



2013

### Fixing the Phantoms of Conceit: Wordsworth's Prefiguration of the Photographic Impulse in "Tintern Abbey" and *The Prelude*

Rachel Daniel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Daniel, Rachel (2013) "Fixing the Phantoms of Conceit: Wordsworth's Prefiguration of the Photographic Impulse in "Tintern Abbey" and *The Prelude*," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol6/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# fixing the phantoms of conceit

Wordsworth's Prefiguration of the  
Photographic Impulse in "Tintern Abbey" and  
*The Prelude*

*Rachel Daniel*

To consider the poetry of William Wordsworth alongside photography first comes off as a mismatched proposal since Wordsworth wrote the bulk of his material several decades before Daguerre formally introduced the photographic process to the public. Beyond being bound historically, the bulk of Wordsworth's poems, with their emphasis on imagination and the central role of nature appear to share none of the qualities typically attributed to the photograph. Moreover, the consideration of photography as a scientific art makes it seem further removed from the conceptual handiwork of the Romantics. Despite these barriers to bridging the photographic with the poetic, Wordsworth elicits profound connections to the pre-photographic desire to arrest images from life that pervaded the late eighteenth century. As I will explain, Wordsworth's selecting and fixing of images in his poetry shares more than

just the complicated subjective stance of the photographic medium. It also shares many of the same epistemological concerns, such as fetishizing memory, abstracting visual experience, and evading stylized subject matter in favor of telling human spectacles. Furthermore, I plan to proceed in a more focused direction by looking at two texts, “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” and *The Prelude*, and how these scene-capturing poems represent an appropriative act prompted by the photographic impulse. I will also examine how the photographic processes that Wordsworth uses in each poem lead to a visually-prompted transcendence of the self, or, in some cases within *The Prelude*, the failure to transcend when the visual memories, or “phantoms of conceit,” defy complete mastery via the medium of words.

## The Photographic Impulse and Its Processes

One of the challenges that arises with placing Wordsworth photographically, is the tendency of critics to place him alongside painting and its picturesque proponents, such as William Gilpin and J. M. W. Turner. While Wordsworth’s critics tend to be divided about the influence that the picturesque movement held over his early poetic ideologies, many agree that the rugged picturesque landscapes—which became pictorial emblems of the Burkean sublime and the beautiful—played a substantial part in forming his notions of the visual (Smith). But the correlations between Wordsworth and the picturesque movement in painting run much deeper. Biographical studies of Wordsworth are replete with meetings of the painters John Constable, Benjamin Robert Haydon, and William Hazlitt (Wu 36). Interestingly, in one of three meetings with Constable in 1806 that Constable’s friend, Joseph Farington, recorded in his diary, Wordsworth discloses an anecdote about his intoxicating relationship to images that began to take root in childhood: “He told Constable that while he was a boy going to Hawkeshead school, his mind was so often possessed with images, so lost in extraordinary conceptions, that he was held by a wall not knowing but he was part of it” (Farington 3044). Farington here focuses upon what he views as an exaggerated self-perception on the part of the poet, but the point that emerges is the trancelike quality that images held for Wordsworth

in conjunction with the imaginative workings of his mind, a wrestling with the visual that he attempts to temper in his maturity.

With the interactions between Wordsworth and his painter contemporaries aside, Wordsworth's view of painting comes across as conceptually affirmative, but the medium itself is found wanting. For Wordsworth, painting exists as an intermediary of poetry capable of expressing a similar perspective of nature. In several instances in his poetry, Wordsworth directly refers to paintings of his day as an analogy for his own mental workings with the visual. For example, Wordsworth slips into ekphrasis in "Elegiac Stanzas," which is a meditation on his brother's fatal shipwreck as catalyzed by Beaumont's 1806 work, *A Storm: Peele Castle* (Wu 248). Beyond reflecting on Beaumont's painting, Wordsworth expresses a desire tinged with sarcasm to enter the same creative position as that of Beaumont himself: "Ah *then*, if mine had been the painter's hand / To express what then I saw, and add the gleam, / The light that never was" (13-15). Based on these lines, the latent poet-as-painter hints at painting's tendency to gloss over and add touches to scenes from life. Wordsworth's narrator of the "Elegiac Stanzas" gains insight into his loss, thanks to the visual power of Beaumont's painting, but Wordsworth suggests that Beaumont's work is not seen from the same stance as the poet—it is not an adequate picture that has captured lived experience, but a visual foundation for thinking through that experience.

