

Wordsworth on Imagination

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WORDSWORTH ON IMAGINATION

IN his recent article, "Wordsworth on Imagination: The Emblemizing Power,"¹ James A. W. Heffernan provides a rare experience for the student of Wordsworth: a reading of *The White Doe of Rylstone* that is sympathetic as well as perceptive. His analysis of the symbolism of this maligned poem not only is valuable in itself but also sheds light on the troublesome question of what Wordsworth meant by "imagination" and how he illustrated its operations in his later poetry. I believe, however, that certain of the inferences which Professor Heffernan draws from the poem as to the emblemizing process should not be applied unqualifiedly to Wordsworth's earlier poetry, where the objects of the process are quite different from what they are in *The White Doe*.

Reading Mr. Heffernan's explication, one is struck by the presence of a number of expressions which, though applicable to *The White Doe*, do not often appear in criticism of Wordsworth's better-known and perhaps more fashionable poems such as the great odes, *The Prelude*, and the early "lyrical ballads." I refer to such terms as "divine service," "pilgrimage," "saint," "*Melior Natura*," "grace," "the cross and wounds of Christ," "crucifixion," "Spirit of Gethsemane," "rend the veil of the temple," "Saviour," "His suffering," "the Banner of Christ crucified," "the Redeemer," "beatification," "apotheosis," "Pauline *peregrinus*," "the breast of God," "a resurrection and an ascension," and "Christlike *patientia*." My point is not that this vocabulary of traditional Christian images and concepts is irrelevant to the poem; indeed, it is impossible not to use such material because, as Mr. Heffernan shows, Wordsworth uses it himself. The emblematic truths of *The White Doe* are clearly of a traditional Christian nature. But the fact that the critic must read this poem almost as he would read a medieval or a seventeenth-century devotional poem suggests an important difference between *The White Doe* and the earlier poetry, where such imagery seldom occurs. Moreover, Wordsworth's adoption of orthodox Christianity has more than merely lexical consequences for his poetry, consequences which may radically alter the imaginative process between the earlier and the later poems.

Mr. Heffernan's explanation of the emblemizing process turns upon what he calls "the necessity of creative sensibility in the observer," the "creation of meaning" in an object by the reciprocal action of mind upon object and object upon mind, as the doe, he says, acquires its emblematic meaning through its relations with Emily (pp. 398-399). But if the poem's major group of images and especially its major symbols—the banner and the doe—are derived from a body of traditional imagery with emotional connotations and symbolic meanings already attached, then the "observer" in the poem cannot be said to be wholly responsible for their emblemization. Wordsworth is not only showing us the imaginative attribution of meaning to an object by an observer, but also calling upon Christian meanings already built into his symbols.

This technique can be seen quite clearly, I think, in the late poem, "The Cuckoo at Laverna,"² which Professor Heffernan cites as demonstrating the "meditative movement of the mind," "the act in which feeling becomes meaning" (pp. 391-392). The cuckoo takes on significance, it is true, because the poet is emotionally stimulated by its sound, but the significance it takes on is a function of the precise locale in which it is heard: the monastery of Laverna, the "Christian fortress," "garrisoned in faith and hope" and spiritually overseen by St. Francis (ll. 32-37). This is no timeless encounter between the sensitive soul and a field of daffodils but an event in a specific location with explicit historical and traditional associations. If the monks hear in the voice of the cuckoo "the great Prophet . . . / *Crying amid the wilderness*" (ll. 93-94), their imagination is indeed "baptized," for it has not so much transmuted feeling into meaning as applied an already existent meaning to the feeling. Professor Heffernan says "meaning is made" by the imagination, but here meaning is at most borrowed from the traditional associations of monks, monasteries, and St. Francis.

I believe the same applies to *The White Doe*, where the crucial symbols also derive at least part of their meaning from associations outside the poem and independent of the operations of mind within the poem. The banner, for example, can become no more significant than it already is—a depiction of the cross and the wounds of Christ—and therefore its meaning draws upon the traditional meanings of these conventional symbols. Likewise, the doe (even disregarding whatever symbolic connotations Christian patristic or emblematic lore might have assigned to a doe and which the poet could well be suggesting in this context) acquires its significance not entirely through the operations of Emily's mind but through its appearance in the context of the "Sabbath-day," the chapel, the churchyard, the "prelusive hymn," the service, the "holy liturgy" (ll. 26-58). Any doe which makes its first appearance under such circumstances needs little help from anyone's imagination to make it suggestive of religious truths.

