The Politics of "Tintern Abbey"
Author(s): Kenneth R. Johnston
Published by: Marilyn Gaull
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/24041014

Marilyn Gaull is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to The Wordsworth Circle
hundred and twenty-five pounds. A deposit of sixty pounds ensures registration. The deposit is refundable until April 1st, 1983. The balance of the fee is payable by June 30th, 1983. Cheques should be made payable to Wordsworth Summer Conference at Dove Cottage and be directed with all other correspondence, to the address on this registration form.

If you would like to know more about the Conference, please write to me. If you decide to join us, the attached registration form should be sent, together with your deposit, to Dove Cottage. As soon as your deposit is received, a place will be reserved for you. I look forward very much to hearing from you soon, and to meeting you at the '83 Conference.

Richard Wordsworth, Conference Director.

---

The Politics of “Tintern Abbey”

Kenneth R. Johnston
Indiana University

Wordsworth’s “Lines, Written a few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798,” is not usually considered a political poem, but if we shift from “political” to “social,” and thence to the still more general “moral,” we find ourselves on familiar grounds of interpretation. The entire poem may be said to turn upon the fulcrum of Wordsworth’s assertion that he has “learned / To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity” (88-91). Most critical interpretations focus on the beginning or end of this process rather than its turning point: i.e., on Nature’s “beauteous forms” or on the transcendentally sublime insights they lead to, when “we see into the life of things” (49). But each of the poem’s five verse paragraphs contain strong language of social responsibility that lends value to Wordsworth’s enjoyment of landscape — otherwise a morally neutral datum — and allows him to build toward quasi-religious assurances. Thus these knots of social language are essential to the reputation “Tintern Abbey” deserves and has long enjoyed, of a secular poem that gives us something to believe in. In its own cultural context, the poem enacts a process whereby a fashionable intellectual pastime — the cultivation of picturesque views — becomes transcendentally important, precisely by virtue of not being an escapist pleasure, but a socially responsible one.

But there are many tensions inherent in this process, directly parallel to the more obvious tensions in the topic sentences of each of the poem’s paragraphs, and generally identifiable with the over-arching drama of Wordsworth’s work (especially The Prelude): how to present the growth of his mind as a continuous, uninterrupted, fundamentally unthreatened sequence, or, to show how love of Nature leads to love of Mankind. In socio-political terms, this problem requires that the connection between landscape-viewing and religious belief be non-violent, certainly non-revolutionary, and possibly even non-political, insofar as politics, the art of the possible, must be practiced in the arena of the improbable and the uncertain. Preliminarily, we can identify some of the strains to which Wordsworth subjects the idea of political maturity even in the poem’s central fulcrum, the sonorously impressive lines on “the still, sad music of humanity.” There is the slight oddity of displacement between verbs, looking on nature while hearing that sad music. Is it a recall to duty or a fading echo? And how has he “learned” to do this? Not the process, but its beginnings and endings (Before and After) are represented most in the poem. The adverbs and adjectives multiply qualifications. “Hearing oftentimes” — but how often is that? And what kind of music is “still, sad music”? It sounds more like the andante of a Brahms symphony than the allegro of a Romantic one by Beethoven, where we...
might hear, rather than “still, sad music,” the agitated, angry noise of human suffering. Furthermore, why is music so obviously calm as “still, sad music” further qualified as being “nor harsh nor grating,” especially when, as John Hodgson has excellently observed, “harsh” and “grating” certainly seem appropriate to the human sounds represented elsewhere in the poem: “the din of cities,” “the sneers of selfish men,” and “greetings where no kindness is”? What is being so carefully protected from harsh grating in a nonetheless necessary process of chastening and subduing? Probably, by way of a preliminary answer, the egoism of the creative artist, fearful of being overborne by other legitimate claims on his genius.

Certainly some of these questions are unfairly loaded, and go too far beyond the text, which after all is what it is, and is not required to supply an exact demonstration of the relation of aesthetic experience — whether landscape viewing or poetry writing (or reading) — to social responsibility and ultimate values. Nonetheless, the poem itself provokes such questions, and if in what follows I seem often to go outside the poem and to imply that Wordsworth is neglecting or sublimating unpleasant associations, it’s not to suggest that he like any poet can’t write the poem he wants to write, but that he himself has imbedded it with language which simultaneously invites and resists probing, opening up just those areas of concern that it determinedly seeks to elide or contain in more manageable terms. Overall, this dialectical tendency in the social language of Tintern Abbey is directly parallel to what is to many readers its most impressive dramatic achievement, its way of making affirmative statements of belief while urging itself along by a constant series of very tentative, not to say negative, qualifications: “If this / Be but a vain belief,” “somewhat of a sad perplexity,” “Nor perchance, / If I were not thus taught,” etc.

