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# The "Honourable Characteristic of Poetry": Two Hundred Years of *Lyrical Ballads*

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# The "Honourable Characteristic of Poetry": Two Hundred Years of *Lyrical Ballads*

## Introduction

Marcy L. Tanter, Tarleton State University

1. It can be argued that *Lyrical Ballads* is the most significant book of poetry published in the last 200 years. The reason for this is that the poems and their authors have influenced the generations of poets who have flourished in their wake, even to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Wordsworth and Coleridge cannot have understood the full importance of their little book when they saw it pass from the hands of their publishers into the hands of the public. Each of the contributors in this volume in the *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* helps us to see how the poems have continued to be important and relevant, especially with respect to American writers and readers.
2. Joel Pace alerts us to Wordsworth's influence on literary reform as related to Poe and Hawthorne and, interestingly, Dorothea Dix. Pace sees a direct correlation between the writers' responses to Wordsworth's lyrical ballads and their use of them "as a model for their own endeavors to bring about change...." Pace begins his discussion by looking at Poe, who publicly expresses disdain for Wordsworth and objects to the moral lessons learned by Wordsworth's characters. In his own work, however, Poe's characters may experience lessons of morality, or the poet may create "architectural metaphor [s] for the mind" that resemble Wordsworth's studies of the mind. Hawthorne's stories also emulate Wordsworth's depictions "of the mind in a 'state of excitement'." Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* are a collection of folk-tales that include elements of reality in a manner similar to the types of tales Wordsworth creates in his ballads. Both Wordsworth and Hawthorne wanted to garner sympathy for the poor and Pace points out that several Unitarians also devised their stories for the same purpose. Dorothea Dix was one such humanitarian who was concerned with the mentally ill and was impressed with Wordsworth's interest in them, especially after she met him. Dix was inspired by Wordsworth and modeled an address to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in which she pled for changes in the state's legislation of laws pertaining to the impoverished mentally ill. According to Pace, this was her first victory in the political realm. As reformers of literary and social movements, it's not surprising that writers such as Poe, Hawthorne and Dix would be drawn to Wordsworth as a model for their work given their common interests.
3. Charles Rzepka brings Wordsworth's ballads and their influence into the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a look at Elizabeth Bishop's acknowledged debt to her predecessor. Bishop once said of herself that "I find I'm really a minor female Wordsworth", and Rzepka notes that Helen Vendler was later the first scholar to note Bishop's direct link to the *Lyrical Ballads*. There are similarities between the lives of Bishop and Wordsworth, including loss of parents at a young age, rural living and, Rzepka says, "the regaining of paradise—later in life." Bishop's debt to Wordsworth is well-chronicled in her notes and letters, which gives readers an interesting insight into her awareness of her relationship to the older, established poet. Her interest in Nature and the types of "common" characters to which Wordsworth was also drawn is evident in work done in two distinct and very different locales; these locales are radically different from those Wordsworth knew, yet for Bishop the responses to place and people are not so different. While Wordsworth's locales are of European or British origin, Bishop writes from Key West and

Brazil. What the *Lyrical Ballads* seem to have done for Bishop, as Rzepka delineates, is to give her a sense of the possibility of "self-transformation" through which one can be a proactive voice to initiate change in society. A very fitting ideal for the 20<sup>th</sup> century as we ask ourselves if humanity has, in fact, learned from the mistakes of the past.

4. From another perspective, Elizabeth Fay works out Wordsworth's adoption of the notion of sensibility and "translates" it into chivalry; she sees the poet thus turning "sensibility against the feminine." <sup>\*</sup>Fay notes the radical and perhaps sentimental positions Wordsworth takes in the 1798 edition of the *Ballads* but then sees his new poems and Preface in 1800 as a move "to a knightly position from which to preserve the past as something it never actually was." Fay takes the knightly stance and links it to the concept that Wordsworth, as poet, chooses a "manly" style: a man speaking to men, which, in turn, alienates his female audience. She highlights this alienation with a discussion of her own female students who feel excluded from the poet's audience through their readings of the "Preface" and Wordsworth's "chivalric posture" For the modern woman, Wordsworth's work becomes problematic, especially when the few editions of the poems are compared. This modern audience then has to grapple with the problems of Wordsworth's poems, try to reconcile the treatment of the women characters among the different poems and then determine whether or not Wordsworth's declarations in the "Preface" are well-founded or "mere nonsense."
5. These three essays are representative of Wordsworth's impact on his readers during the 200 years since *Lyrical Ballads* was first introduced to the public. Readers in the United States have had a unique relationship with Wordsworth's work; we can see this in the likes of Poe and Bishop, whose responses were emotional and assertive. We see it in present-day women readers who feel uncomfortable with the poetry yet are still drawn to it. While many 18th century poets and poems are being forgotten as the new millenium rears its head, Wordsworth's poems continue to startle us and make us think. He said, "It is the honourable characteristic of Poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind" (3) and the materials of these poems are sure to interest the human mind for at least another 200 years.

#### Works Cited

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# The "Honourable Characteristic of Poetry": Two Hundred Years of *Lyrical Ballads*

## Elizabeth Bishop and the Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads*: Sentimentalism, Straw Men, and Misprision

Charles Rzepka, Boston University

1. Elizabeth Bishop's affinities with William Wordsworth were remarked long before her death in 1979. Bishop herself confessed them in a letter to Robert Lowell in July, 1951: "On reading over what I've got on hand"--she was referring to the poems that were to appear in 1955, in *A Cold Spring*-- "I find I'm really a minor female Wordsworth--at least, I don't know anyone else who seems to be such a Nature Lover" (*One Art*, 222)<sup>[1]</sup>. Robert Pinsky, Willard Spiegelman, Helen Vendler, and David Bromwich were among the first to conduct forays into Bishop's admittedly Wordsworthian sensibility, and Vendler was the first to link Bishop specifically with "the Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads*" (109).
2. Given the large-scale homology between the poets' lives, we would expect to find a corresponding homology in their poetry. Jonathan Barron summarizes the biographical resemblances: the early disappearance of both parents; the rural Eden of childhood that was lost with the child's removal to the spiritual suffocation of unsympathetic, middle-class guardians; the regaining of paradise, if on reduced terms, later in life. Bishop's "Hawkshead was Nova Scotia," writes Barron, "and her Grasmere was Brazil" (299).
3. In the past decade and a half, critical views of Wordsworth's influence on Bishop have taken on a more revisionist tone: Wordsworth's "Romantic" (here, a term of opprobrium) version of the natural world and of naturalized human figures has come to be seen by some as an obstacle that Bishop not only had to overcome, but overthrow. What is targeted for overthrow is, in nearly every case, the Wordsworth of the notorious "egotistical sublime"--domineering, intransigent, optimistic, monologicistic, masculinist, self-congratulatory--in short, a sentimentalized Victorian parody of himself. Jeredith Merrin, in her landmark chapter on the two poets in *An Enabling Humility*, apparently had this Wordsworth in mind when she described how Bishop "resisted the Romantic poets' domination of woman and nature by diminishing masculine notions of conquest and by refusing to engage . . . in imaginative imperialism" (105). Merrin readily acknowledges the affinities between Bishop's "perceptive young children of 'First Death in Nova Scotia' and 'In the Waiting Room'" and the "nineteenth-century prototypes we find in the *Lyrical Ballads*," but she chooses to emphasize their differences. Bishop's children, she writes, do "not share the immunity to grief and obliviousness to loss that characterize the 'simple child' in Wordsworth's parable of wise innocence, 'We are Seven.' And the almost-seven-year-old Elizabeth in 'In the Waiting Room' experiences not a Wordsworthian sense of cosmic embrace, but rather the alternating terrors" of amorphous socialization and chilling isolation (104).
4. Surely, nothing in Wordsworth could more sharply contrast with the traumatized Elizabeth of "In the Waiting Room" than the blithely oblivious little maid of "We are Seven." But a more appropriate Wordsworthian proto-text for Elizabeth's fear of "falling, falling," "falling off / the round, turning world," or of "sliding / beneath a big black wave, / another, and another" is to be found in the "Intimations" ode, where "Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon" the Wordsworthian child, along with "those obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things, / *Fallings* from us, vanishings;

/ Blank misgivings of a Creature / Moving about in worlds not realised" (67-68; 141-47; emphasis added). For that matter, how significant is the difference between Wordsworth's little maid and the somber child-mourner of "Death in Nova Scotia"? The one extends her family circle to embrace the graves of her dead siblings, the other believes her dead cousin Arthur has been invited by the English Royal family to be "the smallest page at court." Neither comprehends the terrible finality of death. Differences there are, of course, but not nearly as radical as Merrin's selections for comparison would imply.<sup>[2]</sup>

5. While Wordsworthian straw men do not quite litter the landscape of Bishop criticism, they seem to have been erected as targets at strategic passes, especially where ideological battles are to be joined. Thus, Merrin speaks of Bishop's consciously "working against" male Romantic "domination, of women and nature," "resist[ing] . . . undermining . . . destabilizing" (102), "debunk[ing] myths of masculine heroism and conquest" (102), "replacing the romantic poets' resounding certainties with dubiety, doubleness, radical ambiguity" (97). Not only does Merrin's diction of active resistance and subversion strike me as untrue to what Bishop herself thought she was up to, but Merrin chooses to ignore many instances of Wordsworth's own "sad perplexity" over precisely these putatively masculinist certainties. In a similar fashion, Marilyn Lombardi finds in one Bishop poem an undermining of "the Wordsworthian dream of protection and rest in nature's cradling embrace" (82), without stopping to acknowledge the poet's frequent puzzling over nature's "severer interventions," as he calls them in *The Prelude* (1805: 1.370), or the possibility raised in "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" that Mother Nature could, indeed, have betrayed "the heart that loved her" (122-3). Thomas Travesino cites the grotesquerie of Bishop's "Pink Dog" as a deliberate challenge to more sentimental, Romantic modes of engaging the reader's sympathy, such as the "picturesque and hopeful" Leech-Gatherer of "Resolution and Independence." "Bishop is," he says, "suggesting that the sick and homeless cannot help looking indelicate" ("Flicker," 123). Leaving aside the "picturesque" exhibition of the Leech Gatherer--a doubled-over "sea-beast" (62), with (we are to imagine) leech-covered legs--what of the in-your-face indelicacy of Old Simon Lee, with his nauseatingly swollen ankles?<sup>[3]</sup>
6. Bishop offers the anti-Wordsworthians some small-bore ammunition. As early as the mid-1930s, in her post-Vassar notebooks, Bishop remarked Wordsworth's irritating habit of appropriating his sister Dorothy's notebook entries for his own poetic use: "Wordsworth. 'By My Sister'--keep all the honor for himself. . . . Impossible to argue with, or to talk to" (quoted in Merrin, 84). At about the same period, Bishop characterized as "a great perversity" what she called the "Romantic" practice of "using the supposedly 'spiritual'--the beautiful, the nostalgic, the ideal and *poetic*, to produce the *material*" world (quoted in Costello, 4). Within another year or two, however, she was reading Wordsworth's *Prelude*--hardly comprehensible if her notebook verdicts are to be taken as serious poetic judgments. Bonnie Costello has noted the extent to which, even this early in Bishop's career, Wordsworthian practice and theory, as announced in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, was influencing her adoption, and adaptations, of surrealism (249 n12). In short, Bishop came to outgrow her personal resentment of the poet (apparently, he reminded her of her despised paternal grandfather) as she grew more and more into the "minor female Wordsworth" of her own estimation. Nor did she think that her "minor" status could save her from suspicions of major-league Wordsworthian egotism: "No matter how modest you think you feel or how minor you think you are, there must be an awful core of ego somewhere for you to set yourself up to write poetry" (quoted in Motion, 304-5). Whatever Wordsworth meant to Bishop personally, he was much too varied and self-contradictory *a poet* to fit comfortably in one box.
7. It is Wordsworth's manifold poetic achievement, I think, that makes him so tempting a target for critical misprision--that is, in its basic, etymological sense, selective "mis-taking." Selectivity is not necessarily a fault--indeed criticism is impossible without it. The rule of our profession is not Forster's "Connect, only connect," but "Select, THEN connect." My own selectivity in choosing examples of critical