Wordsworth aligns himself with the pre-photographic impulse—the desire to permanently fix images from lived ocular experience upon a surface—in those instances where the correlation to painting fails to provide the adequate vehicle for his visually-centered works. Rather than aligning Wordsworth's photographic qualities with the earliest picturesque technologies that led to photography as other critics have often suggested, I believe that Wordsworth lingers in the visual turn of painting beginning to give way to, though not necessarily dissipate under, the photographic medium. Or, to put it another way, Wordsworth writes as one on the cusp of a great transition that has yet to happen in the visual arts. Subsequently, Wordsworth reflects numerous ties with painting, such as his use of ekphrasis in a handful of his poems, but he inadvertently accomplishes aesthetic ends that are more akin to photography, though decades before because of his repeated coming back to stationed views like an individual returning to a photograph. In short, by emphasizing the various impressions that the image incites in the viewer upon each revisitation and by his authoring of, or putting into words, these memory-laden scenes through his

poetry, he is an unknowing partaker in the pre-photographic desire to capture an image from life.

Before looking at further instances of this turn towards the photographic medium, let me explore the pre-photographic as woven into Wordsworth's poetry. Joseph Niépce and Louis Daguerre, Geoffrey Batchen's *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* states that the desire to fix the images of the *camera obscura* was a shared desire of several dozen Europeans in the years 1790–1839 and not a singular fantasy. In seeking a Foucauldian “regular discursive practice” for photography, Batchen removes the medium from scientific origins, allowing it “to coincide as much with its conceptual and metaphoric as with its technological production,” including the poetics of the day (36). Batchen references Romantic poetry chiefly to focus on how Coleridge's views of nature, which are inseparable from subjectivity and human culture, are echoed in the discourses of the proto-photographers. Nonetheless, Batchen acknowledges that this same “active and constitutive mode of self-consciousness” that is grounded in nature is shared with other Romantics, such as Wordsworth (62).

To enter the pre-photographic sensibilities of Wordsworth's poetry is likewise to enter a discourse on the epistemological concerns the poet has about the senses, directed most notably towards the eye, which also serves as an analogy for the “seeing” photographic lens. Wordsworth typically expresses a kind of resistance to the visual world in favor of the imagination that finds its vehicle in the articulation of words, especially those not freighted by illustrations. In “Visible Language: Blake's Art of Writing,” W. J. T. Mitchell explains that most of the Romantics showed evidence of favoring phonocentric tendencies that centered around the ear and voice because of their distaste for the printed word. One certainly gains a sense of this privileging of the aural in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* when Wordsworth makes the claim that the poet is an individual “speaking” to, rather than writing to, men. To reach their audiences, Wordsworth and the other Romantics must nonetheless succumb to the “vulgar necessity” that rests in articulating their words via the printed, materialized word (Mitchell 117). The Romantics' anti-pictorialist stance towards the visual lingers not as a purely negative one, however, but as one that is as unavoidable as sight itself.

Wordsworth is caught in a paradoxical divide over the iconophobic perception of sight, what he deems “the most despotic of the senses,” and yet many of his transformative experiences would not be possible without the visual (*The Prelude* XII, 121–31). William Galperin's *The Return of the Visible in British*

*Romanticism* makes a further distinction of Wordsworth's conflicting concerns of sight, noting that his concerns are divided not just between the visible, but between "the visible and the visionary," or the "responsiveness to the visible or material world" and "a world *no sooner seen* than imaginatively appropriated" (3). These qualities—the responsiveness to and the appropriation of the visible—parallel the work of the photographic medium in a way that bespeaks an increased pathos towards the visible and the recording of the object for reflection. As the title of Galperin's book suggests, Galperin finds that vision is repressed beneath the Romantic imagination, though it constantly re-erupts as a sense that refuses complete mastery, or rather, it succumbs to a tempering that aligns it with the imagination. Wordsworth likewise expresses the need to gain control over "the tyranny of the eye," to temper what he experiences and gathers through the sense of sight (*The Prelude* XI, 179). In sublimating the visual, Wordsworth processes imagery in the same way as an early photographic camera, with his eye serving as the receiving lens, and his mature mental subjectivity acting like the chemical vat where the blank surface develops the finalized image.

