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**Wordsworth's Principled Uncertainty:
Lamenting Reason in "Lines Written in Early Spring"**

The important factor in experimentation is the mind's coming to terms with uncertainty.
- James Averill

Nestled in among Wordsworth's larger works is "Lines written in Early Spring," a poem first appearing in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem has proved to be immensely popular, as it is considered a staple of poetry anthologies and collections of Wordsworth's poetry, not to mention of syllabi for classes focusing on the Romantic Era. Given all this attention, the poem itself attracts a surprisingly sparse amount of commentary given its popularity. Naturally, given that it is a smaller work, the trend of criticism has been to look to Wordsworth's more substantial works in order to understand Wordsworth's thought. When mentioned at all, "Lines" is usually considered only in passing, generally only concerning the poem's references to joy in the natural world or describing its lament of "[w]hat man has made of man." In fact, many critics view the poem as lamenting the downfall of humanity, similarly stated in the poetry of Robert Burns.[1] Aside from these sparse references, made to support general claims about Wordsworth's longer and more substantial poems, only a few critics have taken up the poem's central themes on the poem's own terms.[2]

It is unfair, however, to treat "Lines written in Early Spring" as a mere echo of these longer works. While the poem many not have the length of some of Wordsworth's more substantial pieces, it certainly does not lack complexity. Many critics have noted some complexity in the poem, their examinations have often led to understanding the poem as an expression of the unity of nature, while also recognizing the problems that arise from the determining the degree to which the mind of the poem's speaker is active or passive.[3] It is my claim, however, that the poem is more than just a realization of these difficulties and that, by exploring the poem on its own terms, "Lines written in Early Spring" can

provide us legitimate means for exploring and understanding Wordsworth's thought. "Lines written in Early Spring" is primarily an experimental movement in which the speaker's initial thoughts become increasingly less stable as he is confronted with the limitations of rationality, until he is eventually left in a state of hesitant confusion. Ultimately, the poem reveals itself to be an exploration of the faculty of human reason and exposes the limitations of that faculty. In doing so, the real lament of "Lines written in Early Spring" is not what humanity has *become*, but rather a lament of what humanity fundamentally *is*.[4]

As Wordsworth tells us in his "Advertisement," the "majority" of the poems in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* "are to be considered as experiments…written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure" (7). Similarly, in the "Preface" to the 1800 edition, Wordsworth describes the poems as "an experiment…to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart" (241). Yet, as James Averill argues, "[t]he experimentalism of *Lyrical Ballads* goes beyond language" (Averill 147).[5] Given Wordsworth's clear interest in the workings of the human mind, we should view "Lines written in Early Spring" as an experiment not merely in language, but in rationality as well.[6] "Lines" is a rational experiment that, ironically, uses reason to expose the limitations of rationality itself through the difficulty the speaker has in verifying his initial feelings in the natural world. James Averill accurately depicts the experimental process:

> [E]xperiment describes a specialized process of mind, the method of intellectual abstraction from reality peculiar to modern science and empirical philosophy. In experimental procedure, there is a continual interplay between raw data and hypothetical general constructs. The experimenter observes natural phenomena, formulates vague theoretical notions to order them, sets up controlled situations to isolate effects, records new observations, and reconstructs theories in accordance with the new data. (Averill 149-50)

Understood in this way, the experimental process is a "process of the mind" in which one observes "natural phenomena" and abstracts "hypothetical general constructs" from his or her individual experiences. These constructs are then tested against "new observations" and evaluated against this new data. The product of this experimental process is a reconstructed theory "in accordance with the new data." It is important to point out that Wordsworth does not take such an abstract, theoretical view of the processes of the human mind.[7] I am not suggesting that "Lines written in Early Spring" is *literally* a scientific experiment, but rather that the thought process that occurs in the poem, a rational process, bears remarkable similarity to the scientific method. Indeed, the resemblance between the explicit rational method of scientific inquiry and the implicit rational method of the commonplace use of reason exists precisely because the two processes are essentially the same—the "process of the mind" outlined above applies equally to the professional study of science as it does to normal, everyday observations of the natural world. Thus, while "Lines" is not necessarily an experiment in scientific rationality, understanding "science" as the professional discipline of examining the natural world, "Lines" *is* an experiment in scientific rationality if we view "science" in a broader sense of simply a disciplined examination of the natural world.

I. The Experimental Process in "Lines written in Early Spring"

Using this conception of the experimental process, one can examine "Lines written in Early Spring," where the experimental process of reason is present and often goes unnoticed by the casual reader eager to summarize Wordsworth's philosophy on humanity's relationship with nature. The poem begins with the simple sounds of birds and a speaker who is assured of the connection that exists between himself and the "works" of Nature he perceives all around him:

> I heard a thousand blended notes,
>
> While in a grove I sate reclined
>
> In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts,
>
> Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

> To her fair works did Nature link
>
> The human soul that through me ran;
>
> And much it grieved my heart to think
>
> What man has made of man. (ll. 1-8)

From these opening lines, one can summarize the poem's *initial* position. While sitting amidst nature, the speaker enjoys listening to the "blended notes" of the birds. These notes help inspire the "pleasant thoughts" which put him in a "sweet mood." Wordsworth's speaker feels a "link" between Nature's "works" and his own "human soul," only to be "grieved" upon realizing the loss that humankind has suffered—namely, the former union that humankind seems to have severed between itself and nature.[8] These "sad thoughts" of humankind's lost connection, occasioned by the speaker's grief, reveal a dichotomy the speaker feels between the simple "thrill of pleasure" (16) that the works of Nature enjoy and the relative sadness of the speaker. As John Hayden notes, "[i]n the midst of a world that seems to be meant to be free and joyous," the speaker finds that "man alone is joyless" (Hayden 41).[9] Human beings appear to be incapable of delighting in the essentially non-human pleasures that nature delights in, owing to the fact that the restless march of human development has caused humankind to veer off course with its once-kindred natural world.

