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“Changes” in the Country of the Mind: Seamus Heaney’s Revision of William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DEPARTMENTAL HONORS in English Literary Studies in the Department of English

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For almost thirty years, critics have been interested in William Wordsworth’s influence on Irish poet and Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney. In 1973, Heaney told Darcey O’Brien that he had been “getting a lot out of Wordsworth lately” (37). O’Brien struggled to see the connection. The personality, philosophy, and technique of the two poets seemed to him fundamentally different. Seven years later, when he had “begun to understand” the relationship, O’Brien published the first significant critical comparison of these writers, an essay entitled “Seamus Heaney and Wordsworth: A Correspondent Breeze” (37). Scholars have since become more attuned to the parallels between the poets, encouraged by evidence of Heaney’s affinity with his Romantic predecessor, such as his university courses taught on Wordsworth, his BBC special “Wordsworth Lived Here,” and his publication of a selection of Wordsworth’s poems with his own introductory essay. Subsequent criticism has reflected this new awareness and has sought to extend O’Brien’s comparison, claiming an increasingly close correspondence between the two writers. Richard Gravil’s essay, for instance, identifies Heaney as one of “Wordsworth’s Second Selves” foretold by the Romantic poet in “Michael: A Pastoral Poem.” More recently, Hugh Houghton argues for an even stronger similarity in “Power and Hiding Places: Wordsworth and Seamus Heaney,” contending that Wordsworth “haunts Heaney more than any other poet” (62). On the whole, this criticism has concentrated almost exclusively on the similarities between Heaney and Wordsworth, focusing largely on their common connection with nature, similar interest in childhood as metaphor of poetic development, and their shared sense of exile in parallel political circumstances, as Heaney’s relocation to County Wicklow corresponds with Wordsworth’s Grasmere retreat (301).
These comparisons have been both insightful and effective. However, in critics’
 attempts to build on the similarities that O’Brien first identified, they have overlooked the
 stark differences with which he initially struggled. Admittedly, a study of the differences
 between two poets separated by two hundred years, and who represent different national
 identities and literary movements, would be counterproductive and hardly necessary to
demonstrate what Houghton acknowledges as a “world of difference” between the two
writers (93). However, by focusing solely on Heaney’s similarities with Wordsworth, the
significant ways in which the two poets differ can become obscured, hindering our
understanding of each. Paradoxically, the most productive way to explore the important
differences between Heaney and Wordsworth is through a close examination of their key
similarities. Such a study would be especially effective if one of Heaney’s poems was
unmistakably modeled on Wordsworth’s work, allowing for a close comparison that would
reveal not merely coincidental differences between two unique writers, but rather the
significant ways in which Heaney clearly uses Wordsworth as a starting point only to
deliberately deviate from his example.

I argue that Heaney’s “Changes” enables this comparison, as it explicitly imitates and
modifies Wordsworth’s best-known work, “Tintern Abbey,” both thematically and
rhetorically. Heaney said of Wordsworth, “He was the first man to articulate the nature that
becomes available to the feelings through dwelling in one dear perpetual place” (Preoccupations
145). Each piece portrays the poet revisiting such a place from his past, as Wordsworth
returns to the River Wye and Heaney revisits an old pump at his family’s farm at Mossbawn—
a significant image for him symbolizing a giver of life. For both writers, these locations mark
the center of the “country of the mind” that inspires and sustains their work (P 132). While Wordsworth is accompanied by his sister Dorothy, Heaney’s companion is presumably one of his children, as various poems in Station Island recount the early years of his marriage and experiences with his family. As Heaney deliberately returns to the secluded spot after many years, Wordsworth also emphasizes that he had been to the banks of the Wye before and, “though absent long,” had returned to “behold” the natural scene “once again” (24, 4, 5). Each poet’s revisiting experience differs from his earlier memory, as Wordsworth finds the landscape at the Wye no longer impresses powerful thoughts and feelings on him, and Heaney and his child have the unexpected experience of seeing a mother bird and her egg in the pump, which is now a rusted ruin of its former working condition. In addition to parallel rhetorical situations, “Changes” closely mirrors “Tintern Abbey” thematically, as both poets learn that experiences in nature can be relived in memory and both pass the lesson on to their respective companions. Heaney’s closing counsel to his child is to “remember this” experience in order to mentally “retrace this path / When you have grown away and stand at last / At the very centre of the empty city” (23, 24-6). Heaney’s advice directly parallels Wordsworth’s speech to Dorothy to “remember me, / And these my exhortations,” counseling her not to forget “that on the banks of this delightful stream / We stood together” (49-50, 25). Heaney, like Wordsworth, has relied on images from his memory or “forms of beauty” from past experiences in the natural world, which, recalled in “tranquil restoration,” have brought both writers “sensations sweet” “mid the din / Of towns and cities” (32, 29, 27-8). In spite of all the attention critics have given Heaney’s “Glanmore Sonnets” and the poetry of his childhood as examples of his engagement with Wordsworth’s influence, “Changes” is the poem in which
Heaney most clearly models his poetry after that of his Romantic predecessor, taking on Wordsworth’s most famous work.

Surprisingly, in the many comparisons that have been made between these two writers, and indeed in the work of Heaney scholars generally, “Changes” has been almost completely ignored. Of all the critics making the comparison between Wordsworth and Heaney, Michael Parker and Suzana Stefanovic have been the only ones to so much as mention the poem. While Parker accurately links “Changes” to Wordsworth, he only connects the final two couplets to “Michael: A Pastoral Poem” in a footnote instead of making a holistic comparison to “Tintern Abbey.” Stefanovic’s essay accurately points out that “Changes” is “strikingly reminiscent” of “Tintern Abbey,” as both poems suggest that “intimate contact with nature provides a resource that can be drawn upon in other times and . . . circumstances” (250). Stefanovic’s analysis, though observant, is fleeting, devoting only a few sentences to the comparison and looking solely at the poems’ basic similarities. My purpose here is to demonstrate through a close reading of both poems not only the multiple levels on which Heaney patterns “Changes” after “Tintern Abbey” but, more instructively, how and why he consciously departs from Wordsworth’s model, revising as well as reviewing his text. As the poems’ differences can only be fully seen through the lens of their similarities, I will first outline their parallels before analyzing their contrasts. My discussion will center on the two poets’ relationship with nature, their treatment of memory, and their social engagement—both with their individual companions and society itself, as well as each poet’s self view in “Tintern Abbey” and “Changes.”