Galperin explores the paradoxical nature of dependency and opposition that Wordsworth exudes with the spectacles of *The Prelude*, and he finds that, despite the supplanting of the eye by the Romantic "I" as "the prime agent of perception," the very inclusion of such spectacles discloses an arbitrariness towards subject matter that is prophetic of the unbiased photographic medium (31). Viewing Wordsworth's ruling imaginative framing to be deflated, Galperin finds that the accidental quality that emerges from the spectacles devolves to "some other way of seeing," most notably an objectification of privatized experience (111). Such scenes allow one to lift Wordsworth out of painterly readings and center him with subject matter that the photograph documented so well, even at the expense of a near sensationalism that contradicts Wordsworth's seeming distaste for the spectacular.

To better emphasize Wordsworth's leaning towards the photographic arts, let me draw a few comparisons to validate his place aesthetically. While painting and photography share correlations with memory and the development of the image via the darkroom or buildup of paint layers, photography stands as unique in that an image has to be fixed, or halted at a critical moment in its development in order to prevent a transformative fogging of the image. For Wordsworth, this metaphorical fixing of an image serves as an attempt to articulate the image at the precise moment when it both records the past and

provides an ideal catalyst for his future imaginings. Unlike the multiple layers of a painting that eventually amass into a final image, the photographic image as a whole gradually develops in the darkroom bath with an almost ghostly effect. Additionally, if the paints of an oil painter, for example, have the advantage of being workable for a generous span, then the equipment of the photographer is inextricably bound to the enemy of time during the shooting of the image and the processing of that same image. Similarly, Wordsworth develops his latent imagery from the shaded refines of memory as well as from the span of time that those images have steeped since their initial occurrence.

With the aforementioned in mind, I find that Wordsworth's poetry, with its references to formulations as the "picture of the mind," "spots of time," and "phantoms of conceit," includes strikingly similar structures to that of the photograph. While these three terms by no means establish an all-inclusive list, examining them side-by-side provides not only a sense that these temporal concepts are pervasive throughout Wordsworth's work, but also that they arise from an array of experiences with import. Coming from "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth's "picture of the mind," which originates from a former view of the run-down abbey, serves as a visual storehouse that enables him to restore himself to the fond view again mentally and physically. In a sense, Wordsworth's "picture of the mind" equates to a photograph that one can gaze upon at will to evoke a similar reaction as before or even a desire to return to that place. If the picture of "Tintern Abbey" marks an image of focused clarity that has been captured for pleasant revisiting, then the "spots of time" and "phantoms of conceit" from *The Prelude* present poignant scenes that have been tinged by time that the poet struggles to overcome via putting them in words. To posit these concepts photographically, Wordsworth risks overexposing these critical signposts of his imagination in his internal darkroom by revisiting them continuously through his authorship and revision and failing to fix them before the inevitable fogging of memory affects them.

## "Tintern Abbey"

Published in 1798, "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" gives a succinct overview of Wordsworth's patterned treatment of the visual—of its capture, revisitation, and connotative treatment—that serves as a trying on of ideas that would later be amplified in *The Prelude*. The name of the poem alone

garners an important insight, as the poet composed it, not while actively gazing upon the dilapidated cloister and surrounds, but afterwards, during the course of “a ramble of four or five days” (357). Thus, readers enter the poem with a sense that Wordsworth has meditated on the scene post-travel, his mind saturated with its forms, much like the lengthy earliest exposures in photography (Daguerre 11). The poem serves less as a revisitiation of the scene and more as a reaffirmation of it, as it has remained fixed in the narrator’s mind since he last witnessed it: “Though absent long / These forms of beauty have not been to me / As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye” (23–25). By reentering the same subjective vantage, the narrator avoids an amplified version of the scene, for Wordsworth provides only the barest descriptive details. Instead, he reflects on the abstracted scene in his mind to which he can return to at will “in hours of weariness” and gain a “tranquil restoration,” even when such a sight is not physically possible (28, 31). Wordsworth returns to, in the language of cultural critic Susan Sontag, an “experience captured,” though one captured with the mind instead of that uncreated “ideal arm of consciousness,” the camera (3).