Most of Wordsworth's earlier poems do not display this reliance upon traditional symbols; in them, symbols typically start out without associations and acquire meaning through an attributive process operating almost wholly internally and without reference to historical, scriptural, or traditional meanings. In "Michael" (*PW*, II, 80-94), for example, the central image is the "straggling heap of unhewn stones" (l. 17) which begins as an object devoid of organization, purpose, and significance. But how meaningful the heap of stones becomes when we learn that it is the abortive sheep-fold which the old man Michael wished to erect

¹ *PMLA*, LXXXI (Oct. 1966), 389-399.

² *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1940-49), III, 218-222. This edition will be designated *PW* in my text.

in order to preserve and perpetuate his stake in the land. The heap of stones comes to symbolize the intimacy of man and nature in an integrated world where such intimacy promises "the certainty of honourable gain" (l. 73); it also comes to stand for the innate human desire for property, family, and dynastic perpetuation.³ And finally, when Michael's hopes are blasted by his son Luke's dissolution, the unfinished pile of stones comes to symbolize the frustration of these desires by human frailty embodied, perhaps, in the urban society which destroys Luke.

"The Thorn" (*PW*, II, 240–248) functions in a similar way. Like the heap of stones, the thornbush, the mound, and the pond acquire their meaning—a primarily emotional one here—by association with the terrible events attributed to their location by the garrulous and superstitious narrator:⁴ the pregnancy and desertion of Martha Ray, the murder and burial of her baby, her guilt and her suffering, which, romantically, put her spiritually beyond the outraged society which demands her punishment (st. xxi). In another early poem, "Resolution and Independence" (*PW*, II, 235–240), the old leech-gatherer hardly exists at all except as a function of the preoccupied narrator's mind; otherwise insignificant, like the "huge stone" in the famous simile of stanza ix, the old man acquires significance by fulfilling the psychological needs of the narrator. He thus becomes a symbol of human fortitude and endurance amid pain and decay. Old men, and perhaps leeches, may, in the Christian emblem tradition, have had certain religious meanings, but Wordsworth is clearly ignoring them here.

To me the fullest and most detailed description of the operations of Wordsworthian imagination in the early poetry appears in *Peter Bell* (*PW*, II, 331–382), written originally in 1798 but not published until 1819 after several revisions and amid a hail of parodies.⁵ In his dedication to Southey (*PW*, II, 331), Wordsworth says that the poem's Prologue demonstrates that imagination can be aroused by "incidents within the compass of poetic probability" and requires no supernatural stimulation.⁶ And so the Prologue rejects the "supernatural" in poetry—all those traditional elements with which poets had always aroused wonder and excitement and which called upon extra-poetic associations. Sailing about in his little moon-boat (which perhaps symbolizes the fancy, as opposed to the down-to-earth imagination), the narrator disclaims magic (l. 110); astrology and the classical universe ("The Crab, the Scorpion, and the Bull," l. 36); exotic travel lore ("Siberian snows," l. 91); and Spenserian romance and the marvelous ("the realm of Faery . . . the shades of palaces and kings," ll. 101–105). The narrator, the poet, rejects all of these traditional devices on the grounds that mankind no longer believes in them, that they have no significant relevance to human needs any more (ll. 121–127). What is relevant is *experience* ("The common growth of mother-earth," "life's daily prospect," ll. 133, 144). Only in mundane experience can one find moral and spiritual truth, not in tradition or authority or con-

vention; only experienced objects can become meaningful—if the mind and affections operate properly upon them, as do Peter Bell's.⁷ Wordsworth takes a final poke at literary traditions in ll. 191–200, where he has his confused narrator begin the tale *in medias res*, only to be rebuffed for this epic technique by the prosaic and baffled listeners, for whom "common sense" (l. 197) takes precedence over literary conventions.

