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Poetry: Applying the Principles of "Preface"

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in English at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, May 2002

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Introduction

It would be hard to identify a brother and a sister in literary history closer and more dependent upon each other than William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and his beloved sister Dorothy (1771-1855). Only eighteen months younger than William, Dorothy devoted her life to caring for him and helping him in whatever way she could, but particularly in his poetic endeavors. When their parents died early in her life, she was separated from her three brothers and raised by different relatives, but she and William, her favorite brother, always dreamed of living together. In 1795, their dream came true, and they set up housekeeping together in Racedown. From then on, they lived the rest of their lives together, even after his marriage. Outliving William by five years, she suffered from dementia the last twenty years of her life and required constant care by her family members.

It was on January 20, 1798, while the Wordsworths lived in Alfoxden, that Dorothy began keeping her journals. These entries not only give insight into the life of one of England's greatest poets, but also define her as a writer in her own right, albeit in a different genre. The journals record their days spent in walking the countryside, visiting friends, reading and writing letters, maintaining a household, and, in the meantime, feeding, recording, and revising the creative energy that resulted in William's finest hours as a poet of nature. According to Dorothy's biography by Robert Gittings and Jo Manton, *Dorothy Wordsworth*, no one is really sure why she began her journals or if anyone suggested she do so, although in her journal entry of May 14, 1800, Dorothy writes, "I resolved to write a journal of the time till W. and J. return, and I set about keeping my resolve, because I will not quarrel with myself, and because I shall give Wm. Pleasure by

it when he comes home again” (de Selincourt 37). From the beginning, Dorothy’s journal has as much to do with her brother—giving “Wm. Pleasure”—as with herself. Even in her hobbies, she seems unable to separate her self from his.

The close relationship between the writings of Dorothy and William and their interdependence are evident from the beginning of her journal-writing because William copied the first four sentences of Dorothy’s first journal into his own notebook (Gittings and Manton 77). Even such a small event as sharing a journal entry is an example of Dorothy’s total devotion to William, and later his wife and children, a devotion which defined her life. Nowhere in her journals is there any evidence of a desire on her part to withhold anything she writes. She offered her writing freely to her brother and let him create with it what he would. He dipped into her journals often and throughout the years used them as “raw material for at least 35 of [his] poems,” according to Susan Levine (172).

In the preface to *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, Ernest de Selincourt calls Dorothy “probably the most remarkable and the most distinguished of English writers who never wrote a line for the general public” (v). Although her journals fill two thick volumes, she did not publish during her lifetime and was content with a writing life of relative obscurity, only publishing some poems anonymously in William’s books. Perhaps she was somewhat overwhelmed by the genius of the poetic company, including their good friend and companion Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in which she found herself, or perhaps her quiet, self-effacing personality did not allow her to seek the notoriety the other poets sought. Even when her friends the Clarksons urged her to let them publish her account of the tragedy of a Green family in 1808, she refused, claiming that “the events

were too recent, the publicity might harm the children and ‘I should detest the idea of setting myself up as an Author’” (Gittings and Manton 187-88).

Whatever the reason, Dorothy was content to stay in the background of her brother’s career and to record events and scenes in prose that is descriptive and narrative but only at times touches on the poetical. Even in her writing, she took a seat in the background, never inserting herself into a scene and only seldom intruding upon the scene with her emotions. Her talent lay in the close observation of the nature and life around her and her family and an ability to describe these observations in prose. If Dorothy had been anyone other than the sister of the poet who defined English Romanticism, her journal entry about spying a field of daffodils might be all that history has to record the event: “When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up [. . .] I never saw daffodils so beautiful” (131).

From this shared event, William takes her carefully recorded memory and adds it to his own to use as fodder for one of his most famous poems, “I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud” (Perkins 293).

Although he bases his poem on Dorothy’s account of the scene noted above, William sees beyond the physical beauty of the daffodils. The flowers “flash upon the inward eye” (21) and become “the bliss of solitude” (22). They imprint his soul and are transformed into an emotion for him. Not just the casual traveler beside his sister on the road, he is the poet who can wring meaning from even the tiniest flower. The color and appearance of the flowers are not important. What is important to him is what the flowers

make him feel and what emotion they call forth from him. They are the source that makes his heart “with pleasure fill” (23) and “dance with the daffodils” (24). As a prose writer in her journals, Dorothy records every detail of her life shared with her brother, even down to the washing of her hair and the bleaching of the sheets. As a poet, though, William tells us what such details and events *mean* to him, enabling his readers to feel what he believes they should mean to humanity in general.

To William was left the interpretation of the scenes of nature and human nature Dorothy so meticulously recorded. His talent lay in conveying poetically the spirit that he sensed in nature, which he explains in such poems as “Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey.” He writes:

And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought
 And rolls through all things. (92-102)

It is these subjective musings that are found throughout the poetry he bases on Dorothy’s objective prose. With rare exception, her writing remains devoid of any introspection or self-analysis. Her writings are rife with details of the outward forms and functions of the

daily life she lives but lack the emotional depth that William's poems provide. Typical of this lack of emotions is her journal entry of April 9, 1802, in which she writes, "Mrs. C. planting. Sent off letters. A windy morning—rough lake—sun shines—very cold—a windy night. Walked in Dunmallet, marked our names in a tree" (130). Her description is sparse and objective and says nothing about how the windy day makes her feel or even why marking their names in a tree was important enough for her to record.

Dorothy is in the background of her writing but never on the stage in the spotlight as William is. Although she writes in the first person as she records the details of their lives, she reveals very little about her emotions, and one is left to draw the connection between the details she has chosen and what her emotions might be. A most telling example is her account of William's marriage. She records simply:

At a little after 8 o'clock I saw them go down the avenue towards the church. William had parted from me upstairs. When they were absent my dear little Sara prepared the breakfast. I kept myself as quiet as I could, but when I saw the two men running up the walk, coming to tell us it was over, I could stand it no longer, and threw myself on the bed, where I lay in stillness, neither hearing or seeing anything till Sara came upstairs, and said, "They are coming". This forced me from the bed where I lay, and I moved, I knew not how, straight forward, faster than my strength could carry me, till I met my beloved William, and fell upon his bosom. (176)

This passage has flouted critics since it was written because of its lack of emotional explication at certainly a most emotional time in Dorothy's life. But there are no answers offered by Dorothy as to why she didn't go to the wedding or how she felt about her

“beloved” William marrying her “dear” Mary (176). This vignette is about her and one of the most poignant moments of her life, but she chooses to describe this wrenching experience only by relating her actions and not by discussing her feelings. Even in this supremely emotional moment, she steps back and writes as an objective observer. Ehnmen describes it as the difference between being the “objective I” as Dorothy is and the “subjective I” as William is. Dorothy writes as an observer of what is happening around her, and, although she uses first person, she is not within her poetry emotionally as William is. He, on the other hand, is everywhere in his poetry as the “subjective I.” His concern is himself as a poet, and he chooses his subjects according to what has meaning to him and what can best illustrate what he is feeling inside (76).

Considering how close the brother and sister were and the similar circumstances they daily shared and wrote about, how then could they relate the same scenes or events in such diverse ways? William Wordsworth’s “Preface” to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* answers that question. In the preface, William offers a thorough, almost defensive, account of how poetry ought to be created and defined. He delineates four poetic principles, each of which can be seen in poems that have subjects first seen in Dorothy’s journal. He argues that a poet should choose incidents from everyday life as subject matter yet throw over them “a certain colouring of the imagination” (321); that poetry should be written in language “really used by man” (321); that poetry is the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” by one who “had also thought long and deeply” (321); and that poetry is also “emotion recollected in tranquillity” (328). When Wordsworth applied these principles to the prose that his sister recorded, his poetry was

born. With his poet's eye, he looks beyond the minutiae of everyday life she records and creates a poem that reveals what he sees in nature.

Chapter 1: A Departure from "Poetic Diction"

In a bold claim that marks an immediate departure from the often ornate poetry that has preceded his, Wordsworth proposes in "Preface" to "choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men" (321). He is adamant that the common language of common men is the best means to convey the passions of the characters about whom he chooses to write and who were the common men and women he and his sister met and talked to every day. Suddenly leech-gatherers, orphans, wayward children, and beggars become the subjects of poetry and their humble language the vehicle for speaking about them. He explains that "humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity [. . .] [and] the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of Nature" (321).

Wordsworth admires the simplicity and character of the country life. To him, rustic people are more closely "incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of Nature" (321). To describe such characters and incidents, he chooses a language that, in its simplicity, contains "little of which is usually called poetic diction." He writes:

There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; as much pains has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it; this has been done for the reason already alleged, to bring my language near to the language of men [. . .] (323)

William wants to restore the bond "between the poet's heart and the poet's voice, between natural response and versified expression," according to Heffernan (34-35). To

Wordsworth, there was no choice; if he was going to write about the common people then certainly he must write in their language, however different that might be from the poetry that had been written before.

