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## Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads, 1800

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## CHAPTER 11

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 WORDSWORTH'S LYRICAL  
 BALLADS, 1800
 

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JASON N. GOLDSMITH

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 PRELUDE
 

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IN the dense tracts of woodland that stretch south from Esthwaite Water, a young boy pauses amidst a copse of hazel. His chest heaves; his heart races. Brake, bramble, and thorn. Exhaustion and expectation gather in each breath, course through his body and deeper still into his soul. He eyes the trees, fingers the milk-white flowers that hang in clusters, and knows joy. His breathing slows. Leaves murmur in the breeze. His heart fills with kindness. Taking up the crook that lies in the long grass, he swings it wide. Petals fill the air, swirl around him like snow. The hazels give themselves up. Sweat beads his brow as the boy swings the crook again, and again, and again, pulling the branches to earth.

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 I
 

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Thank goodness Wordsworth never learned German. Had he and Dorothy not been so constrained by financial worry; had they not parted company with Coleridge in Hamburg; had they settled in a university city rather than taking rooms with a draper's widow in the provincial town of Goslar where foul weather and poor roads conspired to detain them for five months, Wordsworth might have gained a middling fluency with the language, equipped himself with a thimbleful of philosophy, and, with Coleridge whispering in his ear, devoted himself more fully to *The Recluse*, a poem he was ill-equipped to write. As it was, Wordsworth found Germany 'a sad place' (EY, 199). Goslar was 'a lifeless town' with 'no society' according to Dorothy, where the coldest winter of the century offered a palpable reminder of their isolation (EY, 203). In such conditions, to our good fortune, Wordsworth, according to Coleridge, 'employed more time in writing English

[tha]n in studying German' (CL, I, 459). Stranded by the weather, short on cash, and unable to communicate with the locals, the poet turned inward, writing a series of autobiographical blank verse fragments meditating on his childhood that would become part one of the 1799 *Prelude*, as well as nearly a dozen poems that would appear in the second volume of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*.

Completed over the eighteen months following his return to England in May 1799, the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* is the fruit of that long winter abroad. It marks both a literal and a literary homecoming. Living in Germany made clear to Wordsworth that you do not simply inhabit a landscape. Rather, a landscape inhabits you. Inspired by memories of his childhood amongst lake and fell, he was determined to return to what he increasingly saw as his paternal home. In poem after poem he speaks to us in a voice that emerges out of and celebrates lives shaped by the Lake District. But Wordsworth's relationship to this landscape was by no means secure. It existed in memory, the felt pulse of a distant past. The work of the poems is to manifest this feeling. And this is what makes the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* so compelling. In the months following his return to England, Wordsworth took up residence at Dove Cottage and with painstaking honesty began to map the place of memory across territories of earth and bone, writing it deep into the heart.

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 II
 

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On 20 December, 1799, William and Dorothy Wordsworth arrived at Dove Cottage, their home for the next eight and a half years. Four days earlier they had set out from Sockburn-on-Tees, where they had been staying at the Hutchinson family farm since their return from Germany. On the road between Richmond and Askrigg, they paused beside a small spring and a broken wall where they heard the tale of Hart-leap Well, which Wordsworth would memorialize in the poem of the same name. The initial poem of the second volume of the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, 'Hart-leap Well' teaches us how to read this collection. The poem is in two parts. The first recounts a medieval hunt in which Sir Walter tracks a hart to the top of a hill, where, exhausted, it leaps to its death beside a spring. To commemorate this 'remarkable chace' (17), Sir Walter erects three stone pillars, a basin for the spring, a 'Pleasure-house', and a 'small Arbour' (57, 58). This is no ordinary chase, however. As the speaker informs us, 'This race it looks like not an earthly race' (27). The repetition of three—as the poem opens Sir Walter rides his third horse; he is accompanied by three dogs; the hart leaps in three enormous bounds leaving three hoof-prints in the turf that Sir Walter marks with three pillars after three turnings of the moon—situates the poem within the tradition of Gothic romance.

The second part of the poem opens by rejecting these Gothic tones. 'The moving accident is not my trade,' admits the lyric speaker, 'To freeze the blood I have no ready arts; | 'Tis my delight, alone in summer shade, | To pipe a simple song to thinking hearts' (97–100). With these lines, Wordsworth delivers us from the past tense of the tale to the present moment of its narration, and in so doing effectively distances himself from

that tradition, which had figured prominently in the 1798 edition in works such as Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Wordsworth's 'The Convict'. Rather, the 'principal object' of these poems, declares Wordsworth in the *Preface*, is 'to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature' (*LBOP*, 743). What follows is a 'simple song' that replaces supernatural effect with lyric meditation. Wordsworth disavows Sir Walter's naming—'And they . . . shall call it Hart-leap Well' (63–4)—thereby recuperating the commemorative gesture for his own poetic practice. The speaker encounters a shepherd who relates the site's history—the tale of Part I—and speculates on why the hart was so desperate to reach this spring before it died:

Here on the grass perhaps asleep he sank,  
Lull'd by this fountain in the summer-tide;  
This water was perhaps the first he drank  
When he had wander'd from his mother's side.

