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Wordsworth, Emerson, And The "Art Of Loss"

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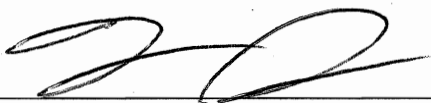
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Wordsworth, Emerson, and the "Art of Loss"

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Nicholas M. Shaner

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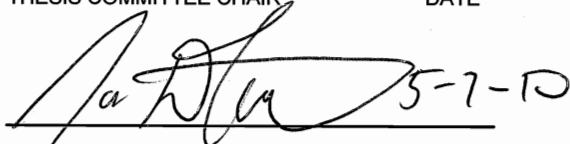
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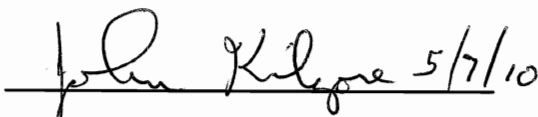
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Wordsworth, Emerson, and the "Art of Loss"

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Abstract

The discussion in Robert Weisbuch's *Atlantic Double-Cross* about the ways in which American writers wrote both with and against their British contemporaries is analogous to the way Ralph Waldo Emerson is influenced by and connected to William Wordsworth through the "art of loss". Wordsworth is the poet of human suffering, and through many of his poems about dealing with loss and mortality, especially, *The Excursion*, and the "Intimations Ode," he has a profound impact on Emerson. Emerson's ability to deal with the loss of his young son Waldo is difficult, and he attempts to look to Wordsworth's poems on death and mourning as a means of dealing with loss, grief, and dejection, and as a source of poetic inspiration and personal healing. The contentious quality of his feelings toward Wordsworth are apparent in his difficulty with following Wordsworth's lead while staying true to himself and utilizing his own version of self-reliance.

I will argue that Wordsworth provides a template for Emerson with his "double consciousness" of reconciling a private grief with public poetry writing. Emerson follows Wordsworth's example in *The Excursion* by facilitating a philosophical discussion through poetry where differing voices help to initiate a dialogue and to ask questions (and not necessarily answer them) concerning mortality, dejection, and healing. Through an intertextual study of the connection between Ralph Waldo Emerson and the poetry of William Wordsworth, and what Patrick J. Keane calls the "art of loss," I will attempt to engage in a transatlantic dialogue between British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism.

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Part One- Introduction: The "Art of Loss"

"It is the comfort I have in taking up those new poems of Wordsworth, that I am sure here to find thoughts in harmony with the great frame of Nature, the placid aspect of the Universe. I may find dullness and flatness, but I shall not find meanness and error" (Journal III 333). In 1835, when the 32-year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson begins to read a collection of Wordsworth's poetry, he comments on his mixed feelings toward Wordsworth, speaking of "dullness and flatness" but not "meanness and error." He remarks that he expects to find "thoughts in harmony with the great frame of Nature." This comment from Emerson's personal journal is indicative of his ambivalence toward Wordsworth throughout his life.

In relation to this ambivalence by Emerson, my argument is that the discussion in Robert Weisbuch's *Atlantic Double-Cross*, about the ways in which American writers wrote both with and against their British contemporaries, is analogous to the way Emerson is influenced by and connected to Wordsworth through the "art of loss". Wordsworth is the poet of human suffering, and through many of his poems about dealing with loss and mortality, especially, *The Excursion*, and the "Intimations Ode," he has a profound impact on Emerson. Emerson's ability to deal with the loss of his young son Waldo is difficult, and he attempts to look to Wordsworth's poems on death and mourning as a means of dealing with loss, grief, and dejection, and as a source of poetic inspiration and personal healing. The contentious quality of his feelings toward

Wordsworth are apparent in his difficulty with following Wordsworth's lead while staying true to himself and utilizing his own version of self-reliance.

I will also argue that Wordsworth provides a template for Emerson with the "double consciousness" of reconciling a private grief with public poetry writing. Emerson follows Wordsworth's example in *The Excursion* by facilitating a philosophical discussion through poetry, where differing voices help to initiate a dialogue and to ask questions (and not necessarily answer them) concerning mortality, dejection, and healing. Through an intertextual study of the connection between Ralph Waldo Emerson and the poetry of William Wordsworth, and what Patrick J. Keane calls the "art of loss," I will attempt to engage in a transatlantic dialogue between British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. In investigating Emerson's optimism despite the loss he suffers, I want to draw comparison or contrast to Wordsworth's own ability to cope with grief and mourning as in his famous elegiac phrase, "not without hope we suffer and we mourn."

In "Fate" (1860), Emerson argues for "double consciousness" as a solution to the mysteries of the human condition; as a method for simultaneously dealing with the private issues of humanity and the public sphere of the poet: "One key, one solution to the mysteries of human condition, one solution to the old knots of fate, freedom, and foreknowledge, exists, the propounding, namely, of the double consciousness. A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and public nature." (792) In trying to move on after Waldo's death, Emerson is struggling with a difficulty that faces many writers, reconciling his private grief and mourning with his public writing that engages his readers in their own battles with loss. This is what Emerson is referring to, generally, in "Fate," with his image of a man riding the two horses of his public and private nature.

This is an area where Emerson turned to Wordsworth and *The Excursion*, as an example of utilizing poetry as an ideal medium for discussing a matter of double consciousness, personal loss. *The Excursion* is predominantly a philosophic debate between four characters (though mainly the Solitary and the Wanderer), asking the age-old question of how to find hope and meaning in a world that appears harsh and indifferent to human sensibilities. Although difficult philosophical themes such as these are normally discussed through prose, Wordsworth utilizes poetry to examine and discuss the difficulties of life, especially the death of loved ones and the ability to mourn and, from that mourning, find healing or, in Wordsworth's terminology, find "recompense." There are not, necessarily, clear answers for Emerson in Wordsworth's verse, but the discussion of loss, grief, and healing is enough to inspire Emerson's own poetry on the "art of loss." Emerson uses this template in his poem, "Threnody," attempting to exorcise private grief through the writing and publishing of a poem to the public. In this regard, Emerson is able to allow himself to be influenced by Wordsworth, and through *The Excursion* and other poems on suffering and loss, we are given a unique lens for understanding Emerson's struggle and reading his verse.

Wordsworth's most original and influential verse had been written before 1820, while Emerson's earliest significant address was delivered in 1837 and his earliest significant essay was published in 1836 (Moore 179). During the years following his early efforts, Emerson's attitude towards Wordsworth wavered consistently, but also grew gradually more enthusiastic and complimentary. He had originally found Wordsworth to be interesting but blundering, admirable in intention but incapable, after his original meeting at Wordsworth's home. In many of Emerson's essays and addresses

there are scattered references to Wordsworth, including the volume containing *English Traits*. Emerson ends his discussion of his visit with Wordsworth in Chapter One of this work by commenting, "Off his own beat, his [Wordsworth's] opinions were of no value. It is not very rare to find persons loving sympathy and ease, who expiate their departure from the common in one direction, by their conformity in every other." (24) Obviously, Emerson did not hold Wordsworth in very high regard after their first visit, while critiquing his narrow mind and conformity. While Emerson's opinion of Wordsworth the poet was not always a positive one, he makes reference to Wordsworth in all but one of twelve volumes of the most complete edition of his works.

Emerson talks more about Wordsworth throughout his journals than all but three other writers, and these three, Carlyle, Alcott, and Thoreau, were his close friends. Through his journals, Emerson's opinion of Wordsworth can be traced from the first mention in 1826, when Emerson was twenty-three, to the last mention in 1868, when Emerson was sixty-five and Wordsworth long dead. Emerson's first observations about Wordsworth, in 1826, reflect common contemporary opinions for a youthful critic of Wordsworth at that time. In one of his first entries, for instance, he observes, "That the boisterous childhood, careless of criticism and poetry, the association of vulgar and unclean companions, were necessary to balance the towering spirit of Shakespeare, and that Mr. Wordsworth has failed of pleasing by being too much a poet." (*Journal II* 106) Emerson has decided that Wordsworth lacks the experience to be considered one of the greatest, like Shakespeare. But the fact that the young Emerson is comparing Wordsworth to the immortal Shakespeare is significant. Two years later, Emerson copies from five Wordsworth poems as a series of favorite quotations from poetry (*Journal II*

230). Emerson goes on to compare a passage from the poem "Pelican Island," by Montgomery, with Wordsworth's *Excursion*. Coincidentally, he calls Wordsworth "metaphysical and evanescent" and relates, "It [Pelican Island] is a poem worth ten *Excursions*." (*Journal* II 235) His reflections on Wordsworth the poet, after this point, would gradually take a more positive position.

