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Wordsworth's Imaginative Duty

I _____
In his well-known essay of 1879, Matthew Arnold suggested that Wordsworth's poetry was 'great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple elementary affections and duties'.¹ Arnold's observation is a penetrating recognition of the things in life which Wordsworth held to be most important – but for all that, Wordsworth's affirmation of duty has frequently been seen as at variance with his faith in nature and the natural world. Misread in this light, the 'Ode to Duty' has often appeared to be an uncomfortable oddity amongst the poems of Wordsworth's 'great decade', both a sign of Wordsworth's looming moralism and resignation as well as the first indication of a philosophical sea change in his later work. Laurence Lockridge, for example, summarises Newton Stallknecht's argument of 1937, obscuring the clear chronology of Wordsworth's composition history to highlight what Stallknecht saw as a disparity of consciousness in his work:

In the transition from 'Tintern Abbey' and *The Prelude* to 'Ode to Duty' and *The Excursion*, [Wordsworth] gives up the morality of imaginative self-realization for that of conscience and duty. His poetry goes into a decline when he sees no way of combining the two.²

That Wordsworth grew to embrace what he saw as the claims of duty through a conservative political outlook and a traditional appreciation for the Church of England in later life is undeniable, but these ideological commitments hardly amounted to a renunciation of 'imaginative self-realization'. In this essay, I will argue that, far from incompatible, Wordsworth saw imagination and duty as essentially connected.

Stephen Gill has called the 'Ode to Duty' the 'most intractable' of Wordsworth's poems, but I would argue that it becomes significantly more palatable in the context of its 1804 composition.³ Hardly the source of a mid-life poetic decline – Wordsworth was 34 years old in 1804 – Wordsworth's willingness to consider 'imaginative self-realization' and 'conscience and duty' as mutually inclusive lies at the heart of the 'Ode to Duty' as it was originally conceived (Lockridge, 127–8). It is my contention that the claims of duty – often surpassing those associated with what we have grown to think of as conventional morality – are implicit in Wordsworth's poetry as early as his *annus mirabilis* at Alfoxden in 1798, when he laid down the original ideas and arguments that would guide the development of his philosophical poetry throughout his life. In this essay, I will argue for a notion of duty grounded in what Wordsworth described as 'an ennobling interchange' between the mind and the world.⁴ While I necessarily devote a great

deal of thought to Wordsworth's dynamic relationship with Coleridge as well as his concurrent work toward *The Prelude*, the 'Ode to Duty' as an original and often-overlooked 'spot of time' stands at the centre of this essay.

II _____

Coleridge, in an apt demonstration of his critical powers, recognised that 'Wordsworth's words always *mean* the whole of their possible Meaning'; in this vein it would hardly be surprising if Wordsworth's understanding of the denotation of duty was wider than our own.⁵ While the most usual sense of the word suggests all 'that is due in the way of moral or legal obligation' – those acts which 'one ought or is bound to do' – it also entails the implication of an action rooted in 'due respect, [or] reverence'. Duty, for all its emphasis of obligatory action, can also suggest an external 'expression' necessitated by an internal sense of 'submission, deference, or respect'.⁶ Wordsworth was immersed in the composition of the five-book *Prelude* in the early months 1804, an examination of his education and formative years that would trace the development of a moral sensibility and existence 'foster'd alike by beauty and by fear' (*Prelude*, i. 307). It is certainly an injustice to isolate a definition of duty that excludes the importance of reverence, a quality that is so characteristic of and omnipresent in the poetry Wordsworth wrote during the first decade of the nineteenth-century.

Any attempt to come to terms with the ultimate meaning and significance of the 'Ode to Duty' must also recognise that a complicated composition history underlies the appearance of its well-wrought, final structure. Like many of his poems, Wordsworth would continue to reconsider and revise the 'Ode to Duty' long after its initial publication; the dynamic and changeable nature of the text thus requires the careful recognition of continuity and

divergences between evolving drafts of the 'Ode to Duty' as individual, isolated 'spots of time'. While the majority of the poem was composed in the early months of 1804, for example, the ode's harsh first stanza with its abrupt Miltonic invocation of duty – 'Stern Daughter of the Voice of God!' (1) – was prefixed to the poem sometime before December 1806, a point at which Wordsworth was preparing the poem for publication in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807).⁷ As originally conceived, though, the poem elusively embarks on a discussion of duty, one in which its first association is more reverential and internal – duty aligned with those who 'in love and truth' (10) do its 'work, and know it not' (14) – rather than the external, imposing emphasis of duty as a 'victory and law' that is 'a Rod / To check the erring, and reprove' (3–4). While the poem as originally composed strikes an initial note that contrasts decisively with its first appearance in print, a sense of the ode's essential meaning is more apparent in a stanza that remains consistent throughout the several stages of the poem's development.

