

AGAINST EXPRESSIVISM: WORDSWORTH'S CYBERPOETICS

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William Wordsworth's famous pronouncement "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (126),¹ which first appeared in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, has long been the centerpiece of an expressivist interpretation of Wordsworthian poetics. According to this view, which still dominates critical discussion, Wordsworth saw poetry as essentially, and at its origin, an unmediated and unpremeditated outpouring of emotion that circumvents deliberate composition with little or no regard for the poet's audience. Cybernetics, the science of control and communication invented by Norbert Wiener in 1948, offers a set of conceptual tools for analyzing this statement that is fundamentally at odds with the prevailing expressivist view. In fact, adopting a cybernetic perspective leads, inevitably, to two claims, one a logical consequence of the other, that will seem, to expressivists, outrageous: first, that "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" with which the poet identifies poetry is to be conceived as taking place in his reader as well as himself, and not as the origin of the creative process but as contributing to its ultimate end, which is the experience of pleasure. Second, that for this reason, the long-standing expressivist view of Wordsworth's poetics, namely, that the poet conceived his verse as the impulsive "pressing out" of his deepest feelings, is fundamentally wrong.

From a cybernetic point of view, the place to begin any interpretation of Wordsworth's spontaneous overflows is not the Preface, where they make their first appearance, but at the beginning of the poet's first efforts to explain what he's up to in *Lyrical Ballads*: the opening sentences of the volume's 1798 Advertisement. Here, Wordsworth characterizes the "majority

of the . . . poems” in *Lyrical Ballads* as “experiments . . . written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure” (116). For a cyberneticist, everything that Wordsworth has to say about poetry in the rest of the Advertisement, as well as in the Prefaces of 1800 and 1802, depends on construing the word “experiments” correctly at the outset.

The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure. Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title. It is desirable that such readers, for their own sakes, should not suffer the solitary word Poetry, a word of very disputed meaning, to stand in the way of their gratification; but that, while they are perusing this book, they should ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents; and if the answer be favourable to the author’s wishes, that they should consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision. (116)

Note, first, the plural “experiments”: in 1798 at least,² Wordsworth was not talking about *Lyrical Ballads* as a whole, but about individual poems within it, and not even all of these, but a “majority.” He’s thinking of these individual poems as devices meant to arouse a certain kind of pleasure in their users, “poetic pleasure,” the only kind one should expect to derive from poetry. Lest readers miss the point, Wordsworth repeats the word “pleasure” at the end of this paragraph and employs a synonym and a cognate (“gratification,” “pleased”) along the way. Each of the poems in question is experimental because it represents a test or a trial of something new, something constructed out of materials drawn from a heretofore neglected source: “conversation in the middle and lower classes of society.” In short, Wordsworth conceived the word “experiment” as referring to a design test and not, as some have suggested, the test of a hypothesis about human nature.

Critical discussion of the meaning of the word “experiment” as it appears in the Advertisement of 1798 and the Preface of 1800 and

subsequently did not begin until well after the term appeared in critical discourse about the *Ballads*. Neither Mary Jacobus, in *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (1979), nor Don Bialostosky, in *Making Tales: The Poetics of Wordsworth's Lyrical Experiments* (1984), thought the meaning of "experiment" worth examining. At about the turn of the last century, however, critics began to consider the word's affiliations with self-experimentation in Romantic science and its place in the history of experimental practice from Francis Bacon to the present, including "experimental" art.

Noel Jackson and Tim Fulford in particular linked Wordsworth's use of "experiments" to the "self-experiments" conducted by the *Ballads*' co-author, Coleridge, and his associates at the Bristol Pneumatic Institution. These self-experiments were meant to test hypotheses about the natural world—specifically, the effects of various gases on the human brain—and to eventuate in reports of alterations in the self-experimenter's sensations, perceptions, and emotions. Such reports bordered, says Fulford, on poetry (89). It was "in testament" to this "culture of enquiry in Bristol," he writes, "that Wordsworth termed [his] poetry an 'experiment' in the [Advertisement] to the Bristol publication of *Lyrical Ballads*" (104). Jackson, writing earlier than Fulford but thinking along the same lines, also cites Wordsworth's use of "experiment" in the Advertisement (124) and, like Fulford, alights on the idea of "self-experiment," offering Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" as the clearest example of what he calls "the experimental lyric" (119). But the fact that Jackson enlists Coleridge's conversation poems to support a reading of Wordsworth's use of the term, and that Fulford's only example of Wordsworth's "self-experimental narratives" is "Tintern Abbey"—a poem so unlike the rest of the *Ballads* that it was probably meant to be excluded from the "majority" that Wordsworth considered "experiments"—suggests that the word's connection to Coleridge and the Bristol Pneumatic Institution is tenuous at best.

That's not to say that Wordsworth's idea of "experiment" isn't indebted to scientific writing in the late eighteenth century, or even to his friend, Coleridge. It's just that Jackson and Fulford are thinking of "experiment" specifically as a way of testing a hypothesis regarding the laws governing the behavior of natural phenomena—in this case, human behavior reduced to natural processes—in order to subsume it under a general law, often a mathematical formula or a statistical probability. At their least mathematical, such experiments might amount to little more than the observation of a particular cause and effect relationship: when people are

exposed to fresh air, it seems to invigorate them; when the “experiment” is repeated with nitrous oxide, they are exhilarated, and so on. Edward Jenner’s “experiment” with cowpox vaccine is a famous example from Wordsworth’s lifetime. Observing smallpox resistance among dairy maids, who were routinely infected with cowpox, Jenner hypothesized that cowpox vaccinations would prevent smallpox. He tested this hypothesis on May 14, 1796, by infecting James Phipps, the 8-year-old son of his gardener, with cowpox and later testing the boy’s acquired resistance to smallpox by trying to infect him with the disease, to no avail (Riedel). Benjamin Franklin’s famous “kite experiment” similarly tested a nonmathematical hypothesis, namely, that “electrical fluid” in the atmosphere was identical to that produced in the laboratory. As everyone knows, it turned out his hypothesis was correct.