The "tale" itself (and, as Mr. Heffernan says of *The White Doe*, the story here too is one of moral rather than physical action) concerns the operations of imagination in a completely unpoetic person, one who is not only vulgar but criminal as well; if the imagination can make experience morally significant for the rude Peter Bell, Wordsworth implies, then surely it can so operate for anyone.⁸ Peter, at first, positively rejects meaning in experience; he thinks only of "his 'whens' and 'hows'" (l. 313), not of "why's." Peter's chief attribute is "hardness" (ll. 316–317), and the poem tells how this hardness is overcome by Peter's innate human feelings and faculties, repressed but not dead, operating through nature and experience on his supposedly atrophied moral sense.

The symbols are, as in the other early poems, arbitrary and initially meaningless; the ass's look, for example (ll. 434 ff.), is meaningless, but the narrator ascribes to it human qualities—reproach, tenderness, and sorrow—which so far fail to move Peter, perhaps because he himself has not attributed them to the ass. The ass's bray, likewise, "Seems like a note of joy" to Peter (ll. 464 ff.), but he rejects the moral implications of this "joyful" bray (that the ass would joyfully accompany its master in death) and only rages the more at the beast's inertia. But those meaningless sounds and looks are beginning to affect Peter, in spite of himself, through his emotions of fear and (surprisingly) guilt. The crucial sight, the one which so terrifies Peter as to change his life, is arranged by Wordsworth to have no connotations other than those given it by

³ See *PW*, II, 478–479.

⁴ See *PW*, II, 511–513.

⁵ On the parodies, see Lascelles Abercrombie, *The Art of Wordsworth* (New York, 1952), pp. 137–141; George L. Marsh, "The 'Peter Bell' Parodies of 1819," *MP*, XL (1943), 267–274; and A. E. H. Swaen, "Peter Bell," *Anglia*, XLVII (1923), 136–184.

⁶ Although this dedication was written in 1819, long after the poem itself, it is an accurate description of what happens in the poem (though a few of the events, if not supernatural, are improbable, such as the Methodist service in the middle of the night). As Mr. Heffernan states, Wordsworth evidently did not change his basic concept of the imaginative process, but nevertheless he seems to have been unaware that (as I contend) his use of Christian materials would alter the process as it is demonstrated in practice in the actual poems.

⁷ Raymond Dexter Havens discusses Wordsworth's faith in the spiritual value of common reality in *The Mind of a Poet* (Baltimore, 1941), pp. 14–25.

⁸ For an argument that *Peter Bell* is a "poem of fancy" and not of imagination, see Kathleen Coburn, "Coleridge and Wordsworth and 'the Supernatural,'" *UTQ*, xxv (1956), 121–130.

the circumstances in the poem. He even denies explicitly any "fanciful" or extra-poetic associations. When Peter peers into the river where the ass is standing, and sees the corpse of the ass's drowned master, and faints, the narrator asks ingenuously what he has seen.⁹ Is it

A grisly idol hewn in stone?
Or imp from witch's lap let fall?
Perhaps a ring of shining fairies?
Such as pursue their feared vagaries
In sylvan bower, or haunted hall? (ll. 506-510)

Here we are reminded of the "realm of Faery" which the narrator shunned in the Prologue, for these hypothetical sights are all fantastic, mythological, and romantic, beyond the scope of common mundane experience which—as Wordsworth wishes to demonstrate—is the source of moral truth. Peter sees only a drowned man; nothing is allowed into his experience here which would force upon him traditional or artificial moral and spiritual meanings, no crucifixes, no banners emblazoned with the wounds of Christ. Whatever Peter learns must come from himself; the environment will help, but it will not enforce his moral regeneration. Hence the radical nature of *Peter Bell* as contrasted to *The White Doe*: in the latter poem, an established Christian meaning is discovered by the self, whereas in the former, meaning radiates from the self. Peter "reads" here, the narrator says, in "A book that is enchanted" (ll. 519-520), but the enchantment is a product wholly of Peter's emotional responses to what he sees; the sight itself is meaningless, arbitrary, and unpredictable, something encountered only in experience and something to which a response has not been taught, as it has to romantic pennons.