Towards the centre of each draft of the poem, Wordsworth turns from generalised third and first-person meditations on the nature of duty to a sharp invocation of the poet's own first-person 'I':

I, loving freedom, and untried;
No sport of every random gust,
Yet being to myself a guide,
Too blindly have reposed my trust;
Resolved that nothing e'er should press
Upon my present happiness,
I shoved unwelcome tasks away;
But thee I now would serve more
strictly, if I may. (25–32)

While punctuation and word-choice alterations change the sense of service and strictness in the final line of each version of this stanza, the constancy of these lines throughout the evolution of 'Ode to Duty' suggests their centrality to Wordsworth's intention behind

the poem; indeed, James Chandler has interestingly identified the stanza as a sort of 'thumbnail autobiography'.⁸ While Horace's 'Ode to Fortune' and Gray's 'Ode to Adversity' veer toward generalised celebrations of a particular virtue, Wordsworth's understanding of duty is insignificant outside of the context of his own life, a consideration that is not surprising when one considers it as cotemporaneous with the composition of *The Prelude*. Indeed, Wordsworth had read the second half of 'his divine Self-biography'⁹ – the 1799 version of *The Prelude* – to Coleridge in the outermost hills above Grasmere in January 1804, and it is likely that the discussion and confidence spurred by this reading, combined with the fact that Wordsworth was 'now after a long sleep busily engaged in writing a Poem of considerable labour',¹⁰ moved him to re-evaluate his 'holy life of music and of verse' (*Prelude*, i. 54).

In the 'Glad Preamble' to *The Prelude*, likely written in January 1800, Wordsworth celebrates the blessing encompassed in the 'gentle breeze',

That blows from the green fields
and from the clouds
And from the sky: it beats against my
cheek,
And seems half-conscious of the joy it
gives. (*Prelude*, i. 1–4)

It is a wind accompanied by an internalised 'corresponding mild creative breeze' that is, for Wordsworth, an affirmation of his imagination and an assertion that allows him to anticipate 'the hope / Of active days, of dignity and thought, / [and] Of prowess in an honorable field' (*Prelude*, i. 50–52). In the central stanza of the 'Ode to Duty' cited above, Wordsworth reaffirms this trust, recognising himself as 'no sport of every random gust' (25) but moved rather by a wind infused with an imaginative power – a claim that bears testament to his 1799 recognition of himself as 'a favored Being',

linked to the natural world through a dynamic 'intercourse' and 'fellowship'.¹¹ Yet the passage is a reaffirmation checked by a crucial need to qualify 'long months of ease and undisturbed delight' (*Prelude*, i. 28). Wordsworth's acknowledgement that 'too *blindly*' he has 'reposed [his] trust' (28) is an indolent and inverse echo of his clear statement of purpose in Book I of *The Prelude*, where he speaks of the need to 'fix in a *visible* home / Some portion of those phantoms of conceit'.¹² The call to duty in this central stanza of the ode, rooted both in reverence and obligation, is a call for the renewal of imaginative vision and for the discipline necessary to externalise that vision in poetry.

