To RAISE, in connection with "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," or with any other poem by Wordsworth, the question of poetic form is to encounter immediately an intricate web of issues branching out to weave into itself everything which is problematical in the work of this poet.

The word or the concept of "form" is heavy with a weight of metaphysical presuppositions. These may be traced back from modern contexts through the various meanings of the Latin "forma" and its sister words to the Greek concepts of form, whether as μορφή, or as Ἴδος, λόγος, παράδειγμα, ἀρχή, αἰτία, τύπος, or σχῆμα, in their proliferating interconnections. The originating texts are the discussions of form or "idea" in the dialogues of Plato and the analysis of formal cause as one of the four causes in Aristotle’s Physics and Metaphysics, but Plato and Aristotle are of course already interpreting terms and models of thought inherited from earlier Greek philosophers. To follow in detail the ramifications of the notion of form in our tradition would be to construct one version of the history of Western metaphysics. Complex as is the history of this concept, however, a single paradoxical structure persists through all its permutations. The notion of form has always presupposed a bifurcation between shape and substance, origin and result, cause and effect, model and copy, mold and molded. In one way or another it has been assumed that the meaning or design of that which is formed pre-exists it, stands outside it, sustains it, and validates it. The authenticity of the formed lies in the adequacy of its correspondence to its formal cause, to its source or origin. The formed must copy its form. One mode or another of the aesthetics of imitation is therefore implicit in the word form.

The paradox lies in the fact that the English word form, like the Greek τύπος, is used to name both the model and its copy. This paradox is not

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1 See the discussion of the three beds in Book X of The Republic and the sections on the four causes in Aristotle, Physics B and Metaphysics A, 3-7, 983a-988b; and Δ, 1-2, 1013a-b.
accidental. It brings into the open a profound ambiguity in the concept of form. The Indo-European root of the modern English word form and its analogues in other languages is apparently “mer-bh-” or “mer-gwh-,” “to gleam, sparkle.”

The root names the manifestation of a thing, its outer appearance or coming into sight. With this root meaning may be associated all those meanings of form, or of the Latin “forma” and the Greek ἡμοιότητα, as outward appearance, external aspect, shape, contour, structure, design, pattern, or beauty. On the other hand, the word form is the English equivalent for the range of meanings covered by the Greek ἄρρητος, ἡδος, or λόγος, that is, principle, essence, underlying cause, source, origin, beginning. For Plato any material bed presupposes the eternal form or idea of beds in the mind of the One, and the painting of a bed is a copy of a copy. For Aristotle the formal cause enters necessarily into the constitution of a thing and is presupposed by it. Form means both the structuring power and that which is structured. The word contains in itself the philosophical or aesthetic problem which it must be used to solve. The difficulty is that the expression of a solution will always turn out to be a restatement of the problem. The problem is inscribed in the metaphorical texture of our languages, locked within their key words.

The so-called “deconstruction of metaphysics” has always been a part of metaphysics, a shadow within its light, for example in the self-subversion of Plato in The Sophist. Nevertheless, the putting in question of metaphysics has taken a novel turn in modern times with new concepts of language, new ideas of structure, and new notions of interpretation.

One way to define this turn in the road is to say that it has been an attempt to escape from the doubleness of the concept of form by rejecting the dichotomy of form and substance, of model and copy. In place of the twofold use of the word form it puts the notion that there is no center of meaning or informing power preceding a given structure of signs. Meaning is generated by the interplay of elements rather than by the copying of some pre-existing sense. Form itself constitutes meaning, in both senses of “constitutes.” The form-making act is the creator rather than the copier of meaning. Meaning arises from the internal relationship of signs to one another, from echo-


ing repetitions of rhythm, syntax, rhyme, alliteration, and figurative language, from all the forms of similarity in difference within a text, rather than from the correspondence of signs to some already existing pattern of meaning. The meaning of a structure of words transcends the physical energy which is differentiated in that structure. There is an incompatibility between any form and its preformal sources, the incompatibility between meaning and the meaningless.

