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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Mary McMillan entitled "Floating Away or Staying Put: Finding Meaning in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and Robert Frost." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

B.J. Leggett

Dr. B. J. Leggett, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:

Nancy M. Goslee

Mary E. Papke

Acceptance for the Council:

Anne Mayhew

Vice Provost and Dean of
Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**FLOATING AWAY OR STAYING PUT:
FINDING MEANING IN THE POETRY OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH AND
ROBERT FROST**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine and articulate in philosophical terms the inherent differences in the poetics of William Wordsworth and Robert Frost. This work differs from many other critical works that have considered the two poets' similarities and differences in that it considers these concepts from a philosophical standpoint. The study looks at the specific philosophical backgrounds of the two poets and utilizes vocabulary and concepts from these to describe the poets' different poetical movements in describing similar subjects.

John Locke's concepts of modes and substance ideas are used to describe the other things that appear in the lines of Wordsworth and Frost. The study also uses the concept of David Hartley's associationism and the concept of transcendence to articulate the different poetic movements the two poets make. William James's pragmatism is also used to draw a connection from Lockean logic into Frost's own philosophy.

These concepts help answer the question of what do these poets find important. The concepts also help describe how and why Wordsworth finds meaning beyond earth while Frost finds meaning on it.

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INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on two relatively popular and recognizable poets, who reveal their poetical ideas by using relatively popular and recognizable natural things. The rocks and trees, birds and clouds, neighbors and farmers and mothers and wives seem to be what attract so many people to the poetry of William Wordsworth and Robert Frost, just as these things and persons attracted the poets themselves. In “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth writes “I again repose...and view/ These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts...” (9-11). The British poet affirms that when he is in “lonely rooms, and ‘mid the din/ Of towns and cities,” it is these “beauteous forms” that bring him “sensations sweet,” and those sensations ultimately help him pass “into [a] purer mind” (25,22, 27, 29). Frost captures similarly beautiful natural images in his poetry. In “Directive,” readers see the beauty of nature as he attempts to retreat from the chaos of the world, as Wordsworth does, into the beauty of nature: “Back out of all this now too much for us,/ Back in a time made simple by the loss/ Of detail...There is a house...upon a farm” (1-2, 3, 5, 6).

Many critics, as well, have been attracted to the two poets and have compared their (arguably) similar styles. Wordsworth and Frost use common natural ingredients but in different ways to make their works beautiful and approachable. The two poets start in the common, (rather) generic nature, but in their poetry they take different paths, investing their own ideas into these things and natural settings and leaving their readers with new and different appreciation for natural things and settings. In their lines, both poets express an overall appreciation of nature, in their pictures of it and their questions about it, in their sentimental tug towards it and their transcendent departure from it.

Though both poets launch their ideas from the common ground of natural scenes and pictures of rural people, animals, and objects in their lines, ultimately the two poets reach different conclusions about the “nature” of these natural things and the work of poetry. They seem to disagree on what is really important, what is essential for meaning, and where and how that meaning is to be found when dealing with natural things.

I am intrigued by how these two poets of nature can deal with such similar physical things and ultimately arrive at such different philosophical conclusions. Though their subjects are similar, they do not treat these subjects in a similar fashion. The two poets have markedly different agendas, it seems, even though they choose similar natural scenes with which to begin their poems. Nature and natural things support both poets. For Wordsworth the natural scene and things are a launching pad, from which he soars into associations and toward transcendent realities. For Frost the natural scene is sufficient and is where he stays; his ideas bloom from it, are rooted in it, are (ultimately) impossible without it. And though Wordsworth does not stay on the physical scene because the transcendent reality is his goal, both poets do share this common starting point. Nature holds up both poets, and they hold it in their poetry. Frost holds it with reverence and with suitable boundaries, so he can appreciate its physical existence from a philosophical distance. Wordsworth holds nature and natural things in his gaze, from his physical distance so these objects will stimulate his ideas—begin the associative process—and in order philosophically to penetrate them and ultimately transcend all of the physical reality.

The philosophical background for both poets is an appropriate starting point for such a study, and in the first chapter, I begin with John Locke and his ideas concerning

physical things and modes to help distinguish the “things” that Wordsworth and Frost are both picturing in their lines. David Hartley and his ideas about associationism aid this study as well. Since it is obvious that Wordsworth and Frost do not differ in their subjects—just in how they treat these subjects—the concepts of transcendence and association of ideas are useful in labeling the philosophical movements of the two poets around, above, into their subjects.

Most critical works that draw comparisons between Wordsworth and Frost are actually studies of Frost, in which critics analyze and assess the influence of the romantic poet on the modern poet. Reuben A. Brower provides many important details of the influence aspect in the Wordsworth-Frost pairing. Brower notes, “Wordsworth and Emerson—and above all Wordsworth—were poets who had shaped the characteristic figure of poems about the natural world” (39). Brower’s objective is one of showing “how [Frost’s] special poetic revelation relies on and diverges from the poetic revelation of Wordsworth and Emerson” (42). He does so by looking at the ways in which Frost was influenced by Wordsworth and Emerson and then how Frost poetically reacted to his romantic predecessors.

Lawrence Thompson, in a few of his works on Frost, deals with the direct influence of Wordsworth on the modern poet. In *Fire and Ice*, Thompson notes that Wordsworth’s “ ‘Prefaces’ had considerable influence on [Frost;]...they had taught him (as he later confessed) not only to keep his eye on the object but also to keep his ear against himself” (98). In *Robert Frost: The Early Years 1874-1915*, Thompson notes that Frost’s mother quoted Wordsworth to her children in order to convey “the ability to feel in nature a presence which could and should inspire with the joy of elevated thoughts”

(71). In *Frost's Road Taken*, Robert F. Fleissner, in turn, notes how Frost reacted as a result of Wordsworth's influence. Fleissner says, "Untermeyer [a close friend of Frost]...has suggested that at times Frost tended even to try to out-Wordsworth Wordsworth: 'His devotion to the intimacies of earth is, even more than Wordsworth's, rich, almost inordinate in its fidelity...'" (103). Other works that mention Wordsworth's direct influence on Frost are William H. Pritchard's *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* and Donald J. Greiner's *Robert Frost: The Poet and His Critics*. Richard Poirier, as well, in *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* mentions Frost's reactions to a Wordsworthian nature: "In his conception of sound...[Frost's] speaker wants us to recognize that he is not the passive, sometimes fearfully receptive listener of Wordsworth..." (286).

These studies are helpful for any scholar preparing to look deeply at Frost's poetry, and they do, to varying degrees, provide background for Wordsworth's influence on the modern poet. My argument, however, is ultimately not about direct influence of the romantic poet on the modern one. This study is less biographically and more philosophically based. In explaining Frost's philosophical purposes in his poetry, most of these critics do deal with William James as one of the poet's philosophical forebears. They do not, however, because these are studies concentrating on Frost, include Wordsworth's philosophical background or use philosophers like Locke and Hartley to articulate the differences in the poetics of Wordsworth and Frost. This is exactly what I wish to do, since this is a study of both poets. I use Locke's modes and ideas of substances along with Hartley's associationism to distinguish between the philosophical objectives and outcomes of the poems of Wordsworth and Frost.

Many critics begin a Wordsworth-Frost comparison with Frost's own words about Wordsworth. Greiner sees Frost's "A Tribute to Wordsworth" delivered at Cornell University in 1950 as an appropriate starting point for any comparison of the two poets (142). In this informal talk, Frost compliments the romantic poet and talks about two facets of him: the essential Wordsworth, which has a "banality which penetrates 'right down into the soul of man'" and the "intellectual" Wordsworth. Frost also mentions specific poems that influenced him, such as "Ode to Duty" (143). As Greiner notes from Frost's comments, "[Frost] apparently senses an affinity between his own poetry and Wordsworth's lyrics" (143). Two other critics in their articles in *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost* mention remarks the modern poet made about Wordsworth. Blanford Parker quotes Frost complimenting Wordsworth's "insipid tone, sweet, insipid tone" (180). Timothy Steele notes that Frost said "Wordsworth was right in trying to reproduce in his poetry not only the words—and in their limited range, too, actually used in common speech—but their sound" (144).

These comments give a starting point. One can learn what it is that Frost liked about Wordsworth and perhaps why some of his poems read like those of the romantic poet. However, I consider less personal motives—how Frost might have wanted to distinguish himself from or affiliate himself with Wordsworth—and more the epistemology behind the poetics of both poets. In this vein, Locke's empiricism is helpful, since it was a basis for Wordsworth's philosophy and also since it compares to and contrasts with Jamesian pragmatism, which greatly influenced Frost. I use these philosophical divergences and the evidences of them that appear in the poets' lines to draw distinctions between the two poets.

Many critics locate the point of departure between Wordsworth and Frost in Frost's skepticism, as it comes across in his poetry in a mocking, witty, ironic or sarcastic tone. Such observations about Frost's skepticism are helpful for founding my argument; they give me a linguistic platform from which I can then dive into a philosophical argument. W. W. Robson in his article "The Achievement of Robert Frost" draws a comparison between "Death of the Hired Man" and "Michael": he says that the "significant difference between the poems" is a "difference in spiritual value," and that this is found in the use of the pastoral quality. Wordsworth, Robson says, "uses pastoral—normally a mode of irony for Frost—with complete seriousness" (213).¹ Though the implications of this point are arguable, Wordsworth does refrain from a mocking tone that Frost utilizes. Brower also notes Frost's mocking tone as a way of distinguishing himself from his literary predecessors: "Frost draws strength from the Wordsworthian-Tennysonian tradition while gently mocking it" (83). Brower, looking at Frost in contrast to another of his literary influences, sees in Frost's "Directive" "a kind of humor alien to both Eliot and Wordsworth" (235). Jonathan N. Barron and Richard Poirier also mention Frost's skepticism as a point of divergence from his romantic predecessor(s). In his fascinating article "Robert Frost and a New Tradition" Barron says that "Frost writes in a Romantic idiom developed by Wordsworth, while, on the other hand, he manifests a twentieth-century skepticism" (16). Poirier contrasts "Spring Pools"

¹ Brower attributes Frost's rejection of the pastoral to his rejection of "the urban sophistication of pastoral, which lies behind the pathetic fallacy [as noted in "The Importance of Being Versed in Country Things"],...and he is certainly not one to indulge in the sophistication of the idealist..." (80).

with a Wordsworthian sentiment; he comments, “A difference between Frost and Wordsworth should be apparent[;]...the poem is feisty rather than brooding” (17).

I, too, give examples illustrating Frost’s skepticism, and the details of my argument (in reference to both poets) refer to how this skepticism affects the way Frost treats nature and the natural things he pictures in his lines. Likewise, I discuss Wordsworth’s complete faith in nature. This deep trust which the romantic poet holds causes him to settle into nature, to plunge into it. Such philosophical movements contrast sharply with the strict boundaries and borders Frost erects in his lines to keep the things that are separate separate.

Considering Frost’s skepticism and Wordsworth’s faith helps explain their respective views of the natural world around them. In this work, I discuss Frost’s darker view of nature in contrast to Wordsworth’s sublime and beautiful one. Brower, too, contrasts the comfort that is to be found in Wordsworth’s prayer at the Grand Chartreuse with the lack of comfort and reassurance at the end of Frost’s “Acquainted with the Night” (127-128). While comparing Thoreau and Frost in “Robert Frost and the Darkness of Nature,” Roberts W. French makes a brief statement of contrast between Wordsworth and Frost: “In a similar mood [to Thoreau], the young Wordsworth went to nature for consolation and spiritual renewal, but Frost never does that; nature offers no such blessings for him” (156). Arguments like these establish a foundation onto which I build further arguments. I consider the notion of Wordsworth being Christian—an argument augmented by William Ulmer’s “The Christian Wordsworth”—since he could be said to have faith whereas Frost has skepticism. Also, I consider where Frost’s skepticism takes him—certainly not into despair but into a more man-made (in contrast to

natural) “salvation.” These “religious” (or philosophic) matters lead into my discussion of transcendence as well.

The critical arguments that approach my own more closely are the ones that note, philosophically speaking, how Wordsworth and Frost differ in their view of nature/natural things around them. However, I have yet to find one study that deals with the same philosophical background and trajectory that I do in explaining the two poets’ philosophical differences. Griener and John F. Lynen—in *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*—discuss, in their comparisons of Wordsworth and Frost, the two poets’ views about the (dis)ability of the poet to reconcile (wo)man with nature. Griener finds “The key difference between Frost’s approach to nature and Wordsworth’s...[is] that Wordsworth stresses the union of mind and external reality by suggesting the merger of thought and the natural scene.... Nowhere [in Frost’s poetry] do we discover Wordsworth’s faith in the kinship between man and nature, but we do find everywhere in Frost’s poetry the gulf separating the two” (145-146). Lynen states that Wordsworth sees a “union of mind and external reality” (142); “thought and object merge” in his lines (143). Lynen illustrates, using “The Wood Pile,” how Frost, on the other hand, “views nature as essentially alien” (145).

In this work, I consider these differences between the two poets and their implications, working to articulate these differences by using the philosophical heritage of associationism. I use not only David Hartley’s associationism but also the tradition of this concept, as David Rapaport deals with it in *The History of the Association of Ideas*. I also use works like J. H. Van den Berg’s “The Subject and His Landscape” and Linda Brigham’s “Beautiful Conceptions and Tourist Kitsch: Wordsworth’s ‘Written with a

Slate Pencil...” to uncover the philosophical outcome of the liberties Wordsworth takes with nature—his infusing things with his spirit, as Jaques Blondel says. And I use Judith Oster’s *Toward Robert Frost: The Reader and the Poet* to reveal the outcome of Frost’s strongly held boundaries.

Also, in this aspect of the comparison between Wordsworth and Frost, I include feminist critique with the help of Karen Kilcup’s informative *Robert Frost and the Feminine Literary Tradition*. In picturing the “other things” in their lines, the two poets differ as well in their dealings with women. Wordsworth, just as he does with other natural things, takes great liberties with the female personas in his lines, making them appear more like one-dimensional objective correlatives to his thoughts rather than like real people. Kilcup mentions Wordsworth in passing a few times but does not offer in any depth a contrast between the two poets. I apply to Wordsworth the categories that she uses to classify Frost as feminine (in some aspects of his work—because he is less transcendent and presents “more real” female characters). By using some of Kilcup’s categories, I have been able to employ gender terms to uncover further and compare the poetic practices of association of ideas and transcendence in these two poets.

In addition to his presenting real characters, many critics note that Frost exhibits greater grace and ease in describing and creating other people in his poetry than does Wordsworth. In “Robert Frost: The Edge of the Clearing,” James M. Cox argues that “It is Frost’s ability to be a farmer poet which distinguishes him most sharply from Wordsworth, with whom he’s often compared. Wordsworth played the part of the poet concerned with common man, but Frost has persistently cast himself in the role of the common man concerned with poetry” (145). Robson deals with this contrasting point

well: Frost's voices are "the poet's own and that of someone very different from himself...[and they] seem equally 'natural'" in contrast to Wordsworth's different voices, Robson notes, since Wordsworth's other voices in his lines are affected and seem "unnatural" (208-209). Frank Lentricchia also mentions this in "The Resentments of Robert Frost." In Frost, he says, "there is no separation...of poetic and laboring voices" (242). Lentricchia goes on to note that Wordsworth, on the other hand, is "a third-person observer," and in "The Solitary Reaper," for example, his "physical distance from the reaper is an aid to the distance required for imaginative reflection" (242).

While I use arguments like those of Cox, Robson, and Lentricchia in my own analysis and classification of the differences between the poetics of Wordsworth and Frost, I develop more strictly my own philosophical structure to classify the differing postures of the two poets. As I explain in the next chapter, Wordsworth's stance is one of physical solitude—as Lentricchia notes, he calls the reaper "yon" highland lass (242). Wordsworth keeps the physical space between himself and his subjects, but he philosophically plunges himself into these other things. Frost, on the contrary, gets closer, physically speaking, to his subjects. For instance, in "A Time to Talk," he does not stay away (at a physical distance) and yell to his neighbor; instead he goes over to talk to the friend. Frost does, however, remain always philosophically separate from his subjects.

