

Wordsworth's "Silent Poet"

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Abstract

This paper consists of two parts. The first part is a discussion of Wordsworth's ideas concerning language and poetry in the light of eighteenth-century linguistic theories. I try to demonstrate that the poet's linguistic ideas are influenced by eighteenth-century linguistic primitivism and linguistic organicism, which form the basis of Wordsworth's representation of the silent poet. In the second part of the paper, I try to show that besides John Wordsworth, there are other figures in Wordsworth's poems that can be regarded as silent poets. My argument is based on three poems—"A Poet's Epitaph," "When, to the attractions of the busy world," and *The Excursion*. The second among these three poems is where Wordsworth broaches the term "silent poet." And I argue that the mourner in "A Poet's Epitaph" is an embryonic form of this figure, whereas the Wanderer in *The Excursion* is for Wordsworth an ideal person who is not only a silent poet, but also a social reformer. In portraying the Wanderer, Wordsworth resolves his conflict between his sense of the inadequacy of language and his social conscience.

Key Words: silent poet, 18th-century linguistic theories, "A Poet's Epitaph," "When, to the attractions of the busy world," *The Excursion*

The term “silent poet” is mentioned only once by Wordsworth in one of the “Poems on the Naming of Places”—“When, to the attractions of the busy world”—to describe his brother John, to whom the poem is dedicated. The figure, or the idea, of the silent poet, however, is more than once represented in Wordsworth’s works. The Wanderer in *The Excursion*, for example, can be seen as a silent poet. But what is a “silent poet?” So far, the idea of the silent poet has not been much discussed by Wordsworth scholars. Jonathan Ramsey’s article, “Wordsworth’s Silent Poet,” is one of the very few works that focus on this topic. In this essay, the writer adopts biographical and phenomenological approaches, and argues that Wordsworth’s rustic childhood experience in nature contributed greatly to the poet’s portrayal of the silent poet (Ramsey, 1976: 262). The critic also asserts that the silent poet is a “mediating” or “borderline” figure who stands for the point of contact between language and experiences difficult to represent by word (Ramsey, 1976: 263). As Ramsey puts it, the silent poet is “the word made flesh” (1976: 271).

Stephen Land approaches the topic of the silent poet from the perspective of eighteenth-century language theories, with a view to refuting the argument that Wordsworth holds the belief of structural organicism prevalent in the eighteenth century, that is, the belief that language is an integral part of thought. According to Land,

Wordsworth seeks to rescue poetry from its consequent consignment to the ephemeral realms of mere diction by reversing the Augustan semantic model. He locates poetry essentially in the pre-verbal thought or feeling and confines the word, not its semantic content . . . to the sphere of the commonplace. (1973: 168)

Both Ramsey and Land have discerned the important role language plays in Wordsworth’s portrayal of the silent poet, and both have thus made the inevitable link between language

and Wordsworth's idea of poets in general. Language is, in truth, of the utmost importance in studies of the silent poet. However, placing our examination of the silent poet in the context of primitivism and Wordsworth's linguistic and poetic theories does not suffice if we take into account the Wanderer who, I contend, is also a silent poet. A context larger than a linguistic one is needed, and this is what I seek to do in this paper, which will consist of two parts, first, the silent poet and language, and second, the development of Wordsworth's representation of the inarticulate poet.

I. The Silent Poet and Language

Although no proof is available to show that Wordsworth read eighteenth-century linguistic theories, in his critical essays such as the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*¹ (Wordsworth, 1974) and the tripartite *Essays upon Epitaphs* (Wordsworth, 1974) we can trace many ideas to eighteenth-century linguistic philosophies, especially those related to primitivism and organicism. M. H. Abrams, when discussing the relationship between eighteenth-century primitive language and primitive poetry in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, recognizes eighteenth-century philosophy as a possible source of Romantic poetic theory (1953: 84). He further identifies two pieces of work that might have served as theoretical antecedents for Wordsworth's theory of poetry—Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (published in 1783, but written two decades earlier), and Reverend William Enfield's essay "Is Verse Essential to Poetry" (1796) (Abrams, 1953: 95–96). Stephen Land also claims that "Wordsworth retains the primitivistic association of passion and metaphor in his theory of poetry," yet "transposes the theory of metaphor from its eighteenth-century context in historical primitivism to

¹ In this paper, when I talk about the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, I refer mainly to the 1802 Preface, because in this preface Wordsworth places emphasis on "the real language of nature," and on the question of "what is a poet."

the context of the cultural primitivism he preferred” (1973: 159). Jim Springer Borck, too, reads Wordsworth’s *Prelude* in the light of eighteenth-century critical theories, and cites John Horne Tooke, Lord Monboddoo and Lord Kames as possible influences on the poet (1973: 610-613). These philosophers, according to Borck, share the idea that as language develops, it moves further and further away from its original “representational function,” which leads to man’s inability to fully express himself. Words, therefore, “instead of steadying and supporting the foundations of rational thought, imperil and obstruct the orderly flow of thinking and its linguistic representations” (611).

All these critics have pointed to Wordsworth’s distrust of words. Yet, as Hans Aarsleff recognizes, “There was for Wordsworth no alternative to the philosophy he relied on. The medium of poetry is language, it alone can mediate between the subjective and private world of the individual and the public world” (1982: 377). Where, then, does Wordsworth’s poetic theory lead him? And what is the relationship between language, the poet and the silent poet? In the 1802 supplement to the *Lyrical Ballads* Preface, Wordsworth asks the question “What is a poet” and provides a detailed answer. According to him, a poet is

a man speaking to men: a man . . . endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present.