In its first entry under “experiment,” however, the *OED* offers a more general definition of the term common to the era of Jenner, Franklin, and Wordsworth, as well as the present day, and probably closer to what Jacobus and Bialostosky had in mind: “The action of trying anything, or putting it to proof; a test, trial.”³ This broader meaning—a test or trial of any sort—was, and still is, current in scientific discourse regarding tests of new devices or inventions. In the field of computer science, where investigating the general laws of nature is much less important than testing new hardware or software to get the bugs out, it is paramount. For this reason, university criteria for appointment, tenure, and promotion in the sciences that typically require theoretical research must be revised in the case of computer scientists and engineers to reflect the fact that they generally test what they call “artifacts”: software, hardware, operating systems, or, in the words of the National Research Council, “processes, algorithms, mechanisms, and the like that manipulate and transform information” (15).

In short, computer scientists perform experiments on things or devices or systems designed and built by human beings for a specific purpose. They do not, as a rule, investigate the natural laws governing processes lying outside that realm. Similarly, in the medical sciences, the testing of “experimental” vaccines is the foundation of biotech research. Besides flying his kite in a thunderstorm, Franklin, as every schoolchild knows, invented the lightning rod. When he first proposed the idea to his friend Peter Collinson in a letter of March 2, 1750, he referred to it as one of several possible “experiments” he had in mind. In the letter, Franklin twice uses the word “experiments” to refer to testing hypotheses about the “electrical

fire” that are not yet “fully explained,” or about its behavior based on what he has “observed.” But the third time, at the end, he refers specifically to the series of practical “experiments” he has just described for testing specific lightning rod designs:

There is something however in the *experiments* of points, sending off, or drawing on, the electrical fire, which has not been fully explained, and which I intend to supply in my next. For the doctrine of points is very curious, and the effects of them truly wonderfull [*sic*]; and, from what I have observed on *experiments*, I am of opinion, that houses, ships, and even towns and churches may be effectually secured from the stroke of lightening [*sic*] by their means; for if, instead of the round balls of wood or metal, which are commonly placed on the tops of the weathercocks, vanes or spindles of churches, spires or masts, there should be put a rod of iron 8 or 10 feet in length, sharpen’d gradually to a point like a needle, and gilt to prevent rusting, or divided into a number of points, which would be better—the electrical fire would, I think, be drawn out of a cloud silently, before it could come near enough to strike; only a light would be seen at the point, like the sailors corpusante. This may seem whimsical, but let it pass for the present, until I send the *experiments* at large. (Franklin, “2 March”; italics added)

Later, in another letter to Collinson written in September 1753, Franklin applies the word “experiments” specifically to his first recorded use of the lightning rod:

In September 1752, I erected an Iron Rod to draw the Lightning down into my House, in order to make some *Experiments* on it, with two Bells to give Notice when the Rod should be electrified. A Contrivance obvious to every Electrician.

(Franklin, “September”; italics added)

Likewise, John Fothergill, Franklin’s friend and editor, uses the word in reference to the lightning rod invention in the Preface to his 1751 edition of Franklin’s *Letters and Papers*:

From the similar effects of lightening [*sic*] and electricity our author has been led to make some probable conjectures on the cause of the former; and at the same time, to propose some rational *experiments* in order to secure

ourselves, and those things on which its force is often directed, from its pernicious effects; a circumstance of no small importance to the publick, and therefore worthy of the utmost attention. (Fothergill; italics added)

When Franklin attached the first lightning rod to his home in September 1752, he already knew that lightning and electricity were one and the same, and that electricity sought the ground. He'd tested that general hypothesis in June, with the kite experiment. In the "experiment" with the lightning rod, however, the hypothesis being tested was, simply, that such a device would work. If it hadn't (and Franklin somehow escaped being incinerated in his own home), the inventor might have tried a different shape, a thicker conductor, or a different material. That is, he would have performed further design tests of this sort until he'd achieved success. Thomas Edison's famous "experiments" with light bulb filaments and storage batteries at Menlo Park also conform to this more practical idea of "experiment" as design testing. In both cases, Edison was engaging in a simple, if tediously protracted, series of trials, exhausting hundreds or (according to some accounts) thousands of different materials and designs before achieving success. Was he testing a hypothesis about the laws of electromagnetism? No. He was experimenting with their practical application.⁴

In *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Science and Literature* (2013), Robert Mitchell takes the long view of Wordsworth's meaning, tracing the fortunes of "experiment" from the Baconian scientific revolution down to our own time and singling out the *Lyrical Ballads* itself as the first real "artistic experiment." Mitchell comes closest to a cybernetic view of Wordsworth's experiments when he says, "the poems were to be understood as technologies for experiments that would take place only in those 'performances' of the poems that each reader makes for him- or herself" (26). That said, Mitchell's notion of readerly "performances" has more in common with the Bristol Pneumatic Institution's "self-experiments" than with Franklin's or Edison's design trials. It's the poet, not the reader, who's testing something new, namely, the new kind of poem he has invented. To say that Wordsworth's readers are performing these experiments is equivalent to mistaking the person test-tasting a new flavor of yogurt for the person who invented it, or a lab rat for the medical researcher injecting it with a new vaccine.