The more appropriate question would be to determine how “the still, sad music of humanity” is represented in the poem? A partial answer has already been suggested, in Hodgson’s gloss on “harsh” and “grating.” But I want to consider Wordsworth’s representations of humanity in “Tintern Abbey” from a variety of perspectives: the progress of the text itself, Wordsworth’s actual and literary experiences during his Wye tours, the poem’s place in Lyrical Ballads and in relation to Wordsworth’s contemporary work on The Recluse, and in the context of his other learning processes combining nature and humanity between 1793 and 1798.

We hear the “still, sad music of humanity” — i.e., see representations of human beings and human emotions — in two basic variations of a single phenomenon: of elision, mutation, or restriction. In the first, descriptive paragraph, human phenomena constitute fully half the description, but are presented in a consistently specialized way that connects them — blurs them, one might say — as undisturbingly as possible into the beautiful surrounding natural landscape. Secondly, in each of the subsequent verse paragraphs, the fulcrum or tonic note of human music is heard within a very narrow yet very intense range of notes, which is generalized, broadened or crescendoed, at the poem’s center into “the still, sad music of humanity.” In paragraph two, it is “the din of towns and cities” and “hours of weariness” — preliminarily generalized into “the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world.” In three, it is “the fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world.” In four, it is “the still, sad music” itself, very much subordinated to Wordsworth’s description of his earlier youthful pleasures in nature and his quasi-metaphysical paeans to it in the present. And in paragraph five, it is “evil tongues, / Rash judgments...the sneers of selfish men, /...greetings where no kindness is, [and] all / The dreary intercourse of daily life,” subsequently generalized to “solitude...fear...pain...grief” (l. 143). Taken all together, these are not very great human evils that go to make up “the still, sad music of humanity,” and do not specifically include the tragic associations we inevitably supply to that sonorous phrase, such as poverty, famine, disease, war, or all the irrevocable losses of love and life, irreversible, unmerited, and uncontrollable suffering which are inescapable in the human condition. At the risk of being gratuitous and unfair, we might rather generalize the specific representations of human suffering in “Tintern Abbey” as the lonely feelings of rejection suffered by a sensitive person in the conditions of intense competitive work in urban markets, where gossip, hasty judgment, jealousy, and smooth hypocrisy all contribute to the feverish pace at which one’s business fails to go along as profitably as one wishes. Or, to gloss this last set of “Lines” in Lyrical Ballads from the first, the “Lines / Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree,” the experiences of human life represented in “Tintern Abbey” sound very much like those of a youth...led by nature into a wild scene

Of lofty hopes, [who] to the world went forth... knowing no desire
Which genius did not hallow; ‘gainst the taint
Of dissolute tongues, and jealousy, and hate,
And scorn, — against all enemies prepared,
All but neglect. The world, for so it thought,
Owed him no service; wherefore he at once
With indignation turned himself away,
And with the food of pride sustained his soul
In solitude. (13-24)

The Picturesque and the Unpicturesque at Tintern Abbey.