In April here beneath the scented thorn  
He heard the birds their morning carols sing,  
And he perhaps, for aught we know, was born  
Not half a furlong from that self-same spring. (149–56)

In contrast to Sir Walter's pleasure garden, which emphasized human dominion over the natural world, the shepherd, and by extension the poem, restore a sympathetic connection between the human and the natural. Although we can never know 'What cause the Hart might have to love this place, | And come and make his death-bed near the well' (147–8), the shepherd's speculations provide a model for Wordsworth's imaginative engagement with the local environment. The shepherd and the speaker sympathize with the hart despite this uncertainty. 'This beast not unobserv'd by Nature fell, | His death was mourn'd by sympathy divine', observes the speaker (163–4). This is the fundamental gesture of the poem.

This is also the gesture that we find in the Lucy poems, which ask us to cultivate sympathy for 'the meanest thing that feels' (180). These brief lyrics illustrate Wordsworth's claim that 'the feeling . . . developed [in these poems] gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling' (*LBOP*, 746). The opening stanza of 'Strange fits of passion I have known' confides the imaginative intensity of emotional experience while simultaneously establishing a sympathetic community receptive to the poem's insights:

Strange fits of passion I have known,  
And I will dare to tell,  
But in the lover's ear alone,  
What once to me befel. (1–4)

Cultivating the very intimacy it describes, this address is made more persuasive by the incidental frame of the narrative. On the way to visit his beloved, the speaker watches the moon sink behind her cottage roof, which leads him to fear that she has died:

What fond and wayward thoughts will slide  
Into a Lover's head  
'O Mercy!' to myself I cried,  
'If Lucy should be dead!' (25–8)

The speaker's emotional intensity seems disproportionate to the event. Which is, of course, the point. 'Strange fits of passion' traces the coordination of perception and feeling, the extent to which experience is shaped by our immediate surroundings. The poem drifts along familiar paths, past the orchard plot, and over the hill finally to arrive at the marked emotional strain that becomes the condition of its telling.<sup>1</sup>

The imaginative experience played out in 'Strange fits of passion' is further developed in the brief 'Song,' 'She dwelt among th' untrodden ways':

She liv'd unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceas'd to be;  
But she is in her Grave, and Oh!  
The difference to me. (9–12)

As much indictment as elegy, 'Song' sets the speaker's feelings for Lucy against her social insignificance. By placing Lucy 'Beside the springs of Dove,' Wordsworth situates her within a specific natural setting while at the same time generalizing her condition: there are numerous Doves throughout England just as there were, undoubtedly, numerous Lucys, young women of little social significance who were cherished nevertheless by those close to them (2). Wordsworth directs us away from Lucy's death to the speaker's emotional response. What matters is not so much the loss in itself, but rather, as the last two lines state, its effect on the speaker. In both poems, the speaker tells us exactly and painstakingly how the event made him feel.

In 'A slumber did my spirit seal,' Wordsworth refuses to editorialize. And it is for this reason that it is the most affecting of the Lucy poems:

A slumber did my spirit seal,  
I had no human fears:  
She seem'd a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.  
  
No motion has she now, no force  
She neither hears nor sees  
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course  
With rocks and stones and trees!

Both 'Song' and 'Strange fits of passion' lead us from the material world to the speaker's mental state. 'A slumber' inverts this trajectory. We begin with the speaker's emotional

<sup>1</sup> For more on the Lucy poems, see Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); John Beer, *Wordsworth in Time* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979); and Richard Gravil, *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation, 1787–1842* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). All quotations from *Lyrical Ballads* are from \*LBOP\*.

state and conclude in the external world. But this is not quite right. What Wordsworth depicts in the first stanza is an amalgam of emotion, perception, and cognition. With astonishing precision, he identifies how we live insensible to death. The second stanza calls us back to the things of this world too late. We are drawn into the blank space between these two trim stanzas as Wordsworth works the edges of an emotion too raw to find expression in words. Hauntingly modern, 'A slumber did my spirit seal', marks a progressive refinement of Wordsworth's investment in 'feelings' over 'incidents' towards increasingly imagistic expressions of inner states. Written while Wordsworth was pent up in Goslar, the Lucy poems suggest the extent to which Wordsworth's sense of displacement and alienation during his time in Germany encouraged the poet to reflect on place, memory and loss, on grieving and reconciliation, on the ties that bind us to one another and how easily those ties might unravel at any moment.<sup>2</sup>

### III

The intense association of person and place that is the strongest through-line in the second volume of the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* is most clear in the 'Poems on the Naming of Places', a series of commemorative acts through which Wordsworth would consecrate the fells and dales around Grasmere as the well-spring of his poetic practice. Written shortly after Wordsworth and his sister set up house in Dove Cottage, these five poems memorialize actual places visited by the poet—a glade in the woods of Rydal Upper Park, the banks of Far Easedale Gill, the garden at Dove Cottage, the weir near White Moss common, a stretch of the River Rothay—and the incidents that gave them 'a private and peculiar interest' (*LBOP*, 241). What is important for Wordsworth, however, is the way in which naming, and by extension the composition of poetry, can perpetuate the emotions elicited by what we might call incidental locations, places that elude our notice because they are isolated or unremarkable. Unremarkable, that is, until we stop and take notice.