The conflict between these two concepts of form is central in Wordsworth’s poetry. His greatness may in part be defined by his role in articulating the modern changes in concepts of form. Often what appears to be a more radical later statement will turn out to have been anticipated either explicitly or in practice by Wordsworth. This is another way of saying that Wordsworth has played a central part in what Geoffrey Hartman calls the humanizing or demystifying of romance. One way to identify what is most challenging in Wordsworth’s poetry is to investigate not only the use of poetic form in his verse but also the ways in which the problem of form enters into his work as one of its essential themes. A preliminary approach to these topics will be attempted in this essay, first by an examination of what Wordsworth says about the sonnet form, and then by an exploration of the way the problem of form enters into the thematic texture of one of his most familiar sonnets.

If Wordsworth adjured the critic to “Scorn not the Sonnet” and wrote so many poems in this form, binding himself to its laws of rhyme and rhythm, and to its brief compass, this was not because of an admiration for the miniature as such. As the metaphors employed in the two sonnets on sonnets suggest, Wordsworth saw the small size and rigid laws of the sonnet as paradoxically allowing for one kind of largeness or another. In “Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room,” the son-


6 E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, eds., The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, second edition, (Oxford, 1954), III, 1-2. Further citations from all poems and essays by Wordsworth except The Prelude will be from this edition and will be identified by volume and page numbers.
net is compared to the nun’s small room, to the hermit’s cell, and to the student’s “citadel.” All these are enclosures making possible an expansiveness of meditation or speculation, a concern with first and last things. The sonnet, in the two suggestive metaphors which follow, is said to be like a spinning wheel or like a weaver’s loom. The sonnet is a forming matrix which allows the tangled fibers of language to be spun into thread and then woven into the texture or textuality of a poetic text. Without this patterning there can be no cloth. The following metaphor of the bee which gives up the open spaces within which he may freely “soar” in order to “murmur by the hour in foxglove bells” anticipates the various musical tropes in “Scorn not the sonnet.” Melody depends on limitation, and the sonnet, in spite of the fact that it is a “scanty plot of ground,” is no prison. Its exigencies are freely accepted. They are accepted as an escape from the paradoxical “weight of too much liberty.”

To understand what might be meant by “too much liberty” it is helpful to remember the paralysis which seizes the poet at the beginning of The Prelude. He has been freed from the stifling enclosure of the city and is now able to give his whole life to the writing of poetry, but the breath of inspiration soon fails him:

\[ \ldots \text{my soul} \]
\[ \text{Once more made trial of her strength, nor lacked} \]
\[ \text{Æolian visitations; but the harp} \]
\[ \text{Was soon defrauded, and the banded host} \]
\[ \text{Of harmony dispersed in straggling sounds,} \]
\[ \text{And lastly utter silence!}^{7} \]

Wordsworth, it will be recalled, was never able to complete the large poem, the major work to which The Prelude was only a prelude. The Prelude is, like A la recherche du temps perdu, a paradoxical work which has as its subject an attempt to account for the fact that the narrator has been unable to write the great work which turns out to be in the act of being written as he describes his failure to write it. Wordsworth’s use of the sonnet and his theory of its use must be understood in the context of this theme of poetic impotence, an impotence born of the poet’s very largeness of ambition and self-imposed inclusiveness of scope. In an apologetic letter to Walter Savage Landor of April 20, 1822, Wordsworth explained that the sonnet was a form in which he had written because he had wanted the courage to write larger works. He

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7 Ernest de Selincourt, ed., The Prelude or Growth of a Poet’s Mind, second edition revised by Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1959), 1850 text, Book I, ll. 94-99. Further citations from The Prelude will be from the 1850 text in this edition, identified by book and line numbers.
now looks back on the habit of writing sonnets as something about which he should feel guilty, as though it were like a fondness for checkers or crossword puzzles: "... since that time, and from want of resolution to take up anything of length, I have filled up many a moment in writing Sonnets, which, if I had never fallen into the practice, might easily have been better employed." 8