To introduce the philosophical notions of transcendence and association of ideas that I use in this work to distinguish between the practices of Wordsworth and Frost, a closer look at an example from their poems seems appropriate. A comparison between "Intimation of Immortality" and "The Birthplace" offers an example of the contrasting

views of nature that the two poets express. In “Intimations of Immortality,” Wordsworth laments his loss of inspiration and that there “hath past away a glory from the earth” (18). However, in this ode, which seems initially like one only of loss, there is ultimate redemption, and Wordsworth’s redemption is natural—based in nature:

O joy! That in our embers
Is something that doth live.
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive! (133-136)

The redemption from the loss is achieved because nature remembers and in remembering saves the poet from being lost. There is a union between nature and the poet; it recognizes him and remembers him. It holds him, insuring his importance and cosmic value.

In “The Birthplace,” the scene, though stated in a very different way, is a similar one. Frost’s shorter poem, too, is a meditation upon origins. But in Frost’s poem the “home” is constructed by man: “Here further up the mountain slope/ Than there was ever any hope,/ My father built” (1-3). Similar to how Wordsworth’s ode begins, there is little “hope” initially in Frost’s scene. However, there come in “The Birthplace” hints of nature’s pleasure upon beholding her inhabitants: “The mountain seemed to like the stir,/ And made of us a little while/ With always something in her smile” (8-10). There seems to be a recognition of man by nature, as in Wordsworth’s poem. Frost’s poem, however, is quietly and slyly sown full of doubt and skepticism, whereas Wordsworth’s is not.

Wordsworth affirms that “Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea/ Which brought us hither” (167-168), but Frost’s bringing (or making) is all done by man:

My father built, enclosed a spring,
 Strung chains of wall round everything,
 Subdued the growth of earth to grass,
 And [even] brought our various lives to pass. (2-5)

There is no great transcendent force, no immortal sea that brought Frost's characters to their birthplace or brought them into being. The origins he illustrates are erected by man, and there is looming doubt that if man had not brought into being these "things" (children, etc.), nature would have done so. Wordsworth's origins, on the other hand, *are* of some transcendent force. Therefore, it is Wordsworth's nature—and the transcendent reality it stands for—that remembers him. Frost's nature, on the other hand, forgets: "Today she [the mountain] wouldn't know our name/...The mountain pushed us off her knees./ And now her lap is full of trees" (11-14). There is no remembrance in Frost's nature (and the subtle, witty tone indicates there never was), no deeper connection between nature and (wo)man that leads to a transcendent (and comforting) reality which can make one feel universally important. Frost could, as I show he does in some poems, figure associated ideas onto this scene—a movement that makes his poems look like Wordsworth's. But in "The Birthplace" he does not; he stays on earth, while Wordsworth in "Intimations" floats into a transcendent reality that comforts and affirms. That striking difference in their poetry is crucial.

CHAPTER ONE:

**PRESENTING THE PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUNDS OF THE TWO POETS
AND ESTABLISHING THE RHETORIC OF THIS STUDY**

In considering the “great, great, great” *expanse*—rather than *expense*, as in Frost’s “On Extravagance”—of things, Wordsworth and Frost differ in how they relate—and relate to—the worlds around them. Primarily they differ in their epistemological approach to describing in their poetry other things, natural things—other people, animals, trees. In order to investigate these differences, it is necessary to look at how and where the poets find meaning, what the poets read in the things around them and what they read onto these things. And whether they are tripping over the physical landscape or falling into a deeper meaning of it, transcendence and association are key concepts in exploring these differences, concepts the poets inherited from their philosophical predecessors. In this chapter, then, I will elaborate these differences using Lockean philosophy and (David) Hartleyan associationist psychology, and, for Frost, I will also consider how Locke and Hartley affect Jamesian pragmatism.

When considering how Wordsworth and Frost look at the natural things around them, Locke’s *modes* help draw distinctions between what exactly the poets see. R. S. Woolhouse in *Locke* quotes Locke’s description of the concept of modes: “[These are] Combinations...not looked upon to be the characteristical Marks of any real Beings that have a steady existence, but scattered and independent Ideas, put together by the Mind” (120). Woolhouse further distinguishes modes from “substance-ideas which are ‘Works of Nature’” (120). Substance-ideas are ideas of things, of substances that exist in nature. However, modes are not—they are “their own ‘archetypes’” (120). Modes, then, are

ideas of abstract concepts and do not find their basis in naturally occurring things. They are “‘voluntary collections [of] scattered and independent Ideas’ which are ‘made by the mind’” (120).

Modes, according to Locke, are all one can know of things, and Wordsworth seems to adopt this opinion. Ernest Lee Tuveson, in *The Imagination as a Means of Grace*, notes that Locke asserts “that the essences of things are unknowable, that all we can know assuredly is the ideas within our own circle of consciousness,” that we “know, not reality, but [our] own impression alone” (25). Woolhouse expands Tuveson’s idea by affirming that Locke says “*modes* [are the only things] whose real essences we do know” (90). And modes, these collections of ideas, are what Wordsworth ultimately relates in detail in his lines, not the unknowable other (physical) things in nature.

In *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787-1814*, Geoffrey Hartman, quoting Hazlitt, mentions the concept of “fill[ing] up the dreary voids with the Moods of [people’s] own Minds” (345). Hartman, then, notes that the “Moods of the Mind” is the title of one of Wordsworth’s sections of poems. It seems that Wordsworth would imagine the “dreary voids” as the things one does not know or the physical things that, as he would assume, have a deeper but yet unknown meaning. So he fills this void with the moods of his mind, i.e. ideas sprung from association. This is exactly what Frost refuses to do. In “Design” Frost toys with the notion of a benevolent Creator, but he ultimately rejects the possibility, likely because he sees it as only that, a possibility. Frost many times assumes an “I could go there” tone, but he always ultimately refuses to do so. This is evidenced in the poem “All Revelation,” as Richard Poirier says in *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*: “Frost shows his capacity for a Yeatsian accent, almost as if he wants to show

how masterfully he can resist it” (20). Frost enjoys flaunting his ability but not too far and then recoiling into reality, as he sees it.

Wordsworth, however, jumps at the chance to make the things that he observes in nature into a canvas onto which he draws himself. He is an artist, then, drawing images—his own impressions of reality—onto a canvas, i.e. that which is not him. He draws onto nature what he conceives in his mind through associated ideas. Is he self-consumed and out of touch with reality? Some might say yes. Yet, Wordsworth is perhaps more philosophically intentional than such a description reveals. Wordsworth is an adherent, at least to some extent, to Lockean logic. Arthur Beatty, in *William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art and their Historical Relations*, notes that Wordsworth “approaches the problem of the mind from the angle of Locke, basing his whole theory on the assumption that thought originates in experience, and that out of the product of sensation, or experience, ideas and the more complex forms of mentality are developed” (108), and Mahmoud K. Kharbutli in “Locke and Wordsworth” and Basil Willey in “On Wordsworth and the Locke Tradition” also acknowledge Wordsworth’s philosophical tendencies as very Lockean. Wordsworth relates what he knows in terms of this philosophy. As Locke says, one can only know modes; therefore, in Wordsworth’s lines modes are the “things” investigated.

Locke’s *modes* which are not “the steady Workmanship of Nature [but rather] Collections made and abstracted by the Mind... for the convenience of Communication” (Woolhouse 121, quoting Locke) differ from person to person. Locke was aware of the subjectivity of perspective. Since modes are abstracted and associated by the individual, they have different characteristics determined by the individual describer. As Woolhouse

says, “The distinction between an idea and what the idea is of is not sharp in the case of modes” (91). Frank Lentricchia in *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* reads a similar concept in Frost’s poetry in terms of phenomenology. He uses the word “landscape” to describe “both a configuration of objects really there in nature and, as well, the phenomenological notion that any particular landscape is coherent because the mind of the artist makes it so” (4). The artistic movements of the poet are subjective ones.

As noted in Lentricchia’s statement, Frost sticks with what he has experienced, and this places him in the realm of Lockean empirical knowledge—the belief that one can relate only what he/she has experienced. It is tempting to think, however, that Frost’s more detailed descriptions of these other things that appear in his lines indicate that he thinks those are what he can and does *know*. Drawing such a conclusion would divorce Frost from Lockean philosophy because these are substances and cannot be, according to Locke, essentially known. Yet, Frost’s describing these things does not assert that he claims essentially to know them. Poirier, in fact, explains how Frost is certain that some things cannot be known or named, and the critic notes how in “The Most of It” that “to be told that ‘that was all’ does not...mean that ‘all’ is nothing” (164). So the initially perceived “anticlimactic sigh” that I mentioned could prove to be not so anticlimactic after all. Poirier describes the “it” in this poem as “an awe-inspiring and wonderful representation of what we do not know and cannot name” (164). The inference that there are “things” that cannot be known is perfectly Lockean, as Tuveson notes.

So both poets adhere—to some extent, but maybe to different extents—to Lockean logic. However, this seeming similarity of philosophical basis leads to

explanations of the two poets' inherent differences. It is tempting to think that Wordsworth's philosophical movements in the direction of Hartleyan associationism are what muddle the common basis of Lockean empiricism he shares with Frost. However, at times Frost also practices associationism, and this concept in and of itself is not so very distant from Frost's own philosophical background, as it is based in William James' pragmatism. Before diving into this philosophical trajectory—from Hartley to James—I will discuss associationism, its history, and how it is important in the comparisons between these two poets. Then I will extend these issues into Frost's practices of Jamesian pragmatism.

A short historical overview of associationism will help distinguish between Wordsworth's and Frost's associations. This will also expose the foundations of associationism and how it is affected by Locke and later by Hartley. In *The History of the Concept of the Association of Ideas* David Rapaport deals with Bacon as a founding father of associationism. Rapaport says that Bacon believed that “all perceptions, of the senses as well as of the mind, are according to the measure of the individual and not according to the measure of the universe”(10). Man measures the universe according to himself; he associates things of the external world with creations in his own subjective perspective, and he believes the connections: this is associationism. Bacon says some men believe the associations “created in [their] own subjective imagination...[are] real connections in the external world” (10). This adequately describes what Wordsworth practices in his poetry.

Wordsworth assumes that the associations he experiences with external nature are real connections. In “Composed Upon the Thames Near Richmond” there is an

association between the poet and nature when the poet recognizes the reflection of his own heart in the Thames:

Yet be as now thou art,
That in thy waters may be seen
The image of a poet's heart,
How bright, how solemn, how serene! (9-12)

The possibility of this reflection of a subjective (and individual) state of being in external nature is the basis of the poem. In many of his poems, a similar association between the poet and external nature is initially observed and leads to the ultimate importance: the effect on the poet. This is the how—by way of his associated ideas—and the when—as they begin to take over his experience—of Wordsworth's leaving the natural scene.

In general, this is not the practice of Frost. In "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind," the poet refuses to fly from the physical scene into an imagined scene. The poet observes, "Something I saw or thought I saw/ In the desert at midnight in Utah" (1-2). Upon seeing the "flickering...light," he begins *seeming*: "It seemed to me..." (7, 9), and he falls into a simile: "It would flutter and fall in half an hour/ Like the last petal off a flower" (11-12). But here, in contrast to his favorable association in "Birches," Frost refuses to digress further into seeming. He identifies his tendency toward fancy: "But my heart was beginning to cloud my mind" (13), and instead chooses the truth, saying, "I knew a tale of a better kind./ That far light flickers because of trees" (14-15). There is no reflection of the poet's imaginative fancy in the natural setting. In this poem, the (initial) perceived connection between the natural scene and the poet is dismissed as a *clouding*

vision. It could be said, then, that Frost distinguishes between the fact of this scene and his initial opinion, which was created by emotional association of it.

In further unpacking fact and opinion in terms of associationism, Bacon asserts the following:

There are and can exist but two ways of investigating and discovering truth. The one hurries on rapidly from the senses and particulars to the most general axioms, and from them, as principles and their supposed indisputable truth, derives and discovers the intermediate axioms. This is the way not in use. The other constructs its axioms from the senses and particulars, by ascending continually and gradually, till it finally arrives at the most general axioms, which is the true but unattempted way [(6) I, 19] (Rapaport 12).

Bacon's distinction between the two ways of discovering truth foregrounds the difference between the deductive and the inductive (respectively) approach to gaining information and ultimately knowledge, and Bacon very much upholds the latter. His words take us philosophically directly to Locke. Bacon's distinctions can be qualified in the same way Woolhouse quotes Locke distinguishing between "knowledge" and "opinion" (84).

Woolhouse says, "Locke's distinction between knowledge and opinion is, in effect, the more recent distinction between a priori and a posteriori knowledge" (133). Locke calls a posteriori knowledge—the knowledge Bacon defends because it is based on an inductive approach—"opinion." Is Locke undermining the validity of inductive approaches to query? Not necessarily. Locke's system of opinion he called "natural philosophy" (89), and he believes that "opinion" is well worth having and developing. As Woolhouse says, "[Locke] thinks that observation of and experiment on things in the world in order to

discover their properties is a worthwhile activity” (88). Ultimately, Locke asserts the importance of having a “system or body of ‘opinion’” (88). In Lockean terms, then, Frost operates in opinion—describing other things that he himself cannot truly know—i.e. substances.

Though the “traditional view of ‘opinion’...has to do with contingencies, with things which might have been otherwise” (88), this definition does not completely explain Locke’s concept of “opinion.” As Woolhouse explains, “So while for the Scholastic tradition ‘opinion’ concerns contingencies, for Locke it concerns what to us seem like contingencies, but what in reality may be universal certainties” (88). These things considered universal certainties to everyone but Locke are things that we can observe and see only from experiment, and Woolhouse says that “relying... on observation we cannot *know* [something]” (85). Woolhouse gives the example of gold dissolving in sulphuric acid and quotes Locke as saying “we can go no farther than particular Experience informs us” in understanding this phenomenon (84). This is because we have no personal experience *being* gold, or *being* any other material or any other thing. We cannot know—an effect of the limitation of knowledge—because we cannot have first-hand experience of what it is like to be anything or anyone else. Because of this, we can never truly know *substances*. This is true because we can never know the *real essences* of substances (87).

Locke says, “Substances afford Matter of very little general Knowledge and the bear Contemplation of their abstract Ideas...will carry us but a very little way in the search of Truth and Certainty” (IV.xii.9, Woolhouse 133). So why philosophically meditate on the physical realm? According to Locke, there is no chance of true

knowledge from such practices, and Wordsworth also suggests in his poetical maneuverings that this is so. Locke says, however, that one can know the real essences of things like ethics, and, likewise, in his quest for meaning, this is what Wordsworth forsakes the physical for. He contemplates his natural setting and dives only into “things”—ideas behind the physical “things”—that, according to Locke, he can truly and essentially know. That is, rather than wasting time in the physical setting, which is composed of unknowable substances, the poet transcends it and muses about philosophical meanings.

In these moves from the physical into the transcendent, further muddling of the common Lockean empiricism between Wordsworth and Frost occurs. This is the point where Wordsworth, while remaining faithful to Locke, as Arthur Beatty in *William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art in their Historical Relations* affirms, assumes more solidly the language and practices of Hartleyan associationism. Frost and Wordsworth differ not in the fact but in the degree of their associationistic tendencies. As Richard C. Allen notes in *David Hartley on Human Nature*, Hartley observes “that ideas regularly call up other ideas and that their pattern of association are creations of experience and habit” (4). Allen traces this basis directly to Locke: “[though] he dwelt upon the irrational wildness of association...a general process of association is the basis for Locke’s notion that ‘simple’ ideas of color, shape, smell and texture together form the ‘complex’ idea of, for example, an orange” (4).