(Wordsworth, 1977: 877-878)

The important factors that make up a poet are listed here as "sensibility," "enthusiasm," "tenderness," "knowledge of human nature," "a comprehensive soul," "passions," "volitions," "spirit of life," and imagination, all of which belong to emotional and spiritual qualities. There is almost nothing mentioned about language. To Wordsworth, language is subordinate to the real passion of man:

[W]hatever portion of this faculty [imagination] we may suppose even the greatest Poet to possess, there cannot be a doubt but that the language which it will suggest to him, must, in liveliness and truth, fall far short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those passions, certain shadows of which the Poet thus produces, or feels to be produced, in himself. However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a Poet, it is obvious that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. (Wordsworth, 1977: 878)

In this passage, words and phrases such as "fall short," "slavish" and "mechanical" suggest that, for Wordsworth, language is altogether insufficient for expressing and describing "real" feelings and actions. We encounter a similar idea in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: "[N]o words, which [the poet's] fancy or imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth" (Wordsworth, 1977: 878). This ties in with what he says in *The Prelude* that a poet "express[es] liveliest thoughts in lively words/As native passion dictates" (Wordsworth, 1979: 263-264).² And this is why, at the very beginning of the appendix to the 1802 Preface, he echoes the eighteenth-century idea of historical primitivism: "The earliest Poets of all nations generally wrote from passion excited by real events; they wrote

² All references to *The Prelude* are from the 1805 version, unless otherwise stated.

naturally, and as men” (Wordsworth, 1977: 892). As Land remarks, “Wordsworth’s interest is not in the ‘body’ of poetry, the language, but in its ‘soul,’ the ‘feelings’ of the poet” (1973: 164).

If passion and feelings are what constitute a good poet, the words Wordsworth uses in describing the ideal state in which good poetry is written—“naturally,” “as men,” “expressing liveliest thoughts in liveliest words” and so on—also suggest that he discriminates between passions that are natural and genuine, and those that are imitative and artificial, a distinction that directly results from his dissatisfaction with eighteenth-century poetic diction and style. And, although he says in the 1802 Preface that the language he adopts in writing poetry is a language “really used by men,” he does not mean just any kind of men. By “men” he refers to those who live a “low and rustic” life, because “in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature,” and because

such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived. . . . Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets[.] (Wordsworth, 1977: 870)

Also, in the same Preface, he maintains that “if the Poet’s subject be judiciously chosen, it will naturally, and upon fit occasion, lead him to passions the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures” (Wordsworth, 1977: 877). This kind of preference and selection seems to indicate that Wordsworth fosters the idea of “cultural primitivism” (which we will explain in detail later). And this leads us to the question of the relationship between language and passion, or language and thought. To explore Wordsworth’s

idea on this subject, we have to turn to the third "Essay on Epitaphs," in which the poet adopts the body and soul metaphor to describe the relationship between language and thought:

If words be not . . . an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on.

(Wordsworth, 1974: 84-85)

Wordsworth was not the first one to apply clothing and incarnation metaphors to the language-thought relationship. It was a commonplace in eighteenth-century poetics to see language as the clothing or ornament of thought. Samuel Johnson, for example, has said that language is "the dress of thought" (qtd. Abrams, 1984: 5). And in 1767, Johann Gottfried Herder, pronouncing an opposing idea, which is close to that of Wordsworth's, wrote that "the thought must be related to the expression . . . as the soul to the body in which it dwells . . ." (qtd. Abrams, 1984: 9). Wordsworth's notion of language's being an incarnation of thought, therefore, is influenced by the eighteenth-century theory of linguistic organicism, which claims, first, that language is "not distinguishable from the mental events it serves to communicate," but is an integral part of thought (Land, 1973: 158). Secondly, the theory predicates that language grows and develops, having "a life of its own as if it were an organicism" (Aarsleff, 1967: 149, 152).

We have earlier mentioned that in Wordsworth's view, emotion is more important than language in the writing of good poetry. W. J. B. Owen, in his analysis of the *Essays upon Epitaphs*, also more than once emphasizes that Wordsworth is less concerned with language than with emotions because language, being the "incarnation" of thoughts, cannot be independent of the latter, nor can thoughts be expressed

without the embodiment of language (1969: 120). At first glance, Wordsworth's use of the incarnation metaphor does suggest that for him, language is inseparable from thought and emotion. A closer look, however, shows that it may be more complex than this. Land has contended that Wordsworth

is only replacing one dualistic model with another: the inter-relationship of body and soul is more complex than that of a body to its dress, but the ontological distinction between body and soul is incomparably greater than the relatively trivial distinction between thought and its verbal embodiment. (1973: 160)

Land does not deny that Wordsworth holds the idea that good poetry is the natural emanation of powerful feelings, but he contends that powerful feelings do not necessarily lead to poetry: "poetic feeling does not in itself either entail or constitute a language and may therefore subsist in independence of any linguistic formulation" (1973: 162). It is based on this argument that Land further maintains that for Wordsworth, "the 'feelings' of the poet [are] essentially pre-linguistic and often of such a nature as to defy linguistic expression" (162).

Herein lies the key, in terms of language theory, to Wordsworth's idea of the silent poet. Land's argument leads to the corollary that since emotion is essentially independent of language, and since poetic feelings do not necessarily lead to linguistic poetic expressions, it is only natural that there exist poets who do not communicate through linguistic expressions. What these poets have are poetic "feelings" rather than poetic "language." David S. Miall, in his article dealing with the complexity of "feeling" in *The Prelude*, bases his discussion on the Infant Babe passage in Book II of this autobiographical poem. Although here Miall is not talking about the silent poet, the infant babe's pre-linguistic state of being, which is similar to the linguistically primitive state of the silent poet, serves to explicate Wordsworth's idea concerning the relationship

between feelings and poetic spirit. Miall contends that "[the] infant's process of coming to know the world is due not to language . . . but to feeling" (1992: 240), and "[it] is this emotional knowing . . . that forms 'the first/Poetic spirit of our human life'" (241). So it is with the silent poets whose "feelings" lead to their poetic spirit.