The Poets’ Relationship with Nature
“Tintern Abbey” and “Changes” each reflect the poets’ reverent approach to the natural world. As Wordsworth and Heaney arrive at their beloved natural scenes, both emphasize a devout silence. While Wordsworth notes the “quiet of the sky” (8) and the chimney smoke of the distant pastoral homes “sent up in silence” (19), Heaney and his companion come “in silence / to the pump” (1-2). Wordsworth proclaims himself “a worshipper of nature” and demonstrates his veneration through apostrophe, addressing part of the poem to Nature as the “anchor of all [his] purest thoughts, the nurse, / the guide, the guardian of [his] heart, the soul / of all [his] mortal being” (112-14). Heaney’s regard for the natural scene is parallel to Wordsworth’s, albeit less pronounced, as demonstrated in his careful treatment of the lid of the pump under which the bird takes shelter. Heaney labels the lid a “citadel,” denoting not only a protected place, but a fortress in command of a city, humbly acknowledging that he is a guest in the bird’s natural realm, empowering her as she protects her egg. His attitude is respectful and his tone almost awestruck as he returns the roof of the pump “as gently as [he can]” to protect the bird from the light, describing the experience as “so tender” (17, 23). While Heaney’s devotional attitude toward nature may be more subtle than Wordsworth’s, his description of landscape in his article “The Poet as Christian” implies something worshipful in his perspective of the natural world. He describes landscape as “sacramental, a system of signs that call automatically upon systems of thinking and feeling” (65). Thus, as Thomas Rand says of Wordsworth, Heaney has to some extent found a system of salvation in nature. The religious element in Heaney’s vision of the natural scene is further supported by his description of the pump in “Mossbawn” as a “slender, iron idol” (FK 3).
These parallels in the poets’ approaches to the natural world are underscored by Heaney’s use of Wordsworthian images and language in his description of the scene. Heaney tells us in a critical essay that “the high moments of Wordsworth’s poetry occur when the verse has carried us forward and onward to a point where line by line we do not proceed but hang in a kind of suspended motion, sustained by the beat of the verse as a hanging bird is sustained by the beat of its wing (P 65). The description of “hang[ing] in a kind of suspended motion” echoes Wordsworth’s language, recalling his words in “Tintern Abbey”—“the motion of our human blood almost suspended”—and affirming that Heaney considers Wordsworth’s return to the Wye a “high moment” (44-5). This comparison of Wordsworth’s poetic rhythm to a bird sustained in flight extends to “Changes,” as the mother bird serves as a Wordsworthian symbol. Heaney’s description of the scene as “so tender” may also allude to the qualifications of a poet outlined by Wordsworth in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads, as being endowed with more “tenderness” than is “supposed to be common among mankind” (125). Heaney’s gentle manner toward the bird and her egg may also point back to a moment in The Prelude where, by contrast, Wordsworth describes his youthful self as a “fell destroyer,” trapping birds and stealing their eggs (1.34).

As these discrepant details suggest, while the two poets share a common reverence for the natural world, their respective relationships with nature also show stark differences. Wordsworth initially tries to ignore the man-made images in “Tintern Abbey,” depicting the riverbank as a “wild secluded scene” which he insists “impress[es] / Thoughts of more deep seclusion” (6-7). In the first stanza, he emphatically attempts to distinguish the natural from the human elements of the setting. The surrounding imagery of civilization is eclipsed by the
natural scenery as Wordsworth observes the “plots of cottage ground, these orchard-tufts, / Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits, / Among the woods and copses lose themselves” (11-3). While he acknowledges the cottages and orchards, he maintains that they remain “green to the very door” and do not “with their green and simple hue, disturb / The wild green landscape” or “houseless wood.” (14-5). Portraying the cultivated bushes that act as boundaries between privately owned tracts of land as part of nature, he states, “These hedge-rows, [are] hardly hedge-rows, [but] little lines / Of sportive wood run wild” (16-7).

Unlike Wordsworth, Heaney undoes the binary opposition of “Tintern Abbey” by conflating, rather than dividing, the human and the natural in “Changes.” In the first stanza Heaney describes his rural destination not as a purely wild scene, but rather as a man-made object in nature: “the pump in the long grass” (2). Heaney hears in his memory the sounds of the pump’s construction: “the bite of the spade that sank it, / the slithering and grumble / as the mason mixed his mortar” (4-6). His word choice of “bite,” “grumble,” and “slithering” to describe the function of the tools links the human-operated instruments with animals, pairing them with the natural as well as the civilized. The poet also applies a natural, animalistic description to the women who formerly used the pump, “coming with white buckets / like flashes on their ruffled wings” (7-8). Indeed, the pump itself is portrayed as an animal as the bird is found in “its mouth” (11). While it seems that the bird’s habitation of the pump signals its complete reclamation by nature, the description of her shelter as a “citadel,” a man-made edifice in command of a city, connects the wild bird to civilization. Heaney even reverses the roles of humans and animals in his position relative to the mother bird as he enjoys “a bird’s eye view of a bird” (12).
Wordsworth’s inability to conflate the human and the wild as Heaney does contributes to the anxiety in the poem that has always been part of his relationship with nature. The central crisis in “Tintern Abbey” is that nature no longer impresses “elevated thoughts” and “powerful feelings” on the poet (98, 123). Wordsworth is all too conscious that he himself has become part of the human world he considers irreconcilable with nature. Realizing that he has lost his connection with the natural world he panics, as signaled by the first two abrupt stanza breaks. Lamenting the loss of his source of inspiration, Wordsworth feels as isolated as “the hermit [who] sits alone,” and is painfully aware that he is no longer “like a roe” or part of the wild setting (23, 70). In the third stanza this anxiety increases in intensity, taking on a desperate, exclamatory tone as Wordsworth questions whether nature ever inspired him: “If this be but a vain belief, yet oh!” he cries, “How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee / O sylvan Wye! […] How oft has my spirit turned to thee!” (52-3, 58-60). These first exclamation points in the poem formally emphasize Wordsworth’s new level of angst. In Heaney’s reading, these anxieties have always been a part of Wordsworth’s relationship with nature. In his essay “The Triumph of Spirit,” Heaney points out the Romantic poet’s childhood fear in nature from *The Prelude*, as he “heard the moorlands breathing down his neck . . . [and] rowed in panic when he thought a cliff was pursuing him across moonlit water; and once . . . found himself on the hill . . . where a murderer had been executed, the place and its associations were enough to send him fleeing in terror to the beacon summit” (vii). These experiences suggest that Wordsworth’s descriptions of his youthful self in nature as being “like a man / Flying from the thing he dreads” are more than figurative (73-4). In Book I of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth states that in the early stages of his
development he was “fostered alike by beauty and by fear,” suggesting that nature inspired dread and anxiety as well as awe and wonder in the young man (302). This anxiety progressed from a childhood fear to becoming part of Wordsworth’s conception of nature as sublime. Edmund Burke, whose *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* strongly influenced Romantic thought, identifies power and terror as well as vastness and beauty as essential attributes of sublimity. Wordsworth’s state of panic in nature is a variation of the anxiety he had experienced in the past.

In contrast, Heaney does not show Wordsworth’s anxieties in “Changes,” but maintains his ability to reoccupy his former place in nature. Perhaps the reason for Heaney’s interest in Wordsworth’s childhood fear of nature is his own parallel experience. In his poem “Death of a Naturalist” he recounts his frightening boyhood memory of frogs when collecting their spawn:

> The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
> Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
> I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
> Were gathered for vengeance and I knew
> That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it. (28-32)

This childhood anxiety, however, seems to have died with the “naturalist” in Heaney and is absent in the tranquil tone of “Changes.” The speaker’s voice is soothing and the neatly ordered couplets and absence of exclamations show a sharp contrast from Wordsworth’s crisis in “Tintern Abbey,” shown by exclamations and long and irregular stanzas. The moment when Heaney’s child uncovers the lid of the pump to find the bird missing recalls
Wordsworth’s loss of his natural inspiration of the past. Rather than meeting this change with panic, however, Heaney’s speaker simply asks, “But where was the bird now?” before discovering her egg (19). Unlike Wordsworth, Heaney can still be a part of nature. As he first removes the pump’s lid, he has “a bird’s eye view of a bird” (12). Heaney’s metaphor in describing himself suggests a subtle contrast from Wordsworth’s simile. As Heaney has a bird’s vision he is a bird, whereas even in Wordsworth’s former inspired state he only bounded “like a roe” (70). In contrast to Heaney, Wordsworth has lost this likeness and accepts that “the coarser pleasure of my boyish days / And their glad animal movements [are] all gone by” (76-7). Heaney’s freedom from Wordsworth’s anxiety and his ability to reoccupy his former status enables him to “recollect in tranquility” and in perfect detail his memories of the pump’s construction and former use while he is physically at the site (127).