Looking into the poems of the two poets, one can see that both poets start from a common standpoint; they both see “substances” as they experience a rather universal nature—trees, the sky, animals, other people. Frost lights on the physical scene, resting,

finding importance and meaning here. He stays on the physical landscape: he “[goes] up to the stone wall/ For a friendly visit” (“A Time to Talk”), he “fetch[es] the little calf” (“The Pasture”), he goes for water. He describes natural things—substances, like birch trees, blueberries, an ax-helve—as they are most readily apprehensible and in so doing, deals in Lockean substance-ideas. Wordsworth, too, *sees* these substances but from a distance and in a different way than does Frost. Wordsworth usually does not get physically close to these other things. (An exception is “Nutting,” which will be explored in the next chapter.) From this “bliss of solitude,” as Frederick Pottle calls it in “Eye and the Object in the Poetry of Wordsworth,” the poet recognizes a spark in these other things that triggers an emotion—a corresponding wind—inside him. Other ideas, then, are associated with the substance at hand, or rather, in sight, and these associated ideas alter the way he describes the physical scene. At this point, the poet is “describing” Lockean modes rather than describing substance-ideas, which Frost describes. We know this because, as Frederick Pottle says, the poet begins to “modify [the physical things] and create [new things]” (274), and, as Locke notes, modes are not “works of nature...[but rather] ideas made by the mind” (Woolhouse 120). For Wordsworth, ideas made by the mind are associated ideas. Allen defines association as involving “a succession of substitutes, whereby an emotion linked to one object or event is transferred to another and at times transformed by the transference” (21). Wordsworth’s departure from the physical and movement into describing modes instead of substance-ideas is the transference, this kind of association of ideas to the physical thing that Allen is describing. Wordsworth begins by observing nature from a vantage point of physical solitude—a solitude that separates him physically from the other things in his lines.

Then, the poet allows ideas to become associated to the physical things before him, and these associated ideas take over the experience and lead him into what he thinks he can really know, a knowable deeper meaning that lies beyond unknowable substances.

This process of association leads to transcendence, which occurs when Wordsworth, from a distance so as to maintain his physical solitude, philosophically plunges himself into the other things that appear in his lines. His transcendence is, as Jacques Blondel in “Wordsworth and Solitude” says, the action of the poet “infusing his spirit into [other things]” (27). The poet penetrates other things but since this penetration is primarily philosophical (and since it ultimately leads to a kind of transcendence—a kind of pulling out, in a manner of speaking, a lack of physical contact), the only offspring produced is a kind of image of himself. So, the deeper meaning he finds is about him—relates to himself and his experiences.

Frost’s poetic actions of staying on the physical landscape are equally complicated ones. Though at times, by way of association of ideas, he swings from the physical earth to the transcendent (romantic) landscape, he always swings back to earth again. And he finds his meaning there. Wordsworth, on the other hand, seems to presuppose that to find meaning necessitates transcending the physical; Frost does not. “Earth’s the right place for love,” Frost says, affirming the importance of the physical landscape; “I don’t know where it’s likely to go better” (“Birches” 52-53). Yet, this distinction between Wordsworth and Frost is not as easy as saying the latter luxuriates and finds as much meaning in the physical as the former does in the transcendent. Though Pottle says “it is a great mistake to consider Wordsworth a descriptive poet” (280), the poet does describe the physical landscape at times. Frost, though he stays on

the physical landscape more than Wordsworth, does wander into emotional associations. Yet a distinction can be drawn because never does Frost run and wallow in the physical as Wordsworth does in the transcendent. One can see this tendency to refrain from such excessive actions in “One Step Backward Taken,” in which the poet refuses to lose himself in the hubbub of activity and the motion pushing forward around him:

I felt my standpoint shaken
 In the universal crisis:
 But with one step backward taken
 I saved myself from going...[and]
 A world turn loose went by me (8-12).

Frost exhibits decorum. He refrains, with his one step backward taken and with the boundaries he so diligently erects in his lines, from getting caught up—and taken away—in the other things around him.

Frost’s experiences, especially in his interactions with the physical, in his poems are always with boundaries. In “Mending Wall,” for example, he is near his neighbor, sharing a few words with him, but simultaneously they are building a wall between them. “And so even as they build and close gaps,” as Judith Oster in *Toward Robert Frost* says, likening the walls that always exist between the poet and the reader to the barrier between the characters in the poem, “the two must keep the wall between them as they go” (8). Thus, though Frost’s physical stance may be one of closer proximity to these other things that appear in his lines, his philosophical stance is one of separateness. He chooses philosophically to abstain from plunging himself into other things in his lines, from infusing other things with his spirit; he refuses to appropriate these other things and their

existence to his experience. They remain separate, as does he, and so maintain a separate meaning apart from him.

Such philosophical separateness would defeat Wordsworth's poetic purpose. The distance that his physical solitude affords him enables him to achieve universal sympathy in his poetry, philosophical unity. Allen Dunn mentions in "Out of the Veil of Ignorance" that "Wordsworth...impl[ies] that [while] universal sympathy is the product of distance...compromising [occurs with] specificity of social relationships" (20).

Universal sympathy is the aim of Wordsworth, and he does not want to compromise by getting specific. Instead of particularizing, Wordsworth strives to relate the universal meaning of the things he sees rather than some "thing" individual or specific. "There is very little 'energetic' picture-taking in him," says Hartman (5); that would particularize too much for Wordsworth. The importance in his poetry is not found in the physical, the natural, the specific. Wordsworth does, as Basil Willey notes in "On Wordsworth and the Locke Tradition," celebrate "figures like the Leech-Gatherer, Michael, or 'Nature's Lady': beings whose humanity is ennobled by close association with 'mute insensate things'" (121). However, the poet shows how this close association leads to a liberty to transcend these natural things, and he finds the deeper meaning in them by following associated ideas. The ultimate importance for Wordsworth lies in the poet; after the death of the maid in "She Dwelt Among Untrodden Ways," the poet ends with: "But she is in her grave, and, oh,/ The difference to me!" (11, 12). To him the associations lead, and within him the deeper meaning is revealed. Richard Allen describes this as an outcome of the association of ideas: he says, "it is the actual occurrence of... transferences and substitutes that effects the successive transformations of the self" (21).

For Frost, the ultimate effect of experiencing nature is not the result on him or in him. His finales seem more like anti-climactic sighs but not frustrated sighs that indicate the futility of any attempts to understand life. As Poirier notes, in Frost's work "You are not led to believe that life is unintelligible or that your capacity to make sense of it merely proves your triviality" (8). Along with this lack of frustration, however, the poet is adamant about keeping the outer separate from the inner. This is in contrast to Wordsworth's (nearly) unsearchable, sublimely deep meanings that are important because they are hinted at in nature, associated by the poet towards something deeper—eventually reflecting the poet himself—and that ultimately affect and change the poet, and through universal sympathy, all humankind. Frost "yards" himself more, as Poirier says (93). The physical scene becomes too substantial, too important, and ultimately too "other" to transcend completely. Though Frost does "like" (as in "Birches") to digress casually into romantic association at times—even association about himself, leading into his own experiences—he ultimately remains true to the *other* thing—the event (in "On the Heart..."), the thing (in "Birches"). Lentricchia says that Frost adopts the "philosophy of common sense realism which posits a world 'out there,' independent of our acts of perception" (3). This world "out there" is ultimately separate from him and cannot be poetically appropriated and associated, absorbed into his own experiences nor infused with his own spirit in order to get at the truth of it. This is a major distinction, then, between the two poets—even though both see other things and even though both, while they are looking at them, follow associations at times, Frost ultimately refuses to transcend these "other things," and Wordsworth readily associates ideas and transcends them.

When looking at the two poets' poetic objectives, which becomes important when considering this dialogue about meaning, yet again a seeming commonality turns into an occasion for investigating the deep-seated differences between the two poets. As already stated, Wordsworth desires a kind of universal effect in his poems. Frost shares this desire. For instance, "Stopping by Woods," John F. Lynen says in *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*, "is not just a record of something that once happened to the poet; it points outward from the moment described toward far broader areas of experience... express[ing] the conflict, which everyone has felt" (3). Frost thus creates a sense of common experience in his poems. Poirier also notes the way Frost strives for a common connection with his readers, commenting on the poet's "Emersonian capacity to make people feel that in writing a poem he was being more like them rather than less" (24). Through his lines, one gets the idea that Frost could be any average person—the farmer in the field, the young boy picking apples, the old man, the hired man—but he never assumes himself to be everyone. Wordsworth, on the other hand, does. By obliterating the particulars, he, in a more *Whitman-like* manner, assumes, after finding a common and universal association, that the other things in his lines become himself. He *is* the solitary reaper because he carries the experience with him and allows it to affect him even after her song "was heard no more."

This difference can be further elaborated by looking at the relationship between inner and outer and how it relates to the concept of transcendence. In the *Preface* Wordsworth notes how in his poetry, "the feeling...gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling" (735). This is a clear privileging of the inner over the outer, justifying and explaining the "spontaneous overflow" of

Wordsworth's interior workings and revelations onto exterior observations—he intentionally spills out the most important, the most meaningful onto and over the less important (and in Lockean terms, the less-knowable). Wordsworth dives ultimately not into nature but, rather, into himself. He “sees” other things around him, but he sees them from the position of his own physical solitude and can thereby easily associate his own ideas onto these things. Pottle notes that for Wordsworth, “the subject is a mental image and the eye is that inward eye which is the bliss of solitude” (280). He stays at a physical distance from his subjects, and this enables him not to really “know” these substances but to write onto them what he sees in his inward eye. For example, in “The Pet Lamb,” the poet has to “o’er [look] the hedge” (3) before him so that he can see the pet-lamb and its keeper. This distance sounds similar to what Frost maintains, but the effect is markedly different. Wordsworth takes the image of the other thing and writes over it. In this poem, the pet lamb becomes the poet’s soul, not a thing in itself.

Frost erects boundaries in order to resist just this kind of transcendent experience, this kind of metaphoric renaming (which is an effect of transcendence) of physical (exterior) things in terms of personal (interior) associated ideas. There is, to appropriate Hartman’s quote about Wordsworth, some realistic “picture-taking” in Frost. But, just as a picture-taker frames the picture, defining its edges, so does Frost with the things he pictures in his poetry. He is always controlling and limiting all else in his lines. Oster mentions Frost’s comparison between the poem and “the will braving alien entanglements” (1); boundaries must be established in order not to become fully “inhabited by alien shapes” (14) and, we might add, in order not to infuse the surroundings with oneself. In “The Ax-Helve,” though the poet finds himself in a foreign

home, he remains in control as the boundary-setter, the one who “must judge...what [Baptiste] knew about an ax” (41). And as the poet becomes “judge,” Baptiste, later in the poem, makes “his defense” (83) before the poet as they discuss education and knowledge. Frost, though he gets closer and sometimes even touches the other things in his lines, ultimately sees them as different, as things that he must judge and keep separate from himself.

This idea of separateness relates to the poets’ relationships with nature at large as well. (I am grouping “nature” into the category of “other things” in the poets’ lines.) The differences between the two poets in this area can best be described using concepts from David Hartley’s associationism. Wordsworth seems to have a reckless abandon in his relationship with nature as he describes it in his lines. He asks question after question as he philosophically plunges deeper and deeper into it, ultimately answering those questions himself and finding and revealing himself in the process. As Geoffrey Hartman states, “[Wordsworth] constantly details the state of his mind. When [he] depicts an object he is also depicting himself or, rather, a truth about himself, a self-acquainted revelation” (5). And there is no reservation in this act for him. This lack of reservation in Wordsworth’s action sounds like the exceeding of “due limit[s],” which is how Allen describes David Hartley’s pleasure/pain boundary. In explaining Hartley’s philosophy, Allen quotes him saying that “a moderate degree of distention in the parts” (this, as I see it, could apply to physical and philosophical parts), “is necessary for their growth and pleasurable state...[in order] to cause a visible solution of continuity” (122). A solution of continuity is “a medical term of art that referred to the displacement, rupture, or dissolution of previously connected physical structure” (122). Using this term to speak in

philosophical terms about the two poets, I mean to say that Wordsworth does not mind “stretching” himself into other things; he does not mind the pull in order to be able next time to run further past previous boundaries in his search in other things for meaning. Frost, on the other hand, does not stretch, at least not in this way, so as to cause “a rupture or dissolution of previously connected [philosophic] structure[s].” The “disruption” (Allen 123) that results is exactly what Wordsworth’s questions intend—a stretching and a pulling of himself deeper and deeper into moments of sublime thought.

Hartley, furthermore, is confident that “the power of nature restores all minute solution of continuity [or breaks]...so that the body receives no perceptible detriment from the single instances” (Allen 124). And Wordsworth, likewise, believes in this restorative power of nature. As he stretches himself into it, he finds solace and healing in it. In “I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud,” for instance, when the poet suffers from “vacant or...pensive mood,” the memories of the beautiful daffodils “flash upon that inward eye...And then [his] heart with pleasure fills,/ And dances with the daffodils” (20, 21, 23-24), illustrating well Hartley’s healing “powers of nature...to repair the damage that is the correlative of pain” (Allen 125).

Not surprisingly, though Frost seems to prefer the physical natural scene more than does Wordsworth, the modern poet has a greater tendency to distrust nature. As is suggested in “Design,” there is no guarantee that there is a benevolent Maker, so Frost dares to plunge into nature only so far and only within his own set boundaries. As Lynen points out, “[Frost’s] consciousness [here in “Stopping by Woods”] seems on the verge of freeing itself from ordinary life, as if it were about to dissolve in the shadowy blank, but his mind holds back from this” (3). There is a jerking away, almost like an abrupt

awakening from a near fall into sleep. This is Frost recovering from that space that is, as Pottle describes it, desirable for Wordsworth, the space where “the edges of things begin to waver and fade out” (284). A space of such indistinct edges is one in which Wordsworth is stretching into other things, where the solution of continuity occurs for him. Frost, on the contrary, does not stretch and bend and fall into things as Wordsworth does. For Frost, a solution of continuity would be disastrous. Hartley says, “a solution of continuity at the molecular level occurs at that point at which a nerve’s vibrations become chaotic” (Allen 124), and chaos is exactly what Frost wants to avoid at all costs. For Frost, only “permanent damage” (Allen 124) comes from exhaustive and chaotic action. “In Frost’s poetry,” as Oster says, “...he was imposing order [and we might add “necessary” to describe that order] on what otherwise seemed unmanageable and chaotic” (7). In Frost there are stiff penalties for not upholding the set boundaries. The overdoers, those who overexert themselves beyond reasonable limits, wreak havoc on themselves and on others. In “Out, Out—”, the poet laments, “Call it a day, I wish they might have said” (10). It is the end of the day, a definite boundary, and any work beyond this moment is excessive. Yet, the boy continues to saw on a piece of wood, and ultimately he loses his hand and then dies. Poirier notes that in “Good Hours” after moving “beyond decorums of space, [the poet] ‘repents’” (90); it is only the poet who is able at times to “[walk] beyond limits [and we might add “safely”] and then [return] to them” (Poirier 91). In terms of his poetics, Frost always returns to his boundaries. He writes within set forms, and he equates poetry without form to tennis without a net, something ridiculous and (perhaps) dangerous.

Frost's desire for order and boundaries seems logical when considering his physical closer proximity to these other things that appear in his lines. He touches these other things, lives nearer to them, talks to them. In order to maintain himself as separate, in order to maintain a personal identity apart from these other things, he must construct boundaries. Wordsworth, however, does not touch these other things in the same way. He does not get so close to them because his boundaries keep him more physically separate. They keep him separate from these other things and enable him philosophically speaking to run with abandon toward and through his conception of other things (rather than into them, their physical beings).

After looking at the differing notions of boundaries in the poets' lines, one can see that Wordsworth's poetical comportment seems freer than Frost's, but it is likely that Frost would call Wordsworth's style epistemological extravagance. In "On Extravagance" Frost says he sees "the universe as a kind of exaggeration...[,] everybody trying to make it mean something more than it is" (903). Frost has a sense of decorum. He refuses to add in what is not there already in nature. "The extravagance lies in 'it sometimes seems as if,'" Frost says (904). Wordsworth often journeys into such "seemings"; his lines are more speculations about than description of the natural objects themselves. He fills his lines with "obstinate questions": queries—"With chips is the carpenter strewing his floor?" from "The Two Thieves"—, with "what if's"—"What if the bee love not these barren boughs?" from "Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree"—, perhaps—"Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow/ For old...things" from "Solitary Reaper"—, and seemings—"[the pet lamb] seemed to feast with head and ears." These questions and queries, speculations and assumptions lead Wordsworth, as he sees it, on

an imaginative, associative process in search of truth. As Pottle says, “Wordsworth and Coleridge...wished to make imagination not merely creative but a power for apprehending truth” (283). Poirier says that to Frost “‘extravagance’ in poetry [is]...saying what is only possibly, or even what is only unlikely to be, the case” (86). Such associative and transcendent journeys are unnecessary for Frost in order for him to find meaning and truth, but very necessary, truth-seeking ones for Wordsworth.