This initial position, the view that the natural world experiences a simple joy that is inaccessible to humankind due to a severed union, is the hypothesis of Wordsworth's experimental poem. After observing the natural phenomena around him, the speaker engages in an act of abstraction and theorizes the severed union between humankind and the joy and pleasure that seems to be operating in the natural world around him. After voicing this initial hypothesis, the speaker begins to cast his eyes around him, searching for new observations with which to confirm his position. At this point, the poem's true movement begins. Although the speaker's initial thoughts surmise a close unity between nature and humans, the conclusion of the poem is quite different. As I will now show, each stanza from stanza three

onward finds the speaker's initial thoughts increasingly less stable, until he is eventually left in a state of confusion, forced to question and doubt his own beliefs.[10] The speaker first casts his eyes on a flower:

> Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
>
> The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
>
> And 'tis my faith that every flower
>
> Enjoys the air it breathes. (9-12)

Once again, the speaker engages in a mental act of abstraction. On the basis of a single observation of one particular "periwinkle," Wordsworth's speaker concludes that "*every* flower / Enjoys the air it breathes." This mental abstraction is made all the more apparent by Wordsworth's precise descriptions of the flowers as "primrose" and "periwinkle"—both words that suggest the exact scientific classification of these flowers. As John Milstead notes, these are the only two words in the poem that suggest such specificity.[11] While we encounter "flower[s]," "birds," and "twigs" throughout the rest of the poem, only here does Wordsworth's speaker try and locate nature's works with any detail. These details highlight the way the speaker carves up the natural world according to the scientific system, lending further support towards reading "Lines written in Early Spring" as an experimental poem of rationality.

While still a fairly confident affirmation, it is interesting that the speaker uses the word "faith" to describe his observation. One would expect that if the speaker were completely assured of his own perception, he would simply *know* that the flowers enjoy the air they breathe. Why use the word "faith?" "Faith," as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is generally considered to be a "confident belief that does not rely on logical proof or material evidence," but rather on the "reliance of testimony." We have faith in things that we cannot wholly verify the truth of, not in things that are plainly obvious and clearly evident. The speaker is beginning to doubt the hypothesis that he stated so boldly in the first two stanzas. Rather than support his abstract theories about humankind and nature, this new observation—this new data—only serves to complicate his position. This doubt stems from the lack of objectivity in the speaker's observations. One simply cannot objectively *view* pleasure, for it is a subjective, first-person *feeling* that a being experiences.[12] In other words, the speaker cannot prove that "every flower /

Enjoys the air it breathes" because he cannot experience the natural world from the flower's perspective. Rather, he is limited to his own point-of-view, a vantage that cannot provide him the knowledge he is desperately seeking because humans cannot literally *see* feelings. One can only view things—material objects and actions—and infer the phenomenal feeling of pleasure from those things. Unlike the inferences of science, however, the speaker's inference is not one that can be tested in the empirical world. The speaker can view the physical flora and fawna in front of his eyes, but he cannot view pleasure in the same manner, raising the possibility that there is no pleasure there at all. The speaker, due to the fact that his observation of the flower's pleasure is derived from inference and not directly from visual experience, is prevented from strictly relying upon material evidence to support this observation.

In short, the speaker's lack of ability to observe pleasure in nature results in the speaker's inability to *prove* that the flowers enjoy the air they breathe, suggesting that the limitations of reason are already beginning to be exposed in the third stanza. Reason demands proof and explanation in order to support its conclusions. Using reason alone, relying upon material evidence and logical proof to guide his thinking, the speaker cannot support his initial hypothesis. Instead, the speaker can merely have "faith" that his observations are sound. "Faith" also suggests a host of religious meaning as well, particularly in the context of the poem's treatment of "Nature" as a higher power that "links" her "fair works" to the "human soul" (5-6). Additionally, the poem's later lines speak of this faith and "belief" being "sent from heaven" and part of a "holy plan," lending further support to reading "faith" in the context of religious belief (21-22). The speaker's belief that the various works of nature delight in the pleasure of their existence is similar to one's faith in God. In both cases, the existence of a higher power and the existence of a uniting principle of pleasure in nature cannot be directly perceived by the senses. These beliefs cannot be wholly verifed using scientific reasoning and instead rely upon authority or testimony to support their conclusions.

Although the speaker's assuredness remains fairly confident at this point in the poem, an interesting problem surfaces from his reliance on "faith." In the normal process of experimentation, the observer reformulates his original hypothesis in accordance with new observations. Yet, the speaker in

this poem does not, for his "faith" in his initial hypothesis seems to extend beyond the reach of this new data. The question is: on *what* does the speaker's faith rely? If "faith" cannot rely on material evidence, but rather must rely on testimony and authority, what provides the testimony and authority for Wordsworth's speaker? Answering this question leads one to a surprising circularity. Wordsworth's speaker appeals to the authority of his senses and the "testimony" they supply, in the form of experience of the natural world, in order to support his initial position. But the senses provide one precisely with *material evidence* and this evidence does not—and, indeed, cannot due to the fact that one cannot observe pleasure—provide the speaker with the support that he so desires. Thus, how can the speaker's belief be grounded if it cannot, in principle, be rationally verified by the material evidence on which the speaker relies?

I argue that reason's limitations are first beginning to be exposed in this stanza because whatever is grounding the speaker's belief, it must lie outside the realm of pure reason, suggesting that reason is limited precisely because it cannot validate an hypothesis that the speaker genuinely has "faith" in. While these limitations begin to emerge in the third stanza, the speaker appears to become more and more aware of their presence as the rest of the poem unfolds. As I have mentioned, unlike a good rational experimenter, the speaker does not stop to reformulate his hypothesis in light of the inconclusive material evidence. Instead he casts his eyes around him for more observations, certain that his "faith" is not misplaced:

> The birds around me hopped and played,
> Their thoughts I cannot measure:—
> But the least motion which they made
> It seemed a thrill of pleasure. (13-16)

