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NOSTALGIA'S FREIGHT IN WORDSWORTH'S INTIMATIONS ODE

BY FRED HOERNER

Despite their evident critical differences, New Criticism and new historicism have tended to read Wordsworth's Intimations Ode as an essentially nostalgic text. This view of the poem has contended that the poet's "philosophic mind" synthesizes objective and subjective orders to produce either Cleanth Brooks's "paradox of the imagination" or Jerome McGann's "Romantic ideology." The problem with this theoretical binary of imagination construed as revelation or false consciousness is that it tends to exclude the possibility that a poem might enact the critical distance poets require to break the usual (or, in the language of Romanticism, customary) correspondences between inner and outer worlds that comprise the structures by which we live. Without sufficiently acknowledging the resources available to poetic and cultural agency even within apparently constraining structure, readers are quite literally bound to confuse Wordsworth's nostalgic material with his poetic practice.

In brief, the perception that the Ode promotes a politics of nostalgia may indicate a premise about agency shared by otherwise contrary critical methods. Against the tradition of readings that assume nostalgia, then judge it as "cure" or "regressive ideal," I argue that it serves as a strategic medium that undermines nostalgia's putative status as the revered (or reviled) basis for the Ode's argument about recollection and identity. As Kenneth Johnston has argued, Wordsworth aims to use mental custom against itself, a goal he images in the Fenwick note as an Archimedean fulcrum point "whereon to rest his machine"; once gained, that point empowers the poet to lever off the weight of "his own mind." I suggest that killing weight leveraged breeds joy because the poet has gained agency from the customary formalism that is nostalgia's inertial freight.

The theoretical dimension of my argument is adapted from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, which conceptualizes practice such that it enables agency even within structural constraints that seem to demand strict reproduction or imitation.
Their emphasis on practice shares a refusal of the subject/object binaries that reduce cultural agency to the reproduction of a psychological or historical model. Echoing Marx, Bourdieu emphasizes that agents tend to construct objects of knowledge that turn on their makers, insofar as they tend to “reproduce themselves in the agents’ dispositions.” Both the latent circularity and potential failure of dialectical practice conveyed by this model ground Bourdieu’s notion of the “habitus,” the process whereby “history [is] turned into nature” and practice contracts into mere reproduction. This crucial shift from history to nature, and practice to reproduction, occurs when cultural agents fail to perceive or “misrecognize” the circularity the shift entails, causing agents to confuse coercive historical discourses with natural or religious laws. The conservative and thus political force of the habitus resides in its capacity to equate “social structures and mental structures,” that is, to make “the sense of limits . . . [conform to] the sense of reality.”

According to Bourdieu, cultural agents cannot help but be conditioned, even used, by the very world they make. However, the fact that this world is “made up”—achieved rather than ascribed—keeps structure available to use and to take advantage of, provided agents foreground its discursive, that is, its historical and formal nature. Similarly, Giddens emphasizes praxis even within revered structures through his theory of “structuration,” which stresses that “structure exists only in its instantiations in practices . . . of knowledgeable human agents” who gain such knowledge and thus agency “in and through” their strategic reproduction of structure. As Bourdieu and Giddens see it, practice involves a temporal dialectic between interests and structures. Perceiving that mis-fit and deriving motivation from it matters because such practice resists custom and ideology that tempt agents with the gratification of identifying their interests with prior structures that claim to be complete. The agent of this resistance is a knowing subject, one who improvises possibility out of the same structures that would dominate were they revered by a conservative disposition such as nostalgia. Thus, “practice theories” can help to foreground how, in the Ode, Wordsworth sustains the chronic tension between subjective and objective orders even as those orders settle into literary form. I suggest that a conceptual and poetic framework able to reckon the use-value of form is too dialectical to let nostalgia have the last or even the mediate word. Consistent with that dialectic is my desire to wed the Ode to theory in ways that let theory gain from Wordsworth. To that end, I will
present both reading and theoretical analysis focused on specific stanzas together, and I will conclude the essay by commenting on further theoretical work thus made possible by this wedding of form to use and aesthetics to politics.

II

Several recent critics have suggested that Wordsworth takes up a strategic relationship with form to frustrate anticipations of totality. Theresa M. Kelley argues that Wordsworth’s revisionary aesthetic depends on contestatory relations between the sublime and the beautiful, marked by “repeated disruptions of a simple aesthetic progress.”9 In his close reading of the Ode, Joseph Sitterson argues, like Kelley, that Wordsworth deploys aesthetic conventions to resist absorption in the sublime.10 Peter J. Manning’s reading similarly concludes that the poem “exploits the resonance of Christian faith without committing itself to belief.”11 Contrary to McGann’s charge that every Romantic poet dreams he can “set one free of the ruins of history and culture,” these accounts stress a dialectical Wordsworth, one disposed to engage thoughts produced in and through the historical ruins of form that structure his heart and poetry.12

Certainly it cuts across the Romantic grain to associate (as Bourdieu’s dialectic suggests) dispositions to thoughts and structures to feelings. That this is so ratifies the Ode’s relevance and McGann’s claim that Romantic representations bind us still, but I will argue that Wordsworth’s reversal of Romantic categories marks the poet’s investigation of and passage through the customary impasse of thought and feeling. McGann and other new historicists tend to overlook this breakthrough when they assume that the textual movement from historical conflict to figuration “resituates those conflicts out of a socio-historical context and into an ideological one.”13 But what if the Ode does not, as our critical tradition assumes, equate the natural with the immediate? How would our reading of the poem’s terms change if we granted Wordsworth the insight that what seems immediate to a child is precisely what social practice naturalizes?

In order to lever himself (and his readers) free from that reified grip, Wordsworth must reckon with poetry as interested practice, a strategic negotiation of historically inflected shapes. Though the perspective Wordsworth voices in the early stanzas of the Ode rejects social mediation in order to affirm the religious transport of the visionary, at the end of stanza 8 the poet recognizes structural

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principles within his account of vision that reveal its obscured collusion with both imitation and all the "dialogues of business, love, or strife" that a disinterested aesthetic aims to transcend. The resulting revisionary mode incorporates temporal, bodily aiming in cherished aesthetic forms.

Actually, Wordsworth interrogates the relationships between disposition, structure and time from the poem's outset. The poem's first utterance is one of temporal loss—"There was a time... where is it now...?" (56). Such a crisis, like an epistemic temblor, shakes the naturalized grounds of experience, jarring customary measures. Wordsworth's expressed despair at vision lost is symptomatic:

Now, while the Birds thus sing . . .

. . .

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

(19, 22-23).

In high Romantic fashion, the poet assumes that "thought" screens the speaker from the longed-for immediacy of the visionary child. The extent that the poet's customary premises become entangled in objective content is cued by this guilty sense that "thought," whose recursive turn tests naturalized limits, does "the season wrong" (26), that is, violates nature itself.14

The oscillations between hope and despair that mark the next three stanzas trace the poet's efforts to recollect "The fullness of... bliss" that encroaching thought presumably taints. Insisting that he "feel it all" (41), "thought" would indeed seem "sullen" (etymologically, "sole"), even "evil" (both 42), when it divorces the subject from immediacy. Yet thought obtrudes. Repressed from the poem since it brought grief, thought, or reflexivity, returns in the poet's "sullen" response as he speaks for the mute Tree, Field, and Pansy, and they "repeat" precisely what has been implicit but which the poet has so far refused to say: "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" (56-57).

But rather than pursue inklings that could fret the conventions that associate "glory" with the "gleam" of immediacy, the poet dodges thought by reciting a chestnut, Plato's myth of birth as a falling from heaven to sublunary time. Though the myth's mood is nostalgic, we should mind its status as a historical text that Wordsworth regarded rather pragmatically. Despite the hallowed tone of stanza 5, Wordsworth remarks on what he can do with myth when, in the
Fenwick note, he writes, "I took hold of the notion of pre-existence . . . to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a poet" (428).