In the following stanza, Wordsworth makes it quite clear in all of the drafts of the poem that his need for a lucid sense of duty, even poetic duty, is unrelated to a sense of guilt arising from the claims of a 'strong compunction in me wrought' (34). It is, rather, the expression of a desire that the mind might apprehend intuitively – 'in the quietness of thought' (36) – a sense of its place in the moral order of the universe. The reality of this order is not to be constraining but rather the source of a more authentic freedom, where the state of one's inner life and external existence are effectively synchronised. Wordsworth's response to 'this uncharter'd' (37), or, in other words, irregular and unwritten, freedom emphasises his desire to solidify an understanding of 'this active universe' (*Prelude*, ii. 266) in words and poetry, to move towards the composition of *The Recluse* and its promise of consequent redemption.¹³ If the idea of Wordsworth supplicating for the control of duty or longing 'for a repose which ever is the same' (40) has been seen as incongruent with what Lockridge described as his 'imaginative self-realization', it is necessary to bear in mind that the plans for *The Recluse*, at least as Coleridge remembered them in 1815, called for Wordsworth to assume the role of a poet in retirement, 'set down and

settled in an abiding Home' and writing a philosophical poem that was 'the result and fruits of a Spirit so fram'd & so disciplin'd' (*Coleridge Letters*, iv. 574).

III _____

But if the ideal of a poet in repose, living a disciplined life of artistic creation was a role specifically articulated for Wordsworth, it was an ideal planned with and incomplete without Coleridge; like *The Prelude*, the 'Ode to Duty' is rooted in the dynamics of Wordsworth and Coleridge's friendship and partially composed with the expectation that Coleridge might be reminded of the hopes and convictions of which he had seemingly lost sight. Towards the end of 1803, Coleridge was 'near to complete mental and physical breakdown' – confronting simultaneously his failed health, his failure to write, and the corresponding feelings of rage and mistrust that followed in train.¹⁴ His visit to Grasmere at the end of the year made his failures abundantly visible, and in consequence allowed Wordsworth to perceive through difference the manner in which his life as a poet in retirement had thrived in a way in which Coleridge's had not.¹⁵

Wordsworth's response to Coleridge can be gauged in another of the ode's stanzas left consistent through several drafts, one in which individual duty is approached as compatible with a larger social vision:

Serene will be our days and bright,
And happy will our nature be,
When love is an unerring light,
And joy its own security.
And bless'd are they who in the main
This faith, even now, do entertain:
Live in the spirit of this creed;
Yet find that other strength,
according to their need. (17–24)

The lines offer a vision of duty's role within a life of 'imaginative self-realization', but

Wordsworth's focus here seems particularly adjusted to encompass Coleridge and his own difficult course toward a recognition of duty. While the other stanzas of the ode are written from a generalised third-person or singular first-person perspective, this stanza is unique in its accommodation of a collective group's experience in the first-person plural, as if Wordsworth is reaching past the boundary of his own existence to include what Thomas McFarland has called 'the significant group' of Coleridge, Dorothy, and himself in his vision of future happiness and serenity. If Wordsworth's desire for calmer and brighter days was made poignant by Coleridge's 'psychosomatic misery' and imminent departure for Malta, his ailing health and wavering sensibility were also pointed reminders of how integral Coleridge's duties were to the fulfilment of Wordsworth's own.¹⁶ While Wordsworth was rededicating himself to an imaginative life of poetic creation in the 'Ode to Duty', he was simultaneously pleading with Coleridge to discharge his role toward furthering the realisation of *The Recluse* in letter of 6 March 1804:

I am very anxious to have your notes for the Recluse. I cannot say how much importance I attach to this, if it should please God that I survive you, I should reproach myself for ever in writing the work if I had neglected to procure this help. (*Early Years*, 452)

Wordsworth's letter of 29 March 1804 was even more piercing:

Your last letter but one informing us of your late attack was the severest shock to me, I think, I have ever received. I walked over for the Letter myself to Rydale and had a most affecting return home in thinking of you and your narrow escape. I will not speak of other thoughts that passed through me; but I cannot help saying that I would gladly have given 3 fourths of my possessions for your letter on *The Recluse* at that time. I cannot

say what a load it would be to me, should I survive you and you die without this memorial left behind. (*Early Years*, 464)

The intensity of Wordsworth's concern and plea was matched, however, by Coleridge's sense of his own doleful incapacity; he would explain to Humphry Davy in March 1804 that there was 'an essential something wanting in me. I feel it, I *know* it—tho' what it is, I can but guess' (*Coleridge Letters*, ii. 1102). While recognising this failure of his own sense of duty, Coleridge's first letter to Grasmere after his January 1804 departure was nonetheless couched in the language of the 'Ode to Duty', particularly the aspiration toward happiness, love, and joy so characteristic of the 'Serene will be our days bright' stanza cited above:

Mortal life seems destined for no continuous Happiness save that which results from the exact performance of Duty—and blessed are you, dear William! whose Path of Duty lies thro' vine-trellised Elm-groves, thro' Love and Joy & Grandeur— . . . How often shall I sigh 'O! for one hour of the Recluse!'— (*Coleridge Letters*, ii. 1060)

While capturing almost exactly Wordsworth's sentiments in the 'Ode to Duty', Coleridge's enthusiasm both for the poetic possibility of *The Recluse* and the supporting stay of duty were largely ineffectual, dissipated in his own jealousy and despair; after his return from Malta, Dorothy would write to Catherine Clarkson that Coleridge had been 'so dismally irresolute in all things since his return to England, that I have more of fear than hope'.¹⁷ By 1836 Wordsworth had altered the 'Ode to Duty', replacing 'find that other strength' (24) in the third stanza with 'seek thy firm support'. Referencing Wordsworth's reliance on that 'firm support' as well as Dorothy's conviction in an 1813 letter that nothing could prompt Coleridge 'to his duty *as Duty*', Thomas McFarland goes so far as to infer that

'Coleridge's failure to recognize the sacredness of duty was, at least from Wordsworth's perspective, perhaps the single most important factor in the eventual estrangement of the two men'.¹⁸

Regardless of the ultimate fate of their friendship, Coleridge's presence is crucial to our understanding of the 'Ode to Duty' and its composition in 1804. Like 'Resolution and Independence' (1802), it is a poem that attempts to articulate a deep and steady strength that would sustain both Wordsworth and Coleridge even after an original 'genial faith, still rich in genial good' had waned.¹⁹ In the first stanza of the 'Ode to Duty' written in 1804, Wordsworth praises those who yield to duty intrinsically, in 'the genial sense of youth' (12); in his 'Dejection: An Ode' (1802), however, Coleridge meditates on 'the grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear' that results when his own 'genial spirits fail'.²⁰ Coleridge confronts the seeming limit of his idealising imagination and in his dejection recognises the individual soul – not the external world – as the only ultimate source of love and joy:

Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth,
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth –
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!
(*'Dejection'*, 53–58)

'Light' and 'glory' are, like 'joy', words that stand in for the central and diffusive power of the imagination. Both light and joy are internally generated – the product of the soul itself – but move outward, effectively 'Enveloping the Earth':

Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous
cloud—
We in ourselves rejoice!
And thence flows all that charms or
ear or sight,
All melodies the echoes of the voice,

All colours a suffusion from that light.
(‘Dejection’, 71–5)

In describing joy as ‘its own security’ (20) and love an ‘an unerring light’ (19), Wordsworth echoes the language of Coleridge’s ode as well as his letter of February 1804, establishing light, joy, and love as elements accessible through duty as well as the imagination. But in a more active sense, the ‘Ode to Duty’ can be understood as a palliative that attempts to redirect the isolationist, individualist bent of Coleridge’s imagination in ‘Dejection: An Ode’ by suggesting that duty and its shared commitments form an integral part of the imaginative life. As far back as the composition of ‘Tintern Abbey’ (1798) and the two-part *Prelude*, Wordsworth understood an imaginative individual as ‘creator and receiver both, / Working but in alliance with the works’ which he beheld (*Prelude*, ii. 273–4). In this sense the imagination participated in a dynamic ‘alliance’ or creative partnership, one in which the imagination had the power to ecstatically dissolve the boundaries between subjective and objective experience. For Coleridge, at least after 1802, the external world did not feed the soul in quite this same way; imaginative movement was from the rejoicing self outward, all colours and candescence simply ‘a suffusion from that light’. If Coleridge could eventually grow to understand the diffusive power of the imagination as one of ‘joy’, his immediate reaction in ‘Dejection: An Ode’ is that of grief, a pain rooted in the recognition that this wholly subjective power carried with it the threat of subjective isolation.

In the ‘Ode to Duty’, it is Wordsworth’s hope that the ‘other strength’ of duty might release Coleridge from the isolation of his own mind. At the same time, he invests his trust in the power of the imagination to effect an unrealised future for ‘the significant group’, one in which ‘Serene *will be* our days and bright, / And happy *will* our nature be’ (17–18).