'To M.H.', for instance, describes 'a slip of lawn | And a small bed of water in the woods' far from frequented trails, reached only by a track of 'soft green turf' beneath ancient trees (6–7, 4). In this 'calm recess' (13), the speaker observes that the man attentive to its quiet charms might so love this place that he would on his deathbed picture it in his mind. 'And, therefore, my sweet MARY', the poem concludes, 'this still nook | With all its beeches we have named from You' (23–4). By naming this place *from* Mary Hutchinson, Wordsworth associates his future wife's nurturing qualities with those of the glade which takes her name. This act of naming might seem to despoil the very thing Wordsworth celebrates about this place: the lack of human presence. But the

<sup>2</sup> On the possible connection between 'Lucy' and Caroline, the daughter Wordsworth had with Annette Vallon, see Gravil, *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation*, 159, 163.

conditional mood of the speaker's imaginative act—'And if a man should plant his cottage near | Should sleep beneath the shelter of its trees, | And blend its waters with his daily meal' (18–20)—suggests that Wordsworth is not inscribing the landscape with the names of himself and his friends, so much as he is interweaving personal associations and local topography. This is reinforced by the poem's imagery. The cottage is planted. The meal is blended. Through such figures Wordsworth assimilates the individual to the place just as the place is imaginatively incorporated in the act of poetic composition. Naming, here an act of loving grace, recognizes correspondences. It proposes a sympathetic intermingling of the human and the natural. Written in the understated blank verse that characterizes much of Wordsworth's best poetry, 'To M.H.' naturalizes the poet's voice. That voice pivots, as does the poem, on the syntax of the final sentence, which begins: 'This spot was made by Nature for herself: | The travellers know it not, and 'twill remain | Unknown to them; but it is beautiful' (15–17). The passive construction of this simple declarative statement effectively emphasizes Nature by pairing the prepositional phrases 'by Nature' and 'for herself' at the end of the poetic line. The colon, however, hurries us to the subsequent lines where we discover that the spot is 'natural' not because it lacks human presence, but because it is unknown to travellers. Wordsworth, on the other hand, is familiar with this place, and the poem presents his response as part of the natural order. It also presents Wordsworth as a local inhabitant with long ties to the area.

### IV

One of the first poems Wordsworth began upon taking possession of Dove Cottage was 'The Brothers'. 'I have begun the pastoral of Bowman,' he wrote to Coleridge on Christmas Eve, referring to the accidental deaths of Jerome Bowman, who slipped off a crag near Scale Force, and Bowman's son, who, in a separate incident, broke his neck falling from Pillar while walking in his sleep (*EY*, 237). The poem starts abruptly:

These Tourists, Heaven preserve us! needs must live  
A profitable life: some glance along,  
Rapid and gay, as if the earth were air,  
And they were butterflies to wheel about  
Long as their summer lasted; some, as wise,  
Upon the forehead of a jutting crag  
Sit perch'd with book and pencil on their knee,  
And look and scribble, scribble on and look,  
Until a man might travel twelve stout miles,  
Or reap an acre of his neighbour's corn. (1–10)

In what is perhaps the most peculiar beginning to one of his poems, Wordsworth presents us with two kinds of tourists. The first, compared to a butterfly, flits from

sight to sight with little but his own pleasure (or a guidebook) to direct his course. The second sketches the scene spread out before her. She passes the day in aesthetic detachment, reducing the landscape to a reproduction she might pocket and carry home. Neither demonstrates more than a passing interest in the actual landscape they have come to see.

