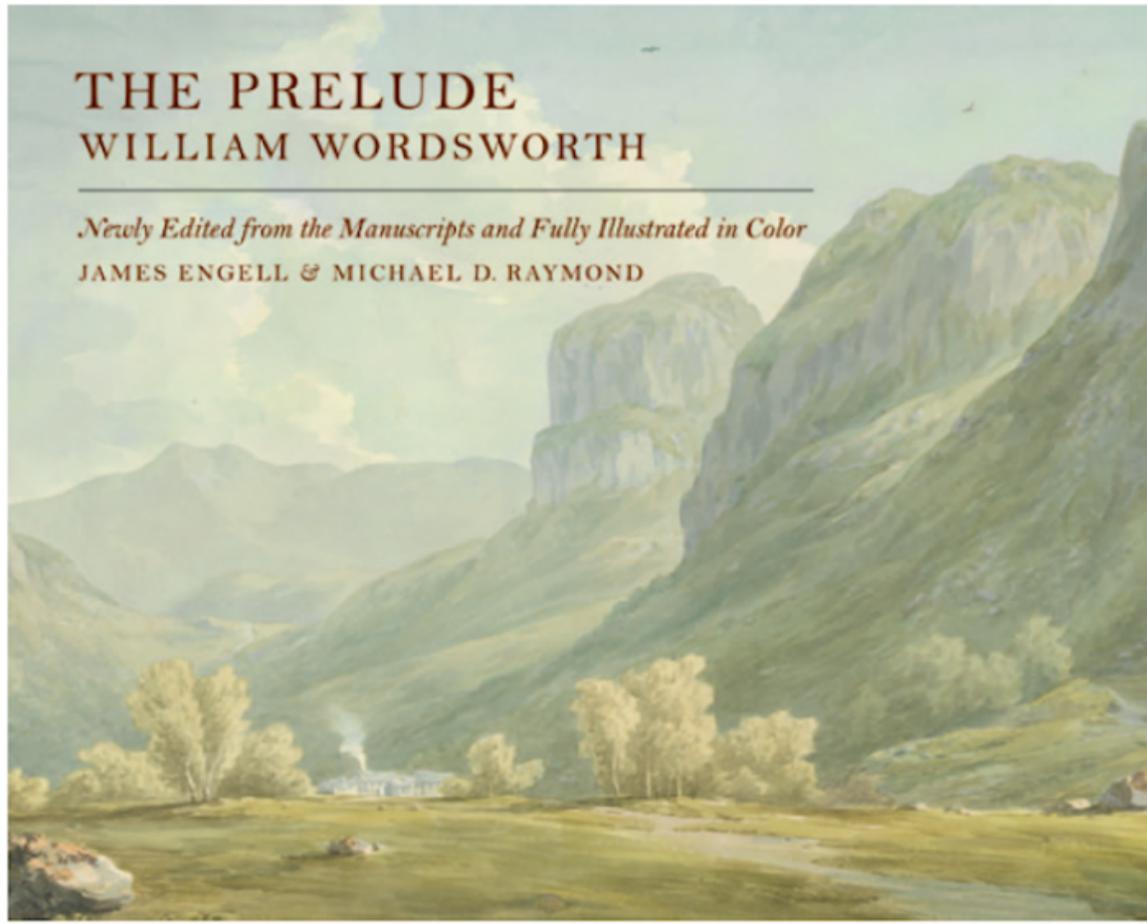


Imagination, Perception, and Technologies of Participation



*Though far inland we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither¹*

*Not in Utopia, subterraneous Fields,
Or some secreted Island, Heaven knows where
But in the very world which is the world
Of all of us, the place on which, in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all.²*

¹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book X, lines 723-7.

² William Wordsworth, *Ode, Intimations of Immortality*, lines 163-6.

"Imagination is the cardinal virtue, because the literalness which supports idolatry is the besetting sin, of the age which is upon us,"³ wrote Owen Barfield. By transfiguring our literal perception of the sense-world, the imaginative faculty reveals a meaningful coherence behind appearances, taking us from "inland far" to the "immortal sea." But let us not insist too much on the metaphor, as the insight and molding of imagination work upon the stuff of "the world of all of us" and are no transcendent flight to a beyond.

