" (l. 109), but as in the above lines, the alternative "spot" is more often used, no less than four times. "Spot," although synonymous with "place" also bears the meaning "to espy." The tautological reference to spot, therefore, becomes the mariner's invocation of readers to *look*; no other word will communicate the same level and kind of meaning, hence the sailor's insistent dwelling upon it. Wordsworth removes the singular use of "place" in versions of the poem published after 1815, and in doing so, he heightens the meaningfully additive effect described (*Poetical Works*).

In his note to "The Thorn," Wordsworth distinguishes between "virtual" and "apparent" tautology. While the former can be tedious and considered a poetic failing, the latter is where there lies a high potential for beauty and richness of meaning ("Note" 288). Russell explains further when she writes that "The tautology arising from reiteration of 'the same words' is differentiated from the redundancy or replication proceeding from the paraphrastic practice of 'using different words when the meaning is exactly the same'" (Russell 105). She suggests that repetition in apparent tautology is necessary because no other word will do; such was the case with the use of "spot" analyzed earlier. To demonstrate his point that apparent tautology can

contribute to an overall poetic musicality, Wordsworth references passages from the song of Deborah: “Awake, awake Deborah: awake, awake, utter a song: / Arise Barak, and lead thy captivity captive, thou Son of Abinoam” (Judges 5:12, qtd. in “Note” 288). Coleridge remarks upon these quotations in *Biographia Literaria* when he offers this assessment of “*apparent* tautologies”: “Such repetitions I admit to be a beauty of the highest kind; as illustrated by Mr. Wordsworth himself from the song of Deborah” (*Biographia Literaria* 246).

Interestingly, despite Coleridge’s comments upon tautology, he does not remark upon the most persistent occurrence of tautology—be it virtual or apparent—in the poem, Martha Ray’s refrain of woe. The woman’s cries of “Oh misery! oh misery! / Oh woe is me! oh misery!” (ll. 65-66) reverberate throughout “The Thorn,” yet their echoes seem strangely trite and melodramatic. The phrase “woe is me,” is one that even by Wordsworth’s time was cliché, being used throughout the King James Version of the Bible (in Isaiah 6:5 and Jeremiah 4:31, among other instances) and in a famous line of *Hamlet*, in which Ophelia bewails, “O, woe is me / T’ have seen what I have seen, see what I see!” (Shakespeare III.1.174-75). In his 1800 “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explicitly states that he has “abstained from the use of many expressions, in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by bad Poets till such feelings of disgust are connected with them as it is scarcely possible by any art of association to overpower” (1800 “Preface” 178). It is curious, then, that the poet resorts to such a banal phrase in “The Thorn.” A single usage of the “woe is me” exclamation might be regarded as a poetic oversight, but Wordsworth’s tautological employment of the phrase hints at something more. Given the narrator’s established unreliability, one wonders whether he has indeed heard Martha Ray’s refrain, or if its words have been invented by his visually misguided imagination.

The circumstances surrounding the narrator's recollection of Martha Ray's "misery" are clouded with visual stimuli. When recounting the first instance of Martha's refrain, the narrator reveals that he encountered her wearing a "scarlet cloak" (l. 63) as she sat "between the heap / That's like an infant's grave in size" (ll. 60-61). Not only does he return to this image of a "scarlet cloak" (l. 179) later in the poem, the mariner's lines repeat his earlier observation that the "heap of earth" (l. 49) beside the thorn "Is like an infant's grave in size" (l. 51). Thus, the potentially "apparent" tautology of Martha Ray's refrain is surrounded by the sea captain's "virtual" tautology, in which there is no real change in meaning, and he plants only suspicion. Furthermore, the "scarlet cloak" (l.63) resembles the "olive green and scarlet bright" (l. 6) blossoms—the "darlings of the eye" (l.43)—that adorn the mossy heap; not to mention the symbolism behind "scarlet," a color of "shame or indignation" ("scarlet, *n.* and *adj.*"). The sailor's emphasis on these visual details causes him to ignore Martha Ray's calls to the extent that they lose their articulate expression and become unintelligible "Cries coming from the mountain-head" (l.171). The refrain of "O woe is me! oh misery!" (l. 253) then becomes the unimaginative effort of an indolent and superstitious individual to make sense of something he cannot, or will not, understand.

Just as in the tales of Johnny Foy and the Winander Boy, Wordsworth considers and esteems the potential for sound as an imaginative enabler in "The Thorn," particularly in his episodes of apparent tautology and his experimentations with poetic form and meter. To perhaps a greater extent than in "The Idiot Boy" and "There was a Boy," Wordsworth demonstrates through his maritime narrator the dangers of the eye and its capacity to mislead. Significantly, it is the older mariner and the maturing Winander Boy who find their imaginative understandings stifled, while the ever-childlike Johnny enjoys an ongoing communion with nature and its

sounds. Because the sea captain refuses to listen to Martha Ray's cries, readers of the poem are correspondingly denied access to crucial aural details, and we are left with the sense of something missing and a hollow resounding of Martha Ray's empty echoes. Ashton comments on the resonance of these wails, noting that "Martha's plaintive cries [...] go unrelieved because the narrator turns a deaf ear to them, and his deafness signifies a dead imagination" (Ashton 176-77). The aged narrator's deafness lies in his stubborn rejection of the auditory stimuli he perceives, and through his obstinacy, he stymies not only the power of his imagination, but any promise for a discovery of the truth.

IV. Friend and Messenger: The Moral Chastening of Wordsworth's Divine Breeze (*The Prelude*, Book I)

“Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze” (I.1) Wordsworth rhapsodizes in the opening line of his autobiographical 1805 *Prelude*, addressing the softly blowing air as a “welcome messenger” and “welcome friend” (I.5). Later in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth celebrates nature in general as a source of companionship and moral guidance, as Geoffrey Hartman notes: “Nature, for Wordsworth, is never an enemy but always a guide or guardian whose most adverse-seeming effects are still pedagogy” (“A Poet’s Progress” 603). It is the influence of sound upon the imagination—particularly by way of the imaginatively communicative powers of the wind—which proves to be nature’s favorite pedagogical technique in the first Book of *The Prelude*. Accordingly, the “gentle breeze” becomes both “messenger” and “friend” to the burgeoning poet Wordsworth.

