Wordsworth’s 1798 poem “Tintern Abbey” is in essence an exploration of the poet’s internal transformation in relation to the natural landscape. Recalling his exuberant boyhood jaunts, and an earlier visit to Tintern and the Wye Valley, the speaker expresses his mature relationship to nature in which sensory enjoyment is integrated with more restrained reflection. Such involved meditations on feeling and thought contribute in part to “our received and cherished idea” of Wordsworth—the ascetic and tranquil poet of the universal sublime (Blank, 15). However, the poem’s emphasis on gratification
derived from gazing upon nature’s beauty suggests a feminization and eroticization of the landscape, which as Kelly Dennis notes in her essay on feminine sexuality and aesthetics, is “a centuries-old precedent … [t]he lush landscape is generally understood as a metaphor for the fertility and generation of the female body.” (59). Reading the sexual subtexts permeating “Tintern Abbey” alongside those of its companion poems in *Lyrical Ballads* and Wordsworth’s poetic treatises as outlined in the 1802 “Preface” to the collection, I shall address some of the text’s seemingly contradictory desires, arguing that it is in fact a trope of “self-pleasure” which best corresponds to the poet’s assimilation of visual enjoyment with thought. Wordsworth’s solitary gratifications in and away from nature, through the body and via memory, and within the uneasy homosocial space of his and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* will be examined within the context of the autoerotic.

Proceeding with an exploration of the sexualized landscape of “Tintern Abbey”, and mindful of Jean Hagstrum’s remark that “grotesque visualizing could easily take over” (105) in such an interpretation, I shall focus primarily on the poet’s erotic response to the object of desire. Although the female body can be mapped onto the topography of Wordsworth’s countryside (the mammary/vaginal association of “The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,” (line 78) for example), it is the sexual language articulating his relationship with nature that exposes the conspicuous masturbatory dynamic of that attraction. Wordsworth explicitly proclaims himself “A lover of the meadows and the woods, / And mountains; and of all that we behold / From this green earth;” (104–06), situating himself in both erotic and visual relation to the landscape. Lying down with his beloved, he reacquaints himself with the contours of her “forms of beauty” (23)

The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Among the woods and copses lose themselves, (9–13)

The depiction of a “wild green landscape” (15), the “unripe fruits” of its maidenly body concealed (with the promise of exposure in a coming season) evokes the impassioned desire aroused by the act of beholding. For Wordsworth the experienced lover, these moments of pleasure are tempered with reflection on his previous assignations with nature, the promise of adding the present experience to his mental “mansion for all lovely forms” (141), and a meta-cognitive encapsulation of these notions as the poet’s mature relationship with nature. This complex and multilayered cluster of erotically charged thoughts maps to what I am referring to as the autoerotic or self-pleasuring trope. Unpacking this concept first requires engagement with the younger Wordsworths as recalled by the author of “Tintern Abbey”.

From the perspective of his 1798 return to the banks of the Wye, Wordsworth considers himself “changed, no doubt, from what I was when first / I came among these hills” (67–68). The poet then complicates the recollection, incorporating his boyhood encounters with nature

For nature then

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1 Hagstrum, in analyzing the sexual imagery of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* strives to be “as indirect and purely suggestive as Wordsworth is” (105).
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
And their glad animal movements all gone by,)
To me was all in all. (73–76)

Resisting for the moment the enticing sexual undertones of both of these extracts, let us attempt to disentangle Wordsworth’s past incarnations along with their associated relationships with nature. G. Kim Blank acknowledges this perplexing interplay of selves in his psychoanalytic reading of “Tintern Abbey”, and identifies a developmental process from the instinctual “animal movements” of Wordsworth’s youth, through the emotional immersion of the visit five years earlier, to his mature contemplative state (133). Crucially, each successive manifestation of the poet retains characteristics of those preceding it, which according to Blank accounts for the partial overlap of Wordsworth’s younger selves and the successful integration of feeling and thought that the poet has achieved by the time of the present visit. For the “self-actualized” Wordsworth “Nature does not, he believes, just give him some feeling of calm; neither is it just something to clamor over. In its power it is also expansive, connective, and … inclusive.” (134). Blank supports his analysis of the three stages in Wordsworth’s psychological growth with biographical material pertinent to the poem’s chronology. Having suffered the loss of his parents at an early age, the young Wordsworth sought relief and escape in the Lake District countryside (52). As an adult, he visited the Wye Valley in 1793 in a state of emotional distress, unsure of his direction in life and disillusioned with the revolution in France (126), but on returning five years later in the company of his beloved sister, he had resolved much of his past trauma (136). Blank’s identification of the poem’s interconnected temporal phases provides a useful framework within which to further explore the erotic dynamic characterising Wordsworth’s process of self-reconciliation.

