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Since its first publication in 1814, *The Excursion* has sparked debate. Half-way between the dramatic form of *The Borderers* (1797) and the epic scope of *The Prelude* (1805), the poem is encumbered by the presence of four abstract characters (the 'Solitary', the 'Poet', the 'Wanderer' and the 'Pastor'), making 'much of the verse […] difficult to follow', according to Stephen Gill.[1] The poem consists of the conversations of the four characters as they wander in the English countryside. Quite widely appreciated during the Victorian period,[2] this nine-book poem has fallen into disregard in the twentieth century. Yet, the last twenty-five years have seen a new surge of interest in this marginalised poem of the Wordsworthian corpus, notably with the publication of three seminal monographs: *Impure Conceits: Rhetoric and Ideology in Wordsworth's 'Excursion'* (1997) by Alison Hickey, *Re-Reading 'The Excursion': Narrative, Response and the Wordsworthian Dramatic Voice* (2002) by Sally Bushell, and '*The Excursion' and Wordsworth's Iconography* (2018) by Brandon Yen, paving the way for a wider appreciation of this underrated poem.

These re-assessments of *The Excursion* underline the originality of the form of the poem, but in very different ways. All three monographs attempt to disprove Francis Jeffrey's

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[1] Stephen Gill, 'The Philosophic Poet', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 150: 'this language is not readily accessible'.
[2] Sally Bushell, *Re-Reading 'The Excursion': Narrative, Response and the Wordsworthian Dramatic Voice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 6: 'There is no doubt then, that both Wordsworth and The Excursion (either the early books or the whole poem) were much read and loved by many Victorians and deeply influential on major writers of the period.'

and Matthew Arnold's charge of philosophical abstraction, which led to the recentring of the Wordsworthian canon on the period before 1814 and on shorter poems.[3] In Hickey's and Bushell's works, the idea of a Wordsworthian philosophical system comes under scrutiny: whereas Hickey examines Wordsworth's ambivalence about the issues of education and imperialism by pinpointing the presence of 'counterforces of dissolution',[4] Bushell demonstrates the performative dimension of Wordsworth's philosophy by applying the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism to the poem. With a similar goal, Yen reassesses the visual dimension of the poem via an 'iconographic approach' inspired by Panofsky that uncovers 'how the iconographical meanings of Wordsworth's imagery […] contribute to the major themes and rhetorical exchanges in *The Excursion*'.[5]

These criticisms help to clarify my argument in this article. Whilst these monographs attempt to redefine the philosophical dimension of the poem through its dramatic or its visual aspects, I will posit a third alternative and investigate the extent to which those aspects depend on and stem from the philosophical dimension of the poem. My article aims to embrace the philosophical dimension of the poem and to show how Wordsworth reduces the gap between philosophy and poetry by highlighting the importance of *The Excursion* within the project of *The Recluse*. To do so, I will use French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's major study *What Is Philosophy?* (1991), in which they theorise the possible interplay between the three major forms of thought: philosophy, science and art. The edition of *The Excursion* to which I will refer is that of 1814 by Sally Bushell.[6] In this article I will first reemphasise the philosophical dimension of *The Excursion* as a part of *The Recluse*,

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[3] Matthew Arnold, 'Introduction' in *Poems of Wordsworth*, ed. by Matthew Arnold (London: Macmillan and Co, 1879), p. xi: '*The Excursion* and *The Prelude*, his poems of greatest bulk, are by no means Wordsworth's best work. His best work is in shorter pieces.'
[4] Alison Hickey, *Impure Conceits: Rhetoric and Ideology in Wordsworth's 'Excursion'* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 13-14.
[5] Brandon Yen, '*The Excursion' and Wordsworth's Iconography* (Liverpool : Liverpool University Press), p. 20.
[6] William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, **ed. by Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye** (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007).

which is often forgotten. I will then focus on the mysterious figure of the 'Recluse' as a

character in Wordsworth's works. I will conclude that this figure is a key to the philosophical

reading of *The Excursion* and can be seen as its 'conceptual persona'.

The Excursion – a philosophical poem within *The Recluse*

The Excursion was written by Wordsworth as the second part of his *magnum opus*,

The Recluse, which he never finished. Designed like a 'gothic church', this 'great

philosophical poem' was supposed to contain three parts (the first part was to be made of

'Home at Grasmere' and 'Tuft of Primroses', and the third part was never written) and to be

introduced by an 'ante-chapel', *The Prelude*. The importance of *The Excursion* in *The

Recluse* is underlined by the presence of 'the Prospectus', a 'poetic manifesto',[7] at the very

beginning of *The Excursion* in its 1814 edition. *The Recluse* is therefore not merely a context,

but the key to understanding *The Excursion*.[8]

