

## Wordsworth's Negative Way

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A lot of critics have had negative things to say about Wordsworth's negatives. 'Wordsworth carries his delight in negatives to the point of tiresome mannerisms', John Jones grumbled.<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Hartman once blamed 'a negative' for Wordsworth's 'wavering rhythm'; Roger Sharrock thought there were 'too many' of them; Kenneth Johnston has spoken of Wordsworth's 'bothersome double negatives'; and for Carey McIntosh, more recently, they can 'seem verbose'.<sup>2</sup> Such complaints are understandable. Negatives (single or double or even triple: 'Nor can I not believe but that...'<sup>3</sup>) make a reader's life that little bit more difficult, and they also can sound, as Orwell knew, gallingly pompous: 'banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the *not un-* formation'.<sup>4</sup> A favourite phrase of Wordsworth's, 'not seldom', once you have stopped to think it through, means 'not not often', as though 'often' alone would not have been suitably cumbersome.<sup>5</sup> "'Twas not indifferent to a youthful mind' (*Prelude* IV. 192) sounds patently unyouthful. A 'track ... not untrod before' (III. 121) should hardly be a remarkable track, you would assume, for having been trod before. 'Not unwelcome' (VI. 14) is not especially welcoming. Something 'not unworthy' (VI. 154) feels less than worthy, if not quite unworthy. A 'Mansion not unvisited of old' (VI. 222) plainly is a mansion visited of old. '[T]he end | Was not ignoble' (I. 343-4), Wordsworth says after plundering a bird's nest, and somehow the claim falls short (unhinged by guilt?) of celebrating a noble end.

But often critics who speak negatively about Wordsworth's negatives (and so perform a kind of double negative) end up saying something positive about them too, as though celebration inevitably infiltrates condemnation. Jones is led to hail 'the unmathematical nature of language. If two minuses make a plus, it is a special kind of plus: the negative form

can be on its own account heart-piercing' (p. 204). Hartman speaks elsewhere of 'the special negativity of Wordsworth's style'.<sup>6</sup> For Johnston, Wordsworth's negatives 'are functional, not sloppy craftsmanship' (p. 19), and Sharrock goes so far as to say that 'the roughness of style ... is often a merit'.<sup>7</sup> If such remarks amount to a dubious sort of praise (since something is thought good but not exactly not bad), these critics nonetheless find a power in negativity, style in verbosity, eloquence in roughness. To look again at Wordsworth's negatives is to be reminded of their ungainliness, for sure, but also of the special kinds of pluses and minuses they make.

Negatives are consonant with a poet who enjoyed being tight-lipped. Everyone knows all too well, for instance, that it is an exasperating habit of Wordsworth's supposedly 'loquacious' narrator of 'The Thorn' to tell us that he cannot say what he *claims* he doesn't know: 'the oldest trick in the gossip's handbook', notes the wise John Blades.<sup>8</sup> 'No more I know, I wish I did, | And I would tell it all to you' (ll. 155-6), the narrator protests teasingly, before venturing to speculate anyway upon the unfortunate fate of Martha Ray's baby: 'I cannot tell; but some will say | She hanged her baby on the tree, | Some say she drowned it in the pond' (ll. 214-16). Secrets are guarded in 'The Thorn', but the narrator deliberately does not guard them carefully enough; for any expert in rhetoric would tell you that apophasis, or the tactic of hiding what subsequently will be largely or partially revealed, always has the effect of making whatever is being held back seem all the more alluring, as though our imaginations are compelled to invest additional energy in 'truths' to which we are being denied easy access. (There is no more intriguing start to a conversation than 'I can't really tell you this, but...') The tick is on show elsewhere in *Lyrical Ballads*. In 'Anecdote for Fathers', Edward's very annoying father won't stop asking him why he would rather be at Kilve than Liswyn Farm. 'I cannot tell, I do not know' (l. 39), Edward replies irreverently, like a well-drilled apprentice of the narrator of 'The Thorn'; but Edward's spoken silence, as you might

call it, is not an empty silence. It is an alluring if unknowable one. The child is the ‘best Philosopher’ (‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, l. 110), Wordsworth reminds us once again, partly because Edward will not, or cannot, speak of what he really knows (which he might not even know he knows).

