

Wordsworth's Examination of the Role of Nature in Reason

In *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explores the dynamic relationship between the value of nature and reason in the continuum of thought. While Wordsworth claims in his "Preface" the purpose of the work is "to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in the state of excitement" ["Preface," page 247], a secondary objective threads through the poetry as he provides a treatise on the function of nature in enlightenment. Reason, observation of and incorporation into the natural world, and learning through books are addressed differently in the poems, thus enabling Wordsworth to survey a range of interaction for these components of understanding. In addition to addressing multiple purposes, *Lyrical Ballads* employs poetry of varying form and style to more effectively reach the audience. The poems range in their content of lyric or ballad elements; some are presented as dynamic stories, others as heated conversations, and still others as quiet contemplation. While, each form of poem has a different value in reaching the audience, their diversity enhances the exploration of nature and reason. Moreover, through his craft at reaching the audience on a deeper level, Wordsworth experiments upon the audience to further explore the "fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature" ["Preface", page 247]. For example, in "The Idiot Boy" he draws upon the character associations learned in society to enhance the reader emotions. Since Wordsworth stated purpose is to examine causes of stimulating human emotions, not to classify the role of nature or of reason, as a collection his poems do not enumerate a specific position of nature within the continuum of

thought. In fact, Wordsworth's explorations contradict in poems such as "The Idiot Boy," "The Tables Turned" and "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey".

"The Idiot Boy" promotes pure nature, or the lack of reason, in a dynamic and emotional tale. Fretting over the health of her inexplicably ill neighbor, Susan Gale, Betty Foy sends her mentally impaired son, Johnny ("the Idiot Boy"), to fetch the doctor. Her heightened emotional states are so impressed upon the reader that they too experience the concern, nervousness, anxiety, fear, pride, distress, hopelessness and joy of Betty Foy. Lacking reason, Betty reacts to the moment; thus, her emotions, though always vivid, are also fleeting.

Though evidence of Betty's lacking reason runs throughout the poem, her emotional shifts and the causes thereof in the duration between sending Johnny out and leaving to find him most clearly illustrate it. After an extended wait with no sign of Johnny's return, Betty's pride and hope, which resulted from sending Johnny to fetch the Doctor, is replaced by an annoyance with Johnny's delay when she describes him as "A little idle sauntering thing!" ["The Idiot Boy," ln 170]. While another hour passes without Johnny's return, Betty's emotional state shifts more towards confusion about the delay and frustration with the fact that she cannot aid Susan. As she waits, Betty has nothing to occupy her time besides watching over the sickly Susan; rather than ponder the possible explanations for Johnny's delay or think upon an alternative cure for Susan, Betty focuses her thoughts upon the frustration of the moment, thereby leaving the audience with an impression of a non-reasoning individual. Finally, Betty Foy's fear for Johnny's safety, which at times replaces her concern for Susan's health entirely, is initiated by a comment Susan makes: "And Susan she begins to fear / Of sad mischances not a few, / That

Johnny may perhaps be drown'd, / Or lost perhaps and never found" ["The Idiot Boy," In 187-190]. Based on the description of Johnny's mental state and his reaction to being sent for the Doctor, one need not reason much to elicit a concern for his safety. That Betty, preoccupied by being forced to wait, cannot develop a readily-reasoned concern for her own son's safety clearly demonstrates her lack of reasoning.

While Betty Foy is not a reasoning character, she is also not a character immersed in nature; she neither learns nor extracts joy from nature. In fact, the primary importance of her character stems from the reader's emotional connection to her, which develops and solidifies with each dramatic shift of state. Having thus designed the character of Betty Foy, Wordsworth addresses his stated purpose in *Lyrical Ballads*; he explores the nature of the bond that a reader develops with a character and the intensified emotional states that can be transmitted through the bond. But there is another purpose to Betty Foy's character, one that addresses his secondary objective of exploring the value of nature and reason within thought. As the main character with whom the reader develops a bond, she is deeply attached to the Idiot Boy.