In reference not only to Frost’s conception of truth and what one can know but in other ways as well, William James’ effect on Frost is very important and is discussed by many critics—Judith Oster, Frank Lentricchia, Lawrance Thompson. Frost himself called James his “greatest inspiration when [he] was a student” (Thompson 536). Allen points out the associationism that exists in James’ philosophy; he says James “attributes the perception of objects to ‘association...between impression of different senses” (151). James says, “In fact the ‘objects’ of our perception...are nothing but clusters of qualities which through simultaneous stimulation have so coalesced that the moment one is excited actually it serves as a sign or a cue for the idea of the others to arise” (Allen 151). This is association as Hartley describes it. So Frost’s associations can be seen as Hartleyan associationism woven into Jamesian pragmatism. This further entangles him philosophically with Wordsworth, who, as Beatty notes, “derived his inspiration and knowledge...[from] the general stock of English thought, especially the stock of English philosophic thought, as expressed in the system of David Hartley” (37).

There are also similarities between Hartley’s queries and Frost’s own. For instance, Allen describes an event when Hartley as a boy was “swinging backwards and forwards upon a gate...meditating upon the nature of his own mind; wishing to find out

how man was made; to what purpose, and for what future end” (27). This sounds like Frost in “Birches” swinging “*Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more,/ But dipped its top and set me down again./ That would be good,” he says, “both going and coming back” (56-58). Frost is, as is Hartley, meditating upon the nature of his own mind—how it works, where it takes him—wanting to fly into emotional associations—to believe a boy bent the birches—but returning to earth—knowing only ice storms could be the cause for the bending branches.

Between the two poets, the distinctions important for this study are appropriately based on Locke and Hartley. It is not that Frost thinks he can *know* substances; as stated above, describing is not asserting knowledge. He is, rather, doubting the describer’s ability to find universal meaning and truth by looking below or above or deeper into these other things. He also trusts, as is continually illustrated in his relationship with nature, these other things less than does Wordsworth. And Frost mistrusts association of ideas to lead him supposedly to truth. Hartley says, “The pleasures of imagination [of which we can include association of ideas]...are to men in the early part of their adult age, what playthings are to children;...they lead them to the knowledge of many important truths relating to themselves, the external world, and its author” (Beatty 112). Wordsworth would agree with this statement. Frost would likely agree that imagination and emotional association of ideas are like playthings that show him more about himself—about why and how he enjoys them rather than about the truth of themselves. He would disagree that these lead to deeper knowledge of the external world and to its maker. As Wordsworth seeks out truth using these tools, Frost denies their efficacy. There is a gap that cannot be bridged in Frost between other things and the poet—not through

observation, association, or touching. For Wordsworth, however, there is something divine left in nature that is reachable by the poet. In this belief, Wordsworth's logic warrants another look before calling it completely Lockean. In *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions*, Cathy Caruth says that for Locke, the "light" of revelation is "natural rather than divine" (6); "this is not revelation but rational experience" (6). Wordsworth believes in revelation, a divine spark that he can reach and/or can receive by transcending the physical. Frost believes there could be a spark in nature but doubts anyone's ability, including his own, to see it, arguing, repeatedly, that it is an extravagance to spend time musing over it, not a crime or even necessarily an ignorant action, just an extravagance.

CHAPTER TWO: ON WORDSWORTH

William Wordsworth's belief in something divine—as opposed to Locke's belief, as Cathy Caruth describes it, in a natural source of revelation—is evident at first sight. One might look, for instance, into his tendency to associate ideas and to transcend the physical for such evidence. These tendencies manifest themselves in different ways, yet it is his seemings and perhaps mentioned in the previous chapter that illustrate most evidently his groping after something divine. In these conjectures, the poet is dealing in, is relating, what *could be* rather than what *is*. He is not merely practicing optimism but is moving from the physical toward something else, something deeper. He is reaching beyond the other things that appear in his lines for something transcendent. And epistemologically speaking, the distance between transcending the physical and seeking the divine is not a large one. The title of Louis Roy's book *Le Sentiment de Transcendence, experience de Dieu?* draws this connection between transcendence and the divine. Andrew Tallon in his review of the book notes that Roy says “Transcendent experience is apprehension of the infinite through feeling” (863); applying this statement to Wordsworth's philosophy, I would read “the infinite” as the poet's “something divine.” Wordsworth's movements of transcending are gestures towards a divine thing, and I read what Roy calls “feelings” as Wordsworth's associated ideas.

For instance, in the poem “Nutting,” Wordsworth begins, “It seems a day.../ One of those heavenly days that cannot die” (1, 3). He does not say that the day merely *is*; on the contrary, “It *seems* a day,” and the reader is already floating above the physical world. The word “heavenly” elevates the reader further into the divine realm—all days die, but

this is one that cannot, symbolizing the infiniteness of the meaning behind what this day represents. This poem, though it “seems” to be a common tale of a boy’s experience in a hazelnut thicket, is ultimately one of a transcendent experience. The line omitted from the above citation—“(I speak of one from many singled out)” (2)—articulates Wordsworth’s associated ideas. He is not observing an event occurring before him in the present; he is observing in the eye of his mind, in his memory, an event from the past. He is writing his experiences from the past onto his present. Eric Gidal says, “Wordsworth’s configuration of his recollective mind as a wanderer...echoes a long tradition of the representation and enactment of memory as a physical repository of objects and images” (457). Line two of “Nutting” indicates that Wordsworth does have a storehouse of memories, of objects and images. After transcending the present and the physical world with all its boundaries and limitations, the associationist poet selects one idea from his memory that sends him in an appropriate direction to make the point he is trying to convey and creates his poem from it.

Wordsworth transcends the physical because to him things, people, life itself are more than the physical. So he omits many of the physical, quotidian details of life, even such details about his own desires and life in general. As Anne Mellor says, “we never hear whether he is hot or cold, whether he washes himself or defecates, whether he has sexual desires or intercourse” (148). And though in most poets’ lines there is no dwelling upon these details, in Wordsworth’s there is an exceptional dearth of them, essentially a complete eclipsing of the physical. In his opinion, there are deeper meanings inherent in the things that appear in his lines. “Wordsworth scorned the merely analytic vision of the naturalist,” says Frederick Pottle, “...because in his opinion that kind of apprehension

empties the object of life and meaning by detaching it from its ground” (280). Whereas “ground” would typically infer an attachment to the physical world, Wordsworth’s “ground” is not the physical earth but a transcendent reality. According to him, the deeper meaning of things is not found in their physical manifestations; only this transcendent reality provides to Wordsworth the deeper meaning, and he accesses it by “look[ing] steadily at [his] subject[s]” (“Preface” 736). This decision to “look steadily” begins the process of transcendence. The poet refuses to relate only the physical because he, first, refuses to see in a merely physical sense. Alexander Eliot says that the romantic vision “involves not just the eye but the mind as well...” (109). He elaborates: “thinking and feeling are involved in seeing” (109). Wordsworth’s “seeing” is a combination of his thinking and feeling. The thinking is his associating ideas, which spring from his feelings. As Morris Dickstein says, “Wordsworth tried to...[look] for deeper, more authentic sources of feeling, either in his own mind or in the unlikely human material around him” (256). I would amend Dickstein’s statement by noting that Wordsworth looks at the “human material around him” initially but in looking “for deeper, more authentic sources of feeling,” he finally refers to his own mind—his associated ideas that do come, to speak in Lockean terms, from his experiences in nature. The associated ideas thus lead the poet into a transcendent reality and in closer proximity to something divine.

Wordsworth’s process of transcendence is not always viewed in a favorable light. L. J. Swingle, among other critics, criticizes the poet by classifying him within the realm of “attempt criticism” (8). “This type of criticism,” says Swingle, “repeatedly presenting Wordsworth as a poet who ‘attempts’ to accomplish things, builds up a picture of persistent artistic incompetence” (8). Are the poet’s could-be’s fulfilled? Swingle and

others say no. These critics do not see Wordsworth's transcendence as complete, as fully reaching anything divine. Geoffrey Hartman, on the other hand, finds value in Wordsworth's seemings. In describing "The Solitary Reaper," Hartman says, "Wordsworth adopts the stance of surmise which points to liberty and expansiveness of spirit" (9). Hartman sees the possibilities in the poet's seemings and affirms that they indicate his poetic ability rather than a lack thereof. Eric Gidal, in contrast to Swingle as well, also finds fulfillment and creative productivity in Wordsworth's poetry, particularly in the poet's "art of memory" which Gidal calls "a poetic realization of the paradoxes attendant upon the empiricist internalization of both the form and the content of the classical rhetorical art" (474). Wordsworth's mind is fulfilling and creating, in Gidal's opinion; the poet's mind "memorially transforms and foundationally constitutes the very identity of the self" (474). Wordsworth is fulfilling his attempts to reach something deeper, something divine, by creating a deeper conception of himself in his lines.

In his attack, Swingle quotes Kenneth Johnston's critique that Wordsworth is usually "praying for inspiration rather than essaying its realization" (9). To critics such as these, Wordsworth is an impotent poet. His "prayers" to them infer a lack of action and creative results. Are "prayers" a waste of time? Is praying energy lost because it is a fruitless activity? (Wordsworth's philosophy here becomes his theology.) Not, perhaps, to someone who professes religious faith and a belief in a divine being, who can be reached only through prayer, and William Ulmer does argue that there is clear evidence to prove that Wordsworth was religious. Perhaps readers can look at Wordsworth's surmises as "prayers" of a sort. Ulmer does qualify the poet's Christianity: "Scholars who accept Wordsworth's Christianity...allow that it was doctrinely imprecise and

selective” (357). Nonetheless, Ulmer argues, the poet’s imagination is “less unreligious than religiously revisionary” (355). If Wordsworth is religious and his “prayers,” as Johnston calls them, or seemings, as I do, are efforts to reach his conception of a divine, perhaps they are less unproductive than Johnston and Swingle accuse him of being and more intentionally creative.

Who—or what—is the divine to whom Wordsworth reaches? Since he refuses to rest in the physical and the other things that appear in his lines become “more” than they physically are, the transcendence is obvious. But to what height is he reaching? Ulmer quotes M. H. Abrams as saying that the typical romantic tendency is “to naturalize the supernatural, to humanize the divine” (350). This appropriately describes Wordsworth. In “Influence of Natural Objects,” the poet longs for “high objects” (9) and a “sanctifying by.../ Both pain and fear” (12-13), but the end desire is not to see a figure of a separate and holy “god.” Rather, the poet longs for these higher movements “until we recognise/ A grandeur in the beatings of the heart” (14). The focus is ultimately on the human, not the physical man but the transcendent reality within the person. More specifically, the focus for Wordsworth is himself. In order to transcend, he relates his *own* associated ideas—his ideas onto things, over things, and (usually) instead of things. His own mind furnishes ideas from his own past experiences that he writes onto these things. *He* is the destination of the transcendence because all his association is about himself. The poet thus ultimately experiences himself. He becomes the divine god figure, the transcendent reality. “The mind and memory of man is now ‘divine,’” says Gidal, “having power of grasping the highest reality through a magically activated imagination” (458). The divinity Wordsworth finds is ultimately within himself.

In “The Poet’s Dream,” the poet gives readers a picture of him becoming such a god. In the prequel to the poem, “The Norman Boy,” the poet portrays a devout boy who lives alone. The boy fastens a cross over his crudely constructed home, and amidst a ferocious storm the poet sees the “dear holy shepherd-boy breathe a prayer of earnest heart” (30). This picture of a devout boy is followed by the poet’s dream in which the poet becomes a “good Angel” (28) who raptures the boy up out of his situation and flies him to where he wants to go. The poet is thus the one who rescues the boy and, it can be inferred, answers the prayers of the boy. Swingle complains that “Wordsworth doesn’t make things happen in a poem” (9), but the action in this poem, in which the poet becomes a divine force of sorts, could call Swingle’s statement into question. “Strong as an Eagle with my charge I glided,” writes the poet (37); strong is the poet to change things, to improve things. Swingle would likely argue that this is “the poet’s *dream*” and, therefore, not part of reality, and that that divergence proves the poet’s lack of productivity. It seems, however, that Swingle’s proscriptive conception of making things happen philosophically differs from Wordsworth’s. The critic seems to want action in the physical realm, results that can be picked up and weighed and held, while the poet strives to transcend this realm and reach something beyond.

In seeking something beyond, Wordsworth, as in “The Poet’s Dream,” becomes god, many times, because (again) of the way he looks at the other things around him. “[Wordsworth’s] eye that looks steadily,” Pottle says, “is not the physical eye. The subject is a mental image and the eye is that inward eye which is the bliss of solitude” (280). Though this “eye” is not the physical eye, it does represent something inherent to the poet; it does not represent something divine in the sense that it is something apart

from him. The eye does not see as a result of revelation from an exterior source. In Caruth's looking at the eye, Locke reappears; that is, Caruth describes how Locke explains understanding by comparing it to the eye: "The Understanding [is] like the Eye" (6). Locke's "Light we can let in upon our own Minds," Caruth emphasizes "is natural rather than divine" (6). Caruth also notes that "this is not revelation but rational experience" (6). The move for Locke is away from a divine god who might work in un-empirical ways. Wordsworth's philosophical move is similar but more complicated. He does, according to Arthur Beatty, "[approach] the problem of mind from the angle of Locke, basing his whole theory on the assumption that thought originates in experience" (108); yet Wordsworth's move is away from a divine "other" being toward finding god in himself. M. H. Abrams quotes Wordsworth as saying, "the materials of a poem come from within" (47). Interiority is of prime importance. The external setting is written over with ideas: Wordsworth's past experiences become substances for him to associate onto the present physical scene. He transcends the physical in search of a divine only to allow association to take him and his readers deeper into himself, or as Ulmer says, Wordsworth turns "from Jehovah to 'the soul of man'" (355). I would add specifically to the soul of himself. In this case, the poet's "prayers" would be to himself, supplications to his own ability to make the things he sees and relates better, to relate their deeper meanings and values through transcendence and association.

Like L. J. Swingle, Linda Brigham argues that Wordsworth fails as a poet-maker. She says Wordsworth has many intentions in his lines but none is fulfilled: "An intention after its recall constantly suffers the threat of annihilation by the revisionary gaze of its own future.... [An] interrupted intention, is... an initial movement that never coalesces

into an individual with a face” (208-209). Brigham’s comments confirm the statements made in chapter one referring to the impotence of Wordsworth’s penetration. In his lines, the “intentions” are the other things that are mentioned—they are the physical things, the sparks, that the poet sees and that excite his mind. Brigham says of an intention that it is “something whose successors annihilate it entirely” (209); so are these other things in Wordsworth’s lines. Their successors are the ideas he associates onto them. The pet-lamb becomes his soul; all the things in “The Simplon Pass”—brook, road, woods, winds, rocks, crags—become “like the workings of one mind” (16); the city in “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” becomes the “calm so deep” that the poet feels (11).

While Wordsworth focuses in order to concentrate on one thing, his lens is associative by nature so that the “thing” that he ultimately relates in his lines is not the physical “thing” with which the poem begins. The poet has written of his desire to unify the things he sees, these other things he pictures in his lines. A mind can have no rest, Wordsworth affirms, “among a multitude of objects, of which it either cannot make one whole, or from which it cannot single out one individual whereupon may be concentrated the attention divided or distracted by a multitude” (Gidal 445). Multitudes are distracting. Wordsworth’s desire to depart from them is seen in his gesture in the “Influence of Natural Objects”; the poet, says he, “Glanced sideways, leaving the tumultuous throng” (48). Multitudes and throngs lead the mind away from the depth—the transcendent depth—that Wordsworth longs to experience and relate. Dickstein notes that in Wordsworth there is an “undifferentiated togetherness he projects” on scenes (262). This togetherness is a result of Wordsworth’s own mental processes, in which he

projects his own associated ideas onto the scenes before him. The togetherness is not a physical phenomenon but, ultimately, a mental one. In considering an inner self looking at a landscape, J. H. Van den Berg questions the “devaluation of extraneousness” that results from a fear of “loss of understanding” (60). Wordsworth, with his strong and growing inner self, does not want to run the risk of losing understanding, so he does devalue extraneousness. The extra things are covered, collected, and what is projected is a unified notion of the poet’s associated ideas. Yet, this lack of acceptance of difference ultimately devalues all the beings that are different, i.e. all the “others” in the poet’s lines.

Examples of this devaluing can be found in Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems.