It's easy to be misled into thinking that Wordsworth conceived his poems as tests of general hypotheses about human nature by his referring,

in both Prefaces, to the “laws of our nature.” The poet says, early on, that his “principal object” in *Lyrical Ballads* is “to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them . . . the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement” (122–24)—emotional excitement, presumably. Well and good: one hears Coleridge channeling David Hartley in the background, while Wordsworth moves his lips, and expects, perhaps, a treatise in associationist psychology. But “tracing” these laws is not the same as discovering them. In fact, the word suggests they are already known and only in need of demonstration or accentuation. Nor is “tracing” them telling us anything new about them, as laws. It’s the “*manner* in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement,” and not the laws themselves, that Wordsworth is “chiefly” concerned with, or so he tells us, and that manner is unique to each person or kind of person. That’s the point of writing a poem about the event, rather than a scientific report: these laws of association create different patterns in different people in different states and degrees of excitement, and the poet’s job is to let us see these laws at work in as wide an array of temperaments and experiences of life as possible. He aims not to generalize from the empirical evidence of many experiences, but to particularize the general through each. A couple of pages later Wordsworth restates his “purpose” as the attempt “to *illustrate* the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement” (126, italics added). “Illustrate,” like “tracing,” again suggests that the poet will foreground the unique effects of well-known general laws by means of particular examples. Snowflakes and frost at midnight both “illustrate” the laws governing phase transitions in hydrogen oxide from a gaseous to a solid state—known as “desublimation.” But no two of these “illustrations,” either snowflakes or patterns of frost on a windowpane, are identical.

“Tracing” or “illustrating” these laws is, says Wordsworth, his “principal object,” but he has many other objects and purposes in writing *Lyrical Ballads*, which he elaborates in the 1802 Preface, among them, jettisoning “poetic diction” (131, 145) in favor of “a selection of language really used by men” and choosing “incidents and situations from common life” in order “to throw over them a certain colouring of the imagination” (123). Looming above all of these, however, as the final end to which each object or purpose contributes, is the very first “purpose” Wordsworth announces in the Advertisement of 1798, and to which he returns repeatedly in the Prefaces of 1800 and 1802: giving pleasure, a word that, along with its

cognates and synonyms—“pleasing,” “delight,” “enjoyment,” “gratification”—appears over seventy times in each version of the Preface.⁵ In light of this overriding end, the words “principal object” might better be construed in the sense of “immediate” than of “ultimate.” If the poet’s immediate “objects” and “purposes” are not, as he originally puts it, “adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure,” they are nugatory.

The poetic pleasure at which all poems should aim is achieved, Wordsworth believes, when the reader, and not just the poet, experiences what he calls a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Poetry, in other words, is to be conceived as an event and not a thing. Poems are things—“experimental” things—but poetry, for Wordsworth, depends on a chain of transmission in which the poetic device is but one part. To put it in cybernetic terms, poetry’s spontaneous overflows occur only when the “communicative system” comprising the poet as “sender,” the poetic device as “medium,” and the reader as “receiver” succeeds in conveying to the reader a cumulative series of “messages” meant to impart what a cyberneticist would call “information”⁶—in this case, a sudden surge of affect experienced as, or accompanied by, “poetic pleasure.”

Reconceiving Wordsworth’s “experiment” as a design test and the poem as a device being tested, along with some basic concepts from cybernetics, can help resolve several textual and contextual difficulties typically overlooked in an expressivist reading of Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”

The expressivist position was memorably described more than sixty years ago in M. H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp* as one of four possible models of poetic communication. The title of his book alludes to two of these, with the mirror corresponding to a mimetic scheme in which poetry reflects a world the poet shares with his or her readers, and that of the lamp corresponding to an expressivist or poet-centered model, where poetry conveys its creator’s unique experiences of, feelings about, and perspectives on that shared world.⁷

Ever since the publication of Abrams’s book, this expressivist—or as it is sometimes called, “expressionist”—view has been firmly tethered to Romanticism, and in particular to Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow.” About a decade ago, in “Expressivity: The Romantic Theory of Authorship,” his contribution to *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, Andrew Bennett summarized this position and, like Abrams, considered “Wordsworth’s famous declaration” (51) its epitome. For the Romantics in general, as for Wordsworth, Bennett claims, “The literary work is, ideally,

a direct repetition, an expression or confession, in speech, of the author's innermost thoughts or feelings, indeed of his self or soul" (50). "There is," he goes on, "no distinction in this theory of authorship between the experience, feelings, or thoughts that generate a poem and that poem" (51). As a result, "the reader . . . is written out of the work" because the author has no specific audience in mind (50). Bennett summarizes his point with a quotation from August Wilhelm Schlegel that literalizes the word's etymology: "the inner is pressed out as though by a force alien to us." For Bennett, it's this "alien" force within the poet, this not-self, that destroys the expressivist premise of immediate self-expression. At the other end of the creative process, of course, there's composition *per se*, language and all its self-alienating material and historical and cultural pressures, which the spontaneously overflowing poet presumably ignores.

The "expressivity" that Bennett attributes to Wordsworth, however, is a straw man, depending as it does on his assumption that Wordsworth paid little or no attention to his audience. The Advertisement and the two Prefaces, where authorial anxieties over being misunderstood are displayed to an almost painful degree, testify to exactly the opposite, namely, the poet's hyperawareness of his intended audience and repeated attempts to anticipate their reactions by putting himself in their place. This is the position of what cyberneticists would call the receiver or receptor of the messages the poem is designed to transmit. The "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," though it may be experienced by the poet, is not something he is trying to "press out" into a poem, as if he were a pimple or a volcano or a tube of toothpaste. It is something he is seeking to incite in his reader by the meticulously designed device of the poem itself, a device that, like a versifying Jonas Salk (Garrison), he is continuously testing, modifying, and retesting on himself in the extended act of composition, rereading, and revision.