The Idiot Boy, a controversial character due to his title, represents a character completely free of reason. Thus, through Johnny, Wordsworth addresses both of his aims. The reader can envision Johnny more as a component of nature than as an element of human society. Wordsworth's diction and structure indicate that his plan was to leave the reader with such an impression. For example, as Johnny rides away from the house, he vocalizes along with the owlets: "And in Johnny's in a merry tune, / The owlets whoot, the owlets curr, / And Johnny's lips they burr, burr, burr" ["The Idiot Boy", In 113-115].

Moreover, Johnny's general lack of concern about the state of Susan Gale contributes to the reader's exclusion of Johnny from human society.

In a response to John Wilson's letter on *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explicitly states his reason for choosing such a potent nickname for Johnny; the intent was the play upon the associations that one develops through society on the word "idiot". While he did not desire the reader to be repulsed by the stupidity of Johnny, as "idiot" might imply, he did seek to draw out a learned association of the audience. "If there had been any such word in our language, *to which we had attached passion*, as lack-wit, half-wit, witless etc I should have certainly employed it in preference but there is no such word" [Letters¹, page 54]. Indeed, the selection of "Idiot Boy" for a nickname illustrates one of the means by which Wordsworth succeeds in exploring the causes of reader excitement.

Having stimulated the reader's emotions through the preconceptions associated with "idiot," Wordsworth utilizes this preconception to challenge the reader's expectations. Betty Foy's attachment to Johnny demonstrates the deep love she feels towards him; moreover, her degree of love and caring add a component of humanity to Johnny's character. An audience unfamiliar with a boy of Johnny's mental capacity might be disgusted at his inability to perform simple tasks; they might consider him a burden and nuisance. However, still Betty Foy loves him beyond all measure. Even her ill state, Susan Gale, who has no maternal relationship to him, demonstrates a love for Johnny. Thus, the audience is presented with their first challenge.

The second challenge to the reader, which is buried slightly deeper in the text, addresses Wordsworth exploration of the value of nature. Though Johnny fails on his mission to retrieve the Doctor, Susan Gale rapidly returns to health. As Johnny wanders

¹ *The Letters of William Wordsworth*, Alan G. Hill editor, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990.

aimlessly enjoying the ride, Susan frets and her mind, as well as her body, becomes ill. Yet, indirectly and unintentionally, Johnny causes Susan to heal. No scientific or reasoned explanation exists for Susan Gale's return to health. Moreover, through no evident means did Johnny assist her recovery. However, the reader cannot deny that Johnny's actions did assist Susan. Thus, the reader is left with the following quandary: if this story is believable, by innocent, unreasoning nature Johnny healed a woman near death. However, to explore the facets of this quandary against reason, the reader must employ a logical reasoning. Now, the reader has reached Wordsworth's third challenge, the same challenge which he himself is attempting to reconcile: how does nature best interact with reasoning to support an understanding of the universe.

While Johnny's character highlights the value of nature, the pony is a highly reasoning character. Wordsworth explicitly states that the pony, which one would expect to be more closely aligned with the natural world, is a thinking pony. Hence, he challenges the reader to accept that an animal can produce coherent thoughts. This propensity for thought is the good-humored pony's only flaw since thinking distracts the pony from accomplishing its task. "But then he is a horse that thinks! / And when he thinks his pace is slack; / Now, though he knows poor Johnny well, / Yet for his life he cannot tell / What he has got upon his back" ["The Idiot Boy," In 122-126]. Thus, Wordsworth paints for the reader a picture of a pony sundering along slowly through the woods pondering the weight and distribution of the object on its back. By stressing that the act of reasoning inhibits the pony's ability to achieve its task, Wordsworth argues against reason.