Wordsworth fills the first Book in *The Prelude* with fond remembrances of his youthful and solitary forays into nature, but he reveals that not all of his adventures were honest ones. When the child Wordsworth stumbles, it is nature and its aural influences that “chasten and subdue” him (“Tintern Abbey” l. 94).²³ Unlike the unfortunate Winander Boy, the young Wordsworth’s childish attentiveness to nature’s sounds allows his imaginative mind to learn and grow from his mistakes. In one episode, Wordsworth recalls that “’twas my joy / To wander half the night among the cliffs / And the smooth hollows where the woodcocks ran / Along the open turf” (I.313-16). Importantly, the timing of Wordsworth’s wanderings—at night—results in the

²³ In Wordsworth’s “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” it is the “still, sad music of humanity” (l. 92) that has the ability to “chasten and subdue” (l. 94). Adam Potkay writes in *Wordsworth’s Ethics* that this “still, sad music” replaces “the evangelical’s ‘still, small voice of conscience,’” resulting in “the transformation of a punitive force into an ethical, and pleasurable, attunement” (10). The implied equivalence between music (or sound) and conscience indicates Wordsworth’s belief in aural stimuli—especially those of nature—as being themselves a morally corrective force; a righteous force that is more “pleasurable” than “punitive.”

obscurement of his vision and his consequent susceptibility to sound and its chastening influence.²⁴ The passage concerns Wordsworth's nocturnal mission to check hunting snares he had set earlier, but the poet admits that he occasionally stole the spoils of others: "Sometimes it befel / In these night-wanderings, that a strong desire / O'erpowered my better reason, and the bird / Which was the captive of another's toils / Became my prey" (I.324-28). Wordsworth puns on the word "toils," which "can mean snares, as well as labors [sic]"; he has not only taken the contents of another's snare, he has robbed them of the sustenance—be it of food or coin—that would have rewarded their labors (J. Wordsworth, et al. 46n3). The dishonorable actions of the young Wordsworth do not go unacknowledged, for

when the deed was done
I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod. (I.328-32)

Wordsworth imagines that he hears someone following him, but in actuality there is no one else present, merely faint sounds of "undistinguishable motion" that are "Almost as silent" as the ground below. The pursuing sounds are not those of a wronged human, but rather of the "frosty wind" (I.312) rustling the surface of the "turf" (I.332) and resounding through the landscape's "smooth hollows" (I.315).²⁵ Essentially, Wordsworth's imagination conjures from these

²⁴ In the auditory manipulations of his poetic lines, Wordsworth hints at his own tendency towards rascality. He describes himself as a "fell destroyer" (I.318), a pun on the alternative definitions of "fell" as both an adjective meaning "cunning" or "eager" and its noun form as a synonym for "The skin or hide of an animal along with the hair, wool, etc." ("fell, *adj. 1, adv., and n. 2*"; "fell, *n. 1*"). Although Wordsworth is ostensibly only checking his snares, the implication of his "cunning" suggests that there may be more afoot—as indeed there is when he steals from others.

²⁵ The aural ability of wind to conjure the presence of another is something Wordsworth revisits in Book IV when he imagines his childhood terrier accompanying him on a walk:

Now here, now there, stirred by the stragglings wind—
Came intermittently a breath-like sound,
A respiration short and quick, which oft,
Yea might I say, again and yet again,
Mistaking for the panting of my dog,

provocative noises the sounds of a hunter set on punishing him for his crime. Together, nature and sound prompt an incident of moral chastisement whose lesson continues with the young Wordsworth into adulthood.²⁶

Further on the first Book, we discover that as a child Wordsworth stole from humans and nature alike: the poet calls himself a “plunderer [...] Where’er among the mountains and the winds / The mother-bird had built her lodge” (I.336-39). In Wordsworth’s memory of robbing from a raven’s nest, nature again provides a moral rebuke through the influence of its sounds upon the youthful Wordsworth’s imagination:

While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears; the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds! (I.348-50)

As before, the “loud dry wind” encourages a moment of moral epiphany, and Wordsworth becomes overwhelmed by his surroundings to the extent that “the sky seemed not a sky / Of earth.” The wind—that “welcome messenger”—speaks to Wordsworth through its “strange utterance,” and the poet’s situation in that “on the perilous ridge I hung alone” resembles the circumstances of another boy who “hung / Listening” (“There was a Boy” ll. 18-19). Unlike the Winander Boy, though, the boy Wordsworth’s survival into adulthood seems an indication that he remained receptive to the aural admonishment of nature.²⁷

The off-and-on companion of my walk,
I turned my head to look if he were there. (IV.174-80)

²⁶ There is nothing resembling this admonishment in the poems of the “Idiot Boy” and “There was a Boy.” The latter poem was originally written in first person, without the reference to death, presumably from Wordsworth’s point of view. The poet’s openness to the aural chastisement of nature can be interpreted as his attempt to distance his youthful self from the insensitivity of the Winander Boy (who approaches adulthood) and instead associate with the childlike Johnny Foy, whose sensitivity to nature’s sounds is so complete that he requires no such reprimand.

²⁷ Albeit despite the fact that it appears to have taken the “welcome messenger” a few attempts to successfully communicate its message to the willfully wild Wordsworth.

Wordsworth attempts to explain the disciplinary ability of nature, and its effect on the imagination, as something sublime—there belongs a sort of divinity to it and its musicality:

The mind of man is framed even like the breath
 And harmony of music. There is a dark
 Invisible workmanship that reconciles
 Discordant elements, and makes them move in
 In one society. Ah me, that all
 The terrors, all the early miseries,
 Regrets, vexations, lassitudes, that all
 The thoughts and feelings which have been infused
 Into my mind, should ever have made up
 The calm existence that is mine when I
 Am worthy of myself. (l.351-61)²⁸

Not only is the “mind of man” likened to “music,” parts of the natural world are characterized as “discordant,” a musical term describing something “harsh” or “lacking in harmony” (“discordant, *adj.* and *n.*”). Musicality, then, reaches through the imaginative human mind and nature alike. In these lines, Wordsworth draws upon the Western philosophy of *concordia discors*, described by John Denham in his 1642 poem *Cooper’s Hill* as the idea that “the harmony of things, / As well as that of sounds, from discords [sic] springs” (ll. 203-04). A concept rooted in theology, *concordia discors* “enable[s] one to take account of the observed heterogeneity and conflict of things but reconcile them” (Mack xxxiv). Given the theological implications of *concordia discors*—employed by Denham in *Cooper’s Hill* and his successor Alexander Pope in *An Essay on Man*—one could take Wordsworth’s description of “a dark /

²⁸ In these lines, Wordsworth echoes his earlier poem “Tintern Abbey,” in which he describes having felt in nature
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply *interfused*,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the *mind of man* (“Tintern” ll. 96-101, emphasis mine)

Invisible workmanship” to be a pantheistic description of God and nature. After all, Wordsworth does credit nature with these “Severer interventions” (I.370). Nevertheless, that Wordsworth redevelops the aural suggestions of Denham’s reflection on “the harmony of things, / As well as that of sounds” (*Cooper’s Hill* ll. 203-4) by explicitly referring to the “harmony of *music*” (*Prelude* I.352, emphasis mine) suggests that he refers to the creative inspiration of poetic musicality itself—at least, as it works through the sounds of nature.

