THE LANGUAGE OF LOSS AND THE LOSS OF LANGUAGE
IN WORDSWORTH’S Lyrical Ballads

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In Book X of The Prelude, Wordsworth looks back on his disenchantment with Godwinian rationalism during the period immediately before the publication of the 1798 volume of Lyrical Ballads:¹

   demanding proof,
   And seeking it in everything, I lost
   All feeling of conviction, and in fine,
   Sick, wearied out with contrarieties
   Yielded up moral questions in despair ....²

In this article I will focus on one aspect of Wordsworth’s disenchantment with rationalism, namely a questioning of the ability of language to express the strong emotions which accompany loss.³ It will be argued that the desire to be a poet, on the one hand, and the wish to express strong human passions, on the other, creates a dilemma for Wordsworth. Four strategies that Wordsworth employs to resolve this dilemma will be outlined, and the structural arrangement of the poems in the 1798 Volume will be looked at closely.

   By looking at the poems in the order in which they were finally arranged and published, we become aware of a developing theme, that of an increasing uncertainty as to the ability of language to deal with strong emotions, especially

those of loss, whether the loss be that of simple physical absence, anticipated absence or death, or actual death. This developing theme culminates in “The Idiot Boy”, which acts as a turning-point in the volume, and the poems that follow “The Idiot Boy” show a new acceptance of loss, and a corresponding lessening of the conflict between language and emotion.

The tension between the ordering nature of language and the disorder of the passions is, of course, not unique to Wordsworth nor even to poets of the late eighteenth century. I suggest, however, that it is not just an eighteenth-century idea of feeling or sensibility that Wordsworth wishes to express in poetic language, but the stronger passions associated with what was to become Romanticism, and which Nietzsche later called upon for his concept of the “Dionysian”: the same powerful elements that post-Freudian feminist criticism now calls the (feminine) “Other”, that is, the strong emotions which resist being expressed in the (masculine) “Logos” of words and rational discourse.5

We know that Wordsworth was interested in extreme emotions from a letter to John Wilson, where he uses the words “stripping our own hearts naked” in the context of a discussion of what makes good poetry.6 This suggests that Wordsworth wants to do the impossible: he wants to write, using the Logos of poetic language, about the “groans that words cannot express”, as Paul puts it