Dickstein says Wordsworth’s “Lucy will never become fully human...[; she is] alive only in the poet’s grieving” (259). Though this is literally true—in the poems we learn that Lucy is dead—, it is also figuratively true on a larger scale of many of the other things and people that appear in Wordsworth’s lines. They, too, will never be fully real because they are not fully related. They are annihilated as far as the reality of their particular experiences goes, by the poetic movements of Wordsworth, his transcending them and projecting his associated ideas onto them.

The poet relates a similar unifying vision of the view he has from a few miles above Tintern Abbey. Instead of dwelling on the particulars of the scene, in this poem he notes:

...Once again

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,

That on a wild secluded scene impress

Thought of a more deep seclusion; and connect

The landscape with the quiet of the sky. (4-8)

As he looks at the scene, the features of it align and configure themselves before him to impress a deeper thought in the poet. He beholds the many facets of the landscape, but instead of particularizing, he receives a unified vision of the view. The cliffs impress upon him one *thought*, one meaning, and he relates this. The effect in the poem is one of unity among the natural things before him to affirm one meaning, not particularized, independent meanings.

At the same time he works to annihilate difference, the poet is also flirting with many other things in his lines—mentioning them, observing them, enjoying them. He watches the girl grow in “Three Years She Grew” and calls her his own: “How soon *my* Lucy’s race was run!” (38, emphasis added). He enjoys the company of the butterfly and says, “Stay near me—do not take thy flight!” (“To a Butterfly” 1). Does he love them? This question is a logical one considering the poet is an adherent of the associationism of David Hartley, whose “entire project,” according to Richard C. Allen, “can be understood to address the question, *How does a child learn to love?*” (17). If Hartley focuses his philosophy on love, would his philosophical protégé not at least consider the concept important? Hartley sees a direct relationship between associationism and love. He believed, “All children will in time grow into beings who overflow with love” (Allen 17). “In time” suggests through the course of a life of associations—emotions being linked “to one object or event [and then] transferred to another and at times transformed by the transference...[resulting in] successive transformations of the self” (21).

Love in Wordsworth is not easily recognized as such, however. In “Stanzas Written in my Pocket-Copy...” Wordsworth describes how the main character, the “Great

wonderer,” disappears periodically and that “Some thought he was a lover and did woo” (32), but actually he is a poet and “verse was what he had been wedded to” (34). In this poem, love is presented as something given to poesy, not to other people. In another poem, presumably addressed to a person who is the object of love, the poet admits “sometimes I in thee have loved/ My fancy’s own creation” (“Yes!” 4). Wordsworth seems to desire to turn a love of nature into a love of man. Dickstein agrees, saying that “Wordsworth’s whole body of work can be seen as an effort to reconcile...solitary introspection with human sympathy” (265). One of the poet’s poetical descendents tests this Wordsworthian premise about love. In *Alastor*, Shelley seems to be asking whether a love of nature can lead to a kind of love of fellow (wo)man. Donna Richardson, in her assessment of Shelley’s work, states that the poet is skeptical of the possibility of this kind of affection transference. She says that Shelley seems to be asserting that “...trying to love nature first will not lead to love of man” (186). The question of love, especially love of the things Wordsworth is describing, is complicated. J. H. Van den Berg explains love in Freudian terms, and these descriptions seem to fit Wordsworth’s conception. Freud calls love libido and says it “leaves the inner self when the inner self has become too full. In order to prevent it from being torn, the I has to aim itself on objects outside the self” (64-65). Since the fact is that when Wordsworth aims his love/libido at other things all that is related is himself, it seems that the cause might be an over-full inner self. Perhaps a rewriting of Hartley’s love incorporating Freud’s concept of the libido would provide a richer explanation with which to describe Wordsworth’s poetic process and effect.

To further explain the poet's philosophical stance, we must revisit the debate mentioned in the previous chapter concerning the search for fact and distinguishing fact from opinion—as seen by Bacon and Locke and extending to Wordsworth. For this poet, however, the search for empirical fact is a move beyond the physical and into a further search for transcendent truth. Wordsworth, as has already been argued, searches deeply—transcendently—for the truth of one thing. In this search the imagination and (even more so) the memory aid him. Eliot says, “Imagination, in its first and most important meaning is simply a technique for apprehending reality” (109). Pottle extends this idea: “In the reigning psychology of Locke extended by Hartley, imagination and fancy—pretty much interchangeable terms—were handled as *modes of memory*.... Wordsworth and Coleridge...wished to make imagination not merely creative but a power for apprehending the truth” (283, emphasis added). Wordsworth's search is more than a search for reality; it is a search for truth. And his search requires more than imagination; it requires the thing of which imagination is a mode: memory. This is the ultimate key to the poet's search for truth. Memory's importance is due to the fact that it is the source of all Wordsworth's associations; it is the “storehouse of... ideas” (Gidal 458). Gidal quotes Locke defining memory: “[it is] the power to revive again in our minds those ideas which, after imprinting, have disappeared, or have been as it were laid aside out of sight” (458). Wordsworth's memories are based in Lockean logic—all empirically sound. They enable him to associate former thoughts, ideas, experiences onto the things he presently sees and relates. In his lines the poet resurrects the past: he brings forth associated ideas from it and applies them onto the present thing before him to reveal a transcendent truth—an inherent meaning—about the (present) thing.

The importance of memory in Wordsworth is evident, and Dickstein describes how this is true in “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.” The critic says, “the scene...[is] providing [the poet] with emotional capital for difficult times to come” (263). The past experience was not fully appreciated when it occurred, but the importance is that it is remembered. So in the future, when the poet is in “vacant or in pensive mood” (20), the past can and does comfort him: “What did not happen then [in the past] is now endlessly reenacted,” Dickstein notes (263). The “inward eye” (23) looks into the past, and the ideas of the former experience are associated and projected onto the present, ultimately changing the present—just as associations change the way the physical thing in Wordsworth’s lines look. In the end the poet’s heart elevates from its vacant mood to dance “with the daffodils” (24). As Dickstein says, “Time and absence have brought the scene inwardly alive for him” (263); I would add that instead of time and absence, memory and the association of ideas that is possible because of it are the important agents here.

This key concept of association helps further explain Wordsworth’s relationship with reality and the truth. Association is a soft art in that it softens physical reality. Pottle remarks how “the edges of things begin to waver and fade out” in Wordsworth’s lines (284), and this accurately illustrates association. It changes the shapes, sizes, colors, overall appearance of things. The other things pictured in his lines lose their sharp, clearly-defined physical edges; their physical beings seem to melt to reveal more clearly their inherent meaning—revealed through transcendence and association of ideas. Beatty quotes Samuel Rogers who notes “The associating principle...addresses our finer feelings, and gives exercise to every mild and generous propensity” (103). With

association, Wordsworth portrays reality more generously and mildly. For instance, Hartman, in describing Milton's evocation of Mulciber's fall from heaven, says, "...while the fable is being told, our mind is released from the harsh pressure of a higher truth, and a meditative pause...calms the poem" (10). Association in Wordsworth releases the reader's mind from the harsh pressure of a specific truth, namely a physical truth. The reader can rest in the associations related while the poet transcends the physical to search for a transcendent truth.

Birds' songs provide Wordsworth with easy access to associations in his poetry. In "To The Cuckoo," the bird's song is the spark for the poet's associating mind. The poet says, "Thy two fold shout I hear...Thou bringest unto me a tale/ Of visionary hours" (6, 11-12). He hears the bird, who is not important because he is a physical creature but because he suggests something deeper:

Even yet thou art to me
 No bird, but an invisible thing,
 A voice, a mystery;
 The same whom in my schoolboy days
 I listened to.... (14-18)

The poet's mind associates the bird's song with a tale from his past, and the present, physical scene is transcended with associated ideas to get at the depth of the experience. That is, the poet remembers and writes of his experience of hearing the same cry in his "schoolboy days" and how that sent him on a search for the source of the sound: "Still longed for, never seen" (24). Though this statement may initially seem to fit the attempt criticism of which Swingle and others accuse Wordsworth, the tone behind the statement

is not one of frustration at never seeing the source. The deeper meanings in things are never to be seen anyway. The tone is, rather, one of satisfaction, as one can “hear” in the poet’s addressing the bird as “O blessed Bird!” (29). The poem becomes an allegory of poetic experience made possible by association and transcendence.

In “The Reverie of Poor Susan,” a similar experience occurs. However, in this poem the association is not the poet’s, *per se*, but the character’s. A “Thrush...sings loud” (2), and this “note of enchantment” (5) transports the unfortunate Susan to a pleasing scene: “She sees...a vision of trees...[and a] small cottage...The only dwelling on earth that she loves” (5-6, 11-12). Poor Susan transcends the physical by associating her past onto her present. The poet in “Cuckoo” says “[I] listen, till I do beget/ That golden time again” (27-28), and his experience seems to end victoriously. Poor Susan, as opposed to (and likely because she is not) the poet, loses her vision in the end: “And the colours...all [pass] away from her eyes!” (16).

To explain the different endings of these two poems, Dickstein’s view of two kinds of solitude becomes helpful. The critic says solitude “is the condition for Wordsworthian sincerity and self-exploration, yet it is also the condition that he most devotes himself to overcoming” (260). The poet in “Cuckoo” is self-exploring, delving into his past to lend depth to the experience in the present. Poor Susan seems just to be looking for a refuge from the brutal present, using association in an escapist way. Dickstein notes that “solitude enables man to commune with himself, to tap the springs of personal power, yet it also cuts him off from other men, who may be trapped in their own forms of isolation” (260). Susan is using transcendence of her present into her past to isolate herself. Through her associations, she is not enabled to commune more

effectively with herself or others. The poet in “Cuckoo” is. He can impose the unifying vision on the cuckoo’s song he hears in the present and the one he heard in the past and commune with them in terms of how they affect/affected him.

Though characters like Susan rarely appear victorious, Wordsworth associates in many important ways with his female characters. These associations differ a bit from the ones related to memory; these are not necessarily from the poet’s own past experiences. Yet, these associations are also departures from the physical scene in order to relate depth to the present experience. Just as Dickstein says Lucy never becomes a full human, neither do other females in Wordsworth. In “The Westmoreland Girl,” the eponymous heroine rescues a lamb from a “frightful current” (17). The description of her is elevated with divine associations. She is called a “guardian angel [who]/ Came with succour from above” (23-24). She is also called the

...fearless lamb-deliv’rer,
 Woman-grown, meek-hearted, sage...[who is]
 Watchful as a wheeling eagle
 Constant as a soaring lark, [and]
 Should the country need a heroine,
 She might prove our Maid of Arc. (81-88)

This completely unreal description of the girl abounds in associations, ones that take the reader everywhere but to the physical person. As Pottle says, Wordsworth simplifies the natural object again and again, until it “becomes the correlative of a single emotion” (280). The emotion of heroism (referring back to Lockean logic, a mode) is what Wordsworth wanted to relate. The poet is not trying to describe the substance-idea—the

physical girl—but, rather, to relate the truth of this mode she suggests to the poet—heroism.

In another poem, the female persona Wordsworth mentions is ephemeral and transparent enough to blow off the page and through which he can read his other ideas:

She was a Phantom of delight
When she first gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely Apparition, sent
To be a moment's ornament. (1-4)

This female is not only a member of the ghost—as opposed to flesh and blood—family; she is also called a “moment's ornament.” She dresses up or frames his idea which is the crux of the poem. He says this female was a “Spirit, yet a Woman, too!” (12). The former is the main focus to the associating poet. In the spirit form she is transparent, so readers can understand his ideas, which he sees as giving substance to the physical. Ultimately Wordsworth thinks that the idea realm is what does give substance. He acknowledges the physical: “And now I see with eye serene/ The very pulse of the machine; A Being breathing thoughtful breath” (21-23), but he ends with the important fact that the physical is not all, because this phantom has “something of angelic light” (30). The poet always wants to reach the transcendent truth behind the physical being.

This habit of reaching beyond the physical beings in his verse to attain a transcendent meaning helps classify, according to many critics, Wordsworth's poetical practices in terms of gender. The fact that he is a transceiver and that his lines show a lack of sympathy for other people clearly places him in the masculine category. Karen Kilcup says that transcendence “becomes questionable in its potential application to a

feminine or other ‘non-mainstream’ writer, since the term presupposes a highly individuated self that *needs* ‘transcending’” (7). This seems to be evident from the poems above in which the persons—specifically the women, in the examples—are not the real focus. Kilcup quotes Nancy Chodorow who describes “feminine selfhood [as having] flexible or permeable ego-boundaries” (7). Having flexible and permeable boundaries initially sounds like a characteristic of Wordsworth’s work, especially referring back to Pottle’s description of the poet’s wavering and fading edges. However, these edges are not “ego boundaries,” which are simply not flexible in Wordsworth. One cannot walk through a Wordsworth poem without bumping into, tripping over, falling into the poet himself. Kilcup says that “the notions of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ seem inapplicable to a personality possessing... ‘flexible...ego boundaries’” (7), and as shown above, concepts of interior versus exterior come up again and again in Wordsworth. The extent of the poet’s ego boundaries is ad infinitum in his lines. Since his ego boundaries are not flexible, there is a dearth of sympathy for other people in his lines, and such sympathy is another quality Kilcup mentions that can categorize literature as feminine. Dickstein also agrees that there is “little novelistic feeling for the inner lives of others” in Wordsworth (260). Readers do not get to know Poor Susan because she is not, essentially, a person; she is the poet’s objective correlative for loneliness.

In “The Solitary Reaper,” many of these claims are readily illustrated. The poet’s initial idea for the poem comes from association. Hartman says, “It was on reading a sentence in a friend’s manuscript...that the two-year-old memory of the solitary reaper returned to him” (5). The poet’s source is not in nature observed before him in the present. It is in memories—that come into his mind by association—“recollected in

tranquility” (“Preface” 740). This space of time and physical distance—two kinds of solitude in the poem—allow Wordsworth to recollect ideas and emotions in order to find a deeper meaning in the mere physical experience. As the poet pictures the solitary reaper in the poem, he sees her from the solitude of physical distance: “Behold her, single in the field” (1). He keeps himself physically out of the field where she is, so they both remain in solitude. He begins with a few descriptions of her—telling what she is doing and noting that she is singing. However, he does not approach her or talk to her in order to gain more information. He cannot; she speaks a different language. “Will no one tell me what she sings?” the poet asks—another example of his obstinate questions (17). He finds no satisfactory answers in the physical realm, so his presence, in philosophical terms, begins to infuse her, to answer the questions, to provide the depth that he assumes is there but cannot find by merely describing the physicality of the situation. He uses his perhapses—his “prayers” for something deeper—to do so: “Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow/ For old, unhappy, far-off things,/ And battles long ago” (18-20).

After reading the poem, a person does not feel he/she knows the “Highland Lass” better. It is Wordsworth who is better known. As Hartman says, “When Wordsworth depicts an object he is also depicting himself or, rather, a truth about himself, a self-acquainted revelation” (5). It is, also, within the poet that the importance, the depth, of this experience is retained: “And as I mounted up the hill,/ The music in my heart I bore,/ Long after it was heard no more” (30-32). The memory is sustained and deepened by the poet, and it is maintained by him, carried on, perhaps, to associate later with other ideas.

These examples that deal with some of Wordsworth’s poetical practices suggest that his poetry is best categorized as masculine, but a few details complicate this

assessment. Kilcup says, “Another boundary that a feminine voice enables the poet to elide is that of genre; and she or he may engage in a form of genre mixing that resists easy classification” (8-9). The concept of a “lyrical ballad” is such a mixture of genre. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* a lyric is “used as the name for short poems (whether or not intended to be sung)...[that] directly [express] the poet's own thoughts and sentiments [and] engages the emotions.” A ballad, on the other hand, is more traditionally associated with the narrative form. The *Dictionary* calls it a “simple spirited poem in short stanzas...in which some popular story is graphically narrated.” This practice of genre-mixing is something to which Wordsworth commits the majority of his work. Kilcup also mentions the sentimental quality of literature that has traditionally been classified as feminine. “Sentimental poetry” she says, “is the most obvious example of [the] constructed affiliation between gender and genre” (9). Many of Wordsworth’s poems can be classified as sentimental. He, in fact, labels an entire section of his poems “Poems Founded on the Affections.” Poems in this section deal with unrequited love, lovers who die, painful farewells, mothers and fathers who lose their children—to death or to prodigality—and an idiot. These poems complicate the classification of Wordsworth’s poetry as masculine.

