

# *William Wordsworth and the Crisis of the “Belle Âme”: Solipsism and Communicability in Expressivist Poetics*

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## **Abstract**

With the emergence of so-called “expressive” (or “expressivist”) theories of language in the eighteenth century, the boundaries between the language of prose, poetry and music became blurred. J. G. Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, in particular, helped to replace the “designative” theory of language (dating back to Hobbes and Locke) with one based on a deeper awareness of the significance of expressive and constitutive or performative aspects of language-use. William Wordsworth’s “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* offers a new poetic theory that corresponds closely with Herder’s and Humboldt’s expressive notions of language. Expressivist theory allows for a prominent position for the Self, the subject/author in any linguistic endeavor, and Wordsworth, particularly in *The Prelude*, make full use of this “emancipation” of the Self and the creative mind, verging at times into what may be called Romantic solipsism or, by Hegel, the position of the *belle âme*, whereby poetry becomes solely a vehicle for cathartic self-expression. This posed a dilemma for Wordsworth, who fully recognized the communicative, inter-subjective and communitarian aspects of linguistic expression, and, even more importantly, the heuristic and pedagogical purposes—indeed, imperative—of any great poetical work. To use more technical terms, the conflict is between “monologicality” and “dialogicality.” In this paper, the psycho-analytic theories of Jacques Lacan as well as the later philosophical work of Martin Heidegger will be employed in order to come to a fuller understanding the Wordsworthian dilemma. Without realizing it, Wordsworth may have anticipated by over a century the Heideggerian notion that it is Language itself that “speaks man.”

*True Philosopher and Inspired Poet  
Who By the Special Gift and Calling of Almighty God  
Whether He Sang of Men or of Nature  
Failed Not to Life Up Men’s Hearts...  
Nor Ever Ceased to Champion the Cause  
Of the Poor and Simple  
And so in Perilous Times was Raised Up  
To be a Chief Minister  
Not only of Sweetest Poetry  
But Also of High and Sacred Truth.*  
– John Keble, “To William Wordsworth,” 1844

*[T]he poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast  
empire of human society... he is a man speaking to men.*  
– William Wordsworth

*Language is the consciousness of self which is for other...*  
– Jacques Lacan

*Man behaves as if he were the creator and master of  
Language, whereas... it is Language which is and remains his  
sovereign... it is Language which “speaks man.”*  
– Martin Heidegger

The relationship between poetry and language more generally has been a topic of some importance in modern philosophy of language. With the emergence of so-called “expressive” (or “expressivist”) theories of language in the eighteenth century and the subsequent emphasis on feelings and emotions in the linguistic realm, the boundaries between the language of prose, poetry and music became blurred. Poetry, in particular, gained a certain prominence as the pinnacle of “pure expression”—i.e., the most impassioned and emotive form of language. The poets of the age felt their newfound power, and dealt with the implications in various ways.

This great transformative period in linguistics, literature, art and politics is commonly known as the Romantic era—a term that in its broadest usage is not by any means restricted to

English literati but covers similar intellectual and artistic trends emerging out of France and Germany, as well as a smattering of other European nations from the latter eighteenth through early nineteenth-centuries. Germany in particular produced two of the seminal figures in the new expressive philosophy of language: J. G. Herder (1744-1803) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835). These men helped to replace the so-called “designative” theory of language (dating back to Hobbes and Locke) with one based on a deeper awareness of the significance of expressive, constitutive and performative aspects of language-use. Of course, such a transformation was intrinsically connected to and in some ways dependent upon a simultaneous revolution in German aesthetics, brought about by Kant and *Sturm und Drang* writers such as the young Goethe and Schiller.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was one of the very first English Romantics, and has often been seen as a spokesman for the Romantic Age as a whole. In his famous “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Wordsworth offers a new poetic theory that corresponds closely with Herder’s and Humboldt’s expressive notions of language. This manifesto is regularly considered to be the founding document of English Romanticism, just as the author’s *Prelude* is said to be the pinnacle of the Romantic literary enterprise. Expressivist theory allows for a prominent position for the Self, the subject/author in any linguistic endeavor, and Wordsworth, particularly in *The Prelude*, make full use of the “emancipation” of selfhood and the creative mind, verging at times into what may be called Romantic solipsism or, by Hegel, the position of the *belle âme*, whereby poetry becomes solely a vehicle for cathartic self-expression. This posed a dilemma for Wordsworth, who fully recognized the communicative, inter-subjective and communitarian aspects of linguistic expression, and, even more importantly, the heuristic and pedagogical purposes—indeed, imperative—of any great poetical work. To use technical terms from linguistics, we might say this conflict or tension is one between “monologicality” and “dialogicality.”

