

THE GENETIC CODE OF POETRY IN WORDSWORTH'S *PRELUDE*

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Abstract

Wordsworth's poetry, primarily in the Prelude, is an example of a cycle of development uniting the great poetries so as to form a progressive tradition, like a link in a long chain. Wordsworth explicitly criticizes Coleridge's style by quoting words from "Frost at Midnight" in Book One when he presents his new way of writing poetry. Then, in Book Six, explicitly referring to the way he wrote poetry in Book One, he announces an improved style. Finally, in Book 13 (or 14 of one edition) Wordsworth refers to his style of writing in Book Six as inferior to his ultimate mastery achieved at the end of the Prelude. Shelley, in his poem Alastor, criticizes Wordsworth's fully developed style when Shelley announces his new way of writing poetry. Within the ten-minute limit for the conference paper, I would like to point out these main interrelated passages proving a cycle of development. Furthermore, I would like to suggest the value of researching this developmental pattern in other literary works: it is repeated so as to unite the greatest works in literature, thus constituting an organizing principle analogous to the biological genetic code. The search for this recurring pattern could lead one eventually to the greatest literature of the present and to that threshold when critical reflection must become creative effort for one's literary development to continue.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, genetic code, literary theory

1. INTRODUCTION: THE ORIGIN OF THE GENETIC CODE IN ANCIENT GREEK TRAGEDY

What if the greatest writers include within their literary works explanations of their origins, re-interpretations of passages, and records of the process of creation? What if literary works improve upon their history in a regular creative process that writers become partially aware of? Then, cultural evolution would have evolved beyond the biological, since human beings could consciously change themselves. Then, students and scholars could advance their knowledge much more by researching the genetic code of literature.

This idea that literature evolves according to its own genetic code has historical roots in two features of ancient Greek tragedy: the cyclical structure according to a strophe, antistrophe, and epode; and the role of the Chorus in explaining the play in progress [1]. In the strophe or turn, the Chorus on stage gives important background information such as a change from previous events before the action starts. Once the inciting action of the play has begun, the Chorus can comment on the events, either speaking directly to the characters or to the audience. The ideas were performed as part of the action. The strophe or turn was demonstrated by the Chorus moving across the stage from right to left. In the middle of the play, called the antistrophe, turning backward, the Chorus would comment on the events or advise the characters while walking in the opposite direction. Near the end of the play, called the epode, the chorus comes to the stage where it makes a final comment on the action that has just finished. Often written in a different meter, it gives a sense of the change from the start to the end and the unity or purpose of the work as a whole.

These two features of ancient Greek tragedy lend some historical support to the idea of a literary genetic code. In a simple almost physical way, ancient Greek tragedy illustrates the idea that literary works are structured as a cycle from beginning to end: strophe, antistrophe, and epode. Equally important, the tragedies contain explicit theory and criticism, relating a work to a previous one and providing the basis for a new one.

It is as if writers include not only stage directions for the characters and Chorus but also directions about the creative process for future writers.

In this brief paper my main purpose is to point out three main passages forming a cycle of development, similar to a strophe, antistrophe, and epode in Wordsworth's *Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem*. I also give some evidence to show that the cycle of development is repeated from Coleridge to Wordsworth and from Wordsworth to Shelley. So in effect it operates as a genetic code as the title of this essay indicates.

2. DISCUSSION OF THE CYCLE OF DEVELOPMENT IN WORDSWORTH'S *PRELUDE*

2.1 Wordsworth's poetic beginning as a strophe

2.1.1 Wordsworth's criticism of Coleridge's style: the boating scene

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his poem "Frost at Midnight" announces a successor by describing the figure of a child who will carry on his poetry.

For I was reared	51
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,	
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.	
But thou, my babe! Shalt wander like a breeze	
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags	
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,	
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores	
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear	
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible	
Of that eternal language, which thy God	
Utters, who from eternity doth teach	
Himself in all, and all things in himself.	
Great universal Teacher! He shall mold	
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask [2].	64

In an uncanny way, this passage foretells the activity of Wordsworth travelling through the countryside, writing poems. If Wordsworth sees himself as the 'child' of Coleridge, someone who was influenced by him and developed a poetry of nature, then this feeling about influence would be a very important fact for understanding how Wordsworth learned to create or how anyone does. According to one acclaimed scholar on the relation of the two poets, the most important time when Wordsworth rewrote a poem by Coleridge was the rewriting of "Frost at Midnight" [3] If Wordsworth believes he writes poetry as an improved version of Coleridge's, then he knows the cause of Coleridge's stylistic limitations. The poetry of Coleridge would be like an inferior version of his own – as if derivative. The Yale poet and critic John Hollander has a book-length study on echoes in poetry, one of them being metalepsis or transumption: "The process of taking hold of something poetically in order to revise upward, as it were, canceling and transforming (Hegel seems to use *Aufhebung* in such a constellation of ways) is a metaleptic act in the broadest sense" [4].