As Johnston points out, Wordsworth aims to use mental custom as an Archimedean fulcrum point upon which to lever off the weight of "his own mind"—and the conserving formalism to which that mind inclines.\textsuperscript{15} Although the visionary child affirms the poem's affective center for those who read the Ode nostalgically, this supposed refuge from the arbitrary assertions of history actually provides Wordsworth a conflict of interests with which he may strategically work. This work begins when the myth that spawns the child and the hope for transcendent unity divides the poetic voice between a speaker in temporal crisis driven to mythic security, and a poet driven to break its appeal. Furthermore, the allusive construction of the myth emphasizes that the visionary child is fashioned by at least two distinct historical voices, Plato's and Wordsworth's.\textsuperscript{16} In brief, the move from crisis to trusty chestnut actually highlights what the speaker aims to screen, disjunctions between the cultural and the natural. Mindful of Wordsworth's intent to "use" it, recourse to myth sets into motion a conflict of interests that reveals naturalness as contingent on a particular production.

This as yet tacit conflict appears in the turn, in stanza 6, from the visionary child's joy to fears for its fall into the profaned spheres of time, earth, body—and manners of the socialized child. Modeled on Rousseau's narration and characterized by "endless imitation," this child so precisely contradicts his visionary origins that the reactive transition between them suggests a symmetry where the speaker claims exclusion.\textsuperscript{17} As yet blind to the subtle ironies of interest initiated in stanza 5, the speaker shuns the gnawing insight that his reactions to each stage of the child—joy in vision, fear of imitation—are historical mediations, intellectual manners; his "conviction" makes the speaker an "inmate man" indeed. As Bourdieu cautions: "the universal structures of a mythopoeic subjectivity . . . [are] nothing other than the socially informed body"—that is, the body informed in ways that naturalize conventional order.\textsuperscript{18} This confusion in turn inscribes domination in partial limits when they are experienced as complete or as common sense.

That domination hedges the poet's regard for his culture is clear in his account of the socialized child. Contrasted with the "Heaven [that] lies about us in our [visionary] infancy," the advent of self-consciousness and language brings "Shades of the prison-house" (67-68).\textsuperscript{19} The poet elaborates the prison-house motif when he character-
izes the imitative process by which foster-mother Earth makes the child “her Inmate Man,” a process that concludes with “the inevi-
table yoke,” the “earthly freight, / And custom [that] lie upon thee
with a weight / . . . deep almost as life!” (82, 130-1). At this point it
seems the poet Romantically rebels against the mode that traps him.
But a closer look at the way Wordsworth constructs his reaction to
imitation reveals just how the ideal of vision internalizes what it
expels. One problem with the oppositional terms that Wordsworth’s
speaker chooses is that rebellion follows a pattern of subversion and
containment that assumes an inside and outside, a real psyche
contained within an artificial system. Thus, the formulation reiter-
ates the same rejection of medium that blinds the poet to his role in
custom as the source of what he claims as his deepest categories of
value. Crucially, this merely oppositional formulation also forecloses
resources of agency still available in the container (or media) itself.

The neat contraries of imitation and vision that pattern the child’s
narrated life suggest a formal complementarity, and indeed stanzas 6
through 8 reveal a symmetry between emotional oppositions that the
poet’s interest, aimed as it is at affirming unmediated vision, has
screened. The last account of the child as “Seer blest” refers to his
imagining of death as “A place of thought where we in waiting lie”
(123). Rapt in immortality, the imagined child cannot conceive of
death as a genuine change of state, so the image is static. Although
the poet’s longings are all for the visionary child, as opposed to the
socialized “little Actor” whose life is “endless imitation” (102), a
significant similarity between them appears at the stanza’s close.
Having lost the “visionary gleam,”

thy Soul shall have her earthly freight
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

(129-31)

If this refers to a spiritual rather than physical burial, structural
forces of enclosure, weight, and stasis “rest” (115) or “lie upon” both
children.

This symmetry startles because just when he seeks to draw a
hierarchical distinction between vision and imitation, Wordsworth
constructs reflecting oppressions, “shades of the prison-house” that
stanzas 5 through 8 associate with joining time and growing up.
Images of oppressive conditioning include “Earth” as “homely Nurse”
(81), and the “light upon him from his Father’s eyes” that encourages
imitation and thus a mimetic art, “Some fragment from his dream of human life” (91). Parallel oppressions appear in the accounts of the visionary child in earlier stanzas. God is “home”—recalling the “homely” nurse—and his celestial light guides the child, as does the light from the eyes of the socially instructive Father, but that “Presence” also “Haunted” the child (113) as it “Broods like the Day”—the light of which the child’s vision fades into at the close of stanza 5—like “a Master o’er a Slave” and the “inevitable yoke” of time (118, 127).

As idealized and free as the visionary child feels, Wordsworth’s construction of him seems powerfully determined, isolating the child in “a place of thought” like the grave he pictures. In describing the child in conflicted terms, does Wordsworth come to answer his own question about why the child desires to “provoking / The years”? But if the child eludes one “Master,” the haunting presence of immortality, he takes on the burden of another: the earthly body, custom, “palsied Age” and death. Thus, the narration concludes on a note of double-loss, a double-bind because either position denies life by sealing it up in oppressive stasis.

This static symmetry holds opposed structures of feeling (imitation and vision) within a formal system characterized by a drive to lock the child away from thoughts that could alter the mode that contains him. Furthermore, the shared stasis, marked by the watchful gazes from the two fathers (God and the earthly, biological father), suggests that the vehemence of this exclusion also incarcerates the voice that speaks of them. This self-surveillance that intensifies what occurs in the opening stanzas signals the conserving effect of the habitus, which we observe if we consider the fathers’ gaze as a figure for the poet’s self-containment within a system he has internalized yet fails to acknowledge as such. However, from a critical perspective that attends to the symmetry within the poet’s contrary judgments, terms that had appeared exclusive turn out to be collusive; that is, two apparently contradictory ways of life—vision and imitation—turn out to be merely differential effects produced by the same system. Because his reverence for, or as Bourdieu would say, “enchantment” with, that system occludes how he gains mythic wholeness by excluding his own imaginative possibilities, it will come to bury him.22

Just as the poet’s enchantment with the child’s direct access to “the eternal mind” (113) causes Wordsworth to overlook how the child is also “haunted,” even enslaved by that immediacy, so the poet

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fails to recognize that in clinging to his exalted sense of the child he escapes the profaned influence of socialization only by interiorizing it. Much as he loathes the thought of life as mere “vocation / [of] . . . endless imitation” (107), his own does just that so long as he contracts vision to a text. By inserting narration—thus history and the arbitrary sign—precisely where he wants to claim visionary immediacy, Wordsworth, to paraphrase Marcel Mauss, pays himself back in the false coin of his dream while internalizing what he ostensibly rejects.23 Thus, the principal hypocrisy of a nostalgic hermeneutic is that it eludes the insecurity of the present by transferring present cravings for stability on to past facts, thereby producing a purified past contaminated by the grip of present interests that hold it still.

As the politics and history of interpellation warn us, vision not only fails to escape the imitative mentality it reacts against, it situates conformity to it at a more insidious level because his enchantment with Plato’s myth of divine origins feels self-fashioned. Just as Bourdieu’s habitus creates the experience of “intentionless invention” that is actually contained within conserving formal bounds, Wordsworth’s visionary transcendence of imitation internalizes the mode of domination represented in the father’s presence.24 In his narration of his own ideal, “thou best Philosopher” (110), Wordsworth includes the haunting presence of the divine father over the child to account for the ambivalent relationship he now engages with the discourse that broods over and structures him. By enchanting the relationship with Plato’s discourse, wishing to obscure its economy and so submit to the sublime absorption in an “eternal deep” never to be articulated, much less challenged, Wordsworth’s “glory” radiates imitation.