In his book, *Saving the Appearances*, Barfield argues that a shift in consciousness has taken place between humanity's original participation with representations of the sensory world, and modern day "idolatry," in which objects are perceived as completely independent of us. He suggests that modern consciousness may be moving toward a third stage of novel participation, while remaining informed by the autonomy gained through idolatry. The transformative power of Imagination plays a crucial role in this movement toward final participation.

Within that framework, this essay examines William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as an act and theory of Imagination, specifically through a close reading of the Mount Snowdon episode in Book XIII. In addition to Poetry, we will consider how Nature, Geometry, and Love can also serve as "technologies" of participation. Finally, we will explore how these tools and the imaginative faculty that animates them may aid in the movement toward final participation.

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³ Owen Barfield (paraphrasing William Blake), *Saving the Appearances*, 161.

Before we can understand how Imagination may lead to final participation, we must elucidate the nature of original participation and its relation to perception.

Barfield explains:

We must not confuse the percept with its cause. I do not hear undulating molecules of air; the name of what I hear is *sound*... Second, I do not perceive any *thing* with my sense-organs alone... When I "hear a thrush singing," I am hearing, not with my ears alone, but with all sorts of other things like mental habits, memory, imagination, feeling.⁴

The act of mental construction that creates recognizable and nameable things out of sensation is what Barfield calls *figuration*. The thinking we do about these representations, a kind of theoretical thinking, he calls *alpha-thinking*.⁵

Anthropologists once thought that indigenous peoples' experience of participation is simply a matter of mistaken alpha-thinking (incorrect beliefs about the representations), but that their figuration is identical to ours. Now some believe that the extra-sensory link involved in participation is in fact due to a difference in figuration, that the phenomena (representations) themselves are different, seen through indigenous eyes.⁶ The loss of original participation and the current state of idolatry (conceiving of the representations as wholly independent of the formative aspect of our perception) are due to a change in figuration effected by the influence of alpha-thinking.⁷

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⁴ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 34.

⁷ The history of this influence takes up a large portion of *Saving the Appearances* and is too detailed to recapitulate here. Suffice it to say that the loss of participation coincides with the rise of the abstracting, scientific mind that treats objects solely under their quantitative aspect as closed, mechanical systems abiding by fixed physical laws, wholly independent of human consciousness.

In both *The Prelude* and the *Ode*, Wordsworth intimates a historical (and finally mythic) movement by a personal narrative. We can see the historical trajectory from participation to idolatry evoked in the passage from early childhood to maturity in the *Ode*: “There was a time when... The earth, and every common sight, / To me did seem / Apparelled in celestial light... It is not now as it hath been of yore... The things which I have seen I now can see no more.”⁸ The enchanted experience of a participated world has disappeared. Or again: “The Youth, who daily father from the east / Must travel, still is Nature’s priest / And by the vision splendid / is on his way attended; / At length he perceives it die away, / And fade into the light of common day.”⁹ The Youth’s tracing of the sun’s passage from east to west, as well as words like “celestial light,” “Immortality” in the title of the poem, and the connected notion that we enter life “not in entire forgetfulness,” all invoke the mythic dimension of the poem.¹⁰ Correspondingly, we can note the mythic overlay in Barfield’s scheme. Original Participation—Idolatry—Final Participation could be likened to many myths but especially the Christian framework of Paradise—Paradise Lost—Paradise Regained. And so we may inquire as to this third stage in the *Ode*. As we have already seen at the outset of the essay: “Though inland far we be, / Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea... Can in a moment travel thither.”¹¹ Fallen from a state of original participation, yet we can move toward final participation.

⁸ Wordsworth, *Ode*, lines 1-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, lines 72-7.

¹⁰ For example, the sun’s rising, passage and setting correspond to birth, life and death. Plato’s Myth of Er in *The Republic* and the idea of *anamnesis* pertain to “Immortality” and “not in entire forgetfulness.”

¹¹ William Wordsworth, *Ode, Intimations of Immortality*, lines 163-6.