What Wordsworth found so troubling about such figures can be seen in his fragment-poem, 'On Seeing Some Tourists of the Lakes Pass by Reading, a Practice Very Common'. The phrase that concludes this descriptive title suggests that this behaviour was fairly typical while at the same time communicating Wordsworth's contempt for the traveller who would bury his nose in a guidebook, oblivious all the while to the very place being described. 'On Seeing Some Tourists' was never published in his lifetime, but the event it describes likely occurred in July 1800, when Coleridge, who was visiting Wordsworth at the time, recalls seeing 'Ladies reading Gilpin's &c while passing by the very places instead of looking at the places' (CN, 1. 760 5½.16). At around the same time that they saw those ladies reading Gilpin, Coleridge recounts another incident. The subsequent entry in his notebook reads: 'Poor fellow at a distance idle? in this haytime when wages are so high? Come near—thin, pale, can scarce speak—or throw out his fishing rod' (CN, 1. 761 5½.17). This encounter would form the basis of 'Point Rash-Judgment', the fourth of the 'Poems on the Naming of Places'. In that poem, as Wordsworth recounts, he, Dorothy, and Coleridge 'saunter'd' along the eastern shore of Grasmere (9). The poem emphasizes their leisure. They 'Play'd with [their] time', wandering aimlessly (11). In the course of their ramble that morning, they see in the distance a peasant 'Angling beside the margin of the lake', the figure from Coleridge's notebook (52). That Wordsworth chose to describe him as angling implies that there is something untoward in his behaviour. Wondering at his idleness mid-harvest when he might earn a decent wage for his labour, they draw near, full of reproach, only to find an old man too frail to work the fields. He fishes so that he might eat. The peasant stands as a rebuke both to their rash judgement and to their own leisure. With this discovery, the poem and the walkers grow sombre.

Until this encounter they had 'stroll'd along', 'indulg'd' themselves by pointing out flowers, 'trifling with a privilege', as the speaker puts it (ll. 11, 29, 28). 'And in our vacant mood', he recounts:

Not seldom did we stop to watch some tuft  
Of dandelion seed or thistle's beard,  
Which, seeming lifeless half, and half impell'd  
By some internal feeling, skimm'd along  
Close to the surface of the lake that lay  
Asleep in a dead calm, ran closely on  
Along the dead calm lake, now here, now there,  
In all its sportive wanderings all the while  
Making report of an invisible breeze  
That was its wings, its chariot, and its horse,  
Its very playmate, and its moving soul. (16–27)

Counterpointed by the 'busy mirth' of men and women reaping, the speaker's 'vacant mood' appears self-indulgent (42, 16). But the poem, let us recall, admonishes those who decry what seems like idleness. 'Angling beside the margin of the lake', as it were, the speaker notes that 'it was our occupation to observe', juxtaposing the usual work or business of earning a living with the quality and intensity of perception (52, 12). Unhurried by any goal, they were employed with the simple act of seeing. Wordsworth thus presents himself at leisure while insisting at the same time that this leisure is productive. In the lines above, what else is Wordsworth describing but the poet he had become? His own 'sportive wandering' impelled by an unseen force. Like the dandelion seed, the poet gives report of an 'invisible breeze', calling to our attention that 'which you might pass by | Might see and notice not' ('Michael', 15–16). As the speaker has been taught not to mistake the peasant's angling as idle, the reader is instructed not to mistake as idle the poet's occupation. Wordsworth allows the rebuke he received to stand in for that of his readers knowing that he was justifying his own occupation as a form of productive labour, a rich harvesting.

We find a similar gesture in 'The Brothers', where the activities of the picturesque tourist, that 'moping son of Idleness', is weighed against the more productive figure who might travel twelve 'stout' miles or take in the harvest (11, 9). Wordsworth, let's be honest, wasn't likely to reap an acre of his neighbour's corn. Yet he did like to walk, and the poem establishes this activity as productive poetic labour by associating it with a local agrarian community that derives its wealth, both material and spiritual, from the land. 'The Brothers' was to be the final poem in a series of pastorals set amongst the scenery of the lakes. And although he wrote only one other, 'Michael', the pastoral mode was central to Wordsworth's poetic project in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>3</sup> In treating what Wallace Stevens would later call 'the exquisite environment of fact', 'The Brothers' and 'Michael' focus on the intensity of the ordinary and mark a turn toward a more realistic version of pastoral compared to the genre's classical antecedents.<sup>4</sup>

Wordsworth's realism is in part an effect of how he depicts place. 'The Brothers' identifies specific topographical features of Ennerdale such as Great Gable, the River Leeza, and the Enna. Both poems take place in locations we might visit were we so inclined. 'Michael' direct us 'from the public way . . . Up the tumultuous brook of Green-head Gill' to 'a hidden valley' amidst the 'pastoral Mountains' (1–2, 8, 5). Although it begins in the manner of a tour guide, 'Michael' emphasizes two very different relationships to the land. '[A]t all times', notes the narrator, 'the storm that drives | The Traveller to a shelter, summoned [Michael] | Up to the mountains' to tend his flock (74–6). 'The Brothers', too, contrasts the leisure of tourists to the labour of those who call the Cumbrian landscape home. 'One roaring cataract' swollen with May rains and 'January snow', remarks the priest of Ennerdale, might afford the tourist a spectacular visual 'feast', but for the

<sup>3</sup> 'The Pet-Lamb', 'The Idle Shepherd Boys', and 'The Oak and the Broom' are pastorals in name only.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 164.

Shepherd who works the hills it is an occupational hazard: 'twenty score of sheep [are sent] | To feed the ravens, or a Shepherd dies | By some untoward death among the rocks' (152, 153, 154–6).