Four years later, in 1831, Emerson writes of Wordsworth with a noticeably different tone: "He has writ lines that are like outward nature, so fresh, so simple, so durable; but whether all of half his texture is as firm I doubt, though last evening I read with high delight his Sonnets of Liberty." (*Journal* II 402) Later that same year, Emerson commends Wordsworth's poetry, saying, "His noble distinction is that he seeks the truth and shuns with brave self-denial every image and word that is from the purpose. But he fails of executing this purpose fifty times for the sorry purpose of making a rhyme in which he has no skill." (*Journal* II 429) In 1834, Emerson compares Wordsworth to another influential poet, Milton: "Milton was too learned, though I hate to say it, Wordsworth was the more original poet than he." (*Journal* III 328) Then, in 1835, just before Emerson started on his famous essay, *Nature*, he chastises Wordsworth, noting that "Wordsworth writes the verses of a great original bard, be he writes ill, weakly, concerning his poetry, talks ill of it, and even writes other poetry that is very poor." (*Journal* III 333) Emerson's ambivalence towards Wordsworth's verse is still rampant, yet in comparing Wordsworth to Milton and explaining his "noble distinction" and writing of a "great original bard", he is clearly captivated by Wordsworth.

After writing and publishing *Nature*, Emerson returns to one of his favorite subjects in his *Journal*, writing: "It is strange, how simple a thing it is to be a man; so

simple that almost all fail by overdoing. There is nothing vulgar in Wordsworth's idea of man." (*Journal IV* 55) Emerson clearly has a new respect for Wordsworth's ability to understand the human condition in his poetry. After this point, Emerson's references to Wordsworth, in his journal, become less frequent, however, they also turn yet more positive, overall. In 1841, he asserts, "Wordsworth has done as much as any living man to restore sanity to cultivated society." (*Journal V* 393) After his second visit to Wordsworth, in 1848, Emerson relates, "but let us say of him that, alone in his time, he treated the human mind well, and with an absolute trust." (*English Traits* 298) Emerson also praises the "Ode on Immortality" as the "high water mark in this age." (298) Emerson stresses that although many misunderstand Wordsworth, his poetry has a unique understanding of the human mind, something that Emerson valued greatly.

Emerson mentions Wordsworth, in his *Journal*, one final time in 1868. Emerson comments, "Wordsworth is manly, the manliest poet of his age. His poems record the thoughts and emotions which have occupied his mind, and which he reports because of their reality. He has great skill in rendering them into simple and sometimes happiest poetic speech." (*Journal X* 68) In certain ways, the aged Emerson probably felt himself closer to Wordsworth than to any other writer. He has not forgotten what he originally disliked about Wordsworth, his ignorance on certain topics and his conservative stance on political and social issues. However, over time, Emerson has found the essential Wordsworth: the courageous, independent friend of nature, and has decided to follow his example in certain facets of his own life and poetry.

The question of influence, specifically Wordsworth's influence on Emerson, has been a longstanding question addressed for nearly a century by numerous critics

including: John Brooks Moore, Stephen Wilcher, Perry Miller, Robert Weisbuch, Joel Pace, Richard Gravil, and Patrick Keane. Moore's essay, "Emerson on Wordsworth" (1926), attempts to disavow literary indebtedness by Emerson to Wordsworth, through how each writer deals with Nature in their poetry and essays. Moore concedes that Emerson quoted from five of Wordsworth's poems in his personal journal, but he feels that Emerson has achieved his vision from the "American Scholar", that his "day of dependence and long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands draws to a close." (53) Perry Miller's "Thoreau in the Context of International Romanticism" (1961), marks a shift regarding "America's initial hostility to Wordsworth and then of his gradual acceptance." (149) Additionally, Miller discusses how Emerson was initially repelled by Wordsworth until later, after 1838, when Emerson underwent a conversion and began to recognize Wordsworth's "great and steadily growing dominion" and, therefore, his influence on Emerson's writing (149). In *Atlantic Double-Cross* (1986), Weisbuch explores how Emerson's entry encourages an antagonistic model of Anglo-American literary relations." (12) Weisbuch also points out that from Emerson's first visit to Wordsworth in 1833, to his last, in 1848, there is a noticeable shift in his opinion of the poet. In 1833, the elder bard left an impression "of a narrow and very English mind," according to Emerson. Yet, after his 1848 visit, Emerson remarks, "the exceptional fact of the period is the genius of Wordsworth." (Essays and Lectures 906) These entries, more than 15 years apart, do not indicate contradiction as much as Emerson's steady ambivalence towards Wordsworth. Gravil's "Romantic Dialogues" (2000) offers a defense of Emerson's work on the issue of literary indebtedness, asserting a reciprocal

transatlantic relationship where British Romanticism is not the same once the light of its influence has been refracted by its American counterparts, including Emerson.

In his preface to *Atlantic Double-Cross*, Weisbuch explains his reasoning for the transatlantic study of 19th- century literature by emphasizing that there is too much to do and too little has been done in the area of Anglo-American comparative study, and so he has chosen a few themes and two authors for each theme and will organize his book accordingly. According to Weisbuch, there are thousands of articles on pairs of writers, studies on the travel books by English and American authors, biographical investigations of transatlantic meetings, and numerous accounts of the rise of American literary nationalism (20). Yet, when Weisbuch's book was published, and even today, this is a relatively new area of study with countless angles, points of emphasis, and directions to explore. *Atlantic Double-Cross* was intended to investigate specific texts intensively, to characterize Anglo-American influence. In my own research, I wish to borrow the template that Weisbuch utilized to investigate a specific topic through the writings of an English and an American author.

In Amanda Claybaugh's study on the legacy of Robert Weisbuch's influential *Atlantic Double-Cross* (1986), she argues that Weisbuch "focused on a number of canonical U.S. authors and showed how they wrote both with and against their British predecessors and peers." (1) Though Weisbuch nor Claybaugh looked specifically at the influence of Wordsworth on Emerson, the dynamic of writing "both with and against" is certainly true in their case as well. Emerson, at separate times, held Wordsworth in high esteem and then detailed the shortcomings of his poetry and personal philosophy. Through two personal visits, multiple journal entries, and personal experiences with

Wordsworth's poetry, Emerson carried a conflicted opinion of Wordsworth and his poetry that gradually became more positive.

Claybaugh also utilizes a key phrase from historian David Armitage, concerning the recent trend toward studying authors from both sides of the Atlantic as a specific "trans-atlantic" field, stating that "we are all Atlanticists now." (11) Claybaugh challenges the distinction of studying British and U.S. literature separately. She feels that it moves the impetus from focusing on the individual authors, and instead, making national arguments and trends the emphasis. Like Claybaugh, I want to utilize transatlanticism for bringing pertinent national literature information into the discussion, without focusing on the transatlantic facet of this question of influence. In investigating Wordsworth and Emerson, and the "art of loss" for each, this analysis is not only a transatlantic exploration. The fact that the authors are from two different countries is not the central focus, as national considerations are only a small facet of this study.

Another work that is central to my study of transatlantic romanticism is Patrick J. Keane's *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason* (2005). Focusing on Emerson and Wordsworth, as well as other 19th- century authors and thinkers Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Margret Fuller, John Stuart Mill, and Immanuel Kant, among others, Keane explores the "casual, but almost always illuminating allusions, either overt or covert, to his predecessors" of Ralph Waldo Emerson through an intertextual, comparative study (2). Keane's study examines the Wordsworth-Emerson connection through Emerson's use of Wordsworth's line "The Transatlantic Light of All Our Day," from Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." Keane argues that light becomes the master trope in Wordsworth's text pertaining to the influence of Wordsworthian light on Emerson.

Keane explains multiple connections between Emerson and Wordsworth/Coleridge through various topics and lenses. He engages with Emerson's part in the transatlantic dialogue between British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. My study attempts to extend Keane's discussion of Wordsworth's influence on Emerson through the "art of loss" and how Emerson writes "with and against" Wordsworth, utilizes Wordsworth's "double consciousness" of enduring a private pain while writing about the experience publicly, and using poetry to facilitate the same philosophical debate on death, mourning, and healing.

Wordsworth conceives of an epic of the mind in his poetry. This perceptible turn inward to focus on the self can be traced to the American tradition and specifically, writers like Emerson, Whitman, and Stevens. The poets who came after Wordsworth were unavoidably engaged in response to the aspects of his poems that explore human consciousness, according to Joel Pace and Matthew Scott, who have attempted to trace the considerable influence and reputation of William Wordsworth in America during the 19th century in their book, *Wordsworth in American Literary Culture* (2005). Pace and Scott argue, "Wordsworth's poetry was being freshly set by American printers from as early as 1802; his first editor, during his lifetime, was an American, Henry Reed; *The Prelude* and Christopher Wordsworth's *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* were better received in America than in Great Britain." (2) Wordsworth had a profound influence in the United States, despite many American authors attempting to form a literary tradition completely independent of Britain. Until the middle of the 20th century, Wordsworth's role in the formation of American literature continued to be overlooked by many scholars.

Literary influence is a pervasive force in the construction of American literary identity, and British Romanticism is remade by the American reading public (and American writers) so that influence is not only literary but cultural as well. Investigating Wordsworth's influence and reputation in America can often be difficult and lead to differing results because of the various ways he exhibits an impact. His legacy can be seen through the publication of primary texts, anthologies, imitations, and parodies. Also, another level of engagement with Wordsworth comes from reviews and articles devoted to the poet, both during the 19th century and today. Wordsworth can also be seen as a "created type" according to region and period, which can be associated with broader 19th century movements in the areas of theology, feminism, humanism, and environmentalism (Pace and Scott 5). The history of Wordsworth's influence in America creates several points of departure and intersection, often utilizing post-colonial and historicist theory. Historicism, specifically, has allowed researchers to acknowledge not only the gaps between reading communities on either side of the Atlantic, but also our own historical gap as we review these 19th- century writers.