Social and Historical Explanations for Differences in the Poets’ Relationship with Nature

There are several reasons behind Heaney’s deliberate deviation from Wordsworth’s view of nature in “Tintern Abbey.” The first explanation for these differences, such as Heaney’s merging of the natural and human, his lack of Wordsworth’s anxiety, and his ability to reoccupy his former place in nature, is one of historical context. It is understandable that Wordsworth, living during the time of the Industrial Revolution in England, would emphasize a greater anxiety about urbanization, largely because of its novelty, than a poet with Heaney’s post-industrial historical perspective. The message of Wordsworth’s poetry is as social as it is aesthetic. In his Preface to Lyrical Ballads he notes that his project involves a “[revolution], not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself” (121). By its continual
emphasis on nature, Wordsworth’s poetry implicitly speaks against industrialization. He sees the new industrial economy of his time and its accompanying urbanization as an attack on the two things he values and writes about most: “Nature” and “the mind of man” (156, 102). He describes the unprecedented industrialization of his day as “a combined force to blunt the discriminatory powers of the mind” that will “reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor” by “the uniformity of [man’s] occupations” (124). Wordsworth’s concern explains his efforts to ignore and diminish the man-made elements of his natural scene as potential threats to his beloved wild. Further evidence of this anti-industrial perspective lies in his descriptions of the city in the poem, as he thinks back to “lonely rooms . . . 'mid the din / Of towns and cities” (27-8). In the urban center, Wordsworth only sees “darkness” and “joyless daylight” (54, 55).

Though Heaney sees the threat of industrialization against nature through a different historical paradigm than Wordsworth, he, too, is concerned about the destructive consequences of urbanization, critiquing its effects in “Changes.” Heaney’s explicit mention of the “silence” they observe at the scene suggests a contrast from their normal state and implies a criticism of the ceaseless noise of modernity (1). While Heaney’s description of the pump’s construction shows the intersection of the human and the natural, his harsh diction can be read as a forceful indictment of industry’s destructive effects on nature: “the bite of the spade that sank it, / the slithering and grumble / as the mason mixed his mortar” (4-6). “Bite” here has a particularly violent connotation. Because of Heaney’s prior experience at the pump, he “heard much that [his child] could not hear,” recalling when the pump was a busy center of activity (3). The poet’s word choice of “could not” rather than “did not” suggests the child’s inability to even imagine her father’s boyhood, when the pump was not only in
constant use but represented a relatively new technology. Such cast-iron hand-pumps were first made in the 1930s and used in agrarian communities like Heaney’s, who describes its installation as “original” (FK 6). Details such as the “bend of the [pump’s] spout” being “rustred” by years without use, and the grass surrounding the pump grown long with neglect, demonstrate society’s removal from its distant agrarian past (21). Heaney’s closing counsel to his child also provides a subtle commentary on the negative impacts of urbanization:

“Remember this. / It will be good for you to retrace this path / when you have grown away and stand at last / at the very center of the empty city” (23-6). “Grown away” suggests that with the passing of time, Heaney’s child and her generation will move increasingly further away from the rural world Heaney has loved since childhood. There is also a sense of finality in “at last,” which suggests that as society becomes increasingly modernized, the agrarian lifestyle which allows for the intersection of the human and natural will ultimately be left behind. Indeed the day will come, Heaney implies, when “the very center of the empty city” will be the only place left to “stand.” The natural world will be humanized, modernized, and made “empty,” and his child will need to mentally “retrace this path” from the city, as the physical trail into nature and the rural world of the past will be gone. When read in this way, Heaney’s poetry in general carries a quiet, implicit critique of modernization; Gravil observes that he has “quite shamelessly resisted both urban and modernist matter” (195).

While Heaney is not without concern over the impacts of modernization on nature, his accustomedness to the intersection of boundaries allows him to conflate the human and the natural. Heaney shows a deep aesthetic interest in dividing lines. This theme is profoundly connected with his identity and can be traced back to his childhood growing up
on the border between his mother’s “predominantly Protestant and loyalist village of Castledawson and his father’s generally Catholic and nationalist district of Bellaghy” (53). More than culturally different, these communities were divided along the line separating the rural from the urban. As Heaney states in his essay “Something to Write Home About,” “Castledawson was a far more official place . . . more modern, more part of the main drag.” There, “factory workers came and went to the sound of the factory horn.” In contrast, in his father’s Bellaghy, “their dwellings were thatched rather than slated, their kitchens had open fires rather than polished stoves, the houses stood in the middle of the fields rather than in a terrace, and the people who lived in them listened to the cattle roaring rather than the horn blowing” (52). The intersection of these two contrasting communities, cultures, and economies is central to Heaney’s identity; as he notes in his poem “Terminus,” “I grew up in between” (16). As the poem’s title indicates, Heaney identifies with Terminus, the Roman God of boundaries, who is divided between the borders of the earth and the boundlessness of the heavens. In “Alphabets,” as Michael Parker points out, Heaney defines himself as an astronaut floating between two worlds (14). Indeed, what Helen Vendler has termed “a sense of dividedness” stemming from his background permeates Heaney’s entire work (19). Thus, Heaney is not only comfortable with the intersection of the human and the natural, for him it is a source of inspiration and identity. Blurring the division between them allows him to see the man-made in the natural and the natural in the man-made. The intersection also enables him to go back and forth between the two, as he is still able to reoccupy his former place in nature after returning from the city. A photograph Parker took of the Mossbawn pump, included in his biography of Heaney, reveals a wire fence standing a few inches behind it.
Considering that the poet’s father, Patrick Heaney, said it was “the very same” as his son “had written” when he showed Parker the pump, this fence would have been there when Heaney wrote “Changes” (269). The placement of the fence makes the pump a site where boundaries meet, providing further insight into Heaney’s merging of the human and the natural while at the scene.

Fig. 1. Taken from Parker, Michael. *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993. 269.

Another social boundary dividing the two poets are their gendered views of nature, as Heaney portrays the natural world as feminine and Wordsworth’s view in the poem, by comparison, is more feminine. Burke considered vastness a central element of sublimity. Accordingly, Wordsworth emphasizes a masculine grandeur in his description of the natural scene throughout the poem, attributing his past inspiration to “steep and lofty cliffs” (5). His is a broad and all-encompassing view of the natural scene which includes the entire
“landscape” and the “sky” (8). He also describes the River Wye, the woods, mountains, meadows, ocean, and the sun as he returns to the specific spot. With his emphasis on nature’s magnitude Wordsworth depicts the scene as masculine. By contrast, Heaney’s vision of nature is distinctly feminine. Rather than describing each feature of an immense landscape, Heaney’s focus is on a bird and her egg. The description of his perspective as a “bird’s eye view” emphasizes the smallness of his subject (12). Nature in the poem is also made explicitly female by the fact that the bird is a mother, guarding her egg, serving as a maternal and feminine symbol as well as a natural image. The women from Heaney’s memory who formerly used the pump are described as birds with “ruffled wings,” again linking nature with femininity (8). Rather than lauding the magnitude of the setting as Wordsworth does, Heaney is quietly moved by its beauty and adopts a “tender” demeanor toward the bird, covering its shelter “as gently as [he] could” (17, 23). As with other boundaries in his poetry, Heaney combines the female and male elements of the setting in the image of the pump which again serves as an important symbol for the intersection of borders. His feminine view of nature is consistent with Parker’s interpretation of the pump itself as an important “fecund presence” in the poet’s consciousness that “with its phallic shape and life-giving water . . . symbolizes the creative union of his parents, the male and female” (6). Thus the landscape itself is feminine and the man-made object that has been inserted into the earth is masculine. The sexual element Parker identifies in the pump is further illustrated by Heaney’s recollection of the pump’s construction in his essay “Mossbawn,” as he describes “men coming to sink the shaft of the pump and digging through that seam of sand down into the bronze riches of the gravel that soon began to puddle with the spring water” (FK 6).
The symbolically sexual union of the pump and the earth in the poem, however, suggests more than the “creative energy” Parker attributes to it, as it also carries subtle and sinister undertones of the national differences separating the Irish poet from England's Wordsworth (6). The cast iron Mossbawn pump is almost certainly one of the British made hand pumps that were heavily produced and exported in the 1930s and 40s. This detail allows us to view the pump itself as a symbol of the British presence in Ireland, corresponding with Heaney’s colonial metaphor of both sexual conquest and a desecration of nature in his poem “Act of Union.” Heaney personifies England as the poem’s speaker, the “imperially / Male . . . tall kingdom over your shoulder” that is addressing Ireland—his female rape victim (15-6, 9).