The speaker chooses a more promising subject, birds, to locate nature's pleasure in. Perhaps the speaker's difficulty to verify that flowers enjoy the air they breathe stems from the fact that they are inanimate, living organisms. Birds, on the other hand, are capable of movement and bear a greater resemblance to ourselves than do flowers. Yet, despite the speaker's hopes, he is thwarted in his attempt

to discover pleasure inside of the birds for the very same reason that kept him from verifying pleasure in the flowers: he is limited to his human perspective. The senses cannot detect pleasure, whether experienced by a flower or a bird. However, the fourth stanza is not a mere extension of the third. Wordsworth is not simply applying the problems surrounding observation in the third stanza to a new experience. A clear mental movement has occurred in this new scene that separates it from the previous stanza. For here, reason's limitations are not only implicitly present in the speaker's reliance on "faith," they are explicitly stated by the speaker himself. While the speaker watches the "birds around [him]" hop and play, he remarks, quite tellingly, that he "cannot measure" their "thoughts." In other words, the speaker realizes that he does not have access to the subjective experience of the birds and, therefore, cannot come to know through the use of reason that they experience pleasure. The word "measure," with its scientific connotations, is an interesting word choice and guides the reader towards the speaker's understanding of the specific limits of rationality. The speaker does not tell us that he cannot understand the bird's thoughts, that he cannot hear the bird's thoughts, or even that he cannot imagine what the bird's thoughts are. Instead, the speaker tells us that he cannot "measure" their thoughts, invoking the language of science. In order to "measure" something, one must "determine the specific magnitude or quantity" of that thing (*OED*). This quantitative specificity, implied by the speaker's use of the word "measure," once again suggests that the speaker's thought process throughout the poem is one situated in the realm of science and rational inquiry. As Hayden argues, Wordsworth is not "unscientific in his scrutiny of experience," and his disciplined examination of the natural environment surrounding him in "Lines written in Early Spring" is evidence of this fact (Hayden 3). The speaker, as rational thinker, postulates that the natural world experiences simple pleasures that he has no access to, due to humankind's severed link with nature. But he soon finds that his lack of access extends much further than this lost connection—it arises from the limitations of the human faculties. In vain, he turns his eyes, and reason, upon the natural world, to try and justify his hypothesis with careful observation—to "measure" the thoughts of birds and record their meaning. Unlike a scientist studying the objective features of the natural world, however, the speaker finds himself incapable of measuring the *subjective* world of

experience outside his own mind. By the fourth stanza, the speaker is aware that his reason will never be able to span the gap between himself and nature's works.

It is this realization that hastens the speaker's movement away from his original position. Having rested his hypothesis on faith in the previous stanza, the speaker is now reduced to saying that the bird's "motion" merely "*seemed* a thrill of pleasure" (15-16; my emphasis). "Seemed" is particularly illuminating, for it suggests that the speaker is expressing a belief about the way the bird's pleasure *appears* to be present in the bird's "motion." Above all, "seems" stresses the first-person subjectivity of the speaker's observation—it stresses the speaker's belief about the way his perceptions simply appear to him and not a fact about what is actually the case. To illustrate this point, take an example from ordinary life. If I say, "it seemed to me that John was upset," I am not implying that John actually was upset or that I am fully assured he was. Instead, I am simply reporting the way things appeared to me, that it appeared to me that John was upset. Indeed, the whole reason for qualifying my belief with the word "seemed" is to inform whomever I am speaking to that I am unsure whether John was upset, regardless of the fact that it is my belief that he was. The speaker in "Lines written in Early Spring" qualifies his belief in the same manner, reporting the way the birds appear to him to experience pleasure. He cannot support his beliefs with material evidence because he cannot, as Frederick Garber humorously puts it, "measure ornithological thoughts" (Garber 96). But, nevertheless, "the least motion which they made…seemed a thrill of pleasure."

This new belief, based on the way the motion of the birds appears to the speaker, is less assertive than the speaker's statement of "faith" in the previous stanza. Despite the fact that "faith" contains a hint of unverifiability, "faith" does communicate a sense of assuredness even in the absence of proof. If we remind ourselves of the religious meaning surrounding the word, "faith" is often used to describe a person's most basic and deeply held convictions. The word "seems," on the other hand, does not communicate the same level of assuredness. Compare the phrases, "I have faith that God exists," and "it seems to me that God exists." One phrase is an assured statement of conviction and the other is a qualified expression of a belief. The speaker is no longer able to assert with faith that nature delights in

joy and pleasure. Rather, he qualifies his language and simply informs the reader that it seems to him that this is the case.

Notice how once again the speaker struggles within the confines of his rational experiment. As I have argued, the speaker's implicit misgivings in the third stanza become explicit here in the fourth. Try as he might, there is simply no way that the speaker can gather the material evidence that his reason is desperately seeking in order to support his initial hypothesis. But the speaker does not bring his experiment to an end in light of this fact. Not only does the speaker fail to bring his experiment to a close, he does not follow rational protocol. Once again, the speaker does not stop to reformulate his hypothesis in light of the inconclusive and problematic material evidence. Instead, his reason pushes him onward to make further observations, despite the fact that these observations cannot provide him with the evidence he wants. The speaker's doubts crop up once again in the fifth stanza, this time increasing their strength and pushing the speaker further away from his original stance. His eyes move from the birds around him to the "budding twigs" that *seem* to him to "spread out their fan / [t]o catch the breezy air" (17-18). After making these observations, however, the speaker analyzes the way his appearances seem to him and remarks:

> And I must think, do all I can,
> That there was pleasure there. (19-20)

In these lines, the speaker's beliefs are reduced even further. There is no assured "faith" in these lines. Indeed, the speaker is no longer even sure of his own observations, of the way things appear to him. The speaker signals the reader of these changing developments by saying that he *"must* think*"* and "*do all [he] can*" in order to believe that there is pleasure in the natural world. Heather Glen argues that these lines reveal a speaker who "is not assertively in control…of his own reactions," thus interpreting "must" as expressing some sense of necessity (Glen 42). In other words, the speaker is forced or cannot think otherwise that "there was pleasure there." While this is a valid reading of the text, I believe that Glen overlooks the fact that "I must think" is quickly followed by "do all I can." The fact that the speaker must "do all [he] can" to believe provides us with a context for interpreting the first line. The speaker is not

simply forced into believing that nature experiences pleasure. He is making an insistent demand of himself, a firm resolve to do everything within his power to believe that "there [is] pleasure there" in nature. This reading is supported by the fact that the rational thought process of the poem provdes the speaker with a good reason to dig in his heels and clutch onto his hypothesis—his reason cannot provide him with the necessary justification. Therefore, given the limitations of reason, it is fitting for the speaker to exhaust his abilities—by doing all he can—in order to obligate himself to believe. The limitations of reason are on full display in this stanza as the speaker battles against his own intuitions. Unlike the previous stanza, the speaker is no longer assured of his own perceptions, of the way his experience *appears* to him. Instead, he must do all he can in order to allign his rationality with his hypothesis. The speaker's misgivings highlight the fact that his initial position is slipping ever further out of his hands as each stanza provides his reason with more doubts.