The character of the pony in “The Idiot Boy” openly represents thought as a negative quality; on the other hand, the personality of Susan Gale, the most strenuously thinking character, subtly argues against thought. Through Susan’s character, Wordsworth contends that one does not need to continuously seek answers. Nothing is accomplished through Susan’s reasoning; in fact nothing is accomplished through the pony’s reasoning either. Moreover Wordsworth highlights the power of nature over reason through Susan. Though hers is the tendency towards thought, she is in a quandary regarding a cure for her illness; waiting for the Doctor to attend her and to prescribe a book-learned treatment, Susan inexplicably heals by the due course of nature.

Long Susan lay, deep lost in thought,
And many dreadful fears beset her,
Both for her messenger and for her nurse;
And as her mind grew worse and worse,
Her body it grew better.

She turned, she toss’d herself in bed,
On all sides doubts and terrors met her;
Point after point did she discuss;
And while her mind was fighting thus,
Her body still grew better. [“The Idiot Boy” ln 422-432]

Thus, Wordsworth implies that given time to pursue to its own devices, nature will amend a situation.

“The Idiot Boy” is a dynamic tale in which Wordsworth employs his craft of reaching the audience at a deeper level to advocate the value of nature. Using the associations that the audience would develop in human society, he forms a deeper bond between them and the characters, one which more strongly conveys the character’s emotional state. In forming this bond Wordsworth addresses his stated goal of examining the manner in which feelings and ideas develop in a state of intensified emotion.

Moreover, through this bond and other poetic crafts, the nature-lover within Wordsworth surfaces as he presents a position that the act of reasoning lacks value and that nature alone is the desired state. Ironically, to extract this message on the role of nature and of reasoning, Wordsworth requires the audience to think carefully upon the elements of the poem.

Due to its length and story-like elements, “The Idiot Boy” contains more substance than shorter poems, such as the heated conversation in “The Tables Turned.” However, the value of “The Tables Turned” rests in the explicit clarity of Wordsworth’s message, not in the complex web of character interaction and meaning. In its 32 lines, Wordsworth provides a clear picture of the downfalls of knowledge inherited through books and study of others’ philosophies; meanwhile he asserts the diversity of the value found within nature.

In “The Tables Turned,” Wordsworth claims that the study of books has a negative effect on one’s health, is a monotonous and endless strife, misshapes beauty and lacks truth. He begins with the humorous message, “Up! up! my friend, and quit your books, / Or surely you’ll grow double” [“The Tables Turned,” ln 3-4]. Though the association between being well-read and overweight is an entertaining introduction, one whose tone matches that of the poem, it is not the most important message which Wordsworth conveys. The lyrical elements and sing-song verses elicit a cheerful excitement in the audience to complement the merry state of the speaker; however, the merriment does not detract from the more profound statements on reason and nature.

Wordsworth argues that studying books is an endless plight through which one cannot reach a valid end. Claiming that the messages contained in books are misshapen

by human intellect, he draws a parallel between a physician's dissection of a body and a scholar's dissection of natural occurrences: "Our meddling intellect / Misshapes the beauteous forms of things; / – we murder to dissect" ["The Tables Turned," ln 26-29]. The harness of this particular criticism is its attack on the heart of reason. To further an understanding of the universe one studies texts with the aim of gaining an insight revealed by earlier scholars; thus, one relies on the validity of the work of the scholar. If in the act of dissecting an observation of nature, the prior scholars misshapen it and thus provides a false impression, the reader studies erroneous information. While the criticisms that book-learning is dull, boring or unhealthy speak against studying from texts, only the assertion of its misleading and fallacious content address the nucleus of its purpose in advancing reason.

Though texts cannot assist in one's pursuit of reason, observations of nature are essential to the quest. Wordsworth summarizes the positive aspects of nature in four lines: "She has a world of ready wealth, / Our minds and hearts to bless – / Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health, / Truth breathed by cheerfulness" ["The Tables Turned," ln 16-20]. As opposed to the endless task of studying the "barren leaves" [ln 30] in texts, the opportunity to examine nature yields copious insight full of pleasure. Wordsworth describes nature with diction of "sweet" [ln 11] and "blithe" [ln 13], thereby implying that by immersing oneself in nature one will experience similar emotions.