The return to the scene post-capture in “Tintern Abbey” serves not only as a way of reviving the potency of the mentally-held scene, but the narrative that emerges as a result also enables the narrator to satiate the desire of the visual and gain a mastery over it by superseding his initial experience with the visionary power of his words. Wordsworth articulates this transcendence of the self in the lines

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
 In body, and become a living soul:  
 While with an eye made quiet by the power  
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
 We see into the life of things. (45–49)

During this moment of pure internalized seeing, the narrator becomes an instrument of sight. The resulting transcendence is two-fold: the pacification of the potentially intoxicating relation to the visual, and the indication that the new sensation is one of suprahuman perception like that of the photograph. Sontag echoes a similar need to augment or permanently bestill the visual when she outlines the following: “Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote” (163). Returning to the notion stated earlier in Farington’s diary of the boyish



Wordsworth lost in the trance of the flickering images in his mind upon the blank wall, one gains the sense of growth and matured focus, a glimpse of the mind that has brought the stilled image into revived imaginative clarity, and indeed, that has created a new experience out of the original scene.

In “William Wordsworth and Photographic Subjectivity,” Scott Hess locates Wordsworth’s visual positioning with the European traveling viewer, an earlier version of the modern day tourist, who commodifies visual experience. Hess suggests a consideration of Wordsworth’s photographic ties as a continuation of the picturesque movement that espoused new structures of perception that were popular with tourists of the day. By associating Wordsworth with early framing technologies like the Claude glass and the *camera obscura*, Hess crafts a historically-validated account of the poet’s disembodied subjectivity that is akin to the photographic one where the device “isolates vision from the other senses and ... removes the observer from its field of representation.” Nonetheless, Hess turns less to the notion of transcendence and more to that of tourism because he concludes that the natural end for Wordsworth is to have his poetry grace photographically-illustrated volumes, whose featured locales, like the Lake District, later turn into popular flocking places. In arguing against Hess’s likening of Wordsworth’s narration to that of “a quintessential modern tourist,” Wordsworth instead functions as a prototypical tourist whose visual experiences, which include connotative interpretation and human spectacles, defy such categorizations, while still retaining their photographic qualities and gaining interpretation at the whiles of human memory (291).

Wordsworth escapes the tourist perspective by creating an ongoing narrative that evolves from the scene proper, rather than packaging the scene for consumption. His narrator resorts to a photo-like capturing of the visual, but he avoids a literal framing by allowing the maturation of the scene in his mind to preside over the poem. Semiotician Roland Barthes describes a similar layering of denoted and connoted meanings pertaining to photography in “The Photographic Message.” Describing the photographic image as one of the perceptive modes because it is “exclusively constituted and occupied by a ‘denoted’ message,” Barthes finds that the connoted, or second-order message, emerges from the cognitive mode that engages personal experiences, cultural ideologies, and historical ideas (18). The first mode of denotative meaning aligns with Wordsworth’s half-perceiving reception of the visual, while the later mode of connotative meaning aligns with his “half-creat[ing]” of a new scene from

cognition of the visual (107, 108). Interestingly, Wordsworth deems this ability to reconceptualize the fixed scene to be restorative:

The picture of the mind revives again:  
 While here I stand, not only with the sense  
 Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
 That in this moment there is life and food  
 For future years. ("Tintern Abbey," 62–66)

This act of making permanent lived visual experience so that it may be continually returned to at a later time aligns with the quality of fetishized memory for which photography would be both praised and feared.

Serving as more than poetic equivalents to the photographic, the fetishized moments revisited by Wordsworth allow one to trace the growth of the poet's mind while still providing a telling snapshot of his former self. For example, further along in "Tintern Abbey," the narrator speaks of feeling no reason to mourn his former boyish treatment of the visual which, consisting of "aching joys" and "dizzying raptures," made him unable to find appreciation for "any interest / Unborrowed from the eye," i.e., an interest not limited to the immediate response to the visual (83–84, 85, 86). Let me elaborate on this notion of Wordsworth's former instantaneous reception of the visual by centering it in the realm of cognition, or more specifically, in the cognition of a child entering the world. John Berger emphasizes the role that sight plays for the growth of the human mind in his treatise *Ways of Seeing*, and he finds the two inseparable: "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. ... It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it" (7). Such an encompassed act of seeing would verge on a mechanical response without a key subjective quality that is acquired with a heightened response to the visual: the act of selectivity that comes with seeing, especially with the tempered form of seeing that is evident in the photograph. This tempered quality of the photograph rests not only in the ability to select a stilled image from life, but also in the continual revisitation that the photograph beckons.

