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WORDSWORTH AND THE WHATCOM LIGHTCATCHER: REANIMATING THE MUSEUM WHEN THE PAST IS A THING OF THE PAST

Kathleen Lundeen
Western Washington University

ABSTRACT:
In the age of digital production, the alienation of texts (visual and verbal) from their own history has deepened since Walter Benjamin declared the "aura" of a work of art to be a casualty in the age of mechanical reproduction. Right in step with the efficiency of artistic reproduction is the efficiency of production. The strange condition of digital texts—bearing little record of the historical moment of their creation yet existing interminably—disrupts the very idea of cultural memory and invites one to ask: is the past merely a trope of a low tech society? And if so, does this render museums, repositories of cultural achievements, obsolete? In the midst of another technological revolution William Wordsworth provided unusual insight into the problem of cultural memory loss. In his epic poem *The Prelude*, written in the first half of the nineteenth century, he tracks collective cultural amnesia at different stages of a civilization, all the while intimating through his poetic practices how to re-imagine cultural legacy. One week after the Interdisciplinary Themes conference in Vancouver, B.C. a new museum opened in Bellingham, Washington. Since the signature feature of the Whatcom Lightcatcher Museum—a luminous wall—gives architectural form to Wordsworth's aesthetic, a description of it concludes my essay.
KEYWORDS: Museum; Literature; Temporality; Wordsworth

The legitimacy of the past as a physical or metaphysical category has, of course, been in question for nearly a century. Physicists have disavowed the temporal structure of past-present-future and challenged the intuition that time flows, that if it flows, it does so in only one direction, and that natural law impels a sequencing of events. Since cultural discourses are never discrete, it is no surprise that the paradigms of Einstein and Heisenberg have found a second home in the humanities where poststructuralists have contended that the past has the ontological status of a text and thus is fluid and susceptible to endless reconstructions, with no particular construction having absolute authority. Notwithstanding the reconception of the universe in the last century by physicists and philosophers, there has always been a distinction between the theoretical past and the experiential past—that is, until the invention of the cyber universe, which frees its traffickers of spatial and temporal orientation and, in the words of the cultural critic Sven Birketts, leaves us "hovering in the virtual now" (Birketts 1994, 180). As liberating as such a condition may seem there is a trade-off for computer keyboard artists.

In the age of digital production, the alienation of texts (visual and verbal) from their own history has deepened since Walter Benjamin declared the "aura" of a work of art to be a casualty in the age of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1955, 223). Right in step with the efficiency of artistic reproduction is the efficiency of production. Though the viral nature of digital technology has guaranteed immortality to every electronic expression (as those who expose themselves on Facebook have long discovered), the medium of electronic texts, unlike that of handwritten manuscripts and printed books, bears few traces of the historical moment in which a text was created. In addition, there is a wholesale evisceration of a textual past in the creative/revision process as one draft is supplanted by another. The strange condition of digital texts—bearing little record of the historical moment of their creation yet existing interminably—disrupts the very idea of cultural memory and invites one to ask: is the past merely a trope of a low tech society? And if so, does this render museums, repositories of cultural achievements since the eighteenth century, obsolete?

In the midst of another technological revolution William Wordsworth provided unusual insight into the problem of cultural memory loss. In his epic poem *The Prelude*, written in the first half of the nineteenth century, he tracks collective cultural amnesia at different stages of a civilization, all the while intimating through his poetic practices how to re-imagine cultural legacy.

Though Wordsworth is the greenest of poets, he rejects the view that urban life and the natural universe are dichotomous and in competition with each other, a view that insures the ebbing of a culture's achievements. Alternatively, he perceives an organic relationship between the natural universe and urban life. Stuart Allen, who notices a dialectic relationship between the city and nature in *The Prelude*, writes: "it is the order and social blend of the city that expresses the soothing `refinement' of nature. This, in turn, encourages further, unbound, social activity. The permanent forms of nature are mediated by the ephemeral; the ephemeral is mediated by nature" (Allen 2005). Though I share his reading of Wordsworth as dismissing the urban/rural binary, I would argue that, taking the long view, the city and nature in *The Prelude* do not merely activate each other; they assume each other's character. To illustrate, in a recollection of his youth Wordsworth writes:

> . . . A rude mass
> Of native rock, left midway in the square
> Or our small market village, was the goal
> Or centre of . . . sports; and when, returned
> After long absence, thither I repaired,
> Gone was the old grey stone, and in its place
> A smart Assembly-room usurped the ground
> That had been ours. (II, 33-40)