Choosing to say ‘I cannot say’ is a favourite manoeuvre of Wordsworth’s, and its powers—born of an apparent lack of power—are various. Often he likes to put in place get-out clauses, telling us that his endeavours are futile even as he commits to them, apparently regardless of his dim chances of success. ‘The birds around me hopp’d and play’d: | Their thoughts I cannot measure, | But the least motion which they made | It seem’d a thrill of pleasure’ (ll. 13-16), he writes in ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’. Really ‘I cannot measure’ should make whatever follows self-consciously pointless, but that ‘But’ refuses to perform the sheepish retreat our ears expect: rather the rhythmic upswing in ‘thrill’ claims just the kind of knowledge that Wordsworth seemed to have no right to expect. He cannot actually lose, in fact, since he either fails as he predicts, ‘I cannot measure’, or otherwise overachieves by not quite failing; and it is a game that Wordsworth plays often, sometimes without even seeming to know he is playing it. ‘I cannot say’, he will say (again) in Book III of *The Prelude*, ‘what portion is in truth | The naked recollection of that time | And what may rather have been called to life | By after meditation’ (ll. 645-8): but how inferior a poem *The Prelude* would be if Wordsworth *could* say it – which he couldn’t: you ‘cannot part | The shadow from the substance’ (ll. 255-6), he soon concedes in Book IV, surely aware that ‘parting’ them would forsake all those temporal fusions and confusions which make *The Prelude* and its archetypal ‘spots of time’ so fruitfully unstable. If anything, allowing himself to fail, and finding beauty in failing, is often Wordsworth’s best method of succeeding. That is what happens in these lines from ‘Home at Grasmere’, where the poet usually remembered for remembering celebrates the soul’s power to rejuvenate itself by forgetting:

Ah no, the stream  
Is flowing, and will never cease to flow,  
And I shall float upon that stream again.  
By such forgetfulness the soul becomes,  
Words cannot say how beautiful...

(‘Home at Grasmere’, ll. 383-7)

This carefully made failure does not actually fail, but suspends ‘the soul’ within an endless state of becoming as that penultimate line lives on despite itself. The U-turn enables Wordsworth to smuggle in just the sort of expressiveness he claims he is unable to accomplish: his modestly undercutting ‘Words cannot say’ nicely ensures that ‘how beautiful’ has to mean something more than just ‘beautiful’.

Those lines know what they are doing, and they are happy doing it; but some of the most striking lines Wordsworth ever wrote prosper by refusing to authenticate their own achievement, largely because they are unsure precisely what it is they are authenticating:

It was, in truth,  
An ordinary sight; but I should need  
Colours and words that are unknown to man  
To paint the visionary dreariness...

(*Prelude* XI. 308-11)

But still our ears expect nothing so impressive as ‘visionary dreariness’, which happens to be a phrase that is not very well known ‘to man’ at all. This deep and unforeseen response to ‘An ordinary sight’ rebounds into language’s self-experience, and into our experience of it, as unavailing words are startled by that polysemic whirl of a phrase which beguiles the mind into sensing many things at once: strangeness, isolation, gloominess, sympathy, bleakness, intensity, sorrow, and beauty. The lines, in truth, do much more painting than they think, and the masterpiece which emanates within them is one of haphazard intensity.

*The Prelude* reflects obsessively upon its own journey towards supremacy, but, far from sounding annoyingly cocksure, the most valuable lesson it learns is that powerlessness

holds a vital place within power's constitution. Negatives are a symptom of that newfound awareness. When poetic juices start to flow in Book I, Wordsworth negatively greets the 'mild creative breeze' (l. 43) as though it were an estranged friend of old: 'Tis a power | That does not come unrecognised' (ll. 47-8). 'I deem not profitless those fleeting moods | Of shadowy exultation' (ll. 331-2), he asserts in Book II. True, 'not profitless' feels like a profitless mouthful; but it makes sense that these darker visitations—'shadowy', unsettling, at once uncontrolled and uncontrollable—should have the effect of shaking up Wordsworth's syntax, even as the double negative concedes grudgingly that great things often arise from 'an obscure sense | Of possible sublimity' (ll. 336-7). Possible sublimity is in part the work of that 'special negativity', a distinctive imaginative trajectory, which is *the* Wordsworthian trajectory: one that retreats in the moment it seizes, fails as it achieves, casts shadows as it projects light.