The second sonnet on sonnets, "Scorn not the Sonnet," 9 proceeds from Shakespeare to Petrarch, Tasso, Camões, Dante, Spenser, and Milton in its litany of the great poets who have employed the form. The sonnet is called successively a key, a lute, a pipe, a gay myrtle leaf, a glow-worm lamp, and a trumpet. A coherent system of thought underlies these metaphors. In each case the image is of something small and enclosed which is nevertheless articulated or structured. Since it has a design it can serve as the means by which inarticulate energies are at once controlled and released. They are given expression by being circumscribed and modulated. The sonnet is the "key" with which "Shakespeare unlocked his heart." The delicately fashioned notches, grooves, and teeth of this key opened what would else have remained locked and gave Shakespeare a power of self-expression otherwise impossible. For Petrarch the sonnet was a "small lute," for Tasso a "pipe." In both cases the notion is that the small "scale" of the sonnet, its limitation to a certain range of notes and melodies, gives it a special power of easing Petrarch's wound or of soothing in Camões an exile's grief. The metaphors used for Dante and Spenser introduce the idea of radiance. The neat pattern of the "gay myrtle leaf," reticulated like a key, "glittered" "Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned / His visionary brow." Within Dante's work as a whole the sonnet was light against darkness, but light patterned, articulated. Though this theme is missing from the image of the "glow-worm lamp" which cheered mild Spenser, the image of small scope which is a projective source of light in the darkness remains.

All these metaphors suggest that the miniature scale of the sonnet allows it to release powerful energies by turning them into harmony. This notion is especially clear in the final image of the sonnet as a trumpet through which Milton "blew/Soul-animating strains—alas, too few!" Milton's creative spirit must be controlled, channeled, tuned, and limited by the resonances already built into the trumpet. Like any musical instrument, a pipe or a lute, it will sound only certain notes. This limitation allows it to transform the undifferentiated rush of breath into distinct tones which may then be combined into melodies. Only

8 Cited in Poetical Works, III, 417.
this articulation of the inarticulate strength of Milton’s spirit gives other men access to it. The spiral tubes of the trumpet pass breath across to breath, spirit to spirit. Milton’s sonnets thereby become “soul-animating,” a source of inspiration for their readers, according to a metaphor defining spiritual energy, whether individual or universal, as wind or breath which Wordsworth inherits from tradition. He finds it inscribed in our languages, for example in the words “anima” and άνω. This metaphor is pervasive in his verse, for example in the imagery of wind which opens The Prelude (“O there is blessing in this gentle breeze”) and persists throughout that poem as one of its structuring images. Without differentiation, without the division of a diffuse and inarticulate power into definite pattern, there can be no transmission of the spirit.

This idea or image is given fuller expression in the dream episode of the Arab with his stone and shell in Book V of The Prelude. There the sound the dreaming poet hears when he puts the shell to his ear, spiral against spiral in mirror or echo, is at once a melody and at the same time the inarticulate sound of the sea. It is a roar or “Blouaugh!” like the bellow of William Carlos Williams’s sea-elephant or like the unmelodious song of wind and water from which the singer by the seashore determines her harmonies in Wallace Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West”: “It may be that in all her phrases stirred / The grinding water and the gasping wind.” The sound of the sea and the wind is at once a song and not a song. In The Prelude the poet hears in the shell a sound which is at once “a loud prophetic blast” and at the same time a “harmony.” It is “an Ode, in passion uttered,” but uttered “in an unknown tongue,” hence mere sound, but a sound, as the dreamer says, “which yet I understood” (V, 93-96). The paradox here, again a traditional one, is based on the opposition between the original and originating word, source of all language, which is yet no word because it holds all words undistinguished within it, and on the other hand the tune played on the lute, pipe, trumpet, or sonnet. This tune both reveals and hides the word. The forms of articulated speech or melody make the unworded blast of the original word available by turning it into definite tones or speech, and at the same time they limit it, transform it, obscure it, veil it over, traduce it by translating it.

This paradoxical relation of the sonnet to its origin does not fail to introduce paradox into the melody itself, the tune Wordsworth plays on
this small pipe, for example in “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” (III, 38). Though the harmony is controlled, the linguistic “tones” finite in number, the compass small, the relation among the parts seems impossible to fix. The poem cannot be reduced to a formal pattern of elements which may be comprehended as an unambiguous meaning by the reasoning mind. It seems as if the vertical incommensurability between the spiritual energy which is the “source” of the finite elements of language and those elements themselves enters somehow into the horizontal relations among the words. This incompatibility, it may be, makes it impossible to resolve the horizontal relations unambiguously. In any case, an encounter with the blankness of an irresolution is an essential component of any thoughtful reading of Wordsworth’s shorter poems. This irresolution is constituted by the “suspens vibratoire,” in Mallarmé’s phrase, of enigmatic juxtapositions among the words of the poem.