Bennett is not alone in his expressivist interpretation of Wordsworth's poetics. In fact, he cites Abrams's book as its fountainhead in the postwar era (49), and it's not difficult to recall more intransigent definitions of Romantic expressivity popping up in Anglo-American criticism from long before Abrams appeared on the scene, including Irving Babbitt's screeds against the Romantics' "violence of expression" (215) and T. E. Hulme's tirades against "spilt religion" (118). In this long historical perspective, no other target of opprobrium draws as much heavy fire as Wordsworth's assertion that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," which in its second iteration in the Preface even more pugnaciously defines poetry itself in these terms.

Examining Wordsworth's famous dictum in its original context only makes clearer, however, its flimsiness as a basis for labeling the poet an "expressivist." That's not to say it makes anything else very clear. The Preface was written in haste, leaving several of Wordsworth's most puissant insights undeveloped, including the "spontaneous overflow" passages.⁸ However, the obscurity surrounding what Wordsworth says about such overflows seems particularly dense because it is repeatedly qualified by references to deliberation and purposiveness.

Here's the paragraph containing the first iteration of this famous phrase in the 1800 Preface.

I cannot be insensible of the present outcry against the triviality and meanness both of thought and language, which some of my contemporaries have occasionally introduced into their metrical compositions; and I acknowledge that this defect where it exists, is more dishonorable to the Writer's own character than false refinement or arbitrary innovation, though I should contend at the same time that it is far less pernicious in the sum of its consequences. From such verses the Poems in these volumes will be found distinguished at least by one mark of difference, that each of them has a worthy *purpose*. Not that I mean to say, that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*. If in this opinion I am mistaken I can have little right to the name of a Poet. For *all good* poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so by the repetition and continuance of this act feelings connected with important subjects will be nourished, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much organic sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced that by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits we shall describe objects and utter sentiments of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of

association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated. (124–26)

Here Wordsworth begins by distinguishing the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* from two distinct but equally inferior types: that which evinces “triviality and meanness both of thought and language” (for which, he apparently fears, a poem like “The Thorn” or “The Idiot Boy” might be mistaken) and that which displays “false refinement or arbitrary innovation” (for which, he feels sure, none of the *Lyrical Ballads* could be mistaken, because this kind of poetry is full of what he will eventually devote an entire Appendix to denouncing as “poetic diction”). Because the former is “more dishonourable” than the latter, even though the latter is “more pernicious,” and because Wordsworth’s “experiments” more closely resemble the former, his focus is on deflecting charges of “triviality and meanness” rather than “false refinement or arbitrary innovation.” In any case, what separates *Lyrical Ballads* from both of these inferior types, Wordsworth insists, is that each of its poems “has a worthy *purpose*,” and the poet italicizes “purpose” to stress its importance. In the Advertisement, as noted above, the first and overriding “purpose” Wordsworth has in mind for trying any of these “experiments” is to give us “poetic pleasure.” Whatever specific “purpose” lies behind any given lyrical ballad, it has to contribute to this larger aim. After a brief digression on how “habits of meditation” can invest the poet’s efforts with a “purpose” beyond his or her conscious awareness, Wordsworth lands on his famous definition by means of an admission that, should this assumption of unconscious purposiveness prove false in his case, he “can have little right to the name of a Poet. For *all good* poetry”—in distinction, presumably, from those two “bad” kinds he just mentioned—“is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”

That conjunction, “For,” implying the introduction of a cause or premise, should give us pause. It links the “spontaneous overflow” in question with the subject of Wordsworth’s previous meditations, the importance of the poet’s having (whether conscious or not) a “worthy *purpose*.” But having a purpose at all is incompatible with the notion of spontaneity, if the latter is to be attributed to the poet: “purpose” implies forethought, while “spontaneity” demands the opposite—thoughtlessness. If you are an expressivist, you might say that Wordsworth believes that what he calls his “habits of meditation” have invested his work with a purpose that

expresses itself in what only seems, to his conscious mind, a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” but is in fact the product of those purposive “habits.” But that just pushes the problem back one remove, because “feelings” of any kind cannot be purposive unless you’re a method actor or a hypocrite (etymologically the same thing, from the Ancient Greek for “actor,” *hypokrites*), and it’s doubtful that Wordsworth thought of the poet as either one. Imagine telling your fiancée, just at the moment you propose marriage, “I love you—or at least, that’s my purpose, kneeling here at your feet.” Or imagine telling her friends and relations at her funeral, “I fully intend to be sad.” If you’re a method actor, you might pull it off. However, the result would hardly be “spontaneous.”

Wordsworth does say that the poet is distinguished from ordinary people by, among other things, “an ability of conjuring up in himself passions” more intense, despite their imaginary objects, than ordinary people’s real ones (138), which sounds a bit like something Marlon Brando might have learned from Lee Strasburg. But “conjuring” is purposive, while spontaneously overflowing with such “passions” is not, and cannot be. When the poet adds that, in describing others’ passions, “it will be the wish of the Poet . . . for short spaces of time, perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs” (138), such “wishing” and “letting slip” seem to resemble what his poetic collaborator will later describe, in *Biographia Literaria*, as that “willing suspension of disbelief . . . that constitutes poetic faith” (2: 2). But any feelings that result from such a “willing suspension” cannot be “spontaneous” because they are, after all, the result of willing: a “wish” and a “letting slip,” or purposive relinquishment, of self-possession.

In short, however hard he tries, the poet’s sense of purposiveness cannot be reconciled with the spontaneity of overflowing feelings that he says poetry—or at least, “good poetry”—is. That being the case, the spontaneity in question, one might begin to suspect, must refer not to the source, or “sender,” of “good poetry” as here defined, which the expressivists would locate in the poet, but to its intended target and the only other candidate within striking distance: its “receiver,” the reader. A good poet’s “purpose” should be to incite such an unanticipated effusion in the reader and, in this way, fulfill his duty to give that reader pleasure.