A brief survey of the 19th-century reviews shows the changing attitude toward William Wordsworth in America. In an article from *Quarterly Christian Spectator*, dated March 1, 1836, the "Poetical Works" of William Wordsworth are reviewed and related to the poet's early reputation in Britain and the United States. The reviewer argues, "For the striking features of his literary history, as he has slowly risen from a neglect and opposition which was almost universal, to a general reputation and regard; he deserves the notice of everyone who is curious to trace the changes of public opinion, and to follow a great man through his difficulties, as they have successively yielded to his

triumphant progress." (1) The article goes on to explain that when Wordsworth's poems were first appearing in print in the early 19th- century, his poetry was subjected to attacks from unfair and abusive critics who attacked with great zeal and perseverance because they realized the importance of his ideas. British critics began to call Wordsworth and his contemporaries "The Lake Poets" as a derogatory term and this helped to sway the public against him. On the American side, those critics agreed with their British contemporaries in almost everything early on, and their criticisms matched that of the Brits. But amidst the storm, Wordsworth, himself, was unmoved. He realized that his poetical tastes were not in agreement with the public, but he was frank and fearless enough to declare his poetical sentiments with fervor and to point out where the public taste was vitiated. Over time, first in Britain, and soon after in the United States, he gained favor with critics and the reading public. The review continues, "In the British Isles, and with us, many are the young who revere his name, as that of their guide and teacher, one who has awakened in their minds poetic feeling, and with it, the noblest aspirations both for this life and the life which is to come. Most of our current writers now speak well of him." (4)

In another article, almost 70 years later, entitled, "Poetry and the Public," Wilfrid Thorley investigates the impact of poetry on the reading public in 1917 by dividing the 19th century into literary periods with the death of Wordsworth as the cutoff where things changed. Thorley was writing for *The Live Age*, an American periodical that was in print from 1897-1941, and the major question he addresses in his article is, "Why has poetry steadily lost prestige since the death of Wordsworth in 1850, so that it has now generally ludicrous connotations in the mind of the ordinary man?" (1) His second question follows

with what the present day poets must do to regain the respect that Wordsworth previously garnered. Thorley is concerned with the fact that poetry, in the generations after Wordsworth's death, is no longer the dominant medium to understand beauty in its relationship to the universe, as Wordsworth did. This is truly high praise from an American reviewer who is only one generation removed from the living Wordsworth. This comment is indicative of the movement toward a greater level respect for Wordsworth's poetry and idealism even in the next century.

To truly understand the complexity of critical opinion for Wordsworth during his lifetime and after, another American periodical, *Current Literature*, dated December of 1907, includes an article entitled "Wordsworth as a Poet Great in Spite of Himself." This article praises Wordsworth's kindness and truthfulness in his poetry, but discounts a limit to his thought. Utilizing Emerson's own words from *English Traits*, the article argues, "He made the impression of a narrow and very English mind, of one who paid for his rare elevation by general tameness and conformity" (1). The article also concludes that while his dealing with the common and simple was noteworthy, it was also monotonous, and his morality makes him enigmatic and hard to approach. In the end, the mixed review and obvious criticism of the article takes a more positive turn: "The world which we find in his poetry may not be the whole world, but it is the real world, revealed to imagination and reproduced by art such as only the great poets suggest." (3)

The *Methodist Quarterly Review*, from July 1857, was an American periodical written after Wordsworth's death as a review of his life and works. The article concludes: "Wordsworth was the greatest man of his age, and that Milton and Shakespeare were his only peers in the English language." (10) This article also

comments on Wordsworth's work in *The Excursion* as being "closest to his heart" and "the most emblematic of his true character and beliefs."

Like the poet himself, *The Excursion* was prone to mixed reception by critics and the reading public. According to *Ballou's Monthly Magazine*, an American periodical from April 1878, early reviews for *The Excursion* were mixed. Lord Jeffrey of the Edinburgh Review commented, "This will never do; it is longer, weaker, and tamer than any of Mr. Wordsworth's other productions." (1) On the other hand, William Hazlitt pronounced it, "unsurpassed in power of intellect, lofty conception, and depth of feeling." (2) This American reviewer concludes, "Poetry was to Wordsworth a solemn calling. It was at once his vocation and his religion, and he served with all the fidelity and belief of a high priest." (7)

The impact of Wordsworth on Emerson is not only critical and literary but personal as well. There is a curious interweaving of passages from Wordsworth's poetry in Emerson's work, especially during the sequence of deaths that Emerson experienced between 1831 and 1842. The relationship between Emerson and the British Romantics is a complicated one. For all of Emerson's self reliance and originality, and in spite of his attempts to decry Wordsworth and other Brits in an attempt to form an "authentic American voice" in his writing, Wordsworth still becomes his primary benefactor.

Wordsworth had an indispensable impact on American Transcendentalism. His thoughtful interaction with nature and his championing of the common, the low, and the humble became a base for 19th- century American Literature. Through his poetry, he also became a provider of much-needed consolation in distress for Emerson. Looking at

Emerson through Wordsworth helps to explain some of Emerson's paradoxical thinking. Emerson is attempting to resolve tensions and bridge apparent contradictions between originality and quotation, individual genius and tradition, self-reliance and participation in an impersonal Universe. Emerson derives a great portion of his philosophy from European Romanticism, and specifically from Wordsworth, in learning to deal with death, write about loss and mourning, and utilize his own cathartic writing and that of others, to help him to heal and move on. By using the model Weisbuch practiced in his book, as well as general ideas from Patrick Keane's book-length study and other articles, I will attempt to explore the "art of loss" in Wordsworth's poetry (*The Excursion* predominantly) and Emerson's work ("Threnody," *Experience*, and "Fate").

Transatlantic cultural exchange is multidirectional, with writers of all nationalities influencing one another, and so what I will attempt is not as much an influence study as an exploration of elective affinities, personal resemblances, and analogies binding together two highly individual writers exhibiting original genius. Using the "paradox of originality" this thesis should appeal to those interested in the Anglo-American Romantic tradition and the innovations of the individual talent. I will focus on Emerson's ability to not only absorb Wordsworth, but to use him as a stimulus to his own creative power. In one of his notebook poems, Emerson explains, "I dare attempt to lay out my own road," while conceding that no one is really "separate/ But all are cisterns of one central sea/ All are mouthpieces of the Eternal Word." (Keane 462) Through focusing on the "art of loss" I will attempt to investigate the relationship between Wordsworth and Emerson. Initially, in Part Two, I will discuss Wordsworth as the poet of human suffering, and I will investigate *The Excursion*, exploring how he poeticizes death, grief, and healing. In

Part Three, I will explore Emerson's personal struggles with death and his writing of "Threnody" and other works dealing with mourning. I will look at how Emerson's ambivalent, but gradually more positive view of Wordsworth influenced his own experience with the death of his son and his own poetic process.

Part Two- Wordsworth's Example in the "Art of Loss"

It is somewhat ironic that William Wordsworth has become famous as the poet of nature. His wish, and the dream of *The Recluse*, that he never finished, was to be the poet of man. Wordsworth was interested in the poetry of human passions, characters, and incidents. From his experience and outlook, this was inevitably the poetry of suffering. He does not attempt to hide from or avoid wretchedness; instead he is fascinated by it. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's speaker broods upon "sorrow that is not sorrow, but delight, / And miserable love that is not pain/ To hear of" (12 245-247). Even in his later work, Wordsworth draws more from the sentimental movement than any of the other major English Romantic poets. The characters he writes about are those that interest the "sentimental traveler," a common phrase Wordsworth commonly uses for himself. He depicts betrayed women, beggars, maniacs, discharged soldiers, and decrepit old men. From the discharged soldier of Book Four of *The Prelude*, to the Wanderer's attempts to comfort the Solitary in *The Excursion*, the essential drama of both incidents is the compassionate, benevolent response to human suffering (Averill 9-11).

The general trend in Wordsworth's poetry after 1805 is toward suffering taken as a philosophical question and away from the problem of literary response, which is likely what attracted Emerson to his work. With *The Prelude* ends Wordsworth's self-conscious investigation of his own fictions. In *The Excursion*, Wordsworth's poetry explores the overpowering burden of earthly evil and leads to his exploration of human

suffering through loss. Wordsworth's effort to discover the premises of his imaginative involvement with suffering is admirable, although sometimes ambiguous. He looks long and deep into the dark sources of his power, through the suffering of *The Excursion*, and his other poems relating to loss. Like the death of Waldo and the writing of "Threnody" for Emerson, which I will discuss in Part Three, Wordsworth's writing of *The Excursion* marks a transition in his poetic career. Wordsworth is beginning a philosophical debate on the "art of loss" in *The Excursion*, which Emerson will later utilize.