The poet’s absorption blots out any aspirations he might have outside the structural system into which he retreats—much less the reflection that, as the form of the words “immediate” and “immaterial” suggest, visionary discourse may draw its power as an after-effect of mediation and material interests rather than as a generator of them. As structuralist systems tend to do, Wordsworth’s strict binaries denigrate what Saussure termed “execution,” a denigration palpable in stanza 7 when Wordsworth chides the imitative child for “fit[ting] his tongue / To dialogues of business, love, or strife” (97-98).25 In effect, the poet seals the sources of the “visionary gleam” safely away from the shifting grounds of history and social interest.
Not surprisingly, when the poet moves, in stanza 8, to narrate the conclusions of his system, Wordsworth is left with both phases of the child buried alive, an image that crystallizes the logical end point of a semiotic system that rejects time and human agency even though it exists as a product of both. In so sealing itself from change, the poet's consciousness resembles the "abyss of idealism" from which Wordsworth says he had actively to "recall" himself as a child (428). Consciousness so tightly sealed from contamination does indeed become "a place of thought where we in waiting lie" (123).

III

With the double incarceration at the end of stanza 8, Wordsworth's conflict of interests—the use of a discourse to deny interested mediation—reaches its climax: simply put, his insistence on the visionary puts him in a hole. Due to the rigorous distinction he has drawn between the child's immediacy with God-the-father and the distracting pleasures of foster-mother Earth who guides him into human history, the poet finds himself both cut off from feeling and unable to feel that the oppositions his system upholds to preserve vision actually imprison him. Might his hermetic isolation break if he were to accept the mother's bodily, temporal kisses and dialogues of "business, love, and strife" as opening up rather than distracting from vision? After all, if he were to acknowledge that his crisis is caused by his refuge, what better tonic than time, human agency, even the mother's body? In other words, given the terrifying prospect of burial by custom, his longed-for home may yet lie in the very qualities his own interested premises profane. These questions are tacit in the internal critique provided by the structure of imagery in stanza 8, a critique the poet can perceive only having followed his narrative to its conclusion, at which point the appealing security of the structure reveals its origin in formalist isolation and concomitant self-absorption. Thus, Wordsworth recovers joy at the start of stanza 9 because he has discovered that the only way out of the abyss of idealism is right through the earthly interests and media that his current values profane.

Formal symmetries between imitation and vision highlight a blindspot also detected in the way "deep" recurs to signal a germinal affinity between contrary judgments. The visionary child becomes the "best Philosopher" because he "read'st the eternal deep," even though it also "Haunted" him "On whom those truths did rest" (110,
112, 113, 115); for the socialized child, “deep” indicates the extent that “custom lie[s] upon [him] with a weight.” Taken together where they converge, “deep” suggests that opposed states of mind force the child to gain identity through submission to an awesome Presence whom the unenchanted eye reveals as merely structural.  

Readings of the Ode tend to assume that stanza 8 presents the poem’s essential conflict, one that Wordsworth will finally resolve through aesthetics, conceived as “the paradox of the imagination,” or through “the repression of history under the weight of transcendent continuities.” Instead, I suggest we grant Wordsworth the leverage and distance on the myth of immortality he aims for in the Fenwick note. If we suppose that the poet, in articulating his continuities, has sensed the produced naturalness on which such systems depend, then joy in the next stanza erupts because the oppressive weight of the poet’s own premises crashes in on him, not to bury but to empower him by granting leverage. Premises that used to contain him have become his Archimedean machine. The instant that custom touches him—he imagines it pressing into him “deep almost as life” (131)—the contact makes him see that the forces that oppress are actually constructed, thus hollow, insubstantial, built up out of a lethal mix of historical texts and his own interests, not from the “real” weighty essences welling up from the “eternal deep” (112) he has assumed. What was gravely oppressive when revered now “breed[s]” joyful possibility as previously unspeakable structures of feeling are brought back into the light of practice. This way, the medium of burial breed[s] life—and joy.

The paradox of a crushing weight that, with a touch, turns hollow demonstrates an important instance of what Cynthia Chase, with de Man, calls a “disfiguration,” a “disruption of the logic of figure or form.” Because “language functions as the representation of meaning only in blotting out the positing power that enables it to act as language,” figuration tends toward symbolic violence, given the conviction of practice theory that agents rather than codes make a difference. In the Ode this disfiguration allows disruption of and recovery from what he has imposed on himself through enchanted figures. If we consider, for example, how the image “freight” works at the close of stanza 8, the figure conveys the reifying, even physical force of custom that freezes the imitative child into determinacy. But at the moment of recovery, the customary logic of the image’s reference to physical weight breaks down because the sense of freight as cargo, as willfully assembled value and force, points not
just to literal but also to figurative forces that weigh him down with dead metaphors of his own making now encrusted by custom.

Through the supplemental significations that disfigure the oppressing force of “earthly freight,” Wordsworth gains his desired Archimedean leverage on it. That fulcrum point gained puts the figure’s possibilities back into play by acknowledging that its former symbolic value, as Chase says, “functions as the representative of meaning only by blotting out” the interested semiotic positing power asserted in part by a historical subject. So it is fitting that it is “weight” at the close of stanza 8 that jolts the poet into joy because it is as if the poem implodes on him. At the moment of implosion, when “custom lies upon [him] . . . / deep almost as life,” Wordsworth finally feels the difference between custom and life’s possibility, symbol and sign, present system and absent history. When that weight touches him imaginatively, it also triggers the reflexive insight that dismisses the threatening externality of “freight,” a force dependent on a habituated, naturalized response to blot out further curative significations. Reflexivity occurs because the poet learns that he makes the “weight” that strikes him: custom gains its particular effect from the poet’s touching figuration. Like the transition between the last stanzas of Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” between stanzas 8 and 9 an accidental signification snaps the poet out of a sentimental trance. Like Keats’ “fairy lands forlorn,” the figures of Wordsworth’s Ode break into the arena of history and humanity, using the unforeseen resource of accidental and abruptly foregrounded verbal mediations to break the prison-house of language.30

These broad claims for agency in poetic practice stem from the developing irony that breaks in on the poet’s consciousness at the close of stanza 8 and gains articulation in stanza 9 through the disfiguring image of the “embers,” those “remains” from which Wordsworth pledges to draw meaning and agency. The encroaching irony is that the enchantment of eternity actually entraps the subject in the historical. The poet finds himself incarcerated and, ultimately, used. But practice theory permits a chronic recursivity—what Giddens calls “practical consciousness”—that resists the “homeostatic causal loop” that acts of reproduction so easily fall prey to, as Wordsworth seems to through stanza 8.31 Giddens argues elsewhere that practical consciousness resists that loop because, “in this conception, reasons and intentions are not definite ‘presences’ which lurk behind human social activity, but are routinely and chronically instantiated in that

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activity.” Reversing Wordsworth’s reverent advice in stanza 8, “Presence [must] be put by” (119) to elude the static loop of custom that inters the subject in his own convictions.

Echoing Giddens’s sense of the recursivity of practical consciousness, Wordsworth’s interest after stanza 8 becomes interest itself—stung by his discovery that if he denies his own he gets used by others—which moves him to foreground and delight in the double-edged enchantment that sealed his own poetic images, an energetic surplus he had overlooked when absorbed in immediacy. When he revises them, their status as semiotic, positional acts, formerly hidden away in formalism, stand out and generate possibilities—“worlds not realized”—rather than foreclose them, as structural binaries tend to.

