

---

Wordsworth and the Problem of Imaginative Story: The Case of "Simon Lee"

Author(s): Andrew L. Griffin

Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 92, No. 3 (May, 1977), pp. 392-409

Published by: [Modern Language Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/461703>

Accessed: 28/07/2013 03:20

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Modern Language Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *PMLA*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## Wordsworth and the Problem of Imaginative Story: The Case of “Simon Lee”

WORDSWORTH’S “Simon Lee” is a puzzling poem. At least it is not what it seems at first, and just what it becomes remains a question. The full title promises a story, something pathetic or humorous: “Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman; with an Incident in Which He Was Concerned.” The stanza is simply two ballad quatrains run together; in the first sixty lines the rather formulaic phrasing, the attention to place-names and setting, the account of Simon’s youth as a paragon among huntsmen—all reinforce our expectation that (in the narrator’s own words) “some tale will be related.” But no tale is related. We are forced to reinterpret the title, to take it literally: on the one hand, “Simon Lee,” in merry youth and miserable old age; and, on the other hand, “an Incident in Which He Was Concerned,” with the narrator himself. The poem’s two parts, or subjects, though obviously connected, never come together. On the contrary, they are thrust apart by the narrator’s surprising abdication of his responsibilities as a storyteller (sts. 8–9). The poem ends with still another disconnected part, marked off by a dash—an oblique, sad discovery of tragedy in gratitude.

These are frustrating developments, not easy to explain, not even easy to describe. In the middle of the eighth stanza, when we have tired of prefaces and background information, the speaker turns to us in a spirit of apology—or is it mischief?

My gentle Reader, I perceive  
How patiently you’ve waited,  
And now I fear that you expect  
Some tale will be related.

Is this the start of an embarrassing confession, or is it tongue in cheek? The speaker knows that we expect a tale, but he pretends to guess; he calls us “gentle reader” and seems to admire our

patience, but he may well be laughing at a patience that will wait so long to hear “some tale.” Is the narrator in a false position, or are we? The next stanza admits that no story will be forthcoming, surely the speaker’s fault; and yet, instead of confessing failure, he shifts the burden of tale-making onto our shoulders—hinting pretty plainly, at the same time, that we are not prepared to accept it:

O Reader! had you in your mind  
Such stores as silent thought can bring,  
O gentle Reader! you would find  
A tale in everything.  
What more I have to say is short,  
And you must kindly take it:  
It is no tale; but, should you think,  
Perhaps a tale you’ll make it.

Though disappointed, we may grudgingly admire how neatly this appeal, or charge, turns the tables on us, requiring that whatever the poem does or leaves undone, we “must kindly take it.” A thoughtful reader (“should you think”) may find himself looking with heightened interest for what is coming next. Still, nothing can change the fact that the narrator has broken faith with us, whether weakly or willfully, and that the poem offers us, if not something less, then something very different from what we had a right to hope for. Unless we can be happy with the bare “incident” that remains and the somber reflection with which it ends—unless, that is, we can do without story and forgive disconnection in poetry—we are through with “Simon Lee.” Stung not only by the poem’s apparent collapse but also by the insinuations about our stores of thought, we may decide to “take” no more of this. The speaker admits, in fact, that it is really not a question of taking but of giving, or making anew. And if that is so what good is “Simon

Lee” to the reader? For that matter, what good is it to the narrator? And finally, of course, what good can it be to Wordsworth?