As Blank notes, Wordsworth’s previous relations with nature “were times void of thought … limited by his physical experience and emotional perceptions.” (133). The poet’s parenthetical inclusion of his “boyish days”—their “coarser pleasures” and “glad animal movements” (lines 74-75) is redolent with sexual, and arguably adolescent masturbatory enjoyment of nature’s physicality. As this recollection of delights “all gone by” (75) offers only a glimpse of Wordsworth at his most bodily, I wish to draw from a poem contemporary with “Tintern Abbey” which elaborates upon Wordsworth’s early relationship with nature. Also composed in 1798, “Nutting” describes a boyhood expedition to the countryside, which the poet recalls with guilt having “violated” nature whilst ostensibly collecting hazelnuts. Both Blank (163–65) and Hagstrum (95–96) discuss the sexual violence implicit in the poem (Blank emphasizing the element of repressed anger over the “lusty impulse”) and the eroticization of the natural landscape evident in the hazel trees with “tempting clusters hung, / A virgin scene!” (lines 20–21) which after “merciless ravage” (45) by the boy “Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up / Their quiet being” (47–48). “Nutting” provides an essential link from the bracketed-off boyhood of “Tintern Abbey” to the poet’s emerging synthesis of sensation and thought—Wordsworth is convinced that this guilty moment constitutes a turning point in his hitherto purely physical relationship with nature. Placing the episode alongside “Tintern Abbey”, the course of Wordsworth’s awakening sensibility with regard to nature is clearly apparent

and, unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past;
Ere from the mutilated bower I turned
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky. (“Nutting” 48–53)

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. (“Tintern Abbey” 89–94)

Prior to this “chastening”, the young Wordsworth relates to the world in a purely impulsive, corporeal fashion corresponding to an unselfconscious and aggressive sexuality. The closing lines of “Nutting” may anticipate the masturbatory inward turn of this urge, Wordsworth insisting “with gentle hand / Touch—for there is a spirit in the woods” (55–56) whilst leaving the object of that touch unmentioned.

Remembering that this youthful physicality persists (if somewhat subdued) in the adult poet, discussion of the mid-phase “emotional” Wordsworth necessarily incorporates elements of his boyhood psyche. As Blank (133) demonstrates, the two states intersect in the apparently oxymoronic “aching joys” (line 85), “dizzy raptures” (86), and “appetite; a feeling” (80) of “Tintern Abbey”—an instincual attraction to nature coloring the poet’s more sentimental response. In fact Wordsworth also depicts the self of five years previous as animal-like, though lacking the “glad movements” of his youthful outings when like a roe
I bounded o’er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led; more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. (68–73)

The poet’s relationship with nature has progressed from his clumsy boyhood fumbling, but remains imbalanced to the point of infatuation. His need to escape emotional distress dominates the liaison, and he abandons himself entirely to nature’s care. Though Wordsworth’s heart is clearly engaged, it is nature’s visual allure which catalyses the alchemic combination of “appetite”, “feeling”, and “love”

