"At Enmity with Joy": A postmodern reading of Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode.*

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Summary

This paper explores Wordsworth's *Ode* to blindness and the loss of insight in a re-invented context of speculation and debate, as fractured, mediated and distorted by the pressure of humanist discourse, and as a partial allegory of the experimental text. In bringing the disruptive, solipsistic procedures of the poem into special prominence, the argument offers a strategically rebarbative and self-consciously antithetical critique of current vocabularies of representation.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek Wordsworth se *Ode* aan die blindheid en die verlies van insig binne 'n herontdekte konteks van bespiegeling en debat, as gebroke, indirek en verdraai onder die druk van humanistiese diskoers, en as 'n gedeeltelike allegorie van die eksperimentele teks. Deur die beklemtoning van die ontwrigtende solipsistiese prosedures van die gedig, lewer die argument 'n strategies afstootlike en selfbewuste antitetiese kritiek van huidige terminologieë van representasie.

The concerns of postmodernism imply allegiance to an inherent sense of critical decorum and can be construed against an elaborate system of constraints and obligations, ranging from the demands of a transgressive discourse to the formulaic insistence upon self-reflexivity. There is, on the one hand, a technology of utterance, a tonal architectonic designed to intrigue the listener with new parables of reading and new elisions of style and insight; on the other hand, there is a decorous aesthetic of tacit judgement, often accompanied by a grammar of legitimation designed to tax the humanistic vocabularies of the deluded literator, the celebrated victim of concealed ideologies and buried agendas. To dispense with these obligations is to run the risk of subscribing to a heresy far more incriminatory than the Anglo-American heresy of paraphrase. It is a risk I shall have to take, since my reading of Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* will not be isomorphically congruent with the animadversions of Arac, the language of Lyotard and the brilliant banter of Bové. I have dared to launch Wordsworth's frail and vulnerable craft into Jacques-infested seas, but I shall try not to put de Man before Descartes.

Although the domestication of postmodernism continues apace, with more and more people using and abusing Nietszche, Habermas and Derrida than ever before, the desire to interpolate a "post-" is still regarded as an affectation inimical to the health and happiness of the text. Similarly, the habit of saying "Lacan" or "Fish" (when a simple "Freud" or "Frye" might do) is thought to betray a wayward desire to indulge in a bit of *cordon blah*. Yet "common-sense", although a useful product of the human imagination, cannot be expected to work efficiently for all texts regardless of style, provenance

and age. It must be tuned to an appropriate rhythm; and "reason", like justice, must be seen to be believed. Postmodernism brings the drive towards creative parody into special prominence and breaks the illusion of serious theoretical representation in order to find alternative sites for new parables of reading. That the result has been a "strong" gobbledegook in which critical, theoretical and cultural impulses change places in a metathetic dance of desire is perhaps less significant than the fact that the Romantic irony inherent in contemporary theory has been responsible for drawing literary studies away from its institutionalized *mise-en-abyme.*

Despite its apparently polite demeanour, Wordsworth's *Ode* makes no concessions to exegesis. It begins with a lament for the waning of visionary power and closes with an assertion of gratitude; it draws its theological inflections from the gnostic tradition of Marcion and Valentinus, yet advocates a responsiveness to the integrity of commonplace incidents in a fallen universe; it privileges the past but appeals to an ennobling interchange between past and present; it is hostile to "all that is at enmity with joy", yet uses that very hostility as the source of spiritual affirmation. I shall try to show that these paradoxes are subservient to a series of larger paradoxes, and that this series, in turn, has its origins in Wordsworth's self-reflexive understanding of the acquisition of language.