We are all familiar with the rhetoric of interconnection in the first paragraph, most fully analyzed by Colin Clarke, by which Wordsworth connects past to present, spirit to matter, man to nature, and other variations of
“dweller” be a “vagrant”? And what does “houseless” add standing out markedly from its bland surrounding contexts partakes of the oxymoronic quality elsewhere in the paragraph (e.g., “pastoral farms”): In what sense can a I submit that such a powerfully ambiguous passage, woods,” where “vagrant dwellers,” besides appearing as a still alive; than that she had only lost the use of her disturbing presence of beggars, gipsies, and vaga- ruined walls; which streamed with unwholesome dews. .. Wordsworth as “vagrant dwellers in the houseless were rather surprised, that the wretched creature was expect to be interested; but found we were. I never shew us, was her own miserable habitation. We did not turing which produced the smoke about whose source the story of her own wretchedness; and all she had to Erdman has unearthed: 7) the extensive charcoal manufac- landscape around Tintern Abbey, noted by Gilpin and by limbs, and meagre, contracted body.” She leads them to Bering “tours” of the ruin’s most interesting spots. GilpinoundingBoxInText:backgroundPoint:1121,205,1277,228,1320,242,1362,256,1407,270,1448,285,1487,300,1658,332,1773,345,1879,355,1971,362,2067,372,2171,382,2243,392,2314,404,2357,412,2395,417,2429,429,2458,434,2486,441,2509,448,2536,454,2558,461,2579,466,2598,472,2616,478,2630,481,2643,485,2653,489,2663,493,2667,496,2675,499,2681,502,2685,506,2688,508,2691,510,2693,512,2695,514,2696,517,2698,519,2700,521,2702,523,2704,526; boundingBoxInText:foregroundPoint:8,122,482,134,582,136,793,138; boundingBoxInText:forewordPoint:484,136,793,138; boundingBoxInText:backwordPoint:484,136,793,138; My point in adducing Wordsworth’s use of Gilpin is not to belabor his indebtedness: doubtless he improves on Gilpin, and being borrowed by Wordsworth is the best thing that ever happened to Gilpin. Rather, I am interested in the use Wordsworth did not make of Gilpin, in light of the fact that his knowledge of Gilpin’s guidebook is demonstrably so strong, arguing perhaps for his carrying it with him on the tour (in 1793 or 1798 or both), or having Gilpin’s phrases so firmly in mind that he could make unconscious use of them in describing similar scenes. What Wordsworth did not use from Gilpin, except perhaps very obliquely, pertains especially to the second half of the first paragraph — its human or social half. In the last six lines of the paragraph, Wordsworth combines into a pleasant picturesque image two distinctly unpleasant aspects of the landscape around Tintern Abbey, noted by Gilpin and by another contemporary guidebook of 1793 which David Erdman has unearthed: 1) the extensive charcoal manufacturing which produced the smoke about whose source Wordsworth could hardly have been “uncertain” (as well as the heavily commercial aspect of the river at that point due to shipping traffic), and 2) the pervasive and disturbing presence of beggars, gipsies, and vagabonds in and around the abbey. These are represented by Wordsworth as “vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,” where “vagrant dwellers,” besides appearing as a conventional picturesque detail (so too the smoke) also partakes of the oxymoronic quality elsewhere in the paragraph (e.g., “pastoral farms”): In what sense can a “dweller” be a “vagrant”? And what does “houseless” add — or take away — from such a construction? His imme-

I submit that such a powerfully ambiguous passage, standing out markedly from its bland surrounding contexts in Gilpin, and reinforced by direct experience, must have
had an enormous impact on Wordsworth, as landscapeviewer, as author of **Lyrical Ballads**, and as prospective author of **The Recluse**, with its philosophical “views of Nature, Man, and Society...of considerable utility” (LEY, 212, 214). And I think he went to great lengths—greatly artistic lengths—to prevent such powerful associations and experiences from overbearing his poem, by recasting such beggars as “vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,” and further distanc[ing] them into the Hermit at home in his cave, where he belongs, sitting by his fire, alone.

It may be objected that the poem is not set at Tintern Abbey, but a “few miles above” it. Insofar as this is poetically true (even if not literally so), I may only be supplying background contexts to the poem. But we must also recall that Tintern Abbey was the focus of all such tours up the Wye, for Gilpin as well as Wordsworth, and that the Wordsworths were at the abbey every single day of their tour, arriving, departing, passing, or visiting. The point of all such tours was to view ruins in landscape, not just landscape alone—a point underscored by the fact that in Gilpin’s guidebook the ratio of illustrations of ruins to those of landscapes without ruins is three-to-one. Furthermore, though the poem’s original title said “written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth later changed this to “composed,” to take cognizance of the fact that he finished it as he descended into Bristol at the end of their “four or five” day tour. And, just as we all refer to the poem as “Tintern Abbey,” so did Wordsworth and his circle, as evidenced most recently in Beth Darlington’s edition of Wordsworth’s love letters to his wife, where he speaks of “the Tintern Abbey, . . . of all my Poems the one [in] which I speak of it will be the most beloved by me.” There have been various attempts over the years to connect or detach the abbey from the poem, but these have been mostly concerned with reinforcing or downplaying the religious associations it would lend. My point stresses, not its religious associations, but the troubling, painful notes its human, social implications would introduce into “the still, sad music of humanity.”