As Bruce Graver has demonstrated, although Wordsworth called these works pastorals, they are more accurately georgic pastorals, generic hybrids that celebrate the toil of rural labour as both inherently heroic and morally necessary.<sup>5</sup> Much has been made of Wordsworth's development of this genre. Without recovering this ground, I want to suggest that we might understand Wordsworth's turn to the pastoral as a response to the picturesque tradition.<sup>6</sup> That tradition was essentially anti-georgic.<sup>7</sup> William Gilpin acknowledged that 'Moral, and picturesque ideas do not always coincide'. The 'waving corn field, and rows of ripened sheaves', he explained, 'these, the picturesque eye... looks at with disgust' (*Observations*, ii. 44).<sup>8</sup> Wordsworth's pastorals emphasize this as a working landscape. Michael's was 'a life of eager industry' and domestic affection (124). He worked his paternal lands 'toiling more than seventy years' (238). Returning home at evening, 'their labour did not cease' (100); Michael, Luke, and Isabel employed themselves carding wool or repairing tools. They 'were as a proverb in the vale | For endless industry' (96–7).<sup>9</sup> Such work was by no means easy. Michael explains his relationship to his patrimonial fields:

But 'tis a long time to look back, my Son,  
And see so little gain from sixty years.  
These fields were burthen'd when they came to me;  
'Till I was forty years of age, not more  
Than half my inheritance was mine.  
I toil'd and toil'd; God bless'd me in my work,  
And 'till these three weeks past the land was free. (382–8)

Similarly, in "The Brothers" the Ewbanks

toil'd and wrought, and still, from sire to son,  
Each struggled, and each yielded as before  
A little—yet a little—and old Walter,

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Graver, 'Wordsworth's Georgic Pastoral: *Otium* and *Labor* in "Michael"', *European Romantic Review* 1:2 (Winter 1991), 119–34. See also Bruce Graver, 'Pastoral and Georgic', in Frederick Burwick (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Romantic Literature*, 3 vols. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), III, 986–93.

<sup>6</sup> On Wordsworth's relationship to the picturesque see James Heffernan's essay in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> See Malcom Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape, Aesthetics, and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 64.

<sup>8</sup> William Gilpin, *Observations... on... the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmorland*, 2 vols. (London, 1786), II, 44.

<sup>9</sup> On the economic framework of 'Michael', see Graver, 'Wordsworth's Georgic Pastoral'; Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Richard W. Clancey, "Wordsworth's *Michael* and Poetry Come too Late," *The Charles Lamb Bulletin* 94 (1996): 79–94.

They left to him the family heart, and land  
With other burthens than the crop it bore. (211–15)

As these passages make clear, both poems also emphasize the legal and financial threat to this world of work in the acerbic references to mortgages, security, and forfeiture in 'Michael' and to Walter 'buffeted with bond, | Interest and mortgages' in 'The Brothers' (217–18).<sup>10</sup> If both poems reveal the precarious financial condition of dalesmen at the turn of the century, so too do they underscore that their land had been in the family for generations, worked by fathers and sons alike. Property functions as a rallying point for familial connections. As Wordsworth explained in a letter to the liberal Whig politician Charles James Fox: 'In the two poems, "The Brothers" and "Michael" I have attempted to draw a picture of the domestic affections... [of] small independent *proprietors* of land here called statesmen, men of respectable education who daily labour on their own little properties' (*EY*, 261). Domestic affections flourish when the land is unencumbered. The tragedy of both poems is that once the land becomes entailed the men are no longer free—physically, emotionally, imaginatively. What is to become of our ability to feel for one another, Wordsworth asks, when independent statesmen are replaced by hired farm labourers whose only attachment to the land they work is a daily wage?

Reimagining the pastoral involved, for Wordsworth, the interpenetration of the personal and the natural. Leonard Ewbank's 'soul was knit to this his native soil' (305). The fields and hills that Michael trod 'were his living Being' (75). For Wordsworth, the rhythms of rustic life fostered honour, integrity, and virtue. As he explained in the *Preface*, 'in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature' (*LBOP*, 743). 'Michael' and 'The Brothers' reflect Wordsworth's belief that one's character is conditioned by one's environment. The narrator of 'Michael', for instance, reveals that his capacity to sympathize developed from 'the gentle agency | Of natural objects' which led him 'to feel | For passions that were not [his] own' (29–31). The deep paternal love Michael feels for Luke is an extension of the love he received as a child from parents who, on this same plot of land, 'liv'd | As all their Forefathers had done' (377–8). And when Luke departs for the city, the sheepfold is meant to be a symbol of the inherently moral disposition of rural life, 'Thy anchor and thy shield;' as Michael tells his son:

amid all fear  
And all temptation, let it be to thee  
An emblem of the life thy Fathers liv'd,  
Who, being innocent, did for that cause  
Bestir them in good deeds. (418–22)

<sup>10</sup> On the actual conditions of independent statesmen at this time see David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (London: Methuen, 1987), 141–9.