In Section VII, for example, the poem recapitulates the gnostic account of the fall of man by transposing this account into an allegorical description of the semantic deceits inherent in language:

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

"As if his whole vocation/Were endless imitation". These lines cast a shadow over the entire poem. The dominant implication is that existence is an assumed position amid other acts of appropriation, an act of displacement in which there is a sequence of transcriptions, imitations of imitations, tropes without end, an "endless" and inexhaustible mimetic order. Just as the child fits "his tongue" to this ceaseless dialogue, so the poet "frames his song" to the generic constraints of the symbolic order. Yet this textual allegory cannot be reduced to a gathering of linguistic analogies. Throughout this section, Wordsworth brings the notion of autotelic *fashioning* into special prominence: the "fragment from his dream of human life" by which the child models his linguistic and cultural responses is "Shaped by himself with newly-learned art", even though the "little plan or chart" is imbued with a prior claim to existence.

Simultaneously, therefore, the act of appropriation is seen both as an inevitable consequence of the need to organize "the game" and as an instrument in the service of an endless act of deferral. On the one hand, language proceeds according to a transcendent model, a prior "fragment" abstracted from a foreshadowing "dream of human life"; on the other hand, language is structured not in relation to consciousness, but by the successive modulations of the mimetic impulse in a random sequence of appropriations. There is an uneasy alliance between transcendence and pragmatics, a perilous balance between the desire to affirm the void and the desire to confirm the temporality of linguistic processes.

It is in this sense that the section may be said to constitute an allegory of the experimental text, a text in which mimetic experience of the type explored in the realist poem is transposed into the register of Romantic irony. What Wordsworth is asserting is that desire – the desire of the child to "father" experience, the desire of the poet to "father" poetry – is not a response to a pre-ordained logic of maturation, but an enactment of language. By the same token, whatever is inimical to desire, whatever is "at enmity with joy", is, similarly, an enactment of language. Despite the poem's apparent emphasis on a conjunction of mind and matter, word and world, consciousness and landscape, its true subject concerns the creation and diminution of linguistic consolations such as those afforded by the intervention of a "timely utterance":

> To me alone there came a thought of grief:
> A timely utterance gave that thought relief.

Yet the consoling utterance has its origins elsewhere; it does not proceed from the poet's consciousness and is vested in the expressive power of another voice. In contrast, the poet's language – marked by "endless imitation" – remains inadequate for the expression of joy.

Instead of confirming and endorsing our desire to witness the triumph of the Romantic imagination over the "prison house" of "common day", the poem draws us into the disruptive, solipsistic procedures of representation. The poet cannot be consoled by strategies of coherence which are not his own, and the consoling power of the poem is diminished by our inability to

discern strategies of coherence and transcendence in the poetic voice. Emblematically, the child in Section VII mirrors our own perplexity as we attempt to disentangle the enactments of language from the conditions of experience. If the child's fragment, or plan, is arbitrarily constructed, then it is impossible to confirm or deny the arbitrariness of the "game" the "little Actor" plays as he "cons another part", and it is impossible to determine the extent to which the poem itself offers a satisfying or fully resolved representation of whatever is "at enmity with joy". Perhaps this is why it is difficult to assign symbolic values to the objects invoked in the poem. At the outset, the seemingly steadfast objects of the Romantic *gaze* – "Meadow", "groves", "stream", "Rainbow" – are associated not with the ideal of constancy, but with a sense of transience. They represent a vision of plenitude by a being at odds with his dreams. The "meadow" and the "grove" and the "stream" can no longer be seen for what they were; the "Rainbow comes and goes". From the very beginning, therefore, the poem repudiates the reader's desire for correspondence and coherence; as the poem develops, Wordsworth's themes become more disparate and less amenable to the vocabularies of organicity inscribed in the humanist tradition. Instead of exemplifying the "grand elementary principle of pleasure" by which man "knows, and feels, and lives, and moves" and without which there could be no "sympathy", since "We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure" – the principle defined and defended in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* – the poem deals in deficits and the annulment of desire: "The things which I have seen I now can see no more... / ... there has past away a glory from the earth ... / ...Wither has fled the visionary gleam?/Where is it now, the glory and the dream?". Without "pleasure" there can be no "sympathy"; without "sympathy" there can be no pleasure. If Wordsworth is to break this self-imposed impasse, his first task is to efface the principle of pleasure, to prove to himself that the alienating energy implicit in being "at enmity with joy" is an essential prerequisite for poetry, and to show that the negative logic of despair takes priority over the Romantic appeal to transcendence.