A century after Wordsworth, Jacques Lacan's neo-Freudian psychoanalytic theory recognizes the potential conflict and resulting alienation that can arise in the process of subjective expression. As a goal of psychoanalytic treatment, Lacan seeks the patient's re-entry into speech: where language "is the consciousness of self which is for others." Lacan's distinction between language and speech, which resembles the Saussureian distinction between *langue* and *parole*, may aid us in understanding Wordsworth's dilemma. In this paper, along with Lacan's treatment of the solipsist, we will also look to the work of Martin Heidegger in order to come to a fuller understanding of the problem. Without realizing it, Wordsworth may have anticipated by over a century the Heideggerian notion that it is Language itself that "speaks man."

As noted above, the expressivist revolution in philosophy of language and aesthetics involved the overthrow of prevailing notions of language, in particular those developed by Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac, which can be called *designative* or *instrumental* theories. This early modern tradition corresponded with Lockean epistemology, emphasizing the dependence of the perceptive subject upon the external universe. Language was, primarily, to allow us to think and communicate with one another.<sup>1</sup> As Charles Taylor has indicated in his essay on "The Importance of Herder," the work of this thinker was instrumental in breaking with the earlier tradition, and effectively swinging our common-sense views of language onto a new course. Essentially, Herder sees language as a reflective stance towards things, and, in the form of speech, an expressive action that both *actualizes* the state of reflection and *presents* it to others in a public space. Following on the heels of Herder, Humboldt argued that language is not merely for the utilitarian purpose of communication, but is also in itself a creative power. "Language is not *ergon*, but *energeia*" (Humboldt 26). Thus, it is only through language that we gain self-awareness, knowledge, and mastery of reality: "It is like a second world in which we know both our own selves and the outward face of things, *like a middle ground between subjective being and objective existence* (26, my emphasis). The self-expressive character of language is of great importance to Humboldt, as this is the freedom and autonomy that is bound up with "the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling." Recognizing the "sad incompetence of speech" (xxi)—the impossibility that others can have direct access to what goes on in our minds—Humboldt asserts that, since words are not designative and do not constitute a fixed nomenclature, privacy is at one level intrinsic to language-use.

At the same time, Humboldt by no means disparages communication, seeing it as the very interaction that gives the individual awareness of others as thinking and feeling beings, and is thus the very condition for self-consciousness.<sup>2</sup> In fact, says Humboldt, language without communication would not be language as at all but merely "undifferentiated, unintentioned expression... much like a never-ending swarm of bees that produces an even-toned hum without getting to the purposeful task of sustaining life by social interaction for the benefit of each and all" (33). Thus, Humboldt concludes that language must perform two tasks: it must give expression to concepts that relate to the external world and also to the mind's own creations: "There is a constant process of reaction or feedback as the mind on the one hand seeks to make the best use of the new linguistic objects, while on the other it strives to maintain its own freedom" (31). This is, in essence,

the conflict between unhindered self-creativity and the communal or inter-subjective aspects of language-use. The *ergon* that is essential to placing us within a linguistic community seems to pose a threat to the creative *energeia* that is a condition for further expansion of our "mastery of reality."<sup>3</sup>

Thus the expressive dimension of human language invokes not only the creative self, but also the idea of a common-space established by language, without which communication is impossible. Taylor concludes his analysis of Herder by claiming that, as a "pattern of activity," language is deployed against a background that we can never fully dominate, and yet one that we are also never fully dominated by: "The language I speak, the web which I can never fully dominate and oversee, can never be just my language but *our* language" (21). This notion, of being caught in limbo—on the fence, as it were, between subjectivity and inter-subjectivity—will be the focal point of this essay.

As Taylor points out, the turn towards an expressivist theory of language presupposes much of what falls under the rubric of modern "aesthetics." Feelings and emotions are central aspects of expression and reflection, whether in the domain of the visual arts, poetry, or language more generally. The thinkers and writers of the post-Herderian era were certainly not ones to be constrained by disciplinary boundaries of any sort. In the closing years of the eighteenth century, William Wordsworth developed a new theory and system of poetics, one that seems to have a basis in Humboldtian expressivism. Although we can assume, with some degree of certainty, that the two writers did not in fact read each other's work, it is evident that they shared a common background.