What is passed down from one generation to the next is more than cottage, field, and pasture. It is a moral capacity. To work the land is to work one's soul. Wordsworth's letter to Fox offers us a more detailed account of how the land shapes our temperament. 'Their little tract of land,' he claims, 'serves as a kind of permanent rallying point for their domestic feelings, as a tablet upon which they are written which makes them objects of memory in a thousand instances when they would otherwise be forgotten' (*EY*, 262). The land perpetuates the emotional attachments that join us to others in bonds of domestic affection because the land, free of encumbrances, plays host to memory.

This is true for Michael. Wordsworth recalls how 'the hills... had impress'd | So many incidents upon his mind | Of hardship, skill or courage, joy or fear' (67–9). The setting for numerous events that Michael recalls, the hills are, in essence, the things remembered. But the hills also 'like a book preserv'd the memory | Of dumb animals, whom he had sav'd, | Had fed or shelter'd' (70–2). More than just remembered objects, the hills preserve experiences long after the events have passed. For Wordsworth, the landscape was an archive of memory, its very condition.

It would be easy to say that Wordsworth places 'Michael' and 'The Brothers' within the pastoral tradition in order to shore up his own literary authority. And this is true. But that would fail to acknowledge the extent to which Wordsworth's poems work the land. Rejecting the picturesque eye's preference for wildness over work, Wordsworth aligns himself with the hard-working dalesmen in his poems. Michael toils to free his land from debt, and so too does Wordsworth.<sup>11</sup> In his own manner turning the soil, he writes to reclaim his patrimonial inheritance, clearing the land of picturesque association, making a place for memory to ripen.

## V

To wander the hills around Grasmere was, for Wordsworth the poet, to work the land. And so he produces a kind of local itinerant whose movement through the landscape offers a marked contrast to the glancing tracks of the tourist. It is a movement similar to that of the Old Cumberland Beggar, one of a class of beggars who, Wordsworth's prefatory note to the poem tells us, 'confined themselves to a stated round in their neighbourhood' (*LBOP*, 228). Wordsworth here re-imagines movement in terms of local connections. Traveling a familiar circuit, the old Cumberland beggar embodies collective memory, inspires individual charity, and teaches us how to endure hardship. His 'weary journey' becomes an allegory of productive labour (53). Anchoring movement in the local and assimilating to it both memory and morality, Wordsworth justifies the 'unproductive' idleness he described in 'Point Rash Judgment', the same idleness that many must have attributed to Wordsworth himself.

<sup>11</sup> On Wordsworth's fears about the utility of poetry as a vocation see Graver, 'Otium'.

We find a similar sense of movement in 'The Two April Mornings', one of the Matthew poems written during Wordsworth's tenure in Germany. The poem recounts an early morning ramble over the local fells. Matthew and the youthful speaker had no destination, no aim other than 'merrily to pass | A day among the hills' (11–12). In the course of their walk, Matthew saddens when the scenery reminds him of another day, thirty years ago. 'And on that slope of springing corn,' he explains to his companion, 'The self-same crimson hue | Fell from the sky that April morn, | The same which now I view!' (25–8). Matthew's sensitivity to the atmospheric conditions that colour our experience of the landscape is astonishing. It is also reminiscent of William Gilpin, who observed that 'we sometimes see (in a mountainous country especially) a variation of light alter the whole disposition of a landscape' and that 'These local variations cannot be too much attended to by all lovers of landscape' (*Observations*, I. vii, viii). But Matthew isn't walking these hills in search of picturesque effect. In fact, the visual appeal is incidental to the experience of the poem, which translates their excursion on the fells into a rich sequence of memories. There is Matthew's memory of the day, thirty years earlier, when fishing along the Derwent's shore he came to the grave of his young daughter. There is his memory of her nightingale voice, and the love he felt for her at the moment, fuller than it had ever been. Turning from her grave he catches sight of a young girl. 'To see a Child so very fair,' he exclaims, 'It was a pure delight!' (47–8). Her presence elicits a pleasure that highlights but can not counteract the sorrow of his daughter's absence:

There came from me a sigh of pain  
Which I could ill confine;  
I look'd at her and look'd again;  
—And did not wish her mine. (53–6)

In resisting the impulse to imagine the girl as his daughter, Matthew betrays an extraordinary capacity for emotional restraint. It is not that he no longer feels her loss. As the first two lines of this stanza indicate, the acute emotional ache is irrepressible. That ache, however, leads to an insistent gaze, a gaze repeated and deliberate that forgoes any desire to possess. Matthew has learned to accommodate his daughter's death. It has become part of his emotional landscape. This allows him to acknowledge the beauty of the world as inherent in its objects rather than in his need. What visual pleasure he receives is purely local. It belongs to this girl and cannot be transferred, not even imaginatively, to his daughter.