If the poem is orchestrated transgressively, in order to defy reduction into Romantic archetypes, then its rhetoric of signification is similarly transgressive and at enmity with the strategies of legitimation available for the Romantic poet. One such strategy involves the privileging of the Romantic teleology of "self" to which Wordsworth dedicates the theory of "ordinary language" advanced in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, a document which defines language in relation to the universal passions and sympathies of an exemplary human consciousness. In the Preface and *The Prelude*, he seeks to rehabilitate ordinary language as a system of tropes and figurations which is analogous to the diverse features of the external world, and to show that there is a profound homology between the excursive power of the mind and the expressive power of nature. His chief concern is to articulate an ennobling interchange between what we give and what we receive, and to show how the mind responds to its poetic energies. It is through his response to the paradoxes inherent in his verbal medium that he becomes conscious of the visionary potential of his perceptions, since he recognizes that the object of his

desire is not "world" but "language", and that his response to language is anterior to his response to nature. Just as the diverse elements of language present themselves as essential parts of a greater totality – a man speaking to men in the knowledge that such speech animates and directs the moral energies of all humanity – so the diverse features of the external world present themselves as necessary contrasts in a morally active universe. Thus the creative interpenetration of mind and matter is rooted in Wordsworth's imaginative conception of language as a great system of thought and feeling.

In the *Immortality Ode*, by contrast, language is dislodged from its position as the bearer of universal "truth", and the self is identified not with the *expression* of thought and feeling but with a protracted act of mimesis: "As if his whole vocation were endless imitation". Representation is no longer self-immanent. Because *everything* is an "endless imitation", even the pleasure principle is subordinated to an act of mimesis, and the "self" is no longer a privileged object of scrutiny, since it has no existence apart from an endlessly proliferating act of representation through which it seeks completion. It is for this reason that the poem's major trope is not identified, according to Romantic convention, with the excursive power of the imagination but with the *loss* of imaginative power and the stripping away of hope:

> Fallings from us, vanishings;
> Blank misgivings of a Creature
> Moving about in worlds not realized.

Paradoxically, it is to these "Fallings from us", these "vanishings", that Wordsworth raises "The song of thanks and praise", since his aim is not to establish a stable ontology of self but to evoke a state of anterior selflessness which can be used as the basis for a gnostic effacement of the mutability of experience.

In the context of gnosis, the phrase "all that is at enmity with joy" loses its conventional, disjunctive significance, since, in gnostic terms, "joy" is synonomous with the alienating fall from celestial origins into the material universe and the spurious accommodations of "reality". This reading of "joy" accords with the opening stanzas of the *Ode*, where Wordsworth registers a "thought of grief" amid the "joyous song" of birds and the melody of the "tabor's sound". It is a precondition for gnosis that all materializations of experience are unsettling and that, as in Blake's comments on Wordsworth, pastoral significations are to be distrusted. If we accept the possibility of a Wordsworthian distrust of nature then we are compelled to re-negotiate and to re-invent the principles which shape our reading of the *Ode*.

Perhaps the first such "re-invention" would be to return the text to its gnostic antecedents and to insert the poem into a pre-existent order of discourse: to return it to the archeology it might have represented had New Criticism not jettisoned the diachronic in the name of modernism. Such a re-invention would not privilege Wordsworth's childhood "experience" as the source of visionary plenitude, but would seek to reveal the elisions and distortions inherent in the notion of "experience" itself. A radical decentering of this notion is essential if we are to come to terms with the disruptive

procedures of the *Ode*, and if we are to re-insert the poem into the order of reading first suggested in Bradley's assertion that "the road into Wordsworth's mind must be through his strangeness and his paradoxes, and not around them...his paradoxes, long known by heart and found full of truth, still remain paradoxes" (Bradley, 1909: 101):

> Much of [Wordsworth's poetry] is beautiful without being peculiar or difficult; and some of this may be as valuable as that which is audacious or strange. But unless we get hold of that, we remain outside Wordsworth's centre; and, if we have not a most unusual affinity to him, we cannot get hold of that unless we realise its strangeness and refuse to blunt the sharpness of its edge (Bradley, 1909: 101).