As an aspect of the sentimental, Kilcup notes the ready “affiliation of women with emotion” (9). This is the strongest characteristic I see that could shift, even if ever so slightly, Wordsworth’s poetry in its gender classification. Alan Richardson also notes that “in moving from an ‘Age of Reason’ to an ‘Age of Feeling,’ male [romantic] writers drew on memories and fantasies of identification with the mother in order to colonize the conventionally feminine domain of sensibility” (13). Wordsworth is adamant about the

importance of emotion in poetry. In the “Preface” he writes “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” and the following statement, his saying that to create a good poem the poet must have “thought long and deeply,” does not undermine his focus on emotion and feelings (735). For instance, he says later in the “Preface” “that the feeling...gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling” (735). The poet’s privileging of feelings over situations depends essentially on the same philosophical core in Locke that keeps his focus on the transcendent and not the physical. Though many critics, like Mahmoud Kharbutli,¹ claim it is Wordsworth’s insistence on thinking long and deeply that maintains his philosophical association to Locke, it is actually his insistence that only modes—feelings—can be known and not substance ideas—the ideas of physical things themselves.

So, not only does noting Wordsworth’s privileging of emotions and feelings shift the gender classification of his poetry, it also further establishes his philosophical affiliation to Locke. Using Wordsworth as a bridge, could Locke be proven to write in the feminine tradition? Perhaps, but that is not the intent of this study. My focus, rather, is on Wordsworth and his poetical association and transcendence and, here, classifying these practices in terms of gender. It could be said that, as Kilcup establishes, transcendence is an essentially masculine literary practice. It seems that it is Wordsworth’s associationism that constitutes the feminine side of his poetics. In fact, Beatty quotes Samuel Rogers who describes “the associating principle[’s]...effects [as] particularly striking in the domestic tribes” (178). Kilcup says, “concerns traditionally

¹ Mahmoud K. Kharbutli, “Locke and Wordsworth” from *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 25 (1989):

associated with women, including ‘domestic’ matters” classify literature as feminine (8).

Wordsworth does not focus, per se, on the domestic in his lines. In fact, in “To My Sister,” we see the poet calling to her to leave the domestic sphere: “Make haste, your morning task resign;/ Come forth and feel the sun” (11-12). This is so, however, because the domestic is too quotidian—referring back to Mellor’s comment—for his concern.

Yet David Amigoni notes that a “cult of domesticity” does surround the poet. Amigoni says that this affiliation is “exemplified in William Westall’s painting of 1840, *Room at Rydal Mount*, in which Wordsworth stands in commanding but meditative pose against a fireplace, whilst Mary is seated at a sofa, attending to domestic work at a table” (30).

The associating principle and the emotions that accompany it, I would argue, add to the rise of this cult of domesticity around Wordsworth. These factors shift the classification of his work in the feminine direction. In association, past ideas—from the poet’s memory—are given credence by being associated onto the present physical scene, the meaning of which they deepen. These ideas include emotions and feelings, which are typically classified as feminine characteristics of literature. Abrams quotes John Stuart Mill, who, in fact, delivers “to the feelings the total control over the associative process” (178).

Wordsworth transcends the physical realm with his emotions guiding the associations he makes. Each level of analysis on which this statement is founded provides a striking and interestingly complicated contrast with the poetics of Frost, as the next chapter will reveal. The objective behind Wordsworth’s forsaking of the physical is not intentionally to ignore any other thing or person; it is rather to reveal more than, as he

sees it, could ever be revealed by staying “with” them—by dwelling on and relating their mere physicality. In his lines, Wordsworth reaches for meaning and truth that are only attainable by transcending the physical and by associating his own ideas with the present physical reality before him. As in “Simon Lee” the poet spends some time describing the old man—that he is “lean and he is sick; [and that his] body, dwindled and awry,/ Rests upon ankles swoln and thick” (33-35)—, but ultimately the poet exhorts the reader that there is something beyond the physical man of Simon Lee:

O Reader! Had you in your mind

Such stores as silent thought can bring,

O gentle Reader! You would find

A tale in everything. (65-68)

Simon Lee is important not because he is a physical being but because inherent in him is a tale. And it is this “tale” behind the physical reality that Wordsworth seeks and seeks for his reader to understand. This is the meaning; this is the importance.

CHAPTER THREE:

ON FROST

There is mystery in the poetry of Wordsworth and Frost. As both poets transcend the physical and leave the known, they experience the unknown. Wordsworth's seemings and perhaps indicate the unrevealed, the mysterious. The romantic poet often refers to the "somethings" he encounters in nature, all indefinite things. Most of his mysteries seem to glow in their ineffable qualities. They seem inherently good, and the reader trusts the poet, just as the poet trusts nature, perhaps not to reveal all but to be smilingly content in the mystery of nature, to enjoy the negative capability of the natural setting. The benevolent mystery Wordsworth encounters is in nature itself and then is related in the poet's lines. Frost, on the other hand, as Lawrence Thompson notes, finds "mystery, ...wonder, ...virtue, ...[and] magic" in *poetry*, "its heterogeneity of elements somehow blended to a single autonomous unit" (18). So rather than the ineffable mystery being found in nature itself, Frost finds his mystery in poetry, even more specifically in the making of poetry. This is what happens, as Richard Poirier says, interpreting Frost's poetry: we, as we read and "hear" from nature, are the ones who "*make* the most of it [nature]" (162-165, emphasis Poirier's). Frost finds in nature no "spontaneous wisdom," no ready-made knowledge, as Wordsworth does. The only "thing"—a clarifying symbol— is what one makes. John F. Lynen notes this Frostian truth in "The Woodpile"; Lynen says, "The only meaning one can find in nature is that imposed upon it by the human mind" (145).

Yet, in his poetics, Frost does not stop with a portrayal of a merely unresponsive nature and an active poet. He goes further to focus on, much more than does Wordsworth, “nature’s dark truths,” as Andrew Stambuk says (9). Lynen comments accordingly on the “bleakness in [Frost’s] landscapes” (141). Though Wordsworth does mention the *fear* that schooled him, this fear is more an awe of nature than a feeling that suggests some nefarious force. When Frost looks at nature, however, he sees its darker side and its dangerous chaos. Eric Carl Link notes this tendency in Frost as well; he says the poet “question[s] at times the optimistic and comparatively monistic vision of Emerson” (183), and one could add Wordsworth to this “monistic vision” category. Frost uses an “ironic foregrounding of epistemological concerns” Link says, “[to] call into question the romantic associationism of Emerson and other light romantics” (194), again, like Wordsworth.

The paradox of Frost is that he does, as Stambuk notes, see nature “emblematically” (3). This sounds like Wordsworth who uses nature, reading onto it meaning by looking for and finding, through his associations, an objective correlative for the emotions he experiences. However, Frost’s use of emblems and symbols for discussing and describing natural things usually indicates the failure of these tropes to express his ideas. William Doeski quotes Frost as saying, “All metaphor breaks down somewhere.... That’s the beauty of it” (35). Frost’s tropes provide a stay against confusion: they clarify and order the world for us. However, they do eventually break down; they are all only momentary. The pools in “Spring Pools” could be illustrations of Frost’s tropes. The pools reflect “The total sky almost without defect” (2), just as a metaphor reflects something in an essential-izing (squeezing a great expanse into a small

figure) and defect-less way. Yet nature ultimately empties the pools—the trees will eventually “blot out and drink up and sweep away/ These flowery waters” (10-11)—just as nature and natural/physical things ultimately empty all tropes of their power. Doeski sees the failures of tropes and symbols in “After Apple-Picking” as well: he notes that “the speaker’s sense [is] that the physical world has failed to embody itself in the symbols his consciousness has attempted to possess” (42); I would, however, put the emphasis of “failure” on the symbol. Though poets try to capture and picture nature in their self-conceived figures of speech, these are all ultimately ineffectual in relating the reality of natural and physical things.

Another illustration of failing tropes is evident in “The Door in the Dark.” Nature is like the dark for Frost; he cannot “see” in it and cannot understand it fully: “In going from room to room in the dark,/ I reached out blindly” (1-2). These movements are like Frost’s attempts to put words around natural/physical things. He reaches out blindly with metaphors and other figures of speech in order to try to create some order, some clarity, shed some light on things. However, in his attempts to wrap words around other things, he misses the physical things many times. In the poem, the poet says,

But [I] neglected, however lightly, to lace

My fingers and close my arms in an arc.

A slim door got in past my guard,

And hit me a blow in the head so hard

I had my native simile jarred. (3-7)

While the simile is jarred, the poet is “hit” (literally and figuratively) with reality—the real, physical thing that escapes his attempts at containing it. “People and things don’t

pair any more” (8); the poet does not know physical “things”; therefore he cannot contain them, pair them up with matching words into language.

Frost’s (ultimately failing) emblems usually signify in two (or sometimes more) directions. Link says, “Frost’s symbolism and metaphor tend not toward Emerson’s revelatory union with Nature, but tend toward multiple interpretation, indirection, and ambiguity” (183-184). The poet’s emblems can suggest, by going deeper into association and into the self (of the one who associates), possible meanings of things which are not physically present, or they can simply be pictures of the physical things. The choice of which to “read” is really the readers’. Jonathan N. Barron suggests this is the case in Frost’s “The Black Cottage.” Barron notes that in Frost’s poem, the appearance of the bees at the end could be interpreted from “the literary perspective...[as] the bees tell[ing] us that nature will offer no solace,” or it could be interpreted “from the naturalist’s perspective, [in that] the bees are merely doing what bees do” (140-141). This multiple perspective in Frost’s lines leaves his poems (perhaps) more open to interpretation than Wordsworth’s. Priscilla Paton notes that in a Wordsworthian poem one usually encounters the poet’s “superiority of imagination that enables him to partake of the landscape’s pleasures” (90). In Frost, the poetic superiority is much more limited. Though the poet is the one who can transgress boundaries—as in “Good Hours”—and can, “if he is lucky,” as George W. Nitchie says, quoting Frost, produce “‘a clarification of life...a momentary stay against confusion’ ” (166), Frost does not ultimately claim that he knows more about the natural setting than does the common (wo)man. In fact, in his poetry he seems to question (playfully at times) whether there even are deeper universal truths in physical things. Frank Lentricchia notes that “we reveal the world... as we

desire to see it revealed” (6-7). What Frost reveals in his poems is his own personal association or revelation, not necessarily the one that anyone else would achieve if exposed to the same physical stimuli.

In considering Frost’s emblems and his similarities and differences with Wordsworth, one would also note Frost’s dealings with the rural, poor people in his lines and, as Karen L. Kilcup¹ deals with, his portrayal of women. Wordsworth uses the rural poor to reveal deeper ideas; he transcends them (the physical beings), following his associated ideas to reach a subliminal, philosophic level. Wordsworth mentions these people and women but ultimately leaves them as mere ideas, not flesh and bone beings. Frost, on the other hand, stays with them. That is, they stay people in his lines; they are not left to be merely ideas, objective correlatives of the poet’s “deep thoughts.” The woman in “The Witch of Coös,” for example, is ultimately not just an idea. She is a person and a most physical being at that, one who speaks in words worth listening to. Kilcup says Frost “combat[s] idealization of [the women in his lines and that he]...provide[s] them with recognizable identit[ies]” (67). The witch of Coös is certainly a recognizable, remarkable, and memorable individual. Frost’s portrayal of her is anything but one of higher ideals and transcendent realities; it is about her—the person, the woman.

Further, though Frost does “read meaning in natural objects” (Stambuk 9), as does Wordsworth, Frost’s associated ideas are more ephemeral and less important than Wordsworth’s. Frost’s poems do not stop with them: they are not the inherent answer

¹ I do not agree with all Kilcup says of Frost and his portrayal of women, however. She says Frost “relinquish[es] his own identity as an autonomous male poet [in order to enter]...into the psyches of these women” (67). This sounds too much like what I argue Frost wants to avoid—losing himself in anything.

behind his poems. Though at times Frost epistemologically wanders in his lines and enjoys associating ideas, he cannot and will not completely avoid the physical. In this refusal to avoid the physical, Frost also refuses to ignore or cover over the scariness he sees in natural things. For instance, Paton explains Frost's veering away from romantic sublimity into a darker view of nature in "The Mountain": "The scene inspires neither the sublimity of inexplicable forces nor expanded human vision and control. The mountain's power is most negative: it 'held the town as in a shadow'" (91). In "Bereft" as well, one can see Frost's view of a more menacing nature; in this poem the "Leaves got up in a coil and hissed [and],/ Blindly struck at [the poet's] knee" (9-10). Additionally, in "Storm Fear," Frost thinks of times "When the wind works against us in the dark" (1). The image Frost has of nature is not a glowing one of a benevolent thing.

Stambuk also gives the example of "Design," which, he notes, "centers on the image of a spider entangling its prey as suggestive of nature's malevolence" (10). The natural scene Frost pictures in this sonnet is one of "death and blight" (4): "I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,/ On a white heal-all, holding up a moth/ Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth" (1-3). The poet likens these characters to "ingredients of a witches' broth" (6), which calls into question the idea of a benevolent "designer." He seems to suggest that perhaps we—all natural beings—are aberrant ingredients in a witch-designer's broth. Frost questions the source of these freaks of nature—a white heal-all, which should be blue; a white dimpled spider. "What but design of darkness to appall?" (13) is the uncertain conclusion the poet reaches, and his uncertainty is shrouded in darkness. These dark realizations Frost makes about nature and his physical

surroundings leave many more of his poems darkly unresolved—in contrast to the sublime (and even glowing) epistemological elevation Wordsworth achieves in many of his lines.

Frost seems, then, to undermine more than elevate (and many critics note Frost's frequent use of irony to undermine romantic associations in order to suggest a darker conclusion). This lack of glowing resolutions hinges on the fact that, as Link states, Frost "express[es] a certain skepticism concerning the ability of the poet to reconcile man and Nature, or the subject and the object" (183). (For Frost "Nature" includes natural things and also other people.) Frost cannot completely reconcile man and nature because he does not fully *know* nature and, therefore, cannot appropriate natural things to himself and his experience. In "Two Tramps in Mud Time" Frost illustrates the "unknowability" of nature by using the example of the weather. The poet says, "You know how it is with an April day" (18), but the point is actually that you have no idea how it will be with an April day. You *cannot* know. One minute "the sun is out and the wind is still...But if you so much as dare to speak,/ A cloud comes over the sunlit arch, [and]/ A wind comes off a frozen peak" (lines 19,21-22). Any logical attempt to know, in this case, April, in a larger sense, nature and natural things and express it in words is futile, and the speaker immediately gets proven wrong.

Frost notes as well the tendency in people to allow their minds to dance away into romantic associations instead of accepting that they cannot really know nature and physical things. In "On the Heart Beginning to Cloud the Mind," Frost relates his own struggles with this temptation: "Something I saw or thought I saw/ In the desert at midnight in Utah" (1-2). One could think, if it were not for the stuttering hesitancy in the

first line, that this line was in one of Wordsworth's poems. The "something" sings of a mere suggestion, an indefinite "thing" that longs (or so it seems initially) to be named by the poet. Frost then begins to play, falling into an imaginative association:

The earth had a single light afar,
A flickering, human pathetic light,
That was maintained against the night,
It seemed to me, by the people there,
With a God-forsaken brute despair. (6-10)

The "something" lulls the poet into a seeming, a naming, a guessing. He colors his words and imaginatively decorates them: "It would flutter and fall in half an hour/ Like the last petal off a flower" (11-12). Then, though, he stops his associations and starts with the truth, turning toward reality:

But my heart was beginning to cloud my mind.
I knew a tale of a better kind.
That far light flickers because of trees.
The people can burn it as long as they please:
And when their interests in it end,
They can leave it to someone else to tend. (13-18)

He loses patience with his heart's play, which he has allowed to cloud his mind. Frost is honest about the tendency of the poet to fall into attempted transcendence of the physical, to spin attractive tales with similes and associated ideas. The light in the poem is like the poet's figure of speech: it burns as long as he will let it, and then he can leave it for

someone else to try to use and build on. Yet the poet is adamant about his preference for truth—the real thing—and reality (which I will deal with at greater length below).