At the beginning of his long autobiographical poem Wordsworth performs a criticism of Coleridge's style immediately before presenting his new style. This double action can be called his strophe. Wordsworth quotes and alludes to passages in Coleridge's poems to show his debt as well as his development of Coleridge's writing style. A highly recommended study of this relationship is Paul Magnuson's *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue*, which is very valuable for scholars [5].

In an often discussed scene young Wordsworth takes a boat without the knowledge of the owner and rows away from a hill, the boy facing the hill with his back turned in the direction of the boat's movement. Then the boy has an uncanny experience using some of the visionary words of his older poetic self, Coleridge, but in a new way.

... my boat	406
Went heaving through the water, like a Swan,	
When from behind that craggy Steep, till then	
The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff,	
[As if with voluntary power instinct,	
Upreared its head: I struck, and struck again,	
And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff]	
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,	
With measured motion, like a living thing,	
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turned,	
And through the silent water stole my way	
Back to the Cavern of the Willow-tree.	
There in her mooring-place, I left my Bark	
And through the meadows went with grave	
And serious thoughts: ... [6].	420

Poetically, fear and guilt become externalized in the image of a cliff becoming angry at the boy; a figure to activate the imagination is created. Following these lines having very vivid physical imagery, the poet writes an explanation of them as an improvement upon Coleridge's. The noticeable difference in the two sets of lines is a kind of peripety, a sudden shift. It is also a mirroring, where the harmony of the inner self with the outer world is demonstrated. He claims his imagination achieves a greater power of perception and expression. He explicitly refers to words in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," discussing the same topic of the way the imagination operates and how it affects him. Wordsworth uses some of the same words, such as "dim" and "form," but he has a different view about the best way to write poetry; he signals the change by two enjambments, meaning a line ends with one meaning but when it is completed on the next line the meaning is changed, representing a change and increase in the power of the imagination.

And after I had seen	420
That spectacle, for many days my brain	
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense	422
Of unknown modes of being: in my thought	

There was a darkness, call it solitude,
Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea, or sky, no colors of green fields;
But huge and mighty Forms that do not live 428
Like living men moved slowly through my mind
By day and were the trouble of my dreams [7]. 430

As the first enjambment, “my brain/ Worked with a dim and underdetermined sense,” has a general meaning at the end of the line with the word ‘sense’ about the functioning of the brain; however, on the next line it is given a more specific meaning not about the brain’s function but about its idea of unknown modes of being. As the second enjambment, at the end of the line “But huge and mighty Forms that do not live,” the word ‘live’ means that they do not live at all. With the next line, however, “Like living men moved slowly through my mind,” the meaning of the way the mighty Forms of the imagination live changes to mean that they do not live like living men but they do live by moving slowly through the mind. The enjambments criticize Coleridge’s style while also making readers feel the difference by causing the mind to change its own interpretation. Wordsworth performs his new idea of the mind’s images, which “moved slowly through my mind.” If the boy is an avatar of the poet, the reader becomes one, too.

In these lines where Wordsworth discovers his new poetic style, he definitely alludes to some lines in Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight.”

... Sea, and hill, and wood, 11
With all the numberless goings on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! The thin blue flame
Lies on my low burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought [8]. 23

We can read the passage in the spirit of an apprentice listening to the master craftsman. Coleridge is describing a way to relate images in poetry; he refers to a “thin blue flame” and the “film,” probably black, that it leaves on the grate. The fluttering of the film is a motion having “dim sympathies with me who live:” a definite inspiration for Wordsworth’s similar language “a dim and undetermined sense” [9].

In contrast, Wordsworth does not believe the forms in poetry live like living men but he writes they still have a motion or expressive force in them both to represent the mind's motion and to move it. Wordsworth intends to revise his predecessor through allusions, in those lines and in at least six other ones and direct quotes; these allusions occur in Book 1 and there are others in the rest of *The Prelude* [10]. In one of those allusions, Wordsworth contrasts his inspiration with that of "other" poets describing his as due to "ministry more palpable" with "severer interventions" [11]. Coleridge begins "Frost at Midnight" with the line "The frost performs its secret ministry" [12]. Here, the word 'ministry' is not specifically religious as it is today; instead, it means "teaching" in a general sense. Wordsworth believes Nature inspires him in a better way than it does Coleridge, enabling him to create more palpable imagery. In Book 2 Wordsworth continues to quote and allude to that poem by his friend. As the editor of *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose* Nicholas Halmi claims, the poet compliments but revises lines from "Frost at Midnight" [13]. All in all, Wordsworth pays tribute to Coleridge by developing his work further, making it live in his own work and then in the work of future generations, on and on.