In addition to addressing the joy of nature, Wordsworth emphasizes the learning which one can obtain by examining it. "One impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man; / Of moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can" ["The Tables Turned," ln 21-24]. The truth Wordsworth associates with the study of nature provides a

stark contrast to the distorted depiction found in texts. Moreover, Wordsworth argues against learning through others in general (i.e. through conversations as well as through books). Though he attacks texts most strongly in “The Tables Turned,” he communicates the downfall of all secondary learning and the benefit of experiencing nature.

While “The Idiot Boy” shed a negative light on reason, “The Tables Turned” avoids a direct assessment of reason. Because the value of nature is expressed through its ability to augment thought, Wordsworth appears to support reasoning. In addition to a contradiction in his review of reason between the two poems, Wordsworth presents the value of nature differently. In “The Idiot Boy” Wordsworth demonstrates that a reliance upon nature has a positive outcome, that nature is capable of healing without the interference of reasoning, and that characters closely connected with nature do not experience distress from worrying. Moreover, Wordsworth leaves the reader to extract the relationship between nature and reason in “The Idiot Boy”; while, in “The Tables Turned,” Wordsworth directly states the relationship. Thus, from a comparison of these two poems, one can conclude that Wordsworth himself was exploring the dynamic relationship between the value of nature and reason and how that relationship impacts a greater understanding of the universe.

“Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” employs a wholly different, ballad-like approach to both the poetic style and the message. In this poem Wordsworth reflects upon a visit to the area five years prior and his emotional state during that visit; he considers the impact that nature had on him both during the visit and during his later reflections upon the visit. The method of conveying information in “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” is based purely on reflection; while “The Idiot Boy” told a

story from which the reader was left to extract information and “The Tables Turned” presented an energized argument with a blatant purpose, “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” removes all action elements. The reader’s only glimpse at action in the poem is through the reflection upon the prior visit:

I came among these hills; when like a roe
I bounded o’er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led; more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. ... [“Tintern Abbey” ln 68-73]

The heavy reliance of “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” on contemplation indicates that Wordsworth supports reflection in the poem. In addition, Wordsworth praises reflection directly throughout the poem. He explains how conjuring the memory of his more youthful visit has sustained him between the visits; moreover, he explains why such memories comfort him. Thus, he demonstrates a deeper understanding of the relationship between nature and reflection, one which he readily shares with the reader.

... For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. 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 ... [“Tintern Abbey” ln 89-103].

Here Wordsworth begins to describe the comfort which he extracts from nature. The source of this comfort is not sensory inspiration of the moment; rather, the realization of omnipresence of nature reassures him, and the recollection of past experiences provides a source of joy. In other areas of “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth elaborates further upon the interaction between nature and reason. He argues that nature provides an intensification of thought and that a return to thought should be grounded in human sensation. Moreover, reason is as crucial as experiencing nature in “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” without the thought and reflection upon his past encounters, Wordsworth would fail to extract pleasure and comfort while absent from immersion in nature.

In *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth investigates the audience response to reach them on a deeper emotional level; moreover, he explores a dynamic relationship between nature and reason. “The Idiot Boy,” “The Tables Turned,” and “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” demonstrate both the range of Wordsworth’s methods and the range of his explorations into nature and reason. All three poems portray the observation of and interaction with nature as a positive experience. However, they differ in the reconciliation of nature and reason. “The Idiot Boy” implies that thought and reasoning serve no purpose besides to cause inefficiencies and inhibit nature; “The Tables Turned” avoids reference to reason and juxtaposes the value of nature with the downfalls of learning from texts; “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” amalgamates nature and reasoning into an advanced understanding of the value which results from combining their benefits.