To return, in conclusion of this point, to Gilpin’s description of the crippled beggar woman, think how many of Wordsworth’s **Lyrical Ballads** recapitulate Gilpin’s stance when confronted by her: “all indeed she meant to tell us was the story of her own wretchedness.” Compare the Female Vagrant: “She ceased, and weeping turned away, / As if because her tale was at an end.” Compare the forsaken Indian woman: “Too soon, my friends, you went away; / For I had many things to say.” And think how much of Wordsworth’s own learning “to look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth” derives from following out the implications of Gilpin’s unwilling expression of surprise: “we did not expect to be interested; but found we were.” Wordsworth composed basically two kinds of poems in **Lyrical Ballads**: “views” or “pictures” of suffering humanity (roughly, his “ballads”) and “lyrics” of meditation upon natural beauty (his five sets of “Lines” in the collection, from those left on the yew-tree seat to those composed above Tintern Abbey). The “views” or ballads of suffering are presented quite barren of commentary or explanation, except for a strong, repeated, but unspecified injunction to thought, as in, “Now think, ye farmers all, I pray, / Of Goody Blake and Harry Gill.” The “Lines,” by contrast, are full of meditation and explanation about the source and meaning of human appreciation of natural beauty, but quite vague and unspecified about its social significance, except for the sense of sharp and even contradictory contrast, as in, “Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?” “Tintern Abbey” in a way brings these two discrete modes together, when Wordsworth says he has “learned to look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth.” But, though it admits more of “the still, sad music of humanity” into its meditations, it nevertheless radically downplays it, proportionate to “all that we behold / From this green earth; of all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear.”

This proportion, or disproportion, within “Tintern Abbey,” and between the two kinds of poems Wordsworth contributed to **Lyrical Ballads**, is explicable within the context of the work Wordsworth considered his main task in 1798, writing of **The Recluse**, to which the composition and collection of **Lyrical Ballads** was very much incidental. By the time he composed “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth had written 1300 lines of **The Recluse**, consisting mainly of the poems now known as “The Ruined Cottage,” “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” the lines on the Discharged Veteran which conclude Book IV of **The Prelude**, and, probably, “A Night-Piece.” More important, however, is the fact that he had, by July, stopped working on **The Recluse**, and the most powerful reason for his stopping, on the basis of internal interpretation, is precisely his failure to integrate the sufferings of Margaret, the old Cumberland Beggar, and the Discharged Veteran with scenes of natural beauty like those described in “A Night-Piece,” or to satisfactorily establish the connection between landscape viewing and social responsibility which is implicit in the frames around “The Ruined Cottage” and the Discharged Veteran—i.e., the connection between their aesthetic, way-wandering young narrator and the bleak human figures or stories he unexpectedly meets on the road. Wordsworth’s poems in **Lyrical Ballads** are successful, relative to his failure on **The Recluse**, because they present separate, discrete, freestanding images of human suffering on the one hand, and meditations upon natural beauty on the other. He had, so far, failed to coordinate such images with such meditations in his masterwork, **The Recluse**, and he had to work very carefully in his most ambitious poem in **Lyrical Ballads** lest their failure to relate, to integrate, overcome and break down that poem as well. Hence the modulated chords of “the still, sad music of humanity.” Of course, the integra-
tion of aesthetic experience to social responsibility is still the largest legacy — or piece of unfinished business — which the Romantic movement has bequeathed to the modern world, and our modern institutionalized academic structures (including scholarly journals) for instruction and research into the nature and meaning of artistic experience have as their major justification, in mass democratic societies, the claim to be doing just that.

From Political London to Picturesque Tintern.