The final stage in the speaker's experimental movement occurs in the final stanza of the poem. At this point, the speaker is left in utter confusion of his own beliefs:

> If this belief from heaven be sent,
> If such be Nature's holy plan,
> Have I not reason to lament
> What man has made of man? (21-24)

The speaker's final thoughts are not captured in an assured statement of faith; they are not said with the expression of how the world seems or appears to him; they are not even the forced resolve that the speaker takes in the previous stanza in order to make himself believe that pleasure exists in nature. Instead, Wordsworth's speaker provides us with two conditional "if" statements, framed inside of a question. First, let us examine the two "if" statements. It should be clear by now that the experimental and exploratory nature of "Lines written in Early Spring" clearly places it within the realm of science and rational inquiry. Read in this light, the two "if" statements are particularly interesting because they invoke the language of logic and philosphy.[13] What a conditional statement essentially asserts is a hypothetical: if the antecedent is true, the consequent will necessarily follow. Thus, in the poem, if it is

the case that the speaker's belief has been "sent" from "heaven," then the rest of the lines will follow. The line that immediately follows this statement, however, is *another* conditional statement: "If such be Nature's holy plan." Hence, the speaker checks his beliefs again with the addition of another nested "if" statement. What does all of this signify? It suggests that the speaker is no longer willing to take any assured stance on the truth of his beliefs. The beauty of a conditional statement is that it allows one to assert the truth of something without having to put anything on the line. What began as an observation and an assured statement of faith, has descended into the speaker merely saying that if certain conditions obtain—namely that his beliefs have been sent from heaven and that this is Nature's holy plan—then perhaps the truth of his observations will stand. He has weakened his original position and hidden behind the language of philosophers.

We have discussed the antecedents of the speaker's hesitant "if" statements, but what about the consequents? Remember, if the antecedent is true, then the rest of the line follows. Yet, Wordsworth's speaker does not provide an assertive statement where one might have expected. It would be perfectly natural, given the speaker's unwillingness to completely give up his initial hypothesis, to expect that the speaker would assert that if these two "if" statements obtain, then his initial hypothesis would be true—pleasure does exist in nature and he has grounds for lamenting "what man has made of man." Conversely, Wordsworth's speaker does not provide such an assertion and one must ask why. The speaker has, instead, supplied the reader with a question: "Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?" John L. Mahoney has recently suggested that the speaker's "if" statements and question reveal a "hesitancy" on the speaker's part to link himself with the nature that surrounds him (Mahoney 83). The qualifiers that the speaker places upon his own beliefs, however, indicate something stronger than mere hesitancy. Rather, they suggest the speaker's *inability*, both to provide rational support for his beliefs and to even affirmatively state his position. The speaker's question reaches out to the audience, as if to ask our opinion on the matter. Thus, he seems to be trying to support his belief by appealing to the reader's intuitions, rather than providing a rational proof for his hypothesis. In this final stanza, the

speaker is not asserting his faith or reporting his beliefs. He is asking and his final question ends the poem on a note that lacks any sense of a resolution to these problems.

Viewing the poem as a whole now, the reader is in a position to summarize the entire experimental movement that occurs throughout "Lines written in Early Spring." What begins as an observation of nature and a posited hypothesis soon descends into uncertainty and confusion. This movement starts with the fact that the speaker must rest his belief on faith, a belief that cannot be verified by material evidence or observation. This new assured belief is reduced even further to a simple statement about the way the world "seems" to the speaker. The speaker makes a desperate attempt to hold onto this belief, but quickly realizes that he is even unsure about the way the world appears to him. This forces him to make an insistent resolution that he "must think" and "do all [he] can" to believe that nature experiences pleasure. Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker is forced to put conditions on the truth of his statements, retreating ever further away from the certainty of his beliefs, and ends the poem with a question. In short, what begins as a positive assertion ends in a question.

II. Reason and the Age of Reason: Exploring Limitations

Noticing this movement, the rational process of experimentation, is important because while many have noted the poem's complex treatment of observation, it is not the complexity of Wordsworth's position that is of paramount interest.[14] Rather it is the poem's exploration of the human faculty of reason and its limitations that should capture the reader's attention. Stephen Gill has recently argued that "the dominant characteristic of Wordsworth's philosophic verse…is that the poetry shifts continually on the axis between the exultantly affirmative and the hesitantly exploratory," and that when one reads Wordsworth's poetry, he or she can see how "[t]he poet's thought is visibly taking shape under pressure" (Gill 152-3).[15] While Gill is primarily concerned with "Tintern Abbey" and *The Prelude*, one reason for reading "Lines written in Early Spring" as primarily an exploration of rationality is that the narrative structure of the poem exemplifies the same exploratory-affirmative tension that Gill highlights in these other two poems. "Lines written in Early Spring" constantly shifts back-and-forth between the

affirmative faith of the speaker and the failure of his reason to validate his beliefs. The poem, in a sense, breathes as the reader watches the speaker's thought taking shape.

The exploratory structure of the poem models the rational thought process, a process that is itself a kind of exploration. "Lines written in Early Spring" does not betray any real sense of philosophical forethought or planning. The poem is not a declarative statement of Wordsworth's philosophy regarding the natural world. Instead, the poem seems to spring spontaneously from the speaker's own thoughts as he tries to validate his initial faith regarding pleasure in the natural world. This fact is witnessed by the speaker's own mental movement away from the position that he initially posits in the opening stanzas. The speaker has not made up his mind when he begins the poem and, in the end, he is left in a state of confusion after a series of escalating difficulties. The speaker formulates an hypothesis and then searches the natural world around him for the justifying evidence his rational mind seeks. Indeed, reason impels human beings to verify their beliefs with factual evidence. As the speaker begins to confront the difficulties arising from this rational inquiry, however, he increasingly qualifies and pronounces his faith with less assuredness, all the while still desperately seeking verification. In the end, after finding no such justification, the speaker is forced to reduce his beliefs to conditional statements and a question. The entire movement of the poem parallels the speaker's own rational thought process—the steps his reason takes in order to arrive at his final position. In this way, "Lines written in Early Spring" is a perfect model and exploration of the human faculty of reason, a faculty that helps to define and, ultimately, complicate humanity's place in the natural world.