That it is the reader whom Wordsworth conceives to be the subject of poetry’s spontaneous overflows is further supported by a crucial word he employs in the passage just cited, a word that’s easy for an expressivist to overlook: “descriptions.” “I believe that my habits of meditation have so

formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*.” It’s in and through his descriptions of the objects upon which he habitually “meditates,” says the poet—that is, in and through the act of composition—that the feelings excited by these objects of meditation are to be conveyed, whether purposive or not. Powerful feelings overflow spontaneously, in short, not previous to the act of meditation and writing, but subsequently or contemporaneously, as the poet puts into words the objects that “habitually” excite these feelings in him. Put another way, it’s not the objects originally exciting these feelings, but the language by which he deliberately appropriates them in meditation for the “purpose” of moving his reader, that in turn moves the poet as he reads the poetry he writes. These emotions feel “spontaneous” because their origin has been displaced from the poet to the words on the page, words to which he responds emotionally like the reader for whom they are intended.

Now, whatever this poet means, he immediately squanders his chance to make that meaning clear. Having written his beautifully succinct definition of poetry, Wordsworth seems determined to forget he did so. In the sentences that follow, as he worries, like a dog at a bone, the assertion that a “worthy purpose” can have an unconscious origin provided the poet’s “habits of meditation” are sound, one waits, in vain, for the payoff: an explanation of just what he means by “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”

One waits, at least, until a few pages later, where the phrase reappears in what looks like a much more promising context:

I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind and in whatever degree, from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment. Now if Nature be thus cautious in preserving in a state of enjoyment a being thus employed, the Poet ought to profit by the lesson thus held forth to him, and ought especially to take care, that whatever passions he communicates to his Reader, those passions,

if his Reader's mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure. (148–50)

This often-cited version of Wordsworth's spontaneous overflow promises much more than its predecessor as an aid to understanding the poet's view of the creative process. It locates the "origin" of the overflow in a "recollected" emotion and describes the "contemplat[ion]" of this past emotion, followed by the gradual "production" of an emotion "similar"—but not identical—to the one recollected and, at last, the activity of "successful composition." But again, as in Wordsworth's first pass at a definition, the reader waits in vain for a "spontaneous overflow" of anything, let alone "powerful feelings." The original "emotion" is "recollected in tranquility," the tranquility mysteriously disappears "by a species of reaction" (presumably of the contemplating mind upon the recollected emotion, but in what way is not specified), and a "similar" emotion, "in one of Wordsworth's most frustratingly passive constructions, "is gradually produced" until it simply "exist[s] in" the recollecting mind. Once this "similar"—in the 1802 Preface he calls it a "kindred" (149)—emotion, or "mood," is achieved, "composition" abruptly "begins," and if this mood, or something like it, can be prolonged, composition (which is to say, "describing" this emotion) can be "carried on" in "a state of enjoyment" to the point where, by the end of this passage, the reader arrives at "pleasure," enjoyment's similar or kindred emotion, which makes its final appearance, not in the poet but in the reader.

There are two things worth noting about this passage before proceeding further: first, how utterly disappointing it is, despite its initial promise. Nothing flows; everything is static, studied, and deliberate. The two emotions in question—both recollected and "actually" existing—are separated by an act of quiet contemplation (what the poet called "meditation" a few pages earlier) that takes the recollected emotion for its object and "produces" something "similar" but not identical to it. Thus, and in contradiction to the expressivist view, the "similar" emotion is not an "overflowing" of the recollected emotion into present awareness, but a replication, and at a distance.

The second thing worth noting is that the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" Wordsworth describes here does not initiate the creative process. He says explicitly that it "*takes* its origin" from the recollected emotion, which means the creative process begins with deliberate acts of recollection and contemplation. If spontaneity is to be found anywhere in

Wordsworth's notion of poetry, it is not at its inception, and that means it is not expressivist. As for the "similar" emotion, it could be considered spontaneous, but only if it is "produced" as an unexpected overflowing from some aquifer of "feelings" deep below the surface of consciousness. Clearly, it's not an overflow of or from the emotion being recollected and contemplated. Even the word "kindred," with its allusion to a common progenitor, implies not literal consanguinity, but literal reproduction: a producing-again, a repeated origination. In any case, the word "produced" suggests, etymologically, a "leading forward" rather than a pressing out.

Let's return now to the second half of this passage: "but the emotion," writes Wordsworth—presumably the second, "similar" emotion produced by contemplating or recollecting the original emotion—"the emotion, of whatever kind"—anger, sorrow, joy, love—"and in whatever degree"—that is, "powerful" or not—"from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described"—that is, deliberately put into words—"the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment."

It's worth pausing here to stress the word "voluntarily." The expressivists would have you believe that Wordsworth rejected any idea of deliberate composition, that the words just came to him of their own accord, "pressed out" along with that spontaneous overflow of feelings that, he insists, poetry is. But here the poet makes a point of noting the deliberateness of the act. Wordsworth has already told us that composition follows close upon the moment when the "similar emotion" "actually exist[s] in the mind": "In this mood," he writes, "successful composition"—that is, presumably, composition that fulfills the purpose of poetry by giving pleasure—"generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on." But he adds that this kind of voluntary description of the "various pleasures" associated with the "similar emotion" brings its own special "enjoyment," and that as the poet "describes" or "communicat[es]" to his reader the "passions" excited by the "similar emotion," he "ought especially to take care" that these descriptions are "accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure," which seems to include both the "various pleasures" of contemplating the emotion and the special "enjoyment" arising from the act of describing it, which is to say, from poetic composition.⁹ But how can the poet "take care" to ensure that his descriptions of these passions will be accompanied by pleasure unless, like Ben Franklin attaching the first lightning rod to his own house, he "takes care" to test the effect of what he composes on his own mind?