It is this kind of reconnection with an original source which concerns us in the examination of the Mount Snowdon episode. The experience depicted is not only an example of reconnection, but also illustrative and instructive as to how this reunification may come about through Imagination. On a foggy summer's night, Wordsworth winds up Snowdon, visibility obscured by the mist. His guide's dog "Unearth[s] a hedgehog in the mountain crags."¹² The creature and diction emphasize an earthy, grounded atmosphere. And again: "With forehead bent / Earthward, as if in opposition set against an enemy, I panted up." But upon breaking through the fog, the ambiance of *gravitas* is suddenly reversed:

For instantly a Light upon the turf
Fell like a flash: I look'd about, and lo!
The Moon stood naked in the Heavens...
And on the shore I found myself of a huge sea of mist...
At my feet: A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still Ocean.

The light of the heavenly moon upon the sea of mist transfigures the earthy mood and coarse landscape. The biblical exclamation ("lo!") and numinosity of the scene suggest a parabolic reading: The light of Imagination transforms the scattered ordinary world into an oceanic whole. "Far beyond, the vapours shot themselves... Into the Sea, the real Sea." The shooting vapours are reminiscent of wind, and through the Latin *spiritus*, reinforce the numinous charge of the scene. The ocean of mist is distinguished (but not divided¹³), from the emphasized *real* Sea. This real Sea is the original source, the wholeness behind seemingly disparate appearances,

¹² Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, line 24. Except where noted all subsequent quotations from the episode are contained in lines 30-203.

¹³ In Coleridge's sense. See Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*, 18. This also seems to apply to the intimacy between figuration and alpha-thinking.

and the landscape, bathed in the ocean of mist, has become its twin through the lamp of Imagination.

Wordsworth makes this faculty's role explicit, noting that off between the mist at his feet and the real sea

was a blue chasm; a fracture in the vapour,
A deep and gloomy breathing-place thro' which
Mounted the roar of waters... roaring with one voice.
...In that breach... That dark deep thoroughfare had Nature lodg'd
The Soul, the Imagination of the whole.

The words "breathing-place" and obliquely, "voice," suggest the Greek *psyche*, confirmed by "Soul," again underscoring the moment's sacred tone. The architecture of the scene, with the misted lands on one side, the real sea on the other, and Imagination in between, highlights Imagination's role as a bridge between the earthly and the divine, its power to transmute the diverse quotidian into a numinous whole—a reflection of the unified Source. Imagination is that transformative faculty which reveals in the mundane landscape an image of the real sea and shows the meaningful coherence behind "mere" appearances.

The idea of a Source behind the appearances is confirmed by Wordsworth's own reflection upon the experience that follows. "The scene...appear'd to me / The perfect image of a mighty Mind... / One function of such mind had Nature there... exhibited." But it is important to distinguish this experience of the sublime from the way that an active Imagination¹⁴ may transfigure a more everyday scene. Though in the first case a certain degree of receptivity is doubtless required from the observer, it is principally Nature that is acting, with "That domination which she oftentimes /

¹⁴ Coleridge's secondary Imagination. Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*, 81.

Exerts upon the outward face of things, / So moulds them... That even the grossest minds must see and hear / And cannot chuse but feel.” However, the appropriate person can exercise this metamorphic capacity of Imagination on his or her own:

The Power... which Nature thus
Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express
Resemblance, in the fullness of strength made visible
...of the glorious faculty
Which higher minds bear with them as their own.
This is the very spirit in which they deal
With all the objects of the universe;
They from their native selves can send abroad
Like transformations.