One question remains: why write a poem that models the rational thought process and exposes the limitations of reason? An answer presents itself if we examine the poem's exploration in light of the historical circumstances surrounding its creation. Throughout much of the eighteenth century, there was a spirit of rational optimism in the intellectual community. It was an age of reason, in which intellectuals were increasingly turning to science in order to unlock the mysteries of the universe. This movement was largely caused by the achievements of Sir Isaac Newton, whose theories suggested that an intellectual conquest of our world was possible by applying the principles of mathematics to nature in every detail.

The scientific enthusiasm of the age is perhaps best expressed by professor M. Waldman in *Frankenstein,* the work of another Romantic writer, Mary Shelley:

> [Natural philosophers] penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows. (Shelley 76)

Professor Waldman's character and comments are closely modeled after Sir Humphrey Davy, a scientist who lived at the time of both Shelley and Wordsworth.[16] In Davy's most famous lecture, published in 1802, he proclaims that "there is every reason to believe" that humankind can discover the "general laws by which [nature] is governed" and his desire for scientific discovery closely mimics sexual desire when he asks: "who would not be ambitious of becoming acquainted with the most profound secrets of nature; of ascertaining her hiddden operations…?". Along with equating knowledge with power, Davy's comments suggest reason should play the primary role in humanity's deliberation. In order to gain knowledge, humankind must turn the light of reason upon the dark recesses of our world and illuminate them. Thus, during Wordsworth's lifetime, there was an implicit assumption that the only legitimate method for discovering knowledge was through the application of reason.

As James Warren Beach points out, the rationalism of the eighteenth-century was "characterized by [a] superficial view of the problems of epistemology, and by an exaggerated confidence in the power of common-sense reason (that is, of the scientific process of analysis and logical deduction) to give a satisfactory account of the ultimate nature of things" (Beach 23). He goes on to argue that it is "broadly true" that "the romantic movement generally was in reaction against [this] type of rationalism" (Beach 23).[17] Wordsworth's "Lines written in Early Spring" seems to be in perfect accordance with this reactionary movement, as particularly evidenced by the breakdown of the scientific process of analysis in the poem. I argue that the poem reveals itself to be a devastating response to the intellectual movements surrounding him in two primary ways. First, while Wordsworth seems to support science and the

application of reason, he is also wary of reason's limitations, causing him to question the "exaggerated confidence" in this faculty to resolve all of humankind's questions. Secondly, Wordsworth believes that reason is not the only faculty by which humankind can come to have knowledge; hence, the rationalist belief that reason is the only human faculty by which humanity can come to have knowledge is false.

Let us first examine reason's limitations. As I have already argued at length, the poem's narrative structure exposes one limitation of reason: reason alone often cannot resolve important conflicts. The speaker follows the rational process of the scientific method, formulating a hypothesis and then checking that hypothesis against new data from his perceptions. But reason hardly triumphs in the poem. The logical conclusion of the rational thought process is either the validation of the initial hypothesis or the reformulation of the hypothesis to concur with conflicting data. As Heather Glen notes, however, the poem does not end on a conclusive note, but rather that Wordsworth leaves "unresolved the disconcerting sense of isolation and separation that has been present throughout" (Glen 42). Thus, while the scientific method has promised the speaker to resolve his conflicting intuitions regarding pleasure in the natural world, at least according to the optimistic spirit of this age of reason, it cannot fulfill that promise.

Why does reason fail to resolve the speaker's conflict? It is not simply that science needs to work harder—that if the speaker were to continue applying the principles of science to the natural world he would eventually find a resolution. Rather, these issues cannot be resolved through the use of pure reason because the faculty of reason is inherently limited and cannot, as a matter of pure fact, grant the speaker the knowledge that he desires. The speaker's problems illustrate the "destructive analysis of knowledge carried on by Berkely and Hume," the upshot of which was "to throw doubt on the power of the understanding (or reason) to arrive at a knowledge of reality" (Beach 20).[18] This inherent limitation of reason is that it can only examine that which exists inside of its domain—the realm of objective observation of material evidence. That the speaker in the poem cannot "measure" the thoughts of the birds highlights the fact that he cannot, from his human vantage point, experience the world from the point-of-view of the various works of nature (14). He is limited to his own subjective, personal, and human vantage point. Wordsworth explores this limitation of reason to a much greater degree, however,

than I have intimated, for the speaker's reason cannot extend beyond his own subjectivity. In the very act of observation, the speaker colors and filters the world around him in the language of humanity—the language of human concepts. For instance, in the opening lines of the poem, the speaker begins by understanding the chirping of birds in terms of human song: "I heard a thousand blended notes" (1). In using these terms, a connection is drawn between the birds' chirping and that of human melody, song, and pitches and tones—all concepts that govern our language of music. Indeed, the fact that birdcalls are often referred to as songs, both in poetic and popular language, exposes this connection. In order to understand nature, the speaker categorizes his experience into human concepts. In this case, the speaker hears the chirping of the birds, perhaps notes its similarity to the melodies of human songs, and in an act requiring the faculty of reason, describes that chirping in the language that the speaker has inherited from collective society.