This deliberate decision, however, to write in the common language of the common people resulted in often angry claims from his critics that he was writing a poetry that often sounded closer to prose than poetry. He defends his position later in "Preface" with the surprising assertion there is little difference in the poetry he proposes to write and good prose. He writes,

[. . .] a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise [. . .] some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written. (323)

Wordsworth thus proposes to write poetry that uses the common language of real men, avoids poetic diction, and differs only slightly from good prose. The question, of course, one many of Wordsworth's contemporary critics posed angrily to him, is how such principles could lead to poetry at all. Can this element of Wordsworth's poetic theory, in other words, be put into practice?

We can derive an answer to this question by comparing Wordsworth's poetic rendering of an event in his poem "Alice Fell" (Perkins 277-278) which Dorothy also captured in her journal, namely, the story of a little orphan named Alice Fell. In this poem, Wordsworth successfully writes poetry that has as its unremarkable subject a little orphan girl and is written in the language of the common people.

The story behind this poem is found in Dorothy's journal entry for February 16, 1802. She writes of a visitor, a Mr. Graham, who related to them the story of his riding in a post-chaise the day before when he heard a "strange cry that he could not understand."

Dorothy continues:

[. . .] the sound continued, and he called to the chaise driver to stop. It was a little girl that was crying as if her heart would burst. She had got up behind the chaise, and her cloak had been caught by the wheel, and was jammed in, and it hung there. She was crying after it. Poor thing. Mr. Graham took her into the chaise, and the cloak was released from the wheel, but the child's misery did not cease, for her cloak was torn to rags; it had been a miserable cloak before, but she had no other, and it was the greatest sorrow that could befall her. Her name was Alice Fell. She had no parents, and belonged to the next town. At the next town, Mr. G. left money with some respectable people in the town, to buy her a new cloak. (115).

Dorothy relates this story in stark, sparse language. There is no description of what the little girl looked like or whether or not anyone at the scene comforted her. For Mr. Graham to know that she had no parents and came from another town, he must have spoken to her. But, did he hold her? Did he offer her any physical comfort at all? It is the middle of February; obviously the weather is cold. Did he offer his own cloak to keep her warm?

Dorothy gives just the bare facts, leaving the assumption that she asked Mr. Graham for no further details. The only time her relation of the event moves beyond the

mere facts is when she comments about the little girl, "Poor thing." We know Dorothy is often moved by the plight of the poor people around her, for she frequently gives money to beggars, even more than she thinks she can afford (143). But, if she is moved to pity by the tale of the little girl who lost her cloak, she expresses it in two words only. No further mention is made of the story until almost a month later—March 13—when Dorothy suddenly records that "William finished 'Alice Fell' " (114).

"Alice Fell" is a simple poem from the pen of William. In it he takes the place of Mr. Graham and becomes the person who is riding in the chaise and hears the cries of the little girl. But differences between his and Dorothy's account begin with the title of the poem, which he subtitles "Poverty." Wordsworth wants to tell a story about a little girl, who was an orphan, one of society's sad characters. But his subtitle reveals he wants to do more as a poet than just tell the story of one little Alice Fell. He wants to bring to his readers an incident that will open their eyes to the condition of those suffering in poverty around them. He also wants to teach the readers through the actions of the narrator of the poem what a proper response to seeing such a pitiable situation would be. Dorothy's version shows what the actions of one man are to the situation; indeed, as with Dorothy's relation, William's version depicts the actions of a single man in response to a pathetic situation. With the addition of the subtitle, however, the story becomes universal and can apply to any of the people who wandered the roads of England at that time as poor, hungry, and alone as Alice was.

There was, in fact, no end to the poor who peopled the countryside of the Lake District and with whom William and Dorothy repeatedly crossed paths in their

meanderings. Gittings and Manton in *Dorothy Wordsworth* calls Dorothy “a faithful witness of the lot of the poor at a time of exceptional hardship” (116). They write:

The times conspired against these ragged walkers. Domestic spinners and weavers found their hand work undercut by machinery, which could be minded by eight-year-olds at two shillings and sixpence a week. Farm labourers lost cottages, vegetable plots, and right to grazing or fuel-cutting under farm enclosure schemes. (116)

Dorothy served as William’s “faithless witness” to such people, one of whom is Alice Fell. Unlike her, however, William is able to use one little figure to represent all those impoverished by the hard economic times. Gary Harrison in *Wordsworth’s Vagrant Muse* writes of the ulterior motive William had for writing “Alice Fell” when he includes the poem in a list of Wordsworth’s poems “which appeal to the need for private charity and point to the injustice of the Poor Laws—Wordsworth attempts to restore dignity to those degraded by the material practices of a laissez-faire system of poor relief” (132). He then becomes an interpreter of the event and through his talents translates one single happening into one of universal meaning. Both Dorothy’s and William’s respective parts in such a work are important, though, since, without both, the work would not have been accomplished.

One of the ways that Wordsworth appeals to his readers’ charity and portrays the poem’s characters is by using the common language that Alice and other such victims of poverty would use. Since Wordsworth wants this poem to be about Alice and, in a larger sense, all poor people, he uses the language that will keep the story of Alice at the forefront of the poem and not draw too much attention to the poetry and, thus, to the poet.

While other poets, especially those of earlier ages, use the type of poetic language Wordsworth calls in "Preface" the "arbitrary and capricious habits of expression" (321), the story of Alice Fell is best told in the stark simplicity befitting her stark existence. She is a common person, and the narrator is a common person (why else would he be riding in a public chaise?), so it stands to reason that their story is best told in the language of the common people.

At times, William's diction in "Alice Fell" is as simple as that of Dorothy. She describes Alice's cry as "a strange sound that he could not understand" (114) while he describes it as "a startling sound" (4). Dorothy describes the condition of the cloak as follows: "Her cloak had been caught by the wheel, and was jammed in, and it hung there." William writes of the cloak:

I saw it in the wheel entangled,
 A weather-beaten rag as e'er
 From any garden scare-crow dangled.
 There, twisted between nave and spoke,
 It hung, nor could at once be freed;
 But our joint pains unloosed the cloak,
 A miserable rag indeed. (26-32)

His initial simile in the poem compares Alice's cloak to a scarecrow—a common, rustic object. In fact, William uses just the right familiar comparison that would readily invoke recognition and, he hopes, passion in his readers. The community of that day would quickly recall the sight of a poor, tattered scarecrow hanging forlornly and alone in a field and be able to transfer that image to Alice. People accustomed to riding in wagons and

chaises would also be familiar with such terms as “nave” and “spoke.” Words such as “beaten,” “twisted,” “pains,” and “miserable” accurately describe the poor people of Wordsworth’s time who suffered daily from want and hunger.

William and Dorothy’s similar diction continues as Dorothy writes, “Mr. Graham took her into the chaise” while William as narrator writes, “Then come with me into the chaise.” Dorothy explains the orphaned state of Alice as follows: “Her name was Alice Fell. She had no parents, and belonged to the next town” (115). William writes, “My name is Alice Fell. / I am fatherless and motherless” (43-44). Again, Dorothy writes, “At the next town, Mr. G. left money with some respectable people in the town, to buy her a new cloak” (115), while William writes, “And I gave money to the host, / To buy a new cloak for the old” (55-56). The lines between the diction of the sister’s prose and the brother’s poetry are blurred, indeed, in “Alice Fell.”

Although the diction may be the same, however, there is a difference in the way Dorothy and William relate the same tale, one which makes Dorothy’s account so completely prose and William’s account poetry. William adds a rhyme scheme and meter to the simple diction he has borrowed from Dorothy. In doing so, he remains true to his desire to write in the language of the common people, yet elevates his tale to poetry.

In fact, Wordsworth contends that the addition of rhyme and meter to a poem is needed to convey the passions of the characters and to offset the pain readers might feel upon reading poetry, such as “Alice Fell.” In “Preface,” he writes,

Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme and metre of the same or similar

construction, an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely—all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling always found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions. (329)

Wordsworth is not giving up his pursuit of writing poetry that is in the common language of men. He just moves over a little in his definition, closer to the middle of a literary fence, and says that he will use a “language *closely resembling* that of real life” (italics added). The poetry will use the diction of common people and will lack the usual artificiality of poetic language; however, the addition of rhyme and meter will add to its pleasure. He tries to walk a fine line between a poetry that is burdensome to its readers because it is too “poetic” and a poetry that lacks any beauty of language or form. He assumes that his reader brings with him some experience in reading poetry with rhyme and meter, which has brought pleasure in the past and admits that the feeling of delight is indeed “complex.” Such explanation, of course, saves him from having to explain it fully.