But let us go back to Land's idea concerning Wordsworth's linguistic theories. On the whole I agree with Land on the problem concerning Wordsworth's linguistic dualism; however, I take issue with him on the point regarding the poet's notion of historical and cultural primitivism. As Land asserts:

[Wordsworth] transposes the theory of metaphor from its eighteenth-century context in historical primitivism to the context of the cultural primitivism he preferred, and in doing so leaves behind the structural and genetic speculations which had enabled Herder to derive from this theory of metaphor an organic model of language. (1973: 159)

The idea of historical primitivism is derived from the theory of linguistic organicism held by eighteenth-century scholars such as Vico and Blackwell, who speculated that the first words had been cries uttered by primitive people to express their emotions. Later, as these people grew in rationality, their cries also developed into a larger and larger vocabulary (Land, 1973: 158). This kind of theory suggests that linguistic primitivism was a historical phenomenon that existed at the early stage of human development. In Wordsworth's 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, however, the poet seems to imply a linguistic primitivism that is cultural rather than historical, that is, the kind of poetic language that rural people use is directly related to the environment they are exposed to, and has less to do with the degree of the maturity of their rationality.

Land is correct in stating that Wordsworth embraces cultural primitivism, but whether Wordsworth rejects historical primitivism is a moot point. My contention is that the poet

embraces both, which can be illustrated in the development of Wordsworth's representation of the silent poet figure, which I will fully explore in Section II of this paper. Right now I would like to quote Aarsleff's words pertaining to social and historical transformation of history, which will help explain why I argue that Wordsworth embraces historical primitivism, and which will lead to another significant idea related to the silent poet. Aarsleff has maintained that Wordsworth, due to his difficulty in "getting around" the limit and the corrupted use of language through time,

rejected the poetic practice and the dominant poetic theory of the [eighteenth] century, but he built his own critical theory on the philosophy of the same century that had given language a central role in our understanding of the ways of knowing, communication, and the potentialities of expression. (Aarsleff, 1982: 373)

This philosophy is the language-oriented theory formulated by the French philosopher Condillac, whose doctrine suggests that words are but arbitrary signs and do not "constitute an inventory of the world, a nomenclature" (Aarsleff, 1982: 375). Any object is therefore represented only as it is "grasped by the mind," whereby ideas are formed. As ideas are essentially private and incommunicable, it is only through social and communal discourses based on shared experiences that communication is at all possible. Such discourses, however, must necessarily be subject to constant changes as a result of social transformations (Aarsleff, 1982: 375-376).

This is an essential part of the philosophical, as well as linguistic, basis of Wordsworth's idea concerning the silent poet as well as the common kind of poet, and the two attest to his dilemma in resolving the problem of the validity of language: the articulate poet is representative of the means without which the power of the creative imagination cannot be manifested, whereas the silent poet signifies the inadequacy of linguistic

means to represent the inner world.

In Wordsworth's poetry we thus find the poet repeatedly alluding to what he calls the "sad incompetence of human speech" (*The Prelude*, 1850, VI: 593). In Book V of the 1805 *Prelude*, for example, a deep sense of loss permeates the opening lines:

Thou also, man, hast wrought,
For commerce of thy nature with itself,
Things worthy of unconquerable life;
And yet we feel - we cannot chuse but feel -
That these must perish. Tremblings of the heart
It gives, to think that the immortal being
No more shall need such garments; and yet man,
A long as he shall be the child of earth,
Might almost "weep to have" what he may lose—
Nor be himself extinguished, but survive
Abject, depressed, forlorn, disconsolate.

(*The Prelude*, V: 17-27)

Although in the *Essays upon Epitaphs* Wordsworth has declared that language should be the "incarnation" rather than the "clothing" of thoughts, and thus language is an integral part of thoughts, here we see him lamenting over the fact that language is, after all, our "garments" which are thrown off after death. Later on he also deplorably says:

Oh, why hath not the mind
Some element to stamp her image on
In nature somewhat nearer to her own?
Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?

(*The Prelude*, V: 44-48)

Wordsworth's apprehension concerning language is also evinced in the third *Essay upon Epitaphs*:

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a

dominion over thoughts. . . . Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve. (Wordsworth, 1974: 84-85)

On the one hand, the poet considers words an insufficient instrument for expressing the inner state of man. On the other hand, as we have shown above, ontologically, there is no alternative for him but to concede the fact that for a poet, language is probably the only mode of mediation³ between the private and the public,⁴ or rather, between one's inner world and the external world. This dilemma parallels the split between his solipsistic propensity—a propensity that draws him towards the internal world where he communes with nature and gains a sense of the infinite—and his belief in the poet's moral duties, a belief that ushers him towards the communal

³ One can argue that there may be other modes of mediation between the private and the public, but for the "poet," whose vocation indicates the choice of communicating feelings and thoughts through language, language seems to be the only mode of expression between the self and the public, unless one broadens the definition of "poet" to include other kinds of artists such as dancers and pantomimists, a definition which, however, is not used in this paper.

⁴ Here I use the word "private" at a psychological rather than sociological level. So "the private" refers to a person's inner psychological realm, whereas "the public" suggests the sphere in which one comes into contact with other people through various ways of communication and sharing. Habermas has defined "public sphere" as "first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. . . . Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion; thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely" (Habermas, 1992: 231). My idea of the public is different from that of Habermas in that he places emphasis on "public opinion" and "general interest." My definition of the public is broader than his, and it refers to the realm that is opposed to that of one's inner mental and psychological activities.

and public sphere (Yu, 1998a). This split, seen in the light of eighteenth-century philosophy, is associated with the so-called "principle of linguistic relativity" propounded by Condillac under the rubric of "the genius of language" (Aarsleff, 1982: 376). Since language is a social discourse, society largely determines people's linguistic taste. This fully explicates Wordsworth's argument that rustic language is more natural, "permanent" and "philosophical" than the corrupted language taken up by eighteenth-century poets. A corollary of "linguistic relativity" is the concept that, in order to "purify" people's use of language, social reformation must first be brought about. Social reformation is thus one of the duties of the poet-prophet. As D. D. Devlin also avers, for Wordsworth, "[moral] and poetic sensibility are inseparable"; "[the] change in taste will also be a moral change" (1970: 44, 24).

