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Kimberly Jones May  
*Brigham Young University - Provo*

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WORDSWORTH'S EVOLVING PROJECT:  
NATURE, THE "SATANIC SCHOOL,"  
*AND THE RIVER DUDDON*

by

Kimberly Jones May

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Kimberly Jones May

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

November 16, 2007  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Nicholas Mason, Chair

November 16, 2007  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dan Muhlestein, Reader

November 16, 2007  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Matthew Wickman, Reader

November 16, 2007  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phillip Snyder, Graduate Advisor

November 16, 2007  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Associate Chair for Graduate Studies

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Kimberly Jones May in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

November 16, 2007

Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Nicholas Mason, Chair, Graduate Committee

Accepted for the Department

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phillip A. Snyder  
Graduate Coordinator

Accepted for the College

\_\_\_\_\_  
John R. Rosenberg,  
Dean, College of Humanities

## ABSTRACT

WORDSWORTH'S EVOLVING PROJECT:  
NATURE, THE "SATANIC SCHOOL,"  
AND *THE RIVER DUDDON*

Kimberly Jones May

Department of English

Master of Arts

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss Wordsworth's evolving nature project, particularly during the Regency, when his sonnet collection *The River Duddon* offered an alternative view of nature to that found in the works of Byron and Shelley. This thesis argues that *The River Duddon* deserves renewed critical attention not only because of the acclaim it received at its publication in 1820, but also because it marks yet another turn in Wordsworth's evolving nature project, and one that comes in opposition to the depiction of nature given during the Regency by Byron, and Shelley.

Wordsworth's portrayal of nature dramatically changed throughout his lifetime. The first chapter deals with the poet's shifting notions of nature up until 1810. Most of the poems discussed here come from *Lyrical Ballads*, the key collection of Wordsworth's early years. In particular, I suggest that "Tintern Abbey" can be read as a hypothesis wherein Wordsworth

reconciles the doubt regarding nature he expressed in earlier poems such as “The Female Vagrant” and “The Thorn.” While Wordsworth continued to express doubt in poems such as “Two April Mornings,” “The Fountain,” and “Michael,” he expressed an appreciation for nature in relation to God in “Ode: Intimations on Immortality.” On the eve of the Regency, however, he returned to doubting nature’s benevolence in “Peele Castle.”

The second chapter deals with the Regency, looking at the development of Wordsworth’s reputation and the emergence of Byron and Shelley’s so-called “Satanic School” of poetry. Wordsworth’s career during this time was marked by mixed criticism, as evidenced by *The Excursion* and *Peter Bell*. At this same time, his Romantic philosophies of nature were being challenged by the more liberal views set forth by Byron and Shelley. This chapter looks specifically at Byron’s *Don Juan* and “Darkness” and Shelley’s *Alastor* and “Mont Blanc” in order to contrast Wordsworth’s nature project with that of the “Satanic School.”

My final chapter turns to Wordsworth’s final Regency-era publication, *The River Duddon*. Here I argue that, while this is one of the poet’s lesser-known works, *The River Duddon* marks a significant new phase in the Romantic conversation concerning nature and is thus worthy of more extensive study. Not only does this poem portray a more confident trust in nature than previously seen in *Lyrical Ballads*, but it also serves to juxtapose the depiction of nature presented by the “Satanic School” during the Regency. To highlight differences between the projects of Wordsworth and the “Satanic School,” I conclude with a comparison of *The River Duddon* with Byron’s “Darkness” and Shelley’s “Mont Blanc.”

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

## WORDSWORTH AMONGST THE CRITICS

Near the end of his life, Thomas Carlyle recorded in his memoir *Reminiscences* an amusing incident involving William Wordsworth. While at a party, it seems, Carlyle had noticed Wordsworth sitting alone eating raisins. Wordsworth's "eye and attention placidly fixed on these and these alone." Surprised at the time at Wordsworth's "rock-like indifference to the babble, . . . with attention turned on the small practical alone," Carlyle recounts that this picture was "comfortable and amusing to me, who felt like [Wordsworth] but could not eat raisins." Summing up his anecdote, Carlyle remarks, "This little glimpse I could still paint [of Wordsworth], so clear and bright is it, and this shall be symbolical of all" (1:536). Wordsworth, who detached himself from the "babble," was indeed a poet of nature "with attention turned on the small practical alone." While Carlyle was obviously ironic in dubbing this scene "symbolical of all," he nevertheless managed to hit on a fair amount of truth. Wordsworth was indeed a poet fascinated with the solitary details of nature.

It is interesting for a man like Carlyle, who wasn't particularly fond of Wordsworth, to paint such a detailed picture. In fact, Carlyle, at times, was exasperated by Wordsworth. On one occasion, the two men were talking about the great poets, Pope, Milton and Shakespeare. Of this discussion, Carlyle remarked, "gradually it became apparent to me that of transcendent unlimited there was, to this critic, probably but one specimen known, Wordsworth himself!" (1:532).

Carlyle was hardly alone among Wordsworth's contemporaries in his equivocal response to the poet and his works. Even from his earliest published poem, *An Evening*



*Walk* (1793), Wordsworth received mixed reception from critics. What the *European Magazine* (September 1793) described as “minuteness and accuracy” (192), the *Critical Review* (July 1793) described as having “a degree of obscurity” (347). In the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (March 1794) Wordsworth was described as one “who knows how to feel and estimate the real beauties of Nature” (252). Thomas Holcroft in the *Monthly Review* (October 1793) disapproved of the images in *Descriptive Sketches*, which was published alongside *An Evening Walk*, when he complained: “More descriptive poetry! Have we not yet enough? Must eternal changes be rung on uplands and lowlands, and forests, and brooding clouds, and cells, and dells, and dingles? Yes; more, and yet more: so it is decreed” (216-17). Holcroft did not stop with this biting commentary, wryly commenting, “We are sorry to see the purple morning confined so like a maniac in a straight waistcoat” (217). What’s interesting about the unfavorable criticism Wordsworth received is that it served as an appropriate foreshadowing of the rest of his poetic career. What one review heralded as poetic genius, another rejected with sarcasm or at least indifference.

Having published *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* at the age of twenty-three, Wordsworth’s career not only started fairly early, but was also acknowledged by the literary community early on as well. However, while Wordsworth’s poetry met with both enthusiasm and skepticism at first, many scholars mark the Regency (1811-1820), the decade during which George IV ruled in the stead of his mentally ill father, as the period in which Wordsworth’s poetry dramatically declined. Jerome McGann, for instance, describes “the notorious waning of Wordsworth’s poetic powers” after 1807 (*The Romantic Ideology* 110). One reason for this supposed “waning” was because

Wordsworth's political and religious ideologies underwent considerable change prior to and during the Regency. At this same time, Byron, Shelley, and Keats were coming of age, and their ideas challenged the traditional values that Wordsworth increasingly espoused. Instead of connecting with nature in an individual and hopeful way, these second-generation Romantics used nature to express dark, sensual, and communal ideas.

In the face of the alternative theories of nature offered by this ascendant group of poets, Wordsworth published *The River Duddon* (1820). As its name suggests, this series of thirty-three sonnets charts the course of the River Duddon, while all along raising issues concerning temporality, politics, and religion. Wordsworth's increasingly conservative ideals are manifest throughout the sonnets; even when uncharted land is discovered and peopled, the river, because of its purity and constancy, is able to restore and cleanse nature. Unlike "Peele Castle", with its famously uneasy ending, *The River Duddon* concludes with the union of the Duddon and the Thames and hopeful reflections on eternity.

This remarkable, yet largely overlooked, series of sonnets will be the focus of this thesis. I will show how *The River Duddon* came at a crucial moment in Wordsworth's career, when he was considered a sellout by many of the second-generation Romantics. Through *The River Duddon*, Wordsworth was able to express his conservative political and religious views in a way that was not only accepted but also praised by many readers and critics. Wordsworth himself even commented, "My sonnets to the river Duddon have been wonderfully popular. Properly speaking, nothing that I ever wrote has been popular, but they have been more warmly received" (*Poetical Works* 505).

After discovering *The River Duddon* for myself, what I have found most surprising is the lack of critical attention given to this significant piece of work. Aside from its concluding sonnet, “After-thought,” this collection has received little recognition. In 1954, Stewart C. Wilcox was the first modern scholar to publish an article on *The River Duddon*, and while others, including Jalal Uddin Khan and Benjamin Kim, have furthered the conversation, no extensive or book-length study has been published on the sonnet cycle. Also, there has not yet been a comparison of Wordsworth’s *The River Duddon* with the second-generation Romantics and the work that they were producing at the close of the Regency. I wish to address this gap.

In Chapter One, “Wordsworth’s Evolving Nature Project,” I discuss Wordsworth’s description and use of nature in his poetry as it leads up to the Regency. I chart the evolution of Wordsworth’s poetry, noting how his political and religious ideologies change, by looking at six works: “The Female Vagrant,” “The Thorn,” “Tintern Abbey,” “Ode: Intimations on Immortality,” “Michael,” and “Peele Castle.” “The Female Vagrant,” as one of the first poems in the 1798 publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, raises doubt concerning nature’s ability to reconcile grief and suffering. “The Thorn” further increases this doubt. However, “Tintern Abbey” is placed at the end of this 1798 publication and offers an absolute statement addressing these previous doubts. I argue that “Tintern Abbey” acts as a hypothesis, in which Wordsworth makes a bold claim regarding nature’s power and permanence. In the years to follow, Wordsworth readdressed this claim made in “Tintern Abbey.” In “Michael” (1800), Wordsworth harbors some doubts regarding nature’s power, but with “The Intimations Ode” he

reaffirms his trust in nature. However, in 1807 Wordsworth rejects the optimism of “Tintern Abbey” in “Peele Castle.”

After discussing Wordsworth’s nature project, I will turn to the “Satanic School” of Poetry in Chapter Two, “Challenging Wordsworth’s Nature Project: The “Satanic School” of Poetry During the Regency.” During the 1810s this “school” was coming of age: Byron as a popular “name brand” and Shelley as a poet and philosopher. Because these poets are unique in their individual emphases, both serve to highlight key differences with Wordsworth. Byron and the idea of the Byronic hero serve as a stark contrast to Wordsworth’s portrayal of nature. The melancholic and hopeless themes expressed in Byron’s “Darkness” are a vivid example of this contrast. Shelley is a particularly interesting figure to juxtapose with Wordsworth, especially in regards to “Mont Blanc,” which, as I will show, anticipates *The River Duddon* in many ways. Published in 1817, three years before *The River Duddon*, *Mont Blanc* charts the course of a majestic river. Throughout the poem, Shelley makes several references to Wordsworth’s description of nature. These references seem ironic, as Shelley is appealing to the secular mind, not to God.

After discussing Byron and Shelley, I will compare their and Wordsworth’s published portrayals of nature from the Regency. This was a difficult time for Wordsworth’s poetry. I will look at *The Excursion* and *Benjamin the Waggoner* as examples of the kind of work Wordsworth was producing. What was sadly ironic about these works was that they only helped fuel the “Satanic School”’s scathing, humorous critiques. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Peter Bell the Third” is a good example of this phenomenon, but several others, including John Hamilton Reynolds and Bernard Barton,

also published *Peter Bell* parodies. Byron's sarcastic allusion to Wordsworth in *Don Juan* is also a famous instance of the "Satanic School"'s treatment of Wordsworth during the Regency.

Thus, I will finally suggest in Chapter Three, "*The River Duddon*: Wordsworth's Evolving Nature Project and the 'Satanic School' of Poetry," that the symbolism of the river would not have been as pronounced had the "Satanic School" been absent from the stage. With their presence, Wordsworth's message in *The River Duddon* stands as evidence that Wordsworth was still part of the Romantic conversation concerning nature, even when many scholars suggest Wordsworth's career was in its declining years by 1820. I will first briefly explain Wordsworth's career during the Regency, pointing out the mixed reception that he received, right before his publication of *The River Duddon*. Due to this mixed reception, the success of *The River Duddon* at the close of the Regency is even more notable. Then, I will analyze *The River Duddon* in relation to Wordsworth's evolving nature project. Finally, I will discuss the "Satanic School" in relation to this sonnet collection. Specifically, I will compare Byron's "Darkness" and Shelley's "Mont Blanc" to *The River Duddon* in order to point out dissimilarities in each of these poets' projects and to suggest that this collection is a significant work that further differentiates the nature projects of Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley at the close of the Regency.