The remainder of the poem chronicles Peter's gradual moral reform after its initiation by the events at the river. He is helped along by further experiences which, in themselves insignificant, are transmuted by the "Spirits of the Mind" (ll. 783, 916), Peter's imagination,¹⁰ into symbols of his moral state: the ass's attempt to find the dead man's son (ll. 656 ff.) suggests vengeance to Peter; the rocks along the way appear to him like "mosques and spires" which "change countenance" and look at him, threatening doom (ll. 681-695); the merest rustling leaf (l. 703) symbolizes nature's outrage at Peter's immorality (he thinks); the ass's "grin" (l. 825), the miners' explosion (ll. 832 ff.), the sounds of carousal at the inn (ll. 866 ff.), all happenstances and insignificant in themselves, take on personal meaning and encourage Peter's moral growth. Even the ivy-covered chapel (l. 853), which might be supposed to carry traditional associations, "blend[s] with the surrounding trees" and suggests to Peter a strictly personal meaning, the shame of his bigamous marriages. Likewise, the sermon of the Methodist preacher is immediately assimilated into Peter's emotional state (ll. 946 ff.).

Lines 971-980 are so unlike what precedes and follows that they are worth quoting in full; they refer to the ass:

'Tis said, meek Beast! that, through Heaven's grace,
He [Peter] not unmoved did notice now
The cross upon thy shoulder scored,
For lasting impress, by the Lord,
To whom all human-kind shall bow;

Memorial of his touch—that day
When Jesus humbly deigned to ride,
Entering the proud Jerusalem,
By an immeasurable stream
Of shouting people deified!

These lines make explicit the few (and submerged) Christian hints of the preceding lines; in 1916, without having seen the earlier versions of the poem, George McLean Harper guessed that ll. 971-980 were inserted later.¹¹ He was right; they first appear in 1819 (*PW*, II, 377). Clearly, they call upon religious associations outside the poem, and they circumvent Peter's imagination, whose exclusive efficacy in the symbolizing process Wordsworth otherwise insists upon. In the manuscript versions, the references in ll. 969-970 to the sinless "infant child" like whom Peter has become do not at all imply Christ-symbolism. It was the older Wordsworth who perceived the possibility of such an interpretation at this point and briefly substituted the world of *The White Doe* for the world of *Peter Bell*.

So Peter learns that "man's heart is a holy thing" (l. 1072). His "self-involved" posture in ll. 1086-95 symbolizes the circular and self-educative process by which he has been reborn; his own emotions have stimulated his imaginative attribution to common experiences of moral and spiritual meaning. The moral reform thus effected is quite different from the conventional "grace of God" conferred upon Emily in ll. 583-584 of *The White Doe*. The later poem, as Wordsworth acknowledges, employs those very "Spenserian" effects he has eschewed and condemned in *Peter Bell*.¹² Wordsworth's use of the term "emblem" in the 1815 Preface (*PW*, II, 439-440) itself suggests the traditional character of the materials of *The White Doe*, as does the use of Bacon and Spenser as literary referents. In the earlier poems, on the other hand, feeling does truly create meaning; in *The White Doe* (though to say this is not to deny its sophistication or its value

⁹ See David Ferry's discussion of Wordsworth's concept of contact with the dead as spiritually fruitful, *The Limits of Mortality: An Essay on Wordsworth's Major Poems* (Middletown, Conn., 1959), p. 64.

¹⁰ Melvin Rader, *Presiding Ideas in Wordsworth's Poetry*, Univ. of Washington Studies in Lang. and Lit., VIII, No. 2 (Seattle, 1931), pp. 121-216, argues that what Wordsworth calls "Spirits of the Mind" are really animistic forces in nature. One factor preventing an ascription of animism to Wordsworth is that it is "experience" and not only "nature" which he believes to provide spiritual truth, as he suggests in the 1800 Preface (*PW*, II, 387). Critics have perhaps over-emphasized nature at the expense of experience in Wordsworth's scheme. In any case, there is clearly no animism in the human contacts from which Peter Bell learns, such as the sermon and his observation of the dead man's family.

¹¹ *William Wordsworth: His Life, Works, and Influence* (New York, 1916), II, 303.

¹² See Heffernan, p. 392.

as poetry), the imaginative process is at the most an interaction of personal needs and traditional symbols whose truths are brought to the poem and not created in the poem.