The revisionary procedure that disperses the determining momentum of “freight” into signs of his own making also makes the poet reckon his own complicity in the semiotic binary that recirculates conceptual and social asymmetries. With that insight, the enchanted structures Wordsworth had cleaved to—Plato’s myth, the father’s gaze, the visionary child—suddenly fall to earth, formerly stable presences fragmented to earthly historical practices in which the poet now recognizes his own complicity. Wordsworth’s acknowledgment of the oppression and interest in custom works like the paradox of gravitational inertia (nicely suited to “freight”): the same force that conserves motion can also perpetuate it. As long as agents regard the interested, historical structures of culture as natural and desire the coherence that those structures can provide, agents (and Romantic poets) freely revere what subjects them. To recall inertia, such homeostatic conditions hold the discursive corpus at rest. But the moment cultural structures strike him as practice, Wordsworth is jolted by epistemic shock. When the sensed taint of coercion dissipates the religious aura from a hallowed structure such as Plato’s myth, the static disposition of custom’s freight turns into aggressive motion, an historically partial form and force not to be revered but used.

The life that subsequently springs from the “embers” at the opening of stanza 9 figures an awakened sense of agency and accident rekindled through structure. If we hold on to the figure’s materiality, two qualities make “embers” evocative of the dialectical turn Wordsworth makes in stanza 9. First of all, embers “live”—catch fire—only if they are acted on, when fanned, blown, or broken. Second, they live by consuming their container; the fire bursts out
from but only by means of the remains that hold it in place. Crucially, these dialectical qualities accord with the disfiguring of metaphor in stanza 8 that made this burst of life out of custom possible. The fire of new semiotic possibility that bursts from a formerly inert structure now actively engaged is analogous to the reflexive turn on “freight” that disfigured its threat, though now the mood is joy, and reflexivity moves to affirm rather than dispel.

Embers image Wordsworth’s turn from incarceration to structuration because now joy springs from the interested use of a temporal medium. Turning from the celestial, Wordsworth brings joy to earth, to a human source bound and yet also fueled by material, media, and time. That the container also fuels life speaks concisely for Wordsworth’s disfiguration of the ideology implicit in the Romantic symbol. Rather than profaning mediation (history, the body) as mere means or container, here what holds energy also breeds it, as in the paradox of inertia and interest. Once engaged with interest, materials that seemed inert, or, in the case of “freight,” overtly oppressive, now display their motion, their historical thrust and the mobility that makes their futures susceptible to revision. This way, the grave weight—or deadwood—of custom can blaze with future forms of life.

Recalling how he “took hold” of Plato’s myth to produce poetic possibility by leveraging received material, we see how Wordsworth’s extension of that myth into the narration and judgment of the child’s fall into history functions as a rekindled ember. Staid structure bursts to life when Wordsworth breaks the substantialist illusion about his feelings and experiences presence as a verbal practice whose shape enables imaginative action. After the dialectical breakthrough of stanza 8, Wordsworth’s joy flares from the limits of symbols that had formerly trapped him, which is to say he will foreground the arbitrary assertions and their semiotic medium. Value once conceived as a base distinct from historical mediation—defining his aspirations according to a “sense of limits”—now stands as sign and thus medium for producing aspirations that, in Marx’s terms, go beyond the phrase, because now they provide a structure to think with, not in.

Embers that ignite by consuming what contains them provide a succinct metaphor for Wordsworth’s joy and cultural practice after stanza 8. Having reckoned his own role in transforming history into nature (medium into base), Wordsworth can reverse the process, causing containment to transmit imaginative (and political) possibil-

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ity. Also indicating a drastic revision is Wordsworth's use of the very word "thought," shifting to a recursive register in stanza 9. Back in stanza 3 it prompted the fall into "grief" (22), while in stanza 8 "thought" reclaimed the visionary—but from the grave. Now, in stanza 9, thought turns memory ("past years") into a potent present that "breeds / Perceptual benedictions." In word and deed, thought generates possibility from formerly profaned matter, just as "breeds" returns creativity to the body; with that turn, Wordsworth re-members materiality, the feminine and time, aspects he had dis-missed as distracting from true "glories" of recollection (83).

That this joy depends on a dialectical tension working right down into the structure of the poet's vocabulary is best registered in what the poet chooses to praise. Not visionary "Delight and liberty, the simple creed / Of Childhood," but

\[\ldots\] those obstruct questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realized.

(144-50, emphasis added)

These figurations emphatically resist reification and easy closure, modes that seal meaning off from time. Wordsworth celebrates instead unclosed activity by phrasing the key "things" as plural gerunds, a grammatical structure that reveals how these structurations harbor processes without end, "rolling evermore," thereby anticipat-ing the dialectical vision of representation and time to which these thoughts will carry us at the stanza's end.

Furthermore, every "thing" falls from the speaker's physical or mental grasp; loss means joy when it jars custom's freight. Such "fallings from us" awaken the mindful body to the ceaseless process just beyond and even within its protective seals. Wordsworth praises realizations that say what their epistemic grammars cannot, which occur when poetry calls for the verb-energy in gerunds to beat through (or "fret") a noun-status that presents verbs as static, "realized" entities.

Johnston's reading takes paradox to the limit by claiming that the loss "Wordsworth joys to remember. \ldots is the fulcrum which enables him to lift the freezing weight of custom off his soul and celebrate." Loss turns useful when it bears the customary structure of feeling. Thus, joy-in-loss articulates the conflict of interests that trapped
Wordsworth in stanza 8, and he sides squarely with questionings that cause verbal “vanishings” to manifest the friction between grammar and the real. From his position, “vanishings” do not signify, as McGann claims, immediacy lost, but rather loss of the nostalgic coherence that makes its limits feel “deep almost as life.”

iv

Looking back to the position constructed in stanza 8, we see that, by dialectical criteria, such a grave state would be a “static, rather positivistic affair” because its narration of the visionary child’s fall into imitation contains only positive binary terms without an attempt to reckon the constructing subject and his entanglement in “the work’s other side,” the history outside the representations that the semiotic structure necessarily represses.35 Wordsworth breaks through this binary by questionings that rekindle his relish for “worlds not realized” (148), for worlds not dreamed of in static conviction. Such streaks of glory sparked by the interrogation of his own representations do resemble the Derridean trace, though not so much through undecidibility as through the capacity of the trace-structure to enact, as Jameson phrases it, “presence and absence in the moment [of the sign] itself, the generation of time out of stillness before our very eyes.”36 Wordsworth celebrates this fecund friction between presence and absence in revisionary improvisations that re-figure former structures such that aesthetic shape paradoxically realizes loss. Rather than screen death, such figures make it palpable, adding both urgency and dignity to poetry conceived as temporal practice in the face of deep entropy.

Escape from a static binary by means of supplemental deferral alone provides only a momentary release from formalism insofar as Derrida’s privileging of the script can leave deconstruction groping “along the walls of its own intellectual prison.”37 Jameson’s analysis of the Derridean trace helps clarify the grounds for what I have argued are the use-value claims for form and meaning in the Ode. For the dialectical critique of formalism generates the movement of time in the sign and then harnesses that undecidibility to determinate social forces. In Marxism and Form Jameson points out how formal and seemingly disinterested systems pack an unexpectedly social and “offensive thrust” when viewed from the outside, granting the “ideological product . . . a functional and strategic value as a weapon [in a] local struggle.”38 This notion of a misrecognized “offensive” labor driving formal systems accords with Wordsworth’s insight, at

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the close of stanza 8, into the inertial freight of structure. There he realizes that the visionary “deep” structures—that which cannot be said—only seem haunted by an Eternal Mind, and do so because it is in the poet’s short-term interest to mystify his own strategic affirmations of the still, stable grounds nostalgia craves.

This discovery of the paradoxical way “deep” functions in stanza 8 marks both a structural and political breakthrough because the recognition of a single, coercive “deep” shaping both the imitative and visionary phases of the child grants verbal form to the mystified asymmetry that had produced the illusion of unitary subjectivity out of incoherent, aggressive fictions. The breakthrough occurs when the formal symmetry that “deep” discloses converts what cannot be said into a sign to be used to pursue aspirations outside received structures. This revisionary shift rekindles joy in two ways. First, it highlights the occluded friction that obtains between cultural structures and individual dispositions and, second, it recognizes how the poet’s misrecognition of that is fueled by the nostalgia for unmediated stillness, an impulse that sacrifices disposition to structure. With these insights, Wordsworth knows that his most cherished ideals harbor an offensive thrust, made stable by an inertial e-motion that his own interest in stability has labored to conserve.