Wordsworth wants to make sure that readers will not be so overwhelmed by the sad situation of Alice that they shut down emotionally and refuse to respond to the need of the poor if the situation ever arises. The pleasure of the rhyme and meter acts as a weight that balances the pathos of the situation of Alice Fell. Wordsworth writes that “there can be little doubt but that more pathetic situations and sentiments, that is, those which have a greater proportion of pain associated with them, may be endured in metrical composition, especially in rhyme, than in prose” (328). With the use of meter and rhyme

in “Alice Fell,” the reader is one step removed from the sadness of a poor little girl as he hears her story through the medium of poetry. Wordsworth hopes that with such a detachment the reader will respond to the more universal plight of the poor.

Wordsworth takes his simple sentences written in the language of common men and arranges them in an ABAB rhyme scheme within each stanza. He writes in the second stanza:

As if the wind blew many ways,
I heard the sound—and more and more;
It seemed to follow with the chaise,
And still I heard it as before. (5-8)

The second stanza could be written easily as prose: “As if the wind blew many ways, I heard the sound—and more and more. It seemed to follow with the chaise, and still I heard it as before.” Wordsworth is writing poetry that is poetic but not overly so. His poem is written in almost perfect iambic pentameter, yet the caesura in the middle of line six provides an unexpected break, forcing the line to sound more prosaic than poetic. He proves himself true to his philosophies that it is acceptable for poetry to sound like prose.

One problem in establishing this particular rhyme scheme, though, is that several times the sentences must be inverted to contrive the rhyme. Whereas the “common” way to state the sentence in the first line of the third stanza would be “At length I called out to the boy,” Wordsworth must write “At length I to the boy called out” to retain the integrity of his rhyme scheme. For Wordsworth, such small poetic shifts in syntax contribute to the pleasure he contends rhyme adds to a poem. At the same time, however, such shifts do

not overwhelm the reader with their cleverness and artifice, which might distract the reader from the lesson of the poem.

Wordsworth also apparently departs from his restrictions on “artificial” poetic devices in his use of meter. He defends his use of meter in “Preface” as he explains why he chooses to write in poetry instead of prose: “...why should I be condemned for attempting to superadd to such description, the charm which, by the consent of all nations, is acknowledged to exist in metrical language?” (Perkins 327). He calls upon the whole world (“consent of all nations”) to stand behind him in support of his use of meter and continues, “a very small part of the pleasure given by Poetry depends upon the metre” (327). M.H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* writes about the apparent dual dictums Wordsworth proposes for the use of meter in poetry:

For Wordsworth, the justification of the use of poetic meter had proved a particularly troublesome problem because, although the natural language of feeling may be broadly rhythmical, the use in poetry of highly regular stress and stanza patterns would seem a matter not of nature, but of artifice and convention. (116)

It is this artifice and convention that Wordsworth is trying to distance himself from in explaining the poetry he is writing. As Abrams explains, earlier poetry considered “figurative language and meter [. . .] primarily ornaments used to heighten the aesthetic pleasure” of poetry (102). Wordsworth feels, however, that meter can be used in poetry not as an “ornament” to the poem but as a means to temper the passions of the poem. The meter should not call attention to itself or trumpet the poet’s talent at contriving language but should elevate the level of common language to a more pleasurable height.

Wordsworth in no way tries to fool his readers into thinking his poetry, written in the language of men, is going to be devoid of some of the usual conventions of poetry, such as rhyme and meter. He makes it clear in "Preface" and in his poetry that his rules are quite flexible. In fact, in the second sentence of "Preface," he describes his experiment in poetry as "fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation" (320). With careful usage within the confines of "common language," meter arises naturally, not artificially. The lines "I am Alice Fell. / I am motherless and fatherless" are certainly common language, yet the words drop naturally into the iambic tetrameter of the poem.

Heffernan writes that Wordsworth's use of meter in poetry even as he proclaims that he will speak in the language of the common man is "a compromise between aesthetic obligation and the 'real language of men.'" Heffernan says Wordsworth cannot outwardly admit that meter is "integral to the production of poetry" because its use would open the door to other artifices of poetry he detested. However, he must admit that meter lends pleasure to the reading of poetry, which Wordsworth feels is one of the main aims of poetry. Wordsworth, then, is left with "a single alternative." The use of meter to Wordsworth is justified because the pleasure it brings is not controlled by the poet but by the past association of the reader with poetic meter (45-46).

Wordsworth, indeed, uses meter in "Alice Fell" as a way to invoke pleasure remembered from the previous reading of meter, tempering the pain the reader must feel upon reading the story of the cloakless orphan girl. The iambic tetrameter also moves the story along quickly, which also allows little time for feeling intense emotions. The first stanza seems to move as quickly as the hurrying chaise:

The post-boy drove with fierce career,
For threatening clouds the moon had drowned;
When, as we hurried on, my ear
Was smitten with a startling sound. (1-4)

The second stanza seems even more frantic:

As if the wind blew many ways,
I heard the sound--and more and more;
It seemed to follow with the chaise,
And still I heard it as before. (5-9)

The frenzy stops abruptly in the third stanza as the boy stops the horses and, in line eleven, a series of commas breaks up the rapid pace of the meter: "But neither cry, nor voice, nor shout. But when the narrator is unable to see the source of the sound, the chaise once more takes to the road as mirrored in the meter.

As the sound is heard again, however, and the narrator finally locates the source of the sound, the meter helps temper the sad situation of Alice, as Wordsworth proposes it should. In the tenth stanza, the language is simple, the emotions are gut-wrenching, yet the meter remains pleasurable:

Insensible to all relief
Sat the poor girl, and forth did send
Sob after sob, as if her grief
Could never, never have an end. (37-40)

This description is quite different from Dorothy's two-word "poor thing" describing the grief of the girl. Yet, William does not so overwhelm readers with the pathos of the

situation that they pull back, unwilling to involve themselves emotionally and forgo the usual pleasure associated with the reading of poetry. Instead, largely through his use of meter, he makes the reading of the poem pleasurable, especially the rhythmical phrase “as if her grief / Could never, never have an end” with its repetition of the word “never” and the repetition in “sob after sob.”

According to Stephen Parrish in *The Art of the “Lyrical Ballads,”* Wordsworth’s good friend and critic Samuel Coleridge found “Alice Fell” to be one of five poems of Wordsworth’s that he found “so plain that they would have been ‘more delightful’ to him in prose” (136). Through Wordsworth’s use of rhyme and meter, however, the poem is able to elevate a small story written in common language into a pleasurable poem. It is a perfect example of his poetic theory at work, transforming his sister’s prose account of a little girl into a poem that not only causes pleasure but also serves as a guideline to how an individual should relate to an opportunity to serve a fellow human being.

Chapter 2: "Emotions Recollected in Tranquillity"

In "Preface," Wordsworth also directs his attention to the origins of poetic inspiration as he explains that poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity" (328). The creation of his poem "I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud" is an example of the application of this principle and illustrates again the difference between the way Dorothy records a scene or a story and how William uses that experience as a poet. With a subject as simple as he uses in "Alice Fell," he turns to the emotions of joy this time and chronicles the process of how a poet can recreate the emotions of the original event inspiring him, even when a significant passage of time has occurred.

Dorothy relates the event as follows in her journal entry of April 15, 1802:

When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last, under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful.

They grew among the mossy stones about and about them; some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness, and the rest tossed and reeled and danced, and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake; they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing. This wind blew directly over the lake to them. There was here and there a little knot, and a few stragglers a few yards

higher up; but they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity, unity, and life of that one busy highway. (131-32)

In a departure from her usual dry narrative viewpoint, Dorothy gives the daffodils life and personifies them as resting their heads, laughing, and dancing. Since neither she nor her brother was in the habit of using such poetic devices, the scene must have struck her with more force than one earlier in the day when she merely listed the flowers they saw—woodsorrel flower, anemones, and pile wort—with no attempt to describe them.

Perhaps the daffodils were memorable because of the events of the days before they were sighted. The two days before the daffodil scene, Dorothy records that she had not slept well and had returned to bed in the afternoon. She was surprised when William appeared after having been gone for seven days, but, feeling tired, he retired and stayed in bed all the next day. Describing herself as “ill, out of spirits, disheartened,” Dorothy finds the highlight of her day was when she and William went for a walk in the rain. The next day they walked with the weather “threatening” and “the wind furious” (131). It was after they crossed a field to avoid some cows that they were taken aback by the scene of the daffodils. They finished their walk, often resting, but were soaked with the rain by the time they reached the inn where they were to spend the night.

As Dorothy looked back on that day to record it in her journal, the daffodils must have stood out as a splash of spring color and spirit against the gloom of the rainy day and “rough” lake. Since she records that she and William were in the woods when they saw the daffodils and not on a road, the “one, busy highway” she mentions at the end of this account surely refers back to her description of the field of daffodils as a “country turnpike.” She sees in that highway of daffodils “simplicity, unity, and life,” using a

description which is another departure from her usual refusal to comment on what a scene might symbolize to her. Since William was only months away from his marriage to Mary and was often working in a frenzy writing poetry, perhaps Dorothy was longing for a time when life was simpler, her health was better, and William was hers alone. William and she were alone the day they spotted the daffodils, and for whatever reason, Dorothy allows much more emotion—much more of herself—to creep into her retelling of this event.