The presence or absence of beggars in poems was not necessarily a political fact in 1798, however much it may seem so today. It was more of a religious fact, having to do with parish relief rates and poorhouses, which, though not without political implications in a society with an established church, was mainly a local problem, not a national one, and certainly not yet a matter of international political ideologies. But mention of The Recluse does touch upon the widest sort of implications for explaining human suffering, since, with its themes of Man, Nature, and Human Life, it was to have been a means of rescuing the young intellectual radicals of Wordsworth's generation from the selfish cynicism into which they were sinking as a consequence of the failures of the French Revolution. Furthermore, while The Recluse was not exactly an ideological poem, it was certainly a philosophical one, and was, in effect, the habitation and the name of the ideal of a philosophically interpretive, and philosophically interpretable, poem which motivated much of the greatest work of both Wordsworth and Coleridge. Although the idea of such a grandly philosophic masterwork undoubtedly came to Wordsworth from Coleridge, Wordsworth had not been innocent of grand plans before he met Coleridge, and the grandest of these was a project whose scope very much resembles that of The Recluse: his detailed discussions between 1792-95 with his best friend before Coleridge, William Mathews, for a liberal journal of politics and to greet the French Revolution and to push for further parliamentary reform in England), and contained many things which could have come from the mind or pen of Wordsworth — if we imagine him working in the special circumstance of a group effort by young liberal university gentlemen publishing a popular journal for the enlightenment of the masses, a group in which he would have been a decidedly junior, apprentice member. This actual Philanthropist was, for the most part, a Godwinian, anti-war, opposition paper. Such sentiments as, “All improvements are slow and progressive,” are pure Godwinism. It contained some bumptious propaganda verse on contemporary abuses (“Bob Shave the King,” against Pitt’s tax on wig powder), but the imitations of Juvenal’s satires which Wordsworth was writing during this same period (which he was later very eager to hush up) would have done just fine in The Philanthropist. For the most part it mixed lengthy extracts from standard Whig texts (e.g., Trenchard’s History of Standing Armies in England) with original essays, the best of which are written in clear, sim-
ple, argumentative prose, based on traditional principles of British constitutionalism, and opposing the war with France not on revolutionary “French principles” but on the expeditious grounds of the war’s damage to English peace and prosperity because it interfered with free trade and the expansion of empire — and also because it inflicted hardship on the lower classes. Thus the politics of the actual Philanthropist of 1795-96 very much resemble the politics of the proposed Philanthropist of 1792-94. Although both might have been considered “radical” in the hysterical political climate in London after the declarations of war (mass meetings, extremist plots, Treason Trials, paid government informers), it was certainly not treasonous, nor activist, and could be characterized as “a very safe little journal,” as E.P. Thompson has described another Wordsworth friend’s provincial journal, The OEconomist, a description which would also fit yet another of his friend’s plans for yet another similar journal, Coleridge’s The Watchman of 1796. When Wordsworth and Mathews were discussing the political slant of their proposed Philanthropist, Wordsworth said, “I recoil from the bare idea of a revolution,” and the actual Philanthropist is not a revolutionary journal, but one aimed precisely at avoiding revolution by advocating economy in public administration and “gradual and constant reform” of profligate ministerial abuses.

Almost all that is known of Wordsworth’s whereabouts in London in 1795 is that he was a frequent visitor at Godwin’s. They first met at a large tea party on February 27 (M.I.; CEY, ) — a tea party which, in the hypothesis I am developing, has all the marks of an organizational meeting. There was Godwin, the tutelary genius and celebrity to act as a magnet and inspiration for the large group of ambitious young literary gentlemen three or four years out of college: Wordsworth, Mathews, James Losh (the friend from The OEconomist, and also the friend who received one of the first notices of The Recluse), and other ex-Cambridge friends of Wordsworth’s, Tweddell, Raine, Thomas Edwards (who would work with STC on Watchman), Higgins, and French (M.I. 263-64). More important, there were, between Godwin and these young men, three men in particular — William Frend, George Dyer, and Thomas Holcroft — who were all experienced publicists in radical-reformist causes. Frend and Dyer were, moreover, former faculty members or family friends of Wordsworth and others in the younger group, and their presence as managers in a joint enterprise would be very flattering and impressive to their protégés. Frend had been removed from his Cambridge tutorship in 1792 for his conversion to Unitarianism, and from his fellowship in 1793 for writing a political and religious tract of liberal, moderate persuasion: Peace and Union Recommended to the Association Bodies of Republicans and Anti-Republicans (1793). Holcroft was a different kettle of fish, irascible and erratic, one of the heroes of the day by virtue of his almost accidental inclusion in the famous Treason Trial of 1794, and, coincidentally, author of a condescendingly cool review of Wordsworth’s first two published books, An Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches (1793).

In sum, without going into all the many biographical details that variously link these people together, I hypothesize that the mix looks right for a publishing venture by a society of young, ambitious, and unemployed university gentlemen. And the title, Philanthropist, was in 1795 virtually a Godwinian code-word, the inevitable abstract personification, common to 18th century journals (cf. The Spectator), of Godwin’s key noun: Benevolence. I propose that London was too small a town in 1795 for such a group of genteel intellectual philosophic reformers as met at Godwin’s house in February not to overlap somehow with the “society of gentlemen” who brought out the first issue of The Philanthropist in March; indeed, it is questionable whether any other group could have published so thoroughly Godwinian a journal. I hypothesize not so much Wordsworth’s composition of particular passages in the journal, but his place among the legwork errand boys of the enterprise: gathering the extracts from Trenchard’s Standing Armies or Robinson’s Political Catechism, writing up drafts — stimulated by meetings at Godwin’s — of current topics, and experiencing the unpleasant sensation of having his drafts heavily edited by his former teacher, Frend, his former schoolteacher’s friend, Dyer, and his former reviewer, the “extremely candid” Holcroft (as Lamb later described him). Furthermore, I connect Wordsworth’s likely reaction to this experience with his letters to Mathews about their proposed Philanthropist, where he expresses the easiest sort of confidence about achieving a simple, lucid prose style with practice (cf. his actual, crabbed prose style in the Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, 1793), and I contrast this with his hesitations about actual newspaper work as he comes to London, preferring solitary composition of occasional pieces of commentary to covering parliamentary debates, because of “being subject to nervous headaches, which invariably attack me when exposed to a heated atmosphere or to loud noises . . . with such an excess of pain as to deprive me of all recollection” (LEY, 138).