Of course, the opening line is just one small instance of subjective interpretation in the poem, for there is hardly a line that is absent of the speaker's coloring of the natural world in the language of humanity. Indeed, in order to grapple with "Nature" as a whole, the speaker has had to personify nature as a being, even giving "her" a gender (5). Furthermore, the speaker is not original in this classification, for by describing nature as a female, he is participating in a rich literary tradition extending as far back as Chaucer, and most likely much further, that sees nature as synonymous with "Mother Nature" (*OED*). By participating in this tradition, the speaker reveals that he is importing literary metaphors from his past experience into his current sensory experience. His constant use of metaphor and analogy suggests that the speaker has to dress up the natural world in the robes of human language and concepts in order to make sense of it. In Kantian terms, he cannot view the works of nature *themselves*, naked from all human conceptualization. The speaker cannot physically detect a link between his soul and the works of nature; he cannot directly perceive that "there [is] pleasure there" in the flowers and the budding twigs; he cannot "measure" the thoughts of the birds. In short, his faculty of reason is limited and the scientific process of analysis can only provide one knowledge of empirical truths, pertaining to material evidence that can be objectively examined. The scientific process, in turn, is limited because it cannot reach beyond its own

boundaries, suggesting that Wordsworth doubts the exaggerated confidence of the rationalistic spirt of his age. One can see these reservations reflected in Wordsworth's "We are Seven," a poem that directly precedes "Lines written in Early Spring" in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. In the poem, the adult narrator tries to convince a young village girl to see the world from a rational, adult perspective. While the poem is "mildly comic," the joke is not on the child whose mind is "limited both by narrowness of experience and imperfect conceptual powers" (Grob 249). Rather, the child's logic ends up trumping the purely-rational conception of the world, teaching the adult narrator "a lesson…about the empowering ambiguities of both numbers and the boundaries between life and death" (Liu 38).

The fact that the narrator in "We are Seven" learns a lesson from the young child leads one to the second way in which Wordsworth is responding to the rationalist "age of reason" in "Lines written in Early Spring." Unlike the rationalists, such as Godwin, who "relied upon reason almost exclusively…for the determination of truth" and "for bringing men to just and reasonable practices in social life," the speaker's difficulties suggest that the faculty of reason is not the only legitimate means for ascertaining such knowledge. Indeed, the barren use of reason often serves simply to complicate matters in Wordsworth's thought and poetry. When Wordsworth speaks of "that false secondary power / By which we multiply distinctions" in *The Prelude*, he is calling attention to the fact that the rational processes of the mind often lead to false conclusions (2.216-217).[19] This "false secondary power," James Scoggins argues, is the "exclusively adult faculty…[of] the understanding"—a faculty whose limits are revealed during the "dramatic conflict" in many of Wordsworth's poems "between the child who "thinks" intuitively and the adult who reasons" (Scoggins 32).

It is not simply the intuitions of childhood that can serve as a source of knowledge for Wordsworth, however. In two other poems contained in the 1798 version of *Lyrical Ballads*, nature itself serves as its own teacher and its lessons are digested more on the level of emotional intuition than cold reasoning. In "Expostulation and Reply," William responds to Matthew's rebuke that he should be feeding his mind with "books" and "the spirit breath'd / From dead men to their kind" (5; 7-8) by informing Matthew that there are other "powers" that "can feed this mind or ours / In a wise passiveness"

(21; 23-4). This "wise passiveness" is developed further in the companion poem, "The Tables Turned," in which the speaker challenges the reader to "quit [our] books" and to "[let] Nature be [our] teacher" (3; 16):

> One impulse from a vernal wood
>
> May teach you more of man;
>
> Of moral evil and of good,
>
> Than all the sages can. (21-24).

In both of these poems, humanity's "wise passiveness" is capable of receiving from Nature a form of knowledge that cannot be deduced from the cold intellect. Here we glimpse a distinction on Wordsworth's part between natural learning and artificial learning, with a clear sense that he favors the latter for its ability to teach humankind more than "all the sages can."[20] Once again, just as the speaker in "Lines written in Early Spring" is prevented from achieving union with the works of nature around him, pure reason seems to stand in humankind's way to achieving harmony with nature in these poems as well. The narrator of "The Tables Turned" notes how "[o]ur meddling intellect / Misshapes the beauteous forms of things," even going so far as to say, quite dramatically, "We murder to dissect" (26-28). It is our cold analysis, absent of natural intuition, and dissection of nature that causes humanity to distort the natural world—and its truth—around him. In all three of these poems, Wordsworth is urging humankind to return to the teachings of nature in order to correct the mistakes of our barren reason, to correct our "meddling intellect."

In the spring of 1798, we find "Wordsworth first attempting to come to grips with the scientific and experimental temper of his age" (Averill 158). This age of reason, dominated by a rationalistic spirit that attempted to solve all of humanity's problems through the use of reason unfettered by emotion, was doomed to failure according to Wordsworth, as witnessed by the ironic experiment in "Lines written in Early Spring." The scientific process of analysis simply cannot settle matters that were of great importance to Wordsworth, just as the speaker cannot validate his own faith in the connection between his

human soul and the rest of nature. In order to justify this connection, the speaker must stand upon his intuition and nature's teaching—he must rely upon his faith.

III. Lamenting Reason

Thinking back to the opening lines of the poem, readers must remind themselves of precisely what causes the "sad thoughts" to arise in Wordsworth's speaker (4). Contrary to those who argue that the speaker is primarily struggling against the activity and passive receptivity of the mind, it is not simply a passive observation of nature that causes the speaker to lament. He tells us directly that it is his "pleasant thoughts" upon observing nature "[b]ring sad thoughts to [his] mind" (4). In other words, it is the action of thinking, an action of the mind, which stirs the sadness inside of him. As the poem's descent continues, the speaker's alienation and assuredness increase in direct proportion to the amount of critical examination he subjects his beliefs to. What is important to glean from all this is that it is the poet's mind, particularly the mental act of thinking, that causes the speaker to lament the condition of humanity. Indeed, he quite tellingly points out that it "grieve[s his] heart to *think* / What man has made of man" (7-8; my emphasis). The relative sadness of humanity does not arise independently of our ability to think and compare ourselves with the rest of nature. The speaker finds that in the midst of a world that appears to be full of happiness, only humanity is unhappy. But there is a reason he is unhappy—only humanity has rational faculties. The sadness the speaker feels, therefore, is entirely dependent on our human faculty of reason. As James Scoggins argues, "only man can be unhappy and only man has rational powers. Wordsworth made the obvious connection between these two assumptions" (37).

