

# Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor, and the authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

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## Voice in *The Prelude*

To the Editor:

Although I thoroughly enjoyed reading J. Douglas Kneale's "Wordsworth's Images of Language: Voice and Letter in *The Prelude*" (101 [1986]: 351-61), I would like to quarrel with one of its basic concepts and with a few passages. Kneale establishes a false dichotomy between "speaking" and the "engraved or inscribed or imprinted word" in that he ascribes "voice, audience, and hence the idea of a rhetor" (351) only to speaking. Using Bakhtin in opposition to Saussure and Derrida, I would argue that both the spoken and the written consist of utterances and that every utterance has voice as one of its characteristics. This voice is invested in the utterance by both the utterer and the hearer or reader. This false dichotomy leads to certain mistaken emphases, such as the concept that all writing is a "dead letter" in contrast to a "living voice" (356). A legal will exemplifies the living voice present within the "dead letter" of a text. And how much stronger is the voice of the Wordsworthian narrator within the written text of *The Prelude* each time a reader reads the poem and renders it once more an utterance invested with a voice that mingles Wordsworth's initial voicing with the reader's own conception of the narrator's voice and the dual perceptions of the utterance's meanings—the author's perception integral to the formation of the utterance and the reader's perception brought to that utterance from his or her own cultural context.

Nature has no voice, but it produces sounds. Wordsworth's personification, however, renders those sounds as utterances produced by "Nature" as a character in the poem. This rendering gives the designated sounds of physical nature the literary illusion of having both a speaking voice and an intended audience. Appearing as the utterances of a personified "Nature," they contain "voice, audience, and hence the idea of a rhetor" for the duration of the reading experience. In an inverse manner, the "blind Beggar . . . / . . . upon his chest / Wearing a written paper" provides the reader with a "voiceless" character whose utterance remains unsaid and unread by the reader of the poem but is voiced utterance for the poem's narrator. The reader has no opportunity to read the paper, but he or she hears the silence, a form of voicing by negation. It is a statement of the individual's condition. The reader also imagines the narrator's reading of the paper both in terms of that voiced silence and in terms of the narrator's investing the written utterance

with the imagined voice of the person who stands silently before him. Thus, "[t]he image of a man wearing a text on his chest" does not suggest "a sentimental desire to have language become one with the objects it intends, to make words invoke real things" (357). Rather, it demonstrates the ability of a poetic fiction to produce such an illusion through the particular voicing of specific utterances. There is no beggar who attempts "figurally to present himself as a text"; there is only a text that causes the reader to imagine the Beggar as a text because a fictional narrator so imagines him. It is not the effort to have the Beggar achieve "pure semiological status" but the sincerity of the Wordsworthian narrator's utterance, the quality of its voicing, that leads Kneale to such a conclusion.

Kneale treats the Beggar as a referential object instead of as a fictional illusion produced by a skillfully voiced utterance. Further, he treats the "written paper" as actually existing with words on it, when it too is a fictional utterance. But more serious is his claim that "[t]he Beggar's label is a written form of utterance that aspires to the innerness of voice. It is an utterance that is not uttered because it has already been 'outed' through writing" (358). Treating for the moment the illusion of a written utterance on the paper as if it were real, one must recognize that it would be an utterance that began as an oral presentation by the Beggar recorded by someone else. The particular wording of that utterance would be invested with the Beggar's voicing and the filter of the recorder's voicing as he transcribed it. When the Wordsworthian narrator read the paper, he would unavoidably invest the written utterance with a voice that he would imagine to belong to the silent person before him. That voice would reflect the narrator's conception of that individual based on what he sees and on the paper's information. The imagined voice of the Beggar would be omnipresent within the utterance. In like manner, we often imagine the voices of individuals before we hear them speak, basing our guesses on observation and on information about them; conversely, we often assign imagined physiognomies to voices we hear on the telephone. In both cases, there is an interpretation of visualizing and voicing. Even without knowledge of the author, we invest a text with some sort of voicing, while in *The Prelude* the Wordsworthian narrator could hardly avoid such investiture with the image of the blind Beggar directly before him. Rather than simply recognize that the Beggar cannot know himself any more than the narrator can know himself or the universe, Kneale is led by his false dichotomy

to state that “[t]he Beggar cannot read his written self” (359). Kneale quotes de Man as saying “all language is about language.” I don’t know about that, but I am certain that utterances, spoken and written, are about and contain much more than self-reflexivity.

I am curious whether Kneale has considered applying Bakhtin’s ideas about the utterance to Wordsworth as others have done, whether he has considered Bakhtin’s approach insufficient for his own critical concerns, or whether he has not yet considered Bakhtin in relation to his own research.

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*Reply:*

I am not at all convinced that Patrick Murphy offers a genuinely alternative reading of Wordsworth simply by substituting one critical position or lexicon for another. He is less concerned with interpreting Wordsworth than with airing an “opposition to Saussure and Derrida.” Since he also displays a fundamental misunderstanding of my essay, however, I wish to make three points.

First, voice is also “writing.” In my essay I sketched the outlines of not just one “false dichotomy” in Wordsworth’s poetry but two: the “tyranny of writing,” as Saussure puts it, and the tyranny of voice. No attentive reader of Wordsworth can comfortably remain in either of these hierarchical oppositions, the one favoring the permanence and stability of inscription over the transience of voice and the other privileging the immediacy and authenticity of speech over the derivativeness of the letter. As I showed, however, what appears as a hierarchical opposition turns out to be *difference*, what Wordsworth conceives of as “mutual domination” (*Prelude* 14.81) or “interchangeable supremacy” (14.84) of terms. The history of Wordsworth’s text—if not of Western metaphysics, as Derrida has argued—is the repression of difference in favor of presence. I tried to be faithful to that repression, to recognize it, and to map it

generally, but I also tried to show how the false dichotomies of voice and letter in Wordsworth’s poetry turn out to be interpenetrations or intersections—for example, “speaking monuments” (8.172).

Second, Murphy seriously misquotes me when he says that de Man claims that “all language is about language.” My citation of de Man said no such thing. Paul de Man, a subtle and tough-minded reader, would never have been comfortable with such an easy assertion. What I actually quoted was this: “*If* all language is about language, then the paradigmatic linguistic model is that of an entity that confronts itself” (emphasis added). Murphy has doubly misread de Man, first by misconstruing hypothesis as assertion and then by mistaking the proposition that all language is about language as the claim that language is *all* about language. There is more to de Man, too, than self-reflexivity. But equally questionable is Murphy’s certainty that utterances “are about and contain” something. The idea that language is “about” something—maybe even about itself—is based on the model of an intentional structure different from or external to something; but the notion that language also “contain[s]” something is incompatible with its “aboutness.” Murphy’s tropes spatialize language in contradictory directions, and when that contradiction becomes the ground of affirmation and certainty (“I am certain that utterances . . . are about and contain much more”), one begins to see how, in de Man’s words, Murphy’s rhetoric “turns back upon itself in a manner that puts the authority of its own affirmations in doubt” (*Allegories*).

Finally, Murphy’s Bakhtinian vocabulary is not so much “insufficient for [my] own critical concerns” as obviously different from my present critical rhetoric. That rhetoric, which I believe sufficient, and sufficiently defined, for my reading, is not Bakhtin’s. I think it reasonable to say, after Wordsworth, that one should not be censured for not having performed what one never attempted.

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