The execution of Wordsworth’s *concordia discors* owes itself not only to the “harmony” of music, but its “breath.” The poet’s use of the word “breath” (or “breathe”) carries significant Biblical connotations in that God is said to have “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). Throughout *The Prelude* persists the “breath” of nature and music: earlier, Wordsworth observes “the calm / Which Nature *breathes* among the hills and groves” (I.284-85, emphasis mine), and it is the sound of “Low *breathings*” (I.330, emphasis mine) that are conjured by his guilty conscience. Breathing is itself an auditory act—with Wordsworth’s association of “breath” with “harmony” and “music,” one cannot help but imagine the intake of breath which a vocalist must make before performing their song. Additionally, as M. H. Abrams notes in his article “The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor”: “That breath and wind are both instances of air in motion, and that breathing is a sign of life and its cessation of death, are matters evident to casual observation, as are the alternations of inhalation and exhalation, despair and elation, energy and torpor” (“Correspondent” 126). “Breath” itself, then, is an enactment of *concordia discors* in music. Just as he admires the “power in sound / To *breathe* an elevated mood, by form / Or image unprofaned” (II.324-26, emphasis mine) in Book

II of *The Prelude*, in these lines, the poet appreciates the power of music to give life to “The mind of man” and instill a sense of “calm existence” when one finds oneself “worthy.”²⁹

Wordsworth expands upon this aural divinity in later revisions to the passage in Book I discussed above. James H. Donelan draws attention to the 1850 version of *The Prelude*, where instead of “The mind of man” being “framed even like the breath / And harmony of music,” Wordsworth writes of an “immortal spirit [growing] / Like harmony in music” and calls humanity only “Dust” ([1850] I.340). Donelan interprets these verses as meaning that “We are mere material, dust, yet mysteriously, something immortal and conscious can emerge from this dust, the way the mere sound of a single note gains significance when in harmony with others” (Donelan 114). Although Wordsworth’s revised lines take away the sense of humanity’s imaginative power that lies inherent in their 1805 counterparts, they still call attention to the almost divine power of poetic musicality. James Chandler views this change as a separation of early Wordsworthian “natural piety” from the poet’s later “Christian piety” (Chandler). Regardless, the revisions succeed in making more explicit the Biblical implications behind Wordsworth’s 1805 use of “breath” and their accompanying association of divinity with poetic musicality and the interpretive abilities of the “mind of man.”

The famous stealing-of-the-skiff scene follows Wordsworth’s reflections on his “dark / Invisible workmanship.” Although the climactic portion of the episode nominally relies upon the visual sight of the “Upreamed” ([1805] I.408) and admonishing cliff, in reality, the moral chastening here derives from the action of sight and sound working together—with the true impressiveness of the scene coming from the influence of the latter. Even in the opening lines of

²⁹ This “breath” is present in nature in the form of its “breezes,” what Abrams calls “the analogue of human respiration; they are themselves inhaled into the body and assimilated to its substance, and so fuse materially, as well as metaphorically, the ‘spirit’ of the man with the ‘soul’ of nature” (“Correspondent” 129).

the skiff story, which ostensibly describe a “sight,” Wordsworth instead offers an aural illustration: “No sooner had I sight of this small skiff” (I.380). Ironically, in spite of the line’s provision of an unimpressive “sight” (the “small skiff”), Wordsworth’s sibilance more expressively conveys to readers the lapping sounds of the water in which the skiff sits. When the young poet describes how “I pushed, and struck the oars, and struck again / In cadence” (I.385-86), his repetitive phrasing of “and struck” aurally demonstrates his “cadence,” which is itself a musical term. Wordsworth remembers that his act of stealing “was an act of stealth / And troubled pleasure. Nor without the voice / Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on” (I.388-90). Here, “the voice / Of mountain-echoes”—possibly created by the wind—surrounds him and his purloined boat, with the consequence that his enjoyment becomes “troubled.” In the lines leading up to the child Wordsworth’s vision in which “a huge cliff, / As if with voluntary power instinct, / Upreared its head” (I.406-08), he describes lowering “my oars into the *silent* lake” (I.402, emphasis mine). Upon his retreat after the sublime sight, Wordsworth reiterates his representation of “the silent water” (I.413). The skiff scene shows an instance in which the visual imagination is a force for good—teaching Wordsworth’s youthful self the wrongness of his actions—and this force is reinforced by the power of sound. For while he meets with an oppressive vision, so too does he encounter an oppressive *silence*, which lingers in the silent and “mighty forms” (I.425) that “[move] slowly through my mind” (I.426) and continue to grow upon the boy Wordsworth’s imagination.³⁰

In his article “A Poet’s Progress: Wordsworth and the *Via Naturaliter Negativa*,”

Geoffrey Hartman argues that, for Wordsworth, the power of imagination supersedes that of

³⁰ Wordsworth does not explicitly say that these “mighty forms” are silent, but from his lack of aural description after his adamant reiteration that the Ullswater lake was “silent,” we can infer that this quietness continues in his imaginative visions. In their silence, the “mighty forms” maintain their mysteriousness.

nature in its independence of “time and place” (610). The imaginative associations attached to these scenes of aural morality in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* continue to affect him even as an adult—evident by his inclusion of them in his autobiographical poem. Interestingly, Hartman remarks only upon the sense of sight, and not hearing, in his analysis of Wordsworth’s explorations into the moods of imagination, yet he repeatedly uses terms associated with sound, such as “silence” and “song” (“A Poet’s Progress” 607, 613). Even when considering the impact of the eye in Wordsworth, one cannot escape the influence of the ear—as is the case in the skiff episode. The imaginative implications attached to sound become nature’s “welcome messenger” for the moral guidance of old and young, and so we can take comfort in “the joy it gives” (I.4).