Nevertheless, the uncomfortable inversion of the adjectives around the future tense verbs in these lines is suggestive of the difficulty of this ideal’s realisation, particularly for Coleridge, whose conception of the imagination at this point in time emphasised the stark boundaries of his own individuality. Wordsworth’s vision of the future thus requires a synchronisation of inner and outer nature, where love can be trusted as an ‘unerring light’ (19) – ‘a love more intellectual [that] cannot be / Without Imagination’ (*Prelude*, xiii. 166–7) – and one’s own sense of joy is not invalidated by the reality of the world. It is a hope no less for Coleridge than for himself, as well as a firm assertion that both imagination and duty link the individual to a larger world. While the overall weight of the stanza centres upon the realisation of this faith through the imagination and those who ‘live in the spirit’ (23) of its creed, duty remains as a necessary buttress for the imagination – that ‘other strength’ or ‘firm support’ that might ‘breed a second Will more wise’ (48).

The claims of duty might appear to be far removed from meditations on the nature of the imagination, but the economy and arrangement of each ideal are, for Wordsworth, largely the same. If *The Prelude* is Wordsworth’s triumphant celebration of the imagination, the ‘Ode to Duty’ is his coterminous panegyric in praise of duty – and it is vital to recognise that each poem purposefully contains a kernel of its contrary. Both works speak to Wordsworth’s concern for understanding and capturing in verse the formation of his own moral imagination; the ‘Ode to Duty’ emphasises ‘love [as] an unerring light’ (19) in the same manner in which *The Prelude* implicitly gestures ‘to duty and to truth’ and a larger ‘discipline of love’ (*Prelude*, ii. 25, 251). But while *The Prelude* devotes ‘long labour’ (*Prelude*, xiii. 172) to tracing the growth of the imagination, the exact nature of Wordsworth’s duty is not as clear. Geoffrey Hartman has

All things shall speak of man, and we
shall read
Our duties in all forms, and general laws
And local accidents shall tend alike
To quicken and to rouse, and give the will
And power which by a [] chain of good
Shall link us to our kind.²⁵

The fact that Wordsworth chose to include this early and important fragment in *The Excursion* (1814) shows just how persistently and persuasively he attached himself to its ideal. That said, his trust that duty is readable 'in all forms' and that it can inwardly 'quicken and rouse' the individual mind stands sharply against Coleridge's sad admission in 1802 that 'I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within' ('Dejection: An Ode', ll. 45–6). While Wordsworth lived in a permeable world, 'creator and receiver both' (*Prelude*, ii. 273), Coleridge was strictly confined. For Coleridge, the imagination's origin was interior and individual, while his sense of duty—in a very Kantian sense—was accountable to an exterior authority and not the result of an inner inclination.

Coleridge was working through Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* towards the end of 1803, and his notebook entries testify to the significance of his thoughtful encounter with Kant's conception of duty:

It is not enough that we act in conformity to the Law of moral Reason—we must likewise FOR THE SAKE of that law / it must not only be our Guide, but likewise our Impulse—Like a strong current, it must make a visible Road on the Sea, & drive us along that road... (Coleridge, *Notebooks*, i. 1705)

Coleridge was clearly impressed with the objectivity of Kant's system and strives here to uphold an external moral law as the base of

right 'moral Reason'. But his abrupt turn in the entry toward an 'Impulse—Like a strong current' is suggestive of the difficulty that Coleridge as an impulsive and passionate individual had in reconciling himself to Kant, whom he held to be an excellent philosopher but a 'wretched Psychologist' (Coleridge, *Notebooks*, i. 1717). Coleridge, like Wordsworth, had dreamed of a state of the world where 'All things shall live in us, and we shall live / In all things that surround us' ('Not Useless Do I Deem', ll. 79–80), but his own imaginative paralysis and Kant's insistence on universal maxims seemed to throw that high argument into question:

Reverence for the LAW of Reason / **now this truly is a feeling**, but says Kant it is a self-created, not a received passive Feeling—it is *Consciousness of the Subordination of the Will [to a Law]*. (Coleridge *Notebooks*, i. 1710)

Kant, here, confirms Coleridge's own sense of the impossibility of receiving 'passive Feeling' in 'Dejection: An Ode', for Kant held duty to be an 'absolute dictator of its own laws, not the herald of those which are whispered to it by an implanted sense or who knows what tutelary nature'.²⁶ And while Coleridge was reluctant to negate the power of his own feelings, the force and seeming unity of an *a priori*, external duty offered, for a time, a sort of escape from his own inner turmoil; in Kant, Coleridge found 'a palliative to the more corrosive aspects of human separation and alienation' (Lockridge, 109).