He describes the sexual and imperial “act of union” as “a gash breaking open in the ferny bed” and attributes “the rending process in the colony / [to] The battering ram, the boom burst” (4, 17-8). The victim’s “strechmarked body, the big pain” is left “raw, like opened ground” (27-8). The sexual, and by implication national, symbolism of the pump’s union with nature is Heaney’s way of accounting for the contrasting nationalities of himself and Wordsworth.

Heaney’s insistence on this distinction is evident in his more lighthearted verse epistle An Open Letter written in response to Penguin Books’ inclusion of his work in an anthology of Contemporary British Poetry in which he states, “Be advised / My passport’s green. / No glass of ours was ever raised / To toast The Queen” (6-8). Heaney has written in an essay that “the feminine element for me involves the matter of Ireland and the masculine strain is drawn from involvement with English literature” (P 132). As Elmer Andrews states, this national division “underlies two different responses to landscape;” one that is, in Heaney’s words, “lived, illiterate, and unconscious” and one that is “learned, literate, and conscious” (P 131,
qtd. in Andrews 374). True to form, Heaney straddles this divide in his poetry, torn between the opposing influences of his rural Irish heritage and his British literary education, as the “illiterate self was tied to the little hills and earthed in the stony grey soil and the literate self . . . pined for the ‘City of the Kings’ where art, music, and letters, were the real things” (P 137). The same ambivalence is evident in the artistic neutrality Heaney maintained during the “Troubles” of Northern Ireland between the Protestant Loyalists and Catholic Nationalists.

In addition to these differences the two poets’ view nature contrastingly in terms of past and present. For Heaney, nature is intimately connected with the past, allowing him to reoccupy his former position and access past experiences at the pump, whereas for Wordsworth nature is inexorably tied to the present. This contrast is emphasized by Heaney’s narration of the poem in the past tense as opposed to Wordsworth’s use of present tense. As the natural scene leads Heaney into hindsight, the Wye landscape keeps Wordsworth riveted on the present moment. Heaney’s ability to access the past through nature is evident in his poetry exploring his childhood through the County Derry landscape. Poems from the volume Death of a Naturalist relate Heaney’s boyhood experiences in the past tense, as childhood memories of a grown man. “Personal Helicon” and “Follower” make this hindsight explicit as the end of each poem moves away from the childlike narration of the past, and emphasizes the retrospective outlook of the adult speaker in the present tense. The County Derry landscape enables Heaney to make the shift between past and present, reminding him that “as a child they could not keep [him] from wells” and how he “wanted to grow up and plough” like his father (1, 17). His native countryside also allows him to access Ireland’s ancient past. Poems from the volume North reflect Heaney’s fascination with the Irish bog as a portal into
the past. “Bogland” notes “astounding” finds, perfectly preserved and dug up “out of the peat,” such as the ancient “Great Irish Elk” and “butter” over “a hundred years” old (10, 11, 13, 14). The “wet centre” of the bog is described as “bottomless,” going back “millions of years” (28, 19). Heaney’s fellow Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh shares his interest, saying that “a turf bog is a history of the world from the time of Noah” (qtd. in Parker 88). Heaney describes his thought process that led to the poem: “I began to get this idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that had happened to it...Moreover, since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own poetry, I had a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland” (P 54-5).

Through landscape, Heaney is able to unearth the ancient past as presently pertinent, just as the butter and elk were exhumed from the bog perfectly preserved. Thus, for Heaney, the past can be brought back or resurrected by the land.

The natural scene in “Changes” also emphasizes Heaney’s ability to access the past through nature. Again, the fact that the grass around the pump has grown long and that the once busy pump is now “rusted” emphasize the passing of time since Heaney’s earlier visits, suggesting that like Wordsworth, he has been “absent long” and his return to the scene signifies a journey back into his past (24). As going down into the ground, for Heaney, represents going back in time as in “Bogland,” where “every layer they strip / Seems camped on before,” the pump itself is also a symbol of the past (25-6). Heaney’s recollection of the pump’s construction depicts a similar descent as he recalls the “sink [of] the shaft of the pump . . . digging through that seam of sand.” “That pump,” he writes, “marked an original descent into earth” (FK 6). Thus the pump and the landscape surrounding it, like the bogland, provide
Wordsworth’s failure to recover his past connection with nature in the present is the central crisis of “Tintern Abbey.” Heaney has described the conflict between past and present in Wordsworth’s poetry, saying that he “was always at his best while struggling to . . . reconcile the sense of incoherence and disappointment forced upon him by time and circumstance with those intimations of harmonious communion promised by his childhood visions” (xii). The poet’s use of present tense in the poem formally emphasizes his inability to escape the uninspired moment and restore his past experience. Wordsworth finally finds some “present pleasure,” knowing that “in this moment there is life and food / For future years,” looking to the future as he is unable to access the past (66, 67-8). This fleeting comfort finally comes in part by reliving his past through his sister as she begins to experience his former connection with nature: “In thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart, and read / My former pleasures in the shooting lights of thy wild eyes” (120-3). Wordsworth then offers a “prayer” that this momentary window into the past will be lasting: “Oh! yet a little while / May I behold in thee what I once was” (125, 123-4). As Thomas Rand points out, Wordsworth’s plea “acknowledges the inevitability of change and the temporal nature of the vision” as he realizes that this moment will become part of his inaccessible past in nature all too soon (151). This realization is evident in the poem’s closing lines: Wordsworth speaks about the present while looking to the future as if the moment had already become part of the past, saying, “We stood together” and “this green pastoral landscape were to me / More dear, both for themselves, and for thy sake” (155, 162-3). The poem’s setting further emphasizes Wordsworth’s inability to access the past. Unlike Heaney’s scene at Mossbawn, the Wye
landscape is unchanged from his last visit—representing a perpetual present from which he cannot escape. Paradoxically, because the scene is unaltered by time Wordsworth cannot access the past with his imagination, as he is prevented from drawing on “the picture of the mind” to revisit former experiences as he does in the city (64).