It is idle to ask which side Wordsworth is on, whether he is angry at bad poets, who default, or bad readers, who won't respond. Wordsworth exposes and indicts neither party so much as he does the circumstances themselves, the conventional relations that hold between writer and audience—what the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* impatiently describes as the “formal engagement” into which every poet is considered to have entered by the mere “act of writing in verse.” Like “The Thorn” and “The Idiot Boy” and the Preface itself, “Simon Lee” originates in Wordsworth's profound uneasiness about the expectations that poet and reader come together to satisfy. But the poems go further than the Preface, organizing Wordsworth's intelligent anxieties about these expectations into actions more psychological than dramatic, structures more rhetorical than narrative, in which the principal characters are not old men, women, and boys but speaker and hearer, or poet and reader—and a third party: that mysterious thing, place, or moment which has the power to prompt a poem, in which “some tale” is felt (rightly or wrongly) to reside. The real concern of these poems is tale-telling and tale-listening, in confused conflict with the poetic imagination: in other words, the problem of imaginative story.

This problem may be understood as a question about genre. Is there such a thing as an imaginative story? Can the surface *business* of any narrative (characters, causes, events, consequences) adequately express or even coexist with the deep, still truths of the imagination? Wordsworth's answer is, I think, that it cannot; that the imagination cannot spin a tale, that it never really moves at all but stands still, pointing and praising, contemplating things to which the narrative and natural eye is blind. And yet, a poem like “Simon Lee” shows Wordsworth testing this proposition, turning it round, considering where the difficulties lie and how they must affect his own work as a poet. Indeed, as we shall see, these poems go to the roots of literary liking itself, analyzing what it is in us that narratives do satisfy and what, in contrast, the imagination cherishes.

“Simon Lee” may be the least of these experiments in mutual frustration, “lyrical ballads” indeed, crossing genres and flying in the face of accepted practice. Though Wordsworth valued it highly, it has achieved nothing like the reputation of “The Thorn” or *Peter Bell*, notorious in their day and ours.<sup>1</sup> It was, however, one of the first, if not the first, in a series of such poems, extending through *Michael* and “Hart-Leap Well,” in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and at least as far as *The White Doe of Rylstone* (1807–15). Moreover, its real ambiguity and complex perspective recommend it, not only as an introduction to our problem, but also as a rich poem in its own right.

In “Simon Lee” an incipient story becomes an “incident,” a moment of remembered vivid, meaningful personal life. The poem offers the fact of a kind of failure—something withheld or missed, for which something quite different is substituted—while leaving open the possibility that to fail thus is, of course, a kind of success. Reader and poet alike, as we have seen already, must ask what went wrong here, who is at fault? But this suspicious questioning leads, even within the poem, to larger and more serious speculations: To make a true poem, what powers of response in the reader, matched by what sort of action on the poet's part, must be fitted to what sort of subject?

To answer this last question, with its three vital “whats,” the following pages approach “Simon Lee” from three directions: considering first the experience of the poem's harried reader; next, that of its perhaps no less troubled narrator; and turning at last, not exactly to Wordsworth himself, but to something recognizably Wordsworthian, the poem's slow movement toward what it calls “silent thought.” This way of proceeding, like “Simon Lee” itself, might seem to make too much of something small and, superficially, not very exciting. But we must kindly take it; for it leads to a full reading of a poem often left unread, even by Wordsworthians, and it sheds a reflected light on all the vexed story-poems and their place in the canon, a problem for Wordsworth studies since the *Biographia Literaria*. To unravel “Simon Lee” is to discover what a tangle of cooperating interests went into the production of these curious works: poems half serious and half mad, half story and

half something else, conspicuously repulsive yet consciously inviting—obsessed with death, decay, and loss, yet full of a crazy glee.

#### The Reader

Most readers of “Simon Lee” will decline the invitation to share the blame for its failure as a narrative (st. 9). It is natural to accuse the speaker of clumsiness or laziness or, perhaps worse, a sort of poker-faced fooling at our expense. But let us take his side for the time being. Let us assume, that is, that he is a capable, conscious artist; that if his poem is some kind of trap, it has been set deliberately; that the expectations he frustrates deserve no better; that the experience of frustration is in some way necessary to the achievement of his purposes.