Wordsworth makes it clear that, as a boy, he saw the Assembly-room's usurpation of his former play area as a hostile takeover. As an adult looking back, however, his description intimates that the "rude mass / Of native rock" matured into a building. With a similar sensibility, toward the end of Book II he describes an abandoned abbey as "a mouldering pile with fractured arch, / Belfry, and images, and living trees" and then proclaims it "A holy scene!" (II, 105-07). He goes on to note the choir has been replaced by a "single wren" and the "roofless walls" are draped with "shuddering ivy" (II, 118, 123-24). Though it appears from his description that manmade structures surrender to the natural universe, his comment "there I could have made / My dwelling-place, and lived for ever there" once again argues for an integration of the natural and the constructed (II, 126-27).

Wordsworth's conviction of a correspondence between the natural universe and human achievements reaches a high point in the epic in a meditation on books:

> When Contemplation . . .
> . . . . spreads widely . . .
> . . . I sometimes grieve for thee, O Man,
> . . . not so much for woes
> That thou endurest . . .
> . . . but for those palms achieved,
> Through length of time, by patient exercise
> Of study and hard thought; there, there, it is
> That sadness finds its fuel.

He continues:

> . . . Thou . . . man! Hast wrought,
> For commerce of thy nature with herself,
> Things that aspire to unconquerable life;
> And yet we feel – we cannot choose but feel –
> That they may perish. (V, 1-22)

After mourning the possible loss of the achievements of civilization, Wordsworth consoles himself with the belief that "poetry and geometric truth . . . [are] / From all internal injury exempt" (V, 65-67), which is followed by a rare dream sequence. Seated in a cave, he reads *Don Quixote*, and either Cervantes or the "sultry air" causes him to fall asleep (V, 69). In a dream he envisions a man with a stone beneath one arm and a shell in the opposite hand, time capsules of science and art, respectively, which the man plans to bury. Imagining art and math as natural phenomena at their core, Wordsworth once again closes the gap that separates culture from nature.

Wordsworth's singling out art and math for their internal strengths sounds naively formalist. If we take a short digression from this commentary on *The Prelude*, however, we hear confirmation of Wordsworth's sentiment. Birketts speaks for many when he muses, "To the degree that we immerse ourselves in a book, listen to music, sink into the visual realm of a painting—to that degree we surrender our awareness of the present as a coordinate on a grid" (Birketts 1994, 193) while the physicist Brian Greene no doubt echoes many a scientist when he admits, "Whenever I sit, close my eyes, and try to think about things while somehow not depicting them as occupying space or experiencing the passage of time, I fall short," but then says, "the closest I come to ridding my thoughts of a direct spacetime association is when I'm immersed in a mathematical calculation . . ." (Greene 2004, 471). The time-free zone Birketts and Greene describe is markedly different from the disoriented temporality induced by cyber activity. The former, in the words of Birketts, is "the time of the self," which he defines as "deep time," while the latter takes us to a place "away from ourselves" (Birketts 1994, 193, 180).

Returning to the poem, we note that Wordsworth, as an adult, is jolted out of his youthful reveries by harsher images of the city, which announce dissonance between the natural universe and human institutions. During his university years the city of Cambridge swirls around him like a carnival while sometime later the legal and religious institutions of London—the courtroom and the church—assume the appearance of performance halls for the rituals of society. The transience of cities, which for Wordsworth have the authenticity and permanence of a stage set, is accompanied by the loss of cultural memory, as he poignantly discovers in London when he encounters someone who literally spells out the signifying absence in urban environments:

> . . . a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
> Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
> Wearing a written paper, to explain
> His story, whence he came, and who he was.
> Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round
> As with the might of waters; an apt type
> This label seemed of the utmost we can know,
> Both of ourselves and of the universe;
> And, on the shape of that unmoving man,
> His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,
> As if admonished from another world. (VII, 639-49)