The most influential delineation of that trajectory in criticism undoubtedly comes in the shape of Hartman's *via naturaliter negativa*:<sup>9</sup> the voyage, as he sees it, of Wordsworth's Imagination through and 'beyond' Nature into a state of absolute independence, where it is shocked to confront the magnitude of its own apocalyptic immensity: 'in such strength | Of usurpation, in such visitings | Of awful promise, when the light of sense | Goes out in flashes' (*Prelude* VI. 532-5). Hartman alludes to a whole system of apophatic theology based about language's minutely negative ways, the premise of which is that you can best articulate God's sovereignty by stating what he is not: to say 'God is not anything' is to say that God absolutely is not merely any old thing. So it is apposite that negatives take Wordsworth along his own *via naturaliter negativa*. A double negative moves (or does it?) his stolen boat:

nor without the voice  
Of mountain-echoes did my Boat move on...

(*Prelude* I. 392-3)



Estranged from the solid world of phenomena, the mind reaches for the ‘familiar’ comforts of home—shapes, objects, colours—but every ‘no’ beckons only a ghost of those comforts, and the mind must dwell in the company of strangers: ‘huge and mighty Forms that do not live | Like living men’. Christopher Ricks has described the implications of ‘do not live | Like’: ‘what may be being said is ... that they live but do not live as men live—or is it that they do not live whereas men do?’<sup>10</sup> It is the virtue of that negative that it has things both ways and neither way at once, eliciting syntactically the disorientating attempt of the mind to diagnose its own nightmarish malady. The forms of language which expound the experience are as uncertain as the ‘Forms’ themselves:

for many days, my brain  
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense  
Of unknown modes of being...

(*Prelude* I. 421-3)

To have ‘dim’, ‘undetermined’, and ‘unknown’ instinctively feels overcooked, partly because ‘undetermined’ and ‘unknown’ mean nearly the same thing, and partly because the proximity of ‘un’ and ‘un’ seems so obviously ungainly: the phrasing is ‘so vague,’ remarks Jonathan Wordsworth, ‘so heavy with border negatives’.<sup>11</sup> The problem is easy to sort out, you would think, for ‘Sense’ could equally well be ‘determined’ – given that what is being determined is precisely that which is ‘unknown’ and unknowable: so, ‘a dim and determined sense | Of unknown modes of being’. But what would be lost there is the struggle of the imagination to distinguish the blankness it perceives from the blankness it has become: it is the seemingly surplus ‘un’ which confirms that ‘unknown modes of being’ are the mind’s own most powerful mode of being.

Negatives are the matrices of transcendence in *The Prelude*, propelling the mind through ‘dim uncertain ways’ (*Prelude* XI. 391) towards the total darkness within itself: how appropriate it is in the skating episode that ‘not unnoticed’ should glance nervously over its

shoulder as the poet hears ‘an alien sound’ that cannot simply be ‘noticed’: ‘the distant hills | Into the tumult sent an alien sound | Of melancholy, not unnoticed’ (*Prelude* I. 472-4). On a larger scale, as well, many of the poem’s most eye-catching episodes might seem to stage a drama of apophasis in the way that power emerges from moments of absence or retreat, as though that tiny rhetorical manoeuvre had been expanded to accommodate all kinds of sublimity: the skating episode (where stopping short makes the universe spin); the discharged soldier (where peaceful wandering is halted by an uncouth shape); the dream of the Arab (where silent sleep rouses visions of a drowning world); the boy of Winander (where deep silence shocks the heart); the drowned man (where death’s ghastly face ushers in forests of romance); the crossing of the Alps (where recreational failure kick-starts the unfathomable rise of Imagination); the climbing of Snowden (where a sea of mist dissolves into an image of the mighty mind).

Wordsworth’s negatives can tease us, as they do in ‘The Thorn’, or honour the deepest mysteries of imaginative life, as in *The Prelude*; and they do many other things too. Sometimes they are tactful, as when a tutor writes ‘not uninteresting’ on an essay he or she would never wish to call interesting. Wordsworth, on Betty Foy’s behalf, cannot bear to call incomprehensible what Johnny says:

And then! his words were not a few,  
Which Betty well could understand.

(‘The Idiot Boy’, ll. 75-6)

That ‘not’ is caught in a wily syntactical pun triggered at the line-ending, where the comma is a triumph in comic timing. At first, ‘not a few’ means ‘more than a few’ as Johnny’s words pour excitedly out; but, once Betty’s bemusement is made known to us, ‘not a few’ lowers its mask to mean ‘less than a few’. It is a joke that is careful not to offend (Wordsworth knows

Johnny wouldn't get it); and any momentary fun-poking is checked by that kind-hearted 'well', which is a mark of the effort Betty makes *to* understand.