The effect of my analysis is to dissociate further the earlier and the later Wordsworth, in contrast to Mr. Heffernan's effort to reconcile them. But it should be possible for critics to avoid an automatic judicial distinction between the two, to accept the dichotomy, and to proceed, as Mr. Heffernan has done, to deal with the later poetry on its own considerable merits.

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II

Mr. Pfeffer's generous, thoughtful, carefully considered response to my article on Wordsworth raises questions about a number of interfluent but nevertheless separable issues: the relation between Wordsworth's earlier and later poetry, the relation between his earlier and later poetic theory, and the relation between his later poetic theory and his poetry as a whole. None of these issues got sufficient attention in my article, but that was partly a matter of choice. My aim was simply to elucidate Wordsworth's concept of the imagination as it had evolved by 1815. I did not mean to imply that the concept of imagination articulated in Wordsworth's comments on *The White Doe of Rylstone* is attributable without qualification to the early Wordsworth, or that objects in Wordsworth's later poetry behave exactly as they do in his earlier poetry. Nevertheless, in my conclusion to the article, I did say that Wordsworth's concept of the imagination as an emblem-making power enables us to see "the grounds of continuity" between his earlier and later work. I am grateful to Mr. Pfeffer for giving me the opportunity to clarify this statement.

Compared with his earlier poetry, Wordsworth's later work is certainly more Christian, more consciously Scriptural in its imagery, and more explicit in the definition of its abstract themes, which it tends to designate rather than suggest. In his later poetry as in his later poetic theory, the imagination becomes a more efficient maker of emblems, extracting intellectual values from physical objects and thereby transforming those objects into fairly precise *signa* of abstract truths. Nevertheless, I do not see a "dichotomy" between the "natural" messages of physical objects in the early poetry and the "supernatural" meanings of physical objects in the later poetry. It seems to me that one is an inevitable outgrowth of the other.

The more carefully we study the imagery of Wordsworth's earlier and later poetry, the more difficult it becomes to separate the two absolutely. To postulate a dichotomy between the "naturalism" of the early Wordsworth and the "supernaturalism" of the later one is to impose a very low ceiling on the implications of a poem like *Michael*, and to establish an inaccessibly high platform for the imagery of a poem like *The*

White Doe. Such a procedure is, I believe, fundamentally alien to Wordsworth's sensibility, equally committed as it was to the demands of sense and spirit. Scripture did not leap into Wordsworth's life in 1807 and radically alter his conception of the natural world. Long before *Michael* was written, he had read Milton at Cambridge, and he could not have made much sense out of Milton without a knowledge of Scripture. Further, the statement cited on p. 389 of my article (note 3), clearly indicates that Scripture *exercises* the imagination, training it to perceive "what is valuable" in natural objects. Wordsworth did not get from Scripture a set of abstract labels which he then pasted on the objects about him. What he got was training in imaginative response to the natural world, development of the emblem-making tendencies that he was born with. The reading of Scripture heightened his sensitivity to the meaningfulness of the natural world, and stimulated but did not predetermine his continuing search for the meanings of natural objects.

Mr. Pfeffer says that Wordsworth's earlier poetry, unlike his later, does not rely on "traditional symbols," specifically on objects which have acquired certain meanings or associations through their appearance in Scripture. In the early poetry, says Mr. Pfeffer, "symbols typically start out without associations and acquire meaning through an attributive process operating almost wholly internally and without reference to historical, scriptural, or traditional meanings." Mr. Pfeffer demonstrates this point by an analysis of "Michael" which is splendid as far as it goes, and which manages to avoid reference to Scripture. But is "Michael" innocent of Scriptural associations? It is subtitled "A Pastoral Poem," and in reading it, we soon discover that its pastoralism is not Theocritan or Virgilian, but rather Scriptural—like the pastoralism of "Lycidas." Consider the relation between Michael and his sheep. Michael is both shepherd and ancient patriarch, venerable with age, and one of the most poignant ironies in the poem is that even as he struggles to build the sheep-fold—for the sake of the flock in the cottage as well as the flock in the fields—he loses the sheep that he loves the most. As for the "straggling heap of unhewn stones," their meaning does indeed emerge within the poem, and can be explained without reference to Scripture. But if they are made to signify "property, family, and dynastic perpetuation," as Mr. Pfeffer suggests, do we not feel this meaning reinforced when we recall that a rock in Scripture generally signifies permanence and stability—meanings which in turn support our "natural" feelings about anything made of stone? I am not suggesting that "Michael" is a religious allegory, which would crudely oversimplify its meaning; I am simply suggesting that Scripture has endowed the principal objects of this poem with certain associations, that Wordsworth was aware of these associations, and that—consciously or unconsciously—he incorporated them into the poem, using them in his own way and for his own purposes, just as any poet working with any object