Putting together what we have discussed so far, we find that first of all, for Wordsworth, the most important thing that distinguishes a poet is his passion and feelings, rather than the language he adopts. Secondly, language is a limited tool for the expression of such emotions, which means that language will necessarily fail to represent the inner world. And thirdly, language's being the only tool for communication between the inner world and the public world, leads Wordsworth to his poetic (linguistic) and social dilemma which divides his poetry between the egotistically sublime that seeks to transcend all boundaries and the socially conscious that attempts to redeem mankind and society. It is on the first two ideas just mentioned that Wordsworth bases his representation of the silent poet who, although without poetic language, is above the articulate poet. However, Wordsworth's social awareness and duty also play an essential role in the later development of his representation of the silent poet.

Concerning Wordsworth's social awareness and duty, the new historicists have argued in the past two decades that in many of Wordsworth's poems the poet evades socio-political

themes and displaces them with the image of a transcendental mind or imagination. Our purpose in mentioning this critical approach is not to discuss the validity of such an argument. What is relevant to our study here is the idea of absence and silence that Marjorie Levinson, one of the new historicists, points out in her study of Wordsworth's great period poems. Levinson claims that many new historicists have sought to show that the literary work often "[presents] formally a sort of allegory by absence, where the signified is indicated by an identifiably absented signifier" (1986: 9). To elucidate this "allegory of absence," she discusses Althusser's idea of silence in discourse, the silence of which, in Levinson's words, "inheres within the work and can determine its peripheral contours as well" (1986: 9). The idea of silence within language or poetic representation can indeed help us delve deeper into Wordsworth's poetry, especially when we are dealing with the "silent" poet and Wordsworth's social awareness. While I do not deny that there is the possibility of Wordsworth's evading social reality in his poetry, I do not entertain the idea that embracing socio-political themes is the only way for the poet to express his socio-political concerns. Kenneth Johnston, who is himself a new historicist, has articulated a similar view: "Turning to something beyond politics, even in moments of political grievance, has a political significance that is not merely an escapist or idealized displacement, because Nature in such moments represents that which the political, no matter how repressive, cannot touch" (Johnston, 1992: 27). In this essay Johnston is talking specifically about nature and elegy, but the concept applies to other things that are "beyond politics."

The other thing we would like to clarify is that what the new historicists are concerned with is silence within language, whereas our concern is not whether silence exists within language, but the inadequacy of language to express a person's inner feelings, or silence "without" language, so to speak. In addition to discussing how language fails as a form of mediation

between the inner world and the outside world, therefore, we want to explore what it is, if it is not language, or poetry, for that matter, that makes certain figures in Wordsworth's poetry "poets," albeit "silent" ones.

II. The Silent Poet

As I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, although Wordsworth gave the title the silent poet to John Wordsworth only, there are other figures that can be seen as such, and in them we discern a development of Wordsworth's representation of the inarticulate poet. I would like to concentrate on three such figures, and they are, according to the chronological order in which they appear in Wordsworth's poetry, the rural figure in "A Poet's Epitaph," John Wordsworth in "When, to the attractions of the busy world," and the Wanderer in *The Excursion*. I will first discuss "A Poet's Epitaph."

"A Poet's Epitaph" was written sometime between 1798 and 1799 when Wordsworth was in Goslar. The poem, in both its title and its form, intertextually relates to Robert Burns' "A Bard's Epitaph." The two poems are both more or less variations on traditional pastoral themes, but it is worth noting that in Burns' preface to the Kilmarnock edition of his poems, which contains "A Bard's Epitaph," the poet specifically claims that

[T]he following trifles are not the production of the Poet, who, with all the advantages of learned art, and perhaps, amid the elegancies and idlenesses of upper life, looks down for a rural theme, with an eye to Theocritus or Virgil . . . unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by rule, he sings the sentiments and manners, he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language.

(Burns, 1993: 193)

Kenneth Johnston has remarked that these words "helped

prepare the way for Wordsworth's great preface of 1800" (Johnston, 1998: 87). I would like to add that these words also mark a connection between Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" and Wordsworth's "A Poet's Epitaph." Burns' words show that he had begun asserting himself as a rural poet. Although Wordsworth can hardly be called a "rural" poet himself, what Burns tries to express in the words quoted above is closely related to what the younger poet seeks to do in both the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and his representation of the silent poet.

A comparison between Gray's elegy and Wordsworth's epitaph shows that there is a great similarity between the two poems in terms of the description of the country fellow. Both are idlers who pass their time in nature:

"There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noontide wou'd he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

"Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he wou'd rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love."
(Gray, "Elegy": 101-108)

But who is He, with modest looks,
And clad in homely russet brown?
He murmurs near the running brooks
A music sweeter than their own.

. . .

The outward shows of sky and earth,
Of hill and valley, he has viewed;
And impulses of deeper birth
Have come to him in solitude.

In common things that round us lie

Some random truths he can impart,—
 The harvest of a quiet eye
 That broods and sleeps on his own heart.
 (Wordsworth, "A Poet's Epitaph": 37-52)⁵

Both Gray's and Wordsworth's poems depict figures that belong to the eighteenth-century idea of "cultural primitivism"—talents who, due to their living circumstances, are untainted by, and yet also unknown to, the corrupted outside world. However, instead of describing the buried poet, as Gray does in his elegy—"Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth/A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" (127-128)—Wordsworth places emphasis on the living, and nowhere in his poem do we find a direct representation of the dead poet. Wordsworth's focus, therefore, has shifted from mere meditation on the deceased to delineating the living poet. Johnston has suggested that Wordsworth's poem is "a direct representation of his own death" and "the autobiographical form of [his] epitaph" (1998: 652). In view of Wordsworth's mental state in Goslar, this may indeed be true—he was living isolated in a foreign country, and was frustrated by his inability to carry on with *The Recluse*. Nonetheless, it was also during this time that he wrote the Two-Part *Prelude* in which his own voice began to emerge, and the problem of the identity of the poet was something that greatly concerned Wordsworth.