In this figural dialectic, the “Thoughts of past years” (136) that help breed recovery can be read as strategic rather than nostalgic. So conceived, “Thought” leverages complication and energy as it pries open the seam between structure (the weight of one’s own mind) and the disposition to imagine possibility. That seam traces the dividing-line between legitimating discourse and individual interest, a threshold, Bourdieu says, between interpellation and the “awakening of political awareness.”

McGann reads “thought” as record of Wordsworth’s participation in “The Consciousness Industry” because “thought of our past years” seals the poet from pain by sacrificing immediacy for the secure remove of idealism. Thus, the “song of praise” becomes a paean to displacement, from immediacy’s gleam to the security of the poet’s consciousness. Predictably, Brooks’s New Critical view is nearly a mirror-image of McGann’s; the symmetry between the critics’ visions reveals a subject/object dualism it is Wordsworth’s task to overcome. Because Brooks views stanza 9 as an assertion of full organic recovery (paradox as breakthrough, not breakdown), those “obstinate questionings” must mean the shadowy recollections of the child’s original vision. While, for Brooks, the child is father to the man, for
McGann, the nostalgic man bronzes not just the baby shoes but the whole child, killing and preserving him in one self-serving, self-destructive gesture.

Wordsworth anticipates these symmetries by identifying their limits as he recollects and remakes his own consciousness at once. After reinvigorating “thought” at the start of the stanza, Wordsworth closes with a reconstructed version of how one can “read’st the eternal deep” in such a way that embraces both the child's appeal to sentimental structure and the self-awareness that must admit the radical chaos of temporal reality and practical agency.

Hence, in a season of calm weather,
Though inland far we be
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

(164-170)

This revisionary version of how to read the deep foregrounds the tensions between structure, time and agency needed to sustain the “obstinate questionings” Wordsworth claims should become the new “master light of all our seeing.” Although the allusions to the child’s prior visionary status (as “Seer blest” in stanza 8) and mythic tone suggest an allegory of transcendence, the framing of thought as liberating disfiguration attunes readers to regard vision as a temporal assertion by a willful agent. While time is emphasized by “season,” “moment,” and the form-dissolving motion of those “mighty waters” (which will roll, unlike the children, “evermore”), “see” and “hear” underscores a framing agent who must first actively “travel thither” imaginatively. A further move from the transcendent to the dialectical appears in the way Wordsworth revises his former images of eternity. The hazy “eternal deep” of stanza 8 shifts to “immortal sea,” then to the undulating rhythms of “mighty waters rolling evermore.”

Similarly, the image of the children at the shore recalls the “deep,” but changes the relationship between child and ocean. First, it does not absorb or “haunt” them, and second, the waters surge with tangible, temporal process—literal waves—rather than coercive mystery, as in the allegorized “eternal deep.” Finally, like the “Seer Blest,” our “Souls have sight,” but “we” remain distanced subjective agents. We don’t become children (the New Critical claim), rather we “see” them and “hear the waters,” a process that both heals the
senses in stanza 4 and recovers the incongruity between the “simple creed” and the ceaseless temporal process figured by those rolling waves.42 Such vision differs because the new “master light” dims from divine presence to “shadowy recollections” that de-realize perception. This seeing gives thanks for traces as semiotic vanishings—streaks of glory. Thus, the incongruity between waves and children reflects an incoherence integral to the sign itself that the poet can delight in and put to use, which we observe when Wordsworth sews up the stanza with a poetic image that foregrounds its revisionary seam. The shore divides poetic images (the children) and time (rolling waves), or as Jameson theorizes it, presence and absence, the mark of a “genuine” dialectic of signs and history that refuses nostalgia by generating from those waves “time out of stillness before our very eyes.”43 This revisionary image displays its motion—its inertial thrust and ephemerality—right in its structure, the key stage in Wordsworth’s recovery of agency, which does so by reorienting meaning away from mystified presence and toward deep structure conceived of as practice.

All of these recastings of the earlier image of the “best Philosopher” mark subtle but crucial revisions of the earlier relation of child to “deep.” Now the text foregrounds the semiotic assertions that the earlier “symbolic” figure blotted out in its nostalgia for presence. This unresolved dialectic between the structured and the temporal that ends the stanza resists any new mode of domination, even as he closes off the “recovery” stanza, because, rather than repossess, recovery springs from the delight in breaking verbal spells that formerly possessed him. Thus, the poet’s interest in the symbolic violence and agency of his representations drives him to foreground and delight in the semiotic assertions he had mistaken as final. When he re-uses them, the same forms stand out and thereby generate possibility—life—rather than shut it down; it seems the orientation toward form is a matter of life or death. Recalling the way that “thought” peels back the naturalized veneer with which the symbol and the habitus coat signs in order to disguise their arbitrary nature, we recognize the complexity of Wordsworth’s announcing, at the outset of the next stanza, that “We in thought will join your throng.” That “throng” (174) refers explicitly to “Birds” and “Lambs” (171, 172), but thought’s vigilant sensitivity to nature’s persistently textualized status prevents the poet’s earlier sentimental submission to narrative ends.

Given the disfiguring revision of children at play on the shore as a
new reference point, it seems that Wordsworth can participate in the
"Gladness of the May," but with a concomitant awareness of the
mighty "deep" to which things fall—to time, temporal agency, and
ultimately to death. Thus, where McGann reads "thought" in this
context as sheer ideological internalization, an eye toward practice
reads "thought" as Wordsworth's commitment to a dialectic that
inhabits structure to breed agency just where materialism or formal-
ism buries it.44 By using "thought" in stanza 9 to foreground the
conceptual violence and nostalgic vision clung to through stanza 8,
Wordsworth converts symbol to sign, base back into medium.
Wordsworth engages ideological materials to think with them. By
that premise, "thought" does not merge history and beauty in
nostalgic recollection, it turns Presence to medium—God to goad—
by experiencing it as an after-effect of hasty self-enclosure.

After the chastening revelation of stanza 8, Wordsworth's practice
expresses a double allegiance to both social (poetic) convention and
the chaotic processes of time and interest that undermine those
structures. That duality helps to explain how "soothing thoughts
[can] spring / Out of human suffering" (186-87). Suffering ensues as
time (and timely acts) breaks down forms of life—but, as Wordsworth
discovers, without change, however painful, narrations haunt their
makers. Thus, "soothing suffering" shares the paradox of "recollect-
ing forgetting" because each emphasizes that the loss, even the
active breaking of what's cherished, is necessary to rekindle life's
harsh glory. This reflexive double-bind breaks the poet's heart but
also breaks those "embers" in stanza 9 whose sparks rekindle the
poet's double allegiance to accustomed forms and to the temporal
fluidity that disfigures them.

Wordsworth's revisionary conclusion refuses closure and struc-
tural domination by engaging structures of feeling with temporal
interest, making the Ode a "timely utterance" (23) after all. Having
relinquished the "one delight" of symbolic immediacy and immor-
ality, Wordsworth accepts identity as a narrative that time will under-
cut yet one in which he must dwell since futures shall arise from
what contains him now. Thus the poet breaks his nostalgia for the
ahistorical "visionary gleam" to join the "habitual sway" of conven-
tion. Having sacrificed immediacy, the poet views those "Fountains,
Meadows, Hills, and Groves" as cultural texts, whether the capital-
zized forms refer to literary or literal locales. "Habitual" highlights
the structured sense of the habitus, yet also evokes the fitting sense
of a pattern without an absolute center as opposed to the essential-

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ism of natural law. "Sway" further decenters the phrase through its etymological friction between "swing" and "rule, dominion."45 If we take Wordsworth's lead and wedge critical thought between meanings, "habitual sway" characterizes the dialectic that animates convention late in the Ode.