Negatives can be worried. A shepherd-boy, in Book VIII of *The Prelude*, is stranded amidst a swelling stream whilst trying to save his sheep:

so he stood,  
A prisoner on the Island, not without  
More than one thought of death and his last hour.

(*Prelude* VIII. 287-9)

'Not without | More than one' sounds as much like a formula as it does a formulation, since it asks you doubly to subtract—and therefore, as logic dictates, to add—and then to tot up a few 'more' thoughts as well. Needless verbosity? No, because the syntax at once is timorous and apotropaic in a way that is sympathetic to the boy's quivering bravery, and to the imaginative efforts he must make to hold at bay his gloomy premonitions: 'thought[s] of death' cannot be extinguished, but negatives serve to thwart their complete intrusion. Other negatives can be grateful, or dubious, or grateful and dubious at once. Wordsworth speaks of:

many wanderings that have left behind  
Remembrances not lifeless...

(*Prelude* IV. 361-2)

But that swerving double negative, 'not lifeless', is cagey about claiming that 'Remembrances' are alive unequivocally. It is very typical of Wordsworth to feel that, for all the renovating consolation it brings, the act of remembering might involve leaving something of the past 'behind' all over again: 'so wide appears | The vacancy between me and those days' (*Prelude* II. 28-9). Negatives also can hover close to inarticulacy. An early fragment, integrated later into *The Excursion*, aspires towards the absolute quietness of 'things':

quiet sympathies with things that hold  
An inarticulate language, for the man  
Once taught to love such objects as excite  
No morbid passions, no disquietude,

No vengeance and no hatred, needs must feel  
The joy of that pure principle of love  
So deeply that, unsatisfied with aught  
Less pure and exquisite, he cannot choose  
But seek for objects of a kindred love  
In fellow-natures, and a kindred joy.<sup>12</sup>

This is not Wordsworth at his free-flowing best, and that is thanks largely to the incessant snagging of negatives. But, then again, you might say that language is undergoing a crisis of identity here as it partially foregoes its own articulacy in the attempt to sympathise with ‘things that hold | An inarticulate language’. So although ‘excite’ looks poised at the line-ending to take its chance, any potential egotistical ascension is foiled by that ethereal procession of ‘no’s, each of which performs a small act of renunciation to turn the mind away from ‘morbid passions’ towards ‘that pure principle of love’. But the energy invested in asserting what the mind ‘must’ *not* ‘feel’ reveals just how close it is to feeling it: ‘Poetry is passion’ (‘Note to *The Thorn*’, p. 39), said Wordsworth, and ‘morbid passions’ are passions nonetheless.

Wordsworth was a poet of nature, of the imagination, even of dark comedy, as my examples have shown so far, but it is rare for anybody to think of him as a great *love poet*. That always has been the case. ‘[N]ever could he, in any emphatic sense, have been a lover’, said De Quincey, a little offensively;<sup>13</sup> and in the aftermath of their falling out Coleridge gossiped sourly about Wordsworth being ‘incapable of being in Love’: ‘tho’ [there is] no man more tenderly attached’, he conceded, ‘still it is not *Love*’.<sup>14</sup> But then there are the letters Wordsworth wrote to his wife Mary in 1810 where he sounds very much more than merely ‘tenderly attached’; and he has his familiar recourse to ‘not saying’ as a means of voicing his love.

I cannot say my Love with what fondness I feed on the thought of our being together...

it [Mary's ill health] employed my mind with an anxiety which I cannot describe...

I looked at them [the Malvern hills] with a trembling which I cannot describe when I thought that you had not seen them...<sup>15</sup>

These instances are striking not just because they put on show a side of Wordsworth (obviously unavailable to De Quincey and Coleridge) that is not usually seen, but because they catch a habit that the poetry both anticipates and perpetuates: where love — though never a negative thing — is tangled up in negatives so that an unlikely collocation is formed: 'not love', as Coleridge would have it, which becomes a way to the expression of love, a *via negativa*. It is characteristic of Wordsworth at his best that he holds an aversion to cliché, and since any plainspoken declaration of love — 'I love you', and so on — comes so dangerously close to phoniness, it follows that he often says what he needs to say by going the longer, negative way round. So when in a sonnet of 1802 he recalls standing on the shores of Calais during the Peace of Amiens, he divulges his love for England only by asking us to perform a process of elimination:

I, with many a fear  
For my dear Country, many heartfelt sighs,  
Among Men who do not love her linger here.

