

lence virtually destroys a poem's pattern. Instead, it correctly represents the fundamental pattern, which is the mind's tool of memory and management. But we agree that it is less rich than a normal reading because it lacks the additions we regularly make by expressive purposeful variations in speaking.

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### Distance in Wordsworth's *Prelude*

To the Editor:

John T. Ogden's article (*PMLA*, 88, 1973, 246–59) on Wordsworth's poetic technique of distancing in *The Prelude* is interesting and helpful in understanding parts of this poem. But I think his thesis must be significantly qualified if we are, indeed, to view this technique as a means by which to “throw light on the workings of the imagination.”

Certainly temporal distancing is operative throughout the retrospective poem, and, as Ogden says, allows the poet to gain perspective and transform the objects into “something new and extraordinarily meaningful.” But *spatial* distancing is not the primary mode at all stages in the growth of the poet's mind, and, in particular, is not dominant in the childhood descriptive scenes. Ogden's thesis applies best to those scenes he quotes so frequently from Book VII, “Residence in London,” where there is a need to mold an unresponsive urban milieu into imaginative vision. But many of the childhood scenes, among them some of the well-known “spots of time,” evince more the power of proximity, where the poet is almost engulfed by the imposing landscape.

Nor do these childhood scenes which illustrate the power of proximity signal a failure of imagination. Imagination can be seen operating whether distancing urban or public scenes, or interpenetrating with nearby or impinging scenes. The matter is not so simple.

The Book I scene of the boy hanging above the raven's nest serves as an example of the power of proximity. He is hanging “by knots of grass / And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock.” He is “Suspended by the blast which blew amain, / Shouldering the naked crag.” The characteristic spiritual communication expressed in terms of the “strange utterance” of the wind comes as a result of the threatening and proximate landscape. There is no attempt in the writing of this passage to gain perspective through spatial distancing. The reader is forced, through the detailed

images, to experience the event in the person of the boy on the cliffs.

Another, quieter, scene that illustrates the power of proximity is the depiction of the boy waiting for the horses to carry him home for a vacation (Book XII [1850]; this scene was in the early 2-book *Prelude*, but Wordsworth later transferred it to Book XII). Interestingly, in this case the boy is sitting on a hill overlooking two roads, but it is not the distant scene that is indelibly etched in his memory, but the deceptively simple, nearby one: he is “half-shelter'd by a naked wall”; on his “right hand was a single sheep / A whistling hawthorn on [his] left,” and they are called “Companions.” Little can be seen at a distance because of a mist that gives only “intermitting prospect.” When the associative link has been forged between the scene and the death of his father—admittedly an example of temporal distancing—it is to the companionable and protectively close images that his mind reverts in later years to “drink / As at a fountain.”

Further instances of the importance of proximity in *The Prelude* could be cited, but I think the point is clear. Ogden is right when he says that the poet sometimes gains perspective through spatial distancing, but this is not the whole story and it does not fully explain Wordsworth's imaginative mode of operation. In conclusion, I will cite a fragment from the Christabel Notebook which was not incorporated into *The Prelude*—though many passages from this notebook were—but which was part of the early autobiographical impulse of 1798–99 that matured into *The Prelude*. This fragment is interesting because it juxtaposes distance and proximity, and indicates that both can be, at different times, modes of imaginative activity:

Long had I stood and looked into the west,  
Where clouds and mountain tops and gleams of light,  
Children of glory all [ ]  
Made one society and seemed to be  
Of the same nature; long I stood and looked  
But when my thoughts began to fail, I turned  
Towards a grove, a spot which well I knew,  
For oftentimes its sympathies had fallen  
Like a refreshing dew upon my heart;  
I stretch[ed] myself beneath the shade  
And soon the stirring and inquisitive mind  
Was laid asleep; the godlike senses gave  
Short impulses of life that seemed to tell  
Of our existence.

(*Poetical Works*, v, 344)

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Mr. Ogden replies:

Proximity does have an important effect in Wordsworth's imaginative view of nature, though I contest

Holborn's assertion that any of the "spots of time" "evinced more the power of proximity" than the power of distance.

As I mention in my essay (pp. 252–53), temporal distance predominates as the power in Wordsworth's childhood experience, while spatial distance becomes more important in the experiences from his youth and early manhood. Yet even in the earlier experiences spatial distance is present. Sometimes it serves as an effective agent, as when it helps bring about the optical illusion that a huge peak is striding after him (i.378). Other times it remains merely a suggestion of sublimity, as when

far distant hills  
Into the tumult sent an alien sound  
Of melancholy not unnoticed. (i.442–44)

Usually the poet shows some awareness of both his immediate proximity and his distant view, and there is often an interplay between what is near and what is far, but the imaginative power in each episode comes primarily from the effects of distance. Imagination spans the distance, so that the distant object or scene touches the observer, "engulfs" him, or more properly its image enters into his being—as when "the voice / Of mountain torrents" is "carried far into his heart" (v.383–84), or when "the sky . . . sank down / Into my heart" (ii.172–74).

The two "spots of time" that Holborn introduces require additional consideration. As the boy hangs above the raven's nest, the "knots of grass / And half-inch fissures" are so keenly felt only because of his high place: they would certainly be of no consequence if he were at the base of that "perilous ridge." The distance downward inspires a fear of falling. Perhaps even vertigo or a feeling akin to it accounts for his exclamation, "with what motion moved the clouds!"

In the other episode that Holborn mentions, the dis-

tant scene is most certainly indelibly etched in his memory—

afterwards, the wind and sleety rain,  
And all the business of the elements,  
The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,  
And the bleak music from that old stone wall,  
The noise of wood and water, and the mist  
That on the line of each of those two roads  
Advanced in such indisputable shapes;  
All these were kindred spectacles and sounds  
To which I oft repaired, and thence would drink,  
As at a fountain. (xii.317–26)

The boy's whole effort of concentration was on the distance, from which the horses would come to take him home for Christmas. Sheep and hawthorne may be the more clearly definable elements for the reader, but for the poet the distant mist has greater importance.

In conclusion, I should like to clear my essay from some implications of Holborn's remarks by repeating several points that I made there. First, "temporal distance is more important in Wordsworth's poetry than spatial distance" (p. 257, and see the rest of that paragraph). Second, while distance is important for granting perspective, its power is greater and more significant as a means of disorienting the viewer and bringing him to a new imaginative recognition (pp. 254–55). Here I would modify my original argument to say that distance not only "may bring disruption" but that it always does, to a greater or lesser degree, in any experience that Wordsworth would call imaginative. In no way do I mean to imply that Wordsworth's concept of imagination is simple, or that distancing is anything more than one of the processes through which imagination works. I have attempted to give a more comprehensive account of Wordsworth's imagination in another essay that will be forthcoming.

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