As all writers know, every act of composition is, at the same time, an act of self-reading and thus, necessarily, self-testing. It entails seeing if what you write makes sense and evaluating its efficacy as a source of pleasure for you. Otherwise, it's not composition, but automatic writing. The crucial importance of the word "descriptions" in Wordsworth's first approach to defining poetry in terms of affect, as well as his notorious fondness for revision, both support the conclusion that if the poet experiences a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings anywhere in the creative process as here depicted, it occurs at this point, as he takes delight in describing the passions his recollecting mind has produced or "led forward."

This kind of self-testing is not what cyberneticists would call "feedback," which is information transmitted back to the sender from its intended receiver, in this case, the reader. There is no reader in the design process at this point. Feedback characterizes what Wiener calls a "self-regulating system" of communication, and Wordsworth is not interested in giving his reader any such reciprocal regulating power. Perfectly realized, "feedback" would consist of the reader tinkering with the poem until it conformed to his or her standards, like Pope beset by versifiers begging for his endorsement in the "Epistle to Arbuthnot": "The piece, you think, is incorrect: why, take it, / I'm all submission, what you'd have it, make it."

In fact, Wordsworth did not take criticism well and often quarreled with those who offered friendly advice, even when he asked for it. Witness his testy response to Mary and Sara Hutchinson's bland criticism of "The Leech-gatherer" and other poems in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*: "My dear Sara[,] I am exceedingly sorry that the latter part of the Leech-gatherer has displeased you . . . I will explain to you in prose my feeling in writing that Poem, and then you will be better able to judge whether the fault be mine or yours or partly both." (Every student of Wordsworth knows whose fault it will turn out to be.) "Your feelings . . . were not indifferent," he concludes, "it was an affair of whole continents of moral sympathy." This is immediately followed by Dorothy's piling on: "Dear Sara[,] When you feel any poem . . . to be tedious, ask yourself in what spirit it was written—whether merely to tell the tale and be through with it, or to illustrate a particular character or truth, etc. etc." (De Selincourt, 367). Lamb, too, received the full force of Wordsworth's rod after expressing his view of the 1800 Preface: "A long letter of four sweating pages" defending the poet's opinions, he tells Thomas Manning in a letter of February 15, 1801 (Marrs 1: 272).

The poet's inveterate quarrelsomeness makes puzzling his denial, in the Preface, of cherishing any "selfish and foolish hope of reasoning [the reader] into an approbation" of the *Ballads*, especially considering how much time and effort he seems to spend doing so. But Wordsworth keeps his word throughout: he aims only to explain, as he puts it, "what I have proposed *to myself* to perform," and to convey "the chief reasons which have determined *me* in the choice of *my* purpose" (122, italics added). In short, he wants to explain just what he has designed these new poetic devices to do. Unless his readers understand that, they cannot make proper use of them, and the final test of using them properly is that his readers will feel pleasure. Fifteen years later in the "Essay Supplementary" (borrowing the remark from Coleridge), Wordsworth will insist that "every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed" (Wordsworth 3: 80). The poet begins that task here, in the Preface of 1800.

Wordsworth's anxiety to convey his design purpose is largely the burden of the long paragraph in which, early on in the Preface, he tries to define the "formal engagement" or "promise" to which writing in verse implicitly binds a poet, only to admit that "many persons" will conclude "[he has] not fulfilled the terms of an engagement thus voluntarily contracted" (244). "Engagement," "promise," "contract"—it's like listening to a lawyer, which the poet's father was, explaining a warranty exempting the manufacturer of any and all responsibility for malfunction or injury due to misuse. If you're employing this ladder for any purpose other than what it was made for—"the chief reasons which have determined me in the choice of my purpose"—its maker denies all liability. Perhaps a better contemporary analogy is to an application designed to run on a particular version of an operating system: if you don't have OS 10.13, don't complain to me that this new video game is running too slowly to be any fun.¹⁰

Wordsworth's Prefaces were written with the aim of reprogramming his readers to allow them to "run" these new poems properly and, thereby, derive what he calls in the first paragraph of the Preface, "that sort of pleasure, and that quantity of pleasure . . . which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart." The readers of *Lyrical Ballads* must undergo a software update. What Wordsworth calls in the Advertisement our "pre-established codes of decision, that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures" (116), must be erased and our interpretive hardware recoded and rebooted. This is why reasoning his readers into liking these poems won't work: he would have to accept their codes as axiomatic, and any chain of

reasoning proceeding from them would necessarily lead to the wrong conclusion. The reprogramming is necessary because the poet will be using radically new poetic materials, “fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation” (Preface 118). These materials, largely drawn from “low and rustic life” (124), have proven to be poetically ineffective up to now in producing pleasure of any sort when read according to the old “codes,” and have often, in fact, produced tedium, mockery, and even disgust and repugnance.

The language of cybernetics casts Wordsworth’s aims for the *Lyrical Ballads* in an entirely new light. To a cyberneticist, Wordsworth’s Advertisement and two Prefaces reveal a man who views poetry not as an uncontrollable gushing out of feelings, but as a communicative system, and the poem itself as a crucial component within that system. This component presents certain design problems when the poet wishes to experiment with new materials that can enhance the system’s output of pleasure, problems that may require tinkering with its intended receiver in order to achieve success. The concluding portion of this essay will elaborate on this basic model.