In *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason*, Patrick J. Keane explores the connection between Wordsworth and Emerson through the similarities of Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode" and Emerson's "Threnody". Keane argues that both poems have a similar trajectory: "an elegiac poem of loss and compensation, and a Romantic fusion of thought and feeling, spirit and nature." (473) From the first time he read the "Ode" in his twenties, Emerson was drawn to the fifth and ninth stanzas. He especially liked the section of the ninth stanza where "fallings from us" are contrasted to that imperishable "light of all our day", where philosophic idealism is replaced by a tragic yet affirmative humanism. As I have noted in Part One, Emerson had reservations about some of Wordsworth's poetry from time to time, but the "Ode" was usually spared in these instances. Emerson even refers to Wordsworth's "Ode" when discussing the possibility of belief in the "immortality of the soul". He says that the real evidence is difficult to put into words, and that the "Ode" is the best modern essay on the subject (474).

This praise is not without qualification, however, as Keane argues "Emerson's shift from his earlier emphasis on Wordsworth's intellect to his brilliant handling of a subject too subtle or too high for rational argument is of a piece with spiritual Boston's

typical response to Wordsworth as great precisely because he was intuitive and feeling rather than disciplined and rational in the lower, or discursive, sense." (475) Yet another example of an ambivalent attitude toward Wordsworth, Emerson is giving the "Ode" the highest of praise. Yet, Keane purports that by praising his intuition and feeling rather than his discipline, rational, or intellect, Emerson is giving conditional praise to Wordsworth, like so many other American writers of the time. This ambivalence is still visible, even in sentiments of the highest praise, from Emerson to Wordsworth.

Keane eventually characterizes "Threnody" as a type of "failed re-writing" of Wordsworth's "Ode". Much like his readings of Wordsworth's *Excursion*, Emerson is attempting to use Wordsworth's verse as an inspiration on effectively dealing with loss. He returns to Wordsworth's poetry during difficult times despite his ambivalence. Emerson is again borrowing Wordsworth's template from his "Elegiac Stanzas" "Not without hope we suffer and we mourn." (511) Emerson is trying to find sources of encouragement, and he is dealing with a private grief through the public act of poetry writing.

Deaths from earlier in Wordsworth's life that he has never fully mourned or processed, show up in his later poetry as he is revisiting these mortality issues. As the older Wordsworth is inspired to write his verse on the art of loss, and to start the philosophical discussion through his poetry, some of his earlier confrontations with the death of family members are revisited. This complicates Wordsworth's ability to write about personal losses through the public act of poetry writing, much like it would later affect Emerson. The major trauma in Wordsworth's early life was the untimely loss of his parents. His mother died when he was almost eight years old, and then his father died

when he was thirteen. The death of his mother marks his diversion of experience into the bliss of childhood and the alienation that comes with maturity. This loss that he feels at such an early age is articulated in much of his poetry, especially the "Intimations Ode" and it can be viewed as a major inspiration for his unfinished meditation on death, *The Recluse*, from which *The Excursion* is derived. Young Wordsworth transferred his deepest feelings for his mother to nature in direct response to her death. The death of his father inspired his encounters with wandering old men and other displaced persons in much of his poetry. A syndrome of pathological mourning has been detected in many bereaved children who have lost parents. The syndrome is a defensive process that is counter to the normal mourning process. Normal mourning consists of gradually letting go of the lost person through periodic eruptions of intense grief. Pathological mourning, however, consists of the child's continuing unconscious fixation on ties to the parent (287). Pathological mourning provides a key to understanding certain visionary moments in Wordsworth's poetry, and especially in his poetic confrontation with death and mourning through *The Excursion*.

Some of the imaginative loss in Wordsworth's life, and articulated in his poetry, can be traced back to the loss of his parents at such a young age. Likewise, the despondency and inability to get over the death of his family that a character like the Solitary faces represents a part of Wordsworth's own psyche due to personal loss. Memories allow Wordsworth the poet to stay connected to his parents through reminding him of a better time when he was with them. This phenomenon is prevalent in *The Prelude*, "Tintern Abbey", and other shorter poems, but this is most relevant to what the Wanderer and the Pastor are trying to teach the Solitary through their stories and lessons

about death and dealing with grief after the loss of family members. It is also significant that they are never able to completely heal or convince the Solitary of their religious and emotional strategies for dealing with death, which says something about the pain and grief that Wordsworth still dealt with in his later years. This unresolved conflict is important for Emerson, as well, because he does not expect answers from the philosophical debate on the art of loss in Wordsworth's poems. These unanswered questions at the end of *The Excursion* are similar to the lack of a resolution for the poet/speaker in "Threnody."

After Wordsworth's father died, in 1783, almost all of his poems of the next few years, some of them unpublished, are concerned with death. *The Valley of Esthwaite* was the most ambitious of these early poems, consisting of over 1,000 lines. Wordsworth, himself, described this poem as being written in the Spring and Summer of 1787. In July, young Wordsworth worked on the second part of this poem, and he describes a scene from when he was thirteen and the death of his father was still fresh. "No spot but claims the tender tear / by or grief to memory dear / alone I bore the bitter shock; / to bear me, to sorrow o'er a father's bier." (25-29) The boy in the poem is vulnerable, and he needs companionship because he is utterly alone. The next section of the poem jumps from the earlier time to the time of writing, in 1787, "For much it gives my soul relief / to pay the mighty debt of grief. With signs repeated o'er and o'er, / I mourn because I mourned no more." (31-35) The poet who is writing this poem seems to be in much better spirits than his memory of the traumatic experience of his father's death. The process of grieving and the passing of time seem to make the seventeen year old Wordsworth feel like he is somewhat ready to move on with his life.

The older boy in the poem is left to wait for a ride at the same spot where the young Wordsworth found out that his father had died. This experience with revisiting this place of anguish has caused the older boy to recall these memories. Wordsworth was never able to completely mourn his father or to recover completely from his death, and this led to a compulsive self-reliance. Duncan Wu argues that this self-reliance led to a false self which is "reflected in Wordsworth's tendency to look for parental forces in nature." (115) In much of his poetry, Wordsworth assigns a parental role to the Lake District, the landscape where he grew up. Nature became the only trusted substitute for Wordsworth to turn to, in dealing with his grief and suddenly feeling so alone with both of his parents gone. Neither William nor his sister, Dorothy, ever completely recovered from their father's death. In February, 1805, news came that their brother John had died at sea, and they responded in much the same way that they had in 1783. Some of the displaced grief and mourning from his father's death had been brought to the surface again when John died. Wu asserts that John's death (because of the association with his father's death) turned the completion of *The Recluse* into a sacred trust for Wordsworth.

Human misery, as a reflection of man's fate, is too serious for less significant questions of life, and this tendency is utilized to its full capacity in Wordsworth's masterpiece of human suffering and loss, *The Excursion*. In this poem, the Wanderer and the Pastor attempt to correct the pessimism and despondency of the Solitary. The poem begins with the story of Margaret and her story of silent suffering from *The Ruined Cottage*. The eight remaining books in the poem explore the "choice of life" in a world of evil and suffering. Within the context of *The Excursion*, the story of Margaret works less as a story about a man telling a sad tale to another and more as an exemplum of the

universal human condition. *The Excursion* seems to have a didactic purpose in that Wordsworth is trying to instruct his readers about how to deal with suffering and loss through his characters' debates in the poem.

A brief summary of *The Excursion* will help to explain its relation to death, mourning, and healing. The young Poet-Speaker, the first-person narrator, is on a walking tour with his friend, the elderly Wanderer, who has achieved a kind of wise detachment through his life as a traveler. They visit the Solitary, who has withdrawn into an isolated valley, because he feels that his life is a disappointment, partly due to the deaths of his wife and children. The Solitary has rejected all positive aspects of his life. The Wanderer attempts to correct the despondency of the Solitary by arguing that although calamities do happen in life, faith and duty can provide support, and these can lead to a loving, interconnected position in the world. The three then walk to the rural churchyard where they meet with the Pastor, a friend of the Wanderer. To counter the Solitary's complaint about the melancholy of life, the Pastor recounts stories from members of his parish and community, at the Wanderer's request. The Wanderer directs, "as we stand on holy earth, / and have the dead around us, / take from them your instances, / for they are both best known, / and by frail man most equitably judged. / Epitomize the life; / pronounce, you can, authentic epitaphs on some of these /we may learn to prize the breath we share with the human kind; / And look upon the dust of man with awe." (5 646-657)

Some of the ambiguity of *The Excursion* results from the multiple points of view in the narrative. Susan J. Wolfson has explained the multiple view point when she argues, "to the extent that Wordsworth shows view to be point of view, and emphasizes

the self-reflecting configurations of what one sees, he unsettles the absolute claim of any one speaker or any one moment of speech." (403) If Wolson is correct, then *The Excursion* has no universally authorized poet or reader. Each character falls prey to his or her own deficit of vision or memory. The dramatic form of the poem embeds an intermittent but ongoing disclosure of limitation in the poem's didactic voices. Along with this disclosure of limitation there is correction and complementation as well. By the end of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth has developed a space where multiple points of view from differing characters can embody death, discuss loss, and start a conversation about the difficult, ambiguous process of loss, grief, and healing. This seems a conscious choice for Wordsworth, as the debate concerning the "art of loss" and the differing viewpoints with unresolved problems at the end is his purpose for the poem.