In “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” the characteristic indeterminateness of a short poem by Wordsworth arises partly from the use of negatives, partly from a pattern of metaphors which lies like an almost invisible garment of light over the realistic texture of the poem. These linguistic elements are two versions of the condensation or displacement essential to all poetic language. They put the straightforward literal meaning of the poem “beside itself.” Such language says two things at once and in this double saying establishes vibrations of implication which resonate outward in diffusive circles of meaning. If the source of the sonnet is a boundless breath, it moves through the limitations imposed by its form back to another kind of openness. It goes from the inarticulated to the articulate and back to an unsayable achieved, strangely enough, through just those devices of differentiation which are basic to poetry. It is as if the melodies played on the small lute of the sonnet, in their attempt to be true to the all-inclusive word or breath which is their origin, had to displace referential language in such a way that another form of indetermination is introduced within the small confines of the poem itself. This new uncertainty arises from the suggestiveness of lateral relationships between one element of the poem and another. The pressure of the word or breath, the wind behind the loud prophetic blast, pushes each word aside from its representational meaning and forces it to become figurative, to say more or other than it says. As Martin Heidegger and others have recognized, language is formed in such a way that it is impossible to speak of anything without speaking of it “as” something else. Language is irreducibly metaphorical. To speak of something is to assimilate it into an already

existing system of language. Within that system each thing is put beside itself and spoken of in terms of something else. 12

The language of "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" has an undeniably mimetic dimension. This dimension is not to be dismissed or transcended by further interpretation. The sonnet is exactly dated: "September 3, 1802." Though it was in fact, so it seems, composed on July 31, 1802, and perhaps revised in September, 13 nevertheless the date, the title, and the use of the present tense mean that at least within the fiction of the poem the reader is invited to think of it not as emotion recollected in tranquillity but as present speech of the poet on a particular day as he crosses a real bridge in the early morning and looks at the silent city. What he sees and feels are reported in straightforward referential language. "Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples" are named, as well as the river, houses, fields, sky, sun, and the fact that there is no smoke in the air. The mimetic aspect of the language of the poem corresponds closely to the circumstantial vividness of the corresponding text in Dorothy Wordsworth's journal for 1802: "It was a beautiful morning. The city, St. Paul's, with the river, and a multitude of little boats, made a most beautiful sight as we crossed Westminster Bridge. The houses were not over-hung by their cloud of smoke, and they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly, with such a fierce light, that there was something like the purity of one of nature's own grand spectacles." 14

The poet's subjective reaction, in the sonnet, is reported in language just as mimetic as that describing the outer scene: "Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!" This line, in its matching of an outer calm ("Ne'er saw I") and an inner calm ("Never felt"), might in fact be taken as the climax of the poem. Such a reading would see Wordsworth as fundamentally an epistemological poet, a poet concerned with the relation between subject and object. 15 Inner calm matches outer calm. The poet "feels" the deep calm within the city as if it were a calm deep within himself, and in this sympathy subject and object are reconciled, made one. Such a reading, however adequate, would nevertheless remain what I have called "mimetic." It would interpret the poem according to assumed correspondences between its language and some

13 See De Selincourt's discussion of this, Poetical Works, III, 431: "It is possible that the sonnet was inspired and drafted on July 31, 1802, and rewritten on Sept. 3, when W. was again in London."
14 Cited in Poetical Works, III, 431.
kind of extra-linguistic reality. Such realities, whether mental or physical, are presumed to have existed outside that language and not to depend on it for their existence. Only by investigating more closely relations between words within the poem is it possible to identify a non-representational meaning present side by side with the mimetic one.