While Dorothy records her reaction to this scene immediately, William waits two years until he draws upon her written memory of the scene to write the poem “I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud.” Given William’s refusal to separate poetry entirely from prose and Dorothy’s unusual poetic bent in her particular journal account, it is not surprising that his first two stanzas are not that different from Dorothy’s prose narrative:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
 That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
 When all at once I saw a crowd,
 A host, of golden daffodils:
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
 Continuous as the stars that shine
 And twinkle on the milky way,
 They stretched in never-ending line
 Along the margin of a bay:

Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance. (1-12)

For once, William's and Dorothy's accounts rely on similar poetic devices, even though later in the poem, as we shall see, their accounts diverge as his description complies to his particular definition of poetry. At first, like Dorothy, he also uses personification and describes the daffodils as a "crowd," then as a "host," and as "fluttering and dancing in the breeze" (3-6). He also writes about their "heads" as Dorothy did. Dorothy describes them as resting their heads upon mossy stones, while he describes them as "tossing their heads in sprightly dance" (12). Both of the writers personify the daffodils as being happy. Dorothy writes that they "verily laughed with the wind [. . .] they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing" (131). He writes, "The waves beside them danced; but they / Out-did the sparkling waves in glee" (13-14). Both accounts also include the lake, with Dorothy's daffodils joining in one image with the lake as they "laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake." But William's images stayed separate as the waves only danced "beside" the flowers.

This relationship of the flowers to the lake is indicative of the differing voices in the two narratives. Dorothy's depiction is a shared experience. Except for the short sentence when she declares, "I never saw daffodils so beautiful," her experience is told in the plural: "*We* fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as *we* went along there were more and yet more; . . . *we* saw that there was a long belt of them"(131; italics added). Although she, characteristically, does not place herself in the scene and tell us how the daffodils make her feel or what they did to her spirits on that gloomy day, it is still a sight she shared with her beloved

brother. She could easily have written, "They lifted my spirits after the dreariness of the last few days. I experienced a moment of happiness." But, as usual, she does not. However much the scene has affected her, she refuses to put herself into the middle of it as Dorothy. She insists on being only half of the narrative voice and blending herself once again with her brother.

To William, however, the voice is a singular one. In fact, the very first word in the poem is "I." This hints that the poem is not about the daffodils but is about what the daffodils mean to the poet and that, in the Romantic tradition, the poet is the central figure in the poem. In keeping with William's belief that poetry is "emotions recollected in tranquillity," it is the poet's reaction to the scene that is important, not the daffodils themselves. As Carlos Baker writes in "Sensation and Vision in Wordsworth," Wordsworth records the natural scenes "not for themselves but for what his mind could learn through the stimuli they offered" (105).

Though the first two stanzas and the first two lines of the third record the natural scene much as Dorothy does, William is merely setting us up for the real subject of the poem. He is asking and answering: What emotions did this scene leave me with? Why is the memory of these daffodils important to me? The flowers are a touchstone for him to later reflect on what he can gain from the flowers. They are a "stimuli" that he can call up later in his life that will that not only recreate the scene of beauty for him, but invoke the same emotions he felt at the earlier date.

The turn in the poem where the flowers become more than external objects begins in the third line of the third stanza when the speaker remarks that "A poet could not but be gay / In such a jocund company" (15-6). Again personifying the daffodils, he catches

the happiness of the daffodils for himself. Their gaiety is so contagious that a poet such as himself who is open to the sensations offered by nature could not avoid being affected. He gazes at the scene, although he is unaware at the time what its real value to him is: “I gazed—and gazed—but little thought / What wealth to me the show had brought” (17-18). These lines are a transition that moves from the Dorothy-esque part of the poem to the quintessentially William-the-Poet part of the poem.

The lines are also the bridge between the two periods of time treated in the poem. It is where the “recollection” part of his poetic theory, i.e., poetry as “emotions *recollected* in tranquillity,” comes into play. The first two stanzas discussed are the time period of the actual sighting of the daffodils. In the final sentence of the third stanza, however, Wordsworth changes the verb tense to the past perfect “had” and introduces another time period. The reader is brought to the present where the poet tells us in line 18 that the “show” of the daffodils has brought a “wealth” to him. According to Baker, the two widely separated periods of time are juxtaposed in such a way that the reader becomes conscious of the growth of the poet that has taken place between the two time periods. He writes that “this process of recollection and juxtaposition of a former and latter time is central to the poem” (106). Again, the growth of the poet is the important issue, not the image of the daffodils.

The first period of time is a sensory experience for the poet, as he gazes upon the daffodils, but the second period of time is an emotional experience in which he internalizes the experience through his ability to recollect emotions in tranquillity—precisely what he proposes as a poet should do. The fourth stanza is where ideas of “emotions” and “tranquillity” combine with the “recollections” to turn this memory into

the poetry William strives to write. It is the stanza that defines the real difference between the way his sister looked at and reacted to the daffodil scene and the way that he as a poet did. She looked at the daffodils and saw beauty that affected her that moment. However, the lines quickly following in her journal record the rain in which she and William were caught and the gloominess of the rest of the day (132). William's impressions stayed with him, though, and imprinted themselves upon his "inward eye" (21), his reservoir that he could dip into when he needed the "bliss of solitude" (22). Upon recollection, the daffodils bring pleasure to every facet of his being until his very heart in the last line "dances with the daffodils" (24).

Wordsworth's tranquillity is apparent when he describes himself in the poem as lying upon a couch as he recollects the daffodils. He is "in vacant or in pensive mood" (20) as he does so, not casting his present thoughts upon the scene he is recording but leaving his mind free and open to whatever emotions might flow into him. This is not something that happens just once or even occasionally either, for he begins the stanza with the phrase "For oft" (19). He is passive as a poet at this point, not creating, not writing, but reclining and leaving himself open to inspiration. Whereas gazing upon the original scene required action on his part, this time period demands passivity and receptivity.

It is during these times of tranquillity or passivity that he recreates the *emotions*, not just the *scenes* as Dorothy does in her journal. Whereas her recollections of their shared experiences are outwardly descriptive of the scenes, his inwardly define what they meant to him emotionally. His job as a poet as he sees it is to contemplate a scene later in tranquillity and recreate those very emotions he felt when he first saw the scene. He

explains this process in "Preface": " the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does actually exist in the mind" (328).

This process is enacted in the poem's last two lines as a result of what has happened in the first four lines of the last stanza. The first two lines treat the tranquillity of the poem as the speaker reclines and remembers: "For oft, when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood" (19-20). The memory then flashes upon his inward eye in the second two lines: "They flash upon the inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude" (21-22). As a result, "the tranquillity gradually disappears" and an emotion is recreated in the mind of the poet much like the original emotion: "And then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils" (23-24). Through this process, he is able to feel almost exactly what he originally felt upon viewing the daffodils the first time.

As the emotion is recreated, however, the poet is much more a part of the scene than he was before. When he first chances upon the flowers, he is wandering "lonely as a cloud." Like a cloud floating on high, he is removed from the happiness of the daffodils, above the experience looking down. He sees the waves dancing and the flowers tossing their heads, but he is removed from them. In the third stanza, he is gay because he cannot help but be, but he still does not have the closeness that he achieves by the end of the process of "recollecting in tranquillity." By the fourth stanza, however, he is one with the daffodils as the strength of his poetic outlook allows him to recreate emotions accurately through the power of sustained recollection, even though he is no longer physically among the flowers. He comes down from his position of floating about the hills as a

solitary cloud and, as his “heart with pleasure fills,” he “dances with the daffodils.” He merges with Dorothy’s image of the daffodils and makes them important beyond their beauty—indeed, beyond their technical existence. Through his application of his theory that poetry is “emotions recollected in tranquillity” he makes poetry that lives long past the bloom of the host of daffodils.

Chapter 3: "Colouring of the Imagination"

Another of Wordsworth's theories about what poetry should be is closely related to his use of common, often socially repulsive, people as subjects for his poetry. The differences between a journal entry of Dorothy's and a subsequent poem he wrote on the same subject illustrate the practical application of this theory. In "Preface" he writes:

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to mind in an unusual aspect [. . .] (321)

His poem "The Leech Gatherer," later renamed "Resolution and Independence" (284-85), is a good example of how he takes a character described by Dorothy and "throw[s] over [him] a certain colouring of imagination" to present him in "an unusual aspect." His philosophy changes the simple man whom Dorothy records almost emotionlessly into a symbol that the poet in his poem is able to make minister to his own needs.