Michael Meyer makes an intriguing case for Wordsworth's complicity in the living theater of London, arguing that he "stages himself as a past spectator of London" (Meyer 2003). He further suggests that the blind beggar dramatizes the position Wordsworth, like any traveler, faces in London: "he is always subject to the gaze of others of whom he may be oblivious to due to the anonymity of the urban masses" (Meyer 2003). Though Meyer finds an unexpected affinity between Wordsworth and the blind beggar, there is a critical difference between them: the beggar cannot read the gaze of those who see him nor can he reciprocate by gazing in return. The problem for the blind man does not stop there. As Rachel Bowlby has pointed out, he cannot read the paper attached to him, which creates an "irrevocable separation" between the man and his i.d., as it were, thus underscoring the "superficial legibility" of the written words (Bowlby 2007, 307). An arresting image, the blind man is a metaphor of the culture at large. With his personal history attached to his chest, he distills the inherent difficulty in the preservation of a culture's past. Cultural artifacts are treated like signifieds though, in fact, they are blind to their own significance. Like all phenomena, they are, in truth, signifiers, and, as such, require other signifiers to define them. The problem, of course, is that the independent signifiers do not guarantee comprehension

since they too need to be decoded. Thus, the crush of humanity dramatizes a universal semiotic problem, which Wordsworth describes as "blank confusion" (VII, 722). He suggests, however, that a sense of coherence is restored by the infusion of the natural on the urban scene: "The Spirit of Nature was upon me there," which "diffused, / Through meagre lines and colours, and the press / Of self-destroying, transitory things, / Composure, and ennobling Harmony" (VII, 767-71).

When Wordsworth roams through Paris in the wake of the French Revolution, the prophetic function of the blind beggar becomes apparent. Wordsworth tells of picking up a stone from the rubble of the Bastille and "pocket[ing] the relic, in the guise / Of an enthusiast" (IX, 70-71), but then confesses, "in honest truth, / I looked for something that I could not find, / Affecting more emotion than I felt" (IX, 71-73). The stone is palpable proof of the recent leveling of a political regime yet for Wordsworth it is vacant of historical significance.

This ebbing of cultural signification reaches an extreme toward the end of the epic when Wordsworth happens upon Salisbury Plain and encounters some very famous stones. Amid the "wide waste" he sees where it "Was figured o'er with circles, lines, or mounds / That yet survive, a work, as some divine, / Shaped by the Druids, so to represent / Their knowledge of the heavens, and image forth / The constellations" (XIII, 336-342). The millennia-old stone formation had literally survived in Wordsworth's day, but its cultural significance in the early nineteenth century was uncertain. Stonehenge is, of course, iconic for its inscrutability, which makes its placement at the end of the epic as the final artifact of civilization conspicuous: the image of the famous monoliths singlehandedly encapsulates the regression of a cultural sign from historical referent to myth to arbitrary symbol to (potentially) empty signifier.

For an epic poem that critiques urban life to present as its final cultural monument the surreal landscape of Salisbury Plain begs the question: even if cultural artifacts survive, will future generations know how to interpret them, or will they all be indecipherable in years to come? Will the achievements of civilization—everything from Newton's *Principia* to Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*—ultimately exist as mere curiosities, and will all cities one day be veritable Stonehenges?

Notwithstanding the moments in *The Prelude* when nature and culture are intertwined, it is tempting to interpret the arc of Wordsworth's epic as a reaffirmation of the cult of naturalism, which sees the natural universe as authentic and enduring and the city as false and transient. Since Stonehenge appears as the final cultural artifact in the poem, it might appear, as noted earlier, that cities eventually surrender to the all powerful natural universe, leaving only ruins behind. Such a reading of the poem would situate Wordsworth in a long tradition of Western writers and artists who, in biblical terms, yearn for Old Eden rather than New Jerusalem.

In spite of his persistent claims of the stamina of the natural universe, Wordsworth, as noted earlier, resists the rural/urban polarity. Many of the manmade structures he stumbles upon in his rambles are deteriorating, but rather than abandoning them he naturalizes them by showing how they have been reintegrated into the natural universe; in addition, the remnants of civilization argue as much for the endurance of cultural achievements as for their inevitable demise. This is especially evident when, in the wake of his fanciful description of the Druidic rituals at Stonehenge, he refers to the famous monoliths as "monumental hints" (XIII, 352). In true Romantic fashion he does not privilege outward over inward seeing but states that such hints may be "viewed / Or fancied in the obscurity of years" (XIII, 350-51). Toward the end of his musing on Stonehenge, he deepens the subjective relationship one has to the world, declaring, "each man's Mind is to herself / Witness and judge" (XIII, 366-67). All cultural artifacts, we might infer, including those that appear to be unambiguous, are in truth only intimations upon which a community constructs its myths. Under the reign of empiricism they have appeared as calcified historical moments, but as Wordsworth demonstrates during his French excursion, we are often incapable of accessing the past, even when we can literally touch the raw material of history. The stones of Salisbury Plain are, in truth, no less determinate as signs than the buildings of a city skyline.