**Memory and the Poetic Imagination**

While Heaney and Wordsworth have contrasting views of nature’s relationship with past and present, both realize that their present experiences differ from their memories of the past. Though Wordsworth finds the banks of the Wye unchanged from five years earlier, he returns to the place a different person from when he last visited. Noting this difference, he states that he is “changed, no doubt, from what [he] was, when first / [he] came among these hills” (69-75). When Wordsworth last came to the Wye, he was not consciously trying to connect with the natural world, but was “like a man / flying from something he dreads;” his natural inspiration was indeed “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (73-4, 123). Now as he “sought the thing he loved,” deliberately pursuing his former connection with nature, he loses it, lamenting that “that time is past / all its aching joys are now no more” (86-87). His earlier experience could not be recreated, as he accurately states, the “pleasure of [his] boyish days” are “all gone by” (76-77). Similarly, Heaney’s experience differs from that of his last visit, which in turn was not the same as his earlier memories of the pump’s construction or of the land before it was built. The discrepancy between his past and present experience is suggested by the title of the poem: “Changes.” Like Wordsworth, Heaney returns to the rural scene changed from his earlier days, as indicated by the physical changes in the rural setting and the presence of his child, who presumably has not visited the pump before.
Although the poets’ present visits are different from their past, each has preserved earlier experiences in memory, which can be restored through recollection. Both writers portray the process of internalizing their experiences in nature in multiple poems. In “The Peninsula” Heaney’s speaker demonstrates this exercise. Initially, he “just drive[s] . . . around the peninsula” so that later, when he is “in the dark again” he can “recall” the earlier memory, using it to “uncode all landscapes” (1, 2, 18). Heaney guides his daughter through the same process in “Changes,” telling her to “remember this” experience so that she may draw upon it in the future from “the empty city” (23, 26). Wordsworth shows this practice in “The Tables Turned,” “let[ting] Nature be [his] teacher” with “a heart / That watches and receives” (16, 31-2). In “Tintern Abbey” he follows the same method, clinging to “this moment” as its “present pleasure” contain “life and food / For future years” (67-8). When Heaney arrives at the natural scene in “Changes,” his memory and perception mix as the proximity of the pump leads him to reminisce. Heaney hears internally the sounds of the pump’s construction. He also sees with his mind’s eye the women’s white buckets “like flashes on their ruffled wings” (8). This visual and auditory memory of the natural scene recalls Wordsworth’s description of “the mighty world / Of eye and ear, both what they half create, / And what perceive” (108-10). The perception of the eye, the actual pump, is combined with the creation of the ear, the sounds from his memory. These memories, as Wordsworth writes, pass into Heaney’s mind in “tranquil restoration” and correspond with the “forms of beauty” (32, 25) described in “Tintern Abbey.” Similarly, the mental images of the natural scene, rather than nature itself, have brought Wordsworth “that serene and blessed mood” and “elevated thoughts” (29, 98). Wordsworth’s mental images, like Heaney’s, are half-created, half-perceived and can be
recalled without being physically present at the location. Wordsworth has turned to these memories for comfort “oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din / Of towns and cities” (27-8). Likewise, Heaney speaks from his own experience when he tells the child to “remember this” experience so that she can mentally “retrace this path” from the “centre of the empty city” (23, 26).

Paradoxically, Wordsworth’s present loss of his link with nature does, in fact, inspire him and lead to his reconnection with the natural world. When nature ceases to impress thoughts and feelings on Wordsworth, he laments the loss of his source of creativity; in contemplating its absence, he finds his new Helicon. He realizes that recollection of past inspiration is equal to the experience itself: “for such loss I would believe / Abundant recompense” (90-1). In this way, nature inspires him by not inspiring him. Wordsworth’s epiphany that his inspiration was not strictly in nature, but rather “in the mind,” would not have come without revisiting the scene and finding the connection missing (102). Thus his experience, agonizing as it is initially, does reestablish a sort of connection with nature and lead to an inspired poem. This paradox corresponds with Wordsworth’s own view of a poet as one who has “a disposition to be affected by absent things as if they were present” (125). The absence of Wordsworth’s connection with nature is ultimately present in his composition of “Tintern Abbey,” as he realizes that he can access his inspiration in other circumstances. When in the city, he can turn to the natural world “in spirit” (58). Indeed, it was during his time there, far and “absent long” from the Lake District, that he experienced “sensations sweet” and the “serene and blessed mood” of nature’s inspiration (24, 43).

This theme of the presence of absence is also reflected in the abbey itself. Thomas
Brennan interprets the abbey as a metaphor for Wordsworth’s self-understanding, saying, “Just as the visual culture that was England in the late Middle Ages cannot be recreated today, so Wordsworth knows that he cannot resurrect his early life experiences from the bits and pieces that memory yields” (15). In his reading, the abbey’s central significance is as a symbolic site of change, suggesting the irrevocable transformation that Wordsworth has undergone. This reading, insightful as it is, does not satisfactorily account for the absence of the abbey in the poem, which is only mentioned in its title. John Peters’s reading explains the abbey’s omission as indicative of its reclamation by the natural surroundings. Though the abbey has become a dilapidated ruin, because it has been taken back into nature, it has become regenerative—giving new “life grown out of death” (78), much like the pump in “Changes.” Wordsworth does not mention the abbey, he argues, because he does not see it—the abbey has become a part of the natural scene. The only problem with this reading is that if Wordsworth does not see the abbey, he would not have made it the title of his poem; it might rather have been called “Lines Written on the Banks of the Wye.” Wordsworth’s omission of the abbey signals his erasure of the traditional Christian salvation system it represented. By pointing out the former source of spiritual life in his title and ignoring it in the poem, Wordsworth calls attention to his faith as a “worshipper of Nature” (156). This is supported by Thomas Rand’s reading, which links Wordsworth’s language to the New Testament to highlight his “construction of a new myth of salvation” (153). What my and Peters’s interpretations share is that “the abbey’s very absence from the poem makes its presence greater” and must be part of our understanding of the text (78).

Heaney’s poetry offers a similar commentary on the presence of absence. Returning to
the pump with his child, he states, “I heard much that you could not hear” (3). Though the time of the pump’s functional state is gone, these memories are still present for Heaney and influence his experience at the scene. His counsel to his daughter to mentally “retrace this path” from the city suggests that even in his absence from Mossbawn, Heaney has been present at his “country of the mind” through memory (24, P 132). Like Wordsworth, Heaney has demonstrated “a disposition to be affected by absent things as if they were present” in other poems as well (125). Just as nature ceases to inspire Wordsworth, Heaney experiences the loss of a beloved influence in his life with the death of his mother, as described in the poem “Clearances.” Like Wordsworth, however, he finds consolation as her absence becomes as powerful as her presence. After relating his mother’s passing, Heaney writes: “The space we stood around had been emptied / Into us to keep, it penetrated / Clearances that suddenly stood open” (VII. 11-3). In the poem’s final section, this loss is connected with the chestnut tree from his childhood that had been chopped down: “I thought of walking round and round a space / Utterly empty, utterly a source / Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place” (VIII. 1-3). Like the tree, his mother’s absence becomes “a bright nowhere,” paradoxically filling and illuminating the void it created (VIII.12). Heaney elaborates on this experience in his essay “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh,” explaining that he had identified his life with the tree, as it had been planted the year he was born and “grew as [he] grew.” After it was felled, he saw the space it had formerly occupied as a “luminous emptiness” and “began to identify with that space just as years before [he] had identified with the young tree” (FK 146). This corresponds to Wordsworth’s “abundant recompense” in the loss of nature’s inspiring influence, as he had been led “from joy to joy” in discovering that
inspiration was to be found not only in nature but “in the mind of man” (91, 129, 102).

The Poets’ Social Engagement with their Companions

The lessons both poets learn about the presence of absence are passed on to their companions; an examination of Wordsworth’s interaction with Dorothy, together with Heaney’s words to his child, reveals some of the poems’ most significant similarities.