V. The Reverberations of Sound Through Memory (*The Prelude*, Book II)

As he reflects upon his days at Hawkshead Grammar School in Book II, Wordsworth persists in his admiration for the sound of the wind as nature's "welcome messenger" (I.5). He recalls "long Excursions far away among the hills [...] while soft airs / Among the leaves were stirring" (II.93-97). Not only does the poet's word choice foreshadow another, later *Excursion*, they harken back to his musings on how the influence of nature can be felt in the murmurings of the air. At the same time, however, Wordsworth elaborates upon the powers of sound, extending them to the realm of remembrance. In Book II, he shares a memory of a boyhood journey to Furness Abbey, for which he and his fellow schoolmates rented horses from a local innkeeper. Within the memory, Wordsworth basks in the serene pleasures of peaceful quietude, but the true extent of the recollection's impact cannot be felt until he returns to it in his young adulthood, after learning of the death of Robespierre in 1794 (Jonathan Wordsworth, et al. 386n1). Thus, at the center of these moments of sublimity lies the potential for sound as a rejuvenator of memory and an enabler of creative imagination. Sound encourages the reliving of the past, and in doing so, allows its listeners to distill greater meaning from its reverberations.

In his recounting of his childhood visit to Furness Abbey, Wordsworth reiterates his belief in the inferiority of the eye. Although he describes the area as a "holy scene" (II.114), the "living trees" (II.113) of the surrounding nature are immediately contrasted with the poet's depiction of the abbey itself: "a mouldering pile with fractured arch, / Belfry, and images" (II.112-13). The aged abbey was once a Catholic sanctuary, being "to St Mary's honour built" (II.111), and the "images" to which Wordsworth refers are the Catholic statues which still occupy spaces within it, like the "cross-legged knight, / And the stone abbot" (II.124-25). On

another level, the “image” Wordsworth provides is one of decay, and so he reinforces a Miltonic and Hebraic iconoclasm, as the abbey and its idolatrous images have fallen to ruin.

Instead of the eye, Wordsworth uses the ear to remember the circumstances of his boyhood escapade. The opportunity for such an adventure, he recalls, came only “twice in the long length of those half-years” (II.100), and the spondaic alliteration of that “long length” aurally demonstrates the expanse of time by obliging readers to linger a little longer upon the poet’s words. Wordsworth also recollects the fibs which he and his companions told the innkeeper from whom they rented their steeds: “sometimes we employed / Sly subterfuge, for the intended bound / Of the day’s journey was too distant far / For any cautious man” (II.105-08). Here, the sibilance of his “sly subterfuge” evokes the hissing of snakes, a Biblically unreliable animal, and emphasizes the rule-breaking tendencies of the young Wordsworth and his companions.³¹ Such feelings which accompany one’s reminiscences—feelings of slowly moving time and sheepish guilt from wrongdoing—cannot be communicated through sight, but Wordsworth successfully conveys them through sound.

Wordsworth begins to lay the foundation for the importance of his boyhood memory in his realization that the peace of the scene owes itself to the power of nature and its sound, particularly that of silence:

To more than inland peace
Left by the sea-wind passing overhead
(Though wind of roughest temper) trees and towers

³¹ Wordsworth’s technique in these lines may draw from the artistry of Milton, who uses the repetitive “s” sound to portend God’s transformation of Satan and the other demons into serpents in Book Ten of *Paradise Lost*:

up and enter now into full *bliss*!
So having *said*, a while he *stood* expecting
Their *universal* shout and high *applause*
To fill *his* ear *contrary* he *hears*
On all *sides* from innumerable *tongues*
A dismal universal *hiss*, the *sound*
Of public *scorn*.” (Milton X.503-508, emphasis mine)

May in that valley oftentimes be seen
 Both silent and both motionless alike,
 Such is the shelter that is there, and such
 The safeguard for repose and quietness. (II.115-21)

As discussed previously, Wordsworth again contemplates the influence of the voice of nature, “the sea-wind passing overhead / (Though wind of roughest temper).” The wind’s “temper” hints at its morally chastening ability, but it nonetheless brings an “inland peace” that pervades the “Vale / Of Nightshade” (II.110-111). In a manner reminiscent of his experimentations in “The Thorn,” Wordsworth’s apparently tautological observation that the “trees and towers” (II.117) were often “Both silent and both motionless alike” (II.119) makes the case that, while silence and stillness—and “repose and quietness” (II.121)—may seem synonymous, in actuality, two entirely different states are being described and experienced, with the result that one reaches a state of sublime consciousness that can only be found in such an environment. Wordsworth’s earlier 1800 “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* comments upon this phenomenon when he theorizes that “Poetry [...] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity [sic] gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself exist in the mind” (1800 “Preface” 183). The tranquil environment of Wordsworth’s memory becomes an ideal one in which to contemplate poetry. Furthermore, the memory draws noteworthy strength from this association with tranquility, for its remembrance in the future allows Wordsworth to re-create this feeling so that again “does itself exist in the mind.” The “shelter” and “safeguard” inherent in the poet’s memory derives from this capacity to augment the sense of silent serenity.

Nevertheless, the memory's quietude becomes interrupted by the song of the wren, who—far from robbing the scene of any poetic sublimity—imbues Wordsworth's recollection with renewed aural richness:

That single wren
Which one day sang so sweetly in the nave
Of the old church that, though from recent showers
The earth was comfortless, and, touched by faint
Internal breezes—sobblings of the place
And respirations—from the roofless walls
The shuddering ivy dripped large drops, yet still
So sweetly 'mid the gloom the invisible bird
Sang to itself that there I could have made
My dwelling-place, and lived for ever there
To hear such music. (II.125-35)

Under the influence of the bird's music, the abbey seems to come alive—its “sobblings [...] And respirations” becoming not only audible actions, but the lamentations of a sentient being. The wren's voice seems to make the young Wordsworth yet more sensitive to the surrounding aural stimuli, as in his onomatopoeic description that “The shuddering ivy dripped large drops”; even readers can hear the rustling of the wind through ivy leaves and the drip-dropping of water off of walls still laden with the day's earlier showers. Peter McDonald, in his book *Sound Intentions*, assesses this auditory abundance in Wordsworth's blank verse, observing that the poet is “willing to exploit what [Samuel] Johnson sees as a limitation (that ‘blank verse [...] seems to be verse only to the eye’) by experimenting with sound and similitude in order to augment, and sometimes complicate, the eye's evidence” (McDonald 77). Such experimentation can be felt in the singing of the wren—although the bird is not immediately present, remaining “invisible,” it still exerts a palpable effect on the mind of the boy Wordsworth: animating and revitalizing a previously lifeless structure of crumbling stone.