The revision of Coleridge's style is performed in *The Prelude's* verses. As the boat scene exemplifies, he makes images with motion or expressive force -- mighty Forms such as the angry cliff, which rises up by itself, as the new imagination does. The magic of these forms replaces Coleridge's need for medieval romance and myths, explicitly rejected in Book 1, for lacking the truth of the world, genuine expressive power [14]. The verses perform the meaning: they tell how and why they were written. They are anagogical, not allegorical. Like ancient Greek tragedy in which the Chorus informs the characters and comments on the events, while moving on the stage, Wordsworth criticizes Coleridge's style while demonstrating a better one.

2.1.2 Wordsworth's new principle of style: the skating scene

Next, in a similarly structured pair of stanzas Wordsworth completes the strophe when he turns toward his future, by demonstrating his new style to be developed. These passages were also published as a poem separate from the *Prelude* called "The Influence of Natural Objects in Calling Forth and Strengthening the Imagination in Boyhood and Early Youth" [15]. A scene of a skating boy chasing a star's reflection and dizzily seeing the earth moving is followed by a stanza mirroring those events with words describing the process of imagination needed to write about them.

Not seldom from the uproar I retired	47
Into a silent bay, or sportively	
Glanced sideways, leaving the tumultuous throng,	
To cut across the reflex of a star;	
Image that, flying still before me, gleamed	
Upon the glassy plain: and oftentimes,	
When we had given our bodies to the wind,	
And all the shadowy banks on either side	
Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still	
The rapid line of motion, then at once	
Have I, reclining back upon my heels,	
Stopped short; yet still the solitary cliffs	
Wheeled by me--even as if the earth had rolled	
With visible motion her diurnal round!	
Behind me did they stretch in solemn train,	

Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched
Till all was tranquil as a summer sea [16]. 63

The physical imagery of the skating scene is mirrored by lines that explain the processes needed to create that scene: he makes Nature sublime by infusing it with expressive or emotional traits (danger or desire among others). Instead of merely personifying Nature, he projects his imagination into its shapes and forms. Then, its operations become visible, he gains self-knowledge, and during the projection new acts of imagination are required so it increases in scope and power.

Ye Presences of Nature, in the sky 493
Or on the earth! Ye Visions of the hills!
And Souls of lonely places! Can I think
A vulgar hope was yours when Ye employed
Such ministry, when Ye through many a year
Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,
On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,
Impressed upon all forms the characters
Of danger or desire, and thus did make
The surface of the universal earth
With triumph, and delight, and hope, and fear
Work like a sea [17]. 504.

Wordsworth uses Nature to impress “upon all forms the characters / Of danger or desire.” What is more, each character is a synecdoche of the whole of nature as “the surface of the universal earth” with the motion and infinite variety of the sea. Poetry is a way for Wordsworth to establish his own place in human history (with the poetic tradition) and the universe. He announces the way he will write in an example of it. He writes anagogically. He writes about an increase in the imagination while causing readers to have it.

The first stage of Wordsworth’s poetry can be epitomized in its strophe, in the paired stanzas turning away from Coleridge’s style combined with the paired stanzas turning toward the new style that he will develop. If this pattern is classic, if it is similar to the beginnings of literary works from ancient Greek tragedy onward, then it might be repeated with variation in the continuing development recorded by *The Prelude*. In Books 6 and 13, Wordsworth will repeat the pattern of pairing stanzas of impassioned physical imagery with lines mirroring them through the imagination’s account of the writing act. Quite remarkably, this pattern continues with some improvement in the poetry of Shelley, who repeats his predecessor’s starting strophe but on a more advanced artistic level. Wordsworth’s first stage of writing contains within itself the direction for its own improvement.

2.2 Wordsworth’s middle stage as an antistrophe

2.2.1 Wordsworth’s criticism of his early style

Midway through the *Prelude* the poet changes his style, performing an antistrophe in relation to his earlier work. Both the boating and skating scenes were followed by explanations of the way they were written using mighty forms of the imagination. Expecting to be impressed again by them, he instead first encounters Mont Blanc as unable to move his mind with passion; it is not a mighty Form:

That day we first	452
Beheld the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved	
To have a soulless image on the eye	
Which had usurped upon a living thought	
That never more could be: the wond'rous Vale	
Of Chamouny did on the following dawn,	
With its dumb cataracts and streams of ice,	
A motionless array of mighty waves,	
Five rivers broad and vast, make rich amends	
And reconciled us to realities [18].	461

This feeling of Mont Blanc – or more accurately the lack of it – is the antistrophe of the feeling for the soulful power he had in the first stage of his poetry in Book One and even earlier in 1773 in *Descriptive Sketches* [19] where the white summit, the tallest in Europe, is a mighty Form, more than a mountain, a sublime expression of the totality of nature, described very lyrically with impassioned physical imagery [20]. Beautiful, awe-inspiring, capable of great creation and destruction, and animated with a power of its own. It's not just a mountain, it's an elemental force, part of the force of nature as a whole, infusing the poet with life. In Book 6 the poet is also disappointed by the realization of his having crossed through the Alps without knowing it – without finding a mighty Form. His excursion up to that point lacks the familiar poetic experience he anticipated. The differences between the Mont Blanc in 1793 and in 1805 are differences both in writing style and in the theory of poetry.