In this way, the poem's signifying strategies set up dispositions to generate possibilities from within history rather than to seek the secure, centralized dominion of univocal reference. Because "sway" teases readers with one semantic option ("rule, dominion") that would shut down the ambivalence, while the oscillation of its contrary meaning ("swing") resists that univocal dominion, readers who sustain the tension between semantic options engage the politics of the poem's semiotic strategies. McGann writes that Wordsworth "imprisoned his true voice of feeling," and if we assume that by "sway" Wordsworth yields to rule, we too make a bastille of both the poem and our reading.46 Yet, if readers attend (even submit) to the poem's subtle lexical antinomies, "habitual sway" becomes too energetically open-ended to reproduce mere ideology. Through verbal structures that go beyond their phrase, Wordsworth shows how dialectic can occur within customary structure provided that readers resist their desire to master the text.

Conventional literary and natural forms sway between structures and their vanishings in the next line of the Ode when Wordsworth identifies with "the Brooks which down their channel fret" (195). "Fret," an auto-antonym like "sway," denotes "gnaw, irritate" yet also recalls its sense of "fretted," back in stanza 7, as "adorned" with the pathos of the mother's affection, an echo also of time compelling the body toward "palsied Age." Somehow a corrosion produces an intricate design—just the paradox of streams that simultaneously follow and modify their channels.

This natural paradox of the brook images the course of the poet's mind in the poem because his revisions "fret" the received narrative structures he has found himself defined by and in which he chooses to write. This perpetually producing, open-ended process looks through and, like a brook to its defining banks, undercuts present structures of feeling, even as it relies on them for the joys and fears that fuel it. So conceived, a brook that frets offers a concise image for the dialectic of structured narrations and obstinate questionings through time that resists the reproduction of symbolic violence, the error detected of the sentimental Romantic vision that precedes stanza 9. The poem's last line distillates Wordsworth's frictive com-
mitment to forms of feeling in time’s sway because a flower that “blows”—yielding to and resisting exterior force—recalls the “ha-
bital sway” that governs structure after stanza 8. The speaker recognizes that the seeming exclusivity of binaries (such as the joy of vision and the fear of imitation) are actually bound by a “deep” fantasy for an absolute center, just the displacement that, as McGann notes, Marx saw as a drug on human consciousness.47

But with his recognition of the radical fictionality of those deep structures—whether customary or visionary shapes—Wordsworth relinquishes the “one delight” (193) of an authoritative center, and what remains behind for him are practices, interests, and time, whose shape-shifting relationships keep him breeding possibilities from the heart’s binary creed of “joys and fears” (204). Pertinent is Helen Vendler’s notice of the flower that recalls the “Pansy at [the poet’s] feet” in stanza 6. She argues that the visual pun on pansy/pensees shows how flowers speak thoughts and thus evoke the poem’s crisis, the “deep fear . . . that thought has replaced feeling.” This insight into the recursivity of “flower” remains productive provided we refuse the formalist cure that assumes, with Vendler, that Wordsworth restores his psychic balance by submitting fears to the “classic proportions of elegy.”48 If we resist the nostalgic solution that Wordsworth retreats into the New Critic’s bastille of formal stasis, “flower” in this context recalls the structure of earlier sentimental fears in order to refigure the limits of its customary emotional logic.

Because “thought” signals Wordsworth’s revisionary commitment, its place in the final line matters: “Thoughts . . . do often lie too deep for tears” (emphasis added). Tears of joy or despair would indicate a retreat into binary feelings shaped by deep narrative structures that coerce if not confronted. Specifically, we recall the way “deep” functions in stanza 8 either to occlude or expose (depending on whether read sentimentally or critically) a shared mode of domination that, once recognized, makes the naturalized though schizo-
phrenic narrative of the child suddenly intelligible. In this sense, practice theory bolsters new historicist detections of those displacements in the Ode that drive experience too deep for articulation or even feeling.49 But once granted that Wordsworth wedges “thought” into that depth, then what he places there is a dialectical, interested principle that releases him from the spontaneous self-narrations that, if misread, can still, at any instant, galvanize “the bastille of his consciousness.”50 So conceived by tracing its streams of contradictory resonances that Wordsworth recovers by improvising on the struc-

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tures handed him, “thought” in the *Ode* does not displace or refuse articulation, it uses language, narration, and feelings to generate an astute, critical activity whose affect is joy because, through it, the poet lifts “the world of his own mind.”

V

It is, in short, one thing to use the bastille to image the threat of nostalgic, ideological consciousness that Wordsworth confronts, but quite another to claim, as McGann does, that the *Ode* is the record of and mechanism by which the poet locked himself up in a “solitude and . . . called it a peace.” McGann’s reading, like an inverse-image of New Criticism, galvanizes the poem by the critic’s own premises, even when they claim referential particularity. Vendler regards that solitude as psychologically salvific, while McGann finds it politically abhorrent and expedient, but both readings lock up the poem in a formalism that need not be. My further objection to materialist readings of the poem is that they prematurely foreclose argument by denying the poet praxis—thus denying poets the capacity to leverage discursive materials against their own limits.

If Wordsworth’s dialectical turn at stanza 9 grants him a practical grasp of his own ideological materials, then McGann’s argument would seem to confuse Wordsworth’s medium with his base. As a result, Wordsworth’s putative politics of nostalgia becomes a spectral image of, as Alan Liu has put it, an “ideology against ideology” that restricts consciousness to binary extremes of reflection or containment. Liu argues that McGann’s emphasis on the loss of particulars actually entangles him in Romantic ideology because to claim, as McGann does, that so much depends on the particular referent returns us to Blake’s microcosmic grain of sand and the Romantic symbol. When McGann assumes that “thought” displaces consciousness toward a closed idealist system, his reading performs its own retreat from the complex signifying strategies of an aesthetic texture.

McGann’s division between the material referent and an idealist system mirrors the dualism of vision and imitation that Wordsworth struggles with in the *Ode*. Thus, McGann reiterates the slide of form into content that Wordsworth suffers yet breaks through. This unexpected formalism in McGann’s anti-formalist reading shows how critics influenced by historical materialism have at times overlooked the productive disfiguration and internal distanciation generated by aesthetic media. As Susan Wolfson argues, “Literary texts often

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signal their own capacity for mounting the kind of critique readers such as McGann assume can be made only from a point outside the poem’s own procedures.” Furthermore, by foregrounding the disfiguring capacities of language, Wordsworth provokes political agency in his readers by constructing what Catherine Belsey calls the “interrogative text.” Granting the reader a stake in interpretation, such works disrupt the linear transmission of the writer’s authority and interrogate rather than interpellate the reader’s premises, an issue Wordsworth addresses directly by suspending antonymical and political possibilities in his use of the word “sway.”

The way Wordsworth’s text negotiates (or, in a Blakean key, “strives with”) a treacherous binary addresses the current critical impasse between formalist and political readings, and it opens up a productive middle ground frequently fenced in under the banner of de-mystification. In attending to the impositions that adhere even in soothing thoughts that spring from human suffering, Wordsworth discovers what we would call the use-value of form. Besides resisting the ideology of the symbol, Wordsworth’s practical and poetic emphasis on use-value demystifies the structural origins of meaning by recognizing them as historical and by reckoning his own complicity in reproducing their strategic thrust as interested social practice. Reckoning the historical and coercive nature of structures he had previously cherished as transcendent forms, the poet gains the leverage he needs to put to use forms of thought that otherwise will use him.