## CHAPTER 1

## WORDSWORTH'S NATURE PROJECT:

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE HYPOTHESIS PRESENTED IN "TINTERN ABBEY"

In his essay "Memoirs of William Wordsworth, Poet-Laureate," Christopher Wordsworth, the poet's nephew, writes of an experience he had while staying at Rydal Mount. One day a traveling stranger came to the poet's home and asked one of the female servants if he could see Wordsworth's study. She consented and led the traveler inside the house. She explained, "This...is my master's library, where he keeps his books; but his study is out of doors" (109).

While this is a lighthearted memory, it reveals, in part, Wordsworth's approach to nature. Wordsworth found great value in observing and experiencing nature firsthand. In "Expostulation and Reply," he writes, "Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife; / Come hear the woodland linnet -- / How sweet his music! On my life, / There's more of wisdom in it" (9-12). By accepting that Wordsworth studied nature while out of doors, it therefore follows that the more time he spent in nature, the more his opinion and understanding of nature changed or evolved. In light of this idea, this chapter will look at significant poems that detail what I have come to understand as Wordsworth's hypothesis.<sup>1</sup> I will follow Wordsworth's poetry up until the period of the Regency and will discuss how Wordsworth's portrayal of nature evolved as a result of his changing political and religious ideologies.

In order to discuss how Wordsworth's perception of nature changed, it becomes necessary to understand the conversation that has unfolded regarding the meaning behind

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Daniel Muhlestein for our discussions and his idea of hypothesis, as it relates to Wordsworth's poetry.

nature in Wordsworth's poetry. After two centuries of debate, the scholarship revolving around this topic is vast in scope; it therefore follows that there are different interpretations regarding the significance or meaning behind Wordsworth's nature. Just as there were debates amongst critics during Wordsworth's life regarding the *quality* of his poetry, there are debates today regarding the *meaning* of Wordsworth's poetry.

For all intents and purposes, modern Wordsworthian scholarship began in the 1970's, when M. H. Abrams and Raymond Williams published landmark studies on the poet. Abrams, in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), argues that nature in Wordsworth carries religious undertones when he says, "deity in a personal form has faded away, leaving his attributes to be assimilated by nature" (137). For Abrams, nature becomes a theological experience for Wordsworth. On the other hand, Williams, in *The Country and the City* (1973), views Wordsworthian nature in terms of Marxist principles.

Williams contends that Wordsworth was part of "a Romantic structure of feeling—the assertion of nature *against* industry and of poetry against trade; the isolation of humanity and community into the idea of culture, *against* the real social pressures of the time" (Williams 79, my emphasis). Williams' use of the word "against" helps emphasize his idea that Wordsworth was working under an idealistic framework as he incorporated nature into his poetry.

Jerome McGann, in *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), agreed with Williams' reading of the "Romantic structure of feeling," but added his analysis of the "processes of elision," a method McGann argues Wordsworth practiced so that the reader is "not permitted to remember" the true historical context of the time (88). This idea of displacement in Wordsworth's poetry has become important in criticism. Marjorie

Levinson's argument in *Four Great Period Poems* (1986) also analyzes the historical influences on Wordsworth's poetry. Her famous description of "Wordsworth's pastoral prospect" as "a fragile affair, artfully assembled by acts of exclusion" (32), reveals the critical perspective she takes, and the belief she espouses that Wordsworth deliberately excluded real aspects of nature so as to present an idealized picture instead. Another New Historicist, Alan Liu, in *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (1989), expresses his belief that time helps obscure the "ghostly, unnatural fictions" of history that are hidden within nature (166), thus supporting Levinson's perspective.

Rejecting the New Historicist approach, Jonathan Bate in *Romantic Ecology* (1991) argues that a critique of Wordsworth's nature against historical facts is a "disrobing and debasement," turning Wordsworth's work into an "algebraic representation of poetry" (17). Karl Kroeber in his book *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994) supports Bate's argument by saying, "Poetry about nature expresses the romantic poets' deepest political commitments, the profundity of which, ironically, has been obscured by 'new historicists' dismissing romantic descriptions of nature as mere 'displacements' of unconscious political motives" (2). Kroeber rejects the idea of displacement, explaining that Wordsworth "exploit[s]...language's power to evoke 'the contrary to fact' in the very presence of the fact itself." He further goes on to explain that this "is perhaps Wordsworth's most characteristic and significant poetic device" (9).

With all of the debate surrounding Wordsworth's use of nature in his poetry, one vein of criticism that remains fairly constant is the meaning behind Wordsworth's use of the autobiographical or Romantic "I." Simply put, Wordsworth liked to talk about himself. He openly admits this in a letter written to Sir George Beaumont dated January



5, 1805, where he explains his plan behind *The Prelude*: “I turned my thoughts again to the Poem on my own life...It will be not less than 9,000 lines, not hundred but thousand lines long; an amazing length! And a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself” (qtd. in Rehder 44). And so, Wordsworth was deliberately choosing himself as the subject of his poetry; this decision, to write autobiographically, was deeply connected to nature. Robert Rehder, in *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* (1981), explains, “Wordsworth in his poetry uses the landscape in a new way in order to define his states of mind. He maps in space what he feels in time, forming what is amorphous into a unified scene with its own metaphoric structure” (162). Thus, using the Romantic “I” to frame his experiences in nature, Wordsworth has created a setting and mood for his poetry.

This idea of the Romantic I and its connection with nature is especially telling when looking at the influence of the French Revolution on Wordsworth’s political ideology. Because the French Revolution impacted Wordsworth’s poetry dramatically, a brief look into this portion of his life is helpful when discussing how nature is portrayed in Wordsworth’s poetry over the course of his career. Wordsworth’s early years, or what Nicholas Roe calls “The Radical Years” in his book *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*, was a time when he was formulating his ideas as a poet. Roe explains that Wordsworth’s “radical identity started to form” in 1791 after the publication of Burke’s *Reflections* (23). The fact that Wordsworth supported the French Revolution at first necessarily influenced his poetry, but not right away. Roe says of Wordsworth’s experiences in France that they would “reverberate through his poetry of later years” (38) and that during the revolution Wordsworth was a “passive looker-on: the poet-yet-to-be”

(41). *Descriptive Sketches* stands as an early example of Wordsworth's radical sentiments regarding the revolution. Liu explains that this is a poem of "fiery futurity [that] predicts the time of a brave new world" (164). This analysis makes sense, as *Descriptive Sketches* was published in January 1793, a mere eight months before the Reign of Terror.

As a result of the revolution, however, Wordsworth's radical views quickly became more and more conservative. Alan Liu explains this shift as a "displaced stance," and continues by saying, "in the aftermath of the French Revolution, he learned to digress into his own mind" (216). This idea of displacement suggests that Wordsworth struggled after the horrors of the revolution, which led him to seek answers in nature. One struggle Wordsworth dealt with was the carnage he witnessed first-hand. Levinson, in her book *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, includes a note made by David Erdman that records the nightmares Wordsworth had in 1793 on Salisbury Plain. These nightmares were "inspired by the bloody warfare" Wordsworth witnessed during his two-month stay on the Isle of Wight (18).

These nightmares are discussed by Wordsworth himself in "Salisbury Plain," a poem written between 1792-93 and finally published as "Guilt and Sorrow" in 1842. In this poem Wordsworth explains his horror over the revolution by creating the image of the "virtuous bleed[ing]" (505). With this image, Wordsworth appeals to the "rulers of the nations" and asks, "Can ought but murder, pain, and tears proceed? / Oh! what can war but endless war still breed?" (506-508). Clearly disturbed by the new directions of the French Revolution, Wordsworth was no longer in favor of the radical sentiments he espoused for a brief time. Alan Hill explains, "Fresh from revolutionary France, the

disillusioned poet was only too willing to blame society for the plight of his two vagrants in ‘A Night on Salisbury Plain’” (217). This passionate call against the French Revolution is in stark contrast to his feelings regarding the war only a few years earlier.

In light of the French Revolution and the effect it had on Wordsworth’s growing conservative ideologies, I will focus most of my analysis on *Lyrical Ballads*, since this can be seen as a turning point for Wordsworth. Yu Liu in his article “Reevaluating Revolution and Radicalness in the *Lyrical Ballads*,” explains how the separation between Wordsworth’s revolutionary experiences and the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* was in part due to his friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He writes, “the quickly flourishing friendship with Coleridge not only rekindled his reverence of nature and fortified his love of mankind but also encouraged and eventually facilitated his endeavor to ‘give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society,’ or to ‘justify the ways of man to nature’” (749). Because *Lyrical Ballads* was published after the French Revolution, this work rekindles Wordsworth’s reverence for nature. As Liu explains, this set of poems marks a symbolic “rekindling” or new beginning for Wordsworth.

Early Poems in *Lyrical Ballads*: Leading up to the Hypothesis in “Tintern Abbey”

One of the first poems included in *Lyrical Ballads* is “The Female Vagrant,” written partially in 1791 and then again in 1793 as a section in the larger poem “Salisbury Plain.” While “Salisbury Plain” was never published in its original form, “The Female Vagrant” was included *Lyrical Ballads* (Butler 50). Set in America, the narrator is forced to leave her home, her father dies an early death, and her husband leaves to fight in the French Revolution. Of the war, the woman explains, “the very nourishment” of men in the war is “their brother’s blood” (126). The woman is obviously affected by the

carnage, when she continues portraying the war. She says, “The breathing pestilence that rose like smoke! / The shriek that from the distant battle broke!” (148-49). These images of pestilence and shrieking in the distance help express the horror that this woman is witnessing as a result of the war. What is fascinating about this description is the experience that follows when the narrator sets out to sea. She explains:

The very ocean has its hour of rest,

That comes not to the human mourner’s breast...

I looked and looked along the silent air,

Until it *seemed* to bring a joy to my despair. (139-140, 143-144, my

emphasis)

This passage suggests that nature is possibly a source of comfort to the woman during the horrors of the French Revolution. At the same time, while the narrator appears to find peace in nature, she is careful not to make any absolute statements one way or the other: nature in this scene *seemed* to bring joy. While the narrator does admit that this image of the ocean helps free her from the “crazing thought [of] my brain” (160), this relief is only temporary. Hunger soon overpowers her, and she is eventually brought to a hospital. At the end of the poem, the narrator weeps “because she had no more to say / Of that perpetual weight which on her spirit lay” (272). While this poem introduces a degree of hope into the female vagrant’s life through nature, she is finally left destitute, without hope of reconciliation. Nature’s beauty is able to alleviate her pain for a moment, but is not enough to overcome her destruction brought on by the French Revolution.

“The Thorn,” composed between March and May of 1798, just months before “Tintern Abbey” (Butler 77), echoes the doubt expressed in “The Female Vagrant”

regarding nature's ability to reconcile pain and suffering. The main character, Martha, is weeping by a mound of earth. Not much is known about Martha, since the narrator is rather unreliable, thinking for a time that she is a "jutting crag" (197). Not much is known about the mound either, and the narrator is left to suggest that it is "like an infant's grave in size / As like as like can be" (52-53). By the end of the poem, however, it seems apparent that the mound of earth is actually a child's grave, as the narrator explains the gossip surrounding the situation: "some will say / She hanged her baby on the tree / Some say she drowned it in the pond" (215-16). With this image of a distraught mother by her infant's grave, Wordsworth introduces nature's place in this story with a fascinating twist. Of the heap, the narrator suggests, "never, never, anywhere / An infant's grave was half so fair" (54-55). These lines connote a kind of beauty springing from the tragic setting of a mother and her deceased child. Because this description comes at the beginning of the poem, it seems as though the narrator is trying to decide if nature can overcome the sorrow of the infant's death because nature has made the infant's grave "fair." What makes this image even more interesting is the thorn that grows "close beside" the infant's grave (50). Instead of being "fair," the thorn is "a wretched thing forlorn" (9). This seems to reemphasize the idea that nature has wrought a change in the infant's grave, so that there are "lovely tints" (44) surrounding "the beauteous hill" (84). In this way, nature has overcome the sorrow of the infant's death.

Wordsworth's final answer, however, is much less confident regarding nature's balm, as the last lines of the poem leave the reader without a sense of hope. The woman's lament echoes, "Oh misery! Oh misery / Oh woe is me! Oh misery!" (252-53). This passage shows that while the poem attempts to recognize nature's restorative power,

in the end there is still sorrow and tragedy. Wordsworth is careful to leave an air of uncertainty mixed with this despair, however, so that the reader, as well as the narrator, is only left to say, “I cannot tell; I wish I could, / For the true reason no one knows” (88-89). With this uncertainty, the image is left without commentary: while the grave is beautiful, the woman is left hopeless in the end. The beginning poems of the *Lyrical Ballads*, as seen in “The Thorn” and “The Female Vagrant,” therefore question nature’s restorative power.