2.2.2 Wordsworth's revised style in the middle of the prelude

Although the impassioned physical imagery in Book I precedes the mirroring words of the imagination, in Book VI the order is reversed: the explanation about the imagination precedes the physical imagery. The reversal shows a change from the previous style. This is an antistrophe, used to show how the imagination has changed: it has become mighty. "Imagination! Lifting up itself/ Before the very eye and progress of my Song/ Like an unfathered vapour; here that Power..." [21]. The relation of Wordsworth's middle stage of poetry to the earlier one resembles the relation of adulthood to childhood. When people become fully developed in adolescence, they can have children or reflect on the experience of children, including their own. Then they do not merely experience childhood but they can observe it with greater self-knowledge. In the antistrophe of the *Prelude* Wordsworth shows his increased self-knowledge as a poet.

Immediately following this stanza of the mighty imagination, there is an antistrophe appropriately signaled by the peripety of a passage with impassioned physical imagery. The well-known passage begins with the poet walking downward in a gloomy mood for having missed a road and ends by declaring the "Characters of the great Apocalypse" [22]. These words definitely refer to words in Book I; namely, "Impressed upon all forms the characters/ Of danger or desire; and thus did make/ the surface of the universal earth/ With triumph, and delight, and hope, and fear/ Work like a sea" [23].

This reference to a previous passage shows that he is consciously improving his style. Now, he believes his first stage of writing in Book 1 eventually leads to soulless images of nature. Here, he discovers the power of his own imagination to make nature sublime. In the manner of an antistrophe he performs a revision of the paired stanzas in Book 1 presenting his new poetic voice: mirroring the skating scene the Presences of Nature "Impressed upon all forms the characters / Of danger or desire, and thus did make / The surface of the universal earth / With triumph, and delight, and hope, and fear / Work like a sea" [24]. The characters of danger or desire from the first stage of writing are improved to become the "Characters of the great Apocalypse" from Book 6 [25].

The beauty of nature no longer depends upon the motion of individual mighty Forms, such as the star seemingly moving because its reflection on the ice changed when the skater moved. These mighty Forms depended on an underlying unity or power. Something greater. Their beauty is derived from a new source. Their beauty depends upon the imagination to express it as their continuing unity despite the decay and growth of the trees and all plants; despite the disappearance and reemergence of water in clouds, glaciers, rivers, and mist; despite the winds blowing against each other in their ongoing common struggle. The surface of nature no longer resembles the changing sea of traits such as danger or desire [26], now the change in nature is subsumed within a higher eternal vision of harmony despite changing traits. Clearly, these two stanzas improve upon those in Book 1: the individual mighty Forms are no longer regarded separately but are integrated to increase the power of the imagination and to make the poetry more powerful, like an orchestra of different instruments playing more strongly than an individual one, with the help of the conductor imagining their cooperation, which then becomes a reality. Wordsworth conducts the orchestra of nature to play a new music.

A strong peripety is the perfect way to present an antistrophe. In Aristotle's Poetics, peripety is "a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity ... it is the finest form of discovery" [27]. The change in style is a change in Wordsworth. The classic example is the conversion of Paul while on the way to Damascus, Syria, by the vision of a light from heaven and the voice of God asking him why he was persecuting Him [28].

The strophe and antistrophe are signs of increasing progress made toward the final goal of poetry. These discourse markers are recorded in poetry, especially on the large scale of a long poem like *The Prelude* or an entire corpus of poems. Short individual poems cannot include such discourse markers to show relations of passages to previous ones or to show the relation of one passage to the overall goal by restating it. Discourse markers can mark or indicate the position of a passage in the whole text or discourse.

2.3 Wordsworth's highest achievement as an epode

2.3.1 His criticism of his middle stage

Finally, in the third passage, in the last Book, either Book XIII or XIV depending upon the edition, he explains and criticizes his own writing in Book VI, while again giving an example of the better writing, which he feels is his highest achievement. As an epode, the poetic scene of his ascent to the top of Mount Snowdon, the highest mountain in Wales, ensures the continuity of what went before and realizes the original aim in a new way. The Mount placed at the end of the *Prelude*, his autobiographical poem, is an obvious symbol of one's highest achievement.