The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye. (77–84)
Indications of autoeroticism may be difficult to discern in this phase of Wordsworth’s development, but I would suggest that even though the poet is physically engaged with (“bounding o’er”) the landscape, the act of looking at nature’s physical form is explicit in these lines. A compulsive, somewhat furtive eroticism is also intimated in the coupling of “haunted” and “passion”. The “aching joys” and “dizzy raptures” of the following lines strongly evoke orgasmic pleasure, but this is definitely achieved in the presence of the object of desire and not via detached fantasizing (lines 82-84). In order to bridge the gap between this phase and Wordsworth’s mature, and as I contend, fully masturbatory self in the present of “Tintern Abbey”, I shall again draw upon a companion poem from *Lyrical Ballads*. Blank suggests that though written in the third person, “Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree” offers “one of the first suggestions of Wordsworth as the transformational poet, controlling himself both as narrator and object of narration as he attempts to formulate restoration from depravation, gain from loss.” (101). Composed between 1795 and 1797, the piece precedes the resolution expressed in “Tintern Abbey” and formulates a potential solution to Wordsworth’s feelings of despair and hopelessness through inward thought that is self-affirming rather than self-pitying (101–03). I would argue that the poem situates Wordsworth in similar erotic relationship to the landscape experienced in “Tintern Abbey”, and its theme of solitary, repetitive gratification positions the narrator at an autoerotic locus parallel to that of the “emotional” 1793 Wordsworth

And on those barren rocks, with juniper,
And heath, and thistle, thinly sprinkled o’er,
Fixing his downward eye, he many an hour
A morbid pleasure nourished, tracing here
An emblem of his own unfruitful life:
And lifting up his head, he then would gaze
On the more distant scene; how lovely ‘tis
Thou seest, and he would gaze till it became
Far lovelier, and he could not sustain
The beauty still more beauteous. (25–34)

Interpreted as sexual engagement, the recluse’s compulsive indulgence in “morbid pleasure” culminates in the spilling of semen on nature’s “barren” body, “tracing an emblem” of the non-reproductive sex act. The post-orgasmic re-situation of gaze from his own body to that of the landscape seems to bear out Wordsworth the narrator’s concluding caution that “The man, whose eye / Is ever on himself, doth look on one, / The least of nature’s works,” (51–53). Wordsworth is thus observed at two unfulfilled erotic moments—the emotionally overwhelmed roe of “Tintern Abbey” unable to conceptualize the pleasure bestowed by nature and thus a virtual sexual amnesiac, and the self-pleasuring loner of “Lines Left upon a Seat” so absorbed in the autoerotic act that he engages with the object of his desire only after his passion is spent. The seeds of Wordsworth’s satisfaction are present in both segments of text—the absent “remoter charm, by thought supplied” will in the fruition of “Tintern Abbey” marry with the now sustained fantasy of “beauty still more beauteous”.

Having traced Wordsworth’s development up to the initial tour of the Wye Valley, we can return to the process by which the poet has managed to integrate feeling and thought over the five intervening years and its correspondence to the trope of self-pleasure. Wordsworth remarks that although the time
of “aching joys” is no more and considerable time has passed since he engaged physically with the Wye landscape, he has not forgotten its delights

Though absent long,
These forms of beauty have not been to me,
As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure; (23–32)

The poem’s opening lines synthesize the blood’s physicality with heartfelt sentiment and, at last, the realm of thought. Again, Wordsworth’s language has a decidedly autoerotic flavor—“sensations sweet” suffusing the poet’s body and mind in the seclusion of a “lonely room”. The repeated salutation of lines 56 to 58 expresses the compulsive nature of Wordsworth’s solitary habit “How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee / O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods, / How often has my spirit turned to thee!” whilst the blissful release and sense of calm following orgasm is apparent in

that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lighten’d:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul: (38–47)

The crucial difference between the sublimely masturbating Wordsworth and his embittered jerking off in the yew-tree seat is the union of thought and desire (both physical and emotional), that is the capacity for sexual fantasy. Separated from the object of his ardor, Wordsworth the fantasist recreates and embellishes sexual situations from his store of erotic memories. I would suggest that the puzzling “unremembered pleasure” of line 32 corresponds to such creative re-imagining. Masturbatory fantasizing is strikingly evident in Wordsworth’s complex, multilayered pleasure on his reunion with the well-loved landscape. Even in the midst of the erotic moment, Wordsworth recalls past delights and revels in the addition of this episode to his repertoire

And now, with gleams of half-extinguish’d thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. (59–66)

Sexual fantasy as a mental dimension of desire is thus a vital component of Wordsworth’s unified relationship with the landscape, corresponding to M. H. Abrams’s characterization of Romantic poetic style in which “the description is structurally subordinate to the meditation and the meditation is sustained, continuous, and highly serious. Even when the initial impression is of the casual movement of a relaxed mind, retrospect reveals the whole to have been firmly organized around an emotional issue pressing for resolution.” (103 q. in Richey 320). Meditative/masturbatory thought enhances the poet’s physical and emotional engagement with nature bringing that “pressing issue” to culmination.