Such practices of associating ideas and transcending the physical landscape, according to Frost, do not help the poet to reveal nature (or the ideas behind it). In most of his poems, Frost refuses to assert himself and his own ideas onto the natural things and physical beings he pictures in his lines, like Baptiste, the birch trees, and even the white heal-all. Though they are enjoyable at times, his associated ideas fall short in reaching, epistemologically speaking, the physical things around him because the physical things are different, other, and foreign. This is a (William) Jamesian concept of the “other” as separate and very different from oneself. James, as Lentricchia notes, accepted “the skeptical and common sense view of the world of objects as indeed ‘out there,’ as hard, dense and often dangerous” (8). From this philosophy comes Frost’s own, and Doeski sees it at work in Frost’s “The Wood-Pile”; he says it “is a poem about...the limitations of the most obvious attempts to reconcile nature and the mind” (39). It is in Frost’s dark view of nature that the danger James sees in “other” things is expressed. And seeing other things as hard and dense means that the only way there will be a merger between looker and object is if the looker changes form. Frost is unwilling to liquefy (to lose his physical form) in order to fuse himself into other things, in order to reconcile himself to them.

The poem “The Thatch” deals with this concept of inside and outside, the poet and his subject(s). In the poem, which pictures what could be one of Thoreau’s Walden-esque scenes, the poet notices that some birds are “living in hermitage” in his thatch roof (16). The poet wants a connection with nature; he would like for the birds to be able to

live there with him, it seems. “It grieve[s] [his] soul” (20) to have to throw the “birds out of hole after hole” (19) that they have made in his thatch roof. However, if the birds were left there to nest, they would destroy the thatch. The “hole after hole” that they have made in the thatch would grow until there would be nothing left of the man-made roof, and the thatch is the man’s *own* protection against the “winter rain” (1) and shield from the world which is “a black invisible field” (10). Permitting things to come “in” that should be kept “out” is dangerous, and this is confirmed in the end of the poem:

They tell me the cottage where we dwelt,
 Its wind-torn thatch goes now unmended;
 Its life of hundreds of years has ended
 By letting the rain I knew outdoors
 In on to the upper chamber floors. (31-35)

Nature is dangerous, and if allowed to enter inside (inside a home or inside a person), the result is disastrous. Ruin will be the result (of the home or of the person).

Informing Frost’s opinion that he cannot ultimately know nature and natural things is his distrust of nature. Aware of its darker sides and the chaos that exists in nature, he does not want to lose himself in it or in associations about it because he is unsure whether, in such confusion, he could ever find himself again. As Lewis Klausner notes, “Frost is less inclined than Wordsworth to privilege Nature as a repository of the human soul” (137). Though Wordsworth practically swims in the sublimity of nature, Frost refrains. He refuses philosophically to plunge himself (and his soul) into nature. Just as Doctor Magoon in “A Hundred Collars” is very suspicious of Lafe’s advice to “Lie down—let yourself go and get some sleep” (162), so is the poet apprehensive about

letting himself go into nature. Judith Oster notes Frost's desire to be "inviolable as an entity that only he possessed" (18). This hesitancy to give himself over to nature (and other natural things he describes in his lines) becomes almost like a religious or philosophical reverence for nature. Link quotes Roberts French as saying that "reading through [Frost's] works, one finds that a major tone involves feelings of profound uneasiness, even of fear toward nature" (184). If fear is a type of reverence, then the religious parallel works. Frost sees nature as too different—to a nearly holy extent—to be fully appropriated. For Frost physical things are to be respected; one cannot totally leave them or expect any kind of understanding to be achieved. The natural setting thus provides an almost religious-like common experience for people in that it is the basis for the only commonality that can be expected between people and things (specifically Frost and his readers). For Frost the physical is the place where any successful communication must begin (and end).

The physical setting is also the only place Frost could ever hope to construct a stay against the confusion that does naturally exist. The confusion that Frost is warring against, as I see it, is the disharmony between the inner self and exterior things. He sees the inconsistencies between the two. Therefore, he presents both, balancing them against each other to produce a kind of settled stay against confusion. In "Birches" Frost digresses into romantic association. He says he does "like to think some boy's been swinging" on the bent birch trees (3), and Oster notes that some of the details are "highly associative and figurative" (60). In "A Romantic Chasm," Frost notes, "In the beginning was the word, to be sure, very sure, and a solid basic comfort it remains in situ, but the fun only begins with the spirited when you treat the word as a point of many departures"

(804). Frost enjoyed the departures from the solid, physical world. However, nearly simultaneously, there is a “devaluation of [such] extraneousness,” as J. H. Van den Berg explains, in order to avoid a “loss of understanding” (60). Wordsworth, also, devalues extraneousness, but his movements are exactly opposite of Frost’s. Frost omits romantic associations and stays on earth with the physical things in order not to lose understanding; Wordsworth omits the differences and individuality among the subjects of his lines in order to unify and find the one collective meaning of the natural thing/scene. As in “Birches,” Frost returns to earth: “But swinging doesn’t bend them down to stay/ As ice-storms do” (4-5). The poet returns to earth and to the truth. Fun is one thing, but truth is certainly something else, something only to be found, according to Frost, on earth. Link sees this kind of movement in the poem: “there is an Extra-vagant ascent into Nature, and a subsequent return to earth, a going-forth and a coming-back, an expansion and recoil” (188). The recoil brings the poet back, lands him on the physical. One can also see this type of movement—out and then back—in “A Late Walk.” The poet notes upon his return from the walk, “I end not far from my going forth” (13).

The movements out and in take place as well in “Going for Water.” Here one can see the pull to the imaginative and then back to reality and the physical landscape. Some children (one might assume) are going for water because the well is dry. This could be read as meaning that the physical landscape is no longer stimulating, and so they must go into the woods and (later) into their imaginations to quench their thirst for adventure. The characters do head into the woods:

But once within the wood, we paused
Like gnomes that hid us from the moon,

Ready to run to hiding new

With laughter.... (13-16)

The natural setting is the initial inspiration for the imagination. It is only when they get into the woods that they feel that they are out of sight and can imagine themselves as some other things/persons and begin to run and play. However, as in most of Frost's poems, there is a pull back to the physical setting. They are not gnomes; they are real people going for water, and it is the sound of the brook that arouses again this sense of reality in them. The imaginative associations stop:

Each laid on other a staying hand

To listen ere we dared to look,

And in the hush we joined to make

We heard, we knew we heard the brook. (17-20)

For the characters of the poem and even the poet himself, rather than flying away into imagination, rather than transcending (and forgetting about) the physical setting, are pulled back to it, back to duty, back into real life.

In "Birches," one can clearly see the poet himself coming back to earth. He says, "I'd like to get away from earth awhile/ And then come back to it and begin over" (48-49). He comes back, as I see it, to achieve understanding. If he continues as a vector all the way into "heaven" (instead of just "*toward*" it, as in the poem), he would lose his reader at some point, and the understanding—the pact—between them would be destroyed. In "Revelation," Frost explains how dealing in the literal is much more conducive to achieving understanding:

We make ourselves a place apart

Behind light words that tease and flout...

'Tis pity if the case require

(Or so we say) that in the end

We speak the literal to inspire

The understanding of a friend. (1-2, 5-8)

Yet the poet is saying it is most definitely not a pity; it is, instead, a *fact*, that one must deal in the literal—the physical thing, one might say—in order to inspire the “understanding” of any person. Frost mentions people who would hide themselves (behind figurative language, for example):

But so with all, from babes that play

At hide-and-seek to God afar,

So all who hide too well away

Must speak and tell us where they are. (9-12)

If anyone, from a babe to God, is trying to reveal something, he/she must speak literally. They must “speak and tell us where they are,” give us a physical setting in which to meet them. The literal, physical thing provides the place for the stay against the confusion that exists in the figurative “light words,” in the imagined heavenly realm.

Van den Berg says “we will not and we cannot do without objects as means of understanding” (60). Though we know that, in “Birches,” Frost admits he does “prefer” the tale of the boy, the romantic (and personal, because the boy is associated with himself) association, he must base this association in the physical—on the bent birch tree bowing before him—or else there will be a loss of understanding. The physical thing does bind the poet at times; it keeps him from sailing away completely into what he

“prefers.” This is illustrated well in “Lodged,” where the poet empathizes with the flowers that “lay lodged—though not dead” (5) after the rain and wind push them down. “I know how the flowers felt,” he says (6), because the poet understands how nature does keep him from blooming into beautiful romantic associations at times. However, it is ultimately more than necessary to stick with the physical thing (nature) in order to achieve understanding. The physical setting supports Frost as he develops ideas and tries to relate them to his readers.

Beyond just acknowledging this necessity to stay on earth in order to effect successful understanding, Frost celebrates being here. Earth is a good place. In “A Prayer for Spring,” Frost beseeches, “keep us here/ All simply in the springing of the year” (3-4). The poem focuses on a kind of *carpe diem* attitude (“Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today” [1]) but even more on an overall appreciation of earth. The poet longs to continue to enjoy the present—the present time, yes, but also the present place, earth: “Oh, gives us pleasure in the orchard white...And make us happy in the happy bees” (5, 7). He affirms, “For this is love and nothing else is love” (13). Love, for Frost, is not melting into something imagined. For him, love is loving what is on earth, what is seen and can be touched, heard, tasted, and smelled.

The physical “thing” that is the common experience for Frost and his readers is what he builds on to achieve understanding. Poirier quotes Wallace Stevens, who notes just this; Stevens says, “Your trouble, Robert, is that you write poems about—*things*” (150). Frost must write about things in order to attempt any communication. This is in contrast with Wordsworth, in whose poetry the emotion that results from seeing/hearing the physical thing is presented as the common experience. M. H. Abrams quotes

Wordsworth as saying that “the materials of a poem come from within and they consist expressly neither of objects nor actions, but of the fluid feelings of the poet himself” (47). For Frost the materials of a poem are physical objects. Frost’s practices are Lockean in this respect because, as Lentricchia says, all his landscapes are “congruent with patterns of experience” (18). The poet’s feelings may flow toward the physical things—through association of ideas—but the truth is that any common understanding that is to be reached as a result of a poem must be built on the physical. Paton says, “ ‘The Mountain’ ...repress[es] romantic impulses in the name of practicality and dour habit” (90). The strength of practicality and, more importantly, physicality holds up Frost’s work.

Instead of reaching for a sublime revelation, Frost privileges the practical and the physical, especially in his search for truth. Truth is key when considering the motive of Frost in his poetry. Poirier (287-289) sees him addressing this in “Mowing,” in which work he says, “Anything more than truth would have seemed too weak” (9). Frost wants to reach a *kind* of understanding (but not a closed kind) in his lines, but what is understanding worth if it is not insight into something true? Frost searches for or, rather, illustrates the universal search for truth. He tells his readers, as Lentricchia says, that “the real thing...is often to be preferred to what we make in the imagination” (xii). Peter D. Poland mentions Frost’s interest in truth as it is revealed in “Neither Out Far nor In Deep.” Poland writes that “The poem is very much ‘about’ this search for truth” (95). This search for truth, especially as it is portrayed in this poem, also, depends upon Frost’s refusal to leave the earth, to go out far or in deep. Poland says this of the people in the poem: “Turning their backs on the land world, their world, [the people in the poem] have violated their promises; they are asleep to their human responsibilities” (96). Frost

continually asserts that a search for any truth will not be found by abandoning the earth—the natural world. In “Birches,” Frost asserts that “Earth is the right place for love” (52), upholding the value of earth in any search for depth. In “Bond and Free,” Frost writes, “Love has earth to which she clings” (1). If love is the deep experience to be sought, earth is the place for the seeking. All the beauty that Thought—one could say, transcendent thought—“fares [so] far/ To find” (15-16) exists here on earth. And Love, by “simply staying [on earth] possess[es] all” (15). To Frost it is important to *live* on earth—to love, to act, to interact. These actions taken in this physical setting are what satisfy any search for depth of philosophical experience. Frost would likely say that Wordsworth goes out too far and in too deep in his search for meaning; he misses the immediate.

Link says of Frost’s truth-searching tendency that “The key to Extra-vagance is the attempt on the part of the poet to journey beyond conventional boundaries in an attempt to uncover hidden truth. It is both a literal wondering and a figurative questing” (184). This is a journey to reconcile one with the world, to find something in nature that resonates with the journeyer. Truth would be that reconciliation. For Wordsworth the reconciliation comes in the form of association. As something in the natural things he comes into contact with stirs a corresponding breeze within the poet, his ideas begin to associate, and he arrives—reconciling nature and man. However, as Link notes, “the quest beyond Nature [in Frost] results in an epistemological ‘crisis of belief’ and ultimately fails” (185). The poet/journeyer is too different; nature and natural things are too different. Association for Frost is like an attempt to bridge the epistemological gap, but even in the launching of this attempt, he quietly asserts the futility of it. The

associations are meager attempts, like an American throwing rocks in the ocean to build a bridge to England. It can be fun; one likes to dream about the grand result, and the thrower can see the results of her attempts—the ripples around the place where the rock is swallowed by the water. But dreaming is all that comes of the attempts, and as she leaves, there is nothing left on the natural scene to indicate to the next visitor that she's ever been there.

This idea that nature is completely unaffected by our philosophical spinning about it is illustrated well in “On Going Unnoticed.” In the poem, the person who is in the woods is “engaged up there with the light and breeze” (4) totally unaware of his/her physical surroundings. Not physically alert (though likely philosophically very aware), the person is transcending the physical. He/she is not appreciating the leaves and trees, the birds' songs and the smells; he/she is above, hovering beyond the physical. Frost expresses his opinion of such a posture through his description of the person: the person is “in the shadow of trees” and “Less than the coral-root” (3, 5); he/she looks up “*small* from the forest's feet” (10, emphasis added) and “linger[s] [his/her] *little* hour and [is] gone” (13, emphasis added). Though the person looks above and likely thinks in “deep” ideas, he/she is still “gone” by the end of the poem:

And still the woods sweep leafily on,

Not even missing the coral-root flower

You took as a trophy of the hour. (14-16)

There is no appreciation of the physical in this person; he/she merely wants a trophy from nature, not to remind him/her of nature itself but of the transcendent experience he/she had in the woods. Nature, however, does not and will not remember. The event is

inconsequential to it, and except for the small flower taken by the human, the natural setting is unchanged by his/her visit there.

In this physical setting, Frost maintains a close physical proximity with the physical things with which he comes into contact. Oster notes that Frost “was not content, or perhaps not able, to remain at the comfortable distance provided by analogy” (10). Frost does not stand back and use figurative language just to compare. He enters the poems: he talks to Baptiste, the Witch of Coös, his neighbor in “Mending Wall”; he invites the “you” in “The Pasture” to come with him. Frost “maintains a constant dialectic...with the Other of feeling and perception” (79), Oster says; as I see it, the poet essentially maintains a dialectic with the “Other.” He talks, interacts, enters the homes of, touches the other things, beings, natural objects in his lines. In “A Dream Pang,” the poet assures the “you” of the poem, “Not far, but near, I stood and saw it all” (9).

The close physical proximity Frost maintains with natural things is tempered by his simultaneously maintaining philosophical solitude, a stance that is the opposite of Wordsworth’s. This stance of Frost’s is clearly illustrated in “Mending Wall,” in which work the poet remains just across the wall from his neighbor but most philosophically separate. The poet asks his neighbor why they must continually rebuild the wall; “He only says, ‘Good fences make good neighbors’” (27). Though the poet is complicit in the building activity, he is of a completely different mindset: “Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder” (and here comes the philosophical wandering to try to meet and connect) “If I could put a notion in his head: ‘*Why* do they make good neighbors?’” (28-30). Yet, in the end, he does not put his own notion into his neighbor’s head: “I could [share my ideas with] him/ But...I’d rather/ He said it for himself” (36-38); so they remain

philosophically separate. This separation is confirmed when the poet notes that as they continue the rebuilding, his neighbor “moves in darkness, as it seems to me” (41). This darkness is “not of woods *only*, and the shade of trees” (42, emphasis added); it is also philosophical darkness: they are separate, and the poet does not completely understand his neighbor’s motives (ultimately) because he is not his neighbor. One can see that Frost builds so much on the physical—his only place to achieve understanding—because there is no common philosophical ground for him; he dwells in philosophical solitude. He does not give himself over to philosophically melting into anything (or anyone) else.