Being part of *The Recluse*, *The Excursion* is defined by its author as a philosophical

poem. Sally Bushell's way of defining the poem as 'dramatic' without betraying its

philosophical dimension is to call it a 'conversational' poem, using Charles Lamb's

adjective.[9] This is a way to link *The Excursion* to the Coleridgean-Wordsworthian canon,

from which it has always been separated as a problematic work. But this is also misleading as

the functioning of *The Excursion* as a philosophical poem is quite different from that of a

Coleridgean 'conversation poem'. Indeed, it is more often argued that the (disappointing)

philosophical dimension of *The Excursion*—and therefore of *The Recluse*—lies first and

foremost in a doctrine that could ideally be extracted from the poem.[10] Bushell criticises this

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[7] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 73.
[8] Bushell, p. 17: 'In the "Preface" published with the poem in 1814 he introduces [*The Excursion*] in the context of "The Recluse" as "only a Portion of a poem" (vii) (p.1) and declares the existence of an unpublished work on "the origin and progress of his own powers".'
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[10] Matthew Arnold, *Essays Religious and Mixed*, ed. by R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press,

idea by trying to bridge over the separation between contents and form with the notion of 'performative philosophy'.[11] Yet, it leads her to define the poem as a 'series of debates' enabling a moral teaching of the reader, which is not satisfying either, as it ultimately reiterates the split between contents and form.[12]

Conversely, Simon Jarvis, in his study *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*, insists that it is precisely in this refusal of a dichotomy between theodicy and poetry that the *raison d'être* of the 'philosophic song' created by Wordsworth in the 'Prospectus' can be found.[13] Jarvis goes even further as he asks: 'is it possible that Wordsworth's poetic thinking takes much of its force just from the resistance to any simple separation of the character of the poet from the character of the philosopher?.'[14] In this sentence, Jarvis uses the noun 'character' to describe Wordsworth's personal qualities. Nevertheless, this hypothesis of a fusion of the two 'characters' (poet and philosopher) in Wordsworth's personality also raises the issue of the existence of 'characters' (as fictional characters in a literary work) in Wordsworth's poem, and of the identity of the eponymous 'Recluse'. From now on I will use italics (*The Recluse*) to refer to the unachieved poem and inverted commas (the 'Recluse') to refer to the character (or 'conceptual persona').

Who is the 'Recluse'?

This new approach to Wordsworth's use of philosophy and characters in his poetry involves a reassessment of the influence of Socrates upon Wordsworth in *The Excursion*.

1972), p. 250: 'No one will be much helped by Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature, as a scheme in itself and disjoined from his poems.'

[11] Bushell, pp. 85-115.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 3: 'Whilst there may be limitations in the extent to which we accept those voices to be fully dramatised, it is my intention to approach the poem from a perspective which acknowledges that it is, after all, a series of exchange and debates, and that the dynamics created by this are an essential element of the poem. Recognition of dramatic voice as an important part of Wordsworth's poetics […] is another major aim of this work.'

[13] Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 3-4: 'It might mean, not that philosophy gets fitted into a song – where all the thinking is done by philosophy and only the handiwork by verse – but that the song itself, *as song*, is philosophic.'

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

According to Sally Bushell, Wordsworth's use of a dialogic form is influenced by the Socratic model of the philosophical conversation, which is also the basis of the form of the novel according to Bakhtin.[15] Yet, one might argue that the influence of the Socratic model is maybe more significant in the use of characters than in the use of dialogues, as, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the creation of the character of Socrates matters more than the use of a dialogic form. This would enable us to reintegrate *The Excursion* in the project of *The Recluse*, Wordsworth's 'great philosophical poem' (of which *The Excursion* is the only part that was actually written), and to elucidate the influence of the hovering and mysterious figure of the eponymous 'Recluse' on the characters of the poem. Indeed, this would also lead us to reconsider Walter Pater's traditional definition of philosophy as dialogue on which Bushell relies in her study. Indeed, for Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, philosophy is defined by concepts instead of discussion.

Therefore, I argue that a more satisfying and global understanding of *The Excursion* as a philosophical poem can be reached by shifting attention from the notion of 'dramatic voice' (inspired by the Bakhtin school) to that of character, and more specifically to that of 'conceptual persona' (as defined by Deleuze and Guattari). It is by answering the question 'who is the Recluse?' that the philosophical dimension of *The Excursion* can be better grasped and that 'the charge […] of ventriloquism in many early critiques of the poem, most notably those of Coleridge and Hazlitt' can be avoided.[16]

Could the 'Recluse' as a character be the model for the characters of *The Excursion*? This phenomenon can be better explored by applying the notion of 'conceptual persona' to the project of *The Recluse* and to *The Excursion* to show how philosophical concepts and