Dorothy records in her journal for October 3, 1800, that she and William met "an old man almost double" on their walk that day. She describes him as carrying a bundle and having an interesting face, dark eyes, and a long nose. At one time, he had had a wife, but she was now dead, as were all but one of their ten children. She writes:

His trade was to gather leeches, but now leeches are scarce, and he had not strength for it. He lived by begging, and was making his way to Carlisle, where he should buy a few godly books to sell [. . .] He had been hurt in

driving a cart, his leg broke, his body driven over, his skull fractured. He felt no pain till he recovered from his first insensibility.

In a matter-of-fact tone, after relating a story filled with pain, sadness, and loss, she ends her account by writing, "It was then late in the evening, when the light was just going away" (63). If Dorothy was affected at all by the sad story of this man, her writing does not reflect it. She recounts his situation in an utterly objective, dispassionate manner. She chooses to note a character in the countryside that many would find unattractive, both physically and because of his choice of occupations, but her journal entry does nothing more than describe his pitiful circumstances. Nothing in her description indicates she was moved emotionally by the leech-gatherer.

In contrast, to William the poet, the leech gatherer becomes much more than a figure in a chance encounter. The image of this simple man on the lonely moor, in fact, lies unmentioned for two years until it reappears in 1802 in Dorothy's May 7th journal entry. She writes: "William had slept uncommonly well, so, feeling himself strong, he fell to work at 'The Leech Gatherer'; he wrote hard at it till dinner time, then he gave over, tired to death—he had finished the poem" (144). For two years, it seems, he had kept the meeting with this man in the back of his mind until a poem bubbled to the surface, demanding to be written.

In the poem, Wordsworth moves Dorothy's leech gatherer from a road where he is journeying to buy some books to a lonely moor the day after a storm. The first three-and-a-half stanzas describe the joy of a poet who is also traveling upon the moor that day. Wordsworth writes:

All things that love the sun are out of doors;

The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;
 The grass is bright with rain-drops;--on the moors
 The hare is running races in her mirth;
 And with her feet she from the plashy earth
 Raises a mist [. . . .] (8-13)

Dorothy does not even mention nature in her version of the event, but in William's poetic version the natural setting becomes an integral part, uniting itself with the poet/narrator and the leech-gatherer.

In the first two stanzas of the poem, the poet is little more than the observer and cataloger of images that Dorothy is. He lists the rain, the sun, the birds, the sky, the hare, and the woods; as the first line of the second stanza reads, "I was a Traveller then upon the moor" (15). He is there, as Dorothy was there with the leech-gatherer, and, in these opening stanzas at least, he, like his sister, has no relationship with nature other than as an admirer of its external beauty.

The poet is happy because nature is happy and beautiful. He is, at this point, allowing his thinking to be controlled by the state of the environment around him. He even refers to himself as "a happy Child of earth / Even as these blissful creatures do I fare; / Far from the work I walk, and from all care [. . .]"(31-32) as if he were on the same level with the hares and sun that are rejoicing simply because they have no reason or capability to do anything else other than reflect the state of nature surrounding them.

What begins as a passive contemplation of the nature before the poet in the first two stanzas, however, becomes an active process in the third stanza, changing the his outlook on his life and worth completely. As the mood of the poet begins to change, he

becomes oblivious to the joy of the world around him and is plunged into moroseness.

But he does not know why it changes and so ascribes it to chance:

But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might
Of joy in minds that can no further go,
As high as we have mounted in delight
In our dejection do we sink so low;
To me that morning did it happen so;
And fears and fancies thick upon me came;
Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor
could name. (22-28)

The poet is sad for reasons unknown. Explaining his feelings in a letter to Mary and Sara Hutchinson a month after the writing of the poem, Wordsworth describes himself as “having been exalted to the highest pitch of delight by the joyousness and beauty of Nature and then as depressed, even in the midst of those beautiful objects, to the lowest dejection and despair” (Perkins 352). At first, he was happy in the presence of a joyful nature, but something within him now has changed his mood to sadness.

From this point on, it is apparent the poem is not a poem about nature but about the poet’s imaginative response to nature. Nothing about nature has changed. The narrator still hears the “sky-lark warbling in the sky” (29) and sees the creatures as “blissful” (32), yet his mindset changes. His mood ceases to merely reflect the beauty around him and takes off in imaginative wanderings of its own, not at all related to the circumstances around him. He begins to contemplate what misfortunes *could* befall him in the future. The misfortunes are not even those circumstances that are already in place

to happen or that are likely to happen but those that *might* happen. He writes, "But there *may* come another day to me / Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty" (34-35; italics added).

By the seventh stanza, the speaker begins to rationalize his feelings of dejection and give them a name and a focus. Instead of some nebulous feeling of possible future calamity, he remembers a particular incident typical of what he fears could happen to him. His imaginative despair is even more real to him now, for now he can claim a real reason to fear patterned on a calamity that has really occurred. He writes,

I thought of Chatterton, the marvelous Boy,
The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride [. . .]

By our own spirits are we deified:

We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;

But therefore come in the end despondency and madness. (43-44, 47-49)

Thomas Chatterton was a gifted poet who died in 1770 at the age of eighteen before he could fully realize and use his promising talent. Overwhelmed by his own imaginative gift, he poisoned himself in a bout of depression. In contemplating the early and sad death of this gifted poet, the poet/narrator realizes that those whom he considers the happiest of all men, poets, often suffer the most miserable of all endings. He begins to wonder if the same fate could befall him, merely by virtue of his role as a poet. "*We Poets,*" he writes (48; italics added). By this time, his imaginings have taken over his mind to such a point that he fears a loss of control over his own fate and begins to worry that perhaps nothing can save him from a destined fate because he came into life with a poetic gift. Even though nothing in nature has changed, he has lost all awareness of it in

the second stanza, except for a lonely image of the dead Chatterton “Following his plough, along the mountain-side” (46). Compared to the beginning, when nature is in control of the poet’s feelings, all has changed. The poet’s feelings are now fully in control of his own imagination, and thus nature has been pushed from the foreground of his consciousness. His unbridled imagination has taken over his thoughts to the point that he is paralyzed.

Suddenly, though, the leech-gatherer comes into view, and the sight of the lonely man upon the moor seems a gift from heaven to the sad poet:

Now, whether it were by peculiar grace,
A leading from above, a something given,
Yet it befell that, in this lonely place,
When I with these untoward thoughts had striven,
Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven
I saw a Man before me unawares:

The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs. (50-56)

Suddenly, there are two people in the poem. Wordsworth has found his “incident and situation from common life” (chancing upon the leech-gatherer) and his “ordinary thing” (the leech-gatherer); he can now present them in “an unusual aspect” by throwing over them “a certain colouring of the imagination.” The leech-gatherer has appeared just in time to check the vain imaginings of the poet. Up to this point, the poet’s imagination has been based on unreal possibilities, much as Chatterton’s imaginings caused him to choose death over facing the uncertainties of life. Although Chatterton did actually die prematurely, there is nothing to indicate that the same fate might befall the poem’s poet,

except that he shares the same profession. His poetic imagination is a dangerous activity at this point, replacing his contentment with despair, his confidence with depression. Too much imagination—precisely what the speaker has been exhibiting—proved fatal to Chatterton. The poet needs to pull himself back to reality and stay rooted to the real facts of the real world. Yet, Dorothy's account of the leech-gatherer is not sufficient for her poet brother because it lacks any imagination at all. What Wordsworth needs to do is find a middle ground, much as he did with poetic diction in "Alice Fell." He needs in this case, however, to strike a middle road between the emptiness of Dorothy's account and the dangers of his own unchecked imagination.

With the appearance of the leech-gatherer and the drudgery of his life, the poet begins to find the help he needs. The life of the leech-gatherer has been marked with real hardships, as opposed to the imagined ones the thoughts about Chatterton have brought to the poet. As the poet's imagination begins to focus on these very real problems, it begins to take on a more constructive role. Facing reality once more becomes easier than facing imagined problems, and he feels his fate will not necessarily be that of Chatterton's. Through the imaginative process of writing poetry, the very real troubles of the leech-gatherer will become the balm to heal the poet's fears.

In Wordsworth's account, the leech-gatherer becomes more than just the "old man bent almost double" whom Dorothy describes in her journal, even though in his first description of the man William uses her words almost exactly—"bent double." But since Dorothy's account lacks the "colouring of imagination" necessary to be a meaningful experience for her brother, his description describes the story of the man's whole life: "His body was bent double, feet and head / Coming together in life's pilgrimage" (66-

67). His body is not just bones but experiences, not just sinews but journeys, and it is from these experiences and journeys that the poet will renew his own flagging spirit.