Rather than seeing "A Poet's Epitaph" as the poet's own epitaph, therefore, I regard it as a poem reflecting Wordsworth's anxiety and concern about the proper role of the poet. As was mentioned above, in the poem, unlike Gray, Wordsworth portrays not the deceased poet, but the person fit to come forth and mourn for the dead. This person, a rustic, is fit as a mourner because he is himself a poet, albeit an inarticulate one. This inarticulate poet is here shown to be an idle dreamer:

⁵ All references to Wordsworth's poems, unless otherwise stated, are from *The Poems* (1977).

But he is weak, both Man and Boy,
 Hath been an idler in the land;
 Contented if he might enjoy
 The things which others understand.(53-56)

Lisa Steinman has discussed this poem in the light of James Thomson's poetry, and regards the rustic as Wordsworth's variation on Thomson's idle dreamer. She also sees Wordsworth "[conflating] his poetic figure in idle (and traditional) retreat with what in *The Ruined Cottage* was the more active figure of Armytage 'harvesting' images with 'a quiet eye' from 'common things'" (1998: 76).

The way Wordsworth portrays the poet as an idle dreamer, on the one hand, shows his anxiety about the profession of poet, since, as I mentioned earlier, he was at this time preoccupied with his poetic identity. Although *Lyrical Ballads* had been published just before he left for Germany, the collection was published anonymously, and he was, by the standards of society, judged an idler and a failure.

On the other hand, however, the idle poet can be seen as an embryonic form of the silent poet. To begin with, the rustic is depicted as communing with nature, through which "impulses of deeper birth/Have come to him in solitude" (47-48). And he is endowed with more than keen sensory perceptions, for he possesses a "quiet eye/That broods and sleeps on his own heart," which not only reminds us of the "wise passiveness" Wordsworth celebrates in "Expostulation and Reply," a poem which had just been published in *Lyrical Ballads*, but also brings our attention to the eye "made quiet" in "Tintern Abbey," with which the poet "sees into the life of things" (49). It is with this quiet eye that the rustic poet reaps "random truths" about "things that round us lie," which others may not be able to find. Both his sensory and spiritual perceptions, which enable him to hold communion with nature, mark his affinity with the dead poet, and we are urged to recognize his worth, not as a man skillful in poetry-making, but,

keeping in mind what Wordsworth says in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, as one whose emotions are those of a poet. In a way, he has become not merely the mourner, but a substitute for the dead poet, or the embodiment of his poetic spirit.

Nevertheless, as we have said, the rustic in "A Poet's Epitaph" is only the embryonic form from which Wordsworth will later develop the silent poet. So now we will turn to the poem in which the term is broached—"When, to the attractions of the busy world." This poem was written in 1800, the year following Wordsworth's settlement, along with his sister Dorothy, in his native land Grasmere. In this poem, the retired poet relates how he frequents a fir grove in the hope that the place can provide him, as winter snow blocks other paths, an open space where he may pace to and fro. Later on, he abandons the place for the precise reason that the thickness of trees deprives him of such an open space. As spring comes, however, he discovers that his sailor brother, who has recently stayed with them, has resorted to the grove and with a finer eye has found a natural path for walking:

. . . I found
 A hoary pathway traced between the trees,
 And winding on with such an easy line
 Along a natural opening, that I stood
 Much wondering how I could have sought in vain
 For what was now so obvious . . .
 . . .
 Pleasant conviction flashed upon my mind
 That, to this opportune recess allured,
 He had surveyed it with a finer eye,
 A heart more wakeful . . . (47-61)

John's visits to the grove lead William to the sudden realization that his brother is more perceptive of nature than he is, as he has not been able to discover the natural path in the grove. And therefore, in the following lines, Wordsworth writes:

When thou hadst quitted Esthwaite's pleasant shore,

And taken thy first leave of those green hills
 And rocks that were the play-ground of thy youth,
 Year followed year, my Brother! and we two,
 Conversing not, knew little in what mould
 Each other's mind was fashioned; and at length,
 When once again we met in Grasmere Vale,
 Between us there was little other bond
 Than common feelings of fraternal love.
 But thou, a School-boy, to the sea hadst carried
 Undying recollections; Nature there
 Was with thee; she, who loved us both, she still
 Was with thee; and even so didst thou become
 A *silent* Poet; from the solitude
 Of the vast sea didst bring a watchful heart
 Still couchant, an inevitable ear,
 And an eye practised like a blind man's touch.(67-83)

We can see from these lines that it is John's love of nature that distinguishes him as a "silent poet." What qualifies him as poet are his "watchful heart," his "inevitable ear," and the eye that "practised like a blind man's touch," all of which enable him to hold communion with nature, and which again remind us of Wordsworth's description of the poet in the 1802 Preface quoted earlier. The eye as described here is especially reminiscent of the "blind man's eye" in "Tintern Abbey":

These beauteous forms,
 Through a long absence, have not been to me
 As is a landscape to a *blind man's eye*:
 But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
 Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
 In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
 Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
 And passing even into my purer mind,
 With tranquil restoration. . . . (22-30, my italics)

Although here in "Tintern Abbey" Wordsworth is saying that, unlike a blind man, he has been visually impressed by a natural landscape and retained its memory, while in "When, to the attractions of the busy world," he is talking about the

compensatory function of a blind man's touch, in both poems the simile is used in connection with a person's ability to perceive natural beauty. And, although the idea concerning the restorative power of nature in the poem dedicated to John is not as important as that in "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth does describe his brother carrying "undying recollections" of nature with him when he leaves home. All these further explain that what qualifies John as a poet is his relationship with nature. As Stephen Land also observes, "The poet's first duty, [Wordsworth] believes, is to realize [the] inner state, to discover it in man's relation to nature and to cultivate it in himself" (160).