While Wordsworth, like Coleridge, was naturally inclined to a sort of reverential duty, his frame of mind—always syncretic—sought to combine an external guide with an internal impulse; for Wordsworth, Kant's adherence to law and maxim was incomplete without the imaginative power of 'primal sympathy'.²⁷ Coleridge, however, was reluctantly separating

himself from that 'ennobling interchange' that lay at the heart of Wordsworth's 1804 poetry, lost in the interiority of an imagination that could give but not receive and prone to the power of an external law that would not give way to inclination. At the core of Wordsworth's ode is an attempt to reconcile duty and inclination, to remind Coleridge of the fusional force of his own moral imagination:

Yet not the less would I throughout
Still act according to the voice
Of my own wish; and feel past doubt
That my submissiveness was choice:
Not seeking in the school of pride
For "precepts over dignified,"
Denial and restraint I prize
No farther than they breed a second
Will more wise. (41–8)

Wordsworth clearly privileges the power of inclination – 'my own wish' – and the emotive ability to 'feel past doubt' as inseparable from the fact of an external duty. His reference to 'precepts over dignified' is an oblique echo of Milton's 'empty and over-dignified precepts' in *The Doctrine of Discipline and Divorce*, but its proximity to the anticipation of 'a second Will more wise' reminds one of the 'Comforter' that follows knowledge and reverence in *Paradise Lost*:

The promise of the Father, who shall dwell
His Spirit within them, and the law of faith
Working through love, upon their hearts
shall write,
To guide them in all truth . . . ²⁸

Law and duty are interiorised, but only as a guide that works through love to lead one through the world 'in all truth'. While Milton might not have seen 'the law of faith / Working through love' as an imaginative power, it is a description remarkably close to Wordsworth's sense of imagination at the summit of Snowdon in Book XIII of *The Prelude*. In a sequence of providential loss and gain, the 'Ode to Duty'

traces a moral evolution from 'the genial sense of youth' (12) through to 'that other strength' (24) of duty which ultimately resolves in 'a second Will more wise' (48). This progression noticeably parallels Wordsworth's account of the imagination – 'how impaired and restored' – in *The Prelude*. It is as if Wordsworth, 'Speaking of nothing more than what we are' (*Home at Grasmere*, 1005), offers Coleridge a path out of loss through the conjunction of interior and exterior life, that 'ennobling interchange' where duty and imagination meet. For if duty begins 'from the point of accountableness to our Conscience, and, through that, to God and human nature' as Wordsworth suggests in 1810, it is the task and joy of the imagination to foster that extension.²⁹

IV _____

In his 'Reply to "Mathetes"', written for *The Friend* in 1810, Wordsworth includes the final stanza of the 'Ode to Duty' at the close of the essay and prefixes it with a revealing summary of its argument: the philosophical poet, associating morality with 'voluntary obedience' and the pursuit of order 'transfers, in the transport of imagination, the law of Moral to physical natures, [contemplating], through the medium of that order, all modes of existence as subservient to one spirit' ('Reply to "Mathetes"', 24. Emphasis mine). Duty, here, is an imaginative act that connects the interior realm of moral nature with the physical world in 'one spirit'. When Wordsworth, 'made lowly wise', calls for the 'confidence of reason' in the ode's final stanza, it is a reason linked to the imagination – another name for 'reason in her most exalted mood' (*Prelude*, xiii. 170). Wordsworth, after all, had already charted his disillusionment with 'Reason's naked self' that 'did not lie in nature' and looked beyond 'the limits of experience and of truth' in Book X of *The Prelude*, and it is difficult to imagine him extolling this sort of unimaginative, reductive

reason in such close proximity to his thorough self-examination in *The Prelude* (*Prelude*, x. 817, 843, 848).