First, however, the leech-gatherer becomes something else to the poet. Before he is even described physically, he is described by means of two similes, each of which is a product of the poet's "colouring of the imagination." In the ninth stanza, Wordsworth writes:

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
 Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
 Wonder to all who do the same espy,
 By what means it could thither come, and whence;
 So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
 Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
 Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun itself. (57-63)

In a remarkably poetic move, the poet uses a double simile, even though the images are extremely unpoetic—a huge stone and sea-beast. The stone seems so oddly out-of-place ("Couched on the bald top of an eminence" [58]) that people would wonder how it even got there ("Wonder to all who do the same espy" [59]); the sea-beast also would hardly be a common occurrence on a lonely moor.

Heffernan explains Wordsworth's use of the two images, a process Heffernan calls "the unity of mutual modification." As Heffernan notes, when Wordsworth speaks of the transforming power of the imagination in the "Preface of 1815," he speaks not only of the power of the imagination upon a single object, but also the transformative imagination upon more than one object (438). In the case of "Resolution and

Independence,” the comparison of the leech-gatherer to the stone and to the sea-beast results in the two images not only mutually modifying each other but also uniting into one image.

Wordsworth explains this process specifically as regards the stone and sea-beast simile. He writes in the “Preface of 1815”:

The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast; and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone; which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original image, that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged Man; who is divested of so much of the indications of life and motion as to bring him to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison. (438)

Through the poet’s imagination, the leech-gatherer is compared to a “huge stone,” which has no life of its own. It merely sits couched on top of a hill or mountain until the poet, in line 61, begins to see a semblance of life in it: “So that it seem a thing endued with sense.” The poet does not go so far as to call it by any name resembling humanity; it remains a “thing,” but a “thing endued with sense.”

At the same time, however, that the poet is coloring the stone with aspects of life, he is removing the life from the sea-beast. In line 63, he describes the beast as crawling out onto a “shelf of rock or sand to sun itself.” It enjoys the “sun” without using it as the inspiration for imaginings, which is exactly what the poet has used the objects of nature for in previous stanzas, to his own detriment. While the sea-beast could be frolicking in

the waves or flopping about upon the rock, the poet paralyzes it on the rock. Even as he pulls the stone closer to life, he draws the sea-beast farther away.

Heffernan writes that the process of mutual modification that Wordsworth uses in this passage depends upon the differences in the two images, namely the stone and sea-beast. The images can be drawn closer together to provide the one image the poet needs, but they must retain their individuality. He writes,

Only if each of the parts retains its individuality will the resulting whole be a living fusion of interacting elements. In Wordsworth's description of the leech-gatherer, the sea beast barely vitalizes the stone, and the stone in turn almost petrifies the sea beast. Each is individually active, and both cooperate to suggest a twilight state of being, a condition that hovers between life and earth, between the animate and the inanimate. Once again, the unifying power of the imagination dissolves a boundary line.

(181)

Wordsworth, then, does not compare the leech-gatherer to either the stone or the sea-beast but to the fusion of the two elements. He compares the image of the leech-gatherer, who seems such a dismal, aged figure, with that of the stone, which is huge enough to cause wonderment to those seeing it, and that of the sea-beast, who is out-of-place yet still enjoying its existence in the sun. Now the leech-gatherer, who produces no sense of wonderment or self-worth in Dorothy's account, has been colored by poetic imagination and can become a symbol for the poet to use.

The poet is now ready to dwell upon the leech-gatherer and develop his symbolic import. Already colored by the poet's imagination, the leech-gatherer is described not in

terms of what he is wearing or what color eyes he has, but in terms of how his body projects what his life must have been. His body “bent double” represents “life’s pilgrimage” and is a symbol for every twisted, winding road his life has brought him down. Wordsworth writes, “As if some dire constraint of pain, or rage / Of sickness felt by him in times long past, / A more than human weight upon his frame had cast” (68-70). Whatever the man must look like to the poet’s eyes, to his mind the man’s appearance is colored by the poet’s imagination to become a symbol of the life the man has lived, yet at the same time further description will keep the man firmly rooted in the reality of natural objects, such as sea-beasts, rocks, and, at the end, a cloud. The poet writes, “Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood, / That heareth not the loud winds when they call; / And moveth all together, if it move at all” (75-77). The comparison to the cloud is the third image, along with the stone and sea-beast, that Wordsworth links to the leech gatherer, images, which, as Parrish points out, are taken from the three realms of nature—land (rocks), sea (sea-beast), and air (cloud) (220).

In his comparison of the leech gatherer to a motionless cloud, the poet reinforces the “twilight state of being,” that, in the poet’s imagination, the man exemplifies. Images of contrast and of being half one thing and half another are continually thrown at the reader to suspend the state of reality and pull him into the poet’s imagination. After the description of the decrepitude of the old man, his eyes are described first as “yet-vivid” (91), which would be a description more befitting a younger person; the poet’s imagination adds the vivacity of youthfulness. Then, his “words came feebly, from a feeble chest” but followed in “solemn order “with something of a lofty utterance” (92-94). However feeble the man seems, to the poet he has a heavenly strength. Furthermore,

his words are “above the reach / Of ordinary men” (96), although the subjects he is speaking about are the hazards and weariness of gathering leeches for a living. To another person, such as Dorothy, the conversation with the leech-gatherer might be just a conversation with a feeble, old man, yet the poet’s imagination filters the encounter and transforms it into a conversation with an extraordinary person whose significance rises above his occupation.

By stanza sixteen, the poet’s imagination has colored the leech-gatherer so thoroughly that the encounter becomes dream-like yet remains grounded in reality as the poet again likens the leech-gatherer to a natural element, writing,

But now his voice to me was like a stream
 Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
 And the whole body of the Man did seem
 Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
 Or like a man from some far region sent,
 To give me human strength, by apt admonishment. (107-12)

Although the poet seems to be suspended in a dream-like state, he nevertheless perceives a purpose in his encounter with the leech-gatherer. He begins to feel that the man has been sent to impart some message to him or some help for his dejection. Until this point, the leech-gatherer has been a passive figure, intent upon his trade until interrupted by the poet. It is only the poet’s imagination that has made him anything else but what he is. But now the poet begins to receive something back from the leech-gatherer, putting the gatherer into an active state. Wordsworth says that the man has been sent “to give me human strength.” The poet’s imagination has made him more than a leech-gatherer; he

has become a source of inspiration precisely through being so thoroughly grounded in reality. He has no dreams of ever being more than he is or having more than he has. He does not even own a home, but depends upon “choice or chance” as to where he will sleep.

Unfortunately, the poet is once again overcome by his former thoughts:

My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills;

And hope that is unwilling to be fed;

Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills;

And mighty Poets in their misery dead. (113-16)

This time, however, the poet believes that perhaps the leech-gatherer can be the answer to his spiritual ennui. Here is something and someone real that perhaps the poet can consider besides his imagined, yet frightening, thoughts about the uncertain future.

Perplexed that his thoughts have returned and “longing to be comforted” (119), he again questions the leech-gatherer, and the leech-gatherer responds with the story of his life.

It is in the story of the leech-gatherer’s life that the poet finds strength to go on with his life and sublimate the fears which have seized him on the moor. If the leech-gatherer can continue in his proscribed duty in life and do so cheerfully, then surely a poet who lives so closely to the beauties of nature, as seen in the first stanzas, can continue in his. As the leech-gatherer continues to seek for leeches even when they are scarce, the poet can also seek for the poetic inspiration he lives by, however scarce it may become in the future. In this lonely image of the leech-gatherer that the poet has created with his imagination, he finds a renewed sense of strength. He has been given hope through the very real person of the leech-gatherer that perhaps he too in his old age will

remain himself—an active poet fully engaged in his natural surroundings. He will not become another Chatterton. The poet remarks, “‘God,’ said I, ‘be my help and stay secure; / I’ll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!’” (140). Although to Dorothy the leech-gatherer is just a pitiful being chanced upon during an afternoon walk, through the coloring of imagination, the simple man becomes a source of spiritual renewal for the poet.

As Wordsworth uses his imagination in “I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud” to transform the daffodils into a source of happiness and in “Alice Fell” to universalize a simple human being, Wordsworth changes the simple leech gatherer into a symbol from which he, and others through him, can wring meaning for their lives. As Heffernan explains, “burdened with all the frailties of the common man, nevertheless [he embodies] [. . .] the ideal spirit of humanity” and becomes a “figure spiritualized by his [Wordsworth’s] own imagination” (200). It is interesting, in fact, to note when Wordsworth speaks of men other than the leech-gatherer in the poem, he does not capitalize the first letter, e.g., “above the reach / Of ordinary men” (95-96). Yet, when he writes of the leech-gatherer he capitalizes the “m” in “Man,” as if elevating the leech gatherer to a higher stature in life, even a deity. Through the poet’s imagination, he becomes more than just a “man”; he becomes a “Man.” He becomes representative of all men.