As the poem concludes we pass through its initial sequence and the progressive action that it described to discover that Matthew is 'in his grave' (57). And yet the speaker sees him 'As at that moment, with his bough | Of wilding in his hand' (59–60). But which moment does he mean: walking on the fells relating the memory, or along the Derwent deep in the memory? Those two April mornings have fused in the speaker's memory of that day. Correlating the natural landscape with the inner landscape of memory, Wordsworth invests the scenery of the lakes with an intimacy inaccessible to picturesque travellers. Theirs is a passing interest. They may sketch the scene. They may, in fact, remember it fondly. 'The Two April Mornings' suggests something much more

complex. We do not simply remember a place. Place is both the thing remembered and that which makes remembering possible.

The interplay of memory and place is the focus of 'Poor Susan', a reverie in which the concrete fact of place becomes indiscernible from a landscape glimpsed in memory. The plot is simple enough. Susan has been living in London for three years. Hearing the song of a thrush she remembers fondly her rural home. But, as with the best of Wordsworth's work, this simplicity belies a complexity easily lost on the inattentive reader. A poem of subtly disconcerting contrasts, 'Poor Susan' begins:

At the corner of Wood-Street, when day-light appears,  
There's a Thrush that sings loud, it has sung for three years.  
Poor Susan has pass'd by the spot and has heard  
In the silence of morning the song of the bird. (1-4)

The thrush 'sings loud' because the streets are quiet at daybreak. This seems clear enough. But at the same time that silence envelops the song, disturbing our sense that everything is as it seems. How can the morning be silent if a thrush is singing? Is it that the very silence of the morning—the absence of the ordinary din and clamour of the city—allows Susan to hear in her mind the thrush's song? These two couplets balance two very different realms: the narrative present of London and the rural home brought to life in Susan's daydream.

The distinction between these two locations is complicated by the poetic act as Wordsworth has framed it. The second stanza describes the birdsong as 'a note of enchantment' that has bewitched Susan:

what ails her? She sees  
A mountain ascending, a vision of trees;  
Bright volumes of vapour through Lothbury glide,  
And a river flows on through the vale of Cheapside. (5-8)

The rhythm of the final line sweeps us along to the unsettling 'vale of Cheapside', the visual disparity of that phrase stressed by the rhythmic disturbance of the word *Cheapside*. Evoking a mist-shrouded morning in the mountains, the second stanza situates us, however incongruously, in the financial centre of London, bounded by Cheapside to the south, Wood-Street to the west, and Lothbury to the north. And yet.

Susan is enchanted by the song of the thrush. We are enchanted by the poet's song, transported to the imagined scene:

Green pastures she views in the midst of the dale,  
Down which she so often has tripp'd with her pail,  
And a single small cottage, a nest like a dove's,  
The only one dwelling on earth that she loves. (9-12)

Juxtaposing rural and urban life, 'Poor Susan' repeats, in a minor key, 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey'. In that poem, Wordsworth recalled how 'oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din | Of towns and cities' he turned for sustenance to nature, to

those 'forms of beauty' stored up in his memory (26-27, 24). 'Poor Susan', however, offers no such comfort:

She looks, and her heart is in Heaven, but they fade,  
The mist and the river, the hill and the shade;  
The stream will not flow, and the hill will not rise,  
And the colours have all pass'd away from her eyes. (13-16)

Still, it is astonishing for its visionary quality and the attendant dislocations it enacts. The poem reiterates Wordsworth's belief in the restorative qualities of nature. As in 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey', 'Poor Susan' emphasizes the extent to which our character is shaped by our environment. But the poem's failure to sustain this vision suggests that Wordsworth was working through the limits of memory, questioning its transformative potential. Wordsworth, in his poem on the Wye, turns to his sister, who extends the poet's imaginative transformation of experience. Susan's tragedy is that she suffers by herself. Although the poem opens her imagination to the reader, it fails to overcome the solitary nature of her experience. Her memory remains hers alone.

## VI

The native setting for which Susan pines is an unspecified rural landscape, but the scenes to which Wordsworth turned were specific to the Lake District. Of the 'Poems on the Naming of Places', 'There is an Eminence,—of these our hills' is the briefest. It is also one of the most telling. It suggests something of the lyric project that Wordsworth was engaged in: the cultivation of an aesthetic based in individual memory yet expressive of communal sympathies. 'There is an Eminence,—of these our hills', he declares, 'We can behold it from our Orchard-seat' (1, 3). 'We' and 'our' bind the poem's syntax to a community rather than a single individual. We might think of this as a rather limited community consisting of William and Dorothy, 'they who are all to each other' as Coleridge once put it (*CL*, I, 484). But their lives in Grasmere differed greatly from the five months they spent in Goslar, physically and culturally isolated. Hosting numerous visitors at Dove Cottage, the siblings were, for the first time in many years, the centre of a thriving community.