From this point of view, although only in retrospect, the first sixty lines will be seen to toy with the reader, whetting his taste for narrative (romance, history, social drama?) only to delay, and then abruptly to deny, its gratification. At first we are unsuspecting, ready to follow what clues the speaker provides as to his intentions. The first stanza establishes a setting familiar to the imaginations of most readers: “the sweet shire of Cardigan, / Not far from pleasant Ivor-hall,” that is, an English bucolic with a little heraldry showing through. Our hero is introduced to us as “an old man,” “a little man,” whose red cheeks still recall his days as “a running huntsman merry,” about whom the speaker suggests a little mystery (“’Tis said he once was tall”). The mystery is trivial in itself, but it seems to point to some tale of the lapse of years—hard times and stern events, no doubt—of which this bent figure is the living memorial. What sort of events? The narrator does not say, but he dwells admiringly on young Simon’s skill with a horn, on his feats and ecstasies in the chase, and, above all, on his essential difference from the dull “sleepers of the village,” plodding daily from work to bed and back to work. Simon is of an older, freer race than these; he can, or could, outrun “both man and horse,” leaving all behind. He is a character out of English balladry, a John Peel trumpeting fit to wake the dead with his hounds and his horn in the morning. His story, whatever it is, will surely be

linked to the larger fate of Ivor Hall, whose name alone suggests landed liberty and power, an almost feudal order of life. It is to be that kind of story, it would seem—in other words, a ballad.

But it is not to be. Simon’s life is indeed linked to the unhappy fate of the hall, but the speaker does not tell its story or his. The fourth stanza begins, “But, oh the heavy change!” and notes, in short order, the death of the master, the emptying of Ivor Hall, the decay of everything Simon knew, and his own descent into poverty—in eight lines, eliding many years and no doubt much pathetic history in a bare statement of consequences. The narrator, perversely, seems to find more fascination in the figure of the ruined old man than in what made him so, lingering with an almost morbid interest on the signs of his sickness and decrepitude. The stanzas go on accumulating as if to introduce a tale—after such beginnings, what else could they be doing?—but something less stirring or amusing than we had hoped. And then the speaker reveals that there will be “no tale” of any kind. We were not wrong to have expected one; the speaker knows we did and all but admits his poem has deceived us. It seems to follow that we have been manipulated toward some end—some end we still do not see, toward which we could not have been led (presumably) by a more open route.

It is this view of “Simon Lee” as a manipulation and a rhetorical tour de force that prevails among modern critics who have taken the poem seriously. According to John F. Danby, we sense that “we are being deliberately tempted” or “challenged” to make the wrong response while being shown the right one—a view of the poem’s design with which Paul Sheats’s still more recent reading largely agrees.<sup>2</sup> As Sheats puts it, the speaker “sets a trap for the reader’s pride,” tempting us to turn away from the old man, then turning round upon us with a new irony and an uncomfortably “cool scrutiny,” finally inviting us to join in a conclusion that resembles “an act of charity.” The Wordsworth of Danby and Sheats is a rhetorical virtuoso, shifting masks and changing voices, his tone carefully modulating “between earnest and game.” According to Sheats, the poet sets out to elicit a stock response from his unsuspecting reader,

and then, by deft and brilliant manipulations of tone, imagery, and point of view, subjects such responses to redemptive discipline. He conducts the emotions of his reader like a symphony, isolating pride, contempt, or disgust, and calling forth other powers of the mind to transmute and obliterate them. (p. 189)

According to Danby, this “discipline” has in view the reeducation of the reader, “literary and psychic”:

The reader is restored to independence: independence of the “poetic” [stock responses], and independence (a more difficult thing) of the Poet. . . . He is restored to himself. (p. 47)