misprision does not prevent me from acknowledging that, more often than not, Bishop's admirers do get Wordsworth right, or at least, that they recognize a more complex and multifaceted "Wordsworth" than some of their specific readings seem to acknowledge<sup>[4]</sup>. That is what makes these instances of critical misprision so baffling, so clearly in need of explanation. In part, such lapses seem to be the result of critical or ideological preconceptions; in part, they arise from unfamiliarity with the full range of Wordsworth's poetic practice.

8. Bishop herself does not seem to have suffered from either fault. She was, however, herself deeply committed to a fierce process of selection, as well as a perversely illuminating brand of misprision. And as it happens, so was William Wordsworth.
9. Wordsworth's deliberate "mis-taking" of other people's words is legendary by now, as is his general interest in how the "mistaking" of words, the act of removing them from their original context and placing them in new narrative settings (usually, but not always, his own), can reveal unexpected meanings that seem almost providentially decided, almost a "leading from above" ("Resolution and Independence," 51). The inscrutable song of a Highland Lass, a fugitive phrase ("What, are you stepping westward?" "Aye"), the paper printed on a blind beggar's chest, a Leech-Gatherer's laconic job description, all, as they are *mis*-taken from their original owners and swept into the poet's narrative orbit, reveal this Wordsworthian tendency to misprision in the service of narrative self-understanding. His poetic children, too, come under the same prehensile power of re-encryption. The little girl of "We are Seven"--encountered entirely by chance on the road to Goodrich Castle--little suspects that her willfully reiterated challenge to demography will be transformed by the poet into an example of our earliest convictions of immortality. Nor could the little Edward of "Anecdote for Fathers" possibly comprehend how his desperately unmotivated response to his father's hectoring "Why, Edward, tell me why?" (48)--namely, "At Kilve there was no weather-cock; / And that's the reason why" (55-56)--could end up showing us "how lying may be taught" in a manner so compelling that his own father could not "teach the hundredth part" (59) of it if he tried!
10. Bishop, too, revealed a tendency to re-creative misprision from early on. The title and text of "The Man-Moth," for instance, came from a misprint for "mammoth" in the *New York Times*. Bishop herself said of this typographical accident, "An oracle spoke from the page of the *New York Times*, kindly explaining New York City to me" (Schwartz, 286). The tone is playful, the result is not--or rather, it is playful only in that somber, defamiliarizing manner that surrealism is famous for. Nor does Bishop's recurrent use of misprision suggest that this device was for her anything less than a matter of poetic life and death. Our words get beyond us, slide queasily onto other narrative sidings, as in "Chemin de Fer": "Love should be put into action!" / screamed the old hermit. / Across the pond an echo / tried and tried to confirm it." The echo of "action," as David Kalstone observed, is "*shun*" (253). For the reclusive and self-effacing Bishop, wrote Kalstone, "the descriptive style was to be most valuable when it grew out of mysterious and engaging encounters in her own daily life and travels" (36), as well as, one may add, in her dreams. "The voice of the child, the testimonies of grotesque, liminal creatures," says Joanne Feit Diehl, "all convey experience profoundly felt and obliquely expressed" (93). These words apply just as well to the chance encounters and mysterious border-figures of William Wordsworth as to those of Elizabeth Bishop.
11. When, in the summer of 1951, Bishop called herself a "minor female Wordsworth" and "Nature Lover," she was thinking of poems largely dependent on natural description, such as "A Cold Spring," "Over 2,000 Illustrations," "The Bight," "At the Fishhouses," and "Cape Breton." Four months later, in November of that year, she landed in Rio de Janeiro for what she thought would be a brief stop-over with friends. Her stay in Brazil lasted sixteen years. The poems she wrote during that time include some well-known studies of tropical landscapes, but many more are about marginal figures, the dispossessed, the rural poor. In those sixteen years, Bishop also began to come to terms with the

traumas of her early Nova Scotian childhood. She began writing short stories about these experiences, including the incomparable "In the Village."

12. As it happened, Bishop's interest in uncovering her own early memories dovetailed with a new-found project dear to her heart: translating, from the Portuguese, the diary of a young Brazilian girl who had lived in a remote diamond-mining district in the late nineteenth century. "Certain pages" of *The Diary of "Helena Morley,"* Bishop wrote in her introduction, "reminded me of more famous and 'literary' ones." Among these she lists scenes from Homer, Chaucer, Mark Twain, and "Wordsworth's poetical children and country people, or Dorothy Wordsworth's wandering beggars" (x). Her comment suggests that it was the poet of border-figures, not the poet of landscapes, that had now begun to interest her.

Bishop had long taken an interest in lower-class and socially marginal characters, especially during her residence, in the early 40s, in Key West. In the poetry she wrote in Brazil, however, these border-figures seem to proliferate: feeble-minded squatters and their children, river-people, fugitive burglars, wooden-clogged denizens of greasy filling stations, truckers and village women overheard conversing at a well below the window of Bishop's house in Ouro Preto<sup>[5]</sup>. I would argue that, in the end, Bishop came to resemble Wordsworth, and especially the Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads*, less in her self-described love of nature than in her willful misprision of these marginal figures, and her personal appropriation of the resulting narrative "anomalies." I also believe that Wordsworth was not her only model of misprision.

13. At about the time Bishop first read the *Prelude*, in the summer of 1936, she was also reading Augustine's *Confessions*, the autobiographical work that probably first showed Wordsworth how to "mis-take" the language of accidental encounters in order to build meanings for himself (Bishop, *One Art*, 45). In the central scene of Augustine's conversion to Christianity, in Book 8, as he sat weeping with sorrow and confusion in his garden, "all at once," he writes, "I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain 'Take it and read, take it and read.' ["*Tole, lege. Tole, lege*"] . . . I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall" (177). Augustine opens his Bible to Romans 13, and "in an instant," he writes, "as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled" (178).
14. The *sortes Bibliae*, like its pagan counterpart, the *sortes Virgiliae*, amounted to a religiously and culturally sanctioned practice of radical misprision--"mis-taking" the divine Word from its original Scriptural context and reinserting it, in a manner that itself seemed divinely ordained, into the narrative of one's own life. The affinities between Augustine's conversion experience and similar moments of inspired misprision in Bishop and Wordsworth lend further support to Barron's argument for the "epiphanic" themes common to both poets (301, 306), a position complicated by what C. K. Doreski calls Bishop's "aesthetic of reticence" (34). Passages such as the following, from an undergraduate essay written while Bishop was at Vassar, suggest that she was already predisposed to interpret such chance encounters in the Wordsworthian mode of "Resolution and Independence," that is, as instances of "a peculiar grace, / a leading from above, a something given" (50-51): "The crises of our lives . . . crop up unexpected and out of turn, and somehow or other arrange themselves according to a calendar we cannot control" (quoted in Kalstone, 24). As early as the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, as I have suggested, Wordsworth offers examples of intersecting narrative sortilege in "We are Seven" and "Anecdote for Fathers." But he is also interested in failed acts of misprision, as in "The Thorn," where Martha Ray's "Misery, O Misery!" (65) remains resistant to the self-distancing narrator, who keeps trying to accommodate it to his own speculative gossip, or in "The Idiot Boy," where Johnny's "very words"--"The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, / And the sun did shine so cold" (449-51)--open a doorway into a narratively inverted world, a sort of photographic negative of ours, the threshold of



which we are finally unable to cross, despite the poet's attempts to make narrative sense of Johnny's midnight ride (312-46).

15. Two of Bishop's poems in particular, one early, one late, seem to me to draw specifically on these two prototypes of thwarted epiphanic misprision from *Lyrical Ballads*. The early work, "Chemin de Fer," offers a dream-like epilogue to "The Thorn," a reflection on the consequences of sympathies that remain unexpressed, in which the retired, telescope-toting sea-captain of Wordsworth's poem has evolved from loquacious specular alienate to raving isolato. The impoverished scenery recalls that of Wordsworth's ballad: "The Thorn"'s "little muddy pond" (30) with its superstitious burden of misery, the drowned babe, has become "the little pond // where the dirty hermit lives," which lies "like an old tear / holding onto its injuries." The "tree by his cabin" seems to be an over-grown descendent of Wordsworth's "aged thorn" (34). It shakes with the blast of the hermit's shotgun, which in turn replaces the self-protective, distancing power of the sea-captain's telescope with the violent and immediately threatening emotions of anger and loss. In addition, the shotgun blast, sending its "ripple" "over the pond," recalls the motions of "the little breezes [that] make / The waters of the pond to shake" (205-6) in "The Thorn," breezes at which Martha Ray "shudders" and cries, "'Oh misery! oh misery!'" (208-9). In "Chemin de Fer," the self-distancing persona of the "The Thorn"--a perfect example of what Coleridge would later call the Wordsworthian *spectator ab extra*--has finally become what he beheld. Most significantly, of course, Bishop's poem supplies the missing moral of Wordsworth's tale of a rural village's deliberate "shun"-ning of the outcast woman's loss and pain: "Love should be put into *action!*" ("... shun, ... shun, ... shun").
16. Bishop's "Twelfth Morning, or What You Will" was written much later, during her Brazilian period. Critics have remained almost unanimously silent about it, with the important exception of Costello, who notes Bishop's "mock-heroic[]" invocation of "the traditional Christian inversion in which the meek shall inherit the earth and a poor infant become King of the Jews" (39). The poem is about Epiphany, and the boy, Balthazar, she points out, is named after one of the three Magi. (I would add, the traditionally black one.) Linking the "whitewash" of mist to the propagandistic "whitewash" of the "exploitative . . . white-owned company that would pass off dunes for lawns" (40), Costello argues that Bishop here "marks the gradual ascendancy and dignity of the poor" from degradation and exploitation "to the tin can turned star in the imagination of Balthazar. From his innocent perspective (which for the poet is highly dubious), 'the world's a pearl, and I / I am / its highlight' (40).
17. For Costello, the poem's dual perspectives--political and personal--recall, on the one hand, the Blakean ironies of "The Little Black Boy," in which the young victim of colonialist oppression is oblivious to the enormity of his own victimization. On the other hand, says Costello, Bishop seems to recognize "a dignity for poverty even as she protests the structures that perpetuate it" (41). This latter view, I would argue (minus the element of political protest, which seems to me muted at best) is reminiscent of the Wordsworthian perspective of a poem like "The Idiot Boy." For Costello, the contradiction between these Blakean and Wordsworthian views is irresolvable, but the very plurality of Bishop's perspectives does suggest "a way of knowing and experiencing the world which mediates between the darkness of utter skepticism and dread . . . and the solipsistic illusion of mastery or transcendence" (41).
18. But can we really conclude that Balthazar is entertaining thoughts of "mastery or transcendence" when he sings "Today's my Anniversary, the Day of Kings"? Does he consciously apply the words of this song to himself? There is no indication in the poem that Balthazar is even aware of what he's singing, let alone deriving a sense of "mastery" from it. Yes, the "four gallon can" on his head has turned into a star, "flashing that the world's a pearl, and I, I am / its highlight!" but *not* in the mind of Balthazar himself. These are the italics of the poet's own epiphanic imagination, as suggested by the poem's subtitle, "What You Will."<sup>[6]</sup>