This distinction notwithstanding, let us note that through encounters with the sublime and the beautiful Nature entrains the Imagination. The vision of unity afforded to perception shows that such a thing is possible. If we recall that every act of figuration involves both sensation and a mental supplement, the difference between an experience of the sublime and a potential transfiguration of more commonplace things becomes one of degree rather than kind. The empowered Imagination can thus “observe affinities in / Objects where no brotherhood exists / To common minds.”¹⁵

Poetry too entrains the Imagination. The Poet is able to access the same power as Nature, transforming matter into a coherent and harmonious whole, a work of art: “Poets, even as Prophets, each with each / Connected in a mighty scheme of truth... [have] been vouchsafed / An influx... Proceeding from the depth of untaught things, / Enduring and creative... A power like one of Nature’s.”¹⁶ In being read, the account of Snowdon in fact fulfills the same end that it is describing. The

¹⁵ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book II, lines 403-5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Book XII, lines 301-12

reader's feeling of rapture before the printed word is analogous to Wordsworth's own feeling of rapture upon the mount. The author's imaginative act of poetry entrains the Imagination of the reader, with the "visionary power [that] / Attends upon the motion of winds / Embodied in the mystery of words."¹⁷ From seemingly disparate words on a page we pierce through to the marrow of life, and are reminded of the numinous realm that lies just behind the cloak of brute objects: "Even forms and substances are circumfus'd / By that transparent veil with light divine; / And through the turnings intricate of Verse, / Present themselves as objects recognis'd / In flashes, and with a glory scarce their own."¹⁸

That Poetry may accomplish in its act the very thing that act is describing—that in telling his story, Wordsworth also imparts upon the reader this same experience—seems connected to Coleridge's pronouncement on Geometry: Mathematical lines, points and surfaces are "acts of the imagination that are one with the product of those acts."¹⁹ Though operating in a different way than Poetry, Geometry too displays the constructive faculty of mind. Its perfect figures emphatically do *not* exist in the real world, exhibiting all the more clearly the mind's power to shape and create a reality, a "clear Synthesis built up aloft / So gracefully, even then when it appear'd / No more than as a plaything, or a toy / Embodied to sense, not what it is / In verity, an independent world / Created out of pure Intelligence."²⁰ Like Poetry, Geometry entrains the Imagination by displaying the

¹⁷ Ibid., Book V, lines 619-21

¹⁸ Ibid., 625-9

¹⁹ Coleridge, quoted in Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*, 15.

²⁰ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book VI, lines 182-7.

synthetic force of mind.

It is no surprise then that “Poetry and geometric Truth”²¹ are the centerpieces in the ‘Dream of the Arab’ in Book V. Let us only consider in this regard the figure that incubates the dream: The Errant Knight of Cervantes, Don Quixote. He is one capable of transforming his world through an act of Imagination. Though many insist he is mad or that he comes to his senses and repents in the end, the only error to which Don Quixote finally admits on his deathbed is believing that there were and still are knights errant in the world. This suggests that he was in full possession of his faculties when he took on his imaginative role, but was simply alone in a world of idolaters. That his romantic and comedic questing is not the true stuff of Imagination may be a just criticism, but consider also the transformative power of the dream as an analogue to Imagination. The quixotic Knight is lifted up and becomes the bearer of the tablets of human knowledge, the Stone and the Shell (Geometry and Poetry), in the face of the apocalypse.

While Nature, Poetry and Geometry (and perhaps dreaming) play crucial roles in elucidating the metamorphic power of Imagination, let us not forget Love. Like Plato’s ladder of the forms of love in the *Symposium*, Wordsworth acknowledges both the central importance and different types of love:

...From love, for here
Do we begin and end, all grandeur comes
All truth and beauty, from pervading love,
That gone, we are as dust... see that Pair the Lamb
And the Lamb’s Mother, and their tender ways
Shall touch thee to the heart; thou call’st this love
And so it is, but there is higher love
Than this, a love that comes into the heart

²¹ Ibid., Book V, line 64

With awe and diffusive sentiment;
Thy love is human merely; this proceeds
More from the brooding Soul, and is divine.

This love more intellectual cannot be
Without Imagination.²²

Even the more ordinary love, whether it is familial or romantic, is a power that transforms one's world. And in Geometry we find the power to construct a world in Intelligence. Both seem to inform the "feeling intellect"²³ or higher love, which is in a sense the apex of and the same as Imagination: "Imagination having been our theme, / So also hath that intellectual love, / For they are each in each, and cannot stand / Dividually.—Here must thou be, O Man!"²⁴ In preparing our faculties for that higher, intellectual love, Love too entrains the Imagination.