The most specific places in The Philanthropist where I would argue for the presence of Wordsworth’s hand are two essays — one signed “W.” — where the topic is the use of genius or talent in the face of widespread human suffering. The implicit argument — or subtext — of these essays is to draw parallels between England’s ignoring its talented young men and its insensitivity to the hunger and homelessness of the rural lower classes, as if to assert, ‘If only I could achieve greatness, so could all of humanity.’ If not exactly a unique topos of argument, it is nonetheless a highly specialized one. Both of these essays concentrate more on poverty’s effect on the human mind than on its bodily ills, as do Wordsworth’s “views” of human suffering in Lyrical Ballads, and both extend such effects to the
entire character of a nation. As “W” says, “familiarity with this kind of wretchedness has also an injurious effect upon the minds of the higher orders.”18 To anticipate, I hypothesize that in “Tintern Abbey” we see some of Wordsworth’s efforts to modulate such injurious effects.

Not only does this hypothesis allow us to give a more concrete location to Wordsworth’s flirtation with Godwinism in the 1790s (otherwise adequately covered by Harper and Legouis), it also provides an active, real context for his narrow but intense range of expressions for human evils in “Tintern Abbey”: “lonely rooms,” “the din of towns and cities,” “hours of weariness,” “the fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,” and, especially, “evil tongues, / Rash judgments...the sneers of selfish so...are...where no kindness is,...[and] all / The dreary intercourse of daily life.” For this is the kind of emotional context my hypothesis suggests: heated discussions, intense arguments, differences of editorial opinion, pressures of deadlines and securing copy, peer pressure and rivalries, oversight by slightly senior former teachers whose success and achievements could not be denied, even as (in Wordsworth’s case) the suspicion dawned that he was a much better writer but not a better journalist, the need to find some employment, the eagerness to succeed, all underlined not only by the heady atmosphere of political liberty unleashed by the French Revolution, but, more to the point, the exciting danger of working on an opposition newspaper in wartime, which was underlined by the danger of treason trials — though for such young gentlemen the danger was less of imprisonment or transportation to Botany Bay than the almost equally frightening danger of damaging their individual publishing prospects, and messing up the development of their careers.

“Tintern Abbey” is not the only poem in which Wordsworth generalizes about human evil from a narrow base of negative emotions. I have already cited the “Lines” left on the yew-tree seat. The portions of Book X of the 1805 Prelude dealing with his London experiences of this time (“Dragging all passions... / Like culprits to the bar”), could as well describe editorial arguments at Godwin’s house as internal arguments with himself. And in the portions of “Home at Grasmere” composed in 1800 — as Book First of Part First of The Recluse — he defends his removal to Grasmere as not the escapist fantasy of a self-indulgent aesthete but as a realistically responsible decision, since human beings in Grasmere are just as bad as human beings elsewhere (i.e., in cities). But we note again the specificity of the evils by which he conveys this: “selfishness and envy and revenge, / Ill neighbourhood...flattery and double-dealing, strife and wrong” (436-38), in contrast to the poem he intends to write, The Recluse, which will keep “clear...of ill advised ambition and of pride” (884-885). The range of powerful generalization that Wordsworth sustains from this narrow base is all the more important when we consider that the “W” of The Philanthropist, confronting much more directly the mental evils of extreme poverty and deprivation, was inevitably if unwillingly driven into veiled threats of violent revolution: “I forebear the direct application of these sentiments to our own country: if my premises be true, its prospects cannot be very bright. The state of the lower orders, I am persuaded, marks more than any other circumstance, the state of a country; that of the lower orders here is certainly deplorable. Let us hope that their relief is within the reach of ordinary means; for the application of extraordinary means to remedy the evil, the hardest cannot anticipate without dread. Yours [sincerely], etc., W.”