Negatives, it has often been observed, have a paradoxical power in poetry. According to Freud, there are no negatives as such in dreams, since whatever we dream has a positive emblematic existence, which is to say, exists as both yes and no, as image. In a somewhat related way, the introduction of negatives in poetry adds more than it takes away. It creates a shadowy existence for what is denied. If I say, “I shall not compare thee to a summer’s day, a rose, a running brook,” I have in spite of myself made those comparisons, and the day, rose, and brook have a positive existence in my speech. The syntactical armature of “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” is made up of the negatives in lines 1, 9, and 11: “not,” “never,” “Ne’er,” and “never.” To these may be added the implicit negatives, reinforced by the explicit ones, in lines 2-3, 12, and 14. To say, “Earth has not anything to show more fair,” is to invite the reader to think of scenes which might be claimed to be fairer, or which others have said to be fairer, or which the poet himself at other times has described as fairer. To say, “Dull would he be of soul who could pass by/ A sight so touching in its majesty,” is to suppose that there are in fact such dullards, souls who would be unmoved by the beauty of the city, as a primrose, to Peter Bell, was only a primrose. The next negative (“Never did sun more beautifully steep/ In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill”) brings into the open the alternative candidate for fairer, namely rural nature. This comparison between nature and the city, introduced by way of the negatives, is fundamental to the poem. “Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!” invites the reader to think of all those other contexts, scattered through Wordsworth’s poetry and usually involving pastoral rather than urban landscapes, in which the poet responds to what he sees with a combination of deep excitement and calm, calm hovering on the edge of ecstasy. This combination is characteristic of the Wordsworthian “gentle shock of mild surprise” when the outer scene enters deeply into the soul of the beholder, as when the Boy of Winander hung listening and the silence “carried far into his heart the voice/ Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene/ Would enter unawares into his mind” (The Prelude, V, 381-385). To say “The river glideth at his own sweet will,” or “And all that mighty heart is lying still!” is, finally, to ask the reader to think of situations in which the river might in one way or another be coerced, or of what it might mean to say that the mighty heart of the city is beating rather than lying still. The negatives throughout the poem have
the paradoxical power to create as a shimmering mirage lying over their explicit assertions the presence of what they deny.

Not less important than the negatives in rippling the representative surface of “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” are the figures of speech used unobtrusively throughout. Like the negatives, the figures make the mimetic language move aside from itself and create through what Wordsworth in the Preface of 1815 calls the “daring” of the imagination a second realm. This new place exists only in the words for it. It is superimposed or stamped on the first as a shadow generated by what Wordsworth describes as “the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers of the Imagination,” those powers by which “the Imagination also shapes and creates.” Rarely has the sovereignty of the mind over things been more extravagantly asserted than by Wordsworth both in theory and in practice. This sovereignty, as his discussion of examples from Virgil, Milton, and his own verse demonstrates, is a linguistic force. It acts through figures of speech to create verbal fictions. Within these fictions “images” are “endowed by the mind with properties that do not inhere in them, upon an incitement from properties and qualities the existence of which is inherent and obvious.”16 The transformation exists not literally but in image.

The pervasive figure in “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” is of course the personification of the city as a sleeping human figure who wears only the transparent garment of the morning, as opposed to the usual clothing of smoke.17 This figure, who seems by implication to be female, lies “Open unto the fields, and to the sky,” as, in Tennyson’s “Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white,” the Earth lies “all Danaë to the stars.” The point of radical ambiguity arises, however, in the contrast between the penultimate line: “Dear God! the very houses seem asleep,” and the last line: “And all that mighty heart is lying still!” The former line suggests that the lady is asleep. The latter would seem to mean that the city is like a corpse. It is like a corpse because there are no human consciousnesses present within it. Only if all human minds are absent can the city be like that other scene, the rural one, brought into the poem by way of a negative: “Never did sun more

16 These citations are all from the Preface of 1815, Poetical Works, II, 437-38.
17 Wordsworth intended the beautiful oxymoron of a garment which yet leaves its wearer “bare,” as is indicated in the letters cited by De Selincourt in a note (III, 431): “John Kenyon wrote to W. (Aug. 22, 1836) that his wife had made the criticism, ‘If the beauty of the morning be worn “like a garment”—how bare? If “like a garment” mean anything (and it is somewhat vague at best) there is a contradiction in thought, and if it mean nothing there is a contradiction in words.’ W. replied: ‘The contradiction is in the words only—bare, as not being covered with smoke or vapour;—clothed, as being attired in the beams of the morning.’”
beautifully steep/ In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill.” (The contours of the valley, rock, or hill, it may be noted, correspond to the contours of a human body and reinforce the personification of the city by the implied congruence of the rural and urban scenes.) Only if there are no human minds present to hide the city from the sun, as the man made smoke usually covers the buildings, the ships, and the river, and only if there are no human beings present to turn the river willfully to their own uses, can the city be like a fair woman, sleeping or dead, or can the river glide at his own sweet will. The openness to the radiant presence signified by the sunlight is possible only if the city is like a corpse. But what of the poet? He is there all along, wide awake and watching, and he claims to participate in the deep calm which is shown to be possible only if all waking human minds are absent, and all the mighty heart of the city is lying still. The poet shares in a calm which can only exist if he is absent. He is both there and not there, as if he were his own ghost.