#### The Hypothesis Set Forth in “Tintern Abbey”

The questioning that characterizes “The Vagrant Woman” and “The Thorn” seems to have disappeared, however, by “Tintern Abbey,” the last poem included in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Stephen Gill explains that “Tintern Abbey” is “the climax to Wordsworth’s first great creative period” (152). This climactic period is one that Wordsworth reaches with great hope and also great reservation. In fact, “Tintern Abbey” represents the moment at which Wordsworth first formulates his great hypothesis concerning nature.

“Tintern Abbey” is set up as a reflection, so that Wordsworth is able to chronicle his relationship with nature. In this way, Wordsworth’s hypothesis can be seen as a matured understanding of nature that has culminated throughout the preceding years. Having been away from the Wye Valley for five years, this return has awakened memories in Wordsworth. He opens the poem, “Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters! / ... The day is come when I again repose” (1-2, 9). Clearly having missed the “mountain springs” (3), “steep and lofty cliffs” (5), and “wild secluded scene” (6), Wordsworth writes,

Though absent long,  
These forms of beauty have not been to me,  
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:  
But oft in lonely rooms, and mid the din...  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart...  
With tranquil restoration; feelings too  
Of unremembered pleasure. (23-26, 29, 31-32)

Even though Wordsworth has been absent from this landscape, he expresses a fondness that has connected him to the scenery throughout the long years spent in "lonely rooms, and mid the din." He has reflected back upon the Wye Valley in order to give him "tranquil restoration." He explains later on in the poem that the time he spends amongst this landscape provides "life and food / For future years" (65-66).

After opening with this reflection, Wordsworth prepares the reader for his hypothesis. He does so by explaining the effect that nature has had upon him throughout the years. Upon his first visit to Tintern, when he was 23, nature, he recalls, "Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock, / The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood, / Their colours and their forms, were then to me / An appetite" (78-81). This youthful fascination with nature, however, has matured over the last five years. Now, Wordsworth realizes, "that time is past" (84). In place of describing nature as an "appetite," Wordsworth writes, "I have learned / To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity... / To chasten and subdue" (89-92, 94). At first, it seems that this transition comes with regret, as Wordsworth realizes his youthful perspective has now turned into a more philosophical or cognitive appreciation

of nature. However, Wordsworth reconciles this regret. He understands that nature will no longer bring “all its dizzy raptures” (86), but concludes by saying, “Not for this / Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur: other gifts / Have followed” (86-89). In this way, Wordsworth is able to accept and appreciate his new understanding of nature. Wordsworth can continue enjoying nature, but in a different way because age has brought him “other gifts.”

Near the end of the poem, Wordsworth approaches his hypothesis when he makes a grand assertion regarding nature. Wordsworth explains how he finds,

In nature and the language of the sense,  
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
 Of *all* my moral being. (111-112, my emphasis)

This absolute language stands in stark contrast to the indecisive tone expressed elsewhere in *Lyrical Ballads*. With this claim, Wordsworth relies on nature to be his guide and guardian. Instead of nature *seeming* to bring joy (as in “The Female Vagrant”) or the narrator and reader being left only with the words “I cannot tell” (as in “The Thorn”), Wordsworth places his trust in nature entirely.

As with any hypothesis, Wordsworth expressed reservations regarding his claim. Stephen Gill, in *William Wordsworth: A Life*, says, “the poem discloses questions and doubts which challenge its confidence and beckon to the future” (152). In this way, Wordsworth must “beckon to the future” to see if his claim is consistent and correct. Geoffrey Hartman adds his voice to this idea by explaining, “‘Tintern Abbey’ [is a] vacillating calculus of gain and loss, of hope and doubt” (27). This doubt can be seen as



Wordsworth uses the word “if” throughout the poem. After explaining that through nature, “We see into the life of things” (49), Wordsworth begins the next stanza by saying, “If this / Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! ... / How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee / O sylvan Wye!” (49-51, 56-57). Even though Wordsworth expresses finality in the statement, “We see into the life of things,” he includes an “if” clause immediately following, which suggests doubt. Further, at the end of the poem, Wordsworth addresses Dorothy, by saying, “If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief, / Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts / Of tender joy wilt thou remember me, / And these exhortations!” (144-47). Because Wordsworth directs this advice to Dorothy, he can express anxiety regarding nature’s healing power without contradicting the claim he has just made.

Wordsworth is also fraught with anxiety over the issue of temporality in “Tintern Abbey.” The poem mentions hedge-rows (14) and “pastoral farms, / Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke / Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!” (14-16). While these images seem picturesque, there is also an evasive undercurrent present, as industrialization is creeping into the natural world. Especially telling is the idea of the smoke ascending in silence amongst the trees, suggesting that temporality is furtively disrupting nature’s processes.

For Marjorie Levinson, this isn’t a hypothesis at all, but rather Wordsworth’s attempt to capture a kind of nature that is no longer existent. Levinson explains that “Tintern Abbey” reveals a kind of nature that is between Dorothy’s idyllic world on the one hand and London on the other (46). I would agree with Levinson insofar that “Tintern Abbey” is a poem that wrestles between the ideal and real concepts of nature. However, Levinson goes so far as to say that Wordsworth has a “fear of exhausting his

own feeding sources, that sensuous concrete reality he repeatedly cannibalizes by way of transforming Nature into ‘beauteous forms’” (46). Levinson’s language is obviously disapproving: Wordsworth “cannibalizes” nature, and nature therefore becomes Wordsworth’s “own feeding sources.” I would contend that this reading is too harsh in that it does not take into account the life study Wordsworth made out of nature. It seems disingenuous to accuse Wordsworth of cannibalizing nature when his esteem for nature comes close to worship, especially as seen in “Tintern Abbey.”

Instead of Wordsworth cannibalizing nature, I have argued that nature in “Tintern Abbey” can be seen as a kind of hypothesis that reconciles human suffering. From a socio-historic point of view, this reconciliation enables Wordsworth to transcend the unanswered questions of the French Revolution. Jerome McGann contends that with “Tintern Abbey” Wordsworth displaces all of the “turmoil of the French Revolution...into a spiritual economy.” In this way, “the mind has triumphed over its times” (88). By so doing, Wordsworth creates a harmony in his poetry that displaces the “real threat” of the Revolution. Wordsworth eliminates “landscape[s] of contradiction” so that what is left is a kind of nature that is dominated by ‘the power / Of harmony’” (86). Wordsworth is searching for a kind of nature that is “free from the threat of disaster” (88), thus reflecting a more conservative ideology regarding the French Revolution.

#### Readdressing the Hypothesis: Works Between 1799-1804

In 1799, just one year after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth complicated the claim he made in “Tintern Abbey” through two companion poems: “The Two April Mornings” and “The Fountain.” These poems were included in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. In these poems, doubt is already changing Wordsworth’s

nature narrative. “The Two April Mornings” recounts a discussion between Matthew and a youthful narrator. Matthew is reminded of his daughter’s death when he says, “‘Yon cloud with that long purple cleft / Brings fresh into my mind / A day like this which I have left / Fully thirty years behind” (21-24). Instead of nature bringing feelings of joy to Matthew, it instead reminds him of the tragic death of his daughter. In this way, nature’s effect on Matthew is in opposition to the effect “Tintern Abbey” allots to nature, which is “to chasten and subdue” the “still sad music of humanity.” Instead of subduing Matthew’s grief, nature’s images have reminded him of past sorrows. Alan Grob notes, “In *The Two April Mornings* Wordsworth dramatizes this reckoning by a juxtaposition of past and present scenes, illustrating how a momentary sorrow of thirty years earlier may intrude into and impair present happiness” (193). Even when Matthew sees another little “child so very fair” (47), he exclaims, “I looked at her, and looked again: / And did not wish her mine!” (55-56). Wordsworth is suggesting through this poem that there is nothing that nature can do to reconcile Matthew’s pain in this poem.

“The Fountain” continues the theme presented in “The Two April Mornings” and is likewise arranged as a conversation between Matthew and a youthful narrator. Here the two are resting by a stream, when Matthew is reminded of a time long ago when his children were still alive. He says, “My eyes are dim with childish tears, / My heart is idly stirred, / For the same sound is in my ears / Which in those days I heard” (29-32). The narrator, in an attempt to console Matthew, responds, “And, Matthew, for thy children dead / I’ll be a son to thee!” (61-62); Matthew quickly says in return, “Alas! that cannot be” (64). Alan Grob explains, “The ideal of community through sympathy, the goal most frequently expressed in the poetry of this period, must acknowledge limitations, areas of

the personal life that no sympathies can reach, wounds there that no substitute love can heal” (202). For Matthew, in both poems, these “wounds” do in fact “acknowledge limitations” because the personal sorrows he has experienced are “areas of the personal life that no sympathies can reach.”

What must be noted, however, is that while Wordsworth’s doubt in nature is sincere, there is still a lingering hope Wordsworth finds through his belief in God. Even though Matthew is sorrowful, he turns towards God when he realizes that nature is not enough to assuage his grief. In “The Two April Mornings,” Matthew exclaims, “The will of God be done!” (4) when nature reminds him of the tragic death of his daughter thirty years ago. This can be seen as Matthew reaching *beyond* nature for consolation. Thus, in 1799 Wordsworth is already looking towards a power higher than nature, and this power comes in the form of a Christian belief in God.

This turn towards divinity is actually seen in another Matthew poem published one year earlier, in 1798, titled, “Address to the Scholars of the Village School of ----.” Wordsworth writes, “Such solace find we for our loss; / And what beyond this thought we crave / Comes in the promise from the Cross, / Shining upon thy happy grave” (69-72). The imagery in this scene is even more explicit than in “The Two April Mornings.” Here, Wordsworth draws the connection between finding “solace” through “the Cross.” The reference to Christ and the Crucifixion are clear, and Wordsworth implies through this passage that humanity must move past nature; once Matthew has moved towards God, he is able to reconcile his loss, even calling the grave “happy.”

Wordsworth again expressed anxiety regarding “Tintern Abbey”’s hypothesis through his poem “Michael,” published in 1800. What is telling about “Michael” is its

placement in *Lyrical Ballads*. Whereas “Tintern Abbey” is the last poem in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, “Michael” is the last poem in the 1800 edition. This places more emphasis on tragedy than it does on nature’s ability to bring about “the deep power of joy,” as expressed in “Tintern Abbey.” The tragedy in “Michael” comes when the shepherd loses not only his son, but his land as well. Michael admits, “if these fields of ours / Should pass into a stranger’s hand, I think / That I could not lie quiet in my grave” (240-42). This idea of land being vital to one’s security is troubling to Wordsworth during a time when the enclosure acts were transforming England’s landscape. “Michael” recounts the story of an old farmer who is forced to give half of his fortune in payment for the debt of his nephew. In an effort to earn back these funds more quickly, Michael has his son, Luke, go to the city and work. While Michael has the wonderful plan of someday bestowing his land upon Luke, he ultimately loses his son. The story explains, “Luke began / To slacken in his duty, and at length / He in the dissolute city gave himself / To evil courses: ignominy and shame” (451-54). Sealing the tragedy, Michael dies, not only losing Luke to the city, but also losing his land, since he no longer has a son to inherit it. So, the land “went into a Stranger’s hand” (483), leaving Michael unable to “lie quiet in [his] grave.”

Lore Metzger, in his article “Wordsworth’s Pastoral Covenant,” concludes that along with the “tragic response” evoked by Michael, there is also a “meditative mood” (320-21). Metzger goes on to explain this meditative mood as “heroic optimism,” wherein Wordsworth “asserts that only the poet’s words can restore the pastoral covenant” during “the changing currents of society” (323). This reading is problematic, however, as it contradicts itself. While Metzger concludes that Wordsworth’s words “can

restore the pastoral covenant,” he must still admit, “‘Michael’ offers no...promise of a restored Eden...the poet does not share his final thoughts; he offers no consolation” (320-21). Admittedly, it is possible that Wordsworth wished to leave hope or “heroic optimism,” as Metzger explains. However, since he ends the poem tragically, it seems Wordsworth “offers no consolation” because he has none to extend. This is a telling revision to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*; instead of the faith in nature expressed in “Tintern Abbey,” “Michael” finishes with a tragedy, raising questions, without offering answers.