It is important to recognize that this strategy works right down to the level of the sign, for there is where, materialists argue, displaced nostalgia and ideology start. When, for example, McGann equates “thought” in the Ode to ideological materials, he associates its vantage point to what Marx called German ideology because it is “conceptualized within a closed idealistic system” that endorses the status quo by “conceal[ing] the truth about social relations.” Central to that concealment, as McGann explains, is Marx’s point that “because all action is mediated by thought, it appears to him to be ultimately based upon thought.” For McGann, Romantic poetry then vitalizes that inversion through an “ideology of poetic vision [that provides] . . . the Idea [or] . . . the power to apprehend fundamental truth which custom and habit kept hidden from the ordinary person’s consciousness.” But as de Man has argued with regard to Hegel’s aesthetics (for Marxists the very model of Romantic recollection and interiorization), the Romantic symbol and its
attendant "dialectics of internalization" must first erase the arbitrary will and appropriation performed by signs put to use by an assertive subject. Because "the relationship between sign and symbol . . . is one of mutual obliteration," the symbolic turns ideological when it shelters the mind from its own self-erasure, which would occur if the organic self recognized that it, like the "Idea," is built up from signs. Romantic recollection spawns reactive ideology when it weds thought and perception in the aesthetic, a seductive confusion of mutually exclusive orders of cognition.

In the Ode, Wordsworth addresses the tempting confusion of sign with symbol in order to refuse it. The dialectical bootstrapping of stanza 9 foregrounds the semiotic nature of both the structures that previously contained Wordsworth as speaker and those that he reforms to express his recovery. Of a piece with this revision away from the transcendent symbolic mode is his move to highlight what de Man terms the "citational" or framing "I" of semiotic predications, which forces the reader to address the freedom and violence of the poetic act. Such technical stakes turn political because they indicate Wordsworth's break with nostalgic slips from sign to symbol and medium to base. On these grounds we can controvert McGann's judgment that Wordsworth mechanically reproduces the "Consciousness Industry" and instead regard the Romantic poet as a knowing, practicing cultural agent. Granted that agency, Wordsworth can resist the temptation to confuse sign with symbol and thereby convert the secret of ideology into the subject of his poetry.

If such temptation is Wordsworth's subject, then nostalgia, shaped as it is by retroactive enchantment, is aptly structured for interrogation. The chastening discovery of the semiotic use-value that underwrites symbolic capital produces a paradoxical principle I have likened to inertia, which leads me to conclude that if the same force that conserves e-motion can intensify it, then nostalgia's freight can motivate revisionary joy. Theorizing the analogy, we might say that here Wordsworth strikes upon what Giddens calls the "duality of structure," the insight that as structure constrains by means of articulating legitimacy, it simultaneously capacitates. Action results because structuration provides subjects with a role in instantiating culture through rules that become resources used to gratify aspirations that exceed received structures. The gist of this duality lets structure act as both medium and outcome: praxis involves actions that in turn provide structural conditions for future improvizations. As Giddens puts it, "every process of action is a production of
something new, a fresh act; but at the same time all action exists in continuity with the past, which supplies the means of its initiation."63 To affirm reproduction as transformational irrevocably entangles the subject’s “deep”-est values in historical practices forever in process, and so accords with Wordsworth’s conviction to defer hypostatized glory and instead find “strength in what remains behind” (183) in received discursive structures.

Turning scrutiny from the poet to the reader, one advantage of a theory of practice that grants the poet agency even when working with ideological materials is that it allows the critic to do more than stand at a safe distance from the poem and label the poet’s consciousness a containing bastille. Instead, that perception about the mind’s penchant for sealing itself in specularity leads to what is finally productive in the Ode. At the break between stanzas 8 and 9 Wordsworth makes that insight into mind as constraining structure whose formulation is differential, not substantial. But crucially, Wordsworth recognizes the coercion latent in the visionary only by actively instantiating its structure. Representation can, in one phrase, invoke that haunting “Presence” and “put it by.”

Providing the break with much ideological critique is Giddens’s claim that “practical consciousness” invigorates knowledge with know how, thereby gaining purchase on ideological materials even in acts of replication.64 This Marxian confidence suggests that the way through history is by means of the instruments it has left us. Inhabiting the contradictions latent in “what remains behind,” the poet-agent gives voice to what former ideologies have silenced. In this way Wordsworth turns his interest from definitive structure to structurations of self-excess, like those rekindling embers and images of revision. While, to contestatory critics, the aesthetic enclosure in which that revision occurs may appear as the threatening bastille of consciousness from which there is no release for critic or poet, we have seen Wordsworth engage in dialectical turns that dare to invoke that bastille with the confidence that, when engaged, its mystified, deep structure reveals its origins in a coercive fusion of interest and structure. That disclosure enables the poet to progress toward subject positions that foreground yet refuse the allure of closure in his own expressions. Such a position commits the poet to conceive of structure as perpetual self-excess since the dialectical position foregrounds agency and so breeds obstinate questionings that break customary structures—like those embers—to release aspirations in and through the duality of their formerly containing analytical form.

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Furthermore, by linking the “deep” to practice, thereby shifting his search from meaning to use, Wordsworth avoids the extreme forms of the decentered subject that have dominated critical discourse since structuralism. As Giddens argues, if “what cannot be said” is a matter of practice (or, to follow Wittgenstein, a matter of “what has to be done”), then subjects gain a non-propositional, tacit knowledge that triggers rule-governed creativity from structural rules. Central to this recovery of agency is Giddens’s emphasis that “the meanings of linguistic items are intrinsically involved with the practices that comprise forms of life.” With the later Wittgenstein, Giddens advocates meaning as social practice, as against the structuralist tendency to identify “that which cannot be said . . . with the unconscious or, in Derrida, with writing,” for a “derogation of the lay actor” ensues when the subject is reduced to a mere “epiphenomena of hidden structures.”

Having demystified those “hidden structures” by locating them in interested practices, Giddens restores agency to the subject through the duality of structure, a position that helps account for the integrity of the philosophic mind that “looks through death” (181). Readers of the **Ode** who criticize Wordsworth as self-absorbed read this phrase as proof of his retreat away from suffering and into consolation, but duality of structure brooks no such dodge. “Death,” with its emphatic declaration that time adheres in and dissolves any thing, forces the poet to confront the pathos that human structures do not intimate immortality. But because, earlier in the poem, the breaking of form is what *produces* questioning and life, death here refuses sentimentality, as again loss that breaks the heart rekindles a dialectic of joining and questioning, presence and absence, that converts structural constraint into the resource of agency. This form of agency, in Terry Eagleton’s phrasing, “found[s] itself in the potentialities of the present in order to bridge us beyond it”—a sharp contrast to the paradigm of displacement Wordsworth has been saddled with by recent accounts.

The eruption of practical consciousness into the **Ode** in stanza 9 forces us to reconsider the use-value of form—and further commits us to re-examine the critical antagonisms that have been visited on the poem. I am drawn to the practice theories of Bourdieu and Giddens because they clarify the rift between form and history that is the threshold of political awareness in the habitus of our profession. To the self-revolving wheel of whether aesthetic automatically coopts us, as political critics contend, or whether ideological critique

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can only recognize ideology and not the complex signifying practices that allow an aesthetic critique of ideology, it seems that, read together, Wordsworth's *Intimations Ode* and practice theory suggest that we have not realized full critical agency—whether aesthetic or political—unless we pass in and through the text.

This poem and method dare us to internalize and be touched by power structures, challenging our self-protective and, so we learn from the *Ode*, self-incarcerating premises about the deep origins of structure and disposition. We learn that the political, contestatory stance carries with it its own formalism while the enchanted romance with aesthetic obscures its own violent interest. This way, the *Ode*, which lives by the heart's tenderness even as thoughts bred by those structures exceed them, rethinks the form and content opposition in order to affirm possibility in and through apparently alienating structures, a task that requires entering them, and letting them enter us, until they feel "deep almost as life." Confident that such shocks recall us to time and the body of absent possibility that formal systems occlude and provide, Wordsworth dares readers to go right through what appears most alienating in order to realize its hidden thrust and so seize its use-value. A risky move, but, as the poem suggests, to avoid this critical risk is to freight what buries us.67

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NOTES


4 As Giddens notes, a Marxist emphasis on material reproduction can lead to *praxis* as mechanical labor in contrast to *praxis* as "a fundamental trait of human social existence," *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983), 54.