19. What the snatch of song represents to Balthazar lies, like the "burr, burr" of Wordsworth's *Idiot Boy*, securely beyond the poet's comprehension. That does not, however, justify characterizing Bishop's view as "highly dubious," nor her tone as "mock heroic." We should not let Bishop's postmodern reputation for debunking epiphanies get in the way of our appreciation for what she is doing here (and so very often elsewhere in her use of religious iconography): that is, attempting to rescue some vague *sense* (if not the certainty) of a higher meaning--a "leading from above"--from the ruck and mess of, to put it again in Wordsworth's own terms, "what man has made of man."
20. There is no denying that, by the time she wrote "Twelfth Morning," Bishop had become aware of the post-colonial realities of Brazil. Despite the evidence of complexion, however, Bishop's little black boy has less in common, after all, with his Blakean than with his Wordsworthian prototype. In "The Idiot Boy," the child's simple mind remains stubbornly unyielding to both poet and audience, regardless of the poet's (in this case truly) mock-heroic but utterly futile attempts to "put . . . into rhyme / A most delightful tale" (325-6) about the child's horseback adventures--"And Johnny burrs and laughs out loud, / Whether in cunning or in joy, / *I cannot tell*" (387-9), says the poet. He leaves Johnny's final lines about crowing owls and cold suns, at last, without speculative comment: "Thus answered Johnny in his glory, / And that was all his travel's story" (462-3). The clash between Blakean and Wordsworthian perspectives in "Twelfth Morning," then, is not undecidable. Like Wordsworth throughout *Lyrical Ballads*, Bishop here remarks the dreary realities of oppression and exploitation, and yet finds herself drawn irresistibly to an epiphanic sense of redemption that will come, not through political protest, but through a more strictly imaginative self-transformation. That was also the faith William Wordsworth expressed two-hundred years ago in *Lyrical Ballads*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *A Cold Spring* includes "At the Fishhouses," a poem that, ever since Ashley Brown noted the resemblance while interviewing Bishop in 1966 (Monteiro, 25-26), has been aligned by critics with Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence." See, for instance, Barron (329) and Costello (111).

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Bonnie Costello more accurately aligns "In the Waiting Room" with "another sublime" in Wordsworth, "the sublime of the void" (124).

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Jacqueline Brogan contrasts Bishop's postmodernist, "Paul-de-Manian" brand of decentered lyricism with the "spoken, authentic voice" of Wordsworthian lyricism (175, 178-9), as though Frances Ferguson and Don Bialostosky, not to mention De Man himself, had not alerted us to Wordsworth's own postmodern prolepses. The same broad-brush version of Wordsworth is implied by Victoria Harrison, who traces Bishop's "poetic practice" back to a "postromanticist, empiricist, and pragmatist" American tradition "that had its roots in Emersonian thinking," but who then insists on differentiating this American brand of Romantic and post-Romantic thinking from "the [English] romantics' faith in essence" (4). Lorrie Goldensohn insists that Bishop was "in reaction against Wordsworth's Egotistical Sublime for the whole of her career," but in practice, Goldensohn is more interested in how the later poet "nonetheless came eventually to terms with his inheritance" (62). Bonnie Costello comes closer to identifying the deep affinity between Bishop and Wordsworth when she argues for the probable influence of *Lyrical Ballads* on "In the Waiting Room," observing that Bishop "adopts the language of the primer in conveying the child's eye, but like Wordsworth she is interested in that awareness for which the primer has no catechism" (188).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Travisano on Bishop's "Manuelzinho" and Wordsworth's revolutionary treatment of the "rural poor" (*Elizabeth Bishop*, 146), or Doreski's reading of "The Fish" (39-41).

<sup>5</sup> As Kalstone puts it, "The experience of village life . . . held for [Bishop] one of the secrets of vitality--a language open-eyed, that is unembarrassed by anomaly" (99)--in short, the language of her childhood.

<sup>6</sup> In conversation with me, Costello has pointed out to me that the "four gallon can" also recalls an episode from *Don Quixote*, Book I, chapter 21, in which Don Quixote mistakes a barber's basin for "Mambrino's helmet," a battle-prize in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. I would add to these sources their classical prototype, the famous passage describing Diomedes' shining helmet in the opening lines of the fourth book of *The Iliad*. The connection with Cervantes reinforces the impression that Bishop's focus is less on political protest than on the survival of the poet's individual visionary powers in a disenchanted world.

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# The "Honourable Characteristic of Poetry": Two Hundred Years of *Lyrical Ballads*

## Wordsworth, the *Lyrical Ballads*, and Literary and Social Reform in Nineteenth-Century America

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1. The distinct allure of the *Lyrical Ballads* in America was its focus on the mind in a state of excitement. The first ballad to be reprinted was "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," in the New Hampshire *Farmer's Museum* of 1799. The editor, Joseph Dennie, introduced the piece by alluding to Darwin's *Zoonomia*. When the poems were published in Philadelphia in 1802, the printer, James Humphreys who had attended Medical School at what is now the University of Pennsylvania, advertised the collection in all of his medical books. The content of the poems was relevant to medical works which had been recently published, such as John Haslam's *Observations on Insanity* and Alexander Chrichton's *Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Mental Derangement* (Youngquist 153). In one of the works in which the *Ballads* was advertised (the *Town and Country Friend and Physician*), he recommended reading as the only therapy for ailments of the mind. The appeal of these poems as a literary elixir to early nineteenth-century America is understandable. The *Ballads* reflected the psyche of emigrants who were transplanted to the New World, and often felt uprooted from the old one. These emigrants were caught somewhere in between the harsh juxtaposition of squalid, overcrowded cities and the frontier where the indigenous flora, fauna and people were thought of as wild and potentially hostile. <sup>[1]</sup>
2. The poem "Ruth" addresses the American wilderness and how for Ruth's lover "whatever in those climes he found / Irregular in sight or sound / Did to his mind impart / A kindred impulse" (ll. 121-4). The lover has been affected to his detriment by the unruly habits of the Native Americans as well. "The Female Vagrant" portrays the distressed state of mind of someone whose circumstances have forced her to relocate to the New World. These ballads and others successfully blurred the distinction between insanity and the *ne plus ultra* of imaginative sublimity. Their precarious position on the cusp of these seemingly disparate realms caused them to appeal across the board to physicians, poets and reformers. This article will focus on the influence of Wordsworth and the *Ballads* on literary reforms, particularly those of Poe and Hawthorne, and the social reforms of Dorothea Lynde Dix. Passing mention will be made of others who use the *Ballads* as a model for their own endeavors to bring about change, and an emphasis will be placed on the Harvard Unitarians' persona of Wordsworth and the adverse reactions to it expressed by Poe and Orestes Brownson. The debates over literary and social reform in America were not entirely unrelated, and those named above participated in them by a devoted adherence to or vehement rejection of Wordsworthian theories as laid out in the *Lyrical Ballads*.
3. Of the American authors influenced by Wordsworth, Edgar Allan Poe seems among the least likely to have been inspired by Wordsworth's *Ballads*.<sup>[2]</sup> The seeming justification for this lies in Poe's comments on Wordsworth; his *Letter to B*— is an anti-Wordsworthian *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Poe is quick to notice the disparity between Wordsworth's poetic theory and practice, and complains that the "long wordy discussions by which he [Wordsworth] tries to reason us into admiration of his poetry, speak very little in his favor" (412). Even the poetry on its own is flawed, and to prove this Poe quotes a poem from each volume of the *Ballads*: "The Idiot Boy" and "The Pet Lamb". He also draws from the *Preface* in order to ridicule it (his comments are presented in italics):



Those who have been accustomed to the phraseology of modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to a conclusion (*impossible!*) will, no doubt, have to struggle with feelings of awkwardness; (*ha! ha! ha!*) they will look round for poetry (*ha! ha! ha! ha!*) and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts have been permitted to assume that title.... (414)

Poe's *Letter* argues against "Lake School" conventions in the same way its predecessor questioned neo-Classical ones. Poe voices his "sovereign contempt" for the Lake Poets, whose popularity is increasing in America (415). Wordsworth's literature is "a throne in possession" of a poet who levies such a dear taxation of influence that the American author is left too indebted to ever be creatively solvent.