It is Poetry and the Arts in general that embody especially well this "feeling intellect" and may play a special role on the road to final participation. The structure and logic of the Arts, alongside the feeling-tone they both evoke and require for creation, let them play an exceptional part in spurring the active Imagination²⁵ needed to transform our manner of figuration. Because "the future of the phenomenal world can no longer be regarded as entirely independent of man's volition,"²⁶ we must "learn to approach the unrepresented by way of enhancing our figuration, so as to make it a conscious process."²⁷ Artistic activity creates

²² Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XIII, lines 146-60

²³ *Ibid.*, line 198.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 178-81.

²⁵ Coleridge's secondary Imagination. Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*, 81.

²⁶ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 160.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

meaningful representations and can be considered a new, conscious parallel to the (largely unconscious) primal act of figuration in original participation.

Additionally, Art functions within a social context. With reference to Durkheim's discussion of clans' use of totemic emblems to express and communicate collective representations, Barfield notes that language carries this same expression and communication today. He continues, "Participation begins by being an activity, and essentially a communal, social activity."²⁸ Though in different ways and to different degrees within each medium, the Arts may be placed alongside totemic emblems and language as performing this representative, communal act through expression and communication.

Furthermore, Art mirrors the structure of original participation insofar as "there stands behind the phenomena, *and on the other side of them from me*, a represented which is of the same nature as me." Whereas in original participation this was the divine mind of God or the spirit world, we are now given the inspired mind of the artistic genius—the one who "maketh a new Nature and so maketh himself as it were a new God."²⁹ The artist creates the unified representation, an image of his or her own Soul—but it is only functioning art when an audience experiences the representation and intuits the unity of mind behind it. Unlike the idols around us, Art *reminds* us that it is precisely a representation; and to be a representation and not an idol, to function as Art, it must be participated in. To play on Coleridge's phrase, this calls for a "willing suspension of *belief*" in idols.

²⁸ Ibid., 32.

²⁹ Scaliger, quoted in Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 128.

Art is a viable path toward final participation because it takes back up the act of representation within a social context, but with a new consciousness of man's "directionally creator"³⁰ role toward Nature. Though Art will not bring about final participation all by itself, it is a template for the way our Imagination can transfigure the world and engage in that participation. This new awareness of self in co-creative interaction with the phenomenal world is a lesson that must be learned in the passage from original to final participation. It serves to redeem and make sense of a narrative arc that may otherwise be construed (or even lived) as a tragic fall. The descent into idolatry allows for the consolidation and liberation of subjectivity, but requires the effacing of identification and extra-sensory ties with the *mana*-Source behind representations. No longer can we "rely on the life inherent in the object," but are called upon to perform the heroic act of drawing "the life forth from within" ourselves.³¹

In the same way that we read the Snowdon episode parabolically, we must perceive that "every man's life is a perpetual allegory."³² As we saw in the *Ode*, the historical and the mythic are contained in the personal; and "with the further increase of final participation, this perception should be extended to the biographies of nations and races, and of humanity as a whole."³³ Imagination is the faculty that allows this perception—and the Arts, the sublime and the beautiful in Nature, Geometry, and Love are rungs upon the ladder back to final participation.

³⁰ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 132.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

³² John Keats quoted in Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 151.

³³ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 151.

But these activities are not sufficient on their own to bring about the reconnection; we have understood them when we have “climbed out through them, on them, over them. ([We] must so to speak throw away the ladder, after [we have] climbed up on it.)”³⁴ It is only thus that we will truly reunite with the original source that is lodged in our own Soul, realizing “that nature herself is the representation of Man,”³⁵ and that we are the creators of the world that lives to us, “and to the God who [looks] into [our] mind.”³⁶ This leap toward final participation is not to original, undivided wholeness but to a distinguished³⁷, complex whole in which our conscious agency is embedded: “The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started and *know* the place for the first time.”³⁸

³⁴ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 108.

³⁵ Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 131

³⁶ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book III, line 144.

³⁷ As in Coleridge’s distinction between dividing and distinguishing. See Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*, 18.

³⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets, Little Gidding*, lines 240-2 (italics mine).

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