For Wordsworth, poetry is, first and foremost, "the spontaneous expression or overflow of feeling" (Wordsworth "Preface" 153). This fundamental tenet was to be accepted by a whole range of nineteenth century thinkers and poets. The "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems written by Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, maintains that these poems were written "as an experiment which... might be of some use to ascertain, 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 the quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a poet may rationally endeavour to impart." Wordsworth longed to develop a new class of poetry, which would be "well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the multiplicity and in the quality of its moral relations" (154). In developing this "new class" of poetry, Wordsworth engaged in a certain cultural primitivism, idealizing the low, rustic peasant, the downtrodden child and the social outcast. However, it was not only the content of the *Ballads* that was to induce communicability and perpetuate the "multiplicity and the quality of moral relations," it was also "the language of men—a plainer and more emphatic language" (156) in which the poems were written. More generally, the whole point of poetry, insists Wordsworth, has been changed: "the poems in these volumes will be found distinguished by one mark of difference [i.e., from traditional poetry]... each of them has a worthy *purpose*" (157, my emphasis). It is here that the dilemma once again surfaces: How can poetry, as expression, be at once *spontaneous* and *purposeful*? Any deliberate plan for poetry would necessarily diminish the self-creative aspect

of such; too much emphasis on poetry as *ergon* would disrupt the *energeia* of poetic expression.

Wordsworth was greatly influenced by the new expressivist aesthetics of the late eighteenth century, which, like the expressivist theories of language, focuses on the artist himself, as the “major element generating both the artistic product and the criteria by which it is to be judged” (Abrams *Mirror* 22). With respect to poetry, the author/subject is placed at the center of a creative universe. Wordsworth accepted the central position of the creative poet—his magnum opus, *The Prelude*, is after all subtitled “The Growth of a Poet’s Mind.” Such a position, however, was not without its own risks, and as much as Wordsworth recognized (and revealed in) the newfound centrality of the Poet as Subject, he feared drifting too far in the direction towards pure subjectivity and (thus) social irrelevance. Such a fear was not, it must be said, very common among other English Romantics, particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge’s younger contemporaries. John Keats proudly affirmed that he “never wrote one single line of Poetry with the least shadow of public thought” (Abrams *Mirror* 26), a stance echoed by Percy Shelley and Robert Southey, and later by John Stuart Mill, who made the claim that all poetry is, in essence, soliloquy. This extreme subjectivism in Romantic poetics can be traced back to Wordsworth’s own dictum that poetry is, after all, a “spontaneous overflow” of powerful feelings—a vision that seems to hold out little in the way of a bulwark against antinomianism. Although Wordsworth tempered this idea with the explanation of poetry’s “worthy purpose,” the naturalistic notion of poetry as a direct overflow without regard for purpose (or audience) is the sort that became the trademark of the Romantic poetic vision.

Indeed, such solipsism is often and quite rightly attributed to the whole Romantic ethos. “The romantic *vaniteux*,” says René Girard in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, “does not want to be anyone’s disciple: he convinces himself that he is thoroughly original” (15). This clearly applies to the Wordsworthian thesis, not only within poetic expression but also in the attempt to create an entire new class of poetry. The Romantic *vaniteux* always wants to convince himself that his desires, as the emanation of a serene subjectivity, are authentic, while those of others are the desires of vanity. According to Girard, “the distinction between passion and vanity seems to vindicate the Romantic of the charge of vanity.” However, even passion is individualistic, and the distinction between the two reminds one of André Gide’s *Immoralist* (1902), in which the protagonist, Michel, is a man drawn between a longing to concentrate the ego and an impulse to dissolve it—between Apollonian order and Dionysian anarchy; conformity and vagabondage—between, as Michel (and Gide) comes to realize, a comforting slavery and a frightening freedom. A critique, but not a rejection of Nietzschean individualism, Gide focuses upon the conflict between the desire for personal fulfillment and self-expression on the one hand, and the feeling for and recognition of others, on the other. In the character of Michel, Gide reveals the intricacies of a manifest neurosis; of a man caught between self-destruction and self-discovery. The problem of the emancipated individual is an ongoing one, encapsulated in Gide’s query: “must one choose between a refusal to live and an individualism which makes others suffer?” (115) Wordsworth’s lament would be similar: “Must one choose,”

he might ask, “between a refusal to create freely and spontaneously and an overflowing individualism which is of no benefit to others?” According to Girard, the Romantic solipsist fails as a literary or poetic genius precisely because he refuses to allow for the collapse of the autonomous self. The true genius, he concludes, “shows” things to us, not as deriving from himself as a “quasi-divine ego,” but as the opinion of the Other—“thereby achieving a real intimacy of consciousness” (Girard 14).