4. Poe notes that the problem with Wordsworth's and Coleridge's writings is that they "are professedly understood by the few, and it is the many who stand in need of salvation" (411). It is clear that Poe is thinking of the Wordsworth of *The Excursion* and the Coleridge of *Biographia Literaria*. To buttress his theory that the intellect and learning of Wordsworth and Coleridge have little to do with good poetry, Poe asks the reader to "witness...that moral mechanism by which the simplicity of a child may overbalance the wisdom of a man" (412). He invokes the Wordsworth of "We are Seven" against the apostasy of the epic Wordsworth. Poe's Wordsworth has never experienced childlike simplicity, but, like William of "Expostulation and Reply," dreamed "away his youth in contemplation with the end of poetizing his manhood" (412). It is conceded that Coleridge is infinitely wise, but composes poems to exemplify "prosaically" a laughable theory. Poe's own verses duplicate the Coleridgean counter-sublime to Wordsworth in that they (particularly "The City in the Sea" and "Dream-Land") consist of unearthly landscapes, like Xanadu, which have, at most, merely a nominal counterpart in reality. Ironically, Poe's most Coleridgean efforts are echoes in poetic prose of Coleridge's prosaic poetry. His *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* works in the sea voyage and the lifeless crew of the "Marinere," and, like the poem, portrays the mariner's fantastic superstition which becomes the "index of a mind for ever / Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone" (*Prelude*, 1850, III, 62-3).
5. Poe's problem with Wordsworth's verse is just this, that the characters' flights of fancy are all too often curtailed by an imposing moral. The portrayal of the mind under the duress of its superstitions is, for Poe, inherently didactic and therapeutic to the reader. The Wordsworth poem that immediately comes to mind in this discussion is "Goody Blake and Harry Gill." Harry Gill achieves the ultimate goal of any creative artist; his imagination creates a world of its own, a hell as credible as Dante's or Milton's. To Harry Gill, it is so (in)credible that it distorts the fabric of reality, and makes his teeth "chatter, chatter still." The imaginative contrition fits well into the moral of the *Ballads'* ministry to the poor. This agenda is most obtrusive in the last lines: "Now think, ye farmers all, I pray, / Of Goody Blake and Harry Gill". He, like Lady Macbeth and Godwin's Falkland, receives this imaginative visitation as a result of wrongdoing, of being unsympathetic to Goody Blake's social and physical predicament.
6. Once again, Poe's efforts are very close to those he criticizes; the mind manifesting a guilty reality of its own is the cornerstone of Poe's Horror. The murderer of *The Tell-Tale Heart* is haunted by the sound of his victim's inordinately loud heartbeats, which he hears long after the crime was perpetrated. It is the imaginative prolongation of the initial feeling of guilt from the moment (or spot) of time when the misdeed was committed, the chattering of Harry Gill's teeth. Poe's story does not end with an intrusive request that the reader mark the tale and not commit murder, but inverts the social structure of the moral in "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" in that it is the servant that has wronged his innocent master. In reference to Poe's *Letter to B*— it is sufficient to say that he would not have considered "puerile" rhyming verse an appropriate vehicle to convey the mind in its most disturbing state. The rhyme is too orderly and regular to reflect an erratic mind. The unadorned but agitated speech of the servant / murderer is, to Poe, truly the language of common men.

7. Only five years after Emerson mentioned to Wordsworth that "Tintern Abbey" appeared to be the favorite poem of the American public (recounted in *English Traits*), Poe published *Ligeia*. To an extent this work can be read as a reverse "Tintern Abbey" and *Prelude*, a tale of love of humankind leading to love of Nature. Ligeia, the narrator's deceased lover, had a restorative effect on him that is similar to that which Dorothy exercised over the Wordsworth of "Tintern Abbey":

[S]ubsequently to the period when Ligeia's beauty passed into my spirit, there dwelling as in a *shrine*, I derived, from many existences in the material world a sentiment such as I felt always aroused, within me, by her large and luminous orbs....I recognized it...in the contemplation of a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water. I have *felt* it in the ocean....And there are one or two stars in heaven...in a telescopic scrutiny of which I have been made aware of the *feeling*. (83, emphasis added)

Just as Wordsworth himself synecdochically becomes the abbey or temple of nature, Poe's narrator becomes the "shrine" of Ligeia who literally "haunts" him "like a passion...a feeling and a love." Poe's character reaches the conclusion that the feeling is far more deeply interfused and is part of the spirit which rolls through all things: "God is but a great will pervading things by nature of its intentness" (84). As the plot unfolds, this Divine Revelation is clouded by the narrator's mental deterioration.

8. In an ironic plot twist that makes Poe's story seem almost a parody of the poem, the character purchases "an abbey...in one of the wildest and least frequented portions of fair England" (87). It is replete with "verdant decay" and "dreary grandeur" and becomes a metaphor for his mind. He falls victim to supernatural horrors that invoke the disturbed mental state of "The Mad Mother" against the loftiness of "Tintern Abbey." This poem is the last one of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballad* and ends the collection with a tone of ascendancy, with the notion that the redeeming qualities of the mind have triumphed. The last lines of *The Prelude* illuminate and praise the beauty and divinity of the mind as well. Poe's story leaves the reader with no such consolation. The main character is vexed by a "mad disorder" in his thoughts, a "tumult unappeasable" (94). Poe's character exercises his imagination as a coping mechanism for the feelings concerning the death of his beloved. His imaginations become an upheaval which leaves him in a perpetual state of decay which is diametrically opposed to Wordsworth's state of mind in "Tintern Abbey."
9. A more obvious architectural metaphor for the mind can be found in "Michael," the poem that closes volume two of the 1800 *Ballads* (and the 1802 *Philadelphia Ballads*). The ruined sheepfold where Michael retreats and does not lift a single stone is the equivalent of the house where Roderick Usher slowly deteriorates mentally and seems to find companionship among the "crumbling condition of the individual stones" (97). Just as there is a certain sense of sublimity and beauty to a ruined structure (cottage, mansion or abbey) there is a corresponding aesthetic of the mind in a state of ruin. This idea is invoked in Wordsworth's "The Thorn" and Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which begins with the narrator traveling alone and on horseback "through a singularly dreary tract of country" (95). He eventually comes across the House of Usher, and is filled with "a sense of insufferable gloom" which is "unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible" (95). The scene begins and unfolds like a spot of time. He is wandering alone as is Wordsworth in the Drowned Man scene or, more appropriately because on horseback, the Penrith Beacon scene. However, unlike the boy's emotional invulnerability due to, in one case, the shining streams of fairyland and, in the other, the pool's "visionary dreariness", Poe's narrator is vexed the "unredeemed dreariness" surrounding Usher's mansion and the "black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling" (95-6, Arac 658-60).
10. Poe reverses Wordsworth's notion of thoughts that lie too deep for tears and portrays tears and gloom that are too deep for thought: "there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the

power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth" (95). The explanation of these processes (through imposition of a moral or other means) is beyond the boundaries of human knowledge. The price Poe's characters pay for attempting to explain them is insanity. Even Dorothy's redeeming force as portrayed in "Tintern Abbey" is a foil to the gloom of Roderick Usher which the narrator traces "to the severe and long-continued illness...of a tenderly beloved sister, his sole companion for long years" (100). It is significant that Usher tries but fails to alleviate his condition by singing lyrics of his own composition. The "ballad" quoted in the tale only reflects Usher's insane (and very Wordsworthian) certainty of "the sentience of all vegetable things" (104). In the same way that the Wordsworth of "Tintern Abbey" believes nature has given him an uplifting revelation, it is the moldering house, its blasted trees and dreary pool that consign Usher to his despondent mania.

11. Imagination is unable to lift itself up and alter the progress of the song (tale), and its defeat is reflected by the downward spiral of Poe's narrative. The implied moral of the ascendant imagination, able to redeem the most traumatic moments in life, is deconstructed. In this sense, Poe's narratives are only partially built up (word by word, short story by short story) to form a plot structure that resembles Michael's sheepfold (stone by stone) in its incompleteness and surrounding despair. On a grander scale, Wordsworth and Coleridge's collection of poetry is, to Poe, an incomplete narrative sheepfold which is unable to keep the reader within the boundaries of its morals. Poe's short stories considered collectively are narratives of characters who are unable to keep their emotions controlled, but are contained by their emotions instead. Michael is bound to his sheepfold as Roderick Usher is to (his mansion and) "an anomalous species of terror", "a bounden slave" (100). In place of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Poe posits his own strain of pulp-fiction Horror and its treatment of the mental supernatural. This genre is, in part, firmly rooted in the *Ballads* and extends toward the twentieth-century stories of H.P. Lovecraft.
12. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* are similar to Poe's stories and Wordsworth's *Ballads* in that they, too, are portraits of the mind in a "state of excitement."<sup>[3]</sup> It is not that *Lyrical Ballads* was the first work of literature to represent the mind in this state, but that in grouping together (in one collection) *short* narratives of what amounts to a dysfunctional literary family—comprised of the lower classes yet exhibiting universal qualities of the human mind in an imaginative and agitated condition—Wordsworth and Coleridge had achieved a very influential literary precedent. Poe's review of *Twice-Told Tales* delineates *concise* poems and "the *brief* prose tale" as the ideal vehicles for the author (448, emphasis added). Hawthorne's inclusion of the Wordsworthian moral in his stories is part of the reason why Poe considers them "peculiar and *not* original" (449). In another instance Poe upbraids Hawthorne for not being Wordsworthian enough:

A skillful artist has constructed a tale. He has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain *single effect* to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, and discusses them in such tone as may best serve him in establishing this preconceived effect. (448)

This idea is very similar to Wordsworth's justification for the thoughts and incidents of the *Ballads*: "the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling" (248). In Wordsworth and Poe the action of the plot is subordinated to the portrayal of characters' minds in a 'state of excitement' and their accompanying associations, which then produce similar states and associations in the minds of their readers.

13. In her fine article on Hawthorne and Wordsworth, Roberta F. Weldon points out the similarities between the old apple-dealer and the leechgatherer. While being entirely accurate, the article does not acknowledge fully that the apple-dealer is a later manifestation of archetypes rooted firmly in the *Lyrical Ballads* and expressed initially in *Twice-Told Tales*. As the title of Hawthorne's book suggests,

he, like Wordsworth, gathered together the folk-tales that he felt had defined the character of a community or class of people and altered them with imagination, fashioning them into his own stories. He and Wordsworth both seek to recount or (like Macpherson) even fabricate folk-tales which are made all the more real by references to actual places and people. As these tales are passed along they are added to by the imaginative, and sometimes superstitious, minds of their narrators. Wordsworth depicts this in "The Thorn" and Hawthorne in *Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe*. In this story different townspeople are convinced entirely by rumor of Mr. Higginbotham's murder and his niece's grief; Hawthorne gives a nod toward Wordsworth when he notes that the "village poet...commemorated the young lady's grief in seventeen stanzas of a ballad" (I, 145).

14. The role as village balladeer is one that Wordsworth and Hawthorne assume in these works. Both "The Thorn" and *The Minister's Black Veil* are twice-told tales to the extent that they relate the town gossip. "The Thorn" is replete with repetitions and variations of "some say" (line 216): "some will say" (214), "some had sworn" (232), "all and each agree" (218), etc.; and Hawthorne's story uses the same narrative device: "with one accord they started, expressing..." (I, 46), "one or two affirmed" (49-50), "the whole village of Milford talked of little else..." (53), etc. During a service, the townspeople see their minister wearing a veil that consists of "two folds of crape"; at

the close of the services, the people hurried out with indecorous confusion, eager to communicate their pent-up amazement....Some gathered in little circles, huddled closely together, with their mouths all whispering in the centre.... (49)

The image of the collection of Wordsworth's ballads as an incomplete sheepfold (each poem a stone) which is unable to keep the narrator's feelings (and Michael's despair) contained, is reworked by Hawthorne into the "little circles" of gossips "eager to communicate their pent-up amazement." The veil's "two folds of crape" become a metaphor for the twice-told tale as well. Just as the double-barreled image of the thorn and its accompanying hill of moss are the catalysts and subjects of the villagers' speculations, the two folds of crape are the basis for the parishioners' well-wrought fictions concerning the minister.