Wordsworth's wren in *The Prelude* resembles the birds he discusses in his 1815 "Preface" to *Poems*. Wordsworth calls the bird in his 1807 "To the Cuckoo" a "wandering Voice" ("Cuckoo" l. 4) because, like the wren, he cannot see it. Similarly, the voice of the stock-dove in "O Nightingale! thou surely art" is "buried among trees" ("Nightingale" l. 13). The invisibility of these songbirds "dispossesses the creature[s] almost of a corporeal existence; the imagination being tempted to this exertion of her power by a consciousness in the memory that the Cuckoo is almost perpetually heard throughout the season of Spring, but seldom becomes an object of sight" (1815 "Preface" xxiv). The wren in *The Prelude* is likewise "dispossess[ed] [...] almost of a corporeal existence," and Wordsworth must rely upon his ear to confirm the creature's existence. The distance between "the poetic object and the observing poet" is something remarked upon by John T. Ogden in his article on "The Power of Distance in Wordsworth's *Prelude*": "As Wordsworth keeps his eye on the object, the intervening distance helps bring about an imaginative transformation in that object, elevating the commonplace to poetic significance" (Ogden 246). Yet Ogden limits his analysis to the observational abilities of the eye and ignores the imaginative potential of the ear. Often the "object" in Wordsworth's poetry is invisible, as is the case with the wren and the songbirds discussed in the 1815 "Preface." It is the singular capability of the ear to discern what the eye cannot and to move beyond the significance of things immediately present. Not being confined by the visual limitation of observing the bird's physical form allows the "music" (II.135) of the wren to more fully enter upon the child Wordsworth's mind and encourage a state of "repose and quietness" (II.121). Accordingly, the poet's imagination allows him to creatively interpret the bird's sounds, whose effect is preserved and amplified in his memory.

Another recurring memory, the friend and messenger of Book I returns in the “Internal breezes” (II.129) that permeate the walls of the abandoned abbey. The holy setting of Wordsworth’s reminiscence—as well as its integration of a sum of differing parts—accommodates a connection to Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man*, in which the 18th-century poet considers the *concordia discors* inherent in the Holy Spirit, which

Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,
Glowes in the stars, and blossoms in the trees,
Lives thro’ all life, extends thro’ all extent,
Spreads undivided, operates unspent,
Breathes in our soul, informs our mortal part,
As full, as perfect, in a hair as heart. (Pope I.268-276)

Wasserman interprets these lines to mean that “human affairs [... cannot] be autonomous fragments of reality with independent meanings. All events are but variant expressions of one fixed master plan” (Wasserman 110). The implications of these lines—as they relate to Wordsworth—are broadened with Maynard Mack’s observation that, during Pope’s time, “Henry More had recently stressed extension as well as indivisibility [...] as essential attributes of spirit” (Mack 48n273). The spirit, whether that be the Holy Spirit or Wordsworth’s chastening breeze of nature, inhabits expanses of space, both within ourselves and in outside environments like the abbey, such that it “Breathes in our soul, informs our mortal part” (Pope I.275)—its “sobblings” and “respirations” (*Prelude* II.129-30) constantly acting upon our minds and hearts.

In an apostrophe to nature at the close of his visit to Furness Abbey, Wordsworth summarizes his memory’s sense of serenity and awe of the natural world while simultaneously introducing the aural image that revisits him in young adulthood:

Oh, ye rocks and streams,
And that still spirit of the evening air,
Even in this joyous time I sometimes felt
Your presence, when, with slackened step, we breathed

Along the sides of the steep hills, or when,
 Lighted by gleams of moonlight from the sea,
 We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand. (II.138-44)

Again, Wordsworth celebrates the “still spirit of the evening air,” the humbling “messenger” (I.5) of nature’s moral influence. The enjambment of “we breathed” (II.141) draws attention to the phrase, worthy of notice for its Biblical connotations but equally so for its vagueness. On a surface level, “we” refers to the young Wordsworth, his friends, and their horses; alternatively, Wordsworth could be breathing with nature itself, whose “presence” (II.141) can be felt “Along the sides of the steep hills” or on “the level sand” (II.142-44). In his memory, then, Wordsworth enjoys a communion with nature that can most be felt in his evocative remembrance that “We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand” (II.143). The line ostensibly provides a visual image of the boy Wordsworth flying along the coast on the back of his steed, but its true poetic weight lies in the expressive aural imagery he employs: “beat” and “thundering,” almost like a percussive beat, in the musical sense, against a drum of “level sand.” The beating of his horse’s hoofs—compounded by the steady regularity of Wordsworth’s iambic metrical beats in that final line—recalls how the messenger breeze first “beats against my [Wordsworth’s] cheek” (I.3) and the young poet finds “A grandeur in the beatings of the heart” (I.441). Wordsworth’s use of “beat,” therefore, becomes a capsule for memories of his adventures, as well as the quickening of his heart in response to the sound and feeling of nature’s “breath” (I.403).³²

The significance of Wordsworth’s recollection becomes clear in Book X of *The Prelude* when the poet returns to it after hearing of the death of Robespierre. McDonald notes that “blank verse is better fitted than rhymed verse to exploit the possibilities of the full repetition of words

³² Breeze, breath, and heart are all components of the earlier discussed Pope passage on the *concordia discors* of the Holy Spirit.

or phrases at the ends of lines: what in rhymed verse would be a so-called ‘perfect’ rhyme can occur in blank verse in a much less conspicuous aspect” (McDonald 79). Wordsworth capitalizes upon this feature of blank verse by repeating an entire line—“We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand” (II.144)—word-for-word at a much later time in his *Prelude*:

Thus, interrupted by uneasy bursts
Of exultation, I pursued my way
Along that very shore which I had skimmed
In former times, when, spurring from the Vale
Of Nightshade, and St Mary’s mouldering fane,
And the stone abbot, after circuit made
In wantonness of heart, a joyous crew
Of schoolboys, hastening to their distant home,
Along the margin of the moonlight sea,
We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand. (X.557-66)