Begun in 1802 and finished in 1804, “Ode: Intimations on Immortality” offsets the anxiety expressed in “Michael” and reaffirms the message of “Tintern Abbey.” Wordsworth initially raises a concern in this ode, as he realizes that nature does not have “the freshness” it used to have in his youth (5). Wordsworth expresses a fear “where’er I go, / That there hath pasts’d away a glory from the earth” (17-18). From this concern, Wordsworth asks the question, “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” (56-57). Unable to answer this question, Wordsworth stopped writing this ode in 1802. After two years, in 1804, Wordsworth came to answer his initial questions in the ode by claiming that man can connect back to “God, who is our home” (65) through nature. Wordsworth writes,

Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind...  
In the faith that looks through death,

In years that bring the philosophic mind. (180-83, 188-89)

This idea, that nature can relieve grief and bring the philosophic mind, reinforces the hypothesis set forth in “Tintern Abbey.” The last line in the Intimations Ode helps connect this idea of the philosophic mind and Wordsworth’s maturing appreciation of nature. Wordsworth writes, “To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (205-6). Therefore, through nature, Wordsworth believes he can gain strength and even “faith that looks through death.”

Wordsworth’s claim that man can connect back to “God, who is our home” (65) was not well received by the public. In fact, some of Wordsworth’s contemporaries classified this ode as blasphemous because Wordsworth hints at a preexistent earth life in writing, “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting” and that “Heaven lies about us in our infancy!” (59, 66). Wordsworth responded to the accusations made against him through a letter. However, Wordsworth never denied this claim in the Intimations Ode. He explained that he was sorry this ode “has given pain to some good and pious persons...but let us bear in mind that, tho’ the idea is not advanced in revelation, there is nothing there to contradict, and the fall of man presents an analogy in its favor” (FN 61). This ‘but’ statement seems to undermine his apology, further reinforcing Wordsworth’s claim in the Intimations Ode regarding a preexistent life.

In addition to religious accusations, Wordsworth’s literary critics flatly dismissed the poetry of the Intimations Ode. Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* complained that the ode was “beyond all doubt, the most illegible and unintelligible part of the [1807 *Poems*]” (227). Coleridge also disapproved of the ode, saying, “we will merely ask, what does all this mean? In what sense is a child of that age a *philosopher*?...Children at this

age give us no such information of themselves; and at what time were we dipt in the Lethe, which has produced such utter oblivion of a state so godlike?" (ii. 138-139). Such reviews made it difficult for the ode to gain any great prestige at the outset.

Despite the criticism, Wordsworth himself was pleased with the *Intimations Ode*. Mark Van Doren explains, "Wordsworth considered the *Intimations Ode* as one of the most important of his works, and gave it the final spot in each of the various editions of his collected poetry" (737). This suggests that the message put forth in the *Intimations Ode*—that of connecting with the divine through nature—is especially important to Wordsworth, therefore reinforcing Wordsworth's growing conservative religious ideology.

#### Rejecting the Hypothesis: "Peele Castle"

The assurance expressed in the *Ode of 1804* was not long enjoyed, as evidenced by Wordsworth's 1805 "Elegiac Stanzas," also known as "Peele Castle." Written seven years after "Tintern Abbey," "Peele Castle" rejects the previous claims regarding nature and calls for a more orthodox kind of faith. J.D. O'Hara explains, "A close reading of 'Elegiac Stanzas' reveals that it is not a poem of regret for the loss of early imagination, like the *Immortality Ode*; rather, it attacks that imagination. It does not find in nature a prop for faith, like the *Ode*; rather, it sees nature as man's enemy" (69). "Peele Castle" therefore marks the first time in Wordsworth's poetry that he not only refuses to reconcile human suffering with the balm of nature, but also blames nature for the tragedy. While Wordsworth eventually came to write hopeful poetry again, "Peele Castle" stands as a dramatic break from Wordsworth's usual portrayal of nature. After the publication of



“Peele Castle,” Wordsworth seemed more aware, sometimes even cautious, of the power he ascribed to nature.

The personal story behind “Peele Castle” helps explain why Wordsworth’s tone changed so dramatically within such a short time period following the Intimations Ode. Letters written between William and Dorothy suggest that, at least in part, Jonathan, Wordsworth’s brother, went to sea in order to earn money so he could “set William free for poetry” (O’Hara 70). When Jonathan died at sea, Wordsworth wrote in a letter to Sir George Beaumont, dated, February 23, 1805, “This is the end of his part of the agreement, of his efforts for my welfare!...God grant me life and strength to fulfill mine!” (LWDW 1:547). While Wordsworth was able to reconcile the grief of Martha’s fictional pain in “The Thorn,” after personally experiencing the death of a loved one, he acknowledged that nature cannot reconcile all things. Wordsworth laments in “Peele Castle,” “How perfect was the calm! / ...I could have fancied that the mighty Deep / Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things” (9, 11-12). Because Wordsworth previously “fancied” the sea was perfectly calm, his current experiential understanding of the sea now forced him to question his own claims regarding nature. Specifically, the belief that nature is “gentle” became a “fond illusion” to Wordsworth (29). The “truth” and “peace” that nature once brought was, quite simply, “no more” (31-32). Once again, Wordsworth used absolute language to reject nature’s glory, emphasizing his immediate break from his former beliefs regarding nature.

Wordsworth explains in a pivotal line, “I have submitted to a new control: / A power is gone, which *nothing* can restore” (33-34, my emphasis). This absolute language is in direct opposition to Wordsworth’s claim in “Tintern Abbey” that nature is the guide

and guardian of *all* his moral being. As if this declaration isn't enough to manifest Wordsworth's altered view of nature, he continues, "Not for a moment could I now behold / A smiling sea, and be what I have been: / The feeling of my loss will ne'er be old" (37-39). Nature couldn't resolve the loss that Wordsworth experienced, and therefore, in this poem, he rejects nature's healing power. Wordsworth continues,

Farewell, farewell the heart that lives along,  
 Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!  
 Such happiness, wherever it be known,  
 Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind. (53-56)

Wordsworth seems to be saying farewell to the "dream" that nature is able to convey happiness. Instead of experiencing the "tender joy" of "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth explains that lovers of nature should be "pitied." This stands in stark contrast to Wordsworth's plea to Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey," when he says, "If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief, / Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts / Of tender joy wilt thou remember me, / And these exhortations!" (144-47). It's as if Wordsworth is refusing his own advice to let the "healing thoughts" of nature restore the grief that came from his brother's death.

McGann discusses the relationship between "Peele Castle" and "Tintern Abbey," breaking Wordsworth's career into two separate periods. The first period, ranging from 1797-1807, includes "Tintern Abbey," which incorporates both vision and critique into the message. The second period McGann describes as Wordsworth's revisionary period, and argues that it only lasted for one year: 1807. McGann says, "Peele Castle is about as close as we come to a genuinely 'secondary' work by Wordsworth, though even here the

term is not neatly applicable since ‘Peele Castle’ and ‘Tintern Abbey’ are only separated from each other, ideologically and stylistically, by a difference in emphasis” (*The Romantic Ideology* 109). Not only does McGann suggest that “Peele Castle” is a revisionary work, but he also compares this work to “Tintern Abbey,” suggesting that “Peele Castle” is revising “Tintern Abbey.” Instead of turning to nature, Wordsworth is rejecting nature in “Peele Castle.”

It is somewhat painfully ironic that Wordsworth writes in “Tintern Abbey,” “this prayer I make, / Knowing that Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her” (122-24). There is a very real sense of betrayal in “Peele Castle,” which can be seen as a kind of response to the earlier and more idealistic point of view expressed in “Tintern Abbey.” This momentary rejection of nature would color Wordsworth’s poetry in the years to come because now Wordsworth was forced to balance his belief in nature’s healing power with the personal empathy he had gained from tragedy. In this way, Wordsworth’s poetry became more conservative. Wordsworth even explains, “I have submitted to a new control” (34). While this “control” is never explicitly explained, it is possible Wordsworth is referring to God. The last line of the poem reinforces this idea, when Wordsworth tries to find meaning out of his suffering. Wordsworth writes, “Not without hope we suffer and we mourn” (60). Thus, Wordsworth submits to a new control, one he hopes can restore what nature has destroyed.

While Wordsworth would continue writing poetry, he did so with a heavier understanding of human suffering. Over the years, nature had meant several different things to Wordsworth. “The Female Vagrant” and “The Thorn” serve as examples of Wordsworth’s initial questions regarding nature’s restorative power. “Tintern Abbey,” as

I have argued, acts as a hypothesis, wherein he claims that nature can be the guide and guardian of heart, soul, and moral being. “The Two April Mornings,” “The Fountain,” and “Michael” further complicate Wordsworth’s narrative, as he expresses doubt concerning nature’s power to reconcile human suffering through these poems. “The Intimations Ode” momentarily expands the central claim of “Tintern Abbey,” but Wordsworth denies his devotion to nature through “Peele Castle.” While not his final definition of nature by any means, “Peele Castle” serves to illustrate a significant and dramatic shift in Wordsworth’s perception of nature. Wordsworth would continue studying nature’s power as set forth in “Tintern Abbey,” but these questions became more problematic, as “Peele Castle” also influenced Wordsworth’s poetic description of nature. While Wordsworth asserted in “Tintern Abbey” that he was “A worshipper of Nature” (153), the subsequent years of his career, as will be examined, served to illustrate his increasingly conservative, religious ideologies; along with a reverence for nature, Wordsworth came to reverence God as well.

## CHAPTER 2

## CHALLENGING WORDSWORTH'S NATURE PROJECT:

## THE "SATANIC SCHOOL" OF POETRY DURING THE REGENCY

King George IV, who reigned as the Prince of Wales during the Regency, was a living example of "the age of indulgence." By the time he died, he weighed twenty-two stones "and his stomach 'reached his knees'" (Murray 187). Indeed, "it seems to have been part of the contemporary creed that a hostess should provide and display far more food than the company could possibly eat" (Murray 191). Renowned for its decadence, the Regency was, as Venetia Murray suggests, more than an age of gluttony. It was also "an intensely social age, an era which reveled in parties of every kind and saw entertaining as a creative art" (201). For the poet Lord Byron, this era of entertainment fit his literary ambitions well. With his publication of *Childe Harold I* and *II* in May 1812, he became a self-made Romantic celebrity. Byron enjoyed being the center of attention. In Nicholas Mason's article "Building Brand Byron" he refutes the claim that Byron "awoke one morning and found [him]self famous" (424). Instead, Mason argues that *Childe Harold I* and *II* sold out in three days because "of a marketing-savvy publisher and a poet with a flair for self-promotion converging at an ideal moment in literary and advertising history" (425). Truly, Byron was "a poet with a flair for self-promotion."

In contrast to Byron, Wordsworth's life during the Regency was decidedly less glamorous. Wordsworth's prominence, understandably, was eclipsed in part by the craze now dubbed "Byromania." In what must have been a blow to Wordsworth, Venetia Murray points out, "Byron sold 10,000 copies of *The Corsair* on the day of publication,

but Wordsworth, who was just as valid a Romantic, sold only 500 copies in five years of the 1815 edition of his poems” (285). The *Edinburgh Review* emphasizes this literary shift that occurred at the beginning of the Regency by explaining, “the ‘old school’ was exhausted” and the new favorite was Byron’s *Childe Harold III*” (Cox 23).

With Byron’s fame came a wave of reviews, some in favor and some opposed to his poetry. One of the most notable critiques of Byron’s project came from Robert Southey in the Preface to “A Vision of Judgment.” Southey writes about a group of rising poets, and while he never mentions any names in particular, it is generally accepted that he was singling out Byron and Shelley. Southey condemns these poets for their “mockery, lewdness and impiety, with which English poetry had, in our days, first been polluted!” and, clearly alluding to Byron, bemoans “the celebrity of an offender” (793). Southey further goes on to reprimand Byron and Shelley, saying they are “Men of diseased hearts...[who] labor to make others as miserable as themselves by infecting them with a moral virus that eats into the soul!” (794). The censure in Southey’s tone is obvious, with his image of “diseased hearts” and “miserable” men. This “moral virus” is characterized by “lasciviousness” (793). Having thus established his disgust, Southey gives a name to this rising group of poets by saying, “The school which they have set up may properly be called ‘the Satanic school’” (794). Byron responded to Southey’s attack with his sarcastic publication *The Vision of Judgment*, where he says of the “supposed Satanic school,” “If there exists anywhere, except in his imagination, such a school, is he not sufficiently armed against it by his own intense vanity?” (482).