15. The black veil becomes the symbolic equivalent of the story and thus can be considered a text of its own. It is the autobiography of the minister speaking strongly of a spot of time that has informed the rest of his life and thrown a color over his preceding existence as well. In this capacity it is in league with Martha's thorn and hill with their text: "Oh misery! oh misery! / Oh woe is me! oh misery"; the placard of the London beggar in *The Prelude*; the scarlet letter of Hester and, in its earlier form, of the young woman in *Endicott and the Red Cross*. *The Twice-Told Tales* and the *Lyrical Ballads* become during their sympathetic reading and writing, mental autobiographies (the (scarlet) letters stitched to the psyches) of their writers and readers. The behavioral patterns of the minister and Martha Ray, as well as the villagers' stories about them, are the burdens of minds in a state of distress. Individuals' feelings are projected onto objects, persons and narratives, and it is implicit that the reader will interpret the story in a similar way so that "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" will be explained by example (*Preface* 245). The ministry of these works is clear: they are an alternative and antidote to the "frantic novels...and idol and extravagant stories in verse" which "blunt the discriminating powers of the mind" by satisfying a "craving for extraordinary incident" (*Preface* 249).
16. Hawthorne was well acquainted with Wordsworth, and his *Twice-Told Tales* did not go entirely unrecognized by the poet either; this is due to Hawthorne's friend (and later sister-in-law) Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. In a letter of February, 1838, she makes Wordsworth aware of the devotion of his overseas disciple:

I send you also this little volume of Tales—as you will agree that the popular story tellers are the ballad makers of the nation; and I should like to show you—what I think is best in this line. The author is a very retired young man though for some years the inhabitant of a city—but his early & his college years were passed in the country—

"His daily teachers have been woods & rills—  
The silence that is in the starry sky  
The sleep that is among the lonely hills—"

...While he breathes the spirit of humanity with a tenderness & depth of tone to which utilitarianism and empirical politics are strangers, he dares to write for Beauty's sake, not doubting but this will involve the highest use, & result in the purest truth....If some of the...tales evince a morbid direction of the fancy—yet I think they are redeemed by the glimpses of the inner nature which he gives us in the Reflection with which he closes each...the broad humor of 'Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe' proves the essential soundness of his mind—for is not *humour* a *rectifier* of morbid feeling? *That* is a true American sketch—so exquisitely characteristic of the excitability of a Yankee village—that I can hardly believe it will suit any other place. (Neussendorfer 197-8)<sup>[4]</sup>

When Peabody speaks of the "Reflection" with which Hawthorne closes every piece she is referring to the Wordsworthian moral which Poe found obtrusive in both authors' works. The *Tales* share the same ministry as the *Ballads* in that both are "*rectifiers*" of feelings, and cause people to empathize with the poor.

17. Poe had disdain for the moral persona of Wordsworth and those who helped to create it because they judged Poe's writings by his persona (as a drunkard, an opium eater, and a rake). The idea of Wordsworth as a good, gray poet was disseminated by the Transcendentalists and Harvard Unitarians. Poe's review of *Twice-Told Tales* is a stab aimed mostly at the author and partially at his associates. In the review, Poe makes specific mention of the limitations of the "criticism of the...cultivated old clergymen of the 'North American Review'," and tells Hawthorne to "come out from the Old Manse [Emerson's family home], cut Mr. Alcott, hang (if possible) the editor of 'The Dial' [a blow aimed at Peabody, Margaret Fuller, and Emerson], and throw out the window to the pigs all his odd numbers of 'The North American Review'" (442, 450). Poe must have been aware of Peabody's review of *Twice-Told Tales* for the *New Yorker*, in which she constructs a very Wordsworthian persona for Hawthorne: "he is frank and communicative in his character, winning thereby the experience of whatever hearts come in his path, to subject it to his Wordsworthian philosophy" (quoted in Harshbarger 124).
18. The anti-Wordsworthian element in the criticism of Orestes Brownson was also due to the fact that he took up station at the exact opposite political pole from the conservatives of Harvard Divinity School (who had made the poet's name synonymous with orthodox Unitarian politics and preaching). Peabody informs Wordsworth of his embroilment in this American political / critical faction:

I have been vexed—as well as a large portion of our people—at a review of your works in the Boston Quarterly—which undertakes to *dethrone you* from your Jupitereal seat on Parnassus. But if it ever comes to your eyes—you must remember what is true—that the Boston Quarterly speaks only the sentiments of its Editor [Orestes Brownson]—& that he has no party. (Neussendorfer 202)

Many radicals, such as Emerson, paid their respect to the poet at Rydal Mount. They went in search of the Wordsworth of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the Wordsworth concerned with the amelioration of the lower classes and improvement of the human mental, social and spiritual condition. Many visitors and



correspondents were able to unearth his radicalism and find in him sympathy for their causes. As does Emerson in *English Traits*, Brownson separates Wordsworth the person from Wordsworth the persona, and the poet of the *Ballads*:

We have little faith in Wordsworth's democracy. He is a kind-hearted man that would hurt no living thing, and who shudders to see a single human being suffer. So far, so good. But he has no faith in anything like social equality. He compassionates the poor, and would give the beggar an "awmous"; but measures which would prevent begging, which would place the means of a comfortable subsistence in hands of all men, so that there should be no poor, he apparently contemplates not without horror. A man is not necessarily inclined to democracy because he sings wagoners, pedlars and beggars...A Wordsworthian society without beggars, or such feeble old paupers as Simon Lee, would be shorn of all its poetic beauty...Wordsworth goes with the high Tory party of his country, and opposes, as much as a man of his inertness can, the efforts of the friends of freedom (qtd. in Miller 435-6). [5]

19. The minister William Ellery Channing, visitor to Rydal and good friend of Wordsworth, immediately took up his pen to defend the poet, noting that Orestes Brownson "exaggerates the hardships of the laboring classes" (Howe 145). Channing had also preached to the poor about their spiritual "elevation" and was careful to distinguish his ideas from Brownson's: "by elevation of the laboring mass, I do not mean that they are to be released from their labor" (quoted in Howe 147). Brownson's idea of Wordsworth shuddering at the improvement of the poor stems from the Unitarian persona. The Unitarians interpreted the *Ballads* as part of their theory that the poor were to be pitied and helped, but not empowered. They saw poverty as a divine punishment and labor as moral improvement, so social leveling would be an interference with God's plan. (Howe 139, 145).
20. Like Hawthorne, the Unitarians authored short stories which were meant to bring about sympathy for the lower classes. Henry Ware, Jr., Unitarian clergyman, professor at Harvard Divinity School and visitor to Rydal Mount, published *David Ellington, with Other Writings* (1846). This work contained stories of a fictitious carpenter who worked contentedly at his hard labor rather than seeking to improve his position (Howe 147). Their message to the poor was to believe in Providence, and one of their means of conveying this message was a cheaply priced anthology which contained an excerpt from *The Excursion* entitled "A Belief in the Superintendence of Providence, the Only Adequate Support under Affliction". [6]
21. Other works anthologized Wordsworth alongside author-reformers. The 1854 *Gems for the Fireside* contains "Practical Hints on Reading" by the Unitarian Orville Dewey, another one of Wordsworth's American friends. His essay advocates reading as a means of improving the lower classes (Dewey 7-10). The same anthology also contains a piece on the character of Wordsworth as well as "A Sketch" by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The sketch is of a rich man's house with its finely bound Bible resting, unread, on his drawing-room table. This scene is juxtaposed with that of a poor woman's apartment and its well-read penny edition of Scripture. Like Goody Blake the woman works industriously in her apartment but she cannot afford enough wood to keep her family warm. She huddles together with her children and by reading the Bible achieves a spiritual warmth that makes the rich man's heart seem as cold as Harry Gill's chattering teeth (Stowe 24-5). Her abandoned position brings "The Female Vagrant" and "Ruth" to mind as well. Once again reading for spiritual improvement and consolation is emphasized.
22. Another author of humanitarian literature was Dorothea Lynde Dix. Her *Ten Short Stories for Children* (1827-8) was later republished as *American Moral Tales for Young Persons* (1832). As the title suggests, these stories all contain a very prominent (and what Poe would deem Wordsworthian) moral. In addition to her own works, she compiled several readers for the young, including *Hymns for*

*Children* (1825) and *Garland of Flora* (1829). Unlike other anthologies which merely included Wordsworth, *Garland of Flora* was compiled according to a Wordsworthian precept:

We admire the cultivated garden, but we love the garden of nature; for oh! believe that

"Nature never did betray the heart that loved her: 'tis her privilege  
Through all the years of this our life, to lead  
From joy to joy; for she can so inform  
The mind that ...all which we behold  
Is full of blessings." (26)

Her main reason for compiling the anthology was to improve the condition of the young and poor through education. Dix's eleemosynary efforts were not only literary: she converted the Dix Mansion in Boston to a school which, according to her, rescued "America's miserable children from vice and guilt and dependence on the Almshouse" (Wilson 52).

23. She was from the congregation of Channing and was a personal friend and travel companion of his, as well as being the instructor of his children. Channing had found in Wordsworth's poetry—particularly *The Excursion*—confirmation of his belief in the potential for improvement in every human being. When he visited Wordsworth in England their conversation touched on this topic and many other related ones.<sup>[7]</sup> By the time Dix met Channing, he had already devoted 20 years to securing affordable housing for the poor and pecuniary support for Irish immigrants and free African-Americans. The Massachusetts Unitarians were reformers and aligned, nominally if nothing more, many British Romantic poets with their causes. Andrews Norton, another Unitarian minister, professor at Harvard Divinity School and visitor to Rydal Mount, also anthologized Wordsworth's poetry for the sake of moral improvement. He added a short sermon to his reprint of "My Heart Leaps up" in his edition of the 1829 *Casket*.<sup>[8]</sup> In the letter Dix wrote to Norton to thank him for his help in her reforms, she pointed out to him that his "labors, though they may seem at a brief glance to be somewhat confined, are in fact *not to be measured*" (Howe 69).
24. Dix felt that her labors, as well as Wordsworth's literary ones, were part of Divine Providence. Her particular interest was in Wordsworth's focus on the mind in a state of mania or dementia. This interest in Wordsworth was enough to bring her to Rydal, with an introductory endorsement from Channing, to discuss these matters in 1836. The rest of her lifetime following this visit was devoted to bringing Wordsworthian theories into practice. "Idiots" were not the subjects of her poems but rather of her lifelong battle against the inhumane treatment of them. She received active support from several other humanitarian visitors to Rydal such as Charles Sumner, the Abolitionist; Horace Mann, the reformer of education in Massachusetts; Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, the Unitarian founder of a school for the blind; and Charles Francis Barnard, the Harvard Divinity School graduate who opened the Warren Street Chapel where he educated hundreds of homeless children. Dix devoted her time to visiting the insane in every quarter of the United States, and found that many were inadequately cared for and kept in cages, cellars, almshouses, jails and other inappropriate places. Her 50 year humanitarian sojourn led to the founding and reform of several insane asylums in Europe as well as in every state in America, including Rhode Island's Butler Hospital, which is still among the leading treatment centers in the US.
25. Like Wordsworth, Dix revolutionized the way Americans and Europeans thought of the insane. Poetry and the societies that produced it had overlooked them, and Wordsworth helped rectify the former and Dix the latter. Dix's opinions of the poet and his work were the exact opposite of Orestes Brownson's. From her meeting with him, she gleaned that the poet was indeed concerned with the treatment of the mentally ill, and he did not, as Brownson implies, patronize them by merely deeming them poetic. Like Channing, she found a Wordsworth who retained many of the beliefs he had explored under the

tutelage of Beauvuy. Brownson places those who sympathize with the revolutions in America and France as the true reformers, and actually numbers Wordsworth among those who were against the French Revolution from its inception. As Stephen Gill notes in *Wordsworth and the Victorians*, "however much Wordsworth's political complexion may have altered since *Lyrical Ballads*, his radical humanitarianism remained constant" (136). Wordsworth's poetry inspired some of America's most important reform movements, and this fact alone is a substantial rebuttal to Brownson's criticisms.