Just as the photograph embodies a "photographer's way of seeing" and the stylization that comes with "the choice of subject," Wordsworth enacts a comparable selectivity of specific temporal moments of seeing that prevents poems of locality like "Tintern Abbey" from being read as late eighteenth-century

tourist reactions (Berger 10). Compare the narrator's complex relationship with the scene held in the mind in "Tintern Abbey" to the sense of immediate viewing gained in William Gilpin's 1782 *Observations of the River Wye*, a popular guidebook that Wordsworth would have been familiar with.

A more pleasing retreat could not be easily found. The woods and glades intermixed; the winding of the river; the variety of the ground; the splendid ruin contrasted with the objects of nature; and the elegant line formed by the summits of the hills, which include the whole; make all together a very enchanting piece of scenery. (qtd. in Bohls and Duncan 137)

While Gilpin's account helps to illustrate the picturesque sensibilities that would reign over English landscape aesthetics for decades, it scarcely transcends the scenery of travel to yield any deeper reflection. Resorting to an idealized visual composition, Gilpin reproduces the scene via words and invites readers to add interpretive gloss privately. By contrast, Wordsworth's account gains potency in the stationed return to the scene—the "picture of the mind" that "revives again"—and in the eruption of a personal narrative akin to the kind photographs solicited (62).

## *The Prelude*

Spanning from Wordsworth's childhood through his residence in London and beyond, the semiautobiographical *Prelude* provides an extensive opportunity to chart the arrested treatment of the visual. While "Tintern Abbey" reads as the return to a fixed scene after seeing it only days prior, *The Prelude* presents a more complicated stance as it is narrated through the adult poet recollecting images of youth that have been transformed with time, almost like an individual returning to memories instilled by photographs. Thus, *The Prelude* allows one to see a Wordsworth who still attempts to contain the visual in the imaginative frame. By entering *The Prelude* with Berger's idea of matured cognition through seeing, one finds that the narrator expresses growth largely through the sense of sight—a sense that captures would-be tourist locales like Snowden, etc., but also more psychologically jolting scenes that appear in photographic records. Appearing in Book I, the first substantial passage hinting at the temporal "spots of time" confesses the photographic impulse to put into the visible

permanence of words images that remain in the narrator's mind long after he has experienced them:

...I had hopes  
 Still higher, that with a frame of outward life  
 I might endure, might fix in a visible home,  
 Some portion of those phantoms of conceit,  
 That had been floating loose about so long. (127-31)

Beyond aligning with the pre-photographic notions explored earlier with "Tintern Abbey," this impulse indicates the poet's continual struggle with his self-authoring, for these images cannot ripen in the immediacy of youth. Instead, they stand as unassimilated parts, albeit altered ones, that must ultimately remain a part of his personal narrative.

Let me draw this distinction of the poet acting like the photographic process further by exploring Hess's concept of the "series of internalized photographs" that are devoid of photographic detail, but that employ similar structures (319). While not automatized like the camera, the poet's articulation of the visual rests in a sensitivity to the fleeting image that the camera captures so well. Given a photographic slant, the oft-quoted "[p]oetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" echoes the poet receiving visual impressions happening in immediacy, but then "[that] takes it origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity" speaks of the transformative work that occurs post-capture when the image runs through the workings of the mind (307). Hess expands on this metaphor of the perceiving poetic mind and the processing photographic camera when he suggests that the "Wordsworthian darkroom of memory and imagination" is where Wordsworth's images, having been returned to, fully achieve the meditative significance one sees in the text (301). Thus, Wordsworth frames several major works from the stance of a mature narrator reflecting on past, even boyish, experiences as an act of transfiguration for his present self. I wish to both acknowledge and diverge from the central ideas laid down by Hess, such as his reading of Wordsworth's "spots of time" photographically.

Without retracing Hess's description of Wordsworth's stylization in *The Prelude* exhibiting "a kind of album or scrapbook of memory," it should be noted that the "spots of time" metaphor garners the greatest attention photographically (304-5). The passage from the "Two Part Prelude reads as follows: "There are in our existence spots of time, / That with distant pre-eminence retain / A renovating virtue". While there are varied opinions about what the metaphoric

“spots of time” articulate, typically critics consider them to be repetitive temporal patterns that constitute the narrator’s imagination applied to a revisited scene (Hess, *Authoring* 216). The patterning of the “spots of time,” however, fails to follow Hess’s demarcation of the middle-aged poet returning to the mastered images of youth, especially when comparing passages of the earliest versions of the poem. Though the “Two-Part Prelude” includes the “spots of time” passage as early as line 288, that same passage does not emerge until Book XI of the 1805 *Prelude*, which reads,