Both Byron and Shelley were part of the more general group, the second-generation Romantics, which consisted of poets who arose during the Regency; the so-

called “Satanic School” is a specialized subset of this larger grouping, characterized by its more liberal views. Therefore, this chapter will argue that while the “Satanic School” was heavily influenced by Wordsworth, this school ultimately rejected Wordsworth’s treatment of nature. This analysis becomes significant to my thesis, as it provides the rationale behind Wordsworth’s response to the “Satanic School” or Byron and Shelley and their portrayals of nature. This chapter therefore sets up my argument that the *The River Duddon*, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, was written in reaction to the “Satanic School” and their differing attitudes toward nature.

#### Echoes of Wordsworthian Nature in the “Satanic School” of Poetry

While I will argue in this chapter that Byron’s and Shelley’s portrayals of nature were by and large directed against Wordsworth’s, it’s also important to note how extensively both of these poets were influenced by Wordsworth. Although Byron was openly critical of Wordsworth, it is apparent that he was impacted by Wordsworth’s poetry. After meeting with Wordsworth in 1815, Byron told his wife, Annabella, “I had but one feeling from the beginning of the visit to the end – *reverence*” (qtd. in McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* 173). Further, “Byron acknowledges ‘a certain merit’ in *Lyrical Ballads* – a book he clearly knew intimately – and he adds that Wordsworth ‘now and then expressed ideas worth imitating’” (McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* 175). For his part, Shelley was even more willing to openly acknowledge Wordsworth’s influence on his poetry. His wife Mary said, “No man ever admired Wordsworth’s poetry more;— [Shelley] read it perpetually” (qtd. in Abrams 461).

Because of Wordsworth’s influence on Byron and Shelley, some of their poetry reflects Wordsworth’s philosophies of nature. Because my research seeks to analyze key

differences amongst these poets, I will only briefly touch on these similarities, giving an overview of works that highlight connections between Wordsworth and the “Satanic School”. I will look at each poet generally to make comparisons, and then analyze in more detail the similarities present in Byron’s *Childe Harold* III and Shelley’s “To a Skylark.”

### Byron

Out of the two, Byron differs most extensively from Wordsworth in his depictions of and attitudes toward nature. Poems such as “I Would I Were a Careless Child” and “To Edward Noel Long, Esq.” hint at a longing for the youthful excitement nature once brought, akin to the longing expressed in Wordsworth’s Intimations Ode. However, instead of reaching towards a hopeful conclusion, Byron expresses regret for what is lost and mourns his current state.

Interestingly, the one consistent similarity between Byron’s and Wordsworth’s depictions of nature can be found in *Childe Harold*. While much of Byron’s *Childe Harold* features a more depressive, gloomier depiction of nature, Canto III expresses ideas that are comparable to a more hopeful, Wordsworthian view of nature. This gloomy mood that pervades much of *Childe Harold* is understandable, as the cantos chronicle the events of several wars. In Canto III, however, the narrator embarks on a sea voyage, and there is peace for a time. In this peace, the narrator optimistically comments,

The Morn is up again, the dewy Morn,  
 With breath all incense, and with cheeks all bloom—  
 Laughing the clouds away with playful scorn,  
 And living as if earth contained no tomb. (Stanza XCVIII)



By personifying the Morn with such positive images as “cheeks all bloom” and “Laughing the clouds away,” it seems as though the narrator has been lifted from the despair characteristic of the Byronic hero and stops worrying about death for a moment. This brief solace can be understood in part because of the context of this canto. Herein, Byron is speaking to his daughter, Ada, to whom this canto was originally addressed. The last lines of Canto III read:

thy fire  
 Shall be more tempered, and thy hope far higher!  
 Sweet be thy cradled slumbers! O'er the sea  
 And from the mountains where I now respire,  
 Fain would I waft such blessing upon thee,  
 As—with a sigh—I deem thou might'st have been to me! (Stanza CXVIII)

Uncharacteristically for Byron, he depicts nature's beauties of the sea and the mountains, even expressing hope through his blessings for Ada. This blessing of “cradled slumbers” closes this section of the poem.

Several years after the publication of *Childe Harold* III, John Wilson noted a similarity between Byron and Wordsworth in the May 1820 edition of *Blackwood's*, saying, “the poetical productions of...Byron, and Wordsworth...however differing from each other in shape and feature—are yet...kindred to each other by their part in the common Soul and Thought of the time that has witnessed their birth” (100). Wilson acknowledges that while their poetry takes on different forms, both Byron and Wordsworth were employed in the same business and thematic concerns of their time. However, while they were both inspired by the “Soul and Thought of the time,” as we

will see below, this inspiration led them to very different ends.

Shelley

Compared to Byron, Shelley's philosophy on nature was more consistently similar to Wordsworth's. In general terms, Shelley and Wordsworth were both the great philosophers of nature during this age. Wordsworth himself even said that Shelley was "one of the best *artists* of us all...in workmanship of style" (*CWPBS* 7:112). Works that illustrate a Wordsworthian treatment of nature include the poems "Ode to the West Wind" and "The Cloud" and the treatise *A Defence of Poetry*. Timothy Morton suggests,

*A Defence of Poetry* is as much a biological treatise as it is a poetic and philosophical one, and life and language turn out to be deeply intertwined within it. The essay begins with a strong thesis on the organic, embodied nature of consciousness. Shelley advocates an anti-dualist idea of the mind as embedded in nature. The mind interacts with its environment like an 'Aeolian lyre' played by the wind. (9)

This connection between man and nature is very similar to that found in Wordsworth, who felt, like Shelley that "the mind interacts with its environment." Further, both Wordsworth and Shelley believed that the most qualified person to discuss nature was the poet. While Wordsworth argues in his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" that a poet "is a man speaking to men...who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul" (296, 297-98), Shelley argues that poets are "the unacknowledged legislatures of the world" (535) in *A Defence of Poetry*.

One poem that is particularly helpful in illuminating similarities between Wordsworth's and Shelley's philosophies on nature is Shelley's "To a Skylark." This

poem marvels at the titular bird, all along praising nature as well. Shelley describes the bird by saying, “From the earth thou springest / Like a cloud of fire; / The blue deep thou wingest, / And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest” (7-10). These colorful, bright images of fire and the “blue deep” are added upon with the lines, “The pale purple even / Melts around thy flight, / Like a star of Heaven / In the broad day-light” (16-19). With this array of colors, the poem’s tone is more hopeful or positive. Other images that further this hopeful attitude include “the white dawn clear” (24), “Heaven is overflowed” (30), “rainbow clouds” (33), and “Rain-awakened flowers” (58). Shelley says of “vernal showers”: “All that ever was / Joyous, and clear and fresh, thy music doth surpass” (59-60). Here, Shelley even comments on the scene, calling the music of the rain “joyous.”

With this great hope expressed during the first two-thirds of the poem, the narrator then addresses the skylark: “Teach us, Sprite or Bird, / What sweet thoughts are thine” (61-62). In this next section, the poem becomes introspective and philosophical. One issue the narrator would like to understand more about is death, and he believes that the skylark can teach of “Things more true and deep / Than we mortals dream, / Or how could thy notes flow in such a chrystal stream?” (83-85). Finally, the narrator again asks the skylark, “Teach me half the gladness / That thy brain must know” (101-102). This turn towards the skylark as the higher teacher echoes the Wordsworthian ideal that purest truths can only be found in nature.

Rejecting Wordsworth: Distinctive Nature Projects and the “Satanic School” of Poetry

While these works by Byron and Shelley call attention to their similarities with Wordsworth, they are more exceptions than the rule. As I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, many of Byron’s and Shelley’s other works break from Wordsworthian

philosophies; where Wordsworth looked at nature as a divine, individual source of inspiration, the “Satanic School” frequently attached a more sensual, communal connection between nature and man. To highlight these differences, I will analyze Byron’s *Don Juan* and “Darkness” and Shelley’s *Alastor* and “Mont Blanc.”

Byron

It is widely known that Byron and Wordsworth had something of an antagonistic relationship. Where Wordsworth was generally sincere and decorous, Byron was often satirical and sensual. McGann explains, “as Wordsworth was moved by a spiritual transcendence of sensuality and sexuality, Byron plunged completely into the contradictions which sentimentalism had come to involve for him (58). These “contradictions” in Byron’s poetry normally came in the form of sarcasm; in this way, Byron was able to discuss issues of sensuality and sexuality in a way that was more lighthearted and humorous. As opposed to this lighthearted attitude, Byron says of Wordsworth, “He had once a feeling of Nature, which he carried almost to a deification of it” (192). Some of Byron’s most acclaimed poetry is therefore shockingly sarcastic and rejects the sacredness of Wordsworth’s depiction of nature. This can be seen in such works as Byron’s “To a Lady Who Presented to the Author a Lock of Hair,” which parodies a love scene taking place in a garden, and *Don Juan*, which I will now discuss in further detail.

Canto I of *Don Juan* (1819) is a quintessential example of Byron’s use of political sarcasm. Written in ottava rima, the poem features a hero who is led on many adventures, including falling in love with a married woman, Donna Julia. In James Chandler’s book *England in 1819*, he writes, “Byron wrote to his publisher, John Murray,

in 1819 that he had no other intention in the poem than ‘to giggle and make giggle.’” Chandler goes on to comment on Byron’s humor in *Don Juan* by saying, “The poem’s great faculty of pleasure, its celebrated wit, exercises itself most flamboyantly in the making of explanatory jokes” (360). This is illustrated in a note included in *Don Juan*, where Byron calls Wordsworth a “clownish sycophant of the worst prejudices of the aristocracy” (184). Obviously, Byron is poking fun at Wordsworth’s shift from radical to more conservative political leanings. One of Byron’s main goals in *Don Juan* is to satirically portray Robert Southey and several other poets who had abandoned radical politics for conservatism.

This use of sarcasm also influenced Byron’s depiction of nature in *Don Juan*. Duncan Wu explains, “In *Don Juan*, nothing is sacred; everything is reduced to the same materialistic level, everything is profaned” (844). With this viewpoint in the poem itself Byron is quick to connect his sarcasm to Wordsworth and nature. In the “Dedication” of *Don Juan*, Byron criticizes Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* by saying, “He who understands it would be able / To add a story to the Tower of Babel” (30-31). This idea that Wordsworth’s poetry is impossible to understand is brought up again in stanzas ninety and ninety-one. At this point, Don Juan is out in nature, by “glassy brooks” (713). In this scene of “leafy nooks” (715), the narrator comments,

[Here] poets find materials for their books,  
 And every now and then we read them through,  
 So that their plan and prosody are eligible,  
 Unless, like Wordsworth, they prove unintelligible. (717-20)

For Byron, as Wordsworth is a poet who finds materials for his books in nature, as seen



fact, this comical approach to nature attempts to turn Wordsworth's project into a joke as well.

Not all of Byron's poetry was meant to be satirical. In fact, much of his poetry was dark and brooding, as seen with Byron's fascination with the demonic character type. The Byronic hero is often the main character in these works and is frequently a lightly disguised version of Byron himself. Such works as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (excluding Canto III, as discussed earlier), "The Prisoner of Chillon," and *Manfred* exhibit these darker undertones. In order to illustrate these ideals, I will discuss the poem "Darkness" (1816), as it serves as a telling example of Byron's fascination with things dark and sinister.

In "Darkness," the narrator has a dream "which was not all a dream" (1) regarding the end of the world. Duncan Wu notes: "the most obvious source for this poem is the weather system that prevailed across Europe in summer 1816. A series of disturbances, including the eruption of the Tambora volcano in Indonesia, caused an unusual incidence of mists, fogs and rains in Geneva" (894). This incident is evidence that nature can be dangerous and violent, and is not always a benign force, as Wordsworth often advocated. From these influences, Byron is impressed to write a poem on the effects that would follow from the absence of light on the earth.

The imagery throughout this poem is bleak, as the narrator explains,

The bright sun was extinguished, and the stars  
 Did wander darkling in the eternal space,  
 Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth  
 Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air. (2-5)

These images help establish the mood at the beginning of the poem, as Byron continues by describing a world that is consumed by “but one thought – and that was death” (41). This is clearly divergent from Wordsworth’s portrayal of nature. Where Wordsworth advocates hope and eternity, Byron here focuses on an “icy earth” that is without light and only thinks of death. This image is furthered by the ironic juxtaposition of the words “despairing light” (22).