('Composed by the Sea-side, near Calais, August, 1802', ll. 12-14)

If he is not one of the ones who 'does not love her' (by which he means the French), he must be one of the ones who does; and that tiny flicker of uncertainty, as we pause to think while sense and syntax are drawn out to 'linger', dictates that 'love' catches up with us belatedly, but when it comes it comes in a special way, like a figure emerging from a haze.

The sort of ungainliness that Wordsworth's negatives bring about rarely causes us to think that the verse simply has gone wrong. Love in those lines is a gift most precious because 'not' has prepared us for a denial; it is revealed without being declared; it tiptoes into existence while language pulls back quietly. And lines shaped in that wayward way do not

merely exemplify Wordsworth's subtlety. They owe their existence, more profoundly, to a reticence borne of his 'fear' of losing something he 'loves', as though he knows that a flinching language is less likely to tempt fate than an unguarded one. (In 1802, the fear of losing England was very real.) The same sense of worry is there when the female vagrant, in the poem of that name, speaks of the love she felt for her husband from the start:

There was a youth whom I had loved so long,  
That when I loved him not I cannot say.

(‘The Female Vagrant’, ll. 64-5)

Something along the lines of ‘I loved him for so long as I can remember’ would be the showy way of saying this. But Wordsworth forgoes a fervent avowal in favour of an iambic line which moves a little gracelessly, with something like a tremble, as the voice catches on ‘I loved him *not* I cannot say’. A double negative can be superfluous, there is no doubt, yet this one bespeaks a mind haunted by love’s great foe, loneliness, in the way that ‘I loved him not’ gives weight inadvertently to the state of separation the female vagrant cannot bear to imagine, and now finds herself living through. Her fumbling words prophesy her loss but intensify her love.

‘No absence scarcely can there be,’ Wordsworth says, addressing Coleridge in *The Prelude*, ‘for those | Who love as we do’ (VI. 255-6). And yet there the ‘absence’ is, absent scarcely, caught in the negatives which foster love and the worry of losing alike. Equally love can frequent minds it is not permitted to inhabit: Vaudracour — in Wordsworth’s miniature tragedy of young love — is freed from prison after killing a ruffian, and although forbidden to contact Julia, he flees to her anyway:

He fled to Julia, and the words with which  
He greeted her were these. ‘All right is gone,  
Gone from me, Thou no longer now art mine,  
I thine; a Murderer, Julia, cannot love  
An innocent Woman...’

(*Prelude* IX. 706-10)

‘How is it under our control | To love or not to love?’, Robert Browning would ask.<sup>16</sup> If Vaudracour tries to sound like some clinical adjudicator imposing injunctions upon his own emotions, he does not convince us, nor himself: ‘gone, | Gone’ goes nowhere, ‘art mine’ and ‘I thine’ together cling in a sonorous embrace, and ‘a murderer, Julia, cannot love’ does not amount to ‘I do not love you’.

Such verbal roundaboutness, such oblique eloquence, cuts to the heart of Wordsworth’s subtlety as a poet, and to the sense he offers of an authenticity which comes out of his faltering efforts to keep feelings in check. And so what Wordsworth says of the discharged soldier might indeed be aimed at him, and at those for whom he speaks—‘in all he said | There was a strange half-absence’ (*Prelude* IV. 475-6)—but what makes his negative locutions stirring, rather than merely dallying, delusive, slack, or ‘strange’, is the way that they allow, in the manner of some kindly corrupt guard, feeling to stray from their watch. ‘But who, ah! who, will make us feel?’, Matthew Arnold wondered after Wordsworth’s death in 1850.<sup>17</sup> The simple answer to that question is ‘no one’ – at least, not anyone else quite in the way that Wordsworth ‘makes us feel’; and vital to that way is his handling of negatives. For Wordsworth possessed a deep-seated awareness that the expressed difficulty of expressing emotion often is emotion’s most touching evocation, and negatives can honour that awareness exquisitely. The female vagrant ‘had no more to say | Of that perpetual weight which on her spirit lay’ (ll. 269-70), but that does not mean she feels ‘no more’ sorrow. Armytage, in *The Ruined Cottage*, ‘cannot tell how [Margaret] pronounced my name’ (l. 253), but that does not mean he is not haunted by the memory of it. ‘No more’, ‘cannot’: even as these negatives keep their distance, refuse to intrude, they carry sorrow’s ‘perpetual weight’. In ‘The Childless Father’, sympathetic villagers encourage old Timothy to join their hunt. Timothy leaves his house with ‘leisurely motion’ (a euphemism which falteringly

covers up his lassitude), before Wordsworth speaks on his behalf the truth which remains unsaid:

Perhaps to himself at that moment he said,  
‘The key I must take, for my Ellen is dead.’  
But of this in my ears not a word did he speak,  
And he went to the chase with a tear on his cheek.