Quite remarkably, he repeats the common strategy of having two stanzas paired together to form a complete poetic act, the one having more physical imagery, the other presenting the different language of the imagination mirroring and explaining its outer descriptive self. However, in contrast to Book 6, and similar to Book 1 again, the impassioned physical imagery precedes the mirroring by the imagination. This similarity of the end to the start calls to mind the ancient principle that the end should refer to the start, to mark the completion, as when Odysseus returns to his home after a series of adventures. The correspondence of the paired stanzas determines the quality of poetry. Wordsworth achieves the highest quality ever achieved up to the writing of the *Prelude*. The beauty of the ascent gives a sense of finality [29]. It is a passage of impassioned beautiful imagery, beginning with "When at my feet the ground appeared to brighten,/ And with a step or two seemed brighter still,' Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,' For instantly a Light upon the turf/ Fell like a flash. I looked about and lo!" [30] This passage ends with the line "The Soul, The Imagination of the whole" [31]. The idea of the imagination in Book VI is here revised and expanded; clearly there is a direct reference.

Here Wordsworth presents his new imaginative processes as a writer – the ones that made the previous lines. Wordsworth achieves his ideal at the end of *The Prelude*. The boy skating to catch a star reflected on the ice in Book 1 does so in Book 13, but not exactly as he had anticipated. He does not catch the star but light connects everything on Mount Snowdon.

2.3.2 His grandest writing style

It is easy to see how the preceding stanza contains impassioned physical imagery, whereas the passage following it contains the explanation of it by the mirror of the imagination [32]. The scene begins in retrospection, “A meditation rose in me that night/ Upon the lonely mountain when the scene/ Had passed away, and it appeared to me/ The perfect image of a mighty Mind?” [33]

The first stanza gives an example of his revised style, with physical imagery made sublime, and the second is its mirror in the imagination. Instead of the imagination of the poet being the guiding force in writing, now it is “the Imagination of the Whole” [34]. The poet feels a new, deeper source of poetry. The new writing style can be summarized by the idea of a greater relationship among the images, they mirror each other in a way that the woods and other images in Book 6 did not. Now “a huge sea of mist” extends itself far away to “the real Sea” where they are united, and the waters deep below the mist in the ravines are the auditory “under-presence” [35]. In Book 6 the various images

Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last, and mist, and without end [36].

In contradistinction, in Book 13, the various images are not “like the workings of one mind,” they are one mind: “The perfect image of a mighty Mind” [37]. This phrase is appropriately ambiguous or, stated more positively, rich in meaning. Does the scene of Snowdon represent (is it a perfect image of) a mighty Mind? Or does the mighty Mind have the scene of Snowdon as its perfect image or content? Is the mighty Mind symbolized more or is the image that this Mind has the meaning of the phrase? Especially in contrast to the idea of the poet’s mind in Book 6, when the imagination is understood as separate, this new view re-unites the imagination and nature (as in an epode) while changing each. Wordsworth probably means the mountain and the poet’s mind mirror each other perfectly, so both meanings are true at the same time.

How does Wordsworth write poems with the ideal of ‘the perfect image of a mighty Mind’? Images will mirror each other more, particularly the human and the natural; this idea is stated in the next stanza containing the new ideal. Poets write in the best way when “They from their native selves can send abroad / Like transformation, / for themselves create / A like existence ...” [38]. What they write presents the process of their imagination. Sometimes a new insight about the imagination changes the writing style: these changes occur in the passages of performative criticism in Books 1, 6, and 13.

This epode unites all his previous development, as the Chorus at the end of an ancient Greek tragedy move together to the center of the stage to comment on it as a whole. The final book of the *Prelude* “reconciles” the mighty Forms of Book 1 with the transcendent Imagination of Book 6: both have limited value within a broader perspective, enabling the poet to rise to the highest level of his ability, analogous to his ascent of Mount Snowdon. The perfect image of a mighty Mind [39] offers a new sense of unity to guide the writing process, the sense he had been looking for throughout his life, expressing a greater correspondence between the human imagination and the world than the Imagination does in Book 6 or than the mighty Forms do in Book 1. This correspondence, tantamount to the expressive writing power, is a test of the quality of poetry.

In these lines Wordsworth claims to have written his best poetry. Book 13 completes the development occurring throughout his life. The three stages of Wordsworth’s poetry are signaled by paired stanzas with a similar structure, though they vary according to their roles in relation to each other. All three form a complete life-cycle, a generation of poetry from revision of the past to significant development to inspiration for the future, namely to Shelley. During the act of writing Wordsworth records important

changes in his development. It helps him to reflect on previous writing in order to improve it, something like the way a GPS shows people where they are to help them go somewhere else.