Norbert Wiener called cybernetics “the field of control and communication theory” in his first book, *Cybernetics*, published in 1948 (11). But in *The Human Use of Human Beings*, published two years later, he calls it, simply, “a theory of messages” (16).

From the most elementary binary circuit to IBM’s Big Blue, from a single cranial neuron to the vast social and cultural systems of peoples and nations, communicative systems, says Wiener, are designed to convey information by means of “messages.” These messages are transmitted from a sender to a receiver through a “channel” or “medium,” terms that can refer to either transmission fields (electromagnetic, liquid, gaseous) or devices (a telegraph key, a mechanical semaphore, a radio transmitter, rising smoke). In cybernetics, a message is any variation in a medium from its resting or steady state. That steady state can be the dead air of a silent room awaiting the passage of sound waves, or it can be a regular series of impulses called “oscillations,” like the broadcast frequency of radio waves, whose variations in amplitude, but not in frequency, result in variations in the electrical impulses traveling through the circuits of their receiver. Because the message constitutes nothing more than a variation in the medium’s steady state, it cannot be judged significant unless it results in the transmission of information, also known as the “capacity to do organizational work” or to “reduce uncertainty” (Heylighen, “Information,”

Web). Random variations are not significant for this reason and constitute what is called “noise” (Heylighen, “Noise,” *Web*), which interferes with the clear transmission of messages carrying the intended information.

Here is an example that may clarify the relationship between what Wiener calls “message” and “information.” You are walking along a still pond and a wave disturbs the reeds near the shore. The wave is a variation in the pond’s steady state and thus, according to cybernetics, constitutes a message. Does the message carry information? The answer would depend on whether or not the wave caused a change in the receptor’s capacity for organizational work or reduced its uncertainty. If you are the receptor and you are uncertain as to whether anyone or anything is nearby, then the answer is yes: the moving reeds inform you that something has entered the pond. But suppose the wave traveling over the surface of the pond is too weak to disturb the reeds. Then, no: no information has been transmitted, despite the fact that a message, a variation in the medium’s steady state, has occurred. Or suppose that crosswinds disturb the surface of the pond so that the wave’s specific impact on the reeds has become indistinguishable. Then a cyberneticist would say that noise has prevented the message from being received, and again, no information has been transmitted. Finally, suppose the wave disturbs the reeds, but you don’t see it. Here, a cyberneticist might say information has been conveyed to the reeds, an intermediate receptor—their powers of self-organization have been temporarily changed—but this information hasn’t been “relayed” as a second message via the medium of light. The chain of messages to your brain has been interrupted.

The genius of cybernetics, for which the human brain is, functionally, just another receptor for processing information, is that this basic communicative model can be scaled down or up, in either direction, by several orders of magnitude, with complex effects reducible to stunningly elegant mathematical and statistical description and manipulation.¹¹ It is also a communicative model that functions entirely independent of what is communicated. What counts is not what the information contains, but variations in how it is communicated. Note, however, that it is only when a chain of message relays ends in a human receptor that one arrives at something resembling what would ordinarily be called “information.”

This more human version of information needn’t be restricted to conclusions about the proximity of water birds or amphibians. The waving reeds at the margin of the pond may startle you, or comfort you, or exhilarate you. They may seem to threaten or greet you. These notions, affects,

and imaginary relations, all of which the philosophers of Wordsworth's day placed under the heading of "ideas," are also information in a cybernetic sense, since they bring about a change of state in the receptor's capacity to organize his or her experience of the world. This complex amalgamation of mental phenomena in the brain's reception of the world's messages is what Wordsworth means when he tells us he's interested in illustrating "the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement"—again, emotional excitement.

To repeat, poetry for Wordsworth is not a thing but an event—something that occurs when, to use the terminology of cybernetics, a communicative system comprising the poet as sender, the poetic device as medium, and the reader as receptor succeeds in delivering a certain kind of information via messages, significant variations in the steady state of the medium. This medium was, for Wordsworth's purposes, the British press in 1798. By that time, speaking cybernetically, the medium had succumbed to "entropy," "a measure of [a system's] degree of disorganization" (Wiener, *Cybernetics* 11) arising from a loss of energy in the communicative system as a whole. Entropy is signaled by increasing noise, which is a low-energy phenomenon ordinarily masked by the high-energy variations that comprise messages. Because their energy level is reduced along with that of the entire system, the number of messages diminishes and they become repetitive, a state to which Wordsworth thought poetry had arrived in his lifetime. He called these lingering, repetitive messages "poetic diction" (130, 144). The immediate purpose of the messages delivered by *Lyrical Ballads* was to introduce new energy to the system in an organized fashion in order to allow deliberate variations in the medium to emerge from the low-energy field of noise,¹² and to use them to communicate "powerful feelings" that were to be experienced, by the reader, as "spontaneous overflows" of affect. These feelings in the reader are "spontaneous" because they are neither deliberately sought nor do they originate from any apparent cause that could conceivably affect the reader personally.

Because this change of emotional state changes how the reader organizes—which is to say, associates—his or her ideas of the world, it amounts to information and is accompanied by information in the ordinary sense, that is, knowledge content, conveyed by other cybernetic subsystems: information about the lives of others, including the poet, both how they live (think of Simon Lee prying away at his tree stump) and how they experience—feel about, make sense of, perceive or misperceive—the world

(think of “We are Seven,” “The Thorn,” or “The Idiot Boy”). All of this information, affective and cognitive, as well as aesthetic, is registered as a change in the reader’s capacity to do organizational work. It reduces his or her uncertainty about how others feel and think about the world. The measure of the poet’s success in communicating this information is the degree to which the reader experiences pleasure.