Indeed it is *The Prelude* that offers an indication of exactly what Wordsworth understood the conjunction of duty and the imagination to be at the time of the composition of the 'Ode to Duty'. It is a theme I can sketch only briefly here, but one that is essential to our understanding of Wordsworth's conception of duty in 1804. After an account of his boyhood adventures in Hawkshead, Wordsworth pauses in reflection to declare that 'daily were my sympathies enlarged' (*Prelude*, ii. 181). For Wordsworth, the sense of coterminous responsibility and affection implied in this sort of statement cannot be attributed solely to an internal or external guide; it is, rather, a natural result of the sweeping away of boundaries that reveal the 'gravitation and the filial bond / Of nature, that connect him with the world' (*Prelude*, ii. 263–4). A synthesis of imagination and implicit duty, this filial bond is linked to the poet's ability, through association, to observe 'a brotherhood' that is invisible to 'common minds' (*Prelude*, ii. 404–5). In extending the filial metaphor to the natural realm, Wordsworth extends familial duty, rooted significantly in love and reverence, to a larger community and world. It is this need for an encompassing and dynamic sphere in which to understand his own individuality, an 'ennobling interchange' between an individual and the world, that prompts Wordsworth's retelling of the story of the shepherd and his son in Book VIII of *The Prelude*. The same need drives his affirmation of a constant community between himself, Dorothy, Mary, and Coleridge—even to the point, in Book VI, of imagining Coleridge as a facet of his life in the early 1790's when he clearly was not. This ideal of a natural community linked through a bond of moral imagination that Arnold noticed in 1879 is, for Wordsworth, a final renunciation of

solipsism and is implicit in the aspiration of the 'Ode to Duty'. More importantly, however, it anticipates a duty pursued for more than duty's sake, a freely-assumed dedication that leads toward that 'love more intellectual' which, 'without Imagination', cannot be (*Prelude*, xiii. 166–7). The heightened awareness of imaginative thought is the driving force through which duty becomes not a burden but an ordinary inclination of life in the world.

V _____
My challenge, here, has been to isolate the 'Ode to Duty' in the moment of its original composition, to hold imagination—'which, in truth, / Is but another name for absolute strength' (*Prelude*, xii. 167–8)—and 'that other strength' (24) of duty as compatible rather than contradictory powers. By the time the 'Ode to Duty' reached the public in print, indeed, by the time Wordsworth finished *The Prelude* in May 1805, the context of the ode and its ramifications had utterly changed. After hearing of John Wordsworth's death off Portland in February 1805, Coleridge, in faraway Malta, misconstrued John's final words as, 'I have done my Duty! Let her go!' These last words seemed to have the force of an imperative, as Coleridge's notebook suggests: 'Let us do our *Duty*: all else is a Dream, Life and Death alike a Dream' (Coleridge, *Notebooks*, ii. 2537). In his own private grief and confusion, Wordsworth was forced to confront the blank misgivings of significant grief and a very new frame of reality:

I have submitted to new control:
A power is gone, which nothing can
 restore;
A deep distress hath humaniz'd my Soul.³⁰

These lines from 'Elegiac Stanzas' were composed in the early summer of 1806; that same year, Wordsworth would add an additional, authoritative stanza to the

beginning of the 'Ode to Duty'. Turning away from the 'absolute strength' (*Prelude*, xiii. 168) of the imagination, Wordsworth leaned toward 'that other strength' (24) of duty as 'empty terrors' (6) overawed. In the emotional storm that followed John's death, duty as the 'Stern Lawgiver' (49) eclipsed the optimism of the 'Godhead's most benignant grace' (50). That Wordsworth would consider it his duty to pursue his imagination and its illumination through this darkness is a testament to the very humanity and honesty of his art.