A new conclusion can be drawn about the ending of an epic poem or an entire corpus: it is a revision of the start and the middle. The main parts of a poem are in a process of change. If a critic attempts to assign an unchanging meaning to the whole poetry or to any stage, the attempt is doomed to failure and sure to cause controversy. Writers can solve the problem of interpretation undecidable by critics. If the two most important stanzas in Book 13 do not have an unchanging meaning but if, like a figure of speech, they change in the act of writing or reading them, then their “meaning” is an action of leading a person forward to make images in a new way. Some theorists confirm this view; the philosopher Ernst Cassirer calls a cultural work a “point of passage” to a new one [40], and the semiotician Thomas A. Sebeok calls it a sign with a message leading it to a new improved cultural work [41].

The last stage of Wordsworth’s development can be understood through the performative criticism of it in Shelley’s “Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude.” Shelley does not so much talk about the limitation of Wordsworth’s poetry as show what it cannot do.

3. SHELLEY’S POETIC ORIGIN IS ANALOGOUS TO WORDSWORTH’S

3.1 Shelley’s criticism of Wordsworth’s poetry: the poet’s dream vision of a maiden in *Alastor, or the spirit of solitude*

Wordsworth’s crowning achievement is criticized and improved upon by Shelley in his twenty-page long poem *Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude*, just as Wordsworth had developed his style by revising Coleridge’s. This similarity in the origin of Shelley’s poetry – by revision of a predecessor -- shows that Wordsworth’s poetry forms a cycle of development, which may be repeated and improved upon, like a genetic code.

Some scholars have made long lists of the allusions to Wordsworth’s poetry to be found in *Alastor*. For example, Mueschke and Griggs found 16 parallels in *Alastor* from Wordsworth’s poetry: eight from *The Excursion*, 4 from “The Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” 2 from “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” and 2 from minor poems (‘A Slumber did my spirit steal’; and ‘A Poet’s Epitaph’) [42].

The Poet’s dream vision of a veiled maiden followed by the despair in the morning when nature seems dead by sudden contrast or peripety. Here are the two stanzas revising Wordsworth’s style as he had revised Coleridge’s. There is a passage of vivid description followed by an explanation of the operation of the imagination, as Wordsworth had written such correlated passages [43].

In the morning after the poet’s passionate dream embracing the veiled maid, the Poet finds Nature emptied of beauty without the vision, and his new doubt awakens hope and despair for some renewal of poetic power. Certainly the sudden contrast is a peripety [44]. The passage develops a negative feeling, beginning with these lines, “Roused by the shock he started from his trance—/ The cold white light of morning, the blue moon/ Low in the west, the clear and garish hills,/ The distinct valley and the vacant woods” [45].

These two passages, mirroring yet contrasting with each other, represent opposite extremes defining Wordsworth’s style: the imaginary vision without a correspondence to nature in contrast to nature without the imagination in it. A leading interpreter of Wordsworth’s art, Geoffrey Hartman, epitomizes the problem as a separation of the “visionary and visual” [46]; Wordsworth writes thoughts without the corresponding images activating the imagination. As his poetry develops, this dichotomy becomes more extreme. Most critics agree in a general decline of aesthetic power after the 1805 *Prelude* and the 1807 *Poems: In Two Volumes*. More and more, the verses become didactic not aesthetic, reflective not expressive. The dilemma is represented in detail in the pure vision of the veiled maiden in contrast to the dead nature of the morning after the dream vision. This demonstrated dichotomy is mirrored in the imagination when the narrator of *Alastor* uses imagery from Wordsworth’s poetry to represent a dilemma concerning the relationship between image and real perceived thing in nature [47].

Shelley is criticizing the way Wordsworth makes images, just as Wordsworth had criticized the way Coleridge did. According to Shelley, images should be neither purely visionary, nor purely visual, to use Hartman's terms, but a new integrated type. Both poets juxtapose a passage with vivid physical imagery with one explaining its creation by the imagination. They create this mirroring to produce and test the harmony of the inner mind with the outer world, or the quality of expression.

3.2 Shelley's new principle of style: a spirit in nature

In Shelley's new sense of poetry, Wordsworth has a limited style. Although he does base imagery on the operations of the human mind, he never gives those operations "a radical figurative priority": the imagination is always interacting with the objects through the senses [48]. Seeing his reflection in the dark depth of a well, the Poet gets the feeling of his death but also a Spirit and then two starry eyes. The following stanza, as in all the previous main poetic passages, is mirrored by another one which follows; this physical imagery is followed by a description or explanation of the processes of the imagination forming it.

Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld
Their own wan light through the reflected lines 470
Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth
Of that still fountain; as the human heart,
Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,
Sees its own treacherous likeness there. He heard
The motion of the leaves, the grass that sprung 475
Startled and glanced and trembled even to feel
An unaccustomed presence, and the sound
Of the sweet brook that from the secret springs
Of that dark fountain rose. A Spirit seemed
To stand beside him—clothed in no bright robes 480
Of shadowy silver or enshrining light,
Borrowed from aught the visible world affords
Of grace, or majesty, or mystery;—
But, undulating woods, and silent well,
And leaping rivulet, and evening gloom 485
Now deepening the dark shades, for speech assuming,
Held commune with him, as if he and it
Were all that was,—only...when his regard
Was raised by intense pensiveness...two eyes,
Two starry eyes, hung in the gloom of thought, 490
And seemed with their serene and azure smiles
To beckon him [49].

Shelley feels more alive, having found a start for a new poetry in the lines that continue his vision of himself in the well. A new light in the Poet's soul leads him to follow a rivulet to a larger stream that images his life. This imagery symbolizes Shelley's new beginning in poetry and establishes his position in the history of poetry. The following stanza with an account of the poet's imagination mirrors the previous one that presents physical imagery.

Obedient to the light	492
That shone within his soul, he went, pursuing	
The windings of the dell.—The rivulet,	
Wanton and wild, through many a green ravine	
Beneath the forest flowed. Sometimes it fell	
Among the moss with hollow harmony	
Dark and profound. Now on the polished stones	
It danced; like childhood laughing as it went:	
Then, through the plain in tranquil wanderings crept,	500
Reflecting every herb and drooping bud	
That overhung its quietness.—'O stream!	
Whose source is inaccessiblely profound,	
Whither do thy mysterious waters tend?	
Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,	505
Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulfs,	
Thy searchless fountain, and invisible course	
Have each their type in me; and the wide sky.	
And measureless ocean may declare as soon	
What oozy cavern or what wandering cloud	
Contains thy waters, as the universe	
Tell where these living thoughts reside, when stretched	
Upon thy flowers my bloodless limbs shall waste	
I' the passing wind!' [50]	514

In these lines Shelley expresses how poetry affects his imagination. His new style uses the principle that everything has its type in the poet. He has a new correspondence of inner self and outer world, one different from Wordsworth's.

The vision of the veiled maiden in *Alastor* is presented as an extreme opposite to the empty nature the idealistic Poet wakes up to when he does not have his maiden. Shelley's new improvement of Wordsworth's style is evident in the passage when the poet looks into the well [51].

Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld	
Their own wan light through the reflected lines	470

Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth
Of that still fountain; as the human heart,
Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,
Sees its own treacherous likeness there [52].

Here the Poet's literal actions of looking into the well, in the poem's narrative, is explained by an analogy to an imaginative act of thinking about death or one's death. Usually, analogies are from the mental to the physical. Shelley explains this signature of his style in his "Preface" to *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts*: "The imagery which I have employed will be found in many instances to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed. This is unusual in modern Poetry..." [53].

Wordsworth based his style on "mighty Forms" described in Book 1 of the *Prelude* [54], such as the cliff that seemed to move, and in a revised definition at the end of his poetic development, in Book 13, where he finds a supreme mighty Form of Forms: "the perfect image of a mighty Mind"; he explains how one object can impress itself on others to create sublimity in verse.

"Upon all others, and pervade them so,
That even the grossest minds must see and hear
And cannot chuse but feel. The Power which these
Acknowledge, when thus moved, which Nature thus
Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express
Resemblance, in the fullness of its strength
Made visible, a genuine Counterpart
And Brother of the glorious faculty
Which higher minds bear with them as their own;
This is the very spirit in which they deal
With all the objects of the universe.
They from their native selves can send abroad
Like transformation, for themselves create
A like existence, and, when'er it is
Created for them, catch it by an instinct, [55]

In retrospect Wordsworth accurately describes many of his poems, some of them discussed in the polyphonic reading of this book. This passage just quoted, however, sounds uncannily like Shelley in *Alastor* when he is announcing his new style with the idea that all natural phenomena have "their type in me" [56]. For Shelley, the object that can impress itself on others to make a poem is not in nature but it is the human mind. Shelley does find his own poetic voice in a way similar to that of Wordsworth (and all great poets) but the starting point is more advanced than Wordsworth's. Shelley's style requires a more active imagination, a more intimate and expressive correspondence between inner feeling and outer objects.

Another example of Shelley's new style is the following one:

Hark! The rushing snow!
The sun-awakened avalanche! Whose mass,
Thrice sifted by the storm, had gathered there
Flake after flake, in Heaven-defying minds
As thought by thought is piled, till some great truth
Is loosened, and the nations echo round
Shaken to their roots: as do the mountains now [57].