In “Resolution and Independence,” the poet’s imagination takes a simple subject that his sister has recorded as a matter-of-fact occurrence of a journey they shared, colors it with his imagination, and discovers a spiritual truth that helps him in his life. The troubles which caused the poet despair at the beginning of the poem—“solitude, pain of

heart, distress, and poverty”—are all problems the leech-gatherer lives with daily and faces with, as the revised title reflects, resolution and independence. In the leech-gatherer’s acceptance of his life, the poet, and perhaps his sister as she reads and edits the resulting poem, find strength to live their own.

Chapter 4: "Spontaneous Overflow of Feelings"

Wordsworth's fourth poetic dictum from "Preface" concerns the origin of poetry and once again illustrates the difference between the Wordsworths in their treatments of the same subjects. It is another dictum through which Wordsworth seeks to forge a new definition of poetry, one that would seem to contradict another of his rules. He declares "that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (328). But, how can any emotion be considered "spontaneous" when, at the same time, it is supposed to be "recollected in tranquillity," such as in "I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud"? Also, does not a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" assume a lack of control on the poet's part of his own poetry, which would defy his careful use of rhyme and meter previously discussed in the poem "Alice Fell"? The answers to these questions lie in the definition of "spontaneity" and may be illuminated by examining the differences between Dorothy's journal account of two incidents she and William experienced together and William's poetic versions of the same events.

A spontaneous overflow of feelings is, in fact, the second step of the process of writing poetry, according to Wordsworth in "Preface," and goes hand-in-hand with Wordsworth's contention that poetry should result from "emotions recollected in tranquillity." He writes, "I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity..." (328). As the poet leaves himself open to poetic inspiration by entering a state of tranquillity and recalling to mind the original emotions of an event, he gives himself over to the advent of feelings that can be turned into poetry. Sometimes there is a spontaneous overflow of feelings, in which case the poetry happens. Sometimes there is no spontaneous overflow, and the

poetry does not happen. If it does happen, then the poet is able to grab hold of those feelings and, with a conscious control, mold those feelings into poetry.

How, one might ask, can feelings be “spontaneous” when Wordsworth demands that time be spent in recollection? The answer lies in understanding that “spontaneity” does not necessarily refer to the speed or time period involved with Wordsworth’s composition but in the manner in which the poetic gift is derived. As Abrams explains, “ [. . .] the suggestion, underlined by the word ‘spontaneous,’ is that the dynamics of the overflow are inherent in the poet and, perhaps, not within his deliberate control.” He, however, compares poetic spontaneity to the spontaneous overflow of a spring or fountain as thoughts flow unbidden from the poet and “consist expressly neither of objects nor actions, but of the fluid feelings of the poet himself”(47). The method of composition that the poet uses in his work, then, is not the object that must be spontaneous; it is the feelings.

As the spontaneous overflow of feelings come unbidden from within the poet upon seeing an object or event, the disciplined, creative process inherent to the poet opens up that object or event in a way that others may see and feel as the poet feels. It is what Heffernan defines as not a “reckless eruption” but “[. . .] the educated effluence of a mature mind—a disciplined spontaneity” (43). Fully in control of his creative processes and the final object of his work, the poet uses his feelings that have sprung unbidden from his poetic talent.

The word “spontaneity” might also imply a lack of control on the part of the poet, as if he is prisoner to those feelings that flow through and out from him. Abrams explains why this is not necessarily so, however. Although he says that the overflow of feelings, as

Wordsworth defines it, is perhaps not within a poet's deliberate control, he further maintains that Wordsworth's theory of poetry as a spontaneous overflow of feelings is firmly anchored in Wordsworth's contention in "Preface" that "I have at all times endeavored to look steadily at my subject" (323). The spontaneous feelings are the result of an actual exercise in concentration and examination on the poet's part. The overflow of feelings has been earned by the poet through a previous contemplation of the subject and a conscious effort to leave himself open to the feelings that might appear, much as a spring that bubbles gently up through the earth after a little digging and not necessarily as a geyser that forcefully tears through the earth.

This definition of spontaneity, then, does not preclude a lack of control on the part of the poet. After the contemplation of emotions in a state of tranquillity and, hopefully, the resultant overflow of emotions, the poet then creates according to a process that Wordsworth describes in "Preface":

For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and [. . .] we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act [. . .] we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified. (321-22)

The process of creating poetry is a lifelong habit of directing one's thoughts to discovering "what is important to men," a process that is repeated and continued by the poet. It involves contemplation, the "spontaneous overflow of feelings," and then a

control of thoughts to mold those feelings into poetry that can enlighten, strengthen, and purify the reader.

But the overflow of feelings must be present. In fact, Dorothy Wordsworth often wrote about this process as her brother William sought to receive these “spontaneous overflow [ings] of feelings.” Some of these attempts were successful; some of them were not. Physically, he composed in the manner of walking back and forth in various locations with his head bowed and muttering to himself, later recording the poetry he had verbally composed or dictating it to Dorothy. Oftentimes, however, even as he walked for the purpose of composing, it was a vain exercise. Dorothy records in her journal entry of October 18th, 1800, her brother’s attempts to compose while walking in the sheepfold. She writes, “William worked all the morning at the sheepfold, but in vain.” On October 22, she records again that “Wm. composed without much success at the sheepfold” and then again the next day that “Wm. was not successful in composition in the evening.” On the 25th, she again writes, “Wm. again unsuccessful.” On the 26th, however, she records that “Wm composed a good deal in the morning” (67-69). There appear in her writing to be no differences in the attempts of William during those unsuccessful times and those successful ones. He was practicing the same methods of composition on both the successful and unsuccessful days. However, some days the poetic ability did not emerge, did not flow unbidden from within. During those times at the sheepfold when William was unable to compose poetry, it was not because he was not trying. He was spending time in tranquillity and leaving himself open to any flashes of imagination or inspiration that at other times illuminated his attempts. But, his well of spontaneous feelings was dry.

Poetry was not something that he could pull from himself and force down on paper; it was something that came--as he insisted it should--unbidden.

At times, however, Wordsworth's spontaneous feelings appear to occur quickly, as if his emotions and spontaneous feelings are telescoped into almost a simultaneous moment of creation. His two poems "To a Butterfly" and "Written in March" seem at first to be spontaneous outbursts as far as the speed at which they were written following a stimulus. A closer reading, however, shows that, regardless of how quickly he composed the poems, they were preceded by years of poetic and personal preparation, from which he was able to quickly call forth "emotions recollected in tranquillity."

In "To A Butterfly" (278), it is a beautiful creature that calls forth fluid feelings from the poet, who can no more stop the overflow of feelings than the butterfly, acting upon the impulses of nature, can stop its flight. Dorothy relates the story of the poem's composition during a breakfast that lay uneaten by her brother:

...with his basin of broth before untouched, and a little plate of bread and butter he wrote the Poem to a Butterfly! He ate not a morsel, nor put on his stockings, but sate with his shirt neck unbuttoned, and his waistcoat open while he did it. The thought first came upon him as we were talking about the pleasure we both always feel at the sight of a butterfly. I told him that I used to chase them a little, but that I was afraid of brushing the dust off their wings, and did not catch them. He told me how they used to kill all the white ones when he went to school because they were Frenchmen. (123)

This passage effectively illustrates Dorothy's gentle personality, which will later become part of William's poem. Once again she steps back, both literally and figuratively, and refuses to take an active part in the scene before her. Afraid of hurting the butterflies and brushing the dust necessary to their lives off their wings, she is in the background of a scene, recording it for later use for her brother, but unable to rush ahead as he does and thrust herself into the action. Just when a reader might wish he could catch a glimpse of Dorothy feeling her emotions from the past and connecting them to the present or to those of her brother's, she interrupts the story with the statement, "Mr. Simpson came in just as he was finishing the Poem" (123). With that, the moment is lost, and there is no sharing of feelings about what she was in the past or is now in the present because of her association with butterflies. She leaves that connection for her brother to create.

It takes William little time to make the jump from the memory of chasing a butterfly to writing a poem in which the butterfly symbolically becomes "historian of my infancy" (4). Although occurring quickly during a breakfast, the composition actually followed years of preparation and a long, close relationship with Dorothy upon which he was able to draw. When Dorothy relates that they "were talking about the pleasure we both always feel at the sight of a butterfly," it is obvious that the Wordsworths had had previous encounters with butterflies that had given them pleasure and that they had shared emotions about butterflies that William could draw upon instantaneously. Recalling those past moments as the thoughts flow unbidden into his mind, he begins the poem addressing a butterfly:

Stay near me—do not take thy flight!

A little longer stay in sight!

Much converse do I find in thee,
Historian of my infancy! (1-4)

No longer just a butterfly, the beautiful natural object reminds him of his childhood days:

Dead times revive in thee:
Thou bring'st, gay creature as thou art!
A solemn image to my heart,
My father's family! (6-9).