This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks  
 Among those passages of life in which  
 We have had deepest feeling that the mind  
 Is lord and master, and that outward sense  
 Is but the obedient servant of her will. (268–73)

The quality of the mind mastering the imagery of the “spots” is completely missing from the earlier version of this passage. Additionally, the later version of the poem expresses childhood as the starting point of the lifelong “spots,” while the “Two-Part Prelude” emphasizes that “[s]uch moments chiefly seem to have their date / In our first childhood” (295–96). When considering such an alteration, one senses that Wordsworth creates the impression of a more mature mastery of the visual than he held previously, or draws attention to those passages where he transcends his physical self and abstracts vision.

Despite the theme that the 1805 *Prelude* embraces, even the later version presents interruptions in the sequencing that defy the same mastery seen with “Tintern Abbey.” What these scenes prophesy is a darker side of the photographic medium: the imposition of trauma and psychological resistance. Additionally, Hess articulates Wordsworth’s deliberately subjective stationing of the “spots” that allow the appropriation of landscapes like the Lake District and Snowdon, but he provides no mention of those scenes that flash as spectacles of sublime terror. For example, the “Drowned Man of Esthwaite” scene fails to adhere to a standard picturesque formulation, succumbing instead to morbid details juxtaposed by natural surrounds: “At length the dead man, ’mid that beauteous scene / Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright / Rose with his ghastly face” (Book V, 470–72). In this instance, Wordsworth jolts readers from any casual reading and confronts them with a veritable snapshot of mortality. Diverging from the idealization of Wordsworth’s experiences, Peter Larkin outlines the enigmatic complexities that weigh upon such a visual reading in “Wordsworth’s

Maculate Exception”: “[the spots] occupy a fault-line between trauma and aspiration, between the struggles of existence and the pathos of any wishing to be . . . [they] assume process, but also resist it as the precipitates of experience are reassembled” (30). Such an explanation of the “spots” makes Hess’s association of them with the Wordsworthian “scrapbook of memory” seem like a understatement of their psychological weight (306). Thus, the imagery in *The Prelude*, while positioning images in a sequence like a scrapbook, lacks the conventional material associated with one.

If Larkin finds that the “spots” embody vignettes of failed imaginative transformation, then an etymological approach reveals similar complications. According to the *OED*, the word “spot” around Wordsworth’s time of may refer to either “a moral stain, blot, or blemish,” or to “a small piece, amount, or quantity,” especially of an interval of time, or locality (“spot”). Even though critics approach the “spots” as crowning moments in the transformative Wordsworthian imagination, the spots force readers to wrestle conceptually with this darker meaning that implies a happening that creates notable impressions in the epistemological fabric. Thus, the “spots” engage the horrors of ephemerality as much as they enact a fixation of the visual, and acknowledging their potency of interruption helps to create a fuller view of *The Prelude*. If the arrested moments that encompass the poem correlate with the structures of the photograph, the “spots” can likewise be classified according to Barthes’s photographic theory of the *studium* and *punctum* that are based on the intensity of reactions that photographs evoke in their viewers. If, on one end, the *studium* equates with an intermediate interest in the image that chiefly informs or describes its subject in a manner consistent with the narrative, then the *punctum* represents the poignant “accident which pricks,” “bruises,” or unexpectedly interrupts the attentions of the spectator in ways that are both meaningful and disquieting (26–27).

I would like to stress that some of the “spots” in *The Prelude* leap out as instances of *punctum* that garner moments of lingering on the scene because of their unexpectedness and defiance of mastery, while the surrounding passages call to mind the average interest invested with the *studium*. These moments of the *punctum*-like “spots” not only serve to disturb the flow of the poem, but they also present moments of arrest that defy explanation, or, as Barthes explains, they are universally uncodeable: “What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance” (51). While the *punctum* detail for Barthes can range from the minutest out-of-place pose to

the realization of a condemned man's mortality, the Wordsworthian *punctum* exists in moments of reactions to sublime landscapes or human spectacles that stand outside the normative codes of narration, where mastery is blemished. With human spectacles like the drowned man, the scene punctuates sensitivity to details such as the man's clothes laid empty on the shore, a detail heightened in the narration of the adult poet that aligns the "spots" well with the camera's telling capture and dependence on the visual. Sontag speaks of this quality of all photos to produce crystalline *memento mori* by capturing moments sliced out of time, and she further explains that this act of capturing results in the participation "in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability"—a sense gained with the scene of Esthwaite (15).