The repetition in Book X evokes the memory of the past: both for Wordsworth and for the reader. Having already experienced the sublime tranquility of the visit to Furness Abbey and the subsequent ride on the beach in Book II, at this point in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s memory has become our own, and we are transported with him to the past. In the midst of his “uneasy bursts / Of exultation,” Wordsworth recalls the “repose and quietness” (II.121) of his youth and with that “emotion recollected in tranquility” expresses hope for the democratic future of France and Britain. In his recollection of “St Mary’s mouldering fane” and “the margin of the moonlight sea,” Wordsworth neglects to mention the “single wren / Which one day sang so sweetly” (II.125-26). The bird now becomes “invisible” (II.132) through its silence. Nonetheless, silence is itself a sound and our memory of the wren is enough to once again listen to its soothing song.

Over the passage of time, our interpretation of memory evolves. Ogden reports on Wordsworth’s change in recollection between Books VII and VIII of the *Prelude*: “The intervening time has allowed Wordsworth’s experience to shift from a mass of details into a

well-formulated part of his development. The intermediate area has filtered out the trivial details and left only the significant parts of the experience.” Alternatively, “Memory has reshaped the experience, and temporal perspective has given it a place in the growth of his mind” (Ogden 252). In a similar vein, Wordsworth’s reflection on his horseback ride attaches special consequence to the line in which he experiences a sort of fellowship with nature, and it is in this aurally provocative repetition that readers can, along with the poet himself, relive the peace of that moment. Memory has allowed not simply “the growth of [Wordsworth’s] mind,” but the growth of aural stimuli *upon* the mind. In a redevelopment of the 1805 text, Wordsworth chooses to end his 1850 version of Book X with his reminiscence upon the “level sand” ([1850] *Prelude* X.603) and leave his political musings for the next book. As a result, he allows our memory of the moment to resound within our minds, ever developing and ever influencing.

VI. Heights of Aural Realization (*The Prelude*, Book VI)

In the summer of 1790, the twenty-year-old Wordsworth embarked upon an Alpine tour with Robert Jones, a fellow Cambridge student (Jonathan Wordsworth, et al. 202n3). He thinks back on their first view of Mont Blanc and how he “grieved / To have a soulless image on the eye / Which had usurped upon a living thought / That never more could be” ([1805] VI.453-56). To Wordsworth, the “soulless image” seems to be the mountain itself, whose immensity overwhelms the young poet’s awareness of other external stimuli and “usurp[s] upon a living thought.” The image lacks both a soul and a spirit imbued with life, and Wordsworth indicates that it is through other means that nature, and one’s relationship with it, can be realized and appreciated. With these lines, Wordsworth enters into one of the most powerful moments of creative imagination in his autobiographical *Prelude*, and he fully embraces the ability of sound to heighten his receptivity to the voice of nature and enhance the broader capabilities of his human mind.

Later on in Book VI, Wordsworth remembers the impact which the majestic Alps first wrought on him and hints at his coming lesson of aurally inspired imagination:

Whate’er in this wide circuit we beheld
Or heard was fitted to our unripe state
Of intellect and heart. By simple strains
Of feeling, the pure breath of real life,
We were not left untouched. (VI.469-73)

Although Wordsworth appears to consider sight and hearing as equivalent senses in this passage, he nonetheless emphasizes that “We were not left untouched” by the “pure breath of real life.” Having already established the connection between breath and wind, Wordsworth’s “pure breath” here could be another manifestation of nature’s “welcome messenger” (I.5). Indeed, M. H. Abrams observes that the relationship between breath, wind, and life was one well-established

by Wordsworth's time, "For the Latin *spiritus* signified wind and breath, as well as soul" ("Correspondent" 121). In particular, Abrams highlights the Biblical implications of breath, or wind, as a source of inspiration, referencing the events of the day of Pentecost, when "suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind [...] And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:2-4). Of interest in these verses, however, is that it is the *sound* of the wind that signals the arrival of the Holy Ghost and the resulting sense of inspiration, not the wind itself. Thus, even in the Bible, breath and wind are explicitly associated with the superior influence of sound, not sight, something of which Wordsworth would surely have been aware. Even more, the Biblical connection between breath, wind, and inspiration serves as a foundation for Wordsworth's later respect for sound as a provoker of imagination. Be that as it may, these realizations are made in the older Wordsworth's reflections upon his young adulthood—in the moment of his traversing the Alps, he still has much to learn.

Wordsworth elaborates upon the extent of his distraction from the natural world when he and Jones unknowingly cross the Alps, and it is this moment that causes "A deep and genuine sadness" (VI.492). As the two students climb along the Alps, they encounter a group of travelers, "making of these our guides" (VI.497), yet after a short "repast" (VI.500) at a mountain inn, the travelers finish early and begin again on the path, leaving Jones and Wordsworth behind. When the two students finish their meal, they rush to overtake the others:

Erelong we followed,
 Descending by the beaten road that led
 Right to a rivulet's edge, and there broke off;
 The only track now visible was one
 Upon the further side, right opposite,
 And up a lofty mountain. This we took,
 After a little scruple and short pause,

And climbed with eagerness—though not, at length,
 Without surprise and some anxiety
 On finding that we did not overtake
 Our comrades gone before. (VI.501-511)

Despite “climb[ing] with eagerness,” their enthusiasm is not for the sake of the mountains, but rather the rediscovery of their “comrades.” Eventually, Wordsworth and Jones find themselves surprised when, upon their inquiry for directions, a local “peasant” (VI.513) informs them that “we had crossed the Alps” (VI.524). So intent on regaining the sight of their companions, the two become immune to the influence of other external stimuli and the sublimity of the mountainous scene in which they find themselves. In their imperceptivity, the pair fail to recognize the glory of their surroundings, a disappointment which subjects the young adult Wordsworth to a state of “dejection” (VI.491).