Poirier argues that “Stopping by Woods” “is about...the enchantments that invite us to surrender ourselves to oblivion” (7). However, Frost does not surrender; instead, he resumes his life on earth, remembering and returning to keep his promises. “The poet resists the attraction of losing himself and being swept into oblivion,” Stambuk says of Frost. This is in sharp contrast to Wordsworth who gives himself fully to nature—or, one could say, totally appropriates the nature that surrounds him, absorbing all into himself. Doreski, in discussing “After Apple-Picking,” notes, “One can conceive of someone foolish enough to take all landscapes, allegorical or otherwise, as personal to himself...[but such a] Wordsworthian stance is not Frost’s” (37). Frost continually resists such a move, and his resistance is indicative of his posture towards nature. There is always a tug back toward the physical. He can never completely transcend the natural setting—people, places, things. Though Frost slips into association (that is, into himself), and out, out, toward oblivion, he is never quite swept away, never enraptured. He returns, like a boomerang, to the place of launching, the physical setting. Stambuk sees Frost’s boomerang-ish philosophical movements in “Stopping by Woods.” Frost

ultimately “doggedly asserts,” the critic says, “that he must get on with living” (14). And “living” for Frost is done on earth.

Frost “proudly insists,” notes Barron, “on the lack of transcendent aims in his work” in contrast to those found in Wordsworth (149). In the end, Wordsworth’s finales are sublimely deep assertions whereas Frost’s are anti-climactic sighs. The sighs are breaths that leave space for his readers to write their own meanings onto the natural scene. As Klausner says of Frost’s “To an Ancient,” “The poem is not a final marker or a monument, but a blank space that we, Frost’s readers, must fill with our own powers of faith, skepticism, and discernment” (see footnote p. 10). The readers may allow their minds to associate ideas with birch trees, spring pools, cow pastures, associated ideas that take them away. Or, they may decide to stay on the physical scene, as does Frost for the most part, to appreciate the look of the branches or the flowers beside spring pools. Frost presents both possibilities in order to give his readers the chance to make their own decisions. He cuts through the chaos of the world to present these two paths amidst the woods of confusion. The reader has her choice of which to take. As Frost says in “At Woodward’s Gardens,” “It’s knowing what to do with things that counts” (37). And Frost likes to stay physically close to his “things.” He listens to the people, picks the flowers, visits his neighbors, goes for water, goes for a walk—always on earth, or else he lands here again after a short stint in the stars.

CONCLUSION

Jonathan N. Barron in his essay “A Tale of Two Cottages: Frost and Wordsworth” says that despite the fact that “since he published his first book, critics have read Robert Frost’s poetry in light of Wordsworth’s,...the connection between the two poets still lacks a sustained, extended critical examination” (132). Barron attributes this to “a lack of critical attention to Frost’s own intellectual, cultural, and literary allusions” (132). In this study, I have tried to articulate more fully many of the similarities and differences between the two poets; instead of looking at allusions, however, I have found the best way to compare and contrast their work is to look at the philosophical traditions in which they wrote.

Locke, Hartley and James provide the philosophical terms that are necessary to deal with the crux of the comparison between the two poets. I see the crux of this comparison as being contained in the poets’ respective answers to the questions of what is important and what clarifies existence. I see both poets struggling to answer these questions as they look at the physical things around them. In their lines they ask, where does one look for the importance and meaning in physical things? Are humans important in reference to nature? Is there something in humans—an inherent quality—that connects us with nature and other natural things? Is there something in nature that will clarify human relationships with it? Is such a connection necessary/important in order to justify our existence and the space we share with nature and other physical things on earth, and would a connection clarify the confusion that otherwise exists among us?

For Wordsworth there is something to be found in nature and within the poet that will clarify the relationship between and connect the two. In “Lines Composed a Few

Miles above Tintern Abbey,” the poet describes nature revealing and him finding meaning. He says these “beauteous forms” of nature have inspired in him “tranquil restoration” (21, 30):

[Yet, to] them I may have owed another gift,

Of aspect more sublime...

While with an eye made quiet by the power

Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,

We see into the life of things. (36-37, 47-49)

In nature exists a deeper “life of things,” and it is the harmony that exists between nature and the poet that enables him to see this deeper life. Wordsworth trusts nature to reveal itself, its deeper meaning—as he notes in this poem, “Nor less, I trust...them,” that is, these forms of nature (36). There is a corresponding wind in nature and in the poet that connects the two, that makes the harmony between them. There are live embers within the poet that nature can recognize and remember. And this recognition and connection are important above all else. They not only bridge the gap between the physical things and the poet; they also unify the poet and other people—giving Wordsworth the connection he needs with Poor Susan and the solitary reaper to find meaning within them. This connection allows the poet to speak wisely about other things. His wisdom, even, is spontaneous and found in nature: it is waiting for him, to be discovered by him, to help him reach and understand the inherent and transcendent meaning in the things he sees.

Frost, on the other hand, has trouble accepting the idea of something pre-existing, active and acting, in nature—something that would clarify all—and in any kind of connection that one might assume exists between humans and physical things/nature. In

“Afterflakes” the poet, during “the thick of a teeming snowfall” (1), is looking in nature at the snow and “up at the sky” (3) for the answer to “why” (4). However, in the final stanza he

...turned and looked back upward.

The whole sky was blue;

And the thick flakes floating at a pause

Were but frost knots on airy gauze,

With the sun shining through. (11-15)

The thick snowstorm at the beginning of the poem abruptly changes into a light snowfall by the end. The poet, who was looking in the first stanza for an answer, a revelation, receives none. In fact, before he can even fully articulate a question—he says vaguely in the first stanza that he just “looked back up at the sky” (4)—the snowstorm is over. No reason given, no meaning understood. Nature abruptly changes, period. The shadow of the storm is indeed “shapeless” (9), and the only “form” (8) one can get out of nature is what he/she can make, and the only meaning one can gain is what he/she can interpret from his/her own making. In stanza two, the poet casts his shadow, and this gives form to the scene, but this form reveals meaning only about the poet: “the shadow of mine should show in form/ Against the shapeless shadow of storm,/ How swarthy I must be” (8-10). No universal truth is revealed by nature. The poet does not reveal any deep meaning of the natural scene; he ends, instead, with a physical description of it, and the flakes remain “but frost knots on an airy gauze.”

For Frost, there could be something left in nature; he does not completely close that door. Yet, he is skeptical above all else that he, or anyone else, could find it—a

thing, a commonality, a connection that would bridge the gap between humans and nature and between (wo)man and (wo)man, something that would eliminate the confusion. This doubt does not, however, render him speechless and useless; he does not throw his hands in the air and lament his own lack of power to speak about nature. This is articulated in the poem “In a Time of Cloud Burst” in which he concedes man’s condition as repetitive but hopes that he won’t grow bitter about it:

May my application so close
 To so endless a repetition
 Not make me tired and morose
 And resentful of man’s condition. (25-28)

And it seems in his other poems that he does not become tired and morose and resentful. Instead, Frost the poet makes himself at home on earth. He gets as close as he can to other things and people—physically close, as I show in earlier chapters—without assuming, however, that he will achieve a spiritual connection with them, and this keeps him philosophically separate. Instead of bemoaning what he does not find, he makes what he can, as he sees it, of what he has. And the making is the poet’s, the person’s. He makes clarity; he helps nature along, so to speak, with his own interpretation, associating his own ideas to make his own provisional meanings at times while enjoying the natural setting.

For Wordsworth, associated ideas are “natural”: the spark for them is found in nature. They are (nearly) obvious, at least to the poet, who has a heightened sense of things. As Wordsworth says in the “Preface,” a poet “is a man...endowed 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” (737). When the poet looks at—from his physical distance—some other thing, he can follow his associated ideas, ultimately, because he trusts nature. And nature is trustworthy. He can trust it because it will bless him and reveal itself to him. As the poet says in the first book of *The Prelude*, “Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze” (1). Since he has an inherent connection with nature—shares a “correspondent breeze” with it (Book One, *The Prelude* 35)—and because he has a “comprehensive soul,” following his own ideas is just allowing himself to be led by nature. Nature wants him, as Wordsworth imagines it, to see, for example, the pet lamb as his soul. For Wordsworth, in order to see—and the word is used loosely here—what is important and in order to articulate the meaning that clarifies existence and that (already) exists in nature, one must have this connection with nature, and to have that, one must be a poet.

Frost’s opinion on such a statement is complicated. One could immediately say Frost would emphatically disagree with all aspects of it and could probably supply justification for such an answer. However, in his search for meaning, Frost does find things of value on earth; though not a corresponding breeze between himself and nature, he does find some clarification of existence. This occurs in the making of a poem and more specifically, in his metaphors. Further, since a poet makes metaphors, one might say that Frost does agree with Wordsworth on at least this aspect of the role of poet. Frost would say that the poet does give clarity—the momentary stay against confusion, but Frost would not agree that the poet is endowed with heightened sensibility in comparison to other people. Another divergence of their opinions is that for Wordsworth the clarity and meaning already exist in nature, and they are just found by the poet,

revealed by nature; for Frost they must be made by the poet—and remade again and again because they are temporary.

For Wordsworth being a poet is (maybe) just one step below being divine, but for Frost the role is not a divine one. The poet, it would seem from reading the “Preface,” is chosen before birth to be a seer, a knower, an interpreter. He is “endowed” with gifts that help him find the importance and meaning in things and relate them in order to clarify for others the meaning of existence. The poet is different—having more gifts “than are supposed to be common among mankind”—and is nearly holy in his elevated role. In the chapter on Wordsworth, I elaborate on “The Poet’s Dream” as an example of the poet becoming god-like at times. In Wordsworth’s separateness and in his special insight, he approaches divinity.

With this aspect of the role of poet, much more than with the first—involving the poet’s connections to nature—Frost would argue. In his doubt and skepticism, Frost, though he does not completely eliminate the possibility of a divinity, does not assume that he himself is divine. Holiness, a characteristic of divinity, is something for which he never aims. He likes being on earth, visiting Baptiste, talking to friends, climbing trees. Ironically, in his poetry Frost is the “maker”—the one who gives order. It would seem that Frost might say, in a rather indifferent tone, perhaps that “maker” is the only one we can expect here, not one who creates from scratch the physical things that exist, just one who puts them in order so that we can “make ourselves” understand. In “Directive,” the poet tells the reader, “Make yourself up a cheering song of how/ Someone’s road home from work this once was,/ Who may be just ahead of you on foot” (29-31). The reader, too, is capable of “making,” and the syntax suggests that in the making we are “making

[ourselves] up” as well as any cheering song we create to give order to our existence. In his poems, Frost is making his own order, and we can, of course, take up his in addition to making our own, just as a neighbor borrows some butter to make his/her own cake.

To make his order, Frost uses metaphors, and he enjoys doing so. He plays with them all the time. However, the metaphors are always momentarily effective in their clarifying ability. I see this resulting from the fact that Frost is, above all, faithful to the earth and to the reality he knows here; he finds truth here and does not forsake that truth or earth in his own art. Earth is changeable—things live and die every day. Mimicking this earthly reality, Frost’s metaphors—his steps toward creating his own little world of order from chaos—likewise cannot ultimately withstand, without changing, the test of time and the power of the natural things that the metaphors strive to contain. The metaphors fail, they crumble, they fall. Like all earthly things, which Frost felt such allegiance to, he based his own little worlds of metaphors on the earthly cycle of being and dying, functioning and decaying, providing order and losing it, falling into chaos again.

Wordsworth’s metaphors, too, are clarifying symbols. Though they might appear to be, to the less “endowed” individual, the making of order from chaos, they are really just order and meaning revealed, not created. These metaphors reveal the poet’s tendency to unify all things in his associative process. And Wordsworth’s metaphors, unlike Frost’s, shine with divinity, with eternal-ness. They provide insight into the meaning of things and are to be praised, worshipped, and understood as clarifying symbols for life and eternity. They do not fail—there is no suggestion that today (only) to Wordsworth the beggars represent poverty and tomorrow to someone else they could

represent something else. The meaning Wordsworth finds as he follows his associated ideas to a transcendent level is a permanent one. Through his metaphors, he, the poet, is the one who identifies meaning, sees the importance and ultimately names the other things according to their meaning.

The natural and physical things, to Wordsworth, are important not in and of themselves but because they represent deeper ideas. His associated ideas take him, as he sees it, closer to the “thing” that can be known. Locke would call it a mode.

Wordsworth would call it meaning, the part, the idea that is important. The physical thing is only a partial manifestation of it, a suggestion to be taken by the poet, and, via associated ideas, he can arrive at the real “thing,” the meaning. In “Animal Tranquillity and Decay,” the poet says of the old man:

He travels on, and in his face, his step,
His gait, is one expression: every limb,
His look and bending figure all bespeak
A man who does not move with pain, but moves
With thought. (3-7)

The physical posture and the old body of the man are only hints at who (and what) he really is (and really represents). The “thought” is the crucial issue, not the physical expressions. The poet observes the man’s physical body, but then the poet can infer that the man is “by nature led/ To peace so perfect that the young behold/ With envy, what the Old Man hardly feels” (12-14). The poet—one of the “young” who behold this truth about the man—inherently knows more about the man than even the man himself can understand by relying on his own physical body, which hardly “feels” at all.

Frost, on the contrary, finds the physical thing *itself* important. He would appreciate the pleasure in Wordsworth's associating ideas. Frost does it himself many times. Frost even acknowledges in "Something Like a Star" that at times we can "choose something like a star/ To stay our minds on and be staid" (24-25). In saying this, Frost is admitting that things above that we cannot touch and cannot really understand—as he notes in the poem, he cannot know the "degree of heat [of the star or the]...elements [it] blend[s]" (12, 15)—still can provide a stay for us, a clarification wrested from chaos. However, the stay can be only temporary. Though one can "be staid" beyond earth, it is in the "staying" there—following associated ideas into the transcendent and unknown and then remaining there—that presents problems for Frost. Though Wordsworth can be comfortable in this kind of transcendent, eternal negative capability, Frost cannot. (In "Animal Tranquility," for example, all is indistinct—the "thought" is vague, the "peace so perfect" is not even felt—but the suggestion is that this is a picture of melting into eternity.) For Frost, there is no permanent stay; the truth is, for him, that everything always changes, and that is all he can know.

This concept of limited knowledge that Frost embraces does, however, illustrate that he, too, is content with a *kind* of negative capability but one that is very different from the kind Wordsworth embraces. Frost's negative capability seems to be a step more negative than Wordsworth's and one with which the romantic poet could never be content. Wordsworth cannot always name the meaning he discovers in natural/physical things, and with this not-knowing, he is content. Frost, too, knows that in this earthly/physical reality he will not and cannot know everything. Yet, Frost is content not just with being unable to name meaning in things but also with the fact that there is no

guarantee that there is any deeper meaning in things. Wordsworth never could be content with this kind of knowledge or lack thereof. The spontaneous wisdom of Wordsworth's nature insures him that there are meanings yet to be found; Frost's nature provides no such reassurance.

So, though Wordsworth finds meaning through both association of ideas and transcending the physical, Frost does not. For the modern poet, association is fine—it's fun and can give, perhaps, individual but never universal meaning. However, transcendence, for Frost, really gets one nowhere. In fact, in "The Star-Splitter" Brad McLaughlin is *laughable* because he "burned his house down for the fire insurance/ And spent the proceeds on a telescope" (16-17), and, after looking through the telescope at the things above, the poet asks, "Do we know any better where we are,/ And how it stands between the night...And a man...?" (96-97). The implied answer is no. Looking above, transcending the physical earth reaches nothing of *substance*, whereas that is just the point—and the importance—of the poetic act for Wordsworth.

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VITA

Mary McMillan was born in Piney Creek, North Carolina, on January 30, 1977. She attended Sparta Elementary School, Alleghany High School, and later the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While at UNC she studied in Seville, Spain, and traveled through Europe. She graduated with distinction from UNC in 1999 with a major in English and a minor in Spanish. During the first months of the year 2000, she traveled back to Spain and then to Lima, Peru, to work with a church until the beginning of May. In August of 2000, she enrolled in graduate school at the University of Tennessee, where she completed her M. A. in August 2002.

While at UT she was given the opportunity to present at literary conferences a creative work as well as critical papers. She will be married to Douglas Terry in August 2002 and hopes to work with Knox County Schools as a Spanish teacher beginning the fall of 2002.