Solitary, creative erotic imagining has obvious parallels with the act of writing, and to reinforce the trope’s self-pleasuring aspect this association will be considered with particular reference to Wordsworth’s poetic theory as outlined in the “Preface” to Lyrical Ballads, and related works. In their introduction to Solitary Pleasures, a collection of essays exploring autoerotic discourses, Paula Bennett and Vernon Rosario identify “the connection between autoerotic fantasies inspired by ‘solitary vice’ and those associated with two other major solitary activities—reading and writing.” (10). The imaginative process required by all three diversions draws upon and constructs a substitute reality that stands in for and enhances the absent. Rosario describes in his own essay on the evolution of “masturbation phobia” how Rousseau’s Confessions makes explicit the perils of imagination as a “dangerous supplement” to reality, just as masturbation is supplemental to procreative sex, and writing to speaking (102). The moral anxiety surrounding these solitary vices in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century identified by Rosario revolves around a concern with social degeneration (124), which brings to mind Wordsworth’s yearning to escape “The dreary intercourse of daily life,” (line 132 “Tintern Abbey”). In his 1850 Prelude, Wordsworth offers a telling eulogy to solitude suggestive of sexual impotence resulting from such unfulfilling encounters “When from our better selves we have too long / Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop, / Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired” (4:353–55, q. in McGavran 158). The poetic fantasy of “Tintern Abbey” effectively edits other humans out of the Wye Valley (although there is a nod to an imaginary cave-dwelling hermit—a fellow masturbator?) in marked contrast to the scene portrayed in William Gilpin’s guidebook, which the poet reportedly took with him on returning to the Wye (Richey 323). Gilpin describes the wretched beggars encamped around the abbey’s ruins, and the noise of the nearby iron-works—turn offs that would have defiled Wordsworth’s eroticized landscape.

Wordsworth’s pleasures are thus enjoyed in seclusion, but the “Preface” also illustrates the trope’s sexual dynamic. “All good poetry” he states “is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (393), a strikingly ejaculatory characterization that recalls the “delightful stream” of “Tintern Abbey” (line 151). These feelings are given shape through thought “by obeying blindly and mechanically those habits” produced by “the repetition and continuance of this act” of contemplation (“Preface” 393–94). Though describing mental exercise, there is a sense of rhythmic, masturbatory indulgence in these lines, intensified by Wordsworth’s statement of poetic purpose, namely “to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement.” (394). The correspondence of
poetic composition and erotic reverie is evident in Wordsworth’s description of “emotion reflected in tranquillity … contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.” (407). The suggestion of a building climax is conspicuous in this description, and Wordsworth emphasises that passionate poetic discourse “should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure.” (407).

I have argued that Wordsworth’s meditation on self-realization in “Tintern Abbey”, his discussion of poetic philosophy, and the broader act of artistic creativity can be analyzed via the metaphor of self-pleasure. One aspect of the poem however, remains unaccounted for—the presence of Wordsworth’s sister in the erotic dreamscape of the Wye Valley. In the final third of “Tintern Abbey”, Wordsworth somewhat unexpectedly addresses his companion, dispelling the atmosphere of indulgence in seclusion. Dorothy is positioned in the poem as an analogue of the youthful pre-meditative Wordsworth through which he contemplates his earlier selves in relation to the landscape they now both engage with

in thy voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures in the shooting lights  
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while  
May I behold in thee what I was once,  
My dear, dear Sister! (117–22)