Wordsworth’s “prayer” is that he would “read / [his] former pleasure in the shooting lights / of [her] wild eyes” (121-23). While this yearning is in part due to Wordsworth’s desire to replicate the ecstasy of his past experience, he also wants Dorothy to experience the “sensations sweet” that he has known (29). He prophesies that Dorothy’s “mind / shall be a mansion for all lovely forms” in future years and that her “memory shall be as a dwelling-place / for all the sweet sounds and harmonies,” as he now realizes has been his privilege while in the city (143-4, 145-6). He then offers his “dear, dear Sister” counsel that will benefit her in the future, when he will be gone and “no more can hear [her] voice” (125, 151-2). If he is no longer with her and “if solitude, or fear, or grief / should be [her] portion,” he advises her to “remember me, and these my exhortations,” in addition to their experience on the Wye (146-7, 149-50). He knows that these recollections will bring “healing thoughts” and “tender joy” to her as they have helped him “in the darkness” and in the “joyless daylight” of the city (148-9, 54-5). By remembering Wordsworth’s experience and poetry, Dorothy will be reminded to treasure up her own memory and recall the joy she felt without physically returning to the spot or experiencing her brother’s crisis. Wordsworth gladly imparts this knowledge to his “dear, dear Friend” and finds even more happiness in helping her than he knew in his youth, as nature has “led [him] from joy to joy” (120, 128-9). Indeed,
Wordsworth’s happiness in imparting his newly acquired knowledge to his sister is a demonstration of his “love and kindness,” the “best portion of . . . [his] life” (37, 35). The joy in teaching his sister, and her experience which is beginning to mirror his own, make the “green pastoral landscape” to Wordsworth “more dear, both for themselves and for [her] sake” (161, 163).

In much the same way, Heaney’s advice to his child demonstrates his care for her. As with Wordsworth, Heaney’s experience is “more dear” to him because of his child’s presence and “for [her] sake” (163). In turn, Heaney wants her to remember the experience, both for itself and because of him, as the special spot from her father’s boyhood will be more meaningful to her by its association with him. Heaney’s affection for his daughter is further suggested by the “tender” tone he uses in speaking to her (23). His paternal guardianship is also implied in the images of the mother bird protecting her egg in the “citadel” of the pump, her defensive “tail feathers splayed” in maternal vigilance for her egg; the “ruffled wings” of the women in his memory also associate birds with maternity (16, 22, 8). Heaney’s manner of covering the bird’s shelter “as gently as [he] could,” his “tender” voice, and his bird-like position effectively feminize him as the speaker and make him a part of the feminine landscape. This feminization creates a parallel between Heaney and the mother bird (17, 23).

Heaney realizes that just as the bird must eventually leave, exposing an unprotected “single egg, pebbly white,” he would not always be there to guide his child—a recognition that influences his advice to her (20). Following their “tender” experience with the bird, Heaney tells the child, “Remember this” (23). The importance of this counsel is highlighted formally as it marks a line break and the end of a sentence. Heaney encourages his child to impress the
scene upon her mind as it is now, knowing from experience that both the child and the setting will change in the future. The poetic guide wants his pupil to remember the place and her experience so that she can draw upon it in future times of need, saying, “It will be good for you to retrace this path / when you have grown away and stand at last / at the very centre of the empty city” (24-26). After his return trip to the pump, Heaney advocates a mental rather than a physical retracing of steps, as his child will need the mental escape the most “when [she] stand[s] at last” in the center of the “empty city” (24, emphasis added). This preference of the journey of the mind over a physical pilgrimage is due to Heaney’s experience of returning to the natural setting from his memory. Like Wordsworth, Heaney has had to recall his experience in nature “in lonely rooms” amidst “the din / of towns and cities,” and sees “what [he] once was” in his child (124, 27-8). Heaney prophesies that she will “[grow] away,” suggesting that as she loses some of her connection with nature with the passing of time, she will need to rely on her memory (25).

Both Wordsworth and Heaney predict a future recollection for their pupils. Thirty-three years later, Dorothy recorded the fulfillment of her brother’s prophecy in her poem “Thoughts on my Sickbed.” As Dorothy is confined to a bed in the poem, where she would spend the last twenty-six years of her life as an invalid, her memory is stirred by the “preclusive sounds” of spring (3). Just as the sight of the pump restores memories to Heaney, the sounds of early spring trigger in Dorothy’s mind recollection of past excursions in nature. One sound she notes is “the caroling thrush on his naked perch, / towering above the budding trees” (19-20). While Dorothy sees a male bird, Heaney’s child, coincidentally, has “a bird’s eye view of a [female] bird,” underscoring Wordsworth’s masculine view of nature as
opposed to Heaney’s feminine portrayal and emphasizing that no two experiences in nature are the same and therefore an experience cannot be replicated (12). At this point in her life, Dorothy is far removed from Tintern Abbey, saying, “Our cottage-hearth no longer our home, / companions of nature were we” (21-22). Now confined “in this lonely room,” much like Wordsworth turned to nature “in lonely rooms” amidst “the din of towns and cities,” she mentally changes locations (48, 28). “No prisoner in this lonely room, I saw the green banks of the Wye / recalling thy prophetic words—bard, brother, friend from infancy! / No need of motion . . . I thought of nature’s loveliest scenes / and with memory I was there” (45-8, 49, 51-2). As the bard predicted, Dorothy’s mind became “a mansion for all lovely forms” and her memory a sweet “dwelling place” (144, 145). Although bedridden, Dorothy remembers her experience and her brother’s “exhortations” and “[treads] the hills again” (44). In her hour of difficulty, she too draws upon experiences in nature from her memory and finds “healing thoughts” of “tender joy” in her return to her “country of the mind” (148-9, P 132).

While Heaney’s influence on his child is more subtle, some interesting evidence suggests that he has, indeed, “remember[ed] this” experience. Nowhere to my knowledge is it recorded which of Heaney’s three children accompany the poet in “Changes.” A 1972 photograph shows Heaney, his wife Marie, and his two sons, Michael and Christopher, visiting Broagh near Mossbawn. It is likely that more than one of Heaney’s children accompanied him to the pump, either together or separately. It is also conceivable that they saw a bird on multiple occasions, as Parker notes that the pump was again being occupied when he visited. Perhaps his young children wanted to visit the pump in order to see the bird.
The poet could have repeated his instruction to each of his children on multiple occasions to remember their experience, as he wanted all of them to have childhood experiences in nature as he had. Heaney’s prophecy seems to have been fulfilled in the work of his son, Christopher, an award-winning Belfast photographer. In contrast to his father’s fixation on the rural, Christopher Heaney’s subject matter is distinctly urban. Indeed, he seems to have “grown away” from the rural settings he knew as a child, and works from the “very centre of the . . . city,” as much of his work is for corporate clients or reflects the urban imagery of Belfast (25, 26). Still, one piece entitled “Plural Creative” demonstrates his effort to “retrace this path,” recalling his father’s poem on multiple levels. The piece presents four juxtaposed images of a chair; two of them taken in a decorated room and two in front of different natural backdrops. The fact that the chair is the same in both man-made and natural environments recalls Heaney’s ability to access nature from the urban environment through memory. The
two images in the natural setting parallel Heaney’s conflation of the natural with the human in “Changes,” as the chair’s blue upholstery blends in with water behind it. The pattern of jagged lines on one chair and thin vertical lines on the other reflect both the mountains and the long grass in the background. The boundaries between the natural and human are further emphasized in the photographs as one shows the chair near the edge of an asphalt road which crosses a lake, and the other is placed partly on a gravel path and partly in the wild grass. In both photos, the man-made chair organizes and centers the landscape by its contrast, mirroring Heaney’s “Changes” and calling to mind Wallace Stevens’s “Anecdote of the Jar” as well as the man-made imagery in “Tintern Abbey” which marks Wordsworth’s location, though he attempts to suppress it.
Despite these similarities, the two poets’ relationships with their companions in the poem are fundamentally different. Until the final stanza, Wordsworth gives the impression that he is alone at the Wye, only mentioning the presence of his sister Dorothy toward the poem’s end: “For thou art with me, here, upon the banks / Of this fair river” (118-9). Wordsworth makes his “dearest friend” conspicuously absent for most of the poem and portrays his return to the Wye as a “solitary walk” (139). While Wordsworth ignores his sister, Heaney, by contrast, is careful to include his child throughout “Changes,”
acknowledging her immediately in the first line: “As you came with me” (1). Heaney communicates with her during the experience as well, telling her to “gently [unroof]” the lid of the pump before giving his closing counsel (18). The fact that Heaney addresses his child three times in the poem, compared to Wordsworth’s single though extended acknowledgement of Dorothy in the much longer “Tintern Abbey,” emphasizes that Heaney is more focused on his child than is Wordsworth on his sister. While Wordsworth takes the reader deep into his own psyche, Heaney seems to follow more closely what Wordsworth sought for his poetry in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that is, “to keep [his] Reader in the company of flesh and blood” (124).