In spite of his dismay, Wordsworth rallies himself and finds the cure for his passive reception of the world in

Imagination!—lifting up itself
 Before the eye and progress of my song
 Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,
 In all the might of its endowments, came
 Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
 Halted without a struggle to break through,
 And now, recovering, to my soul I say
 ‘I recognise thy glory.’ (VI.525-32)

The poet appears to conjoin the senses of sight and hearing when he describes the “eye [...] of my song,” but the possessive “of” indicates that the “eye” is something which belongs to his “song.” The sense of sight is subordinated to that of sound, as it is relegated to the status of the ear’s possession. In referring to his verse as “song,” Wordsworth directly draws attention to the musicality of his words and stresses the impact of sound upon his imagination. Additionally, the poet’s simile that “I was lost as in a cloud” recalls the situation of his seafaring narrator in “The

Thorn,” who becomes literally caught in a storm upon the mountains: “’Twas mist and rain, and storm and rain, / No screen, no fence could I discover, / And then the wind!” (“Thorn” ll. 188-90).³³ The appearance of the wind and breath—directly alluded to by the mariner in “The Thorn” and suggested by the respiratory “vapour” (VI.527) in *The Prelude*—in these stormy scenes again encourages the reader to consider the perhaps divine significance of sound, especially in connection with the imagination.³⁴ Wordsworth’s description of his song’s “eye” (IV.526) also suggests the influence of the wind, as “the wind’s eye”—a nautical phrase of which the fictional mariner in “The Thorn” would have been aware—describes the “direction from which the wind is blowing (“eye, *n. l*”). The inspiration which promotes exercise of the imagination, then, comes directly from the poet’s “song,” or the auditory influence of both his own and nature’s verse. Now imaginatively alert to nature’s auralty, Wordsworth is able to escape the perpetual darkness to which the narrator of “The Thorn” dooms himself, and so the poet and his soul find healing: “And now, recovering, to my soul I say / ‘I recognise thy glory’” (VI.531-32).

It is the recovery of his creative imagination that finally allows Wordsworth to appreciate his surroundings—and in the midst of it all beckons the voice of nature. As he continues in his climbing of the Alps, he notices

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And everywhere along the hollow rent
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears—
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside

³³ As Wordsworth finds himself lost in his metaphorical storm (in contrast to the actual tempest experienced by the mariner), he too is placed upon the mountains; he is still on the Alps.

³⁴ Abrams points out that stormy winds in moments of epiphany are a common motif in Romantic poetry (“Correspondent” 119). Earlier in the poem, the older Wordsworth subtly invokes the recurrent breeze and breath, which first “beat[] against [his] cheek” (l.3) with the description of the “beaten road” along the Alps (VI.502).

As if a voice were in them—the sick sight
 And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
 The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
 Characters of the great apocalypse,
 The types and symbols of eternity,
 Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (VI.556-72)

The repetition in the paradoxical situation of “woods decaying, never to be decayed” enforces one’s wonderment at such a prospect; yet further consideration proves that such a condition is entirely possible in the environs of one’s imaginative memory, in which the “decaying” woods can live on, perpetually growing and achieving an “immeasurable height.” Again, the sound of the wind recurs in this passage, in which there are “Winds thwarting winds.” Wordsworth reconciles the scene’s many apparent contradictions—the “thwarting winds,” the “stationary blasts of waterfalls,” “the sick sight / And giddy prospect,” the “Tumult and peace, the darkness and light”—in the realization that they are all parts of nature: *concordia discors*, yet again.³⁵ Such unity becomes evident to the poet when he considers that through them all runs a “voice”—a voice heard in the “rocks that muttered,” the “Black drizzling crags that spake,” and the “raving stream.”

In Book XI, entitled “Imagination, How Impaired and Restored,” Wordsworth laments the assumption in his adulthood of a state “In which the eye was master of the heart” (XI.171), and he reiterates his belief that the responsibility for his “impaired” imagination lies with this sense of vision. Sight, after all, is “the most despotic of our senses” and it “gained / Such

³⁵ As Wasserman demonstrates, Wordsworth’s predecessors, Denham and Pope, illustrate their *concordia discors* with the direct comparison afforded by heroic couplets (82, 112). Meanwhile, Potkay points out that Wordsworth employs a more measured tempo in his blank verse engagements with *concordia discors*, instead choosing to linger in his own “expansive syntax” (“*Concordia Discors*” 12).

strength in me as often held my mind / In absolute dominion” (XI.173-75).³⁶ Later, Wordsworth refers to sight as “This tyranny” (XI.179), crediting nature as a force of counteraction in that it

Summons all the senses each
To counteract the other and themselves,
And makes them all, and the objects with which all
Are conversant, subservient in their turn
To the great ends of liberty and power.
But this is matter for another song. (XI.179-84)

Not only does Wordsworth yet again refer to his verse as “song,” he contends that nature calls upon the senses to “converse” with their surroundings. One’s relationship with nature is an interactive one that requires us to not only be receptive to the voice of nature, but ready to give back in the form of our imaginative interpretations of external stimuli. Wordsworth returns to the scene upon the Alps as a moment in which he embraces this attitude: “through the gorgeous Alps / Roaming, I carried with me the same heart” (XI.240-41). Wordsworth indicates that the momentary visionary weakness felt upon the Alps eventually returns to haunt him later in adulthood, when a “degradation” (XI.242) of his imaginative faculties made “The milder minstrelsies of rural scenes / Inaudible” (XI.249-50). Unable to use his imagination, the older Wordsworth finds himself unable to *hear*. Nevertheless, he eventually overcomes this adulthood plateau, crediting his imaginative responsiveness in childhood with saving him: “I shook the habit off / Entirely and for ever, and again / In Nature’s presence stood, as I stand now, / A sensitive and a *creative* soul” (XI.253-56). Wordsworth’s italicization of his “*creative* soul” plainly communicates his conviction that communion with nature is an active one, in which participants must alternately listen and answer back through the imaginative conjurings of our minds.

³⁶ Wordsworth clarifies in the 1850 *Prelude* that he speaks of the “bodily eye” ([1850] XII.128), to be distinguished from the metaphorical or inward eye, in recognition of the aural limitations of descriptive figurative language.

In the ensuing stanzas, Wordsworth meditates upon the idea that “There are in our existence spots of time, / Which with distinct preeminence retain / A renovating virtue, whence [...] our minds / Are nourished and invisibly repaired” (XI.257-64). The poet goes on to provide two examples of such “spots of time,” but one could argue that his climbing of the Alps—as well as his journey to Furness Abbey and his youthful excursions through the woods and upon Lake Windermere—are also educational moments. Sound, in all these “spots of time” provides the budding poet with guidance—serving as a source of moral chastisement, a prompter of restorative memory, and a provoker of the human spirit and soul. Yet key among all these powers of sound is the power of one’s creative imagination, which serves to bring us closer to nature. Sound—and in Wordsworth’s verses, poetic musicality—works in tandem with the imagination to fashion a world that is both perceived and created, and in that creation, it continues to grow upon our minds.