If my reading appears to be "at enmity with joy", at odds with an aesthetic of "joy" entrenched in the vocabulary of Wordsworth criticism, it is because I do not wish to blunt the poem's estranging edge and because the *Ode* itself is at enmity with joy at a level which is seldom acknowledged.

Postmodernism; posthumanism. Do these metaphors for strangeness and paradox have anything to do with the consolations of literature? Is my reading merely a happy misadventure among theoretical master narratives? In the context of literary studies in South Africa – a country blinded by Eurocentric insights and burdened by acts of critical appropriation – how shall I legitimize my reading/misreading? Is it possible to escape an implicit allegiance to one of the two over-coded discourses of Wordsworth criticism, the Arnoldian and the Bradlean? Is it possible to read and write against received opinions without *abjection,* without appropriating a defensive strategy which confirms the very discourse it seeks to displace? If I were to show that the canonical text, in this case an *Ode* to blindness and the loss of insight, is fractured, mediated, distorted by the pressure of humanist discourse, in what sense could I be said to have "caught up with" postmodernism?

"There was a time", the poem begins, "when meadow, grove, and stream,/The earth,and every common sight,/To me did seem/Apparalled in celestial light / The glory and the freshness of a dream". Is the "dream" a dreaming forward, a prefiguration of experience, or an anamnestic recollection of experience? If the "glory" and the "freshness" are inscribed in a "dream", there is a close identification between illusion and perception. Moreover, because it is impossible to estimate the temporal value of the phrase "There was a time", it is impossible to estimate the temporal distance between "There was a time" and the "now" of enunciation ("It is not now as it hath been of yore"), unless we interpose a conventional but essentially arbitrary dimension: the difference between "childhood" and "maturity". And it seems that the Romantic trope of loss through separation, a trope made possible by our readiness to accede to prior Romantic tropes about innocence, experience and the loss of Eden, does not square with the powerful signature which precedes the poem:

The Child is father of the Man
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

If the child is father of the man, there is a sense in which the man, now author, cannot sustain his act of inscription and intervention without the authority of the child whose lost presence is the subject of the poem. The child is the displaced author of the "self", while the "self" re-creates the child as the lost object, the subject of visionary aspiration. The child, identified as the lost author, fathers an author who is incapable of re-discovering the child. "There was a time", then, does not necessarily dictate a stable chronology, the definable period of "childhood", but refers to a prior perception, a "spot of time", a "marker" or moment in the act of composition when the author effaces this authority in favour of a pre-discursive state in which there is no need to write and no need to father a text. "Bound each to each by natural piety" exemplifies the rhythmic pulsions of Kristeva's *chora*. To be forced to write without the signature of the child, without the "celestial light" which legitimizes the Romantic quest, is to be forced into an act of "endless imitation" which puts the desire to write "at enmity with joy", and which calls into question many of the assumptions which inform the Wordsworthian ethos: the desire for completion, the desire for the plenitude of growth, the desire for a stable teleology. Wordsworth is certain that "nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower", and the "joy" he apprehends is destined to be vested in a non-human other: "Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing your joyous song! / And let the young lambs bound".