(‘The Childless Father’, ll. 17-20)<sup>18</sup>

That ‘*not* a word did he speak’ does the important work. The negative choreography achieves so much more than any conventional speech could have done, since we are urged at once to feel deeply for Timothy (because ‘Ellen is dead’) and to admire his unflinching fortitude (because he does not say ‘Ellen is dead’). His thoughts come to us with the peculiar force of a sound never exposed to air.

The ‘introduction of negatives in poetry adds more than it takes away’, remarks J. Hillis Miller, which is easy enough to say, but the comment gestures towards a particular truth of those negatives of Wordsworth’s which push in one direction but carry us—and themselves are carried—in another.<sup>19</sup> Once the Wanderer has spoken eloquently in Book IV of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth takes his cue from Matthew 24:35 (‘Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away’) as he asserts that ‘words’ shall endure:

The words he uttered shall not pass away  
Dispersed, like music that takes the wind up  
By snatches, and lets fall, to be forgotten;

(*The Excursion*, IV. 1284-6)<sup>20</sup>

And yet it is hard to imagine a more eloquent way of honouring their passing ‘away’: Michael O’Neill describes finely how ‘the poetry passes into an imagining of its own denied dispersal’.<sup>21</sup> Such eloquence is achieved thanks to, and not despite, that ‘shall not’, the

presence of which forms a precarious safety net that frees the mind to envisage death's gentle 'music that takes the wind up', even as that music lives and dies on borrowed time.

As the imagination 'takes' them 'up' and 'lets' them 'fall', Wordsworth's negatives turn this way and that, and rarely know quite where they are going: 'sounds | Of indistinguishable motion' (*Prelude* I. 333-4). A suffix makes a word jerk against itself: 'smokeless' in the Westminster sonnet 'calls up, without stress, its opposite: it cancels yet preserves', says Hartman ingeniously, for there is a difference between air that simply is clear and air that strikes you as being clear *because* it is without its usual smoke.<sup>22</sup> Cancelling yet preserving is the special dynamic of the Wordsworthian negative: 'I do not speak of knowledge, moral truth, | Or understanding' (*Prelude* III. 91-2), the poet writes of his university years, whilst sensing that he needs something to pitch his rebellion against. Of the old Cumberland beggar, he urges us to 'deem not this man useless' (l. 67), and yet he seems all too suspicious that his warning is about to fall on deaf ears. These are examples of the sort of negative, as Empson has it, 'which puts something into your head while telling you it is not part of the picture', and there are many more instances of them.<sup>23</sup> Often with poignancy, 'not' and 'nor' stand tall or push back within verse across the career, and usually they call upon a brave-faced weightiness of stress as they try to convince themselves of their own conviction, preserving as they cancel, cancelling as they preserve: 'Tears had not broken from their source' (but threaten to); 'sorrow is not there' (but close enough); 'Not always is the heart unwise' (but usually); 'I am not heartless' (but worries he is); 'Not for this' (but maybe for this); 'She knew not that he lived' (but prays he does); 'She knew not he was dead' (but prays he isn't); 'thou in this place wilt see | A work which is not here' (but he never does, and it never is); 'That must not die, that must not pass away' (but it must and it must); 'Nor wilt thou then forget' (but she might); 'I came not dreaming' (but he dreams); 'We will grieve not' (but we do).<sup>24</sup>

Wordsworth's negatives always deny, and also touchingly are in denial: the poet 'has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present' ('Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*', p. 85). So when John Kerrigan describes words which 'would seem hollow did they not so honestly betray the fascination of what they reject', he captures a force that much of the poetry holds, not least 'Poor Susan'.<sup>25</sup> On Wood Street a thrush's song peters out, and so fades the precious vision it brings to Susan's eyes, of another place, another time:

She looks, and her heart is in Heaven; but they fade,  
The mist and the river, the hill and the shade;  
The stream will not flow, and the hill will not rise,  
And the colours have all passed away from her eyes.