Another way to frame the Wordsworth-Gide conundrum is to introduce the classic aesthetic distinction between the Beautiful and the Sublime. Taking these two terms in the Kantian sense, they can serve as useful parameters to guide us through this problem. Whereas the Beautiful is connected with altruism and selflessness, reflecting the inter-subjective and dialogical aspects of expressivism, the Sublime, which can only be “defeated” by the god-like power of the creative and isolated human mind, identifies with the necessarily subjective component of expression, the ego or I. Wordsworth’s *Prelude* in particular was often condemned for its “egotistical sublime”—for taking Longinus’s classical notion of sublimity as “the echo of a great soul” to a solipsistic extreme. (Abrams *Mirror* 73)

In the mid-nineteenth century, halfway between *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Immoralist*, John Keble presented an interesting proto-Freudian thesis on poetry as “disguised self-expression.” The impulse to express one’s emotion, he argues, is repressed by “an intrinsic delicacy that recoils from exposing them openly, as feeling that they never can meet with full sympathy” (Abrams *Mirror* 147).<sup>4</sup> From this, argues Keble, arises an inner conflict in the poet between the need for relief and the noble requirements of modesty.

A much more elaborate but not unconnected *post*-Freudian theory of language and the expressive process has been developed in more recent times by Jacques Lacan. Like Keble before him, Lacan recognized the potential for personal crisis in self-expression, and his distinction between language and speech, as well as his discussion of the *belle âme*, can prove useful in investigating the Wordsworthian dilemma. Lacan’s re-reading of Freud involves, as an essential aspect, the view that, rather than having to undergo a psychoanalytic search for an event or events behind the patient’s condition—“making for an unwanted condition of an entity called the ‘unconscious’”—the patient must instead be enabled to “re-enter” speech and “re-write” her desires with and into speech generally. Moreover, speech calls for a reply: “there is no speech without a reply, even if it is met only with silence, provided that it has an auditor: this is the heart of its function as analysis” (Lacan *Écrits* 40). Lacan speaks of the “frustration” of the subject, who becomes engaged in “an every-growing dispossession of that being of his, concerning which,

by dint of sincere portraits which leave its idea no less coherent, of rectifications that do not succeed in freeing its essence, of stays and defences that do not prevent his stature from tottering, of narcissistic embraces that become like a puff of air in animating it—he ends up by recognizing that his being has never been anything more than his construct in the imaginary and that this construct disappoints all his certainties? (*Écrits* 42)

In essence, the subject recognizes that her reconstruction *for* another can only be accomplished through language, in which she rediscovers the fundamental alienation that has made her construct it *like* another, and which always destined to be taken from her *by* another. The ego, says Lacan, is “frustration in its essence”—not of a desire of the subject, but rather an object in which her desire is alienated and which the more it is elaborated, the more profound becomes the alienation. (*Écrits* 42) Empty speech is that in which the subject talks in vain about someone (or something) that can never become one with the assumption of her desire. Yet, Lacan maintains, the existence of communication is affirmed in the very act of speech, even if nothing is communicated, for speech constitutes truth and portrays faith in testimony. Moreover, the subject “goes well beyond what is experienced subjectively” by the individual, “exactly as far as the truth he is able to obtain” (55). The truth of the subject’s personal history is not all contained in his script; rather “the place is marked there by the painful shocks he feels from knowing only his own lines” (58). In short, human desire finds its meaning in the desire of the Other, not so much because the Other holds the key to the Object desired, as because the first Object of the desire is to be recognized by the Other. Even—or especially—the solipsist needs recognition.

Lacan makes a distinction between language and speech that resembles Saussure’s classic structuralist distinction between *langue* and *parole*.<sup>5</sup> Language is so made as to return us to the objectified other (the ego)—the other whom we can make of what we want—while Speech is founded in the existence of the Other (other people): “language is as much there to found us in the Other as to drastically prevent us from understanding him” (*Speech* 246). The aim of Lacanian analysis, again, is to invoke the passage of true speech, joining the subject to another subject, “on this side of the wall of language.” That is, in effect, the “final relation of the subject to a genuine Other... [and] the terminal point of the analysis” (246). At the end of the analysis, the *Ich* must be called on to speak; to enter into relations with real others, the subject must be replaced by the *Ich*-subject: “This is where the subject authentically reintegrates his disjointed limbs, and recognizes, re-aggregates his experience” (247).