To follow the implications of the negatives and the figurative language in “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” leads the interpreter away from an unambiguous mimetic reading toward the recognition that the poem expresses an oscillation between consciousness and nature, life and death, presence and absence, motion and stillness. This recognition is the characteristic endpoint of any careful reading of Wordsworth’s best poems. Another example would be the enigmatic interplay between the first and last stanzas of “A slumber did my spirit seal.” In the second stanza the awakened poet discovers that Lucy can be a “thing” beyond the touch of earthly years only by indeed becoming a thing, “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,/With rocks, and stones, and trees” (II, 216). She can fulfill the promise of her seemingly immortal vitality only by dying. Just as the scene witnessed by the poet in “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” is both “still” and at the same time gliding with the river, so Lucy, now she has died, has “no motion” and yet moves ceaselessly with the rotation of the earth. In both poems the poet is the survivor of a death which is by implication his own death. This death which he anticipates or takes into himself or projects outward on nature is the force behind the imagination’s transformation of the literal scene. This transformation turns what is “really there” into emblem, that is, into a corpse: “And all that mighty heart is lying still!”

The doubleness generated by the opening out of time and death through the activity of the imagination may be seen in the twofold implications of the river’s gliding. The flowing of the river is the free movement of nature when man is not there, when consciousness is absent or dead. This gliding never dies and thereby combines perma-
nence and change, like the woods and waterfalls of the Alps in Book VI of *The Prelude*: “The immeasurable height/ Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,/ The stationary blasts of waterfalls” (VI, 624-26). At the same time the gliding river is transformed by the metaphorical displacements of the poem into a sign of the reaching toward death of a human mind which has accepted death or which has survived the death of another. Such a mind dwells free of illusion in the space of the imagination, that is, in the space between life and death. This region is characterized by a paradoxical movement in stillness expressed here in the immobile motion of the scene. The motif of the memorializing of the dead by the poet or by his personae, so ubiquitous a theme in Wordsworth’s poetry, for example, in “The Thorn,” in “Michael,” in the Matthew poems, in “The Ruined Cottage,” and in “The Boy of Winander,” is present here in the way the speaker of the sonnet has outlived the death of the human consciousness ascribed to the city. The poem might be defined as the epitaph for a dead city. Here too the death puts the poet beyond ordinary life, and here too the proleptic awareness of his own death places him in a precarious situation of sudden insight. This insight Wordsworth often expresses in a metaphor of abrupt pause or “hanging,” as in “The Boy of Winander”: “in that

It may be noted here that the analogies in structure and theme between any one poem by Wordsworth and other poems, often a large number of other poems, do not provide an escape from the ambiguity or shifting of meaning I am describing in “Composed upon Westminster Bridge.” It is not possible to set Wordsworth’s poems side by side to extract some common or “central” meaning present in them all. Each new poem turns out, when it is scrutinized, to be another expression of the same ambiguous insight, the same alternations between one meaning and another, which it may have been called upon to control in the first poem examined. No poem is the archetype which may be used to interpret all the others. Whatever poem is chosen as the focus of attention reveals itself to be just as problematical as the others. Moreover, the relation between one poem by Wordsworth and another is itself problematical, another form of the same oscillation of meaning encountered within each single poem. To what degree, for example, is it legitimate to read all the so-called “Lucy poems” as a group and to propose an interpretation of any one of them based on a global interpretation of them all? The insoluble problem of the relations among Wordsworth’s shorter poems is mirrored in *The Prelude* in the pregnant ambiguities generated throughout by enigmatic juxtapositions of episode with episode. What meaning lies in the blanks between sequence and sequence in *The Prelude*? Why, for example, is “The Boy of Winander” put in the book about books, sandwiched between an attack on modern educationists and the episode of the drowned man in Esthwaite’s Lake? Answers to this and to other such questions may certainly be found, but such answers constitute one form of that extrapolation or reading between the lines which is a necessary danger to be embraced by the man rash enough to undertake the interpretation of Wordsworth. The critic of Wordsworth must, like the Boy of Winander, hang listening in the silence, the blank between the poet’s words, and his commentary must consequently dare to “speak silence.”
silence while he hung/ Listening."\(^{19}\) This poise, when it appears in Wordsworth, indicates that the poet has entered into full awareness of the powers and dangers of the human imagination. It involves always the copresence of motion and stillness as essential components of human time.