While Heaney includes his child, their relationship has an element of quiet isolation as the two arrive at the scene “in silence,” allowing each to have their own individual experience with nature (1). While Heaney includes the child in the experience, he does not speak any more than necessary, observing the silence through most of the poem. This decision not to speak corresponds with Michael Parker’s account of Heaney’s excursions with the Irish painter, T.P. Flanagan. During their travels through the Donegal bogland there was “an unvoiced decision not to discuss the landscape,” as each recognized that he needed to “preserve his isolation.” Parker reveals that Flanagan was unwilling to show Heaney even the outline of a sketch, as it might hinder the “individual imagination’s wrestle with its subject” (87). While Heaney’s silence at the poem’s opening would seem to indicate his attention to his own connection with nature, it actually allows his child to experience the moment in nature for himself. Heaney’s instruction to his child in the poem’s penultimate couplet to “remember this” as “it will be good for you to retrace this path” emphasizes the importance of the child’s
individual experience (23-4). He ensures that his child is an active participant rather than a spectator, urging him to uncover the bird’s “citadel” himself (16). Heaney’s silence is a mark of kindness and assumed equality with his child, allowing her to experience the scene for herself, rather than through him. Their quiet experience seems to bring father and child closer together. Similarly, he describes his isolation with Flanagan as communal: “I think I did the ‘Bogland’ poem independently, but the whole feeling of shared pleasure in the landscape, the bleakness and the bareness was a shared one” (89). Heaney’s dedication of “Bogland” to Flanagan underscores their silent social connection during the experience. Furthermore, Heaney’s emphasis in the poem is as much cultural as physical, as he compares the Irish bogland to the American prairie, suggesting the greater depth of Irish history. Indeed, most of his poems about the bogland are primarily concerned with ancient and modern societies.

While Heaney is loathe to say any more than he needs to in “Changes” and in other experiences in nature, Wordsworth seems unable to stop speaking in “Tintern Abbey,” carefully directing Dorothy’s response to the setting. Rather than allowing Dorothy her own independent relationship with the setting, Wordsworth is closely involved, micromanaging her experience and acting as a mediator between her and nature: “Therefore let the moon / Shine on thee in thy solitary walk” (138-9). Wordsworth’s active presence makes the description of Dorothy’s experience as “solitary” strangely ironic. In the last of his long and effusive stanzas, he advises Dorothy, “Remember me, / And these my exhortations,” substituting his poetry for nature and for Dorothy’s individual experience (149-50).

Remaining at the center of his advice for this sister, he asks, “Wilt thou then forget” that “we stood together; and that I, so long / A worshipper of Nature, hither came, / Unwearied in
that service” (153, 155-8). Wordsworth’s careful controlling of Dorothy’s experience corresponds with his view of the poet as a man “endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind” (125). In Wordsworth’s mind, Dorothy needed a gifted poet to interpret her experience for her.

This difference in the two poets’ treatment of their companions can be partially explained by what critics have identified as Heaney’s communal as compared to Wordsworth’s individual poetic focus. Heaney not only includes his child from the beginning of “Changes,” but emphasizes community and social connections throughout the poem. All of the past experiences he recalls at the pump involve other people, as he mentions the men who installed the pump and the women who came to it for water. Similarly, his present experience at the pump is shared with his child, as the two come together at the “tender” natural scene, and Heaney imparts his fatherly counsel to her. Even the bird that Heaney and his child witness is not alone but is protecting her egg—corresponding with Heaney’s own parental care of his child. The pump itself is a site of community for Heaney, as he explains in his essay “Mossbawn:” “five households drew water from it” (3). Contrastingly, Wordsworth’s experience at the Wye and his memories of his past there are fundamentally individual. From his contrasting of his past inspiration and present struggle to his realization that his former connection with nature partially came from his own mind, Wordsworth himself remains the clear focus of the poem. Hugh Houghton supports this difference in the two poets’ emphasis, by noting a contrast in their “hiding places of power;” Heaney’s “hiding places are communal and cultural while Wordsworth’s are personal” (69). O’Brien also points to Heaney’s emphasis
of “the rejuvenating qualities of shared experience” in the “Glanmore Sonnets” as “the cottage and its landscape conspire benignantly to bring husband and wife together” (42-3). In contrast, Marjorie Levinson points out Wordsworth’s individual emphasis through the poem’s setting, interpreting the abbey as a symbol of Wordsworth’s “devotion,” “individual and private rather than communal and collective” (29).

The Poets’ Use of the “Self as Subject”

Let me hasten to add here that I am not suggesting that Wordsworth is an egotist or that Heaney is somehow a better person than his predecessor; indeed, the first explanation of Wordsworth’s intense focus on himself lies more in the literary movement he helped create than in his personality. His staged concentration on the self demonstrates a knowledge of the cost of Romanticism’s focus on the individual mind. Wordsworth seems painfully aware of the price of a genre in which all he can write about is his own mind, recognizing the potential for social detachment and egotism. In the poem’s first stanza, Wordsworth describes “wreaths of smoke / Sent up in silence” and speculates that it comes from “some hermit’s cave, where by his fire / The hermit sits alone” (18-9, 22-3). The redundant description of a “hermit” being “alone” emphasizes Wordsworth’s preoccupation with isolation. Wordsworth resembles the hermit in that he has lost his connection with nature and becomes isolated from his sister in seeking to regain it. This realization leads to his panic, signaled by the first stanza break immediately following the line. In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth addresses the need for the reader of Romantic literature to break from the traditional neo-classical forms in order to understand and appreciate a new class of writing with a social metaphor: “If I propose to furnish him with new friends he must abandon his old friends” (128). This trade-off extends
to the poet, abandoning not only old literary forms, but as Wordsworth recognizes as a possible implication, literally abandoning friends and loved ones for the sake of the individual relationship with nature.

The contrasting levels of social engagement with others can also be explained by the discrepancy in life experience of the two poets. As both poems emphasize that perception is shaped by experience, the older Heaney displays a different perspective than the much younger Wordsworth. Heaney reminds readers of Wordsworth’s youth when he wrote his most famous works in his essay “The Triumph of Spirit:”

Faced with the almost geological sobriety of works such as "Tintern Abbey", "Michael", "The Ruined Cottage", and the celebrated "spots of time" in The Prelude, it is easy to forget that they are the work of a young man. These poems . . . were written while he was still in his 20s. Yet the note is sure, the desire to impress absent, and the poems thoroughly absorbed in their own unglamorous necessities (viii-ix).