One paradox of the relation of language and speech, says Lacan, is that of the subject who loses her meaning in the objectification of discourse: “here is the most profound alienation of the subject in our scientific civilization, and it is this alienation that we encounter first of all when the subject begins to talk about himself” (Lacan *Écrits* 70). The *moi*, the ego of the modern person, has taken on its form in the dialectical impasse of the *belle âme*, who “does not recognize his very own *raison d’être* in the disorder that he denounces in the world” (70). We always return to our double reference to speech and language. “In order to free the subject’s speech, we introduce him into the language of his desire, the *primary language* in which, beyond what he tells us about himself, he is already talking to us unknown to himself...” (81). Essentially, the antinomy between speech and language emerges as language becomes more functional, and thus more and more “improper” for speech, and as it becomes too particular for us, it loses its function as language. What is redundant as far as information is concerned is precisely that which is resonant as speech: “For the function of language is not to inform but to evoke” (86).

I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. The goal of analysis can only be the advent of a free speech and the realization by the subject of her history in relation to a projected future. A Lacanian analysis of the Romantic solipsist would attempt to do just that.

In the above discussion, we see Lacan refer to the “dialectical impasse” of the *belle âme*, which can be translated, with some loss of meaning, as “noble spirit” or “noble soul.” The *belle âme* condemns others and the world in which he lives while remaining unable to recognize her own *raison d’être* in that very world. According to Anthony Wilden: “The heartfelt identification with the universal well-being of humanity by the individual governed by the law of the heart passes into madness when he discovers the opposition and indifference to his good intentions of those he wishes to save from themselves” (287-88). The *belle âme* is in this sense the Romantic solipsist in disguise, out for recognition. “His madness,” Wilden continues, “is the delusion of his self-conceit; he projects his inner perversity onto the other and seeks to express it as other.... He condemns individuality in the other, but not in himself” (288). As we have seen, Lacan equates the *belle âme* with the subject in analysis, providing a popular interpretation of Moliere’s *Misanthrope* in the process. This is to condemn the subject of the *parole vide*, or, in Girard’s view, the subject who has not yet discovered herself through the *expérience romanesque* in the others she condemns.

Language is the consciousness of self *which is for others*, which is immediately *present as such* and which, as this consciousness of this self, is universal consciousness of self. It is the Self which separates itself from itself and becomes objectified (through speaking of itself) as pure *Ich bin Ich* and which, in this objectivity, fuses immediately with the others and is their consciousness of self... language comes forth as the mediating element of the independent and recognized consciousness of self. (Lacan *Ego* 288) Faced with the poverty of its object (its Self), the consciousness is divided between its subjectivity and its own existential poverty: “The absolute certitude of Self changes therefore immediately for it as consciousness into a dying echo, in the objectivity of its being-for-itself; but the world thus created is a discourse which it heard similarly non-mediatly and whose echoes keep coming back to it” (Wilden 289). The consciousness is reduced to a state of anguish of sullyng its purity by action or contact: “the hollow object it creates for itself thus fills it with the consciousness of the void.... Its occupation is a nostalgic aspiration which simply loses itself...—it becomes an *unhappy belle âme*” (289).

The *belle âme* partakes of a consciousness that judges others but refuses actions itself. In his vanity, the *belle âme* values his ineffective discourse above the facts of the world and expects it to be taken as the highest reality. By essentially refusing the world, he attains neither being nor non-being but an “empty nothingness” (Wilden 289). Thus, coming to consciousness of “the contradiction in his unreconciled immediateness,” the *belle âme* “is unhinged to the point of madenss and wastes away in a nostalgic consumption” (290). According to Lacan, the *belle âme* is a schizoid personality; his relationship to being-in-the-world and to being-with-others is a “splitting of the ego (the Self) into an opposition of an ‘inner-self system’ and a ‘false-self system’.” He fears the Other because he wants so much to be the Other, but being the

Other means losing himself. Hegel makes the point that the “normal” relationship of being-with-others is both subjective and objective, whereas the *belle âme* seeks to preserve an unsullied subjectivity because he fears “depersonalization” (the Abyss?) that is part of interpersonal relations.<sup>6</sup> “If a man is not two-dimensional, having a two-dimensional identity established by a conjunction of identity-for-others, and identity-for-oneself, if he does not exist objectively as well as subjectively, but only has a subjective identity, an identity for himself, he cannot be *real*” (Laing 81).

Though he consciously avoided the Keatsian extremes of solipsistic self-expression, Wordsworth certainly set the tone for such a development in Romantic poetics, and was aware of the potential dangers and contradictions in his program. It may be, however, that Wordsworth was in fact elaborating something somewhat different: not a subjectivist but rather a Heideggerian thesis on poetry and poetic language, a full century before Heidegger’s own birth. It may be possible, in looking at Wordsworth’s thesis in light of Heidegger’s theories of language and poetry, to extricate the poet from the charges laid upon the *belle âme*.