Realizing this connection grants us the means for interpreting the poem's concluding line. After examining the various works of Nature the speaker finds around himself, and after having struggled to assure himself that they experience the pleasure that he initially believes they participate in, the speaker asks the following question:

> Have I not *reason* to lament,
>
> What man has made of man? (23-24; my emphasis)

These lines have often been interpreted as an echo of their earlier occurrence in the poem, taking "reason" to simple mean "a reason." This reading suggests that the speaker's question relates to "man's inhumanity to, and dehumanization of man" (Stein 241). But another, more interesting reading of "reason" takes into account the fact that the word plays upon a double meaning. The word also signifies the very faculty that seems to separate humanity from the animal world to begin with—the faculty of *reason*, as in rationality. In other words, a pun is at play in this passage. Considered in this light, the speaker's question can be read as asking if we should lament the faculty of reason that humanity possesses.

Why lament reason? By asking this question, Wordsworth suggests that "internal factors are responsible for his disharmony with the environment" and that the speaker's lack of union is more of a "mental than physical state" (Averill 57). It is not simply the use of reason, however, that Wordsworth targets for lament, but rather the *unfettered* use of reason—falsely believing that reason can resolve all of humanity's difficulties and answer all of man's questions. In connection with "The Tables Turned," Wordsworth is not suggesting that the reader give up reading all together. Wordsworth was no enemy of book learning. Rather, he was merely "protesting against the overbearing encroachment of the 'meddling intellect.'" (Noyes 41). Unrestrained rationalism should be lamented because, in Wordsworth's view, it leads humankind away from an holistic understanding of the world by shielding one from the influence of nature and emotion.

The movement that exists in "Lines written in Early Spring" and the way the poem explores the faculty of human reasoning, intimates this reading of the poem's conclusion. By lamenting "reason" in the final lines of the poem, the speaker is effectively lamenting *who* man is, what man's fundamental nature consists in. The speaker seems compelled to test his "faith" using the principles of rational inquiry. Despite his failure to come to a resolution using this rational method, the speaker is prevented from simply reverting to his initial beliefs. It is not the case, as Perkins suggests, that the poem "leaves no question that the poet accepts as a belief sent from 'heaven,' as a 'faith,' that 'every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes'" (Perkins 246). Instead, his artificial learning has somehow managed to cast

unremovable doubt upon his natural intuitions. The speaker's faculty of reason, a faculty that is fundamental to humanity, is compelled to seek out rational explanations for his beliefs. Given the difficulty involved in restraining reason to its domain, the poem's lament is a question of whether humanity ever should have been endowed with reason in the first place.

This reading is supported quite nicely by the speaker's own conditional "if" statement. The speaker says that if his belief—that the natural world experiences pleasure that humanity no longer can enjoy—is true and that this fact of the world is "Nature's holy plan," only then might he have reasib lament his faculty of reason. If Wordsworth were merely lamenting the course of humanity in these final lines, one might ask what Nature's holy plan is. But if we read these lines as lamenting the fundamental nature of our being and a faculty of reason that naturally leads to an unrealizable quest for knowledge, then a way of reading "Nature's holy plan" readily presents itself. Wordsworth's question might be rephrased as: if it was nature's plan to distinguish humanity with a faculty of reasoning unparalleled in the natural world, and it is precisely our faculty of reasoning that makes us aware of our position and renders us unable to participate in the simple pleasures of the natural world, should we not lament this distinguishing faculty of reason?

Why lament reason? Considering the speaker's personification of Nature and inability to span the gulf between himself and the natural world, there is a pressing reason to lament *reason*. It is precisely humankind's ability to reason that enables us to come to know the world around us. It is precisely what allows us to observe Nature—with pleasure— and, most importantly, it is precisely what demands we provide a rational explanation for all of our beliefs. Upon realizing that his sadness has been created by his own mind, the speaker laments his reason as the sole creator of his sadness.

Wordsworth's speaker desires to approach and re-enter the natural world after feeling that he has been thrown out of it. He has a desire to observe the natural world *as it really is in and of itself*, and not simply mediated by the human imagination and the active mind. But the closer he gets, the more insightful and subtle truths that he uncovers as a result of his observations, the more he realizes that his ideas and perceptions can never be supported by the scientific process of analysis. One cannot be aware of

the lost connection with nature until one has severed it—until one has walked out of the forest, become disillusioned, and tried to find one's way back into the woods. The true lament of "Lines written in Early Spring," therefore, is not that humankind has lost touch with its common roots in Nature—that we have drifted from some pleasant course we once were traveling upon. It is rather that we ever had the ability to believe we were connected in the first place and the horror that follows from realizing that we are forever alone in our attempt to justify that connection.[21]

Notes

[1] For instance, Edwin Stein, whose work specifically deals with Wordsworth's use of allusions to other works, argues that the lament in "Lines written in Early Spring" concerns "man's inhumanity to, and dehumanization of man," and furthermore that the lines "may echo Burns's "Man's inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn," taken from his poem "Man Was Made to Mourn" (Stein 241). Russell Noyes believes that the fact that "France had ruthlessly invaded Switzerland" lends the speaker a "reason for man to lament man" (Noyes 41). Finally, James Butler, who notes that the poem's pleasure takes place "amidst the poverty and anguish of neighboring common men and women" and provides the speaker with "reason to lament 'what man has made of man,'" also describes Wordsworth's lament in the poem as "echoing Robert Burns" (Butler 40). See also Mary Jacobus (1976), pp. 202-204.

[2] Two notable examples are John Milstead (1984) and Robert Ready (1985).

[3] Critics who have commented on the complexity of belief in the poem include: John Hayden (1992) pp. 145-146; Frederick Garber (1971) pp. 95-96; Heather Glen (1983) pp.40-42, 247-248; Mary Jacobus (1976) p. 98; and Paul D. Sheats (1973) p. 221. Their comments are perhaps best summarized by Hayden: "Wordsworth seems to be clearly positing a serious belief in the sensibility of plants and birds that 'link' themselves to the human in a kind of community, and yet the qualifiers in the passage…have caused the animism to be taken figuratively or at any rate not seriously" (Hayden 146).

[4] At this point, in the final draft of the paper, I'm going to extend this thesis beyond the scope of "Lines written in Early Spring" and show how Wordsworth is not only showing the limitations of human reasoning, but in the whole Age of Reason that occupied the scientific & philosophical views of the times. Essentially, I believe that Wordsworth is playfully showing how unfettered rationalism leads to problems in that it ultimately confuses the intimations we have during sensory experience. I have a few good sources on this topic that support my notion of Wordsworth's anti-intellectualism. I'm not simply going to argue that Wordsworth disdains reason, however. Rationality is necessary for mankind; yet Wordsworth's love of human reasoning is a conflicted love, insofar as reasoning is problematic.