In addition, the eye that is as sensitive to natural beauty as a blind man's touch, again, is linked with the eye "made quiet" in "Tintern Abbey":

While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (47-49)

Here we see Wordsworth making a connection between sensory perception and the transcendental state of mind in which the poet's corporeal frame is "laid asleep," allowing him to "see into the life of things." Of course this connection is not to be found in "When, to the attractions," but the use of the blind man simile subtly indicates an eye (John's eye) that sees yet sees not, but rather "feels," and thus suggesting John's communicating with nature in both external and internal ways.

In another paper, I have discussed in great detail the group of poems categorised as "Poems on the Naming of Places," to which "When, to the attractions of the busy world" belongs (Yu, 1998b). These poems were written at a time when Wordsworth needed to strike roots and to attain a sense of place. But this need was also bound up with the poet's task of writing *The Recluse*, a poem, Wordsworth wished, "that might live," a poem by which he could carry forward the tradition of English poetry. According to Coleridge, *The Recluse*, an epic-scale

poem laid out by Wordsworth and himself during the Alfoxden years, was to be a “philosophical poem” addressing those who are disillusioned in the aftermath of the French Revolution. *The Recluse* was therefore a poem aimed at redeeming fallen souls with principles for social and philosophical systems (Coleridge, 1993: 527; 1990, *Table Talk*: 31 July 1832). In Wordsworth’s own words, he was to dwell on “Man, Nature and Human Life.”

In 1800, however, despite his high hopes of carrying on with *The Recluse*, Wordsworth found himself frustrated with the task, and finished only *Home at Grasmere*, which would form one fraction of the first part of the epic poem. Before he could resume its composition, he had to turn to his own mind and examine to what extent “Nature and Education had qualified him for such employment”—as he puts it in the preface to the 1814 edition of *The Excursion*. We therefore find him returning to *The Prelude*, in which the poet alludes to his *Magnum opus* more than once. For our purposes here, however, we will focus on one passage in Book XII only, the passage where Wordsworth proclaims that his future song will be “things oracular,” and that he will sing of those whose external appearances may seem rude, but within whom “high service is performed” (Wordsworth, 1979: 226). Yet his song, he stresses, shall not strike an oracular note to the ear of

men adroit
 In speech and for communion with the world
 Accomplished, minds whose faculties are then
 Most active when they are most eloquent,
 And elevated most when most admired.
 (*The Prelude*, XII: 255-259)

His song will be heard, instead, by other listeners, and it is here that Wordsworth introduces the idea of the silent poet:

Men may be found of other mold than these,
 Who are their own upholders, to themselves

Encouragement, and energy, and will,
Expressing liveliest thoughts in lively words
As native passion dictates. Others, too,
There are among the walks of homely life
Still higher, men for contemplation framed,
Shy, and unpractised in the strife of phrase,
Meek men, whose very souls perhaps would sink
Beneath them, summoned to such intercourse:
Theirs is the language of the heavens, the power,
The thought, the image, and the silent joy;
Words are but under-agents in their souls—
When they are grasping with their greatest strength
They do not breathe among them.

(*The Prelude*, XII: 260-274)

Of the two groups of people described here, the first refers to the kind of poets whose language is an organic form of their passions, or the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." The other, higher, kind of souls are the mute poets who communicate not through the medium of words, but through a "heavenly" language—the power of their minds in which "high service is performed."

It is worth pointing out that this passage was first written in 1804, and lines composed during the same period of time, which were originally intended for Book VIII of *The Prelude*, were later reworked into other books of this epic, but also into lines 1 to 26 of the second book of *The Excursion*. In this passage, Wordsworth compares the life of the minstrel with that of the Wanderer, and places the latter above the former:

[The minstrel], sleeping or awake, the robber spared;
He walked—protected from the sword of war
By virtue of that sacred instrument
His harp, suspended at the traveller's side;
His dear companion wheresoe'er he went
Opening from land to land an easy way
By melody, and by the charm of verse.
Yet not the noblest of that honoured Race
Drew happier, loftier, more empasioned, thoughts

From his long journeyings and eventful life,
 Than this obscure Itinerant had skill
 To gather, ranging through the tamer ground
 Of these our unimaginative days;
 Both while he trod the earth in humblest guise
 Accoutred with his burden and his staff;
 And now, when free to move with lighter pace.
 (*The Excursion*, II: 12-27)

These lines echo the idea conveyed in the passage from Book XII of *The Prelude* quoted above. It is not difficult to find the link between the articulate poets mentioned in *The Prelude* and the minstrels, but how is the Wanderer a silent poet? To answer this question, we have to go to the first book of *The Excursion*, which, before the inception of *The Recluse*, stood independently as *The Ruined Cottage*.⁶

That the Wanderer, or, the Pedlar, is a silent poet is evident from the following passage that reflects the notion of cultural primitivism:

Oh! Many are the Poets that are sown
 By Nature; men endowed with highest gifts,
 The vision and the faculty divine;
 Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse,
 . . .
 Nor having e'er, as life advanced, been led
 By circumstance to take unto the height
 The measure of themselves, these favoured Beings,
 All but a scattered few, live out their time,
 Husbanding that which they possess within,
 And go to the grave, unthought of. Strongest minds
 Are often those of whom the noisy world
 Hears least; else surely this Man had not left
 His graces unrevealed and unproclaimed.
 (*The Excursion*, I: 77-94)

⁶ In terms of the time of composition, *The Ruined Cottage* precedes "When, to the attractions of the busy world," but since it was later incorporated into *The Excursion* and underwent redactions, I place the poem at the later developmental stage of the theme of the silent poet.