In opposition to the sublime, beautiful landscapes Wordsworth describes, Byron writes, “Happy were those who dwelt within the eye / Of the volcanoes” (16-17). Happiness here is only felt because of the temporary light that comes from the volcanoes, which are in themselves hazardous, sources of light. The world only brings a “fearful hope” (18). This is contradictory to Wordsworth’s portrayal of nature, except as expressed right after the death of his brother in “Peele Castle,” when Wordsworth experienced a brief loss of hope.

In the closing lines, Byron is sure to expunge all hope that comes from nature. Scenes in nature that would normally bring pleasure are described with grave-like qualities. The narrator explains,

The rivers, lakes, and ocean all stood still...  
 The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,  
 The moon their mistress had expired before;  
 The winds were withered in the stagnant air,  
 And the clouds perished. (73, 78-81)

While all of these otherwise hopeful symbols of nature are stripped of their powers, Byron ends the poem with the words, “Darkness had no need / Of aid from them – she



was the universe” (81-82). By personifying darkness, Byron is able to leave the world powerless. Nature, in this way, symbolically represents the absence of light. It is finally clear that the narrator of this poem is characteristic of the Byronic hero: gloomy and brooding. As with several other of his works, including *Childe Harold*, *Manfred*, and even at times *Don Juan*, Byron emphasizes the despair and destruction that can come from nature.

### Shelley

While I noted earlier the surprising number of similarities between Wordsworth and Shelley, what might be even more surprising is that, even with these similarities, their thematic use of nature within their poetic projects was vastly different. I wish to highlight two main differences as seen in Shelley’s poetry: first, connecting nature to sensual contact with other individuals and, second, his use of nature to express doubt in God or a higher order. A quick look into Shelley’s life helps ground these differences. Not only was Shelley a proclaimed atheist, but he was also a political radical who “advocated free love and encouraged others to so experiment with his first and second wives” (Morton 18). Shelley’s works often portray doubt, as seen in “The Necessity of Atheism,” *Alastor*, and “Mont Blanc.” Susan Wolfson and Peter Manning help explain why *Alastor* challenges Wordsworth’s project with nature when they call the poem “a somewhat equivocally framed story of a young visionary poet alienated by life in the world who seeks visionary fulfillment, finding this ultimately in death” (1703). Rather than nature pointing towards hope and reconciliation, *Alastor*’s final answer comes through death.

What is unique about the doubt expressed in *Alastor* is that Shelley uses this doubt to point out the flaws in Wordsworth's discussion of the solitary in nature, so that he can replace this ideal with a more communal, sensual portrayal of nature. Shelley summarizes the plot of the poem in the Preface to *Alastor* when he writes:

The magnificence and beauty of the external world sinks profoundly into the frame of his conceptions, and affords to their modifications a variety not to be exhausted. So long as it is possible for his desires to point towards objects thus infinite and unmeasured, he is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed. *But the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice.* His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to himself. (73, my emphasis)

For this youth, nature provided complete satisfaction only for a time. When the “magnificence and beauty of the external world...cease[s] to suffice,” this character “thirsts for intercourse.” Clearly, because of the influence Wordsworth had upon Shelley, *Alastor* is a rejection of Wordsworth's belief that man's connection to nature is complete or whole. As Timothy Morton points out, for Shelley, “Wordsworth had failed in his presentation of intimate contact with other (sentient) beings. *His work was not erotic enough*” (9, my emphasis). This idea, that Shelley felt Wordsworth's poetry “was not erotic enough,” highlights a key difference between these two poets and their projects with nature.

The argument that “Wordsworth had failed” is best presented through the poem itself. The poem begins with the youth wandering in nature:

He would linger long

In lonesome vales, making the wild his home,  
 Until the doves and squirrels would partake  
 From his innocuous hand his bloodless food,  
 Lured by the gentle meaning of his looks. (98-102)

From this passage, it is clear that for a time nature did provide joy for the youth. While the youth is surrounded by “lonesome vales,” in the wilderness he found “his home,” and even the woodland animals accepted him into nature. However, this picturesque scene is soon interrupted. The narrator explains, “There came, a dream of hopes that never yet / Had flushed his cheek” (149-50). In this dream, the youth dreamt of “a veiled maid” who “Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones. / Her voice was like the voice of his own soul / Heard in the calm of thought” (151-154). In this way, the woman is a soul mate to the youth and has overpowered the joy previously felt with nature alone. The woman awakens a longing that nature cannot satisfy. The narrator explains, “His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess / Of love” (181-82). This love is comparable to the idea quoted earlier in the preface: The youth abandons nature and “thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to himself.”

As a result, the youth spends the majority of the poem seeking after a realization of the woman in his dream. The poem relates, “At night the passion came, / Like the fierce fiend of a distempered dream, / And shook him from his rest, and led him forth / Into the darkness...thus driven / By the bright shadow of that lovely dream” (224-27, 232-33). This dream has led the youth into a kind of “darkness”—an unknown desire—that the youth is compelled to pursue. Instead of finding peace in nature, his time spent wandering is “a weary waste of hours” (245). Finally, the youth “knew that death / Was

on him” (626-27). While Shelley pointed towards a higher ideal in nature at the beginning, ultimately the youth is still consigned to an early death because of his inability to satisfy sensual, communal desires of interaction. With an obvious ironic allusion to Wordsworth’s Intimations Ode, the end of the poem moralizes the story by saying,

It is a woe too “deep for tears” when all  
 Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,  
 Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves  
 Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,  
 The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;  
 But pale despair and cold tranquility. (713-18)

Instead of Wordsworth’s phrase, “*thoughts* that lie too deep for tears” (203, my emphasis), Shelley uses the word “woe,” expressing a sense of hopelessness. Nature becomes an ominous, unfeeling power that leaves behind “pale despair and cold tranquility.” Where Wordsworth uses this phrase to express the philosophical beauty of a single flower (202), Shelley appropriates this phrase to express the hopeless state that nature has left the youth in.

Shelley’s final words in the poem point directly towards the disappointment of nature’s cyclical, indifferent power. He writes,

when some surpassing Spirit,  
 Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves  
 Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,  
 The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;  
 But pale despair and cold tranquility,

Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,  
 Birth and the grave, that are not as they were. (713-20)

Here, nature has ravaged the youth, and he is finally left alone to die, without any “sobs or groans.” Instead of restoring this youth, nature has concealed his tragic end, and he is left not with “clinging hope,” but rather “pale despair and cold tranquility.” To nature, “birth and death” are one in the same, as the cycle continues.

“Mont Blanc” (1817) also expresses doubt, but rather than dealing with human interaction, as does *Alastor*, this poem helps emphasize the doubt that Shelley substitutes for Wordsworth's spiritual faith in nature. Shelley writes,

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue  
 Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,  
 So solemn, so serene, that man may be  
 But for such faith with nature reconciled. (76-79)

Whereas Wordsworth attempts to evoke faith and reconciliation from nature, Shelley here dismisses this idea, and instead sees “awful doubt” within nature. Michael Erkelenz reinforces this idea in his article “Shelley's Draft of ‘Mont Blanc’ and the Conflict of ‘Faith.’” Erkelenz says: “Nature appears self-sufficient and self-sustaining, and therefore no god need be invented to explain its existence. Instead of faith in God, the wilderness teaches faith in an uncreated and never-ending Nature” (100). This expression of doubt, as opposed to faith in God, is in conflict with Wordsworth, as though a conversation is taking place between these two poets. Duncan Wu says, “Only by...a Wordsworthian faith in nature can man be reconciled to the mysterious indifference and violence of nature; otherwise, one must adopt Shelley's respectful open-mindedness” (1077).

This doubt in “Mont Blanc” is furthered by Shelley’s depiction of eternity. He writes, “All things that move and breathe with toil and sound / Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell” (94-95). This reading supposes that eternity is not divine progression, but merely a cyclical process that nature carries out without emotion or sympathy. In presenting the sublime mountain, Shelley explains,

Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled  
 The veil of life and death? Or do I lie  
 In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep  
 Spread far around and inaccessibly  
 Its circles?...

Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,

Mont Blanc appears,—still snowy, and serene. (53-57, 60-61)

In these lines, Mont Blanc is the one constant, “unearthly” (62) form that “still” remains. The narrator, however, questions his existence, amongst the transitive aspects of nature. In this way, he is “Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep / That vanishes among the viewless gales!” (58-59). While the narrator is unable to attain the “mightier world” and is caught in “circles,” Mont Blanc is the ideal to look towards: not God, not faith, but an impersonal, unfeeling, grand form that represents nature.

What becomes even more significant about “Mont Blanc” is that the river in this poem highlights key differences when contrasted with *The River Duddon*. Both poems chart the flow of a stream or river that is eventually united with a larger body of water. As I will argue in Chapter 3, this becomes useful, as “Mont Blanc” was published just before *The River Duddon* and serves as an example of the diverging ideals of

Wordsworth as compared to Shelley. This comparison helps substantiate my claim that *The River Duddon* deserves renewed critical attention because it stands as an important addition to Wordsworth's evolving nature project, and it comes at the close of the Regency when the "Satanic School" has offered a different reading of nature.

## CHAPTER 3

*THE RIVER DUDDON*: WORDSWORTH'S EVOLVING NATURE PROJECT  
AND THE "SATANIC SCHOOL" OF POETRY

While Byron and Shelley were making their names during the Regency, Wordsworth was experiencing a period of mixed reception. For instance, in 1814 Wordsworth published *The Excursion*, which was rejected by some and admired by others. Francis Jeffrey's infamous review in the widely influential *Edinburgh Review* no doubt colored the public's reception. Jeffrey wrote: "This will never do...The case of Mr. Wordsworth, we perceive, is now manifestly hopeless; and we give him up as altogether incurable, and beyond the power of criticism" (1,2). In this review, Jeffrey goes on to draw an analogy between Wordsworth's poetry and a "malady" and calls on critics to stop "harass[ing] him...with nauseous remedies" (2).

While this was a bitterly sarcastic review, there were several other reviews that applauded *The Excursion*, including one in the *Quarterly Review* which said this poem provided "ample matter for entertainment" (Lamb 826). The *Monthly Magazine* also praised the poem, saying, "We here introduce our readers to one of the best poems of this age" (638). In the end, however, even with the positive reviews, it took six years to sell the majority of the 500 copies originally printed. (St. Clair 201). Of the 500 copies that were originally published, 291 were sold by June 1815, but 36 remained unsold by 1834 (St. Clair 661). Whereas the 500 copies of Byron's first 1812 edition of *Childe Harold I* sold out in a period of weeks (St. Clair 586), *The Excursion* was a disappointment in comparison. Part of this could be due to the fact that Byron's *Childe Harold* was 30 shillings (St. Clair 586), while Wordsworth's *Excursion* was 42 shillings (St. Clair 661),



although, technically speaking, both volumes were extraordinarily expensive for their age.

After the mixed reception and disappointing sales of *The Excursion*, in June 1819 Wordsworth published *Peter Bell*. Impressively, of the first 1,000 copies of this poem, 701 were sold in the first month of its publication. While the sales of this poem were markedly improved from *The Excursion*, much of this likely had to do with the copies selling for 5.5 shillings instead of 42 (St. Clair 662). However, in contrast to the mixed reviews for *The Excursion*, critics were almost uniformly unimpressed with *Peter Bell*. One rare sympathetic review came from *Blackwood's Magazine*, which exuded that *Peter Bell* “will probably be considered as one of the best which have been produced by this author and has every chance of circulating more extensively than some of his other writings” (136). Yet, as Donald Reiman points out, this review “stands out as one of the few that shows an understanding of Wordsworth’s purpose” (90) for the poem.

Among those who spoke out negatively, the reviews were fairly harsh. Leigh Hunt called *Peter Bell* “another didactic little horror of Mr. Wordsworth’s” (282). Even those critics who had previously admired Wordsworth’s poetry were disappointed in *Peter Bell*. One reviewer from the *British Critic*, for instance, explained, “Still in our consideration of what Mr. Wordsworth might have been from what he sometimes is, we confess, regretfully, that he seems to us to have failed; not merely failed in the acquisition of present popularity, but also in our opinion” which has “led us to anticipate for him” (584). *The Eclectic Review*’s critique of *Peter Bell* is even less sympathetic, explaining that Wordsworth “is himself devoid of any talent for humour, so he is, through a singular simplicity of mind, insusceptible of the ludicrous. We imagine that this in *sooth*

furnishes the key to that part of Mr. W.'s poetical character, which is written in cipher" (62). Adding to the sting of the poor reviews for *Peter Bell*, Wordsworth also found himself and his poem frequently parodied, most notably in Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third* and John Hamilton Reynolds's *Peter Bell*.