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[15] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 112: 'Such are the basic characteristics of the Socratic dialogue. They justify our considering this genre one of the starting points for that line of development in European artistic prose and the novel that leads to the work of Dostoevsky.'
[16] Yen, p. 19.

poetic image are fused together in the poem, so as to subvert the traditional dichotomy between philosophy (logos and discursiveness) and poetry (assertion and delight).[17]

Who is the 'Recluse'? I believe that this is the question one should ask to better understand the characters of *The Excursion*. Indeed, the title of Wordsworth's philosophical poem is quite intriguing. Is the 'Recluse' a character or is he an abstract entity endowed with an allegorical value? Several hypotheses have been developed to explain this title. A brief overview of these hypotheses will show the need for a new approach.

One should first notice that Wordsworth himself justifies his choice in his preface to *The Excursion*, which was published in the first edition in 1814 with the 'Prospectus':

> It may be proper to state whence the poem, of which The Excursion is a part, derives its Title of The Recluse. Several years ago, […] the Author retired to his native mountains with the hope of being able to construct a literary Work that might live, [...] a philosophical poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society; and to be entitled The Recluse; as having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement.

Wordsworth here sees in the 'Recluse' a figure whose three major characteristics are those of a poet, solitary and philosopher who reflects on the society from which he has decided to retire.

Therefore, a way to explain the use of the figure of the 'Recluse' in the title, as well as the presence of the other characters in *The Excursion*, is to link them with Wordsworth's life. Johnston's biographical reading of *The Excursion* establishes a direct correspondence between the characters and the multiple facets and stages of Wordsworth's personality.[18] The figure of the 'Recluse' could thus be seen as the sum of the characters in the poem and ultimately as Wordsworth's alter-ego. For instance, the 'Solitary' is interpreted by Johnston as

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[17]Alain Badiou, *Que pense le poème ?* (Caen: Éditions 'Nous', 2016), p. 61.

[18] Kenneth R. Johnston, 'Wordsworth and The Recluse', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. by James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 87-88: 'Each of these characters represent transformative roles, or challenges, Wordsworth imagined for himself as the Bard of *The Recluse.*'

an avatar of the young Wordsworth who had sympathies for the French Revolution.[19] This

idea is endorsed by Jonathan Wordsworth, who argues that the Solitary's 'selfish isolation'

also mirrors Wordsworth's loss of hope after the failure of the French Revolution.[20] For

Johnston, the character of the wanderer is also based on Wordsworth's childhood.[21] Stephen

Gill shares this opinion, hearing in the Wanderer's voice that of the poet himself.[22] Of course

the similarities between the poetic voice of *The Prelude* and Wordsworth's life have often

been underlined.[23] One could argue that this biographical reading of the characters of *The*

Recluse springs from Ernest de Selincourt's statement:

> *The Recluse,* 'as having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of
> a poet living in retirement', was itself essentially autobiographical—even in
> *The Excursion*, which was intended to be dramatic, not only the hero but also
> the Solitary and the Vicar were thinly veiled portraits of their author.[24]

Yet, this biographical reading of *The Recluse* is not entirely relevant as it gives way to a

psychological reading of the poem without shedding light on the philosophical dimension of

The Recluse, which remains its defining characteristic. As Judson Stanley Lyon puts it, the

characters are 'independent creations of [Wordsworth's] pen'.[25]

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[19] *Ibid.,* p. 87: 'Wordsworth sets forth […] a man, (The Solitary) who had thrown himself into sympathy for the ideals of the French Revolution as enthusiastically as the young Wordsworth, only to recoil into cynicism and quietism as the Revolution (and its enemies) turned sour and opportunistic.'

[20] Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Borders of Vision* (New-York: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 364-65: 'Like the other characters in the poem, the Solitary is largely Wordsworth himself, but instead of being idealized as are the Wanderer, Poet, and Pastor, he is an embodiment of confusion that has been prolonged, disappointment that should long ago have been checked. He is the wrong kind of recluse. Instead of seceding from the common world to anticipate, and to further, the coming of the milder day of love and knowledge, he has chosen a selfish isolation.'

[21] Johnston, "Wordsworth and The Recluse", p. 87: 'a wise old pedlar (The Wanderer), whose seasonal rounds through the countryside have transformed him into a natural philosopher – aided by accidents of birth and early education that are clearly derived from Wordsworth's own life, since he incorporated early drafts about the Pedlar's childhood into the first two books of *The Prelude.*'

[22] Gill, 'The philosophic poet', p. 142: 'Four figures occupy the ground of the poem, supposedly in dramatic interaction, but few readers have ever doubted that the most important of them is the Wanderer and that through him speaks Wordsworth the Sage.'