The *Excursion* is a poem where the interaction of the four major characters manifests Wordsworth's contradictory aspects of his own personality. The Wanderer is the didactic Wordsworth, the Solitary is the skeptic poet, the Pastor is the Church poet and the Poet-Speaker is the objective observer. The Wanderer and the Solitary establish the functional binary opposition in the poem's structure, similar to the dynamic Emerson will use in "Threnody" with the poet and deep Heart. The Solitary has experienced great personal loss in war and through the deaths of members of his family. He is persuaded to come out of his abode and confront his misery and fear of death; to understand the essence of life which is more than despondency. The Wanderer looks at the sustaining features of life while the Solitary questions the values of life. The Pastor attempts a Christian response but ultimately fails, and the confusion continues. The Solitary has many riddles that he wants answered including: Is man a child of hope? Do generations

of man continue without progress? Is man stopped by death without finding any answer? Does good or evil dominate man? What is virtue? And are we doomed to decay and expire in dust through death on this earth? (Jha 63). These questions cause the Solitary's dejection and the Pastor does help him to understand some of these issues by the poem's end. However, Wordsworth fails to answer some of these questions through his characters and tales in the poem. He attempts to universalize the problem, at times, rather than to find definitive answers for the Solitary's many questions. Book Three's end remains inconclusive as general suffering still endures.

In Book Six of *The Excursion*, the speaker compares the village church-yard to an enclosure within an "unkind world, where the voice of detraction is not heard; where the traces of evil inclinations are unknown; where contentment prevails, and there is no jarring tone in the peaceful concert of amity and gratitude." (68-75) Wordsworth is describing an enclosure that he normally uses to get away from the public and the urban. This passage shows a conflicting attitude toward areas representing death, as this is a more traditional Wordsworth describing a place of death and burial as peaceful, where the traces of evil are not known. The speaker finds temporary relief from what is disturbing him about the art of losing.

The Excursion marks a different direction for Wordsworth in his treatment of nature and death. "The rural space of *The Excursion* indeed seems qualitatively different from that of the earlier poetry and evidences an enhanced realism of description." (Sharp, 395) *The Excursion's* community of the living and the dead, the tight-knit community organized around the unmarked graves of its village cemetery, has been virtually taken over by the graveyard. One of the poem's major themes is to show us death and to put

hope into words. The poem transitions toward a massive communion with the dead.

This work is unique in its length that is almost totally dedicated to dealing with death and how the living go on after a tragic loss. As the poem proceeds, more ghosts are raised and nature becomes a large graveyard. The Vicar, a character in Book Five who relates the authentic epitaphs of those buried in the cemetery, passes effortlessly from speaking of the living to speaking of the dead. The dwellings of the living and the graves of the dead start to sound very similar in their description. Like the dead, the living seems to reside within the earth, and in the walls of a tomb. The Vicar tells of the living, humble inhabitants of the mountain cottage who reside in, "A house of stones collected on the spot, by rude hands built, with rocky knolls in front, backed also by a ledge of rock." (5 693-696) The couple live perched on a mountainside like birds in a shallow, rocky, lifeless grave. They are seen to be relics or ghostly survivors of a distant past.

This area, in *The Excursion*, is peopled almost exclusively with individuals with a relation to death and loss that gives them the aspect of the living dead long before their actual deaths. Death becomes the literalization of an already existent state of affairs. Besides Margaret, from Book One, the Solitary is the intended beneficiary of the kindly efforts of the Poet-Speaker and the Wanderer. The Poet depicts the secluded valley where the Solitary is the only inhabitant as "urn-like" and describes the scene, "So lonesome, and so perfectly secure; / It could not be more quiet; / peace is here or nowhere; / days unruffled by the gale of public news or private; / years that pass forgetfully; / uncalled upon to pay the common penalties of mortal life, / sickness, or accident, or grief, or pain." (2 364-369) This spot, like the grave, shelters its sole

inhabitants from mortal life itself. The Solitary is alive but is living like he is already among the dead in this lifeless area.

Later in Book Four, "Despondency Corrected", Wordsworth's Wanderer comforts the Solitary with an "eloquent harangue" about how he needs to learn to look at objects as neither animate or inanimate things, nor as his subjectivity projected onto objects, but as the signs of scientifically and dynamically ordered processes (Farina 12). The Wanderer preaches, "Science, dull and inanimate, / no more shall hang chained to its brute slavery; / but taught with patient interest to watch the processes of things, / and serve the cause of order and distinctness, / shall it forget that its most noble use, / must be found in furnishing clear guidance, / a support to the mind's excursive power." (150-155) The Wanderer does not prescribe a spiritual acknowledgement of the Imagination or the life within us to cure the Solitary's gloom. Instead, he prescribes a categorized investigation of the relationship between things. The Wanderer discerns the hidden connectedness underlying each idea in relation to the "all inclusive commonwealth of things". The Wanderer's science of partly perceiving the deep character of things instances a fundamental change in strategies of dealing with death and loss. He advises the Solitary to find comfort in conversation with living things. He wants him to find "a thing impossible to frame" and "spiritual presences of absent things". Yet, this is vague advice, as the Wanderer does not explain what these things are. *The Excursion* marks the ambiguous communing of human and non-human entities. (Farina 15)

In Book Five, the Poet is interrupted by the whisper of the Wanderer who draws his attention to the spectacle that is the Solitary. Standing apart; with curved arm reclined on the baptismal font, his pallid face upturned, gracefully he stood, the semblance bearing

of a sculptured form that leans upon a monumental urn in peace." (Book 5 214-217) The Solitary has become the monumental urn, a lifeless statue representing a life that has already passed by to death. (Sharp 397) This is a reoccurring theme in *The Excursion*, a poem that is full of depictions of individuals who, plagued by memory, by excessive grief, write their own epitaphs or become their own tombstones. In Book Four, "Despondency Corrected", the Wanderer will diagnose the Solitary's illness, "This vital warmth too cold, these visual orbs, though inconceivably endowed, too dim for any passion of the soul that leads to ecstasy, and, all the crooked paths of time and change disdaining, takes its course along the line of limitless desires." (180-185) This melancholic disease is not unique to Margaret, the Solitary, and his wife. This "dreadful appetite of death" is endemic to the sheltered vale, touching everyone whose histories we come to know. The rural space has become explicitly a place of death or death in life, and a space wherein the dead are never determinately buried and grief never resolved.

Later in Book Five, the Poet-Speaker and his two fellow travelers journey through the natural landscape to the rural churchyard. The Poet changes the physical journey into a mental excursion on existence, and the inner depths of his consciousness are played out through the differing voices of the Wanderer, the Solitary, and the Pastor. Digression, departure, and disruption characterize the Poet-Speaker as hero moving through the space of his mind. The Wanderer questions, "Among so many shadows, / are the pains and penalties of miserable life, / doomed to decay, and then to expire in dust / Accord, good Sir, / the light of your experience to dispel this gloom." (5 476-481) The Solitary's sadness in reference to his existence comes from brooding over the pains and penalties that remain, the conditions of a miserable life. Hall asserts that Wordsworth's feelings

are expressed through an elegiac discourse where elegies lamenting the dead turn into self-morbid feelings. Self contrived responses become spontaneous reactions to death through the character of The Solitary (663).

The Pastor responds to the Solitary, "The hopeful and the hopeless, first and last, the earliest summoned and the longest spared-are here deposited, with tribute paid; and gentle nature grieved, that one should die; or if the changed demanded no regret, observed the liberating stroke." (5 973-978) The Pastor seems to understand the hopelessness of the Solitary as nature receives the dead and others are left to grieve. He comments on the universality of death, mourning, and healing. All of these are experienced by the hopeful and the hopeless-alike. For Wordsworth, the Pastor's voice is that of the talebearer who reads the landscape and interprets the graves to show universal truths for the listeners. *The Excursion* offers its readers a voice that unites the living and the dead through a self-reflective lament that mourns the loss of the deceased. *The Excursion* becomes a sermon to be heard and lived out in the lives of its parishioners. This "sermon" dynamic is exactly the way Emerson utilizes the philosophical discussion through verse that Wordsworth has undertaken, with *The Excursion*. Rather than turning to religion or family, Wordsworth's poetry is Emerson's help in time of need.

The Pastor's voice explains an imagined world of the dead and a world of the actual dead, as both compete for self expression (Hall 664). The Poet enters into his own poem as a safeguard to offset the excesses of poetic imagination. *The Excursion* is a literary autobiographical poem and a study of despondency and death. The questions from the Wanderer and the Solitary replicate questions within the mind of the poet who becomes the author and critic of his own work. The Pastor's resolution to the state of

dejection comes from his own positioning (by Wordsworth) as the poet-prophet, commemorating the dead. In Book Seven, the Pastor recalls a story of a deaf Dalesman, "there, beneath a pain blue stone, / a gentle Dalesman lies, from whom, / in early childhood, was withdrawn the precious gift of hearing. / He grew up from year to year in loneliness of soul." (7 398-404) The story is a product of the imagination as the blue stone commemorates a memory of the dead. The Pastor works to bridge the gap between the living and the dead. The Pastor speaks for the voiceless entity who was silent in life and is now still silent in death. He uses this figure to help his listeners to realize that life and death are not that different and should not be feared by the living or the dying.