26. Although Brownson's attacks were aimed at the Wordsworth of the *Lyrical Ballads*, this Wordsworth was the one after whom Dix modeled her own writing for changes in state legislation regarding the poor. Her first victory took place in her native Massachusetts. As a Sunday-school teacher in the East Cambridge House of Correction, she came across several insane persons who were kept in unheated rooms. The next two years were spent in a thorough documentation of the treatment and housing of the mentally ill throughout the state. The result of this was a memorial she delivered to the state legislature. In presenting something of such monumental importance as the plight of Massachusetts' mentally ill, Dix needed a means of documentation which portrayed actual details and facts so as to draw out the sympathy, empathy, and understanding of her auditors. She found her model in the *Lyrical Ballads*. The *Memorial* is a very powerful plea for the enlargement of the Worcester Insane Asylum, and it is also one of the most fascinating pieces of Wordsworthian influence. Unlike Brownson, Dix believed that Wordsworth's writing possessed a very efficacious means of displaying the disturbances of the mind. She introduces her collection of narratives about Massachusetts' "idiot boys" and "mad mothers" with a declaration similar to the of the *Preface*:

I shall be obliged to speak with great plainness, and to reveal many things revolting to the taste....If I inflict pain upon you, and move you to horror, it is to acquaint you with sufferings which you have the power to alleviate....I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane and idiotic men and women. (*Memorial* 3-4)

In a similar way, the *Preface* is the declaration of equality for the citizens of the *Ballads*, and the ballads themselves are the voices of these characters, the representation of the under-represented.

27. Like the *Ballads*, each narrative is connected to a certain location and this small detail instantly makes the narrative much more credible to its reader. Dix introduces a seemingly deranged woman from Newburyport, who has been very poorly maintained in a cellar, and as a result has "wasted to a skeleton". Like Martha Ray of "The Thorn", this woman's misery also has a refrain: "Why am I consigned to hell? dark—dark—I used to pray, I used to read the Bible....I have done no crime in my heart" (8-9). Her words, like Martha's, are ones which corroborate the point that the narrator is seeking to prove, and are part of Dix's scrupulous attention to particulars. In another instance she notes that an insane woman was given a bed which was a mere "three feet long, and from a half to three quarters of a yard wide" (10).
28. The Newburyport woman is "consigned" to the "hell" that is the cellar and is being kept and treated like a beast even though she exhibits an almost angelic piety. Dix does not seek merely to present the facts of the cases, but makes her case even stronger by giving the insane a voice in her *Memorial*, and allowing them to plead for themselves. The skeletal qualities of the woman's body exemplify the adverse mental and physical effects of incarceration in a way that is similar to "The Dungeon":

Each pore and natural outlet shrivell'd up  
By ignorance and parching poverty,  
His energies roll back upon his heart,  
And stagnate and corrupt; till changed to poison,  
They break out on him, like a loathsome plague-spot (ll. 6-10)

Dix also implies that diseases of the mind like those of the body are curable, and she, like Coleridge, advocates Nature's healing power. It is understandable why Dix, a lover of "Tintern Abbey", declares that

Humanity shudders at the thought that those whom God in his providence has bereft of the light of reason, should be confined within the narrow bounds of a prison, deprived of the enjoyment of the pure air of heaven. (24)

29. The other cases she treats are the real counterparts of the characters of the *Ballads*. Wordsworth introduces "The Mad Mother" in a very shocking way by describing her features: "Her eyes are wild, her head is bare, / The sun has burnt her coal-black hair." Dix employs similar means. She prefaces her comments on individuals with descriptions: "There she stood with naked arms and disheveled hair" (5); "There she stood, shivering in that dreary place, the grey locks falling in disorder about the face gave a wild expression to the pallid features" (19). Her use of the word "dreary" is a clever utilization of a subjective adjective (and a very Wordsworthian one). One of Brownson claims against Wordsworth was that writing about those in need of society's aid is not enough; however, Dix refutes Brownson when she makes one of her most powerful statements with a mute image of "a demented Mother" and her "poor little child":

Disqualified for the performance of maternal cares and duties, regarding that helpless little creature with a perplexed, or indifferent gaze, she sat a silent, but O how eloquent, a pleader for the protection of others of her neglected and outraged sex!.... (24)

30. Dix also makes mention of those who are not incarcerated but are "vagrants": "I encountered during the last three months many poor creatures wandering reckless and unprotected through the country" (5). One particular case is of an "idiot boy" who was "unoffending, and competent to perform a variety of light labors under direction, and was often allowed a good deal of freedom in the open air" (14). In one instance when he was left entirely unsupervised he escaped from his keepers "rather through sudden waywardness than any distinct purpose" (14). Dix explains that months later while on a visit to a neighboring asylum, she heard one of the patients say:

'I know her, I know her,' and with a joyous laugh John hastened towards me. 'I'm so glad to see you! so glad to see you! I can't stay here long; I want to go out,' &c. It seems he had wandered to Salem, and was committed as an Insane or *Idiot* boy. (15)

Dix relates "all his travel's story" and shows, just as Wordsworth's does, that the "idiot boy" is capable of enjoying Nature and that it is beneficial for him. Wordsworth convincingly portrayed that a mother loves her "idiot boy" as much as any other mother loves her children. This is an implicit statement against the poor treatment of Dix's cases who are physically abused and given inadequate food, clothing, and shelter. Dix shows that the boy is capable of making emotional attachments, and ends her tale with a moral: "I cannot but assert that most of the Idiotic subjects in the prisons of Massachusetts are unjustly committed, being wholly incapable of doing harm" (15). The statement has a theological underpinning that asserts the God imparted benevolence they exhibit.

31. Unlike many of the characters of the *Ballads* and *Twice-Told Tales* who are indelibly marked by their mental aberrations, the delirium of those Dix encounters is highly treatable and even curable. Wordsworth and Hawthorne redeem their characters and readers through the moral of the narrative, but Poe offers no moral or bright ending. He documents the imaginations of disturbed minds, leaving them in a perpetually pathological state. Dix's bright ending is her documentation of the improvement of her cases, and her moral is that the demented notions society has of the insane stand in need of realignment. As she informs the Massachusetts legislature of the unique condition of those she has

visited, she points out that the treatment they receive often perpetuates and detrimentally affects their mania. Wordsworth and Dix present manifestos well adapted to interest humankind permanently "and not unimportant in the multiplicity and in the quality of its moral relations" (*Preface* 242). Dix uses literary techniques, as exemplified in the *Ballads*, to draw her audience into dialogue with her subjects. She ends her *Memorial* with an appeal to the heart, mind, and imagination of her listeners:

Could we in fancy place ourselves in the situation of some of these poor wretches...troubles without, and more dreary troubles within, overwhelming the wreck of the mind,—how should we, as the terrible illusion was cast off, not only offer the thank-offering of prayer, that so mighty a destruction had overwhelmed our mental nature, but as an offering more acceptable devote ourselves to alleviate that state from which we are so mercifully spared. (24)

After Dix's efforts in the legislature, a bill was passed for the enlargement of the Worcester Insane Asylum.

32. These cases of the influence of Wordsworth and the *Lyrical Ballads* on nineteenth-century America are only a few of the many that stand in need of documentation. The poems can be viewed as literary configurations of characters exhibiting the way in which the mind associates ideas in a state of excitement. They are presented in such a way as to agitate the emotions of the reader who then in this "state of excitement" associates the individual ballads with each other in such a way that they form an organic whole. The use of several short narratives to elicit this reaction in the reader, and convey one theme through form matching content, becomes a very influential model for Poe, Hawthorne, Dix and others. As these examples indicate, there were major debates taking place in nineteenth-century America with regard to social and literary reform, and they were, in part, mediated by the *Lyrical Ballads* and the persona of its principal author.
33. It is no coincidence that many of Wordsworth's American admirers were Abolitionists, Feminists, and Transcendentalists. Little by little his American visitors, correspondents, and readers unearthed and to an extent rekindled his radical notions. William P. Atkinson wrote to Wordsworth to request a contribution to an anthology he was compiling to benefit the Abolitionist movement. Margaret Fuller not only quotes from but thanks Wordsworth in her Feminist manifesto: *The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men, Woman versus Women*. Peabody also expresses her gratitude at Wordsworth's efforts on this front: "Let me thank you in the first place for all you have sung of women (in the name of my sex)" (Neussendorfer 194). The letters and works as well as Brownson's and Poe's adverse criticism are all directed at the Wordsworth of the *Lyrical Ballads*; the Wordsworth whose verse painted mental and physical portraits of the poor, insane and underrepresented.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between British emigration and American literature, see Stephen Fender's *Sea Changes* (1992).

<sup>2</sup> All references to Poe's writings are taken from the Davidson edition, and those from the *Lyrical Ballads* are from the Brett and Jones edition.

<sup>3</sup> Quotations from *Twice-Told Tales* are taken from the second edition (1842).

<sup>4</sup> I would to thank Jeff Cowton and Robert Woof of the Wordsworth Library, Grasmere for allowing me to consult the Peabody letters in MS form. I am indebted to Deanna Turner for her excellent analysis of



Hawthorne.

<sup>5</sup> This article originally appeared in *The Boston Quarterly Review* II (April 1839), 137-68.

<sup>6</sup> See *The American First Class Book; or, Exercises in Reading and Recitation: Selected Principally from Modern Authors of Great Britain and America; and Designed for the Use of the Highest Class in Publick and Private Schools*, edited by John Pierpont (1823), 317.