Audiences have always played a role in the history of poetry; from the earliest odes and dithyrambs, poetry has been a social act, a form of communication with spirits and others. For Wordsworth, however, poetry had become increasingly distanced from regular folk, and had become by the eighteenth century an art for the elite. He attempts to change the way poets view and approach their audience by invoking a new class of poetry, one that is “not for Poets alone, but for men,” and which communicates to the Other(s) not by overtly speaking-to, but by virtue of the spontaneous expression of the poet’s own feelings. Thus, the spontaneous expression serves the ‘worthy purpose’ of creating an aesthetic bond of mutual awareness among the people. It is evident that Wordsworth anticipated a change in human perception from one that sees the world in traditional and stable terms to one that sees a world that is uncreated and uncertain of itself. “In such a world,” says J. P. Ward,

human languages would cease to be that which templated realities and would become the chief means by which, inadequately and in our crowded and only half-comprehended existence, we contact each other... not so much to give trustworthy information as far as for comfort, some degree of support and happiness, and security. (Ward 3)

Whereas Keats and Shelley had to re-activate the old myths, William Blake invent his own, and Coleridge, in some despair, turn to German metaphysics as a means to reaching conclusions about the vanishing traditional positions, Wordsworth let language go where it took him. In doing so, the Poet felt some serenity, but was never free from personal insecurity, as he could not conceive of the Heideggerian idea of Language “speaking itself” or “speaking man”; and thus may have felt that his ideas were only further embellishment of the expressive poet as creator-for-himself—the *belle âme*.

In a fundamental sense, Wordsworth’s poetics resemble the later Heidegger’s notion that “the voice of thought must be poetic because poetry is the saying of truth” (Heidegger “Language” 74). For Heidegger poetry is projective utterance—“the saying of world and earth, the saying of the

arena of their conflict and thus of the place of all nearness and remoteness of the gods... the saying of the unconcealedness of what is” (74). From early the late Heidegger, we find the comprehension of the fundamental identity of art and language with poetry:

All art is essentially poetry, because it is the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is. And poetry, as linguistic, has a privileged position in the domain of the arts, because language, understood rightly, is the original way in which human beings are brought into the open dealing of truth, in which world and earth, mortals and gods are bidden to come to their appointed places of meeting. (Hofstadter xii-xiii)

Always considering the possibility of an authentic human existence, Heidegger sees in poetry a way of looking at the world in order to see how it fits together, so that we may find the measure by which to determine the possibility of “dwelling.” Like Gide before him, Heidegger recognizes a crisis in modern life, in which “man” as a technological and framing being is immersed in a life in which everything, including “man” himself, becomes material for a process of purely self-assertive production—a self-imposition of the human will on things regardless of their own essential natures. It is the task of the poet to help us see once more the bright possibility of a world in which we might be able to dwell (poetically). Poetry—together with the language and thinking that belong to it and are identical with it in essence—holds for Heidegger an indispensable liberatory function.

Thus Heidegger, like Wordsworth, places the Poet in a position of centrality, but with a power that is tempered by the power of language and poetry itself. There is no room for the *belle âme* in Heideggerian poetics: the poet’s, and poetry’s, role is to enable us to transcend the egocentrism of modern existence by allowing us to see other possibilities.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Heidegger posits that there is something more to language than mere communication, for the linguistic work, or the poem in a narrower sense, alone “brings what is, as something that is, into open for the first time” (Heidegger “Language” 73). Thus, the two-dimensional subjective-inter-subjective axis is complicated with another, third dimension in which the author/poet creates a work then disappears, or destroys himself in the process by which the work emerges, leaving Language and the Poem to speak itself:

That shall endure, as long as man endures  
To think, to hope, to worship and to feel,  
To struggle, to be lost within himself  
In trepidation, from the blank abyss  
To look with bodily eyes and to be consoled.  
(Wordsworth in Abrams *Mirror* 451)

Any extreme self-assertion means danger, to both Wordsworth and Heidegger. The most mortal among mortals, says the latter in “What are Poets For?” are those who are even more daring than the self-assertive human nature that is already more daring than plant and beast. In fact, “man” is at times more daring than Life itself, more daring than Being, which is Nature. However, “[h]e who is more venturesome than the ground of Being ventures to where all ground breaks off—into the abyss”: “When man entrenches himself in

purposeful self-assertion, and by means of absolute objectification installs himself in the parting against the Open, then he himself promotes his own unshieldedness.” (“What Are” 119-20)