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1. Matthew Arnold, 'Wordsworth', in *English Literature and Irish Politics*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1973), 36–55, 51.
2. Laurence S. Lockridge, *Coleridge the Moralist* (Ithaca and London, 1977), 127–8.
3. Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford, 1998), 144.
4. William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca, 1991), xiii. 376. 1805 Text. Hereafter cited in text as *Prelude*.
5. Coleridge to Robert Southey, 14 August 1803, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earle Leslie Griggs (6 vols, Oxford, 1956–71), ii. 977. Hereafter cited as *Coleridge Letters*.
6. *The Oxford English Dictionary. Second Edition* (20 vols, Oxford, 1989), 'duty' forms 1. a. and 4. a.
7. Wordsworth, 'Ode to Duty', *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca, 1983), 104–10. References to the Cornell edition's first reading text of 'Ode to Duty' will be parenthetically noted within the text.
8. James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago and London, 1984), 249.
9. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Merton Christensen, and Anthony John Harding (5 vols, Princeton, 1957–2002), i. 1801. Hereafter cited as *Notebooks*.
10. Wordsworth to John Thelwall, January 1804, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. De Selincourt, Second Edition, *The Early Years 1787–1805*, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967), 430. Hereafter cited as *Early Years*.
11. Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1798–1799*, ed. Stephen Parrish, The Cornell Wordsworth Series (Ithaca, 1979), i. 70, i. 149, i. 142.
12. Wordsworth, *Prelude*, i. 130–1. Emphasis mine. Wordsworth composed *Prelude* i. 55–271 between 14 January and 13 February 1804. See Mark Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Middle Years* (Cambridge MA, 1975) for the composition history of *The Prelude*.
13. That the Cornell edition's third reading text—a construction of the 'Ode to Duty' from Wordsworth's revisions to the 1807 printed sheets—sets this stanza at the ode's conclusion testifies to its growing importance in Wordsworth's mind, emphasising his desire for a written work that might balance to satisfaction the competing claims of one's inner and outer life.
14. Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford, 1989), 222.
15. My argument here, primarily biographical, is considered at length in Chandler's account of the role Coleridge plays in *The Prelude*. See Chandler, 235–65.
16. Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton, 1981), 75.
17. Dorothy Wordsworth to Catherine Clarkson, 6 November 1806, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. De Selincourt, Second Edition, *The Middle Years 1806–1820*, rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill (2 vols, Oxford, 1969), i. 86. Hereafter cited as *Middle Years*.
18. *Middle Years*, ii. 124; McFarland, 60. See also Wordsworth's letter to Thomas Poole of 30 May 1809. Speaking of Coleridge, Wordsworth notes: 'I give it to you as my deliberate opinion, formed upon proofs which have been strengthening for years, that he neither will nor can execute any thing of important benefit either to himself his family or to mankind. Neither his talents nor his genius mighty as they are nor his vast information will avail him anything; they are all frustrated by a derangement in his intellectual and moral constitution—In fact, he has no voluntary power of mind whatsoever, nor is he capable of acting under any *constraint* of duty or moral obligation' (*Middle Years*, i. 352). The 'Ode to Duty', of

- course, was written long before Wordsworth had reached the severity of this judgment.
19. 'Resolution and Independence', *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 123–9, l. 39.
 20. Coleridge, 'Dejection: An Ode', *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, *The Bollingen Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (6 vols, Princeton, 2001), I.ii, 695–702, ll. 21, 39.
 21. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814* (New Haven and London, 1964), 279, 278.
 22. William A. Ulmer, 'The Creative Soul: Simplon Pass to Mound Snowdon' in *The Prelude: A Casbook*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 2006), 259–91, 261.
 23. F. W. Bateson, *Wordsworth: A Re-Interpretation* (London, 1954), 162.
 24. Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, ed. Beth Darlington, *The Cornell Wordsworth Series* (Ithaca, 1977), ll. 1006, 1008.
 25. Wordsworth, 'Not Useless Do I Deem', *William Wordsworth: The Oxford Authors*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1984), 679, ll. 36–41. The fragment, printed as an appendix in Gill's collection, is a rejected conclusion for *The Ruined Cottage*.
 26. Immanuel Kant, copied in Coleridge, *Notebooks*, i. 1723 and translated by Thomas K. Abbott in Kathleen Coburn's notes. Also cited in Chandler, 252.
 27. Wordsworth, 'Ode', *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 271–7, l. 184.
 28. See Gill, *Oxford Authors*, 713; John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Second Edition, ed. Alastair Fowler (Harlow and London, 1998), xii. 486–90.
 29. Wordsworth, 'Reply to "Mathetes"', *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (3 vols, Oxford, 1974), ii. 18.
 30. Wordsworth, 'Elegiac Stanzas', *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 266–8, ll. 34–36.