This book sold 6,000 copies by 1826 and was still being printed in 1855. G. S. Hillard, the Unitarian visitor to Rydal Mount, published Wordsworth alongside Hawthorne and others in *A First Class Reader* (1856). Wordsworth was also anthologized with several Harvard Unitarians in *Class Book of Prose and Poetry* (1859).

<sup>7</sup> See John Beer's full treatment of Channing's visit to English literary figures. Alan G. Hill's "Wordsworth and His American Friends" is the best source of information on Wordsworth's American visitors.

<sup>8</sup> See Norton's *The Offering for 1829*.

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# The "Honourable Characteristic of Poetry": Two Hundred Years of *Lyrical Ballads*

## Wordsworth's Balladry: Real Men Wanted

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1. One aspect of the medieval was particularly appealing to the Romantics: its focus on courtly love and the modern-seeming emotions of the knight or poet for his lady. Such a subjective, introspective, and ennobling experience as transcendent love was newly appealing through the popularized theories of sensibility, and the new knowledge of how emotions could impact the bodily and mental state of the individual. Similarly, the poetry of sensibility investigates subjectivity itself; its practitioners verbalize feeling as a state of being, pushing past reason to the mind's and body's other paths to knowledge. Recognizing the concordance, Wordsworth translates sensibility into chivalry, reabsorbing the sentimentalism that usually attends Romantic chivalry into a bodily comprehension of the sensible. At the same time, this absorption allows him to disallow the feminine object its subjectivity, so that Wordsworth is able to turn sensibility against the feminine. To convince readers of its naturalness, Wordsworth attempts in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to make this a contractual process, but it remains throughout his poetic career a chivalric move. Only in his moments of troubadourian consciousness does Wordsworth confront the feminine as sensible matter.
2. Because it is one thing for a poet to work this out for himself, and another for him to feel mocked by outrageous applications of its possibilities, Wordsworth is disgusted, particularly in the Preface, by the Della Cruscan phenomenon. What seems to him a duplicitous unmaning of poethood by those who exploit the unnatural aspects of troubadourism—its false attachments between poet and beloved, its mockery of meaning-making—threatens the sincerity of his own project. Jerome McGann differentiates between poetry that enacts, as in the sensibility of a poet like Frances Greville, and the self-consciousness of a poem like Hannah More's sentimentalization of sensibility. It is that self-consciousness, the mindfulness of emotions felt on the body, that distinguishes poetry of sensibility. More's *Sensibility: An Epistle to the Honourable Mrs. Boscawen* (1782) is a poem of analysis, a celebration of the sincerely sensible, and a critique of those whose sensibility is put on for effect. More's poem worries that "[a]ffect is haunted by the demon of affectation, virtue by virtuosity, the language of the heart [by artifice]" (McGann 52). This distinction between sincere and insincere sensibility shows that the latter's self-consciousness practices deception on those who believe in sensibility's promise. It is a far greater and dangerous distancing of the subject from his subjectivity than what prevails in the sentimental awareness of self.
3. The sincerity necessary to sensibility insures that thought bonds to feeling, producing an unmindful immediacy that compacts time so that the felt present of the speaker is also the textual present moment, the moment of enactment. Insincerity endangers the compact between speaker and reader that such an experiential moment is real. In the case of the Della Cruscan school of sentimental poetry, the distancing of subject from an immediate experience of environment and emotions led some readers to interpret the poetry as insincerity rather than sentiment. When Hester Thrale Piozzi recommended Della Cruscan poems to Anna Seward, Seward thought they were all written by the same male poet who was dramatizing a faked love affair for sensational effect. The disturbing difference between sensation and sensational also grated on Wordsworth's nerves and was the basis of his strong dislike of Della Cruscan poetry. Wordsworth does not object to sensibility, but to a corruptive praxis that, like

Gothic drama and novels, preys on readerly belief by manipulating emotions. The danger for Wordsworth is that such literature will destroy the compact between poet and reader, a contract in which the reader can be assured that the poet's heartfelt effort is always the ground of his art. The Della Cruscan's self-conscious (sentimental) use of language and nature as artifice to represent the "natural" images of the mind acted as a bad precedent to Wordsworth's desire for a more intense relation to the "natural," such that its representations are indistinguishable from those of the mind. This apparent fusion draws on the bonding of thought and emotion crucial to sensibility, but is distinguished by a self-consciousness drawn from sentimentalism. In bringing the two approaches together, Wordsworth politicizes sincerity as the elemental trait of Nature inheritable by man. It, rather than bodily nerves, is the poet's only true path to vision and poetic knowledge. What Wordsworth views as the Della Cruscan's artifice derives, in fact, from their posture, public display of private emotion, and projection of a courtly world as a referential base. Paradoxically, what Wordsworth sees in the late eighteenth century as an artifice of style resulting from an artificiality of spirit, was for the medieval court poets the wringing of a poetic style out of a new naturalness of both emotion ("true love") and language (use of the vernacular).

4. But whereas medieval courtly love poetry played with the idea of manliness as subservience or fealty crossed by desire—both of which place the man at the mercy of the lady—Wordsworth interprets Della Cruscan troubadourism as effeminacy, an unmanly (and thus a superficially and deeply insincere) relation to Nature. A gentleman's or knight's manners reveal an ingrained chivalry, a nobility of soul; the superficial manneredness of the troubadour as displayed by Merry exposes the distance between act and spirit. McGann argues that Wordsworth's "Preface. . . is a conscious critique of the Della Cruscan and the kind of writing inspired by their work. . . . Feeling is the central issue because the Della Cruscan had launched their own writing fifteen years earlier under the same sign"(75-76). Effeminacy is a double play on the relation between supposed passion and natural feeling, and thus a manipulation of all that poetry should engage.
5. If Wordsworth is explicitly disgusted by what he views as a misapplication of sensibility to poetics and history, he is compelled by the relation of virtue to poetry that metrical romance and uses of the medieval, particularly in Spenser, hold forth. His 1798 contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* articulate the posture of the radical, if at times sentimental, poet with little deviation, but with the second volume added in 1800 and the new preface written to justify both the original selections and the new additions, Wordsworth has begun to move away from a radicalizing position for which the present moment and the future are the keys to the past, to a knightly position from which to preserve the past as something it never actually was.
6. Wordsworth's 1802 Preface retains the introductory posture that marks his 1800 defense of the *Lyrical Ballads*, a combination of assurance and challenge that targets the reader's readerly merit without preamble. Wordsworth does not revise this gauntlet-throwing posture out of his 1800 Preface. Certainly the posture of the 1800 Preface constructs a poet uneasy with his own time. He follows his initial challenge with a show of humility that can seem a bit false: "I had formed no very inaccurate estimate of the probable effect of those Poems: I flattered myself that they who should be pleased with them would read them with more than common pleasure," but otherwise, "with more than common dislike." Flattery, humility, and hostility frame the presentation of poems that originally had only the "Advertisement" to recommend them, itself a condensed version of courtesy, gauntlet, and honor hiding behind an anonymity that scarcely proclaimed courage. Indeed, it is the threat of dishonor, mentioned three times in six paragraphs, that hedges the initial section of the Preface: "I myself may be protected from the most dishonourable accusation which can be brought against an Author, namely that of an indolence which prevents him. . . from performing it [his duty]"; this "I" is posed against "Poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men"; and "I acknowledge that this defect [the triviality and

meanness both of thought and language], where it exists, is more dishonourable to the Writer's own character than false refinement or arbitrary innovation" (Gill 596-97). The "defence of the theory, upon which the poems were written," based on this threat of dishonor, requires that the poet act in a manner worthy of the "healthy [taste]" he is trying to inculcate, and against the "depraved [taste]" he wishes to vitiate (595-96). Thus the poems, whose defense hangs between honor and dishonor, are anticipated by an essay whose length indicates that the common reader also threatens the poet with dishonor because of his or her proven taste preferences.

7. The reader must be taught to read correctly, to appreciate a taste antithetical to Della Cruscan effeminacy, a false refinement frequently substituted for real poetry "by Poets . . . in proportion as they . . . indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation." Wordsworth specifically counters such consumerist fickleness, based as it is on bodily appetites and decadent foods, with the "incorporat[ion]" of "the passions of men. . . with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." To prefer food to art, capriciousness and indulgence to "simplicity" and "contemplat[ion]," and eating to other forms of incorporation, is, of course, a female or effeminated preference (Gill 597). Against this "sickly" and fickle taste (represented by the desire for "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" [599], and compared to "a taste for Rope-dancing, or Frontinac or Sherry" [605]) Wordsworth will construe a truer, more "permanent" relation of linguistic interchange. Rather than turning poetry into food, he proposes to overturn this body-language relation by representing instead language as the vehicle for the body to elevate itself through the passions to a state of linguistic transcendence. In this state, the mind will absorb what is atemporal and permanent about the persistence of art in life. That is, poetic language will be represented as the natural communication between men and things, as a vehicle rather than an end, and validated through original rather than degenerate appetite: "[rusticated] men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived" (597). In the 1802 Preface, this thought is preceded by a return to the 1798 Advertisement: "They who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers. . . will, no doubt, [here] frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title" (596). That claim, from the second paragraph of the Advertisement, was there a defensive gesture, but in the 1802 Preface it becomes ground for the poet's self-definition.
8. This return to origins—figured by the recapturing of the 1798 statement, and redirected to real language of real men that is nevertheless transcendent—is the object of manly poethood. This is the poethood that takes such language and such men in order to be a man speaking to men. This poet needs a "style [that] is manly" in order to overturn any self-doubt about his ability to transform passion into "language as exquisitely fitted for the passion as that which the real passion itself suggests," rather than the kind of "slavish and mechanical" imitation which, if one succumbs to it, might "encourage idleness and unmanly despair" (Gill 609, 604). Such manliness, which is not perturbed by the exquisite but rather by the superficial or "trivial" imitation of it, as a "false refinement" (597), is emphasized by the repetition of the word "purpose." The "mark of difference" that the lyrical ballads sustain is "that each of them has a worthy *purpose*."

Not that I mean to say, that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*. If in this opinion I am mistaken, I can have little right to the name of a Poet. (597-98; emphasis in original)

This thrice repeated and twice emphasized term clearly says what Wordsworth wants it to, and he

repeats a few lines later, "I have said that each of these poems has a purpose." But he would not have been so pointed if he were not anticipating that hostile reader who, degraded by Della Cruscan-style sentiment, believes in poetic idleness, and desires poetry as an idle indulgence. "I have said that each of these poems has a purpose. I have also informed my Reader what this purpose will be found principally to be" (598). Nearly twice as many repetitions of "purpose" in half the space allotted to the repetition of the terms of honor earlier in the Preface establishes this positive and enacting word in the place of the anxiety of dishonor. But still the reader must be convinced.