This argument has a great deal to be said for it—not least, that it encourages one to find the intelligence at work in every apparent ineptitude. It also dovetails perfectly with Wordsworth’s attitude toward the public taste, an attitude that combined the urge to renovate his readers with a determination to protect himself from them, even if that meant not being read. Wordsworth was consistently, and at times irrationally, scornful of the public taste of his day, and in particular of the bull market for “novels” in verse. Both the “Advertisement” of 1798 and the Preface of 1800 reveal a mixture of contempt for and fear of his gentle readers and their “pre-established codes of decision.” The “Advertisement” complains of the public habituation to “the gaudiness and inane phraseology” of modern literature and begs readers not to let the word “Poetry” (with a capital “P”) “stand in the way of their gratification” or Wordsworth’s reception (*PW*, II, 383). The much longer and, by fits, more truculent and aggressive Preface of 1800 exhumes the metaphor buried in the word “taste” to characterize the modern reader as a literary alcoholic, driven by a “degrading thirst” and “craving” for “gross and violent stimulants” and “outrageous stimulation.” To Wordsworth, the later decades of the eighteenth century have been a kind of literary lost weekend. Modern literature, like gin, has worked “to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.” By this strong drink Wordsworth specifically means narratives: “events” in print, fictional or national; “extraordinary incident,” “frantic novels, sickly and

stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (*PW*, II, 389; my italics). To tastes like these, modern writers have not only contributed but also “conformed themselves”—with the result that “an Author in the present day” by the mere “act of writing in verse” is understood to have made a “promise” or contracted an “engagement” to supply the facile fiction his readers want and expect.

Of course, Wordsworth has promised no such thing; to have this despised public think, even fleetingly, that he has done so chafes him extremely. Therefore, the Preface hastens to announce his difference from his contemporaries in poetry and his disdain for public applause. But how does Wordsworth imagine that his new voice will make itself heard? How are his poems to find readers, if they are so sure to disappoint the people who read poems? Not, certainly, through the good offices of a preface like this one, which (granting the gentle reader Wordsworth grimly imagines to be opening his book) seems much more likely to offend and warn away potential admirers, as Coleridge said it did, than to welcome and assist them.<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth claimed, in any case, to have no confidence in the power of his prose to educate or persuade. He *knows*, he says, at the very beginning of the Preface, that the reader will “look coldly on [its] arguments” (returning the poet’s own icy stare, it is tempting to add). He says he has no “foolish hope of *reasoning* him into an approbation of these particular poems” (*PW*, II, 385). He might have said of his Preface what we find him saying some years later, in the middle of a similarly self-justifying letter to Lady Beaumont: “I am wasting words.” Lady Beaumont is a convert and needs no more convincing, while those who do need it are impossible to convince: “If said to those for whom it is intended, it would not be understood” (*MY*, I, 147).

The note of weary indifference is misleading, however, for Wordsworth did not despair of readers, only of present readers—and then, only in large numbers. Both the Preface and the letter to Lady Beaumont look forward to a future reader—indeed, to an amendment, or even, in time, “an entire regeneration,” of the English reader. He reminds Lady Beaumont that “every great and original writer . . . must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must

teach the art by which he is to be seen" (*MY*, I, 150), but not through prefaces or the good offices of admirers. Only the gradual action of the poems themselves can do this work—poems by which, in the Preface's words, "the understanding of the Reader *must necessarily* be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified" (*PW*, II, 388, my italics). When Wordsworth three times insists on his *purpose* in these poems, maintaining that "each of these poems has a purpose," it is this work of enlightenment and moral purification that he has in mind—of benefit to the reader who is thus worked upon but of no less benefit to the poet, who thus comes "to be seen." It is to this great work of reformation that he dedicates himself in his invocation of 1798 (the so-called "Prospectus to *The Recluse*"), chanting "in lonely peace" and "long before the blissful hour" when he might not be so lonely:

By words

Which speak of nothing more than what we are,  
Would I arouse the sensual from their sleep  
Of death, and rouse the vacant and the vain  
To noble raptures.