[23] Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth. A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 94: '*The Prelude* substantiates its account of the poet's spiritual journey, its record of awakening, crisis, recovery, and maturity in the innermost world of the mind and heart, by locating it on the map. That Hawkshead, Cambridge, London, Paris, function within traditional poetic usage [...] does not alter the fact that these places of the mind were real places as well.'

[24] Ernest de Selincourt, 'Introduction', in *The Prelude, or, Growth of a poet's mind, by William Wordsworth*, p. xxxvii.

[25] Judson Stanley Lyon, *The Excursion: A Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 46.

Another way to explain the use of the 'Recluse' in the title—but also why this figure

is so important in Wordsworth's project—is to link it to the historical context of the writing of

the poem. In the late eighteenth century, the figure of the 'recluse' was not as rare as one

might think. Kenneth R. Johnston reminds us that 'images of recluses and hermits were

newly attractive in the late 1790s, as many writers opted for expressions of pastoral retreat to

escape the repressive climate against free expression that Pitt's camp-down on sedition at

home had cast over the land'.[26] Therefore, Wordsworth was part of a literary trend, as was

Charlotte Smith in *Ethelind, or The Recluse of the Lake*, which was published in 1790. In this

novel, Smith is inspired by Rousseau and sees in the figure of the recluse a noble character

who is close to nature. In this Rousseauist perspective, the moral superiority of the recluse

results from his proximity to nature, which preserves him from the vices of civilisation.

Nevertheless, as underlined by Johnston's quotation, the figure of the 'recluse' is also

endowed with a highly political dimension, as the nickname of 'the new Recluse' was given

to John Thelwall (1764-1834), a radical politician and poet. He had himself chosen this

nickname so as to underline his retirement from politics in the context of Pitt's political

repression.[27] According to Nicholas Roe, Wordsworth met him in 1798 with his sister

Dorothy and Coleridge.[28]

Yet, this historical approach does not solve a major problem that remains in defining

the figure of the 'Recluse' in the eponymous poem—although a 'Recluse' is mentioned in the

title of the poem, the word appears only three times in *The Recluse*, and in *The Excursion* to

qualify 'the Pastor', who is described as a 'pale Recluse' (Book V, l. 222; l. 603, and Book

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[26] Johnston, "Wordsworth and The Recluse", p. 75.

[27] Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 234: 'Violent intimidation and repressive legislation forced John Thelwall to abandon his political lectures. […] From this moment, Thelwall was in retreat'.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 235: '[John Thelwall] eventually settled at Llyswen in South Wales where he tried to make a living by farming and was visited by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Dorothy in August 1798'; 'In the prefatory Memoir to his Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement, Thelwall described himself as "The new Recluse": a restless pariah comparable to the figure imaginatively realized by Coleridge in his Ancient Mariner, denied even the barren repose of Wordsworth's "lost man"'.

VIII, l. 338). This nickname can be explained by his retreat to his cottage, which is described

at the beginning of Book V. One cannot but notice that his dwelling is compared to an

undergrowth, therefore re-enacting the theme of the harmony between the recluse and nature.

> […]; for duration built;
> With pillars crowded, and the roof upheld
> By naked rafters intricately crossed,
> Like leafless underboughs, in some thick wood,
> All withered by the depth of shade above (ll. 149-153)

Nevertheless, Wordsworth never dwells on the definition of the 'Recluse' in the poem.

Therefore, it becomes quite problematic to account for, on the one hand, the quasi-

absence of the 'Recluse' as a main character, and on the other hand, the flurry of characters

who are also defined by a similar function or activity (the Wanderer, the Poet, the Solitary, the

Pastor). Although the figure of the 'Recluse' seems to hover above the eponymous poem, it

is never embodied in a distinct character; it seems rather to suffuse the poem and to

contaminate all the characters, even Margaret in the first book of *The Excursion*, who

embodies a tragic and feminine version of isolation. The persona of the 'Recluse' is

Wordsworth's version of the traditional figure of the philosopher who retreats from society so

as to better understand human nature and the natural world. But for Wordsworth, this persona

is necessarily associated with that of the poet. This figure is briefly sketched in the fifth book

of *The Excursion*, when the narrator—the Poet—describes his retreat:

> A choice that from the passions of the world
> Withdrew, and fixed me in a still retreat;
> Sheltered, but not to social duties lost,
> Secluded, but not buried; and with song
> Cheering my days, and with industrious thoughts;
> With the ever-welcome company of books (ll. 50-55)

This retreat is far from being idle, as shown by the anaphora 'but not', as it involves the

'company of books', 'industrious thoughts' and 'social duties', which can be likened to the

task of the philosopher who meditates and reflects on the fate of modern society, which is

also the duty of the Romantic prophet-poet.