Jonathan Ramsey has argued that the Wanderer is not, after all, a *silent* poet (1976: 261); the Wanderer is not merely articulate, but truly eloquent whenever he speaks. It is in terms of poetry-writing that he is seen to be a silent poet who, as Wordsworth clearly tells us in the passage quoted above, lacks "the accomplishment of verse." Nevertheless, bringing in our discussion at the beginning of this paper, we can see that what distinguishes him as a poet, although a silent one, lies in his affinity with nature—he is one who is "sown/By nature." This is why Wordsworth goes to great lengths in telling us about the Wanderer's education, the details of which bear great similarities to Wordsworth's own childhood experience in nature. For example, the emphasis on solitude and the keen perception of natural beauty and power, which forms a predominant theme in the opening books of *The Prelude*, has also found its way into *The Excursion*:

From that bleak tenement [the village school]
He, many an evening, to his distant home
In solitude returning, saw the hills
Grow larger in the darkness; all alone
Beheld the stars come out above his head,
And travelled through the wood, with no one near
To whom he might confess the things he saw.

So the foundations of his mind were laid.
In such communion, not from terror free,
While yet a child, and long before his time,
Had he perceived the presence and the power
Of greatness; and deep feelings had impressed
So vividly great objects that they lay
Upon his mind like substances, whose presence
Perplexed the bodily sense.

(*The Excursion*, I: 125-139)

In the ensuing lines, Wordsworth depicts the child Wanderer as a meditative soul who holds communion with nature, and

through such communion develops his imagination and love for mankind:

[His] spirit drank
 The spectacle: sensation, soul, and form,
 All melted into him; they swallowed up
 His animal being; in them did he live,
 And by them did he live; they were his life.
 In such access of mind, in such high hour
 Of visitation from he living god,
 Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired.
 No thanks he breathed, he proffered no request;
 Rapt into still communion that transcends
 The imperfect offices of prayer and praise,
 His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
 That made him; it was blessedness and love!

(The Excursion, I: 206-218)

But the Wanderer's education does not stop here; it would not be complete without the moral element. And so in the passage that follows, Wordsworth raises the Wanderer's education to a level higher than that of an aesthetic and spiritual one. In these lines, Wordsworth echoing a metaphor used in "Michael," compares nature to a book, and

All things, responsive to the writing, there
 Breathed immortality, revolving life,
 And greatness still revolving; infinite:
 There littleness was not; the least of things
 Seemed infinite; and there his spirit shaped
 Her prospects, nor did he believe,—he *saw*.
 What wonder if his being thus became
 Sublime and comprehensive! Low desires,
 Low thoughts had there no place; yet was his heart
 Lowly; for he was meek in gratitude,
 Oft as he called those ecstasies to mind,
 And whence they flowed; and from them he acquired
 Wisdom, which works through patience; thence he learned
 In oft-recurring hours of sober thought
 To look on Nature with a humble heart,

Self-questioned where it did not understand,
And with a superstitious eye of love.
(*The Excursion*, I: 227-243)

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's education is represented as "love of nature leading to love of mankind," which then leads to the noble cause of the French Revolution, its disillusioning aftermath and the final solution of salvation through the educational and prophetic power of the imagination embodied in poetry. The Pedlar's education parallels Wordsworth's not without a reason. Wordsworth denied that the Pedlar's early experience and education were autobiographical, but told Isabella Fenwick that

Had I been born in a class which would have deprived me of what is called a liberal education, it is not unlikely that, being strong in body, I should have taken to a way of life such as that in which my Pedlar passed the greater part of his days. At all events, I am here called upon freely to acknowledge that the character I have represented in his person is chiefly an idea of what I fancied my own character would have become in his circumstances.
(Wordsworth, 1977, II: 952)

And there is an obvious association between the Pedlar's upbringing and Wordsworth's early experience described in *The Prelude*. Manuscript evidence shows that passages originally intended for *The Pedlar* were merged with the poem on his own life.⁷ Such an intertextual link suggests that Wordsworth probably intended to place his own experience in a less personal context for the sake of both probing into philosophical questions and satisfying his social conscience at the same time, and on a larger scale. Another possible reason for Wordsworth's blending his personal experience with that of the Wanderer's may be related to his placing, subtly and covertly, the silent poet above the articulate poet, which we have pointed out

⁷ For example, lines 321 to 341 in Book II, *The Prelude*.

earlier.

In a sense, Wordsworth probably sees himself as both a silent poet and a common kind of poet. Given his childhood experience in nature and his distrust of words, one even wonders whether he would rather be a poet without words. But here his idea concerning the duty of a poet comes into play, and it would be against his conscience not to be involved in the enterprise of redeeming and educating mankind through poetry. This elucidates the fact that he gives the most important role in *The Excursion* to the Wanderer. In this figure is combined the Wordsworthian ideal of the silent poet and the role of an educator. And by incorporating his own early experience into the upbringing of the Pedlar, Wordsworth subtly expresses his preference for the silent poet, and, at the same time, experiments with the possibility of charging such an ideal figure with the responsibility of social reform. This responsibility, as we can see from the latter half of *The Prelude* and the Prospectus to *The Recluse*, he has also taken upon himself and, seen from this perspective, has more or less identified himself with the Wanderer. Kenneth Johnston plainly avers that the Wanderer *is* the poet himself. According to him, the fact that in the manuscripts of *The Pedlar* Wordsworth incorporated large sections of the 1799 *Prelude* shows that the Wanderer “is not an old Scots peddler but someone else from the north of England with a wider education and a wider range of traveling experience: the Poet, himself” (Johnston, 1998: 772).

But then we may want to ask the question—why, if Wordsworth is identified with the Pedlar, is there the necessity of inventing the figure of the Wanderer, and why not just let the Poet play the major role? The same question may be asked about the Solitary and the Pastor as well. Several critics have suggested that all four major characters in *The Excursion* are Wordsworth’s personae.⁸ I agree with them, and see the poem

⁸ See, for example, Kenneth Johnston’s *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, and

as largely a dramatization of Wordsworth's debate with himself on topics of "Man, Nature and Society" as he divides his life into different aspects represented by the four characters. The poet is one who tries to learn about human suffering; the Solitary who, after the French Revolution and a series of personal misfortunes, turns into a cynic. The Pastor stands for religious and communal healing power; and lastly, the Wanderer demonstrates union with nature and universal love, which forms the basis of Wordsworth's idea of social reform.