Michele Turner Sharp offers another way to view the questions raised by the solitary, when she writes that Wordsworth "reads landscape as if it were a monument or grave" (387) in his poetry. The topography of Wordsworth's poetry and prose is littered with graves and traces of burial. The inhabitants of rural spaces have difficulty mediating death and the loss that it figures. This is interesting because Wordsworth often favored the rural over the urban, consistently showing a preference for "humble and rustic life" as that condition in which the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity. A poem like *The Excursion* sometimes works in opposition to Wordsworth's normal sentiments on the rural and humble being better than the urban areas of 19th century England. *The Excursion* represents country life as "clearly tainted both from without and from within" and hence "the degree to which the rural idyll is questionable in its own, intrinsic terms, regardless of the threats of ulterior vested interests" (Sharp 388), causes the poem's narrator to question his own sensibilities about rural ideals and people.

Kenneth Johnson asserts, "Wordsworth takes up the creation of the Solitary as a deliberately distanced reconstruction of a personality that has been damaged by the loss of loved ones, of religious faith, and of revolutionary and humanitarian idealism—all conditions that Wordsworth knew intimately as he entered the later years of his life and poetry writing." (76) The Solitary's mental despondency arises directly from the failure of social institutions to support his ideals, exactly the situation Wordsworth had reached. In Book Four of *The Excursion*, private myth-making is offered to the Solitary as an antidote to mental depression because of public disappointments (along with the deaths he is still living with). The Wanderer has tried to help his spirits, and he is attempting to cure the disease of despondency in the Solitary, just as Wordsworth is trying to help readers of his poetry deal with death, grief, and healing in their own lives. A major theme in this book and throughout *The Excursion*, is that modern society, the public, needs a new kind of church to help the grieving process. This is another instance of the public versus private debate that Wordsworth and Emerson struggle with while facing personal loss and attempting to create poetry for the public, from a difficult personal situation.

Lorna Clymer also argues for the pivotal position of Wordsworth's *The Excursion* as "the deliberate, culminating expression of the collective rather than the individualistic nature of the epitaphic charge." (347) Clymer explores the connection between Wordsworth's *Essays Upon Epitaphs* and *The Excursion*. There are many specific epitaph-like passages in Book Seven of *The Excursion*, narrated by the Pastor who oversees the churchyard. This passage is intended as a didactic exemplum for the living, as the group of characters listening (the Wanderer, the Poet, the Solitary) stand in for a

larger group of the living dealing with deprivation and suffering. Each character has his own specific experience with recuperation after the death of someone they know. Clymer also believes that Wordsworth's views as expressed in this poem are not always that dissimilar from that of *The Prelude*.

The Excursion reveals Wordsworth's perception of death as a self-conscious search for signs of the dead that become images of the poetic self. *Essays Upon Epitaphs* is an inquiry about death which links the act of dying to the act of writing. Wordsworth argues that epitaphs manifest the human impulse toward immortality to perpetuate life after death through inscriptions. Both the reader of epitaphs, and Wordsworth in his poetry on death, imagine the dead living on in the sublimated memory of those left alive (as Emerson attempts to memorialize Waldo in "Threnody"). Books 5, 6, and 7 of *The Excursion* become Wordsworth's attempt to exalt the suffering in the ordinary lives of villagers as recurring figures revealing religious and philosophical truths about the dead (Hall 662).

Unlike the epitaph-like poems of the 18th century, Wordsworth borrows facets from elegy, epitaph, and other similar poems on death from the previous generation without becoming a complete recidivist. Like Emerson, Wordsworth is influenced by those coming before him who wrote about the same subject. He is influenced by the previous generation, but Wordsworth still attempts to remain true to himself through the "art of loss" in his poetry. Similarly, Emerson utilizes Wordsworth's philosophical debate on mourning in his poetry as a template, but he pens his verse in his own way. Wordsworth attempts to employ two competing poetic modes simultaneously in *The Excursion*, expressive and rhetorical/didactic, and as the poem oscillates between the two

types of poems, it is never firmly established in either camp. In *The Excursion*, Wordsworth emphasizes the oral record of those buried in the churchyard to further the idea of commemorating the dead through the living. Epitaphic accounts of the dead are essential to the living characters' ability to deal with death (Clymer 389).

These epitaphs compress the circumstances of one life and state the essence of the individual. The epitaphs are intended to resolve the listeners' debate, and so they are intentionally didactic. Through these recited records, the Pastor stresses positive virtues and values, asserting that all human effort and longing is eventually answered. Two and a half books cover stories of an unwed mother losing her child and then dying from grief, a deaf Dalesman, a misanthropic woman, and many others. These stories are to demonstrate the presence of love, both divine and human, through the interpretation of the Pastor. These epitaphic tales of love are supposed to overturn the Solitary's complaint against the instability and hopelessness of life (Clymer 382).

Home at Grasmere tells three stories of husbands and wives split apart by death. Two of these stories were later transferred to *The Excursion*, Book Six, and are presented as proof that the poet's heart may, "Breathe in the air of fellow-suffering / Dreadless, as in a kind of fresher breeze / Of her own native element." (2 449-451) The primary effort of *The Excursion* is to fulfill the wish of *The Prelude*, for the poem that will select "sorrow that is not sorrow, but delight". There is some ambiguity in *The Excursion*, however, as it is pervaded by a profound sense that the suffering of the world sometimes defies the optimistic, and the human interpretation. There is an attempt to justify human loss by a vague law of compensation, as characters find evidence of a divine benevolence through those who remain, despite the loss they have suffered (Averill 279-282).

In M.H. Abram's "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age", he posits, "It is not irrelevant, that many seemingly apolitical poems of the later Romantic period turn on the theme of hope and joy and the temptation to abandon all hope and fall into dejection and despair; the recurrent emotional pattern is that of the key books of *The Excursion*, labeled 'Despondency' and 'Despondency Corrected', which apply specifically to the failure of the millennial hope in the Revolution." (17) The "turn" occurs in the poet's mind from hope to despair and identifies a recurrent emotional pattern of repeating pleasurable experiences and repressing others when dealing with death. We can also see an example of this in "Threnody", near the end of the poem, while the deep Heart is still trying to make the speaker realize that life must go on. After speaking of an "eternal verdict" and "hour of doom" deep Hear questions, "Wilt thou not open thy heart to know / What rainbows teach, and sunsets show?" (1173). Hope is suddenly forced into the poem, asking the poet to open his heart and enjoy what rainbows and sunshine show humanity.

Wordsworth also uses poetry to transcend his suffering in life through reflections upon the afterlife. His meditations on death embody a major source of poetic production. Epitaphs become another theme linking Wordsworth to a culture of mourning in literary thought. Wordsworth's discourse extends the cult of the dead by locating the deceased in the mind of the poet, rather than in the ground. His perception of death becomes fundamentally altered over time and reconstituted according to the poetic mind that has trouble with its own dying. Perception, therefore, becomes a double agent of self-revelation and self-disclosure, for Wordsworth. As the poet realizes the end of life, he seals what is left in an open grave that he can repeatedly return to in his writing. This is a

kind of reconfiguration of the poetic self, through dealing with impending death and how it affects the living (Hall 657). Similarly, through the loss of his son, Emerson is also forced to confront his own mortality. He has reached middle age, and this is the first incident in his life that has really caused him to confront his own inevitable death, giving Wordsworth's verse on the "art of loss" a whole new meaning for him.

Part Three- Emerson, "Threnody", and Experiencing Loss

The relationship between the Wanderer and the Poet in *The Excursion* was influential in Emerson's own character dynamic in "Threnody". Just as the Wanderer instructs the Poet and the Solitary about the ways to handle dejection and to start the healing process, Emerson's deep Heart helps the poet/speaker through his difficult time. The characters in both poems helped to facilitate the philosophical debate on the human condition that each writer was attempting through verse. The character dynamic also helped two writers to navigate the tension between a "double consciousness" of private grief and public poetry writing. Emerson was writing with and against his British elder, Wordsworth, and even while he wanted to form his own literary tradition as an American, he still looked to Wordsworth for his shared experience with, and inspiration to write about, the "art of loss."

Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Threnody" is a personal lament owing its impetus to the death of Emerson's first born son, Waldo. Emerson produced this elegy poem while attempting to come to grips with his loss. The speaker/poet begins "Threnody" with the inability of nature to comfort or save: "The South-wind brings/ Life, sunshine and desire, / And on every mount meadow / Breathes aromatic fire; / But over the dead he has no power, / The lost, the lost, he cannot restore; / And, looking over the hills, I mourn / The darling who shall not return." (1-7) The South wind, which usually brings life, desire, and inspiration has no power over the dead. The speaker/poet realizes that his lost son will never return and nature is helpless to come to his aid. Richard Tuerk explains that

"Threnody" depicts the progress of its nameless narrator through his grief from the untimely loss of a beloved nameless son and then, indirectly, through the speaker's concern with his own death (14). The speaker learns to accept the death, in the end, as essential for life to continue. The natural process of life seems to mock the speaker at first, but is eventually reconciled with the inevitability of human existence. The success of the poem comes from its personal narrative of grief and mourning while holding a universal applicability to grieving and acceptance of the natural process of death.