Considering the mixed-to-negative criticism that followed Wordsworth throughout the Regency, *The River Duddon*, a collection of thirty-three sonnets, received a surprising amount of positive attention after its publication. This sonnet cycle was published in 1820 in a volume entitled *The River Duddon, a Series of Sonnets: Vaudracour and Julia: and Other Poems. To Which is Annexed, A Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes, in the North of England*. In comparison to *Peter Bell*, which sold for 5.5 shillings, *The River Duddon* sold for 12 shillings (St. Clair 662), and by June 1821, 340 copies out of the 500 were sold. Thus, despite the increase in price, this volume did sell rather quickly.

Even more remarkable than the sales of this poem are the positive reviews that nearly all of the magazines gave *The River Duddon*. The *Literary Gazette* first responded to the poem by saying, "We consider these poems to be by much the...most beautiful of any that this distinguished individual has ever written" (201), and the *British Critic* says *The River Duddon* is "the gem of the volume" (134). Other magazines that applauded *The River Duddon* include *Blackwood's Magazine*, the *European Magazine*, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *Lady's Monthly Museum*, and the *Literary Chronicle*.

Even more unsympathetic critics tended to acknowledge the accomplishment of *The River Duddon*, including the *Monthly Review*, in which "The reviewer was pleased to

see an ‘improvement’ in ‘this altered and amended’ Wordsworth” (Khan 62).<sup>2</sup> The *Gold’s London Magazine* suggested that the poem contained “less of the idiomatic peculiarities and more of the modest philosophical beauties than in any preceding works of the author” (623). These magazines seemed to applaud Wordsworth for a poem they could not otherwise ignore. In 1849, just one year prior to his death (Khan 64), Wordsworth himself acknowledged his poem’s success by saying, “My sonnets to the river Duddon have been wonderfully popular. Properly speaking, nothing that I ever wrote has been popular, but they have been more warmly received” (*Poetical Works* 505).

There were a couple of magazines that included sarcasm in their reviews, but this sarcasm was mainly directed towards *Peter Bell*; their analysis of *The River Duddon* was surprisingly positive. The *Eclectic Review*, for instance, while taking a jab at *Peter Bell*, admitted, “‘The River Duddon’ stands boldly forward, indeed, in defiance of all ludicrous associations” (172). The reviewer went on to suggest that this sonnet collection contained “no ordinary beauty” (177). Likewise, the *British Review* stated, “these sonnets on the River Duddon are a lively specimen, and we cannot but think that the more this style of poetry engages him, the more his reputation will be advanced” (40).

The popularity and critical esteem that the Duddon sonnets enjoyed during Wordsworth’s time, however, was fleeting. Stewart C. Wilcox observes, “none of Wordsworth’s later poems has been so neglected as his sonnet cycle *The River Duddon*” (131). The poem remains one of Wordsworth’s lesser-known works. Articles that have been published on *The River Duddon* are few in number. Most recently Benjamin Kim’s

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Jalal Khan in his article “Publication and Reception of Wordsworth’s ‘The River Duddon’ Volume” for the selections from the aforementioned magazines on *The River Duddon*.

“Generating a National Sublime: Wordsworth’s *The River Duddon* and *The Guide to the Lakes*” (2006) has analyzed the *Convention of Cintra* in relation to the themes found in *The River Duddon* and *The Guide to the Lakes*. Other notable articles on the poem include Daniel Robinson’s “‘Still Glides the Stream’: Form and Function in Wordsworth’s *River Duddon* Sonnets” (2002), which explicates the poem in relation to the sonnet tradition, and Steven Wilcox’s “Wordsworth’s *River Duddon* Sonnets” (1954), argues that this sonnet collection deserves renewed attention and offers a reading. Among contemporary critics, Jalal Khan has published most widely on this sonnet cycle. Most notable are his essays “Publication and Reception of Wordsworth’s ‘The River Duddon’ Volume” (2002) and “Wordsworth’s *River Duddon* Volume: A Response to Coleridge and Byron” (1996). This last article, while asking a set of questions similar to those I explore in this thesis, devotes much of its attention to Wordsworth’s response to Coleridge through *The River Duddon*. Of the nineteen pages in the article, sixteen are devoted to comparing Coleridge’s poetry to *The River Duddon*, while only two pages focus on Wordsworth’s response to Byron through the sonnet collection. Because Khan does not provide a thorough investigation of the topic, his article emphasizes the need for a further study of the relationship between Wordsworth, Byron, and *The River Duddon*.

As evidenced by the articles mentioned above, it is apparent that there has been some renewed interest in *The River Duddon* during recent years. However, this piece has still not been given its due attention, something this thesis in general and this chapter in particular aim to redress. In what follows, I will explicate *The River Duddon* in two ways: first, I will show how this sonnet collection furthers Wordsworth’s evolving nature

project as discussed in Chapter 1; second, I will show how *The River Duddon* emphasizes the differing nature projects of the “Satanic School” described in Chapter 2.

*The River Duddon* in Relation to Wordsworth’s Evolving Nature Project

Before I begin my analysis, some background information regarding *The River Duddon* will provide a history of this sonnet collection. In regards to the personal history surrounding *The River Duddon*, it’s actually surprising that Wordsworth ever wrote this sonnet collection, as his first visit, while he was a student at Hawkshead, to the river was less than pleasant. He recounts, “We fished a great part of the day with very sorry success, the rain pouring torrents, and long before we got home I was worn out with fatigue” (FN 31). Surely if Wordsworth’s interaction with the Duddon had ended with this distressful childhood memory, *The River Duddon* never would have been realized. However, as he grew older, Wordsworth’s years at Cambridge helped him to appreciate the river (Dawson 8). Wordsworth himself seemed surprised at the reversal of his feelings towards the river when he explains, “Little did I then think it would have been my lot to celebrate, in a strain of love and admiration, the stream which for many years I never thought of without recollections of disappointment and distress” (Dawson 8).

While a few of the sonnets in this cycle were composed in earlier years, twenty-nine of the sonnets were written within two years of the publication date (Jackson 55). Mary Wordsworth recorded in a letter to Sara Hutchinson, dated December 1, 1818, an anecdote surrounding the composition of *The River Duddon*: “William is sitting with his feet on the fender and his verses in his hand—nay now they have dropped upon his knee and he is asleep from sheer exhaustion—he has worked so long—he has written 21 sonnets (including 2[o]ld ones) on the river Duddon—they all together compose one

poem” (Jackson 49). Thus, much of *The River Duddon* was written during the closing years of the Regency, after his reputation had declined by degrees.

As a collection of thirty-three sonnets, *The River Duddon* charts the course of a rather obscure river in the Wye Valley. In the opening stanzas, Wordsworth describes the “birth” of the river (III.9). By sonnet IX, “The struggling Rill insensibly is grown / Into a Brook” (1-2). The brook then unites with other sources of water to eventually become a river, as Wordsworth writes, “Of yon pure waters, from their aëry height, / Hurrying, with lordly Duddon to unite” (XIX. 4-5). Finally, the river empties into the sea: “Majestic Duddon, over smooth flat sands, / Gliding in silence with unfettered sweep! / Beneath an ampler sky a region wide / Is opened round him” (XXXI. 7-10).

With the general outline of the poem established, I will now discuss *The River Duddon* in terms of Wordsworth’s evolving nature project. As discussed in Chapter 1, *Lyrical Ballads* is fraught with anxiety over the issue of nature’s permanence. In *The River Duddon*, however, it seems Wordsworth has reconciled some of his confusion and doubt and is expressing more openly his unconditional faith in nature. The stream becomes a symbol of eternity, which carries with it a tone of devout, religious conviction. John Wyatt, in his book *Wordsworth’s Poems of Travel, 1819-42*, explains, “The Duddon valley is in a long perspective ‘a vale of peace.’ Although the river rages and there are storms, the sonnet sequence is constructed as a framework of reconciliation and security” (41). Thus, Wordsworth’s faith in this poem stands as yet another phase in his evolving nature project. In contrast to the doubt Wordsworth expressed in earlier poems such as “The Thorn,” “The Two April Mornings,” and “The Fountain,” *The River Duddon* is

more absolute in its conviction regarding nature's permanence and builds upon the initial faith Wordsworth expressed in "Tintern Abbey."

Even from the beginning sonnet, Wordsworth expresses this unwavering faith, writing, "Pure flow the verse, pure, vigorous, free, and bright, / For Duddon, long-lov'd Duddon, is my theme!" (13-14). Using the river as a symbol of stability, Wordsworth further shows his faith in nature in sonnet XII, entitled "Hints for the Fancy":

Bright liquid mansions, fashion'd to endure  
 When the broad Oak drops, a leafless skeleton,  
 And the solidities of mortal pride,  
 Palace and Tower, are crumbled into dust!...  
 Turn from the sight, enamour'd Muse—we must;  
 Leave them—and, if thou canst, without regret! (7-10, 13-14)

Wordsworth here suggests the temporality of societal institutions. Palaces and towers come to naught, symbolizing the false strength of "mortal pride." The ideal becomes "liquid mansions." This image is admittedly paradoxical. Liquid is logically less "fashioned to endure" than a "palace" or "tower." This can be answered in part by Wilcox's analysis: "If 'Wordsworth's fear of mutability was clearly the initial cause for his devising a form of symbolic art,' he could have found no better image than water to embody both change and permanence" (134). Wordsworth is seeking a symbol that represents both extremes. In this way, he is able to show the irony of temporal pleasures as opposed to the lasting joy found in nature. Rather than questioning nature, Wordsworth seems to see in nature an eternal aspect that will overpower temporality.

Even though Wordsworth seems more at peace with personal doubts concerning the constancy of nature, he understands that temporality continues to threaten nature's tranquility. He writes in sonnet XXIII, for instance, "if Duddon's spotless breast receive / Unwelcome mixtures as the uncouth noise / Thickens" (9-11). The "uncouth noise" Wordsworth refers to does not destroy nature's purity; instead, "the pastoral River will forgive" (11) because "Though false to Nature's quiet equipoise: / Frank are the sports, the stains are fugitive" (13-14). This forgiveness acknowledges injustices, but does not introduce doubt into the scene. While temporality seeks to "madden and pollute," nature is able to "forgive" because the stains are "fugitive" and fleeting. This shows that while Wordsworth acknowledges that there are inevitable hardships, he relies on nature for reconciliation. This unwavering faith breaks from several of Wordsworth's earlier publications, including "Michael" and "Peele Castle," which are fraught with anxiety and doubt.

This permanence in nature is best seen in the last two sonnets of *The River Duddon*, as the river unites with the sea and the reader is left with thoughts of immortality. In sonnet XXXII, Wordsworth writes,

And may the Poet, cloud-born Stream! be free,  
 The sweets of earth contentedly resigned,  
 And each tumultuous working left behind  
 At seemly distance, to advance like Thee,  
 Prepared, in peace of heart, in calm of mind  
 And soul, to mingle with Eternity! (9-14)



Here, society, or the “tumultuous working,” is “left behind” by the Poet. The Poet is then free to enjoy “peace” and “calm” as he “mingle[s] with Eternity!” In this way, society, or “the sweets of earth [are] contentedly resigned” so that the man can connect with nature and finally with eternity. Unlike the initial doubt expressed in “Tintern Abbey” and the Intimations Ode, or the doubt Wordsworth leaves the reader with in “Michael” and “Peele Castle,” *The River Duddon* never falters or questions nature’s timeless qualities.

The last sonnet is the most famous of the collection and is entitled “Conclusion,” although in some collections it is also titled “Afterthought.” In this sonnet, Wordsworth’s faith in nature is expressed with conviction. He writes, “I see what was, and is, and will abide; / Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide; / The Form remains, the Function never dies” (4-6). In line four, the notion of eternity is seen through the language of past, present and future: “what was, and is, and will abide.” In lines five and six, this notion is added upon by the phrases “shall for ever glide” and “never dies.” The constancy of nature is contrasted with the mortality of men when he continues, “We Men, who in our morn of youth defied / The elements, must vanish; be it so!” (8-9). Here Wordsworth seems to be reconciling the reality of death. As opposed to “The Thorn,” “Michael,” and “Peele Castle,” death is looked upon as part of life, and Wordsworth counsels through these lines, “be it so!” His rationale for this reconciliation is found as Wordsworth concludes *The River Duddon* by connecting nature to man, and both to divinity:

Enough, if something from our hands have power

To live, and act, and serve the future hour;

And if, as tow’rd the silent tomb we go,

Thro' love, thro' hope, and faith's transcendent dower,  
 We feel that we are greater than we know. (8-14)

Wordsworth here can be seen transitioning from temporality to immortality. This language of “faith’s transcendent dower” is hopeful and points toward a higher, benevolent power. Wordsworth is able to look past “the silent tomb” and the pain experienced from loss because “We feel that we are greater than we know.” In this way, Wordsworth’s evolutionary process continues, as he frankly asserts in this poem that instead of nature striving to destroy and condemn, it is a power that uplifts and inspires.