Nevertheless, I would like to point out that there is another reason why Wordsworth invents the figure of the Wanderer. Despite the overlapping of Wordsworth's own early education with that of the Pedlar's, the latter represents an ideal which the poet himself has not attained and is not able to attain. A further examination of the Wanderer's education reveals an emphasis on a special kind of love and an intrinsic purity gained from his communion with nature:

Far and wide the clouds were touched,
 And in their silent faces could he read
 Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
 Nor any voice of joy; his spirit drank
 The spectacle: sensation, soul, and form,
 All melted into him; they swallowed up
 His animal being; in them did he live,
 And by them did he live; they were his life.
 In such access of mind, in such high hour
 Of visitation from the living god,
 Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired.
 No thanks he breathed, he proffered no request;
 Rapt into still communion that transcends
 The imperfect offices of prayer and praise,
 His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
 That made him; it was blessedness and love!

(*The Excursion*, I: 203-218)

Johnston, although he works mainly with the manuscripts of *The Pedlar*, has rightly pointed out that the focus here is “not simply the Pedlar’s powerful experiences of love, nor their source or content, but their *unutterability*” (my italics), and that “the Pedlar’s special relationship to Nature began without the mediation of any human element and has no basis in any attribute of human consciousness or thought” (1984: 23). When formed on such a basis of natural education, the Pedlar’s idea of society, according to Johnston, “[rises] from a context outside of, and larger than, human relations” (1984: 23).

Johnston’s observation provides us with a clue to an interpretation of the role of the Wanderer from the perspectives of morality and language, and herein is found the essence of the silent poet. The Wanderer’s communion is no common communion with nature, but rather a communion, as Johnston states, unmediated by human element, and therefore a pure state of mind which transcends, or is preexistent of, language and rationalization. And it is this state of mind that nurtures the moral spirit of the Wanderer, with which he first teaches the Poet to face and interpret Margaret’s suffering, then seeks to correct the Solitary’s despondency and cynicism. In his description of the Wanderer’s sense of morality we find Wordsworth’s emphasis on how the Wanderer cannot be tainted by the dark side of human nature and worldly concerns:

[There] he kept
 In solitude and solitary thought
 His mind in a just equipoise of love.
 Serene it was, unclouded by the cares
 Of ordinary life; unvexed, unwarped
 By partial bondage. In his steady course,
 . . .
 Unoccupied by sorrow of its own,
 His heart lay open; and, by nature turned
 And constant disposition of his thoughts
 To sympathy with man, he was alive
 To all that was enjoyed where’er he went,

And all that was endured; for, in himself
Happy, and quiet in his cheerfulness,
He had no painful pressure from without
That made him turn aside from wretchedness
With coward fears. He could *afford* to suffer
With those whom he saw suffer.

(*The Excursion*, I: 353-371)

This moral element is echoed in *Home at Grasmere*. I have pointed out in another paper that in this poem Wordsworth essays to set up an ideal community based on the poet's idea of nationalism and human redemption (Yu, 1999). The fact that *Home at Grasmere* is the first part of *The Recluse* further suggests that the Pedlar's sense of morality is closely related to Wordsworth's concept of social redemption through a silent poet whose poetry is not written in language but is seen in his direct communion with nature, which sustains and nurtures his moral sensibility.

According to what Wordsworth says in Book XII of *The Prelude*, which we quoted earlier, the silent poet is higher than the common kind of poet, and we have given it an explanation based on Wordsworth's poetics as stated in his prose works. Also, as we have shown, the quality of a silent poet, rather than his ability to express himself through language, lies in his sharp perception of and his communion with nature, the result of which generates the noble passions and feelings that come foremost in the making of the ordinary kind of poet as well. Wordsworth recognizes the superior state of a primitivism; nevertheless, being a poet himself, he cannot but choose to resort to language to fulfil his social responsibility. The poet resolves this conflict in portraying the Wanderer as one in whom is combined the silent poet figure and a social reformer. The former represents for Wordsworth the ideal of unmediated communion with nature, which is significant in terms of his solipsistic penchant, whereas the social part complements his inclination towards the idea of the poet's being a prophetic and public figure.

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渥滋渥斯和「無言的詩人」

余幼珊

摘 要

本文分成兩部分，第一部份由十八世紀語言哲學的角度探討渥滋渥斯的詩學和語言觀，認為其中具有十八世紀語言理論中的文化和社會原始主義，以及有機體主義。渥氏詩中「無言的詩人」形象乃是奠基於這些理論。論文的第二部分則試圖尋找「無言的詩人」在渥氏詩中的發展脈絡。此一脈絡以三首詩呈現：一位詩人的墓誌銘、當我受到這紛亂的世界、和《遠足》。在「一位詩人的墓誌銘」這首詩裡，可發現「無言的詩人」之雛形。在「當我受到這紛亂的世界」一詩則是「無言的詩人」這個名詞的出處。而《遠足》裡的「漂流者」，乃是渥氏塑造的一位理想人物，用以結合渥氏心目中地位崇高的「無言的詩人」和社會改革者。透過「漂流者」這位理想人物，渥氏得以化解自己在語言觀和社會道德責任之間的矛盾。

關鍵詞：無言的詩人、十八世紀語言理論、一位詩人的墓誌銘、當我受到這紛亂的世界、《遠足》

Browse through William Wordsworth's poems and quotes. 386 poems of William Wordsworth. Still I Rise, The Road Not Taken, If You Forget Me, Dreams, Annabel Lee. Wordsworth, born in his beloved Lake District, was the son of an attorney. He went to school first. " William Wordsworth. Composed upon Westminster Bridge. Earth has not anything to show more fair: Dull would he be of soul who could pass by A sight so touching in its majesty: This City now doth, like a garment, wear The beauty of the morning; silent, bare, Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie Open unto the fields, and to the sky; All bright and glittering in the smokeless air." William Wordsworth. A Complaint. There is a change "and I am poor; Your love hath