6 Bourdieu (note 5), 78.
7 Bourdieu, 164.
12 McGann (note 1), 91.
13 McGann, 89.
14 As Bourdieu (note 5) remarks, “Once a system of mechanisms . . . ensures the reproduction of the established order by its own motion, the dominant class have only to let the system they dominate take its own course in order to exercise their domination” (190).
15 Johnston (note 3), 62.
16 In the Fenwick note, Wordsworth states that “a pre-existent state has entered into the popular creeds of many nations” (428), suggesting a succession of versions prior or in addition to Plato's, which implicitly multiplies the voices beyond just two.
18 Bourdieu (note 5), 124.
19 Wordsworth’s account of incarceration by custom will expand to include discursive conventions. According to Fredric Jameson, such incarceration recurs when agents fail to historicize structural oppositions; see The Prison-House of Language (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), 119-20.
21 That the two fathers may figure effects of self-incarceration is developed by Jameson’s analysis of the slip from form into content that occurs when the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of the symbolic act are deemed incommensurate, a characteristic of structuralism since Saussure (Prison-House, 206-16). Applied to the Ode, the mirrored fathers image how visionary transcendence of arbitrary custom merely displaces reference between equally arbitrary sign systems.
22 As Bourdieu (note 5) remarks, “in order to be socially recognized [domination] must get itself misrecognized . . . . lest [its relations] destroy themselves . . . they must be euphemized” (191).
23 Mauss in Bourdieu, 195.
24 Bourdieu, 79.
25 Saussure performs his own denigration by arguing that “execution is never carried out by the collectivity. Execution is always individual, and the individual is

26 And yet, because arbitrary also signifies it as “merely” historical, the poet’s imagery displays the principle of euphemized conceptual violence that obscures the agent/structure dialectic that sparks possibility and marks healthy symbolic orders (see Bourdieu [note 5], 170-71).


28 With this move Wordsworth claims agency through practice and avoids reducing the subject to “the epiphenomena of hidden structures” that, Giddens argues, makes “de-centering . . . as noxious as the philosophies . . . attacked if it merely substitutes a structural determination for subjectivity” (Central Problems of Social Theory [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979], 40).

29 Cynthia Chase, Decomposing Figures (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), 6, 94; emphasis added.

30 Of course, if the poet’s recovery relies on the disfiguring quality of language, he also risks what de Man diagnosed as the death of agency: “meaningful movements or events are generated by random and superficial properties of the signifier rather than by constraints of meaning” (“Shelley Disfigured,” The Rhetoric of Romanticism [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 114). We might map structuration to disfiguration via Giddens’s remark that “acts have unintended consequences . . . [meanings that] systematically feed back . . . [and alter] the unacknowledged conditions [ie, figural vehicles] of further acts” (Constitution [note 8], 8). Giddens provides an alternative, but so do Romantic figures, according to William Keach, who argues that de Man obscures how “valuable constraints of meaning may be generated by, or discovered within, random verbal resources” (Shelley’s Style [London: Methuen Press, 1984], 185).

31 For Giddens, “homeostatic causal loop” contrasts ideological reproduction with the “reflexive self-regulation in system reproduction” of structuration (Constitution [note 8], 28).

32 Giddon, Central Problems (note 28), 39-40 (emphasis added). Giddens rejects the notion of actors “mere ‘bearers of a mode of production.’ . . . Institutions do not just work ‘behind the backs’ of the social actors who produce and reproduce them” (71).

33 This enabling disorientation registers “dialectical shock,” Jameson’s term for the somatic and conceptual shudder that forces the agent to conceive of self-consciousness as “thought to the second power . . . as though in the midst of its immediate perplexities the mind had attempted, by willpower, by fiat, to lift itself mightily up by its own bootstraps” (Marxism and Form [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981], 308). Importantly, this bootstrapping agency distinguishes Wordsworth’s sense of use-value from Edmund Burke’s notion of customary “usage” (see Reflections on the Revolution in France) that regards cultural inertia as a steady state of change, which individuals inherit and engender as an awesome duty, like a haunting presence.

34 Johnston (note 3), 62.

35 Jameson, Prison-House (note 19), 120.

36 Jameson, Prison-House, 188; emphasis added.

37 Jameson, Prison-House, 186.

38 Jameson, Marxism and Form (note 33), 381.

Fred Hoerner
30 Bourdieu (note 5), 170.

40 To be fair, it is of course Brooks’s New Criticism that motivates McGann’s response and thus structures the symmetry of the antagonism.

41 By foregrounding the subject, Wordsworth highlights what de Man calls the “citational” predication involved in sign-making, acts of a “thinking subject” who must “be kept sharply distinguished from the perceiving subject” indicative of the symbolic mode. In highlighting that “I” and thus the assertive imaginative act that transports us to the shore, Wordsworth confronts how, as de Man argues, semiotic force “appropriates the world and literally ‘subjects’ it to its own powers” (“Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s Aesthetics,” Critical Inquiry 8 [1982]: 767).

42 Brooks (note 1) remarks that “adult” philosophers read the immortal sea “by sporting on the shore” and by “playing with their little spades,” acts which “corroborate [I. A.] Richards’ interpretation” that the child’s silence “can become the most important in the poem” (143). G. Wilson Knight claims that the poem’s climax occurs when the child “read’st the eternal deep” (“The Wordsworthian Profundity,” The Starlight Dome [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959], 42-43).

43 “What makes up a genuine dialectical opposition is that one of the terms is negative, one is an absence” (Jameson, Prison-House [note 19], 119-120). For “time out of stillness,” see (188).

44 McGann (note 1), 88-89.


46 McGann (note 1), 91.

47 McGann, 91.

48 Vendler (note 2), 80.

49 Levinson (note 2) argues that “a thought that lies too deep for tears is also too deep for words”; thus “such thought is the stuff of ideology” (98). But revising the customary Romantic priority of feeling before words causes that depth to articulate rather than bury its fugitive paradox.

50 McGann (note 1), 91.

51 McGann, 91.


53 Liu, review (note 52), 179.


55 Belsey, Critical Practice (London: Methuen, 1980), 91. Yet, in her next chapter, Belsey’s reading of stanza 9 rehearses premises about Wordsworth that deny resources of agency available to the poet that are more complex than the binaries that frame this reading (121-23).

56 In Jerusalem (11. 5) Los is “Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems” (The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David Erdman [1965; rpt., New York: Doubleday, 1988], 154). When delivery denotes both rescue from and birth within, systems “breed.”

57 McGann (note 1), 90, 8.

58 Marx quoted in McGann, 9.

59 McGann, 114.

Nostalgia’s Freight
60 De Man (note 41), “Sign and Symbol,” 771.

61 In The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), Geoffrey Galt Harpham analyzes a long tradition in Christianity concerned with this “temptation” in language and how “the ascesis of discourse” may turn seduction to resistance.

62 De Man (note 41), 767.

63 Giddens, Central Problems (note 28), 70.

64 See Giddens’ analysis of “practical consciousness” in Constitution (note 8), 41-45.

65 Giddens, Central Problems (note 28), 34, 35, 40.

66 Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 229. Levinson (note 2), for example, argues that Wordsworth’s nostalgia “set[s] a regressive ideal for mankind. Politically, the Ode advances a radical conservatism; ethically, a doctrine of consolation and compromise; intellectually, a curriculum grounded in memory” (95).

67 I dedicate this essay to the scholarship and friendship of Theresa M. Kelley.