VII. Conclusion: A World Half Created

In the opening lines, the “Glad Preamble,” of his 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth feels within himself a “creative breeze, / A vital breeze” that “Brings with it vernal promises,” including “The holy life of music and of verse” (l.43-54). He draws upon the Biblical implications of “breeze” as symbol of inspiration, but instead of moving into a pantheistic celebration of a Holy Spirit in nature, he draws attention to the divinity “of music and of verse.” Poetry, to Wordsworth, is itself a religious endeavor and experience that is aided by one’s aurally stimulated creative imagination, and the poet explores his own reverence for the power of sound in “Tintern Abbey,” one of his earliest and most admired poems.

In his celebrated verse, Wordsworth demonstrates an appreciation for the relationship with Nature that he enjoys, not as an innocent child, but as a person receptive to the sublimity of the world around him. Wordsworth himself has returned to the banks of the Wye after “five summers, with the length / Of five long winters!” (1800 “Tintern” ll. 1-2). He delights in the reactions of his sister, Dorothy, who visits the Wye for the first time: “in thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart” (ll.117-18). Although Wordsworth revels in the experience of reliving, through Dorothy, his initial encounter with the Wye, he nonetheless treasures the understanding of nature that he has attained in adulthood:

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. (ll. 89-94)

Wordsworth clarifies the value he places upon childhood in his other poems in *Lyrical Ballads*—it is not necessarily for their innocent interactions with nature that he respects children, but their

willingness to engage open-mindedly with their surroundings. The younger Wordsworth, which his five-years-senior counterpart describes, resembles the unfortunate Boy of Winander and not the unassuming poet Johnny Foy. In his relatively more mature adulthood, Wordsworth has worked to retain—or perhaps, regain—his previous kinship with nature, “when like a roe / I bounded o’er the mountains” (ll. 68-69), but this time with a thoughtfulness gleaned from experience. Now, Wordsworth finds himself both able to listen to “The still sad music of humanity” (l. 92) and to heed its “ample power / To chasten and subdue” (ll.93-94) his “animal movements” (l. 75).³⁷

Wordsworth dwells heavily in “Tintern Abbey” on memory and remembrance, mental powers evoked by sound and strengthened by the creative imagination. He tells his sister Dorothy that “thy mind / Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms, / Thy memory be as a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies” (ll. 139-142). John Hollander asserts that, in these lines, “No skulllike [sic] cave of memory is openly described, but the recorded sounds will surely exist there forever as rebounding, undying echoes” (Hollander 52). These “undying echoes”—like the “beat[ing of] thundering hoofs [across] the level sand” (*Prelude* II.144)—are kept alive by the clarity of an imaginative memory and serve as the basis for “healing thoughts” in times of “solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief” (1800 “Tintern” l.143-144). At one point in his odic poem, Wordsworth tests the more immediate memory of both his sister and his readers with the closing lines:

Nor wilt thou then forget,
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me

³⁷ One gets the sense that the adult Wordsworth has learned his lesson after being chased by an imaginary pursuer in the wake of stealing the “captive of another’s toils” (*Prelude* I.327), among other childhood moments of tutoring by the sounds of nature.

More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake. (ll. 155-159)

Here, the poet repeats certain phrases and words from the beginning of the poem—the “steep and lofty cliffs” (l. 5), the “landscape” (l. 8), and the “pastoral farms, / Green to the very door” (l. 16-17) all make a reappearance. With his subtle reminders of the past, Wordsworth ensures that his words continue to resound in the listener’s mind and imagination.

In “Tintern Abbey,” as in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth uses sound as a way to reconcile discordant elements, a spiritual unifier in the tradition of *concordia discors*. John Denham employs the River Thames in *Cooper’s Hill* to such effect: “Wisely she [the River Thames] knew, the harmony of things, / As well as that of sounds, from discords [sic] springs” (Denham ll. 203-04). With regard to these lines, Wasserman comments upon the *visual* elements of this aquatic symbol—“being a continuous flow, an everchanging sameness, it [the river] expresses the dynamic stability inherent in the system of harmonious discord”—but Wordsworth takes things a step further by elaborating upon the *aural* elements suggested by his precursor Denham’s verse (Wasserman 80). For Wordsworth, the River Wye becomes his vehicle for *concordia discors*, but he specifically takes advantage of its onomatopoeic *murmuring*: “again I hear / These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs / With a soft inland murmur” (1800 “Tintern” ll. 2-4). The murmurs of the Wye reappear in Wordsworth’s alliterative announcement that he will neither “mourn nor murmur” (l. 86) the loss of his youth’s “dizzy raptures” (l. 85). Even as he appears to have moved beyond the corporeal world to a reflective introspection, the recurrence of the “murmur” previously associated with the Wye reminds readers of its ever-flowing waters. Thus, the river and its “sounding cataract” (l. 76) maintain their haunting presence in the imaginative echoes elicited by sound, and in so doing unify the world inside the poet’s mind with that which surrounds him.

Before beginning his address to Dorothy, Wordsworth concludes:

Therefore am I still
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,
 And mountains; and of all that we behold
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world
 Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
 And what [they] perceive. (1848 “Tintern” ll. 103-08)

To the poet, the world consists of that which we “perceive” and that which we “create” with our imaginations. Humanity observes both components of this “half create[d]” world through the senses of our “eye, and ear.” The 1800 version of Wordsworth’s poem lists these senses as “eye and ear” (1800 “Tintern” l. 107), but the poet later saw fit to include an extra comma (after eye) and a dash (after ear). With these revisions, especially his now-augmented caesura, Wordsworth singles out the power of the ear and forces his listeners to dwell upon the significance of our hearing sense. After all, according to the poet, sound enables us to escape that “bondage of definite form” and allow our impressions of the world to resound within us—to “grow—and [continue] to grow—upon the mind” to more sublime effect (1815 “Preface” xxx, xxxiv). Consequently, more than any other sense, it is sound which encourages us to exercise the limits of our creative imagination in the way we interpret not only poetry, but the “mighty world” around us.

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