'Conceptual personae'

The question that remains unanswered is that of the relationship that connects these strange characters, as they are merely defined by a function, each of them seemingly embodying a distinct version of the 'Recluse'. The notion of 'conceptual persona', as it is described by Deleuze and Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?*, is indeed highly useful for understanding these characters.

Yet, one must be reminded that the idea of 'conceptual persona' presupposes a specific definition of philosophy as being characterised by its capacity to produce concepts, which are then embodied by 'conceptual personae'. To Deleuze and Guattari, Socrates is the conceptual character *per se*, which underlines the fact that to them the essence of philosophy is not defined by the principles of conversation (or 'maieutics') any longer, but by the use of a distinct character (the 'conceptual persona'). Although I am aware that this conception of philosophy may clash with Sally Bushell's dialogic and dramatic reading of *The Excursion*, I think it is worth exploring it, as the notion of concept (which, as we will see, fuses words and images) is very relevant to *The Excursion*, and can be linked to Wordsworth's approach to poetry in the Preface to the *Poems* (1815), where he sees images as a mixture of abstraction and imagination: 'In these images, the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers of the Imagination immediately and mediately acting, are all brought into conjunction.'[29]

Indeed, for Deleuze and Guattari, theatricality or conversation are not enough to define what philosophy is. Moreover, the dialogue is inadequate to describe the essence of philosophy as it always gives way to 'a reduction of the concepts to propositions like simple opinions'.[30] The dialectic, by introducing a form of discursiveness, only links opinions together. However, philosophy is not about opinions but about concepts, which are

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[29] William Wordsworth, *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose: authoritative texts, criticism*, ed. by Nicholas Halmi (New York: Norton, W.W., and Co., 2014), p. 514.
[30] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. by Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Verso, 1994), p. 80.

'paradoxical' not because they hold together various opinions but because they 'use sentences

of a standard language to express something that does not belong to the order of opinion or

even of the proposition'.[31] Indeed, 'philosophy has a horror of discussions'.[32] Socrates

himself 'constantly made all discussion impossible' and rather turned it into a 'pitiless

monologue'.[33] Concepts can therefore only be expressed through a persona and not through

discussion.

What is more, the most dialogic passages are also often the less successful parts of the

poem, for instance in Book IV, when the Wanderer delivers very general and unequivocal

statements such as 'the law, by which mankind now suffers | is most just' (ll. 304-5) or 'Spirit

only can redeem Mankind' (l. 318) so as to answer the Solitary's scepticism. One could rather

argue that *The Excursion*, being a part of *The Recluse*, is a success in Wordsworth's attempt to

create his own 'conceptual personae', who create complex concepts through poetic images.

The Poet himself seems to advocate in Book III the intermingling of philosophy and poetry,

which are described as being of a 'kindred stock' (l. 345), and the need for philosophy to be

'styled' by 'Poesy' (l. 344).

> I said, 'My thoughts, agreeing, Sir, with yours,
> Would push this censure farther; - for, if smiles
> Of scornful pity be the just reward
> Of Poesy thus courteously employed
> In framing models to improve the scheme
> Of Man's existence, and recast the world,
> Why should not grave Philosophy be styled,
> Herself, a dreamer of kindred stock,
> A dreamer yet more spiritless and dull?' (ll. 338-46)

The Poet therefore condemns the use of poetry to versify philosophy ('employed | In framing

models': one might think of *De rerum natura*, by the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius).

Yet, this condemnation does not preclude a form of stylisation of philosophy, which

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[31] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

otherwise remains 'spiritless and dull'. The adverb 'courteously' underlines the servility of poetry when it is used to embellish philosophy, whereas the past participle 'styled' conjures up the Latin word 'stylus', that is to say the pen of the poet which can endow philosophy with 'spirit'—or 'spiritus', therefore 'a soul' in Latin—when it is used as something more than a mere decoration. Indeed, in *The Excursion*, it is the characters, as creators of poetic images, who play a crucial role in making philosophy less 'dull'. They are themselves used by Wordsworth to flesh out his concepts (the adjective 'styled' is used to describe the Pastor in Book V, l. 104).

To Deleuze and Guattari, the study of philosophy is linked to the study of those characters.[34] Even if the conceptual persona is often 'nameless and subterranean', he must 'always be reconstituted by the reader'. An active role is thus given to the reader, who must distinguish the conceptual persona from a normal character (a psycho-social type or an aesthetic figure).[35] In the case of *The Excursion*, the conceptual persona that is to be reconstituted by the reader is that of 'the Recluse', which accounts for the presence of 'the Prospectus' at the beginning of the poem.