By 1842, Emerson had experienced many personal losses. When Emerson was eight years old, his father took a trip to the sea one morning and never returned. While he was still a child, Emerson lost one brother when he was four and a sister when he was eleven. During the 1830's, he lost his first wife, Ellen after one year of marriage. He then lost two of his brothers, Edward and Charles. Even after all of these deaths, Emerson insisted that he was immune to loss. In his letters, he once strangely declared that he felt happy after his wife's death. In 1838, he bragged to friend and poet Jones Very that if his wife, his child, and his mother should be taken from him, "I would still remain whole." (Chapman 74) However, when Waldo died in 1842 of a sudden illness, scarlatina, Emerson reached a changing point. His earlier refusal to mourn suddenly became impossible after losing his first-born son. Critics have often read Waldo's death as a turning point in Emerson's career. Mary Chapman argues, "because of his inability to reconcile personal loss with the more universal philosophy of transcendentalism, this moment marks a shift in Emerson's career from assertiveness to resignation, his prior belief in freedom replaced by a submission to fate as a beautiful necessity." (76) Like most deaths, Waldo's death also opened up the wounds of earlier losses. Each loss

recapitulates a prior loss. Each time one is faced with death and mourning, an earlier deflection of desire is repeated. In Emerson's case, his inability to mourn for his father as a young boy caused psychological problems, since, in a way, his son's death uncannily echoes this loss (Porter 3).

It was important to Emerson that his poetry succeeded, as poetry held special status among the literary community. Like Emily Dickinson, he wrote for private performance and coterie, and that artist and author were at war in Emerson. (Thomas 418) Emerson resented becoming a writing professional, instead seeking to remain an amateur for his own intellectual reasons. Emerson, unlike many of the other major writers of his time period in the United States, never lost control of his works to commercialization. Even more than in his essays and other writing, Emerson wanted to be sure to remain true to himself and to control his poetry. This desire to remain true to himself and to be an amateur poet with success is indicative of the public versus private tension in Emerson's writing. Like he would later argue in "Fate", Emerson is struggling with this idea of "double consciousness" as a solution to the mysteries of the human condition. Poetry, for Emerson, is a very private undertaking, especially with a subject as tragic and difficult as "Threnody". But Emerson is simultaneously trying to turn a private grief into a public manifestation through his poems. He is allowing the reader (the public) to view his private experience with grief, and hopefully to learn more about the human condition and the art of loss through his personal poetic process.

"Threnody" was written in two parts, beginning shortly after his son's death in January, 1842, and finished a couple of years later. The elegy was finally published in December, 1846. The Threnodic elegy is a specific type that many of these poems are

classified as; Emerson's "Threnody" is considered a pastoral elegy, having commonality with Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais" (Tuerk 108). "Threnody" depicts a nameless narrator and his journey through grief from the loss of his son, eventually causing him to confront his own death. The speaker of the poem, at times, comes to accept death as a natural part of the cycle of life.

In "Mythic Patterns of Reconciliation in Emerson's 'Threnody'", Richard Tuerk investigates Emerson's use of elegiac form as well as the ways he utilizes reconciliation in his poetry. Tuerk argues that explaining "Threnody" through the pastoral elegiac form and with Emerson's own personal experience is missing a great deal of the poem's significance. Emerson molds his experiences so that they can expand beyond the personal to attain "universal applicability" (1). Tuerk concludes that the poem's ending, where the narrator is reconciled to his loss through the words of another voice within the poem, allow for the poet's reconciliation to occur. This universal applicability is important for Emerson. This is what he saw in Wordsworth's *Excursion* and other poems on the "art of loss." Both writers attempt to create a philosophical debate through poetry applicable to others experiencing loss and trying to start the healing process.

Emerson's choice of form is significant because he has written an elegy rather than the more popular condolence poem in the 19th century. The elegy form often figures the poetic mourner as a child negotiating the loss of literal or literary parents. The elegy is traditionally defined as tracing a mourner's successful movement from loss to consolation (Chapman 78). "Threnody" dramatizes Emerson's struggle to depict himself as father and his refusal to remove the position of rebellious child that was often associated with his philosophy. Emerson avoids assuming the father role by taking

refuge in the conventions of the elegiac form. Emerson sets up Waldo as a poet-seer and predecessor for himself in the poem, and Emerson assumes the child-role. This transference of roles is similar to the dynamic that the young Wordsworth enacts in the "Esthwaite" poem. This probably contributed to Emerson's difficulty in processing his grief as he avoided his father position in his writing, a position his philosophy summarily rejects. The deep Heart figure of the second section is forced to take an authoritative role and borrows ideology from the Old Testament God, Fate, and Emerson's own minister Father. The second section reveals Emerson's melancholia and deep Heart chastises the speaker for his loss of faith (Porter 6). "The deep Heart answered, 'Weepest thou? / Worthier cause for passion, wild / if I had not taken the child. / And deemest thou as those who pore,/ with aged eyes, / short way before, / Thinks't Beauty vanished from the coast of matter, / and thy darling lost?'" Deep Heart's answer about the role of fate in our lives and the position of the divine sounds similar to the advice the Wanderer gives to the Solitary at the beginning of Book 4 of *The Excursion*: "One adequate support/ for the calamities of mortal life/ Exists, one only;-an assured belief/ that the procession of our fate, however/ sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being/ of infinite benevolence and power." (10-14) In both instances, a higher power is being questioned and while deep Heart takes the position as a deity, the Wanderer reminds the Solitary of the place of the divine.

In "'Threnody' and Emerson's Poetics of Failure," David Porter explores the relation of Emerson's poem about the loss of his son to his self-perceived failings as a poet. Porter argues that when Emerson's poetry failed, it was because of the internal concern with an ideal aesthetics that drained the poetry of its immediacy and personal

voice. Porter concludes that for Emerson, "the poems grasped only the experience, the structure of which was identical to the structure of a layered consciousness dividing its labors between talent and genius, between observation and artistic creation, and the obligation of which it was to convert the world to truth." (6) Emerson's essays succeeded where his poetry failed, grasping the dynamic reality of his imagination. Emerson is attempting to explore difficult aspects of the human condition through his poetry, rather than through prose. Emerson is already renowned as a writer of prose, but he chooses verse in "Threnody" to relate his personal loss to the public.

In "The Economics of Loss: Emerson's 'Threnody'", Mary Chapman researches Emerson's rejection of standard reflexive duties to father of his time, and instead, imagined a world one could possess through one's own perception. Chapman's essay examines the relationship between property and paternity, and on the economics of grief, looking at "Threnody" and the essay, "Experience", written shortly after the death of Waldo. Chapman argues "the trauma of 'Threnody' points out the ways in which Emerson's unresolved grief lay dormant, revived by the experience of a second loss that uncannily echoed the first. This troubling elegy dramatizes the melancholic processing of deaths." (86) Chapman concludes that the unmourned, or unsuccessfully mourned father is a type of "buried male muse". Emerson's inability to successfully mourn the earlier losses in his life (like Wordsworth) has come back to influence his psyche and his poetry.

The first several stanzas of the poem were written immediately following Waldo's death and the ending of the poem was finished about two years later as Emerson was finally gaining some perspective and acceptance of his son's fleeting existence.

Formally, the pastoral elegy deploys numerous elegiac conventions: the pastoral setting, the myth of a vegetation deity, the elegiac questioning, the outbreak of anger, the procession of mourners, and the tropes of weaving. The speaker and the poet are attempting to move from grief to consolation through verse. It is spoken by two voices, a eulogy, spoken by a grieving father, made up primarily of conversation fragments, journal entries, and written letters, and a consolation voice, deep Heart. The two separate voices are significant to the philosophical debate between the speaker and the deep Heart character. Like Wordsworth did in *The Excursion*, Emerson has utilized these voices as distinct facets of the debate he was waging in his own mind. Deep Heart is helping to correct the dejection that the speaker is feeling, much like the Wanderer tries to comfort the Solitary in *The Excursion*. The first section is informal, irregular, and inventive. The speaker/poet is alone, recalling memories of his lost son and commenting on his hopelessness at facing the remainder of his life alone. The first part is a multi-faceted discussion of grief with comments on God, nature, and love, and how all the universe is helpless in breaking the speaker's misery. In the first section, the poet/speaker laments, "O truth's and nature's costly lie! / O trusted broken prophecy! / O richest fortune sourly crossed! / Born for the future, to the future lost!" (164-168) The boy's death is depicted as truth and nature's lie, a broken prophecy, and the loss of a fortune. The speaker/poet feels that he cannot face the future if his son is not a part of it. The repetition serves to enhance the utter hopelessness the speaker is enduring.

The second part, with the second voice castigating the mourner, is more familiar to readers as the confident Emerson. In the last stanza of the poem, the more confident and hopeful speaker relates, "What is excellent, / As God lives, is permanent; / Hearts are

dust, hearts' loves remain; / Heart's love will meet thee again." (251-255) The speaker/poet concludes that because he still loves the lost child, that love will bring them together again. This resolution does not continue through the end of the poem, as the grieving speaker/poet is still experiencing doubt and dejection, but speaker of the second section is gradually more positive and understanding. Critics have often found "Threnody" problematic for being too static and never fully presenting reconciliation of the two voices (Porter 8). However, in light of Wordsworth's example and both writers' purpose in beginning the exchange on the art of loss, the lack of reconciliation is expected, as specific questions are asked, but answers are not always given.