He recalls when he and his sister both would chase butterflies but for different reasons:

Oh! Pleasant, pleasant were the days,
The time, when in our childish plays,
My sister Emmeline and I
Together chased the butterfly! (10-13)

While she seems to chase them as any child would—attracted by their beauty and freedom of flight—to the poet William, the sight of the butterfly, which begins as a mere “gay creature,” spontaneously calls forth “powerful feelings.” These feelings first become a link to his past and then offer further insight into the divergent perceptions of his sister and himself:

A very hunter did I rush
Upon the prey; – with leaps and springs
I followed on from brake to bush;
But she, God love her! Feared to brush
The dust from off its wings. (14-18)

Powell explains that Wordsworth creates such poetry through his possession of a power that makes common or trivial things an “expressive creation” as he rearranges “objects of Nature to be the words in which he tells his tale” (124). The object of nature in this case is the butterfly that calls forth spontaneous feelings from within the poet and becomes the means for Wordsworth to express recollections from his childhood and observations about his sister and himself.

F.W. Bateson in *Wordsworth: A Re-interpretation* quotes this final stanza as typifying the poems that celebrate this period of their lives, which “emphasize a fundamental difference in temperament” (43). This poem, as well as others, characterizes the gentle nature of Dorothy as contrasted with the wildness of William. It is obvious from the memories within this poem that the knowledge William had about the temperaments of Dorothy and himself did not accumulate merely at the time of the writing of the poem, but throughout the years. He knew her nature from many years of loving her and caring for her (reciprocated on her part) and needed little time to recollect the emotions necessary to spontaneously create the feelings in “To A Butterfly.” The emotions had probably been recollected many times as he had observed her bent over near the waning daylight meticulously copying his poems or as they sat in the garden, silent yet together, watching the birds. The feelings had been there for years, and, when the object of nature presented itself in the memory of the butterfly, the thoughts poured unbidden while his soup lay before him untouched.

A similar situation recurs in the creation of the poem “Written in March” (282). It was written almost immediately after seeing the sight that inspired him and, in fact, precedes Dorothy’s record of the incident in her journal. She records on April 16, 1802,

that she “left William sitting on the bridge, and went along the path on the right side of the Lake through the wood,” then returned a while later and “found William writing a poem descriptive of the sights and sounds we saw and heard.” Even though she was not with him as he wrote the poem, both of their records use much of the same language. She writes:

There was the gentle flowing of the stream, the glittering, lively lake,
green fields without a living creature to be seen on them, behind us, a flat
pasture with 42 cattle feeding; to our left, the road leading to the hamlet.
Not smoke there, the sun shone on the bare roofs. The people were at work
ploughing, harrowing, and sowing, lasses spreading dung, a dog’s barking
now and then, cocks crowing, birds twittering, the snow in patches at the
top of the highest hills [. . . .] (133)

What she writes upon viewing the spring scene is a meticulous enumerating of the scene’s parts. It is what Elizabeth Fay in *Becoming Wordsworthian* calls an “accumulative descriptive catalog.” Dorothy’s eye for detail is precise and thorough, yet typically for her, she goes no farther with that detail than describe it. Fay says that through this type of cataloging, Dorothy provides readers with all the necessary elements for a meditative Romantic poem, yet she stops short of synthesizing the elements into any type of “symbolic abstract,” as her brother would do. Dorothy’s literal eye acts as witness to the beauty of nature and is her tool in relating to the beauty of nature, to which William insists in *The Prelude* Dorothy introduced him (123).

To William, then, is left the task of synthesis and symbolic creation. He does both. He writes,

The cock is crowing,
 The stream is flowing,
 The small birds twitter,
 The lake doth glitter
 The green field sleeps in the sun:
 The oldest and youngest
 Are at work with the strongest;

The cattle are grazing,
 Their heads never raising;
 There are forty feeding like one. (1-10)

The rhymes at the ends of each line unite the elements of a stream and the small birds, a lake and a green field. Young and old are united with the strongest, and forty cattle cease to be individual cattle and feed “like one.” The personification of the green field draws the objects of nature into the living images of the humans working and the cattle feeding. The individual elements Dorothy so carefully catalogues are synthesized into one scene of beauty capable of inspiring feelings in William to be recreated as poetry.

With a selective and careful use of personification, Wordsworth continues:

Like an army defeated
 The snow hath retreated,
 And now doth fare ill
 On the top of the bare hill;
 The Ploughboy is whooping—anon—anon:
 There’s joy in the mountains;

There's life in the fountains;
 Small clouds are sailing,
 Blue sky prevailing;
 The rain is over and gone! (11-20)

The elements of the scene before him now are alive in the striking simile of the snow as a defeated army, the mountains as capable of feeling joy, and the fountains of sustaining life. As a poet, he has gone beyond the mere cataloging of the scene, to create joy and happiness in the scene that is itself not really aware of such feelings. Harkening back to another tenet in his poetic theory, he has thrown over simple objects “a certain colouring of the imagination” and presented them “to the mind in an unusual aspect” (321).

But, when Wordsworth sat down upon that bridge that day, did he intend to create joy or see the snow as an army? No. Those thoughts came to him unbidden and spontaneously. But they didn't come to him without any preparation on his part. For years, he and Dorothy had been wandering the hills and roads of their countryside and enjoying the surrounding beauty. From the time he was a boy, he had felt a sense in nature that had prepared him for this day on the bridge. In “Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (209), he writes of the relationship he has had with nature from the time he was a boy:

For nature then [. . .]
 To me was all in all [. . .]
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me
 An appetite; a feeling and a love,
 That had no need of a remoter charm,

By thought supplied, nor any interest

Unborrowed from the eye. (72, 75, 79-83)

Long before he sat upon the bridge, he had begun nurturing his relationship with the nature that, in turn, nurtured him—the nature he called “The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being” (108-111).

Wordsworth’s “spontaneity” is indeed the result of long years of a relationship with both his sister and with nature. The resulting feelings were there within his mind and ready to pour forth when he needed them that day to express the joy he felt and which he later recreated for others to feel. With a memory of a butterfly shared with Dorothy and a view of a spring day, William is able to define how poetry can be both recollected in tranquillity and written spontaneously.

Conclusion

The difference between the accounts of Dorothy Wordsworth and William Wordsworth of the events they experience together is that William uses the proposals he sets forth in "Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads" and applies them to Dorothy's prose to create his poetry. In telling the story of a poor little orphan girl in "Alice Fell," he adds just enough rhyme and meter to lift the account from an unemotional retelling of a sad event to a poem that could appeal to readers without overwhelming them. In "I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud," William draws from Dorothy's recording of their sighting of a field of beautiful flowers and adds his belief that poetry is "emotions recollected in tranquillity." In doing this, he, as the poet in the poem, finds joy in the memory he shares with his audience. A simple leech gatherer, an unusually common subject, also becomes a means for William in "The Leech Gatherer" to bridge the gap between Dorothy's prose and his poetry as William throws over the simple subject a "certain colouring of the imagination." Through the poet/narrator's imagination the leech gatherer becomes a symbol of human endurance and strength that comforts the poet and gives him hope for his life. Lastly, William also uses his belief that poetry is a "spontaneous overflow of feelings" and draws upon past relationships with Dorothy and nature to produce poetry, such as "To A Butterfly" and "Written in March," seemingly effortlessly.

At times it almost seems like Wordsworth contradicts himself in his dictums. That assumption is not the case, however. He instead walks a fine line between producing poetry that is almost prose, but not quite; subjects that are simple and everyday but have symbolic import; and emotions that are both recollected after a period of time and yet

written spontaneously. With the reality of Dorothy's descriptions pulling him one way and his own poetic talent pulling him another, he is able to stand firmly in the middle and make his poetry work according to his proposed tenets in "Preface."

He takes from Dorothy's journals a memory, an idea, a description and uses it as the foundation of deeper and more personal poetic revelations than Dorothy ever did. This person he called "my dearest Friend / My dear, dear Friend" ("Lines" 115-16) was also the beginning of his poetry in that she provided him with the love and stability in his life through which he was able to reach out and perceive the security and serenity in nature that inspired his poetry. He also used her as his secretary and recorder to take care of the details in his life, such as remembering shared events, so that when the poet in him was ready for those experiences, they were available to him. It was not a relationship that Dorothy found unfulfilling either, although it will never be known whether she could have been a poet in her own right if she had not been overshadowed by the genius of her brother. Given her personality, however, which is evidenced by the background role she took in her accounts, she would most likely never have been a poet—at least not one like William.

Together, through their writings, the brother and sister illustrate the basic definition of what it is to be a poet, according to William's definition. Dorothy was not a poet; William was. They both looked at and reported the world differently. While Dorothy focused on an objective, realistic recording of her world, William looked through the coloring of his poetic imagination and saw the extraordinary in the ordinary. He took what Dorothy had to give, added his own gift, and brought them both to the altar a sweet and acceptable offering to the world.

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