('Poor Susan', ll. 13-16)<sup>26</sup>

The game really should be over with 'but they fade', and yet the vision plays on, even as it plays backwards: rhythms swim against unstoppable currents, verbs resuscitate negatives (how much less tantalising 'The stream will flow not, and the hill will rise not' would be), as negatives paralyse verbs. It is the sort of stanza which reminds you that Wordsworth's is rarely an art merely about loss but more often an art of losing, an art which struggles to yield to the departures it tasks itself with tracing. Stillness tempts the stream and the hill, though neither stays still; 'colours have all passed away', though in Susan's eyes a sober colouring remains. As Macbeth would say, 'nothing is, | But what is not'.<sup>27</sup>

Verse of this kind makes poignant the sort of feeling I imagine losing contestants must experience on television quiz shows when they are forced to watch a video clip depicting some exotic holiday they *would* be about to enjoy if things had happened differently. (For Susan, if life had happened differently.) 'The things which I have seen I now can see no more', catches a glimpse, 'I now *can* see', of the shimmering world that is 'no more' ('Ode: Intimations of Immortality', l. 9): again, the negative phrasing there does not

perform time-reversing, life-changing miracles, but makes felt the difficulty of letting something go, and reminds us that grief is itself the unwavering impulse of an imagination that seeks to preserve something in the wake of its cancellation, shaded by the awareness that any hope of so doing – still an unwavering hope, and always unwavering – will forever be futile: ‘nothing can bring back the hour | Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower’ (‘Intimations’, ll. 180-81); ‘I cannot paint | What then I was’ (‘Tintern Abbey’, ll. 76-7).

Wordsworth’s negatives do not constitute a highly exclusive kind of genius, that is to say, but exemplify in its most achieved form a way of shaping language that seems normally true to life. In 2015 the neurologist Oliver Sacks wrote a column in the *New York Times* months before he died of cancer: ‘I cannot pretend I am without fear’.<sup>28</sup> The sentence is devastating, as the light and shade of the imagination collide in the double negative, before the light is dimmed. And it is not unlike the line with which Wordsworth concluded ‘Elegiac Stanzas’ after the death of his brother John: ‘Not without hope we suffer and we mourn’ (l. 60). If Sacks’s negatives creep away from fear fearfully even as they face up to it, Wordsworth’s negatives dare only to hope for hope as they strain to vanquish the desolate ‘ne’er’ spoken earlier in the poem: ‘The feeling of my loss will ne’er be old’ (l. 39). Most of all, I think, these negatives are caught somewhere between withholding and succumbing to the awareness that, however much we search for hope, or for an alternate fate, we have little control over the feelings we feel, or the course our lives take; and Wordsworth is rare among poets in knowing that it is not his place to feign such control, which is not the same as not wishing he could possess such control. For although we hope that ‘Things’ may be ‘worthy of unconquerable life’ (V. 19) –

And yet we feel, we cannot chuse but feel  
That these must perish.

(*Prelude* V. 20-1)

It is a masterful stroke to add ‘we cannot chuse but’, for ‘And yet we feel’ alone — so rhythmically indubitable — would do little justice to what it feels like to feel something you do not want to feel. The point about the recasting is not that it manages to dodge the fatalistic gist of ‘And yet we feel ... that things must perish’ (‘we cannot chuse but feel’ knows this truth all too well), but that its intransigent negatives put up enough fight to make you aware that they certainly would halt fate’s ominous sway, if only they could. Language articulates those moments when the impulse of the mind to resist curbs what might otherwise have become merely a shrug of resignation. Similarly, it honours the reality of a mind which once was touched by the ‘pure breath of real life’, and, while no longer immersed in that purity, still is stirred by it now:

By simple strains  
Of feeling, the pure breath of real life,  
We were not left untouched.

(*Prelude* VI. 471-3)

(The other half of ‘we’ is Robert Jones.) ‘We were not left untouched’ as opposed to ‘We were touched’ or else ‘We were moved’ might hardly seem important; but ‘We were touched’ would complete a movement of the mind, and that would be that. Wordsworth dares to be messier, his imagination too intimately and continuingly involved with the reality of the past ever to make something complete of it: his negatives hide something away, but equally they are harbingers of the ‘feeling’ they hide. In Book IX of *The Prelude* Wordsworth remembers watching the ‘bravest Youth of France’ (l. 269) leaving their families for the army; and the lines which describe what he felt sum up finely how his negatives work by not quite working:

Yet at this very moment do tears start  
Into mine eyes; I do not say I weep,  
I wept not then, but tears have dimmed my sight  
In memory of the farewells of that time...