And in fact the poem broadens from their private residence at Dove Cottage into the public way, where the two walk at evening beneath the cliff which 'seems to send | Its own deep quiet to restore our hearts', providing the speaker a model of emotional stability (7-8). Notice, too, how the imagery of the poem directs our attention upwards, from the public path to the distant cliff and the meteors that haunt about it. This rising motion connects the earthbound and the heavenly. Such movements in Wordsworth typically map an internal progression as well. The lyric speaker arrives at some insight, and that seems to be the case here as well. Having described Stone-Arthur and its restorative qualities, the speaker declares: 'Tis in truth | The loneliest place we have among

the clouds' (12–13). This description echoes that of the tall peak singled out in 'The Brothers,' '(It is the loneliest place of all these hills)', where it comes to signify the death of Leonard's younger brother James (140). Two springs used to flow down that mountain, 'brother fountains' (144). But now, 'one is dead and gone', the peak having been struck by lightning (145). In the churchyard, not sure whether his sibling is alive, Leonard wonders at absence of headstones or other identifying markers. '[T]he dead man's home', he remarks to the priest, 'Is but a fellow to that pasture field', cinching Wordsworth's assimilation of the individual and a landscape defined in terms of agrarian labour (174–5). 'We have no need of names and epitaphs', he is told, 'We talk about the dead by our fire-sides' (179–80). Local in its commitments, this practice forgoes memorials for memory, a lived experience that depends upon and constructs community, here stressed by the priest's use of *we* and *our*. Although he learns of his brother's death from the priest, Leonard is no longer a part of this community. The memory of home, family, and loss proves too painful and he departs, returning to a life on the seas.

In 'There is an Eminence', Wordsworth transforms Leonard's despair. '(It is the loneliest place of all these hills)' becomes "'Tis in truth | The loneliest place we have among the clouds', the potentially painful isolation implied by 'loneliest' contained by the plural pronoun. Solitude becomes a shared experience:

And She who dwells with me, whom I have lov'd  
With such communion, that no place on earth  
Can ever be a solitude to me,  
Hath said, this lonesome Peak shall bear my Name. (14–17)

To dwell is to reside but also to linger over or to ponder in thought, and Wordsworth here conjoins these two meanings to suggest the imaginative potential he is proposing: that memory stands in for physical location. His use of 'communion' asserts the sacramental nature of their bond, a metaphorical consubstantiation as it were in which the poet's love assumes divine proportions. These lines suggest that the intimate relationship brother and sister share can overcome any isolation. But the emotional trajectory of the poem counteracts this possibility.

'There is an Eminence' reflects deeply and unsparingly on solitude, articulating the fragile intersection of love, community, and place. On the one hand, the poem seems to resist the pull of place. It suggests that love trumps location, that Wordsworth will never feel lonely because of the intimacy he and Dorothy share. It stands on an interfusion of spirit. Each lives in and through the memory of the other, no longer bound by physical place. And yet this is belied by the movement of the poem, which pulls us back to rutted paths and heathered hillsides, back to Town-end, back to 'this our little domestic slip of mountain' (EY, 235). As in Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', the impulse to slip the orbit of our material existence is rejected.

'There is an Eminence' insists on the importance of place, of home and local surroundings. It concludes with the naming, which anchors the individual self to the local topography. The 'lonesome peak' thus becomes a metonym for the poet speaker. The peak, the poet, the poem are filled with a solitude only overcome in and through specific

acts of remembrance and imaginative extension. What remains, of course, is the longing. By consecrating the place of memory, Wordsworth finds community, and communion, in solitude. Solitude is not a condition but a mood, an emotional receptivity. The poem holds that solitude, savours it, and at the same time opens it to others and welcomes them inside.

## CODA

It is winter at Goslar. How often must Wordsworth have sat alone beside the fire lost in memories of his childhood in the Lake District, of flowers swirling like snow, while the rain, half frozen, tapped out weary hours on the window-pane? A blank-verse meditation on one of his favorite pastimes, 'Nutting' was intended for the *Prelude* but found its place in *Lyrical Ballads*. And here it belongs. Wordsworth believed that it and 'Joanna' 'show the greatest genius of any poems in the second volume' (quoted in Moorman, EY, 506). The precision with which 'Nutting' evokes the flush of boyhood experience is striking. But the poem's genius is contemplative, not descriptive. '[A]nd unless I now | Confound my present feelings with the past', Wordsworth reasons:

Even then, when from the bower I turn'd away,  
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings  
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld  
The silent trees and the intruding sky. (47–52)

How much this is wishful thinking—Wordsworth's desire to see the child as father to the man—we can never know. What we do know is that Wordsworth's poetry affirms the authenticity of experience in the face of such uncertainty—is, in fact, underwritten by this very uncertainty. If the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* teach us anything, it is that the place of memory is the time being. It is scored by forgetting. It confounds present feelings and past experience. It is all that we never were, which is to say, all that we have become. In memory we are displaced. And then we find our way home.

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