Yet there is an insistent emphasis on the possibility of returning to lost origins, despite Wordsworth's avowal that no return is possible. In order to reverse the principle that the child is father of the man, in order to make it possible for the man to father the visionary child, the poem will have to create a special discourse outside the law of the father, outside the axiom that the child is father of the man. The refractive power of this discourse is discernible in the diffusion of values within the poem's semantic constraints. Because the figure of the child is simultaneously redemptive and destructive, exemplifying both the salvation of the father and the father's fall from grace, its symbolic significance alters with every change in inflection and emphasis. In Section V, for example, the child is defined as "trailing clouds of glory". "Heaven lies about it in its infancy", while the "man perceives" the "vision splendid .../... die away / And fade into the light of common day". In Section VIII, however, the "little Child" is accused of *provoking* "The years to bring the inevitable yoke":

> Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
> Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,
> Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
> The years to bring the inevitable yoke
> Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?

Is this accusation merely an instance of *rhetorical* intimidation, a textualized apostrophe to the vanished child? If we accept the convention of an implacable thrust of destiny, the accusation can be read as an impassioned protestation against the powers of horror that will force the child into abjection. The

poem, however, does not endorse this assumption. At the core of the *Ode* there is a blatantly unambiguous disavowal of nature as a benevolent power and an emphatic assertion that nature is "at enmity with joy", an assertion that calls into question both the tutelary role of natural processes and, by implication, the sacrosanct status of the child as an exemplar of natural piety:

> Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
> Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
> And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
> And no unworthy aim,
> The homely Nurse doth all she can
> *To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,*
> *Forget the glories he hath known,*
> *And that imperial palace whence he came.*
> (77-84; my emphasis)

In these lines, the myth of progress intersects with the failure of progress. The man perceives the "vision splendid" fade into "Shades of the prison-house"; the child provokes "The years to bring the inevitable yoke"; the Man is forced to relinquish the myth of memory as a creative power akin to the workings of the imagination. Paradoxically, however, this intersection constitutes a liberating drive towards the preservation of difference, radically altering the import of the signature cited earlier. If nature prevents the man from reappropriating the "glories he hath known", then the figure of the Child loses its authority as the repository of visionary splendour and, simultaneously, the Man's desire – the wish to bind Man and child by natural piety – loses its utopian appeal, since the binding has already been decisively sundered by an implacable force, beyond hope and desire, the irrefutable presence of "Earth", the unmediated "Other".

This representation of nature as the "Other" textualizes Wordsworth's failure to live up to his childhood as well as the failure of *The Recluse*, the *magnum opus* which would synthesize "mankind's philosophical, scientific, historical and political knowledge in poetry", the magnificent mutilation to which he consecrated the full power of his imagination. "To this work", he announced to De Quincey, "I mean to devote the Prime of my life and the chief force of my mind" (*Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years*, 454). As *The Prelude* demonstrates, repeatedly, visionary plenitude follows from the obliteration and negation of nature "in such strength / of usurpation, when the light of sense / Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed / The invisible world" (*Prelude*, VI: 599-602) and when the human subject is forced into "obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward Things". The extinction of nature effaces all intimations of immortality, but it is a necessary precondition for the poet's assertion of autonomy, his desire to stand in opposition to procedures institutionalized in his own poetic practice: love of nature leading to love of man; the myth of memory; the ennobling interchange between nature and the human mind. The power of the *Ode* is evinced in such hidden refusals, in its questioning of the centrality of nature, and in its willingness to celebrate the failure of the Romantic modalities of

value. Just as, in *The Recluse,* Wordsworth fails to live up to Coleridge's high-minded specifications for the prototypical Romantic poem –

> Facts elevated into Theory – Theory into Law – & Laws into Living and intelligent Powers – true Idealism necessarily perfecting itself in Realism, & Realism refining itself into Idealism. – Such or something like this was the Plan, I had supposed you were engaged on (Griggs, 1956–1971: IV, 575) –

so, in the *Immortality Ode,* he reaches beyond the conventional appurtenances of Romantic holism in order to create a counter-mythology of fracture, failure and paradox.