To return to “Tintern Abbey,” we may say that insofar as it describes a process of learning “to look on nature not as in the hour of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes the still, sad music of humanity,” it is a process very different from the implicit disruption of picturesque context which occurs in Gilpin’s guidebook, or the one that is explicit in The Philanthropist. Like “still, sad music,” this learning is represented as smooth, continuous, and unbroken, not disruptive, violent, uncertain, or threatening. This is why it must be “nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power to chasten and subdue.” Harsh, grating music might break the music of the poem, might cause the poem to break down, and open up the gaps in the fabric of thought, or society, such as those that “W” could only anticipate with dread.

Inevitably, this address to the politics of “Tintern Abbey” sounds critical of Wordsworth, and to a certain degree it is. But not to a fundamental degree: I wish him to have been neither a political journalist nor a revolutionary activist, and his shift of enthusiasm away from the French Revolution is a shift that almost all European intellectuals underwent in greater or lesser degree. Nor am I suggesting that “Tintern Abbey” should somehow be “more” political — that Wordsworth should have more forthrightly included some ruins — human or architectural — in his landscape “a few miles above Tintern Abbey.” Rather, I am saying that the poem is already political, that its necessary social fulcrum is everywhere present (if narrowly defined), that the beggars are there, as “vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,” and that this necessary political element opens the poem up to further appreciation if we press appropriately on the language Wordsworth himself provides, aided by information outside the poem. Undeniably, Wordsworth engages in some retrenchment in presenting the mediating social terms of his learning process; we may call this his conscious artistic control or his unconscious psychological sublimation, or a little of both. This is part of the cost of his becoming a poet, and the price of “Tintern Abbey’s” being the poem it is: moving without fundamental breaks from the beautiful landscape toward seeing into the life of things, with Nature as “the soul of all my moral being.” Indeed, it is part of the triumph of the poem to
be able to include as full a representation of this process as it does — in comparison, for example, with Wordsworth’s tendency elsewhere in the Lyric Ballads to divide his poems into powerful narratives of human suffering (that only vaguely imply “thought”) and equally powerful meditations about the interrelation of Mind and Nature (that only vaguely refer to “what man has made of man”). I am as impressed by Wordsworth’s honesty in allowing the socio-political tensions of his poem to show through as by the parallel rhetorical statement of doubt (“If this be but a vain belief”) that organize his final affirmations.

Coda: The Date of “Tintern Abbey”

The date of “Tintern Abbey” may bear importantly upon its political sublimations. The standard account is that William and Dorothy left Bristol on July 10 and returned on July 13; the poem being inspired, composed, and completed during most of these four days.21 However, Wordsworth in later life spoke of a tour “four or five” days (Fenwick Note), and the rate of progress which he and Dorothy would have had to maintain to complete the entire tour (from Bristol past Tintern to Goodrich Castle and back) in four days has been calculated as twenty miles per day, even granting two stretches they covered in the sightseeing boats which plied a lively tourist trade between Ross-on-Wye and the Wye’s mouth at Chepstow.22 This may not seem much to such super-human walkers as the Wordsworths now appear to us lazy moderns, though it works out to three miles per hour if we assume eight full hours of steady walking, making allowance for time stopped for refreshment, time spent inspecting ruins (the main business of such popular excursions as the Wye tour), and the fact that Dorothy, however energetic, would necessarily have been a genteel young lady hiking in long skirts and none-too-comfortable shoes. Moreover, Wordsworth’s description of another walking tour, his summer jaunt across Europe in 1790 with Robert Jones (which also began, coincidentally, on July 13; cf. Prelude VI.355-57), consistently emphasizes their lightning speed and astonishing rate of progress. Yet my calculation of the stages of this journey (from Bristol past Tintern to Goodrich Castle and back) shows them to have been approximately twenty-five miles per day — essentially the same as the Wye tour’s — covered by two young men aged 20, rather than a brother and a sister, aged 28 and 26. My wife and I tested these hypotheses by some “feet on” research in August, 1982, and though satisfied that the Wordsworths could have accomplished the circuit in four days, we are certain that five days would have been more comfortable. (The day deserving most suspicious scrutiny is the Wordsworths’ third day, a 27-mile walk down the whole course of the trip, from Goodrich Castle through Monmouth past Tintern to Chepstow — and thence back up the river to Tintern to spend the night.) Given Wordsworth’s literalism, there is not much reason to doubt that he dated the poem of the day he finished writing it. But there is every reason to suppose he looked at it long and hard the next day (it was at the printers with the rest of Lyric Ballads by July 18), and, with that same literalism, thanked his Muse it was already finished. But it is intriguing to suppose that the tour took one day longer than we think, and that Wordsworth, in light of other contemporary socio-political associations we can find lurking beneath the calm surface of its “still, sad music,” turned its clock back twenty-four hours, to avoid setting off the powerful buried charges that would be exploded if this loco-descriptive meditative landscape poem concluding his new volume of poems, were to have been entitled, “Lines / Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 14, 1798.”23 Though “Tintern Abbey” may never come to be regarded as a political poem, it may well be, in light of these interpretive possibilities, one of the most powerfully depoliticized poems in the language — and, by that token, a uniquely political one.