“Pleasure,” “pleased,” “enjoy,” “enjoyment,” “delight”—was there ever a poet more set on making his readers happy? Their pleasure was the touchstone of his success, but it’s a particular kind of pleasure he has in mind and depends on a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” not easily obtained. A camel can more easily pass through the eye of a needle than a connoisseur of “poetic diction” and “inane phraseology” (Advertisement 116), or “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories” (Preface 128) can enter the heaven Wordsworth has prepared. It’s as though each poem were a lightning rod awaiting the arrival of the right atmospheric conditions—the correct disposition, the openness of mind, the simplicity of heart, the precise emotional ionization, if you will—necessary to draw fire from the sky. Wordsworth’s lightning rods are made of “the real language of men,” and under the wrong weather conditions they are, he fears, silly-looking things or, worse, downright ugly. Under the right conditions, however, they can be electrifying.

Coda: One sign of entropy, besides increasing noise, is the communicative system’s inability to generate new messages because the number of alternative outcomes in the transmission of messages has been reduced by the dwindling of energy in the system as a whole. A famous example from popular film is the “death” of Hal 9000, the supercomputer, at the end of Stanley Kubrick’s classic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. As David Bowman, the astronaut played by Keir Dullea, gradually removes pieces of Hal’s electronic circuitry, the computer’s increasing aphasia is registered as a lowering and slowing of its voice to an unintelligible—because invariable—rumble, and a narrowing of its range of available speech options. Eventually, it is reduced to repeating three phrases: “I’m afraid,” “My mind is going,” and “I can feel it,” before it lapses into reciting the first song it was ever “taught” by its designers, “Daisy Bell,” with its well-known refrain, “on a bicycle built for two.” Hal’s entropic decay perfectly illustrates not only the decay of verse to the level of “poetic diction,” but also Wiener’s description, in *Cybernetics*, of entropy’s reduction of communicative alternatives and its consequences for “the transmission of information”: “If

only one contingency is to be transmitted, then it may be sent most efficiently and with the least trouble by sending no message at all.” To be effective, messages must be “continually varied in a manner not completely determined by their past” (10). In short, they must be new and original.

It is doubtful that Norbert Wiener ever read *Lyrical Ballads*, although, as the son of a language professor and an avid student of world literature, he might have. In any case, he learned a thing or two from the poets he did read. In *The Human Use of Human Beings*, Wiener’s term for this particular symptom of entropy, in which the same message is transmitted over and over, signifying nothing, is “cliché.” “Clichés,” writes Wiener, “are less illuminating than great poems” (21).

Great minds think alike.

NOTES

1. All references to the Advertisement of 1798 and the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* come from vol. 1 of *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser. Unless otherwise indicated, references to the Preface are to the 1800 edition.

2. In the first paragraph of the Preface of 1800 and all subsequent editions, Wordsworth uses the singular. His final emphasis, however, here as in the Advertisement, falls on “pleasure”: “The first volume of these Poems . . . was published, as an experiment [to see] how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart” (118).

3. I’ve been unable to find Wordsworth using “experiment” in this sense, or any sense, outside the Advertisement and the first paragraph of the Preface. However, Coleridge apparently had the same meaning in mind when he told William Hazlitt, “the *Lyrical Ballads* were an experiment about to be tried by him and Wordsworth, to see how far the public taste would endure poetry written in a more natural and simple style than had hitherto been attempted” (Hazlitt 107). In a letter of January 30, 1801, Charles Lamb conveys an almost identical sense of what Wordsworth meant, considering the poems “Experiments on the public taste” (Marrs 1: 266–67).

4. For a popular but accurate account of Edison’s invention of the light bulb, see the Franklin Institute, “Edison’s Lightbulb.”

5. Specifically, seventy-six times in the 1800 Preface, seventy-four in 1802. “Pleasure” alone occurs forty-one times in 1800, superseded in frequency only by “language,” at fifty-one. Word counts courtesy of the “Count Wordsworth” website at <http://countwordsworth.com>.

6. I draw these terms from the founding text of cybernetics, Wiener’s *Cybernetics: Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948) and its immediate sequel, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950). Wiener does not provide a glossary in either book, drawing his basic vocabulary from engineering, computing, and neurobiology, in which the transmission of information using communicative systems is fundamental. A helpful supplement to Wiener’s texts is F. Heylighen’s *Web Dictionary of Cybernetics and Systems*.

However, some of Wiener's most fundamental concepts—e.g., “sender,” “receiver,” and “message”—do not appear in Heylighen except to define more specialized terms, such as “entropy” and “information,” perhaps because their meanings appear so obvious as to need no definition.

7. The other two that Abrams lists besides the mimetic and the expressivist are either centered on the literary work (e.g., “formalism”) or the reader (e.g., “oratory”).

8. Wordsworth forestalls criticism along these lines by, in effect, defending the spontaneity of the Preface itself. Against the advice of “several friends,” he has refused to “prefix a systematic defence of the theory, upon which the poems were written” because he knew “the Reader would look coldly upon [his] arguments” and doing justice to the topic would require a much longer essay (120).

9. Not surprisingly, these reflections on the pleasures of poetic composition come near the end of Wordsworth's prolonged defense of having written his poetry in verse rather than prose, when he's just insisted that there's “no essential difference” (134) between the two.

10. In class, I used to liken Wordsworth's idea of a poem to a radio transmitter. The *Lyrical Ballads* is transmitting FM signals in a world of AM receivers. In order to receive his signal clearly, the poet's listeners need FM tuners, or instructions on how to build them. I had to find a new analogy when my students no longer knew what a radio was.

11. No one reading this essay would be surprised that Wiener's math is quite beyond me.

12. What does “in an organized fashion” mean to a cyberneticist? Blowing up your car with dynamite after you run out of gas won't get it running again, despite your introduction of a great deal of energy to its drivetrain.

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