uses the associations that we commonly attach to that object, winnowing them and shaping them for his own ends. Subliminal or not, the Scriptural elements are a part of the poem, subtly heightening our sense of its enduring significance.¹ Sheep, shepherd, and stones are timelessly and inexhaustibly meaningful materials—still more so because Scripture has established a precedent of their signficatory power, without dictating for all time precisely what they mean. “Emblem” is a most unfashionable word. It conjures up in the modern mind the spectre of allegory, a pale procession of sterile, static, carefully labelled images. But the fact is that an “emblem” derived from Scripture often has a good deal of the indeterminacy that we associate with “symbols”—that is to say, objects virgin in their purity, unravished by Scripture. Scripture is not quite so thorough as we tend to think. It impregnates an image with meaning; but the poet who uses the image must still deliver that meaning and decide just what to call it.

I think this is perfectly demonstrated by the more explicit emblem-making in Wordsworth’s later poetry. In this later work, says Mr. Pfeffer, and particularly in *The White Doe*, “the crucial symbols derive at least part of their meaning from associations outside the poem and independent of the operations of mind within the poem.” I quite agree. But I think the same can be said of any poem—from Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday” to Carl Sandburg’s “Fog.” Be it a cat or a turning stair, unless the symbol bears some reference to what we know of these things outside the poem (whether our knowledge comes from reading, or “experience,” or both), they will make no sense to us. What Mr. Pfeffer means, though, is that the crucial symbols in *The White Doe* depend *much more* on outside associations than do the symbols in “Michael.” He says in fact that the Banner “can become no more significant than it already is—a depiction of the cross and wounds of Christ—and therefore its meaning draws upon the traditional meanings of these conventional symbols.” Yes—certainly it draws upon them. But it also shapes, defines, and *uses* them for distinctly dramatic purposes.

The Banner means different things to different people. Its meaning is not presupposed, but carefully worked out in a way that reveals and dramatizes its multiple impact on various characters: an emblem of doom for Emily, of violent victory for Norton, and finally, for Emily and the reader, an emblem of transcendent patience. As for the doe, it is admittedly strange in the opening canto, but no more so than Coleridge’s ancient mariner, with his glittering, hypnotic eye. The “supernatural” aura of the doe is chiefly intended to provoke the question of how it got that way—which takes us into the narrative of its experience with Emily, an experience that transformed and elevated it. I maintain that what the doe becomes—an emblem of patience—is firmly founded on its natural qualities: its gentleness, its devotion to Emily, its quiet submissiveness, and its consolatory power as a living creature in the midst of death and destruction.

Wordsworth himself tells us that his story is based on a “local tradition” about a real doe (*PW*, III, 535), and in any case, we need not refer to supernatural agency to explain the continuing devotion of an animal to a dead master or mistress. An actual instance of such devotion occurred in Wordsworth’s own time.²

Mr. Pfeffer’s analysis of *Peter Bell* is most illuminating, but I cannot agree with the inferences he draws from it. The main point Wordsworth makes in his dedicatory letter to Southey, written four years after the publication of *The White Doe*, is precisely the point which *The White Doe* itself demonstrates: “that the Imagination . . . does not require for its exercise the intervention of supernatural agency” (*PW*, II, 331; italics mine). In *The White Doe*, as in *Peter Bell*, there are no supernatural agents—no figures or objects with superhuman powers who physically affect the course of the action, as does the polar spirit, for example, in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” In both of the Wordsworth poems, passive objects—the doe, the ass, the Banner, the drowned man—are invested with moral, spiritual, or supernatural meanings by imaginative observers. The only “foreign” element which *The White Doe* does not share with the original version of *Peter Bell* is a Scriptural image—the cross and wounds of Christ; and I do not think—insofar as the existence of Christ is a matter of history—that such an image belongs in the “realm of Faery” which Wordsworth renounces in the Prologue to *Peter Bell*.³ Even if it *does* belong with the trappings of romance, Wordsworth uses it in the same way as he uses the objects of *Peter Bell*: to reveal the feelings of his principal characters, whose own imaginations transmute it into a complex emblem of their fears, hopes, and final aspirations.