[5] Averill's discussion, in a chapter entitled "Experiments in Pathos: *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)," goes on to argue that "the poems are experiments in psychology" and, in particular, their "main interest is in what today we would call abnormal psychology" (Averill 148). While I do not wholly agree with his claim, I find that the general way he treats these poems as experiments to be quite useful. For another view of Wordsworth's experimentation that goes beyond Wordsworth's experiment in language, see Stephen M. Parrish: "His intention was not simply to experiment with the language of poetry or the psychology of passion. It was, beyond this, to work in experimental forms that were distinctive in several important respects: some were marked by heightened metrical patterns; some by a jocular, mock-heroic, almost comic manner; some were innovations in dramatic method; some were Wordsworth's versions of pastoral; some were designed to reduce the role of story or event in narrative, in favor of passion or feeling—to internalize the action" (Parrish x).

[6] For a comprehensive examination of Wordsworth's interest in the human mind, see John O. Hayden (1992). Like Hayden, I do not agree with Averill's claim that the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* solely "reflect Wordsworth's love of suffering" (Hayden 39). With the exception of some of Wordsworth's early poems which "do exhibit an unhealthy sentimental interest in suffering and in abnormal psychology itself," Wordsworth's primary interest was "on healthy states of mind and generally on *normal* psychology"—to include the workings of rationality itself (39-40). For more views on Wordsworth's primary interest in normal psychology, see Donald Davie (1962) pp.25-26; and W. J. B. Owen (1969) p. 108. For additional support of Averill's view, see Alan Bewell (1989) pp. 10, 56.

[7] While Wordsworth was an avid reader of philosophy and science, he does not appear to be solely in the complex theorizing of his good friend, Coleridge. As Hayden remarks, "it is good to remember that Wordsworth began with experiences, not with theories; he was not apparently interested in theories per se but only as explanations of those experiences" (9).

[8] Many critics have found the opening of "Lines" to express the very same point. As David Perkins puts it, "In 'Lines Written in Early Spring' (1798) Wordsworth speaks of a moment when his 'human soul' was linked to nature, and he was made aware of its essential life, or being, that 'grand elementary principle of pleasure,' by which everything, including man, 'knows, and feels, and lives, and moves' (Perkins 245). My objective is not to quarrel with this position, only to point out that it is the speaker's *initial* view and, as I go on to argue, that its claims are not only complicated by the speaker's hesitancy, but are also shown to be insoluble with the meddling faculty of reason.

[9] Hayden's words almost precisely mirror Russell Noyes's words on the same point: "In the midst of a world that is supposed to be free and joyous, and that appears to be so when you look at nature, man alone is joyless" (Noyes 41).

[10] Heather Glen has noticed a similar pattern in these central stanzas: "The pattern of the central four stanzas is one of disjunction: an exact articulation of a newly felt gap between the speaker and the world which he sees. The first two lines of each offer a delicate observation…and the last two his hesitant response" (Glen 41). While I agree with her general analysis of the pattern in these four stanzas, my argument goes further than her own, for I am primarily interested in arguing about the poem's *overall* movement from stanza to stanza, and not simply the localized movement inside of each stanza.

[11] John Milstead argues that these two words are the only "non-literary referents" in the poem and suggest a scientific intrusion into Worsworth's poem (Milstead 34).

[12] The lack of objectivity concerning pleasure is highlighted by the fact that we cannot accurately report the experience of pleasure in other beings for skeptical reasons: i.e. they could be pretending to experience pleasure. Thus, the only pleasure that I can accurately report is my own, subjective experience of pleasure.

[13] To quote John Corcoran's entry in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*: a conditional is "a compound sentence, such as 'if Abe calls, then Ben answers,' in which one sentence, the antecedent, is connected to a second, the consequent, by the connective 'if…then'….In traditional logic, conditionals are called hypotheticals."

[14] For critics who examine the poem's complexity, see note 3.

[15] Kenneth Johnston, on a similar point, argues that this exploratory shifting is not simply apparent in the drafting of Wordsworth's poems, but actually makes it to the "highly wrought verse" of the printed editions (Johnston 595).

[16] For more on the connection between Davy and the character of Professor Waldman, see MacDonald & Scherf, pp. 21-23. An interesting fact raised by these editors, is the connection that existed between Davy, Wordsworth, and William Godwin: "Davy was a poet as well as a scientist, and a friend of Coleridge and Wordsworth as well as of Godwin. He corrected the proofs of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)" (MacDonald & Scherf 22). Hence, not only are Davy's comments a reflection of the general intellectual spirit of the age, they are also particularly appropriate for my argument, which claims that Wordsworth's "Lines written in Early Spring," published first in 1798, can be seen as a response to this intellectual spirit.

[17] For a more complete analysis of the general reaction of the Romantic movement against this type of rationalism, see chapter five of Alfred North Whitehead's, *Science and the Modern World* (Whitehead 1950).

[18] Joseph Warren Beach credits Hoxie Neale Fairchild with developing this reading of the reactionary spirit of the Romantic poets against the rationalism of their day (Fairchild 1931).

[19] See Ernest de Selincourt's introduction to *The Prelude* for more concerning this power of the human mind: "With Coleridge's attempt to fuse philosohpy and religion he was wholly unconcerned. His philosophy, as far as he was a philosopher, was his religion; he never examined its logical implications, and any analysis that seemed to disturb its integrity he wouldhave set down to "that false secondary power by which we multiply distinctions," appealing again to the tribunal of his own deepest experience" (de Selincourt xxxiii-iv).

[20] See (Liu 38) and (Scoggins 30).

[21] I would like to extend my deepest thanks to Kurt Fosso, son of Harold, finest professor of the Lewis & Clark faculty, who will no doubt chastise me for my (Greek) praise. Not only did the ideas for this project arise in a seminar he taught, his continual support and comments on previous drafts helped guide it to its conclusion. I would also like to thank Carissa Wodehouse, Christie, Kalyn Ekstrom, and Dana