NOTES

1Carl Woodring has recently traced in “Tintern Abbey” a movement from Picturesque to Sublime, stressing its “sublimity of humble human feelings,” and comparing its “still, sad music” to the “still, small voice” of God in Old Testament prophecy (“The New Sublimity in ‘Tintern Abbey,’” in The Evidence of the Imagination, ed. Reiman, Jaye, & Bennett [1978], pp. 86-100). My conclusions are similar, though in many instances our interpretations of textual details are so different we may be said to have arrived at agreement by opposite routes.


5In his general valuation of the inter-penetration of cultivated and uncultivated land, Wordsworth follows Gilpin: the artist “wishes that these [property] limits must be as much concealed as possible...that the lands they circumscribe, may approach, as near as may be, to nature — that is, that they may be pasturage” (p. 30). Specifically, Wordsworth’s “hedge-rows...little lines of sportive wood” follow closely Gilpin’s discussion of the border shrubs planted by a Mr. Norris at Persfield (below Tintern, incidentally): though causing “the most pleasing riot of imagination,” such “paltry” improvements are but “splendid patches, which injure the grandeur, and simplicity of the whole,” and their “formal introduction” should be avoided in favor of “wild underwood” (pp. 40-42).

6Gilpin, p. 45.

"With a sweet inland murmur" (1.4); Wordsworth's note ends with the same phrase as his title: "The river is not affected by tides a few miles above Tintern." There is considerable evidence available to caution us against taking too literally any of Wordsworth's statements in, or about, the poem (see Notes 11 and 21). The Wye ceases to be appreciably affected by tides very close to Tintern, perhaps less than a mile above it; tourist officials cite Tintern as the limit, for convenience.

I am grateful to Pamela Woof for this information, offered during an expert tour of "The Discovery of the Lakes," an exhibition of picturesque landscape paintings mounted in the Wordsworth Museum, Grasmere.

See Note 8. Geoffrey Little argues that the Wye landscape described in the poem bears more similarity to the areas Wordsworth visited on his first tour in 1793, much further up the valley ("Tintern Abbey" and Llsywen Farm," TWC, 8 [1977], 80-82).

If the tour took four days (see Note 21), they arrived at Tintern on the first day, departed from it on the second, passed by it on the third (returning to spend the night there), and departed from it on the fourth.


For an interpretive overview of Wordsworth's work on The Recluse, see my "Wordsworth and The Recluse: The University of Imagination," PMLA, 97 (1982), 60-82.

I wish you would write a poem... addressed to those who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind... It would do great good, and might form part of The Recluse" (LSTC, I.527).


For a full account of Frend, see Frida Knight, University Rebel: The Life of William Frend, 1757-1841 (1971). At the university disciplinary hearings on his dismissal, the Cambridge undergraduates strongly supported him, Coleridge prominent among them (DNB); in 1789, he made a summer walking tour of France and Switzerland, returning with glowing reports of the new republic — such enthusiasm from a widely admired young faculty member may have helped stimulate Wordsworth to make essentially the same tour the following year.

The Philanthropist (London: Printed and sold by Daniel Isaac Eaton, Printer and Bookseller to the Supreme Majesty of the People, at the Cock and Swine, No. 74, Newgate Street, December 14, 1795), in Early British Periodicals (1972), University Microfilms, reel 244.


McNulty, p. 293n3.

J. R. Watson, while accepting the July 13 date, subjects it to interpretation that support my suppositions. Besides emphasizing the date's importance for Wordsworth as personal anniversary (because of the landing at Calais in 1790), he points out that on July 13, 1793, exactly five years before, Marat had been murdered in his bath by Charlotte Corday (the event which led most directly to Robespierre's rise to power), adding that Wordsworth, if he did indeed revisit Paris in autumn 1793, would've been aware of the great propaganda value the Jacobins had derived from this assassination, principally by David's famous painting, presented to the Convention on November 14, 1793 ("A Note on the Date in the Title of "Tintern Abbey," " TWC, 10 (1979), 379-80).