*The River Duddon* is also evidence that Wordsworth no longer questions nature’s power; this suggests that he is building upon the hypothesis set forth in “Tintern Abbey,” where nature is “The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of *all* my moral being. (111-112, my emphasis). Sonnet XXVI, titled “Return Content” helps illustrate this idea. The sonnet reads,

Return, Content! for fondly I pursued,  
 Even when a child, the Streams—unheard, unseen;  
 Through tangled woods, impending rocks between...  
 They taught me random cares and truant joys,  
 That shield from mischief and preserve from stains  
 Vague minds, while men are growing out of boys. (1-3, 10-12)

This discusses the role of nature as teacher. As a child “fondly” investigates nature, the boy is “shield[ed]” from “mischief” and “stains,” and is instead taught “joys.” Here nature represents the truest teacher. The sonnet closes with the lines, “Maturer Fancy owes to their rough noise / Impetuous thoughts that brook not servile reins” (13-14). This

idea, that maturity is gained through the teaching of nature, helps emphasize the central importance Wordsworth ascribes to nature. This sonnet is further clarified by Benjamin Kim when he notes, “what this particular poem lacks, in comparison to ‘Tintern Abbey’ or *The Prelude*, is conflict. This ‘return’ brings contentment” (63). As nature becomes a way for man to connect to God, there is no reason for conflict as seen in “Tintern Abbey.” The “contentment” in “The River Duddon” is evidence of Wordsworth’s evolved understanding of nature.

#### Significant Differences between Wordsworth’s Nature Project and the “Satanic School”’s Nature Projects

Having discussed Wordsworth’s evolving nature project in relation to *The River Duddon*, I will now move to my argument that this publication stands in opposition to the poetry published by Byron and Shelley during the Regency. This progression, as I will outline, is implicit rather than explicit; Wordsworth never singles out and addresses one of these poets by name. However, Wordsworth’s portrayal of nature serves to challenge the ideals set forth by the “Satanic School.”

Unlike Wordsworth’s more indirect approach, Byron and Shelley openly addressed Wordsworth by name and allusion in their poetry. In *Don Juan*, canto I, Byron called Wordsworth a “clownish sycophant of the worst prejudices of the aristocracy” in a note attached to line forty-six, and also mocked Wordsworth’s “unintelligible” poetry (720) in stanza ninety. Shelley went so far as to write a poem entitled “To Wordsworth,” wherein he laments Wordsworth’s decision to sell out, or reject the liberal politics he once espoused. Wordsworth’s reply in *The River Duddon* was unique from the

publications of the “Satanic School” because he was never publicly scathing towards their poetry.

To begin my analysis of *The River Duddon*, Wordsworth introduces children into nature in sonnet V. This decision to introduce children before introducing man to the river is symbolic of the budding, growing river. The lines read,

’Mid sheltering pines, this Cottage rude and grey;  
Whose ruddy children, by the mother’s eyes  
Carelessly watch’d, sport through the summer day,  
Thy pleased associates: – light as endless May  
On infant bosoms lonely Nature lies. (V. 10-14)

Unlike the more cynical depictions of man’s interaction with nature seen in Byron’s “Darkness” and Shelley’s *Alastor*, this sonnet of Wordsworth’s explains that man is nature’s “pleased associates” who “sport through the summer day.” This introduction to nature is hopeful and positive and is in favor of “lonely Nature,” instead of seeking for a kind of communal nature.

This idea of the solitary in nature is further discussed in sonnet VIII. Wordsworth presents a prehistoric man who is introduced to the River Duddon. The sonnet’s opening section is set up in the form of a question:

What aspect bore the Man who roved or fled,  
First of his tribe, to this dark dell—who first  
In this pellucid Current slaked his thirst?  
What hopes came with him? (1-4)

But “No voice replies;—the earth, the air is mute” (9). What is interesting about this depiction is that Wordsworth is careful to explain that a single man broke away from his tribe and was the first to discover the beauties of the river. Wordsworth is idealizing the solitary man’s interaction with nature in this sonnet, as he describes the scene with imagery of a “pellucid Current,” and also by asking a question revolving around “hopes” of the man.

This picturesque description of the solitary individual interacting with nature is a significant divide between the projects of Wordsworth and Byron and Shelley. While all three poets depict individual interaction in nature through their poetry, Wordsworth’s emphasis on the solitary man in nature communing with God is markedly dissimilar from the projects of Byron and Shelley. This can be seen with Byron’s project in *Don Juan* and his satirical connection with nature and Donna Julia’s eyes. In this instance, Byron even pokes fun at Wordsworth’s depiction of the solitary, as discussed in Chapter 2. Even the Byronic hero, who is characterized by loneliness, differs from Wordsworth’s idyllic representation of the solitary in nature. Unlike the spiritual experience nature can be for Wordsworth, the Byronic Hero is left brooding and depressive. Shelley’s project also diverges from Wordsworth’s depiction of the solitary in nature, as the youth in *Alastor* seeks the love of a woman to complete his communion with nature. At first the youth was content with his solitary interaction with nature. When he is introduced to a woman, however, he becomes “sickened with excess / Of love” (182) and is eventually driven to the grave trying to reunite with the woman. Hence, unlike Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley portray the individual in nature with sarcasm and skepticism instead of solemnity and faith.

Sonnet VIII can more specifically be compared to Byron's "Darkness." As "Darkness" was published in 1816, *The River Duddon's*, published four years later, comes at a time that heightens the distance between Wordsworth's and Byron's portrayals of nature. In a letter written to Southey in January 1815, Wordsworth complains of Byron's success when he writes, "As to the Excursion I have ceased to have any interest about it...[L]et this benighted age continue to love its own *darkness* and to cherish it. I shall continue to write with I trust the light of Heaven upon me" (*LWDW* 3:187, emphasis added). Because this letter came one year before the publication of "Darkness," Wordsworth's choice of words is fairly ironic. Further, with this frustrated acknowledgment, it seems clear that Wordsworth desired to reassert his view of nature in a way that the public would accept as readily as Byron's "Darkness."

Unlike the dreadful silence that closes "Darkness," the seventh sonnet of *The River Duddon* describes a scene that is picturesquely "mute" (9). Nature is a silent, benign power for Wordsworth, concealing the "hideous usages, and rites accus'd" (7) that men have performed. The sonnet explains,

And Thou, blue Streamlet, murmuring yield'st no more  
 Than a soft record that whatever fruit  
 Of ignorance thou might'st witness heretofore,  
 Thy function was to heal and to restore,  
 To soothe and cleanse, not madden and pollute! (10-14)

Nature here is not a fearful power of destruction, but rather a peaceful companion. The stream's function takes of the "fruit" that enters, and heals, restores, soothes, and

cleanses. Nature is able to reinvigorate the solitary individual and does not reveal those things that “madden and pollute!”

In “Darkness,” however, nature’s function is destructive. Byron personifies darkness as “the Universe” (82), and this power leaves the earth ravaged: “no Love was left; / All earth was but one thought—and that was Death” (41-42). This bleak scene is intensified by Byron’s description of the silence that pervaded. He writes,

The rivers, lakes, and ocean all stood still,  
 And nothing stirred within their silent depths...  
 The winds were withered in the stagnant air,  
 And the clouds perished; Darkness had no need  
 Of aid from them. (73-74, 80-82)

In contrast to Wordsworth’s picturesque representation of silence in nature, Byron makes silence seem like a terrifying absence, and a symbol of the impersonal and devastating control that nature levies over mankind. In this way, Byron’s description of nature in “Darkness” seems to “madden and pollute,” while Wordsworth’s nature heals, restores, soothes, and cleanses.

After highlighting differences with Byron’s “Darkness” and Wordsworth’s *The River Duddon*, I now turn to Shelley. I’d like to compare the ending sonnet in *The River Duddon* to the final lines in Shelley’s poem, “Mont Blanc.” It is disappointing that Wordsworth never mentioned “Mont Blanc” in his letters or correspondence, especially in light of Shelley’s implied allusion to Wordsworth when he says in “Mont Blanc” that the wilderness either “teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,” as I have already discussed in Chapter 2. It is clear that Wordsworth was aware of Mont Blanc, as a section in

*Descriptive Sketches* is devoted to this mountain scene (582-90). Interestingly, scholars including Alan Wu and Kermeth Cameron have analyzed “Mont Blanc” in relation to “Tintern Abbey,” but never to *The River Duddon*. I would contend that while the thematic contrast between “Mont Blanc” and “Tintern Abbey” is worth analyzing, “Mont Blanc” also engages with *The River Duddon* in significant ways that are worth exploring, especially since Shelley charts the course of a stream in “Mont Blanc.” For these reasons, I will now offer my analysis, contending that *The River Duddon* is a significant work of Wordsworth, especially in light of the contrasting values of Wordsworth and Shelley.

Wordsworth’s depiction of nature clashes with Shelley most noticeably in “Conclusion,” where Wordsworth explains the eternal nature of the River Duddon. He says, “Still glides the Stream” (5); similarly, the last section of “Mont Blanc” also explains that the river “Rolls its perpetual stream” (109). However, instead of expressing belief in eternity, Shelley ends “Mont Blanc” explaining that nature reveals

The limits of the dead and living world,  
 Never to be reclaimed. The dwelling-place  
 Of insects, beasts, and birds, becomes its spoil;  
 Their food and their retreat for ever gone  
 So much of life and joy is lost. (113-16)

Shelley’s idea that “their retreat is for ever gone” and that “joy is lost” clashes with Wordsworth’s use of the river to symbolize eternity, as Wordsworth writes that the river or stream, “shall for ever glide; / The Form remains, the Function never dies” (4-6).



Further, in relation to man and the river, Wordsworth and Shelley present opposing viewpoints on death and on life's cycles. Wordsworth says,

And may the Poet, cloud-born Stream! be free,  
The sweets of earth contentedly resigned,  
And each tumultuous working left behind  
At seemly distance, to advance like Thee,  
Prepared, in peace of heart, in calm of mind  
And soul, to mingle with Eternity!" (XXXII. 13-14)

This depiction of preparing to die describes leaving behind "tumultuous working" so that the soul can have "peace." Further, Wordsworth expresses a hope that the soul will continue on in "Eternity!" In stark contrast, Shelley explains, "The race / Of man flies far in dread; his work and dwelling / Vanish like smoke before the tempest's stream" (117-19). The process of Shelley's river is not symbolic of "faith's transcendent dowers," but rather of earthly processes that continue, even as men "Vanish like smoke." Shelley's last lines read,

one majestic river,  
The breath and blood of distant lands, forever  
Rolls its loud waters to the ocean waves,  
Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air. (123-26)

Both rivers continue to flow through time, but whereas Wordsworth's man continues after life, Shelley's follows a temporal, earthly cycle, going through its unfeeling succession of death repetitively, with no hope of something more.

*The River Duddon* therefore has a dual purpose, as I have explained in this thesis. Much like the twofold symbolism of the man and the stream, this sonnet collection successfully reaffirms Wordsworth's faith in nature, and also serves as an example of the Wordsworth's conflicting view of nature, when compared to Byron and Shelley. Rather than advocating sensual contact with others and doubt through nature, Wordsworth seeks the solitary, who connects with nature, and therefore connects to a higher being, or God. And so, with the publication of *The River Duddon* in 1820, Wordsworth's nature project continues to evolve.

In closing, this thesis has chronicled Wordsworth's evolving nature project as it led up to *The River Duddon* and has contrasted this with the philosophies of Byron and Shelley, who were characterized as the "Satanic School" of poetry. I have done this in order to establish my argument that *The River Duddon* came at an ideal time in Wordsworth's career. Through this sonnet cycle, Wordsworth was able to reaffirm his faith in nature. Further, *The River Duddon* serves as a publication at the close of the Regency that differs from the more liberal nature projects set forth by the "Satanic School" during the Regency. Instead of doubt and communal interaction, Wordsworth resolutely puts forward his more conventional, religious beliefs in nature, therefore leading him to say in 1820 that nature provides a connection with divinity, causing him to feel "that we are greater than we know."

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