Though Wordsworth anticipates that “these wild ecstasies shall be matured / Into a sober pleasure” (139–40), they are not the same instincts that propelled the poet in his youthful relationship with nature. Dorothy’s nurturing role in the resolution of her brother’s earlier emotional trauma locates her within the restorative force—as Hagstrum observes, she is “the chief begetter and sustainer of the great Wordsworthian persona, Nature.” (93). This “insinuation of Dorothy into nature and of nature into her” Hagstrum continues, is problematic in the context of a sibling relationship given “the sexual energies that the poem seems to find in nature” (93). In order to sustain the autoerotic model, both this difficulty and the presence of the Other in the physical and fantasy landscapes of Wordsworth’s desire must be traversed. Hagstrum provides a detailed biographical discussion of the tender relationship that brother and sister enjoyed, concluding that although the suggestion of incest would be “tasteless and unwarranted” there may have been instances of guilty or dangerous emotion (96–97). Whilst it could be argued that a masturbatory sexuality provides a safe outlet for such feelings, dwelling upon the Wordsworths themselves is of little importance if the sexual element of the poet’s evolving relationship with nature is employed metaphorically. However, as mentioned previously, the self-pleasuring quality of that metaphor is at stake. This sexual inward turn may be substantiated by Wordsworth’s praise of his sister in the Prelude where he states “the beloved woman in whose sight / those days were passed … Maintained for me a saving intercourse / With my true self” (10.335–42 q. in Richey 15), suggesting with appropriate masturbatory nuance the point of emergence of the autoerotic trope. Dorothy and nature have both been instrumental in healing Wordsworth’s emotional pain, and in this nurturing aspect they are commingled. The model for Wordsworth’s integration of thought and feeling to which I have mapped the autoerotic trope is supplied by nature alone in its dual provision of physical allure and spiritual succor.
We have already extended the autoerotic trope beyond “Tintern Abbey”, but the poem’s situation in the co-authored *Lyrical Ballads* merits further discussion. Published anonymously in 1798, the volume was a loose poetic collaboration between Wordsworth and his close friend Coleridge, with each contributing both completed pieces and ideas or revisions for the use of the other. This furtive dissemination of their literary “experiments”, as Wordsworth refers to them in the “Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*” (Richey 17), hints at a possible mutual and/or communal masturbatory process. The appellation itself suggests stories with no purpose other than the pleasure of introspection (Richey 4), analogous to the non-generative act of self-pleasuring. Wordsworth dominated subsequent editions of the collection, incorporating the apologetic “Preface” and relegating a number of Coleridge’s poems, notably replacing “The Ancyen Mariner” with “Tintern Abbey” as the first poem of the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* (Richey 384). James Holt McGavran elaborates upon the “homosexual panic” that Wordsworth appears to have experienced in his collaboration with Coleridge, detailing the erasure and re-inscription of homoerotic elements in successive revisions of his poem “The Discharged Soldier” (149–50). McGavran’s description of Wordsworth’s textual struggle to “become a strong, independent, masculine, heterosexual, but continually self-questioning—and eventually self-overwhelmed—male Romantic poet” (163) is fascinating in itself, but it is the fixation on self and poetic self-emanations that I feel characterizes Wordsworth’s discourse. The positioning of what I have argued is his masturbatory magnum opus as the flagship poem in *Lyrical Ballads* signals his desire to define himself a “self-generated poet” (Magnuson 10 q. in Mcgavran 147).

Exposing masturbatory imagery in Wordsworth’s dignified poetic discourse might be dismissed as an exercise in puerile double entendre, but I have been careful to emphasize the correspondence of autoerotic sexuality as a trope for the poet’s great theme of feeling and thought united. “Tintern Abbey” demonstrates the vitality of imagination able to evoke and enhance sensation in physical isolation from its visualized object—a characterization that applies equally to the masturbatory sexual act. Wordsworth’s chosen intercessor between self and the world is nature, and as Hagsrum reminds us, “[i]t would be unnatural of nature to be ascetic” (94).
Works Cited


Wordsworth, William. “Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree Which Stands near the Lake of Esthwaite, on a Desolate Part of the Shore, yet Commanding a Beautiful Prospect.” Richey 45–47. Print.


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