9. Purpose and duty argue against the threat of indolence anticipated as that which dishonors the poet. Thus the poetic vocation, which is historically an indolent one, must be justified against the labor of the biographer, historian, lawyer, physician, mariner, astronomer, natural philosopher, scientist, chemist, mathematician, and anatomist. Significantly, this comparative study, which pits the truth of poetry, "truth which is its own testimony," against the "fidelity," "knowledge" and "pleasure" of the professions, is figured as "the tribunal to which it [such testimony] appeals." Vocation wrestles with profession as in a knightly joust of a medieval appeal to truth (605). This embattled position, in which the poet represents an access to Truth against the desire of the reading public, the facticity of the man of history, and the knowledge of the man of science, is that of the knightly champion. "But Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men" (608).
10. This champion must carry his quest into the public domain, his task to generate representations of "truth . . . general, and operative," a truth "carried alive into the heart by passion" (Gill 605). The poet is, like the knights of medieval romances, a man "originally possessed of much sensibility" yet armored against the "gross and violent stimulants" promoted by the unmannered abusers of romance, "frantic novels" and "sickly" Gothics. The "magnitude of the general evil" facing the reader indeed requires a knight's challenge to battle. That he gleans his poetry from the "language of ordinary men," the very men reading cheap reprints of romances circulating about the countryside, requires both a defense to the reader and a further knightly quality, *homage*: "Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the Poet's art . . . it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love: further, it is a homage paid to native and naked dignity of man" (Gill 605). The homage here is not to an overlord but to human dignity, yet it is couched in the language of chivalric love; Wordsworth the knight has put aside his arms to become the courtly lover, thus completing his self-transformation into the medieval model of manly perfection.
11. One reason I am drawn to the complex politics of the Preface is that over the course of the last ten years my women students, both undergraduate and graduate, have consistently objected to both the posture and the terms of Wordsworth's self-presentation in the Preface. The manly perfection escapes them, and in reaction to his emphasis on sincerity, students repeatedly respond with hostility, using terms like "arrogant" and "insincere" to describe their perception of his chivalric posture. As hostile readers, these women students sit in for the hostile readers anticipated by the Preface, readers who are incapable of accepting the terms of the poetic contract. The reasons for their incapacity become doubly interesting when the poet's style is emphatically promoted as "manly" against the effeminacy of the degraded reader's taste, for whom poetry is "a matter of amusement and idle pleasure" (Gill 604). Women reading Wordsworth's Preface understand that they are excluded from his defined readership even before they discover its literal exclusionary terms in the definition of poethood as "a man speaking to men" (603). Students who do not target this particularly marked phrase, nevertheless sense the hostility emanating from the Preface and directed toward them. They find themselves in battle position with a poet whose very defensiveness situates him as proscriptively embattled. He cannot, as it were, imagine his manly project without an enemy, and oddly enough, the woman reader stands in for this enemy—literally, the effeminated reader rather than the female one—instead of standing in for the enabling reader, she who urges the knight onward or who needs to be rescued by his valiant acts. This feminizing of the enemy, a not unfamiliar trademark of male aggression, and one often acted out in war



time by the rape of the enemy's women, is covertly remarked on in "Nutting," a poem added to the *Lyrical Ballads* along with the Preface. "Nutting" was composed in October to December, 1798, however, and so prefigures the Preface both imagistically and ideologically. Its knightly quest ends in a rape of the feminized, indeed sacrificial, landscape as the boy ravages the trees' fruitfulness. His aggression against the female, complicated imagistically by the simultaneous hostilities against the fruit as male seed as well (the rape of enemy women is always an assault upon the male, a desecration of property), enacts the authorial hostilities of the Preface.

12. For women, then, the Preface sets up a readerly double bind that presents a distinctly different level of poet-reader interaction than that which engages male readers. For women, the Preface's chivalry is not that of romance but of patriarchy, the contract not a romantic promise but an exhortation; both the chivalric and contractual terms appear to contemporary women dissemblings that contradict rather than complement the sincerity Wordsworth strives for in his poetry. Thus for those unschooled in reading Wordsworth according to contract, a certain amount of readerly resistance comes from his construction of poetry according to his theory; but an equal amount comes from the same contradictory stance that they locate in his poems of current rural life. There, when the Wordsworthian speaker balances a chivalric sympathy for the defenseless against a contractual relation, a triangulation between himself, his object, and the reader, the woman reader finds herself in an untenable position. So even the radical poet of the 1790s is read by twentieth-century women as conservative, his sincerity implausible. Freud's question of what it is that women want haunts the woman reader's relation to this text even as Wordsworth deftly elides such a query through authorial hostility. The relationship Wordsworth builds up with the properly constructed reader displaces the woman reader, who is figured as resistance, and as in a poem like "Nutting," which represents the more fully medieval character of the two-volume edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, as an object of knightly battle.
  
13. To what purpose does Wordsworth turn an initially hesitant chivalry in his 1798 Advertisement, which edges on a courage-less use of anonymity to assert a kind of balladic verisimilitude, into full fledged medievalism by the 1802 edition? Similarly, why are the 1798 poems contributed by Wordsworth lacking any real nostalgia for the past while the second volume of the 1800 edition is woven through with such themes? Since displacement and fakery, the articles of female reading, appear to be the very things Wordsworth's Preface argues against in poetic practice, it is interesting to consider that one of the "real" ballads on which Wordsworth and Coleridge were basing their lyrical ballads was the "The Nut-brown Maid." "The Not-browne Mayd," as Bishop Percy gives the title in his *Reliques*, was perhaps already 300 years old when Wordsworth was writing "Nutting," and it had already provided inspiration for other literary works, including Prior's *Henry and Emma* (Percy, headnote to "The Not-browne Mayd," II.265-66). But its main pertinence to this discussion is the demand the lover puts on the maiden for her to give up everything of her privileged life to follow him in his outlaw life as he goes into hiding. Her willingness to go live in the woods with the "banyshed man," and worst of all, to disguise her femininity in order to do so (she must cut off her hair and her skirt—"As cut you're here up by your ere,/ Your kyrtel by the kne") proves not only her own valiant love ("For in my mynde, of all mankynde/ I love but you alone" is her part of the ballad refrain), but the ability of womankind to love truly and loyally.

"Ryght wele knowe ye that women be  
 But feble for to fyght;  
 No womanhede it is indede,  
 To be bolde as a knyght.  
 Yet in such fere yf that ye were,  
 With enemyes day or nyght,  
 I wolde withstande, with bowe in hande,  
 To greve them as I myght,

And you to save, as women have,  
From deth 'men' many one:  
For in my mynde, of all mankynde  
I love but you alone."

(ll. 157-68)

The maid's courage passes the test, for test it is. Unlike the superficial readers against which Wordsworth inveighs, this woman would give up every indulgence to be with her knight. Her lover is not an outlaw after all: "Thus have you won an erlys son,/ And not a banyshed man" (ll. 347-49). This, however, is not the full weight of the tale that Wordsworth borrows; for him, it is not the maid's value as a proper reader that he draws on, but her selflessness, metonymically meaningful for him as her nut-brown figuration, her naturalization as nutted or fruitful, and her loyalty. These allow him to transfigure her into woodedness, as the patient and yielding hazelnut trees. Her courage as a female companion becomes the readiness of nature, ever-present, to *encourage* the male poet on his quest. This reading of the maid is put in place by the ballad's frame, which opens with a charge against women's inability to love truly, and closes with the maid as proof: "Here may ye se, that women be/ In love meke, kynde, and stable" (ll. 349-50). If Wordsworth's balladry depends on the language really used by real men, his Preface and his poetics increasingly agrees with the Nut-browne maid poet, that men's complaint that to love a woman is "A labour spent in vayne" because "yf a newe [love] do them persue,        Their first true lover than

Laboureth for nought, for from her thought  
He is a banyshed man. (ll.4, 9-12)

Rather than proving or disproving women's fickleness, Wordsworth takes it for granted that such readers are unworthy unless radically realized as ground. The maid would never stand Wordsworth's test for a loyal reader; she is better served as the spirit in the wood who haunts the ending of "Nutting" and who warns other female readers, troped by Wordsworth's best female reader, Dorothy, in the final lines of that poem:        Then, dearest Maiden! Move along these shades  
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand  
Touch, --for there is a Spirit in the woods. (52-54)

This reader, even as a companion after the fact, is not allowed to pick up arms as the Nut-brown Maid proposes to do; she may only touch gently in order to commune with the Maid's spirit in order to learn the lessons such proposals incur.

14. Wordsworth's Preface goes beyond this transformation of reader into matter. His stated purpose is to emphasize the relation of words to their objects, that is, the literalness of the "real language of men." Posing this real kind of language in opposition to the inflated and de-based, or ungrounded, figurative language too common in contemporary literary endeavor, his grounded model of artistic language will serve to re-connect the urban reader to a purer linguistic experience and thus to *his* purer self, ending finally in a truer (poetic) ability to judge (see Bialostosky 917, "the quality of their judgements"). This is the projection not only of political, but of chivalric purpose onto the reader, for to purify the reader's relation of language to feeling, to dissociate manners as dead metaphor from manners as a literal relation to living words, is to knight the reader and charge him with a quest of his own. The paradoxical effect of treating purified language as literal, and therefore more truly metaphorical rather than chimerical and sickening, presents such language as a romance object. The poet knight must seek to preserve the inherently mystical nature of the word such that the sign itself is not a dissociable commodity but something coherent, contained and meaningful. But, the Preface seems to suggest, the reader will only agree to such a quest if he is romanced into it. This necessitates, as I have argued, a refutation of Della Cruscan poetics and of the women readers who made it fashionable, and a regendering of that "taste" in order to construct the reader anew as a man among men.

15. Part of what complicates Wordsworth's regendering of Della Cruscan sentimentalism is the confrontation between the real pain of rustic life—an emasculating pain, as evinced in the 1798 lyrical ballads—and the pain of romance so celebrated in the metrical ballads of Percy. Moreover, when the pain is female, as in the deprivations of the Mad Mother, Martha Ray, Betty Foy, and Goody Blake, they are elaborated in the 1798 ballads, but by the knightly two-volume edition, women's pain—Lucy's being the most memorable—is elided. To write the 1800 Preface, Wordsworth had to medievalize his female subjects as well as his reader and his authorial presence. This means de-historicizing the feminine in order to reference it for knightly protection, a move that looks troublingly like the Della Cruscan model of over-generalized personnae.
16. I want to suggest that while my women students are usually oblivious to the rhetorical, moral, and political nature of Wordsworth's poetic contract, they are nevertheless emotionally sensitive to its exclusionary tactics, and deeply suspicious of the juxtaposition of such exclusion to the embrace of rustic objects as a purer claim. And that perhaps such hostility points to the cost of enjoining a romance economy with manly enterprise such that chivalry's truth operates at the expense of Camelot itself. For although Wordsworth was crowned laureate, a kind of poet-King Arthur, for the lifelong quest first announced in the Preface, readers have followed Coleridge's lead in evading the terms of romance there, by assuring themselves that the Preface is mere nonsense after all—a sad reflection, as Cervantes also noted, on the claims of chivalry, poethood and the story of self for the new age.

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