In Book V of *The Prelude* the poet laments that the Mind, though "gifted with such powers to send abroad/Her spirit," has such "frail" "shrines" to "stamp her image on" as books (V, 45-49). In fact the daring of the imagination, in its transactions with the external world, as in "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," is just such a stamping. It creates out of the dislocations of literal language a rural scene and a figure sleeping or dead where there was only London on a September morning. In this verbalized transformation the poet stamps his image on nature, inscribes himself on it, makes nature into emblem. In so doing he brings death, imagination, and human time into being in the signs for them, in an act which is identical with the composition of the poem. The power to make signs creates the realm of the imagination. In that realm things are not what or where they are. They dwell in a continual flickering displacement, the displacement described in the splendid metaphor of the aurora borealis used in Book V of *The Prelude* to define the strange space of those verbal fictions "forged" by the imagination: "Space like a heaven filled up with northern lights,/ Here, nowhere, there, and everywhere at once" (V, 532-33).

The auroral alternation between one interpretation and another so characteristic of the final insight the reader reaches in working his way into one of Wordsworth's poems, even into so apparently innocent and straightforward a poem as "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," is in that poem exemplified in the vibration between the two meanings of the gliding river. On the one hand, as I have said, the line may be taken literally, as an expression of the poet's recognition of the natural time of everlasting stillness and motion. On the other hand, all the images of the poem may be taken as emblems of the poet's own consciousness as an inhabitant of that place beyond death and yet ever moving toward it. The poise of this motionless motion characterizes the space constructed by the imagination's daring in Wordsworth's poems. Between mimesis and emblem, between imitative form and creative form, the images of the poem hang balanced.

To return to the question of poetic form with which I began: Most concepts of form in poetry presuppose covertly or overtly the existence of a center outside the play of elements in the poem. This center is at

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\(^{19}\) I am indebted here to the admirable discussion of this poem by Paul de Man in an unpublished Christian Gauss Seminar.
once the origin of meaning and at the same time the control over meaning. It keeps the meaning from entering into an indefinitely expanding resonance of implication initiated by the give and take of words within the poem. In the Western tradition this center has taken the name of source, end, consciousness, God, the Word, and so on. The metaphor of wind articulated into melody by the trumpet and the other similar metaphors in the sonnets discussed here would seem to confirm Wordsworth's allegiance to one form of that concept of a centered structure. Nevertheless, Wordsworth's poetry pervasively puts this concept in question, as my examination of these poems has tried to show. If the "source" is an undifferentiated wind, then it is without meaning in itself. The wind or breath is only the possibility of meaning, not a forming matrix. It is not a simple or single origin, but a cacophony. It is no Word, but rather the murmur or roar which is the unformed possibility of all words. The sound the dreaming poet heard in the shell was not a single Logos, but a congeries of words. It was "a god, yea many gods,/Had voices more than all the winds" (The Prelude, V, 106-107).

Meaning comes into existence only in the modulation of this primal multiplicity into distinct sounds. This form-giving activity, as "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" demonstrates in the ambiguity of its negatives and metaphors, creates a form controlled by no still center outside itself. In a poem with such a form meaning arises from an act which makes that meaning impossible to fix definitely. It is a form in which the issue of form is one of the thematic elements entering into what is formed. The poem raises questions about its own mode of existence. A fuller investigation of this torsion of Wordsworth's poetry back on itself must, however, be postponed to a discussion of the dream of the Arab in Book V of The Prelude. In the interpretation of that crucial text the problem of poetic form in Wordsworth may be approached by way of the question of the role of written as opposed to oral language in his work.

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

20 See the opening pages of the essay by Jacques Derrida cited in footnote three above.