Deleuze and Guattari establish a fundamental difference between the 'character of the dialogue', who 'sets out concepts', and the conceptual personae, who 'play a part in the very creation of the author's concept'.[36] They further argue that 'the philosopher is only the envelope of his principal conceptual persona and of all the other personae who are the intercessors [*intercesseurs*], the real subjects of his philosophy', so that 'the destiny of the philosopher is to become his conceptual persona or personae'.[37] This is very relevant to *The Recluse*, and would explain why biographical readings of the poem are so popular.

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[34] *Ibid.,* p. 62: 'In any case, the history of philosophy must go through these personae, through their changes according to planes and through their variety according to concepts. Philosophy constantly brings conceptual personae to life; it gives life to them.'
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

The hypothesis that *The Excursion* actually hinges upon conceptual personae is reinforced by Deleuze and Guattari's idea that a work of art can display conceptual personae (they notably mention Hölderlin, Kleist, Rimbaud and Mallarmé whom they call 'hybrid geniuses').[38] According to them, 'conceptual personae are thinkers, solely thinkers,' which could describe all the characters of *The Recluse*, who are not, indeed, mythological or theatrical characters, because they are not distinguished by a specific idiolect.[39] Unlike characters in a novel, their characterisation is quite vague. They are rather defined by 'relational features', which are typical of the conceptual personae and which appear in the names of the characters: the Wanderer, the Solitary, the Pastor, the Poet, who all are figures of isolation. These characters can thus be seen as resurgences of the subterranean conceptual persona of the 'Recluse', with whom they all share this 'relational feature'.

In this regard, one may notice that the characters of *The Excursion* seem to originate in each other, like Russian dolls, and to be presented firstly to the reader through the other characters' discourses, in a form of nesting pattern that points to a common origin—the figure of the 'Recluse'. In Book I, the character of the Wanderer is firstly presented to us through a portrait drawn by the Poet. In Book II, we learn about the Solitary's life through the Wanderer's speech (as from l. 171). This organic expansion of the characters in the poem is justified by the emotional links that bind them together: the Poet and the Wanderer are 'tried Friends' (I, l. 53), the Wanderer and the Solitary spring from the same 'stock of lowly parentage' (II, l. 172). The Pastor is also introduced in Book V by the Wanderer as 'a genuine Priest' (l. 102).

One can also notice how the nouns that are used to describe the characters are sometimes used to define other characters, confusing the reader, but also underlining the

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[38] *Ibid.*, p. 66: 'The plane of composition of art and the plane of immanence of philosophy can slip into each other to the degree that parts of one may be occupied by entities of the other;' p. 67: 'hybrid geniuses.'
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

similar relational features that the characters display. The Solitary, for instance, in Book II, is also metaphorically called a 'pastor' (l. 194) and a 'wanderer' (l. 197), as if each character were to contain the other characters of the poem. The Solitary is later described as a 'tenant' (l. 422), which links him to Margaret in Book I ('Last human tenant of these ruined walls', l. 951). In the same way, the 'nakedness' (II, l. 666) of his cottage is highly reminiscent of the 'naked walls' (I, l. 30) of Margaret's ruined cottage. The adjective 'pale', mostly used to describe the pastor (as the 'pale Recluse') is also used to depict the Solitary (II, l. 525), thus weaving a network of echoes between the characters. Therefore, it seems that the characters of *The Excursion* embody different facets of the same conceptual persona, whose subterranean presence is subtly hinted at through the use of similar adjectives and nouns.

Yet, another characteristic of the conceptual persona according to Deleuze and Guattari is to be able to create concepts. To them, 'conceptual personae are also the true agents of enunciation' and 'the conceptual persona is needed to create concepts', as a 'distinct operator'.[40] This creative power of the conceptual personae gives way in *The Excursion* to some of the most interesting passages of Wordsworth's poetry. A notable example of the characters' ability to create concepts is the Wanderer's definition of 'moral truth' in Book 5 of *The Excursion*:

> […] Moral truth
> Is no mechanic structure, built by rule;
> And which, once built, retains a stedfast shape
> And undisturbed proportions; but a thing
> Subject, you deem, to vital accidents;
> And like the water-lily, lives and thrives,
> Whose root is fixed in stable earth, whose head
> Floats on the tossing waves. (ll. 563-570)

In this passage, the Wanderer defines his concept of 'moral truth' by resorting to a comparison with the 'water-lily'. This metaphor is an extended one, as shown by the use of

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[40] *Ibid.*, p. 65, 75, 76.

the words 'roots', 'stable earth' and 'tossing waves', which all describe the natural

environment of the water-lily. The Wanderer contrasts a mechanical definition of moral truth

('mechanical structure'), with his own definition, which is an organic one ('vital accidents').