Any object the poet can touch—a rock, a tree, a hill, a sheep, a thorn—carries a built-in cluster of vague associations. Whether these associations are sacred or profane, whether they come from books or the Bible or from direct, physical experience, or from all of these, the poet must reckon with them; he must select from them, shape, and define them, making them participate in the emotional and imaginative life of his poem. And if he succeeds in doing this, it does

¹ Carlos Baker observes that Michael is “formed and strengthened by his mountainous environment and his enduring and durable will. *Levavi oculos meos in montes* runs the psalm; and this is part of Wordsworth’s testament.” “Sensation and Vision in Wordsworth’s Poetry,” *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York, 1960), p. 99. The influence of the Old Testament on “Michael” has been treated extensively in an unpublished paper by Carl Dawson of the Univ. of California at Berkeley.

² See his note to *Fidelity* (*PW*, IV, 417), and Kenneth Curry, “A Note on Wordsworth’s ‘Fidelity,’” *PQ*, xxxii (April 1953), 214.

³ Mr. Pfeffer’s commentary on the Prologue blurs the distinction between Scriptural imagery and Spenserian romance, which draws on Scriptural imagery. Spenserian romance also draws on epic conventions, which include fantastic situations and supernatural agency, and it was these that Wordsworth rejected. He was not repudiating everything traditional—else even his Methodist preacher would have had to go.

not make sense to say that certain of the associations he started with are inherently "poetic," while others are inherently "extra-poetic." It seems to me that the whole "dichotomy" between tradition and experience is unwittingly resolved by Mr. Pfeffer himself, when he cites the passage in which Peter sees the ivy-covered chapel. The chapel, says Mr. Pfeffer, "which might be supposed to carry traditional associations, 'blend[s] with the surrounding trees' and suggests to Peter a strictly personal meaning, the shame of his bigamous marriages." Certainly this is a personal meaning; but it is hardly innocent of traditional associations. Marriages, after all, "traditionally" take place in chapels or churches, and Peter's shame is partly inspired by the fact that this chapel, which reminds him of the place where he married his sixth wife (ll. 861-865), also reminds him of the sanctity of the marriage contract—which he has repeatedly violated. Here, as in *The White Doe*, traditional associations are not fenced out. Instead, as Mr. Pfeffer himself seems to imply, they are "assimilated" and *personalized*; they are made a part of Peter's feelings, just as the crucifixion is made a part of Emily's feelings in Canto Second of *The White Doe*.

I do not deny that Wordsworth's use of traditional imagery—of Scriptural imagery in particular—is more conscious and deliberate in his later poetry, and that such poetry is more "emblematic" in the traditional sense. But I cannot accept the view that when he turned to Scripture, Wordsworth abandoned "experience" for tradition, because such a view is founded

on the assumption that tradition and experience are mutually exclusive. Perhaps this is true for some men and some poets; I do not believe that it was true for Wordsworth. Experience and tradition became one in his mind and heart; he came to see profound affinities between religion and poetry and to regard Scripture as one of the "grand storehouses of enthusiastic and meditative Imagination" (*PW*, II, 439). Certainly he never believed that materials which came from that storehouse were "extra-poetic" or that they would preclude the exercise of his own imagination.

Intention and performance, of course, are two different things, and each reader must finally decide for himself whether Wordsworth's later poetry is successful in assimilating the imagery of Scripture and shaping its meaning anew by an original act of the imagination. In the responses it evokes, the image of Christ crucified is somewhat more restrictive than is a field of daffodils, a drowned man, or a jar on a hill in Tennessee. But *The White Doe* shows that Christ crucified does not necessarily paralyze the imagination of a poet. If the reader can free himself from preconceptions about Scriptural materials of any kind, if he can understand that, very often, Scriptural emblems are almost as malleable as symbols, and if, like the Anglo-Saxon, he can still find it possible to dream of the rood, then, I think, he will begin to see the continuity between Wordsworth's earlier and later work.

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