Both Wordsworth and Heidegger use the same word (“abyss”) to refer to a pit of non-being into which the self-assertive poet may fall. For Heidegger, the poet lives essentially by risking his nature in self-assertion; converting, as a result, the ‘parting against the Open’ and inwardly recalling its unwholesomeness into a sound whole—“the poet sings the healing whole in the midst of the unholy” (“What Are” 140). Once, or perhaps better to say *while* this healing whole is sung, the Poet must disappear from view. For language is neither (self) expression nor communication; rather “Language speaks.” “Man,” especially the *belle âme*, acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language is the master of “man.” When, Heidegger concludes, this relation of dominance gets inverted, “man” hits upon “strange maneuvers,” and language “decays” and becomes solely a means for expression. (“Way To” 215)

Thus, for Heidegger, language as poetry is neither an activity of “I for I” nor “I for We,” but an activity in itself—Language speaks to humanity, and thereby speaks humanity. The poet, in his venturesome self-assertion, challenges the ground of Being and risks falling into the Abyss, but his poetic work is in itself an important part of the drive towards a more authentic human existence. Similarly, for Lacan, language is neither natural expression nor a code—“it is not to be confused with information”—but “is so irreducible to a superstructure that materialism itself is seen to be alarmed by this heresy” (*Écrits* 125). Lacan suggests that language “speaks the subject”; that the speaker is subjected to language rather than master of it. The psychoanalyst recognizes, as well, the double character of language: that which is enjoined on the subject and that which speaks from the unconscious. Thus it is not upon the “I” that we must focus, says Lacan, but upon the language itself: “The truth has said: ‘I speak.’ To recognize this ‘I’ by what he speaks, perhaps we should not have turned to the ‘I,’ but paused at the angle of intersection of the speech” (125).

With Heidegger, then, Lacan envisages the subject as subordinated to language, cutting across the distinction between interpersonal and intrapersonal relations by presenting the second as a subset of the first in the chain of signifiers that link them. Both agree that although “man” behaves as if he were the creator and master of language, it is in fact language itself that is and remains his sovereign:

For in the proper sense of these terms, it is Language which speaks. Man speaks insofar as he replies to Language by listening to what it says to him. Language makes us a sign and it is Language which, first and last, conducts us in the way towards the being of a thing. (Heidegger *Being* 47)

Discourse, says Lacan, is “trans-subjective”—it requires both a sender and a receiver, as well as a message mediated by a code available to reciprocal interpretation. The unconscious, moreover, is not an individual, intra-psyche entity, but is a function of the collectivity that in fact creates and sustains it. “The mark of these [great] poets, is that to them the nature of poetry becomes worthy of questioning because they are

poetically on the track of that which, for them, is what must be said” (Heidegger “What Are” 141). William Wordsworth seems to be on the Heideggerian track, without fully realizing it himself. The Poet recognizes the inadequacies of language, in that much lies hidden from the ‘reach of words’; much that would fulfill his “worthy purpose.” At the same time, Wordsworth realizes the Lacanian Inversion: instead of trying to get language into the mind, he looks to enter the mind into language, through a new poetics of purposeful self-expression. Wordsworth was content with Poet as creator, and language as expression, though an expression that, due to the heightened sensibility of the Poet, will excite the feelings of others:

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 has also thought long and deeply. (*Ballads* 157)

Wordsworth, as a poet of Heideggerian “praise,” questioned the very nature of poetry, and found that all previous poetry, written when language was established within a world seen as of transcendental significance, could not allow for the fulfillment of human desire and feeling in the secular world that is characterized, in Lacanian terms, by the necessity of communication with the Other.