The difficulty in reconstituting cultural history in *The Prelude* is largely a semiotic problem, as noted above, but the challenge in decoding signs is exacerbated by the temporality of the poem. As many readers discover, it is nearly impossible to establish a timeline for Wordsworth's long journey since the narrative proceeds at times synchronically rather than diachronically, disrupting any effort to read it as a linear history. The temporal problem is further

complicated in Book VII of the poem, as Alberto Gabriele reveals in a perceptive analysis of Wordsworth's "aesthetics of fragmentation" (Gabriele 2008, 366). As Gabriele argues, Wordsworth presents London as a discontinuous set of frames, a syntactic style that anticipates cinematic perception. Wordsworth's impressions of the city, Gabriele observes, "are caught in *movement,* therefore hindering any contemplative sustained attention, and, most importantly, experienced in *time,* thus increasing the fragmentary accumulation of passing impressions" (Gabriele 2008, 366). We might add that the portrayal of London as a fleeting assortment of disconnected impressions mimics the larger structure of the poem, which is arranged as a series of discrete episodes. Unlike most epics, however, in those episodes more often than not, nothing happens. Though *The Prelude* shuttles between the eventful and the uneventful, the many incidents Wordsworth relates do not fit easily into either category; that is, events in the poem are seen at some level to be ordinary, and non-events are shown to be noteworthy.

The refusal to distinguish between the significant and the significant would appear to undermine cultural memory altogether, but Wordsworth demonstrates otherwise. To illustrate, in Book XII, he writes of a Christmas vacation that was memorable for the saddest of reasons: his father died. He begins by describing himself as "Feverish, and tired, and restless" (XII, 289) as he waited impatiently to be taken home from boarding school, and then goes on to depict the scene on the crag from where he watched for the palfrey. Initially, it seems that the non-event of waiting impatiently to get home was followed by the unforgettable event of losing his dad. His narrative deconstructs that binary, however.

Though in retrospect, waiting for his ride was insignificant, Wordsworth spends nearly twenty lines telling about it and narrates that "non-event" in detail. He describes with precision where he situated himself on the crag and then composes the scene in a way that invites us to read it symbolically: "I sate half-sheltered by a naked wall; / Upon my right hand couched a single sheep, / Upon my left a blasted hawthorn stood" (XII, 299-301). Ever in search of an affiliation with nature, he may be suggesting that he is like that lone lamb, belonging more on the crag than in the confinement of either a school or his family home. He may also be intimating an affinity with the blasted hawthorn, a rare image of natural destruction in Wordsworth's poetry. Similarly, within the context of the scene, he may see the damaged tree as an ominous reminder that he requires the shelter of civilization, or perhaps he sees it as a symbol of a young life thwarted by untoward circumstances. However one interprets the sheep and tree, they are situated at the acme of the geographical scene and placed at the rhetorical climax of the passage. Though nothing significant happens as Wordsworth waits for the palfrey, he frames the non-event in a way that makes it seem significant.

By contrast, Wordsworth narrates his father's death in five unornamented lines:

> Ere we to school returned, --
> That dreary time, -- ere we had been ten days
> Sojourners in my father's house, he died,
> And I and my three brothers, orphans then,
> Followed his body to the grave. (XII, 305-09)

The one descriptive adjective, "dreary," is an odd way to characterize a momentous event. Even more unsettling is the punctuation of the passage. Instead of following the statement "he died" with a period, which would instruct the reader to stop, contemplate the event, and pay respect to his deceased dad, Wordsworth follows the clause with a comma (the briefest of pauses) and proceeds with his narrative.

There's no indication that Wordsworth was unaffected by his father's death. Indeed, the guilt he feels in the wake of his decease indicates he was strongly impacted by the incident, which to him was "A chastisement" for his "trite reflections of morality" on the crag (XII, 311, 314). His narrative, however, reveals there is not a clear distinction in his life between events and non-events. At a simple level we might argue that what is termed a "non-event," such as waiting for a ride, is necessary to recognize and experience an event, such as the death of a parent; reciprocally, an important event enables us to notice less significant moments with a sense of proportion. In a word, the terms define each other. But the above passage reveals a deeper intimacy between so-called "non-events" and events. The event of Wordsworth's father's death *made* the non-event of

waiting on the crag an event. In doing so, however, it minimized its own significance because it put the two situations on equal footing. When an event occurs, it resignifies the inconsequential moments that preceded it and gives those moments heightened significance while non-events, in turn, demystify events by assimilating them into the syntax and rhythm of ordinary life.