Interestingly, the meditation on the drowned man expresses different responses to the corpse, depending on which variant one interprets. The "Two-Part Prelude," for instance, offers the narrative of a boy witnessing a corporeally-jolting scene and a somber memorializing of what he has seen, though it remains fixed in his mind as one of the "[d]istresses and disasters, tragic facts / Of rural history" (282–83). Here, the narrator resorts to an abstract cataloging of the event, but the drowned man's mortality still impresses the mind with a segue to the "spots of time" description because of its impact. By contrast, the later version of 1805 exposes an attempt to transform the drowned man via the Romantic imagination into something no longer arresting, for he immediately recasts the man as "a spectre shape," claiming to have seen "[s]uch sights before among the shining streams / Of fairyland, the forests of romance" (475–76). As Susan G. Wolfson points out in "The Illusion of Mastery," however, such revisions reveal, not a mastery of the incident's imaginative framing through the fixed space of the poem, but a failure to mask the shock of his recollection, though much of the emotional charge is lost (917). Sontag notes a similar tendency of photographic images to anesthetize: "An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs ... But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real" (20). Just as an individual returns to what was once a stirring photograph and finds himself or herself less shocked than before, Wordsworth attempts to distance himself from past experiences by constantly revisiting (and revising) them; however, sometimes his results muddle the clarity of the original image rather than mask it, like an image that has been left too long in a developer.

The question remains one of what expression Wordsworth ultimately achieves as he pursues this continuous revisiting of mentally recorded images. Borrowing from Sarah Kofman's *Camera Obscura: Of Ideology*, a reflection on the metaphors of the *camera obscura* as employed by twentieth-century philosophers, I find that the still images that populate Wordsworth's poems tend to have a two-fold function. On one hand, they express the revisitation of experience via the Freudian concept of the unconscious to conscious processes, and, on the other hand, the selecting and editing of those experiences that are beneficial for the present and future through the Nietzschean metaphor for forgetting. As with "Tintern Abbey," the maturation of visual impressions captured by the senses, but held by the unconscious, echoes the Freudian negative and positive phases of the psyche, where the past repeats itself like the images produced by the camera. Kofman describes the past's engrossing compulsion of a double made from the negative as "duplicating itself within representation . . . because the event has never been lived in the fullness of its meaning, in the positivity of its presence," because the child was yet unable to fully endow the impressions with meaning (24). As I have explored, these two-fold functions of maturation and forgetting with the Wordsworthian camera exist as much in conflict as in accord with one another. For instance, *The Prelude* exhibits the same tendencies to emphasize the maturation of past images as "Tintern Abbey," but the Nietzschean metaphor of selective recollection *The Prelude's* constant revision of the scenes evidences, or "spots," often edges in and complicates the initial import of these scenes.

This tendency to mask the original sensations created by stilled images, while indicative of Wordsworth's mission to fix the "phantoms of conceit," reveals his inability to fully dismiss them from his history. Even in the later versions of *The Prelude*, many of the same scenes appear reframed with slight alterations, such as his father's death and the murderer's gibbet-mast. Indeed, an entire proliferation of human spectacles fall outside the range of sublime landscapes: the bird-mimicking boy of Winander, the quixotic Arab, the masses of the London streets, the revolutionary ousting of the French monarchy, and the blind beggar. Despite this inability to transcend the voyeurism of the spectacle, Wordsworth nonetheless participates in that humanizing side of the photographic image.

Let me close my photographic comparison of Wordsworth by turning, not to Mount Snowden, the "perfect image of a mighty mind" that usually towers over the images in the final books of *The Prelude*, but the equally complex scene



of the blind beggar (69). If the London spectacle of Book VII has a tendency to resort to a dizzying overabundance of images that leads to an aversion of the real, the imposition of the blind beggar “amid the moving pageant” serves as one of those instances of *punctum* whereby the poet realizes his failure to maintain a complete imaginative distancing of himself from the scene before him (610). The scene of the blind man wearing a sign describing his condition only flashes on the narrator’s eyes momentarily, but the permanent ripples it creates epistemologically makes the poet all too aware of his inability to escape fully his own physical senses, particularly that of sight:

My mind did at this spectacle turn round  
As with the might of waters, and it seemed  
To me that this label was a type  
Or emblem of the utmost that we know  
Both of ourselves and of the universe. (616–20)

Although Galperin defines the blind man as an individual existing “independent of ... subjective controls,” the humanity of the blind beggar must also be realized amongst the moving crowd around him that serves as a symbol of the majority that is bound to the visible world, including the poet himself (120–21). Indeed, the stark figure of the blind beggar that is part, but also apart from, the swarm of Londoners may be read as emblematic of a longing for that same pure transcendence, though the beggar remains to readers an image of pity because of humanity’s own natural dependence on the agency of sight.