While Heaney praises the young Wordsworth’s poetry, he also seems conscious of his youthful focus on himself. Heaney is especially attuned to this self-absorption as he experienced it himself as a young poet. Heaney’s “Personal Helicon,” written when the poet was, like Wordsworth, “still in his 20s,” recounts his childhood experience at another natural scene—an old well at Mossbawn—comparable to the setting of “Changes.” While these poems share a similar setting, the younger Heaney shows much more of a preoccupation with the self than does his later poem. “Personal Helicon” begins, “As a child, they could not keep me from wells / And old pumps” (1-2). Heaney then describes what drew him to the wells: “the smells / of waterweed, fungus and dank moss” and “the rich crash when a bucket /
Plummeted down at the end of a rope” (3-4, 6-7). But what Heaney found most compelling in the wells was the semblance they offered of himself, as their “echoes gave back your own call” and his reflection in the water is mentioned in four of the poem’s five stanzas (13). This suggests that Heaney, like Wordsworth, loved hearing his own poetic voice in its developing stages and had a youthful fascination with what he termed in The Essential Wordsworth “the self as subject” (4). The poem’s final stanza shows a playful separation of the young man from this childhood egocentrism, suggesting that, like Wordsworth, the young poet is conscious of the speaker’s narrow self-absorption: “Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime, to stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring / Is beneath all adult dignity” (21-3). The final sentence, however, reveals that the poem itself provides a parallel reflection and represents the same self-exploration: “I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (23-4).

While Heaney remains, as he describes Wordsworth, “a finder and a keeper of the self as subject,” with experience has come an expanded poetic focus more concerned with the people around him. This broadened perspective is suggested by his clear inclusion of his child in “Changes,” published when the poet was 45 (4). Details from Heaney’s personal life, as well as poetry, reflect this expanded focus. Explaining the purpose behind his family’s move to County Wicklow, Heaney revealed his widening familial focus in an interview with Bel Mooney: "I wanted the kids to have that sort of wild animal life that I had . . . and I suppose I didn’t want to lose that in myself” (qtd. in Parker 257). Eventually, however, Heaney foresaw that “the teenage years of the children” would be “slightly disconsolate” in Wicklow, saying in an interview with John Haffenden, “I suppose that for the first time in my life, I thought of the future . . . [and] thought we’d move to Dublin” (qtd. in Parker 257). Heaney’s novel
vision of the future was distinctly familial, suggesting that with age and experience he became increasingly concerned with those around him, particularly his family.

Though only in his twenties when *Lyrical Ballads* was published, Wordsworth demonstrates a similar progression in “Tintern Abbey.” Michael Molino’s “‘Singing School: A Portrait of the Artist,’” compares Heaney’s semi-autobiographical sequence of poems, “Singing School,” which corresponds with various stages of his life and poetic development, with Wordsworth’s three stages of development in “Tintern Abbey”: “youth, adolescence, and adulthood” (12). An examination of these three stages in Wordsworth’s poem reveals the development from a youthful, narrow focus on himself to a more holistic outlook that includes those around him. In the poem’s third stanza, Wordsworth describes what Molino refers to as his “youth,” when “first / I came among these hills, when like a roe / I bounded” (69-71). It was during “the pleasures of [his] boyish days” that he was unconscious of his connection with nature, and was simply driven by “an appetite: a feeling and a love” (76, 83). His adolescence made up his five-year absence from the Wye, during which he lived in the city. This stage of development is characterized by greater contemplation and a broader view of himself, in which he becomes conscious of the “elevated thoughts” and “sense sublime” which he formerly enjoyed in nature (95). He relived these experiences “in spirit,” reliving “feelings too / Of unremembered pleasure” (30-1). The fact that some of these feelings were “unremembered” suggests that Wordsworth was aware even then that these experiences were “half-create[d]” as well as “perceive[d],” and was beginning to realize that his inspiration originated “in the mind of man” (109, 110, 102). The final stanza corresponds with Wordsworth’s last stage of adulthood, in which he is much more aware of his sister. It is in
this stanza that he first acknowledges Dorothy and discovers that by helping her experience
the natural world as he has, nature has led him “from joy to joy” (129). In the poem’s final
lines, he states that “this green pastoral landscape, [are] to me / More dear, both for
themselves, and for thy sake” (162-3). In these lines Wordsworth portrays the intersection of
the natural and the human with which he initially struggled. Thus, through Wordsworth’s
three stages of development in “Tintern Abbey,” he, like Heaney’s speaker in “Changes,” had
“learned to look on nature, not as in the hour of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes /
The still, sad music of humanity” (92-4). It is the adult Wordsworth that realizes that “the best
portion of a good man’s life; / [are] His little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and
of love” (35-7).

The formal differences between “Changes” and “Tintern Abbey” provide insight into
Heaney’s purpose for imitating Wordsworth as respectful rather than competitive. Heaney’s
poem is a mere twenty-six lines in couplets compared to Wordsworth’s one hundred sixty-
three. “Changes” is only one word compared with his predecessor’s eight word title with an
explanatory subtitle. Heaney represents nature through a bird and her small egg, which are
dwarfed by Wordsworth’s “lofty cliffs” on the banks of the Wye (5). These differences
demonstrate Heaney’s deliberate miniaturization of “Tintern Abbey,” as a way of honoring
Wordsworth. Parker’s reading of the “Glanmore Sonnets” supports this humility of purpose.
In Sonnet III, Heaney begins to compare himself and his wife to Dorothy and William in
their pastoral home in Wicklow, only to be cut off by Marie who “interrupts: / You’re not
going to compare us two . . . ?” (11-12). Parker writes, “Having recognized and voiced his
feelings of affinity with a poetic giant such as Wordsworth, he fears his own
presumptuousness. To allude, for Heaney, is to pay tribute, to claim kin, but not equality” (168). Just as he declines to develop a direct comparison in the “Glanmore Sonnets,” he withdraws from any form of competition with Wordsworth in “Changes,” but rather bows to him, crediting his poetry for its influence on his own development.

On the other hand, Heaney’s “Changes” is an extension as much as a miniaturization of “Tintern Abbey.” The brevity of Heaney’s poem compared to Wordsworth’s lengthy one also reflects that Heaney is without Wordsworth’s anxieties. While this can be attributed to differences in personal experience, historical perspective, and poetic style, there is also a sense that Heaney does not imitate Wordsworth’s panic out of respect. In his essay “Triumph of Spirit,” Heaney admiringly attributes the “wholeness and depth” of Wordsworth’s poetry as the “hard-earned reward of resolved crisis” (ix). In a sense, Heaney begins the poem “Changes” where Wordsworth leaves off in “Tintern Abbey.” He starts with the focus on his companion that Wordsworth arrives at and begins to immediately access past experiences through memory, knowing that they are only “the picture of the mind” (64). Thus, Heaney begins the poem standing on Wordsworth’s shoulders and departs from him, exploring the past rather than the present, merging instead of reinforcing boundaries between the human and natural, and including, rather than ignoring, his own companion in the revisiting. These and other differences should not be seen as a competition or critique, but as Heaney’s way of exploring his own poetic territory. His explicit imitation of Wordsworth, together with his deviation from the Romantic’s model, correspond with his view described in the poem as “a bird’s eye view of a bird” (12). It will be remembered that the bird, for Heaney, is a Wordsworthian symbol. Thus, in seeing the bird from a bird’s perspective, he writes both about Wordsworth
and like Wordsworth. As Heaney compares both himself and Wordsworth to birds, he can be seen as the bird’s egg, or Wordsworth’s poetic offspring, as well as his child’s guardian, as he has been taught and nurtured by his predecessor. As Wordsworth predicted for Dorothy, so too has Heaney “matured” as a poet. His “mind’ has become “a mansion for all lovely forms, / [His] memory . . . a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds” (143-6). While he has “remember[ed]” Wordsworth “and these [his] exhortations” (149, 150), retaining his ability to “retrace [his predecessor’s] path,” he has also “grown away” from him, progressing into his own territory and becoming an individual poet in his own right (24, 25).
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