According to J. P. Ward, language must be one of three things: an address to God, pure subjectivity, or a gift—and object to be given, by the poet, or by the ordinary person, which becomes the mode or ground of social interaction. In Wordsworth, the imprint of his seemingly hyper-subjective “expressings” must be viewed as a “message.” As such, Wordsworth becomes the primal poet of modern language—the one who made poems out of the stuff of “contingent accidental utterance.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Wordsworth’s “pure” utterances come close to Roland Barthes’s assertion that the proposition *is the act itself*. The “I” fades into the utterance, as in Heidegger, and, following Lacan, language itself is prior to the individual through whom it is passed, and is temporarily content to let that be known in its very movement. “Saying” becomes not just “I say,” but “It is.” Ward contends that Wordsworth stamped English literature (and culture) with the language of freedom—a language that knows itself to be there and exposes itself as social and cultural, whatever else it may be. It is likely, however, that Wordsworth did not realize the implications of his poetic thesis, and consequently suffered the guilty conscience of the *belle âme*. His obsessive objects and characters are, in Lacanian terms, “perverse fixations,” which stand in like fetishes do for someone in whom the relentlessness of desire is too great for ordinary life with others to be completely, generously lived. While language motivates us, in the form of desire or heightened sensibility, the poet, already having words as a gift, will have this desire intensified, a process which necessarily infects the culture-bound language with the action brought by the individual’s contingent engagement with the world. Wordsworth feared the Abyss, not recognizing the necessity of self-sacrifice to his own creative work, in order to allow his poetry to speak to the world.

Whatever his personal inner psychic state, in Wordsworthian language gains autonomy, and frees itself

from the limitations of the subjective/inter-subjective axis. Emanating from the Self, language (or speech) as *poetry* becomes communication on a universal, pan-human scale, skipping the immediate inter-subjective basis of general communication between parties. This may be the most significant goal of language in our time: to communicate not just in way of imparting information but for the sake and need of human interaction. However, language could not have become this without the opening of the Self first to subjective expressivism,<sup>9</sup> in order to develop a confessional, interactive discourse of shared humanity. In effect, the *belle âme* must be sacrificed at the altar of the *freedom* of speech.

Poets, even as Prophets, each with each  
 Connected in a mighty scheme of truth,  
 Have each his own peculiar faculty,  
 Heaven's gift, a sense that fits him to perceive  
 Objects unseen before, thou wilt not blame  
 The humblest of this bard who dares to hope  
 That unto him hath also been vouchsafed  
 An insight, that in some sort he possesses  
 A Privilege, whereby a Word of his,  
 Proceeding from a source of untaught things,  
 Creative and enduring, may become  
 A Power like one of Nature's...  
 – Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book 13, lines 300-311

#### Notes

1. Condillac flirts with the idea of “expression” as the basis of language, but eventually falls to the side of Hobbes and Locke, positing the essential “primitive” character of expressive language and its impossibility in the modern non-emotional age.
2. This may remind one of the Kantian notion of the inter-subjectivity engendered by reflection upon the “Beautiful.”
3. Humboldt was influenced by Diderot, whose aesthetic concentrated on the language-maker, the poet, whom he compares to the painter. “It is the pure instinct of nature that inspires the poet without his being aware of it; the poet’s palette is language” (Humboldt liii). Yet, this creates a problem, once which Diderot returns to continually: whereas a finished painting can be neither narrative nor discursive, poetry cannot escape the “successivity” of language, and yet must all same strive for “simultaneity and synthesis.” The successful poet creates a poem that like a *hieroglyph*—a task, says Diderot, that is so difficult that good poets (more so than good painters) are few and far between.
4. Wordsworth did not publish his autobiographical *Prelude* until the year of his death (1850), for fear of a backlash against his perceived egoism.
5. For Saussure, *la langue* is the “social and collective institution of language as a system of signs possessing certain values and beyond the conscious control of the individual,” as opposed to *la parole*, “the individual act of combination and actualization (in a discourse) of speech,” which would be an essentially conscious use of unconsciously determined structures. (Wilden 204)
6. For Hegel, the coalescence of the subjective and the objective await the *belle âme* in the world of the Absolute Spirit: “the renunciation of the pure self, and the acceptance of

the objective self (for others), in the recognition on the part of the *belle âme* of his own inner baseness and hypocrisy, which leads to his pardon in the ‘reciprocal recognition of the absolute spirit.’”

7. According to Albert Hofstadter, poetry expresses thoughts that belong to perennially to human life but that have been clouded over by the “artificialities” of “the modern imprisonment of man in a culture dominated by the will to power and technical-technological brain” (Hofstadter xix).

8. By way of example, Ward cites one particular line from *The Prelude*, where the Poet exclaims: “and with what motion moved the clouds.” “To say, ‘and with what motion moved the clouds,’” says Ward, “is to put it to the reader as sheer utterance; for the moment is defined in circular fashion, and yet to state flatly that ‘the clouds moved with motion’ would be senseless and empty. Wordsworth again expresses ‘contingently’—leaving an opening for a dialectic return or response” (Ward 196).

9. “Wordsworth not only achieved the expression of engagement of self with reality... [h]e also moved toward a language which could be the foundation of the precarious interaction between individuals in an era like ours” (Ward 104).

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