While *The Prelude*, with its human spectacles, presents an altogether different relation to the visual than that of “Tintern Abbey,” one cannot deny that both represent the poet’s fixing of images that aligns prophetically with photography, including its fetishization of memory, its abstracting of experience, and its evasion of tourist landscapes. Wordsworth’s failure to consistently transcend the outward forms of sight, rather than resulting in a seeming weakness in the poet’s imaginative prowess, reveals his complicated ties, like those of the photographic medium, with the visual realm. More specifically, those *punctum*-like images in *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth struggles to fix experiences in the imaginative frame of words, add unexpected qualities that prevent the poem from falling into scenic formulization. Furthermore, the tendency to transform cognitively experiences that have been primarily captured through the instrument of sight as lens not only releases the Romantics from their iconophobic tendencies, but also allows one to recuperate poets like Wordsworth as capable

of interpretation through other mediums than that of painting. Thus, the pre-photographic impulse, which arguably supersedes painting as a more fit vehicle to carry the interactions with lived experience that are so characteristic of the semiautobiographical Wordsworth, opens up a valuable area in both visual and Wordsworth studies that deserves further exploration.

## Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "The Photographic Message." *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. 15–31. Print.
- . *Camera Lucida*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980. Print.
- Batchen, Geoffrey. *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1997. Print.
- Bohls, Elizabeth A., and Ian Duncan. *Travel Writing, 1700–1830: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Daguerre, Louis. "Daguerreotype." Ed. Alan Trachtenberg. *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven, CT: Leete's Island, 1980. 11–13. Print.
- Farington, Joseph. Diary Entry 12 November, 1807. *The Farington Diary*. Ed. Kathryn Cave. Vol. vii. Yale: Yale UP, 1982. Print.
- Galperin, William H. *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993. Print.
- Heffernan, James A. W. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993. Print.
- . *The Re-creation of Landscape: A Study of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Constable, and Turner*. Hanover, NH: Published for Dartmouth College by Univ. of New England, 1984. Print.
- Hess, Scott. "Pedlars, Poets, and the Print Market." *Authoring the Self: Print Culture, Poetry, and Self-representation from Pope through Wordsworth*. London: Routledge, 2005. 190–221. Print.
- . "William Wordsworth and Photographic Subjectivity." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 63.3 (2008): 283–320. Print.
- Kroeber, Karl. *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth*. Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1975. Print.
- Mandell, Laurie. "Imagining Interiority: Photography, Psychology, and Lyric Poetry." *Victorian Studies* 49.2 (2007): 218–27. Print.
- McGrath, Brian. "Wordsworth, 'Simon Lee,' and the Craving for Incidents." *SiR* 48 Winter (2009): 565–82. Print.
- Smith, Laura. "Beautiful, Sublime." *Division of the Humanities | The University of Chicago*. The University of Chicago, Winter 2002. Web. 4 Nov. 2011.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA, 2001. Print.
- "spot, n.1." *OED Online*. September 2011. Oxford UP. 11 December 2011
- Wolfson, Susan J. "The Illusion of Mastery: Wordsworth's Revisions of 'The Drowned Man of Esthwaite,' 1799, 1805, 1850." *PMLA* 99.5 (1984): 917–35. Print.

- Wood, Gillen D'Arcy. *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760–1860*. New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001. Print.
- Wood, John. *The Scenic Daguerreotype: Romanticism and Early Photography*. Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1995. Print.
- Wordsworth, William. "Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont." *Poems in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1983. Print.
- . *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*. Eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Charles Gill. New York: Norton, 1979. Print.
- . "Miles Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*. Ed. James Butler and Karen Green. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992. Print.
- . "Preface." *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*. Ed. James Butler and Karen Green. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992. Print.
- . "The Tables Turned." *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*. Ed. James Butler and Karen Green. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992. Print.
- Wu, Duncan. *Wordsworth: An Inner Life*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002. Print.