The beauty of these negatives, in a way that is characteristic, lies in Wordsworth's lack of confidence in them, or, better, his confidence in their precariousness. What difference is there between shedding tears and weeping? Not enough to justify 'I do not say I weep' (ghosted by that ungoverned stress on 'do tears start'). D. H. Lawrence once said that it is 'the hidden *emotional* pattern that makes poetry, not the obvious form'.<sup>29</sup> Here, the 'hidden *emotional* pattern' we detect is one of a mind drawing distinctions it knows not to be proper: between tears and weeping, between what was felt at 'that time' and 'at this very moment', between a grief negated and a grief endured. If those 'not's are half-hearted, they are full of heart: for it is the place of Wordsworth's negatives to remind us that 'we love, not knowing that we love, | And feel, not knowing whence our feeling comes' (*Prelude* VIII. 170-1).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Jones, *The Egotistical Sublime* (1954), p. 204.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (Cambridge, MA, 1964), p. 27; Kenneth R. Johnston, 'The Idiom of Vision', in Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth* (New York, 1972), pp. 1-40: 5; Roger Sharrock, 'Introduction', in *Selected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1958), p. xxxvi; Carey McIntosh, *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700-1800: Style, Politeness, and Print Culture* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> 'I am not One who much or oft delight', in *21<sup>st</sup>-Century Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 2008), pp. 276-7 (l. 43).

<sup>4</sup> George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language' (1946), quoted from *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: Volume B*, pp. 1366-72: 1368.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Prelude* (1805), in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York, 2014), I. 576, III. 75, VIII. 786, XI. 19, and, most famously, I. 474. Unless stated otherwise, all Wordsworth's poetry and prose is quoted from this edition hereafter.

<sup>6</sup> Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (London, 1987), p. 208.

<sup>7</sup> Sharrock, p. xxxvi.

<sup>8</sup> John Blades, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 162.

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- <sup>9</sup> See *Wordsworth's Poetry*, and especially Section II, 'Synopsis: The Via Naturaliter Negativa', pp. 31-69.
- <sup>10</sup> Christopher Ricks, 'Wordsworth: "A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines"', *E in C*, 21 (1971), 1-32: 11.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Borders of Vision* (Oxford, 1982), p. 47.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Not useless do I deem...' (Appendix b), quoted from *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1984), pp. 678-80 (ll. 1-11). See *The Excursion*, IV. 1202-11.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson (Edinburgh, 1862-71), ii. 182.
- <sup>14</sup> Coleridge to Henry Crabb Robinson, 12 March 1811, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford, 1956-1971), iii. 305.
- <sup>15</sup> William to Mary Wordsworth, 19 August 1810, 11 August 1810, and *Ibid.*, in *The Love Letters of William and Mary Wordsworth*, ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca, 1981), pp. 85, 62-3, 61.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Two in the Campagna', in *Robert Browning: The Major Works*, ed. Adam Roberts (Oxford, 1997), pp. 281-3 (ll. 34-5).
- <sup>17</sup> 'Memorial Verses', in *Matthew Arnold: Selected Poetry*, ed. Keith Silver (Manchester, 1994), pp. 103-5 (l. 67).
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted from *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason (1992; Harlow, 2007), pp. 306-7.
- <sup>19</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton, 1985), p. 71.
- <sup>20</sup> Quoted from *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca, 2007), p. 165.
- <sup>21</sup> Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford, 1997), p. 31.
- <sup>22</sup> Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, p. 208.
- <sup>23</sup> William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930; 1949), p. 211.
- <sup>24</sup> 'Vernal Ode', l. 119; *Prelude* II. 307; 'Incident at Bruges', l. 25; *Prelude* III. 191; 'Tintern Abbey', l. 86; *The Ruined Cottage*, l. 398; *Ibid.* l. 399; 'Michael', ll. 419-20; 'Home at Grasmere', l. 887; 'Tintern Abbey', l. 156; 'Home at Grasmere', l. 428; 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', l. 182.
- <sup>25</sup> John Kerrigan, 'Wordsworth and the Sonnet: Building, Dwelling, Thinking', *E in C*, 35 (1985), 45-75: 46.
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted from Mason, pp. 266-7.
- <sup>27</sup> Act I. iii. 142, in *Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan (2014), p. 777.
- <sup>28</sup> Oliver Sacks, 'My Own Life', *New York Times*, 19 Feb. 2015.