In his epic Wordsworth intimates through personal remembrances, such as the one just mentioned, as well as through reflections on the culture at large, the danger in calcifying historical events as though they were staid monuments of a culture's memory and, conversely, in treating monuments as though they were immortal embodiments of historical moments. Both rest on the hierarchy of the significant and insignificant, which, as noted above, collapses. Not surprisingly, cultural history is often read according to the conventions of the epic, but Wordsworth implicitly challenges that familiar reading by exposing the deficiencies of the genre. Through his poem, composed of scenes from Wordsworth's childhood and youth with interludes of self-reflection, he parodies the epic with its rises and falls, and reveals its inadequacy as a template for cultural history.

If we review Wordsworth's rejection of the familiar dualities of the natural and the manmade, the significant and the insignificant, the art and its viewer, and, perhaps most importantly, the subject and the object, an alternative template emerges. Donald Preziosi has described one example of an artistic institution that resists those dualities. After noting succinctly the traditional function of museums, to "frame history, memory, and meaning through the patterned deployment of artifacts abstracted from our own and other societies . . ." he then describes how the Soane Museum in London refuses that function by "problematizing aesthetic chronology and rationalized genealogy" and "transforming what had become the dramaturgy of the public art museum into a series of intersecting labyrinths: a landscape of ruins and fragments . . ." (Preziosi 1994, 141). A new museum in the State of Washington goes even further, however, in deconstructing the traditional museum as a repository of cultural expression, and it achieves this by giving architectural form to Wordsworth's aesthetic.

On November 14, 2009 over 4,000 people celebrated the opening of the new Whatcom Museum at the Lightcatcher in Bellingham, Washington. The distinguishing feature of this beautiful structure, designed by Jim Olson (a founding partner of Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects), is indeed the lightcatcher, a translucent curved wall in the courtyard of the museum. Though walls typically divide and separate one area from another, this wall, which is 37 feet high and 180 feet long, extends and unites the interior and exterior space of the museum through illumination. The wall's refusal to operate as a barrier is also announced by several square portholes, which appear at regular intervals along the wall at eye level. The portholes enable those on either of side of the wall to look through to the other side and thereby serve as picture frames. Peer through a porthole from inside the museum and you may see a tree, which in that instant is no longer peripheral landscape but a part of the museum's showcase. Peer through a porthole from outside the museum and a piece of sculpture may greet your gaze; though outside the museum, you are not an outsider. Instead of standing in the community as a hermetic container of precious contents—an imposing symbol of cultural elitism—the Lightcatcher museum, to a degree, dissolves the boundary between the architectural outside and inside and, hence, the social outside and inside.

The translucent wall also alters the conventional subject/object encounter the viewer has with works of art. Though the glass used for the portholes is transparent, enabling one to see through to the other side, it has a reflecting surface so that viewers see their own image mingling with the art when they view it from the courtyard and mingling with the trees when they view them from inside the museum. More precisely, they see etherealized versions of themselves as if they were holograms. This eerie mingling between the viewer and the art object calls to mind the phenomenological claim of Georges Poulet, who argues that in the act of reading, both the reader and the book depart their familiar ontology and enter another zone—"You are inside it; it is inside you: there is no longer either outside or inside"—a clear description of the visual "reading" experience a visitor has at the Lightcatcher (Poulet 1969, 54). The wall, in effect, dramatizes the subjective nature of artistic reception. Since each viewer creates, through his or her reflection, a different image mingling with the art object, the dynamic character of the art object and the changing perception and interpretation of the art object is continually affirmed.

The Whatcom Lightcatcher Museum provides an epilogue to Benjamin's lament over the fate of art in the face of encroaching technology. Though technology may indeed be responsible for the loss of one kind of artistic aura, as the conventional belief in the past recedes into obsolescence it is technology that is supplanting that loss with another aura—an aura that is not engendered by the historical distance between oneself and the work of art but by one's participation in the artwork's dynamic perpetuity.

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