In Sections X and XI, for example, Wordsworth's stoicism – expressed as a quest for the "philosophic mind" that has "kept watch o'er man's mortality" – is displaced by the anxiety of closure. Instead of stopping at the scene of the "Other", where the "mighty waters" roll "evermore", and where the Romantic trope of the "immortal sea" accommodates both the prospect of a redemptive journey and the difficulty of a return to origination – the text surrenders itself to a valediction forbidding grief, to a metaphysical transposition of "human suffering" into "faith", and to a further transposition of past splendour into a future sobriety. The text's oppositional understructure is transformed into the suspensory state of mind defined by Keats's doctrine of "negative capability". This modulation, although legitimated and incited by the myth of completion, reconstructs only a fragment of a poetic argument marked by tension and ellipsis. Far from extracting and subduing the enigmatic character of Wordsworth's intimations of immortality, the transposition dispels the possibility of a genuinely harmonious resolution of contrariety. There is too much argument by assertion, and the insistent avowals of an "abundant recompense" threaten to overwhelm the delicate tinctures of hope inscribed in the phrase "*intimations* of immortality":

> We will grieve not . . .
> The innocent brightness of a new-born day
> Is lovely yet . . .
> Thanks to the human heart by which we live.

It is in this sense that the poem may be said to be a Romantic "failure" – not a failure of consciousness, for that would be to imply a transcendent logic of coherence, but a failure of bravura, the inability to confront the tensions and enigmas of the preceding sections of the poem. In the guise of an affirmative ending, Wordsworth suggests that his gaze discerns the boundary marked by the "shore", displacing the flashes and vanishings of the imaginary, the intimations lodged in the anamnestic consciousness of the child. Instead of bringing the perilous nature of the homeward voyage into special prominence, he reinstates the logic of completion in the context of the Romantic ethos of consolation and stasis and the Romantic mythology of ultimate closure.

In reconstituting the *Ode* in the context of failure, I have implicitly opened up a frame of reference which permits a further reconstitution in the context

of culture. Although my aim has been to offer a literary-critical reading of an "object", the possibility that the object is a failure in terms of modernist paradigms of cohesion implies that it *may* lie outside the purview of literary criticism, and that the intellectual activities which are assumed to be appropriate for practitioners of "Eng. lit." are simply inadequate for the complexity of the real task, that of constituting the Wordsworthian consciousness within the context of cultural and ideological formations. Wordsworth, it is as well to note, did not limit his project to exclusively "literary" interventions. He knew that the literary activity was also a social and cultural activity, just as he knew that social and cultural concerns are moral concerns. His prose statements – such as the pamphlet dealing with the Convention of Cintra, the morally prescriptive *Guide to the Lakes* and the Preface itself – take up an emphatically adversative position in relation to current cultural and aesthetic hegemonies, not the least of which is the reified "Romanticism" of his predecessors.

I hesitate on the brink of the other discourse beckoning for attention, its ideological dagger poised before me; an uncloistered discourse, it does not respect the ontological certitudes of literary studies, and sets our expectations about literary – theoretical speculation at nought. Doubtless, it is a discourse marked by failure, for no-one can "synthesize mankind's philosophical, scientific, historical and political knowledge" under the aegis of a literary "reading" or a literary "writing". Perhaps, however, that is exactly the point: the broken text of *The Recluse* is a magnificent reminder of the tensions and possibilities inherent in such a discourse; and if such a discourse is destined to fail, it is because, like *The Recluse*, it would be archeological, a surviving remnant of discourses mined and extracted from many disciplines, a discourse in which there is a fructifying interpenetration of presence and absence, object and subject, wholeness and fragmentation, "completed" *Ode* and "unfinished" *Recluse*. The main protagonist in this discourse of failure and recovery is the mind of the theorist, willing to "offer ideas as hostages to fate and [to] risk all manner of 'uncanny' after-effects, textual as well as historical" (Machin and Norris, 1987: 17). I hope that one after-effect of my speculation will take the form of a demand: a demand for a discourse which does not pretend to be Wordsworthian in an institutionally acceptable sense, but Wordsworthian in a subjective, meditative and reflective sense, a "sense" that defies reduction into stereotypes and is not "at enmity with joy".

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