In the final two paragraphs of the elegy poem there is a shift in voice through consolation. If the chief goal in mourning is to recover one's voice, manifest in elegy by inheriting the voice of the poet, "Threnody" renders Emerson's grieving melancholic and incomplete. The second section is overly dogmatic and metrically insistent. And Deep Heart's consolations sound closer to the Old Testament or Puritan theology than to the radically new Transcendentalism. This relates back to Wordsworth's influence, as Wordsworth's poetry became more and more traditionally religious in his later years. This trust in the divine is like what deep Heart is asking for in "Threnody". The tone of the final two paragraphs of verse is that of an angry father correcting his child (Chapman 84). This ambiguity could be the result of the difficulty that Emerson was still feeling, even a few years removed from Waldo's death. There are several competing ideologies in the poem. Emerson's noted optimism and personal philosophy is at war with his traditionally religious roots as a Calvinist preacher and theologian. His faith is battling with his doubt and sadness from the loss of his son as well as the revisitation of the other

losses in his life. Emerson and the speaker are being pulled and influenced from several angles and perspectives, which suggests the confusion of his verse. At the end of the poem, the speaker relates, "Silent rushes the swift Lord, /through ruined systems still restored, / broadsowing, bleak and void to bless, / plants with words the wilderness; / Waters with tears of ancient sorrow, / apples of Eden ripe tomorrow. House and tenant go to ground, / Lost in God, in Godhead found." He is lost in God and found in God. From his verse it is clear that the speaker (and Emerson) have made some progress through acceptance of the loss and commemoration of the life of Waldo. The battle is not won, however, and struggle with grief, doubt, and the competing pull of differing theologies on his life will be forever present. *The Excursion* ends in a similar manner as the Poet questions, "What renovation had been brought; and what/ Degree of healing to a wounded spirit, / Dejected." (784-785) Wordsworth, like Emerson, is questioning the efficacy of the answers that have been given. The Poet relates, "and whether aught, of tendency as good/ and pure, from further intercourse ensued; / This, inspire the serious song, and gentle hearts cherish." (790-792) The Poet argues that further intercourse should ensue from this philosophical debate among the characters of *The Excursion*. Similarly, deep Heart and the dejected speaker of "Threnody" begin a similar discussion on the art of loss.

Patrick Keane argues that Emerson and Wordsworth engaged in related struggles in their dealing with loss, mourning, and trying to hold onto hope through despondency. Emerson saw Wordsworth's struggle in the *Intimations Ode*, certain passages from *The Prelude*, and especially, *The Excursion*. Emerson had previously shown an obliviousness to the pain of losing those he loved until Waldo's death, and his final affirmation of the

"art of loss" is colored by consolation he found in Wordsworth's poetry. Emerson often quoted and wrote of Wordsworth's assertion "not without hope we suffer and we mourn" from "Elegiac Stanzas" (398).

It was paramount for Emerson that he holds onto some form of optimism and hope despite the pain he was feeling. In the wake of Waldo's death, he records in his journal, "I am defeated all the time, yet to victory am I born." In his essay, "Tragedy", Emerson recalls Wordsworth's "stream of tendency" form of optimism when he asserts, "The spirit is true to itself, and finds its own support in any condition, learns to live in what is called calamity, as easily as in what is called felicity, as the frailest glass-bell will support a weight of a thousand pounds of water at the bottom of a river or sea, if filled with the same." (517-518) Emerson feels that a man should not commit his tranquility to things, but should keep control of his situation whenever possible, avoiding extreme emotion of joy and grief. Waldo's death is, according to many critics, the transformative event in Emerson's life and career, the point at which affirmation yielded to resignation, freedom to fate. Emerson was then forced to practice a type of demanding optimism because that was all he could muster, at the time. The optimism that Emerson is able to work toward resembles the hard fought "mighty stream of tendency" that Wordsworth's Wanderer practices in *The Excursion*. The Wanderer is, at times, trying to help the Solitary deal with his suffering by relying not on organized religion or family, but finding solace within his own vision of life. Wordsworth's Wanderer explains in Book 9 of *The Excursion*, that with experience that comes with age, we can attain an eminence, where we may find conferred upon us, "fresh power to commune with the invisible world, / and hear the mighty stream of tendency uttering, / for elevation of our thought, a clear,

sonorous voice, / inaudible to the vast multitude." (81-92) Similarly, Emerson recorded his approval of this privileged perspective, that of a poet "represented as listening in pious silence to hear the mighty stream of Tendency" in his journal, shortly after Waldo's death. He also utilizes Wordsworth's phrase in his essay "Art" (Keane 414).

Emerson repeatedly turned to "The Prospectus" to *The Recluse* during his grieving. This first section of *The Excursion* tells of the poet's principal theme, he will sing, "of truth, of grandeur, beauty, Love, and Hope, / and melancholy fear subdued by faith; /of blessed consolation in distress." (14-16) Consolation in distress formed a notable portion of Wordsworth's value to innumerable British and American readers in the 19th century, who benefited, like Emerson, from what Matthew Arnold called Wordsworth's "healing power" (Keane 403). Emerson went as far as to say that Wordsworth's total value came from his ability to heal others through his poetry. Healing power took the form of renewed creative power for Emerson, through Wordsworth's example.

Wordsworth's healing power was far reaching. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, M.H. Abrams writes an entire chapter about Wordsworth as Evangelist to other writers. William James, a friend of Emerson, says that his reading of *The Excursion* was instrumental, in his pivotal recovery from psychological crisis in the spring of 1873 (134-140) Abrams does not mention Emerson in this chapter, but it is apparent that Wordsworth's effect on Emerson was at least as powerful as his support to James. William James did not share Emerson's optimism in his own life, yet he also drew comfort from the 19th- century's major philosophic poem of despondency and recovery, *The Excursion*. In addition to *The Excursion*, Emerson calls the *Intimations Ode* "our

best modern essay on the mystery of immortality". The human suffering that Wordsworth is feeling in the Ode because of the loss of a childhood wonder and innocence, is important to Emerson in his own circumstance. Both men were sometimes accused by critics of achieving calm by avoiding obstacles to their optimism. Emerson aligns himself with Wordsworth, remarking that one should speak the affirmative; emphasize your choice by utter ignoring of all that you reject. Emerson's optimism, like Wordsworth, is helped by a neglect of the facets of life that detract from positivity.

Books 4 and 9 of *The Excursion* were of immense importance to William James and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Wordsworth's insistence on the triumph of hope over despair was the major themes of both of these books. Emerson's favorite passage was from the Fourth Book where the Wanderer tells the Solitary that within us "a faculty abides", threatened by darkness that serve but to exalt the soul's "native brightness". Wordsworth's Wanderer asserts the power of this faculty to save us from "the encumbrances of mortal life, / from error, disappointment-nay, from guilt; / and sometimes, so relenting justice wills, / from palpable oppressions of despair." (1072-1077) No matter how difficult his circumstances, Emerson was comforted by the conviction he shared with Wordsworth: a moral law which shone through this cruel world. And that despondency could be defeated through the power of the individual character, discussed in no less than three of Emerson's major essays (Keane 422). Like Wordsworth, Emerson was secure in the belief that, amid the selfishness and cruelties encountered in life, no malignity would prevail against us.

Joel Pace argues that the image of the young man and the Wanderer of *The Excursion* as Emerson and Wordsworth seem to be the perfect analogy for explaining the

relationship between the two. The words of the young man to the Wanderer sums up the cathartic effect of Wordsworth on Emerson, and also summarizes the emotional cleansing of one poet's thoughts to another (16). Wordsworth instructs Emerson in the way of emotionally understanding death and the loss of loved ones. Emerson found a consolation in the rational idealism of the narrator in *The Excursion* who holds that "Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind, / that what we feel of sorrow and despair from ruin and from change, / and all the grief that passing shews of being leave behind, / appeared in an idle dream, / that could not live where meditation was." (Book 1 985-990) Emerson saw the power of solitary thought in these words, which helped him to process the difficult emotions that were overpowering him. In his journal, Emerson recalls, "states of mind that perhaps I had long lost before this grief. Them shall I ever revisit? I refer now to last evening's lively remembrance of the scattered company who have ministered to my highest wants. They are to me what the Wanderer in *The Excursion* is to the poet. And Wordsworth's total value is of this kind." (Pace 22)

We find traces of Wordsworth's influence through Emerson's Journals as well as parts of his essays. Yet the relationship between the Wanderer and the Poet in *The Excursion* is the best example of Emerson's own character dynamic in "Threnody", and the closest evidence of Emerson writing with and against Wordsworth. Just as the Wanderer instructs the Poet and the Solitary about the ways to handle dejection, death, mourning, and healing, Emerson's deep Heart helps the poet/speaker through his difficult time. The characters in both poems helped to initiate the philosophical debate on the human condition that each writer wanted to instigate. The character dynamic also helped two poets to navigate the tension between a "double consciousness" of private grief and

public poetry writing. Ultimately, Emerson was writing with and against his British elder, Wordsworth, and even while he wanted to form his own literary tradition as an American, he still looked to Wordsworth in experiencing and writing about the "art of loss."

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