In the context of the lyrical drama, the avalanche is explained by the accumulation of thoughts, by the operation of the human mind, as Shelley defines his stylistic signature. At first Shelley's method in forming extended analogies seems contrary to the right way to make powerful images. Physical imagery seems easier to understand, not to mention more self-evident than mental operations. Nevertheless, the material of poetry, namely language, differs from that of other arts, which use physical media such as marble for the sculptor, paint for the painter, or sounds for the musician. Language is half inner, half outer, half physical, half imagined, making it one of the most intimate of arts, bringing it inside ourselves, inside the ongoing dialogue that is our subjective power. When we read or write poetry we assume different personae, making us participate in the composition. Getting deeper inside our inner selves, more able to construct the world with images and express them, Shelley's new style empowers a person to be more of a subject with a purpose --- to be more alive. Poetry empowers a person to be more alive – the topic of the next chapter.

In *Alastor* Shelley feels more alive, having found a start for a new poetry in the lines that continue his vision of himself in the well.

He heard

The motion of the leaves, the grass that sprung 475
Startled and glanced and trembled even to feel
An unaccustomed presence, and the sound
Of the sweet brook that from the secret springs
Of that dark fountain rose. A Spirit seemed
To stand beside him—clothed in no bright robes 480
Of shadowy silver or enshrining light,
Borrowed from aught the visible world affords
Of grace, or majesty, or mystery;—
But, undulating woods, and silent well,
And leaping rivulet, and evening gloom 485
Now deepening the dark shades, for speech assuming,
Held commune with him, as if he and it
Were all that was,—only...when his regard
Was raised by intense pensiveness, ...two eyes,
Two starry eyes, hung in the gloom of thought, 490
And seemed with their serene and azure smiles

To beckon him [58].

4. CONCLUSION: THE GENETIC CODE OF POETRY AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Often in primitive literature or myths, as in Gilgamesh, the hero hears a story of a plant of immortality and then starts on an adventure to find it. At the end he or she returns to his or her community to tell the story of what happened. This final story or epode is essential since the hero has a different understanding of the events than when they began. So, the hero explains what happened. Furthermore, the story suggests a quest to a future heroic successor. So a story forms one cycle in a developing chain of stories.

Jean-Francois Lyotard has written much about the operation of tradition through "narrative cycles of transmission".

I, an Aryan, tell you, an Aryan, the narrative of our Aryan ancestors' acts. The single name Aryan occupies the three instances in the universes of the narrative phrase. ...The closed narrative cell operates prescriptively. ...If you hear, tell or do. If you tell, hear or do. If you do, tell or hear. The implications are reciprocal. You don't therefore enter into the narrative cycle, you are always already there, or you are never there. Such is the genre of mythical narrative. It is not cyclical in theme, but in its (if you will, pragmatic) transmission. That is why tradition obeys a ritual protocol; I, an Aryan, tell you this story that an Aryan told me, so tell it, carry it out, Aryans" [59]

More than a story of some adventure, a narrative framework for the process of creation is present in the works of the greatest writers. This code of creation is ready for a literary successor to develop in a new way. Poets demonstrate and explain their process of creation within their verses. Wordsworth improved upon the style of Coleridge, as he makes known through quotations of specific words and allusions, and Wordsworth also improved upon his own style, each main turning point of his poetry having a similar pattern of a stanza with physical imagery mirrored by one describing the imagination's creation of that imagery. Shelley improves upon Wordsworth's poetry in a way similar to the way Wordsworth improved upon Coleridge's. If this cyclical process of improvement recurs again and again in the history of poetry, and in a continuous way from one writer to the next, there is evidence for a genetic code of poetry, with specific variations and improvements in each new great poetry.

This idea of a general organizing principle for literature like a genetic code leads to some suggestions about further study. First of all, I recommend that students and scholars study literary works on the level of the whole corpus, since some features of poetry are not present in short poems and since the overall purpose of poetry guiding its creation can only be understood in its development, in the change of main stages, and in the change of poetic styles from one poet to the next.

Secondly, I recommend that students and scholars try to define the last great opposition between one great poet and his/her main predecessor. Since each opposition of great poets produces a unique improvement in poetry, no understanding of poetry could ever be greater than one particular great body of work. A writer with ambitions of redefining the tradition would follow each development to the present instead of trying to control it ahead of time or to make the perfect interpretation-machine. Once at the most recent great poetry, then the ambitious poet could deepen the analysis of the nature of poetry by analyzing the most recent and highest level. The highest criticism is the new poetry itself. The first and best criticism of Wordsworth's art is Shelley's poetry, especially if it is remembered that Shelley criticizes the previous writing and demonstrates a superior style within his literary work itself.

Thirdly, criticism would become creation when a student or scholar understands the most recent great writer better than that writer understood himself/herself. New great writers create by an analogy of previous creation, though they have a new starting point on which they begin to imagine a kind of extrapolation and revision of the most recent great literary work. There are many excellent detailed

studies of how writers imitate but parody their predecessors by repeating words, types of characters, situations, and themes in an experimental attitude. There are many examples of literary works in which the end explains the start and gives the whole work a final unity. In this way the master writers prepare their apprentices very well.

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