The Wanderer is not merely exposing the concept as a mouthpiece or as a character in a

dialogue, but creating it, as he conjures up images from his personal imagery, that is to say

the natural world.[41] We are therefore presented with the process of conceptual creation that

defines the conceptual persona. One may notice that the discourse of the conceptual persona

has come to characterise the author, Wordsworth himself (who is often seen as the poet of

nature *par excellence*, as his poem was used as a tour guide during the Victorian period).[42]

The characters' creative and conceptual powers can also be found in their capacity to

rework and to develop well-known concepts. For instance, in Book IV the Wanderer enriches

the traditional concept of man as a 'man of dust' (Adam), which is often used to describe

human frailty and mortality, with the image of 'the pillar of smoke' (l. 142). This metaphor is

then extended:

> Man is of dust: ethereal hopes are his,
> Which, when they should sustain themselves aloft,
> Want due consistence; like a pillar of smoke,
> That with majestic energy from earth
> Rises; but having reached the thinner air,
> Melts, and dissolves, and is no longer seen. (ll. 140-5)

One can see the obvious link between the verticality of the figure of 'man' and that of the

'pillar', whereas 'dust' is turned into airy 'smoke'. The hopes of a man who is made of dust

can only be 'a pillar of smoke', that is to say a fragile attempt at transcendence. The

dissolution of the 'pillar of smoke' points at their lack of consistence but also creates an

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[41] Johnston, "Wordsworth and The Recluse", p. 87: 'a wise old pedlar (The Wanderer), whose seasonal rounds through the countryside have transformed him into a natural philosopher.'

[42] Yen, p. 29: 'there is an alternative tradition that regards The Excursion as a record of the visual contours of the Lake District;' 'Toward the end of the century *Through The Wordsworth Country* (1891) [...] regarded *The Excursion* itself as a guidebook.'

image of utter loss and 'sorrow' (l. 147), showing how hard it is to 'converse with heaven' (l. 131), even with faith (the Wanderer is pious). Poetry is therefore used not as a mere decoration, but as a means to make more complex an existing concept. Being stylised by poetry, the concept is enriched and the boundary between poetry and philosophy is blurred. The natural and cosmic vocabulary is adapted once more to the personal experience of the Wanderer and to his relational feature which makes him close to the natural world.

Indeed, what characterises the creation of concepts in Wordsworth's poem is the conceptual personae's reliance on poetic images that make the concepts more striking. Alain Badiou argues in his essay *Que pense le poème?* (2015) that even Plato himself could not do without poetic images, which he used to symbolise his greatest and most complex concepts, such as the Form of the Good, which is 'beyond substance'.[43] Therefore Hartman's remark that Wordsworth failed 'to create haunting images' in *The Excursion* can be explained by the fact that he rather used images as a way to formulate philosophical concepts and to make them clearer.[44] This use of poetic images so as to make concepts more accessible is particularly notable in Book II, when the Solitary derives the concept of 'harmony' from the vision of the 'two huge Peaks' (l. 719) he can make out from his cottage.

> 'Those lusty twins', exclaimed our host, 'if here
> It were your lot to dwell, would soon become
> Your prized companions. - Many are the notes
> Which, in his tuneful course, the wind draws forth
> From rocks, woods, caverns, heaths, and dashing shores;
> And well those lofty brethren bear their part
> In the wild concert – chiefly when the storm
> Rides high; then all the upper air they fill
> With roaring sound, that ceases not to flow,
> Like smoke, along the level of the blast,
> In mighty current; theirs, too, is the song
> Of stream and headlong flood that seldom fails;
> […] Nor have nature's laws
> Left them ungifted with a power to yield
> Music of finer tone; a harmony,

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[43] Alain Badiou, *Que pense le poème?*, p. 66.
[44] Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 294.

> So do I call it, though it be the hand
> Of silence, though there be no voice; - the clouds,
> The mist, the shadows, light of golden suns,
> Motions of moonlight, all come thither – touch,
> And have an answer – thither come, and shape
> A language not unwelcome to sick hearts
> And idle spirits: […]
> Thoughts are no busier in the mind of man
> Than the mute agents stirring there: - alone
> Here do I sit and watch.' (ll. 721-752)

This landscape, which progressively becomes a soundscape ('roaring sound'), and then suddenly turns into a mindscape (ll. 749-50), explores the notion of visual as well as of auditive harmony ('wild concert'). This passage also represents the process of poetic creation, as the wind, which 'draws forth from' the natural elements, can be seen as a reworking of the image of the breeze, which traditionally symbolises poetic inspiration.[45] The description of this very picturesque landscape is almost an 'ekphrasis', as it relies on visual effects such as chiaroscuro ('the clouds, | The mist, the shadows, light of golden suns, | Motions of moonlight'). Wordsworth here demonstrates that visual imagination is involved in the creation of concepts, and that, as Yen puts it, 'words need the sensuous support of images.'[46] The landscape itself thus seems to deliver a mysterious message (the 'language not unwelcome to sick hearts | And idle spirits'), asserting the evocative power of the poetic image. The Solitary infers from this landscape the concept of 'harmony', and underlines his coining of the concept by the expression 'So do I call it' (l. 743). This 'harmony' is quite a paradoxical and a troubled one, as it seems to hold together violent, and possibly contradictory, forces. This could remind one of Coleridge's definition of poetic creation as a 'war embrace'.[47] The paradoxical dimension of this concept of harmony can only be

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[45] M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: Norton, 1984), p. 42: '[the wind is]both the stimulus and outer correspondent to a springlike revival of the spirit after a wintry season, and also to a revival of poetic inspiration which Wordsworth, going beyond Coleridge, equates with the inspiration of the prophets when touched by the Holy Spirit.'
[46] Yen, p. 23.
[47] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by Nigel Leask (London: Everyman, 1997), p. 191: 'In Shakespeare's poems, the creative power and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace. Each in its excess

expressed through a poetic image that can contain these apparently conflicting forces. This

image expresses how difficult it is to find peace and harmony in a post-revolutionary world,

which is also a post-lapsarian one according to Yen.[48]

In the same way, the concept of faith is poetically rendered in Book IV by the

Wanderer through the image of the 'shell':

> I have seen
> A curious child, who dwelt upon a tract
> Of inland ground, applying to his ear
> The convolutions of a smooth-lipped shell;
> To which, in silence hushed, his very soul
> Listened intensely; and his countenance soon
> Brightened with joy; for from within were heard
> Murmurings, whereby the monitor expressed
> Mysterious union with its native sea.
> Even such a shell the universe itself
> Is to the ear of Faith; and there are times,
> I doubt not, when to you it doth impart
> Authentic tidings of invisible things;
> Of ebb and flow, and ever-dusting power;
> And central peace, subsisting at the heart
> Of endless agitation. Here you stand,
> Adore and worship, when you know it not;
> Pious beyond the intention of your thought;
> Devout above the meaning of your will. (ll. 125-44)

The image of the 'smooth-lipped shell' (l. 128) is a multi-faceted symbol that refers both to

the faithful ear of the believer and to the universe to which the ear is attuned. Its

'convolutions' symbolise the mystery of faith, but also the origin of the universe. The

sophisticated form of the shell illustrates the apparent complexity of the world, whereas the

music represents the hidden, simple and pure meaning that can be found underneath

appearances. The ear of the child is also that of the sincere reader, who must be able to

genuinely appreciate the musical quality of the verse to access its meaning. The concept of

faith is therefore fused with a poetic image which does not only illustrate its contents but also

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of strength seems to threaten the extinction of the other.'
[48] Yen, p. 31.

creates unexpected connections between the ear and the sounds that are heard. With the 'murmurings' of the shell, contents and form, divine message and supernatural utterance, philosophy and poetry are fused together to create a Wordsworthian concept of faith.

Therefore, the philosophical dimension of *The Excursion* does not lie in a 'theodicy', or in the theatrical nature of some of its books, but in its characters, and in their ability to produce concepts and to fuse them with poetic images. As Yen puts it, in *The Excursion* Wordsworth sought 'a conceptual model for the thoughts and feelings central to his poetic enterprise'.[49] We have seen that Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'conceptual persona' shed light on this phenomenon. Wordsworth's conceptual personae in *The Excursion* created concepts that were later to be associated with the poet himself, notably by the Victorians ('moral truth', 'harmony', 'faith').[50] In this regard, Wordsworth's poetry can be compared to the writings of other philosophers who did not resort to a simple form of ventriloquism, but invented independent characters, such as Plato or Nietzsche. To Wordsworth, poetry is therefore not a decoration or a means to embellish philosophy, but rather a means to create philosophical concepts. Indeed, the best passages of *The Excursion* are not to be found in the moral debates initiated by the Wanderer because of the Solitary's scepticism, but rather in the creative meditations of the characters and in their 'high-wrought strain[s] of rapture' (II, l. 727, in the 1850 edition).[51]

To conclude, *The Recluse* is not a mere historical context of the writing of *The Excursion*, but rather the key to understanding its philosophical dimension. The subterranean figure of the 'Recluse' permeates the whole poem and is made visible by the 'chorus' (III, l. 736) formed by the characters of *The Excursion*. By encouraging us to reconstitute the

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[49] Yen, p. 24.

[50] Bushell*, p. 5: 'In a general sense, nineteenth century response to Wordsworth was one of uncritical admiration and respect for the poet's high morals and for the spiritual strength which his work was felt to give forth.'

[51] William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949).

fragmented figure of the 'Recluse', Wordsworth thus continually spurs us to see beyond

chaotic appearances and to engage still more actively with his poetry.

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