(*The Recluse* I. 811–15)

Never again was Wordsworth so confident of raising the British Lazarus, but he never renounced the aim: poems of moral purpose in answerable style. His last major statement of this kind, the "Essay, Supplementary" of 1815, shows us a Wordsworth undismayed (perhaps invigorated) by nearly two decades of small sales and critical hostility—confirmed in his evangelism, "charged with a new mission" to awaken and win souls for the "kingdom" of sublime poetry, no matter what the difficulties, however few the converts,

establishing that dominion over the spirits of readers by which they are to be *humbled and humanized*, in order that they may be *purified and exalted*. (*PW*, II, 426; my italics)

We may therefore think of Wordsworth as guided, when composing the poems that became *Lyrical Ballads*, by his conviction of the reader's vacancy and vanity, sensual sleep, low expectations, and thirst for narrative—habits of mind numbing and destroying those tastes (or, rather, powers) to which Wordsworth would

rouse the reader, for both their sakes. We should not be surprised to find in *Lyrical Ballads* at least a few poems devoted in a direct and immediate way to the amendment or chastisement of habits like these. When the speaker in "Simon Lee" informs us that he sees "How patiently [we've] waited," he may well be hinting that he perceives in us something of what the Preface so rudely calls "a state of almost savage torpor." It seems we have become used to waiting, passively gaping after plot and action. If so, what better way to shake us from this "sleep of death" than the way of frustration already described? Certainly our experience of lines 1 to 72 seems calculated to heighten our consciousness of ourselves as readers, though perhaps at the expense of our good temper. But, even if we throw the book down, Wordsworth's purpose has been partly achieved: we have been stirred from our torpor, made aware of our craving. Regenerable readers will go on from such a shock to recover "the discriminating powers of the mind" and to relearn the pleasures of a "voluntary exertion" of their faculties.

Stanza 9, which completes the speaker's ironic apology, plainly demands nothing less of the audience:

O Reader! had you in your mind  
Such stores as silent thought can bring,  
O gentle Reader! you would find  
A tale in everything.  
What more I have to say is short,  
And you must kindly take it:  
It is no tale; but, should you think,  
Perhaps a tale you'll make it.

We are invited, here, to make two overlapping efforts of mind: we have to "think"—that is, we must do at least some of the work we have been used to leaving to the poet—and we must also "kindly take it." The latter demand is an appeal to our moral sense, no doubt a part of our humbling and humanizing. The phrase implies, on one level, that we, like Lady Beaumont, are to accept whatever the speaker is pleased to give us now. But it also requires that we be humble in a wider context and a higher sense, as Danby has pointed out (p. 45), and learn to take things *kindly*, that is, with human sympathies, recognizing that men share a common humanity. Such recognitions are not easy, involving, as they usually do, the shedding of some comfortable illu-

sion about the world and an acceptance of the real, as in "Elegiac Stanzas":

Farewell, farewell, the heart that lives alone,  
Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind.  
(ll. 53–54)

"Simon Lee" requires of its readers this same farewell to fiction, a new feeling for "the kind."

Toward this moment of choice the long first movement of the poem has led, creating its own readership as it goes, fit audience though few. Some readers may hang back, but the poet risks this reaction, sure that the best will bestir themselves; for to rebel now would be to regress into fantasy. Whatever his story may be (and we shall never hear it now), Simon Lee is real, terribly so in fact. In its own small way the poem expels a few of us (against or with our will) from an imagined or literary garden—the "idle and extravagant narrative" we had expected—into the human wilderness. The "incident," or nontale, that follows stanza 9 gives us old Simon in his infirmity, and he is just what the infirm often really are: ugly, faintly comic, defeated by trivial obstacles, embarrassingly grateful to anyone "concerned" enough to help them. But, like it or not, he is all that is left of the poem, all that it now can be.

How very little is left! So inconsequential is Simon's trouble with the stump that we seem to have no choice but to contribute heavily from our "stores." Even our selfishness is thus enlisted on the side of moral and imaginative effort. Of course, the effort yields "no tale" but, instead, a moment of re-created experience; yet, the experience is oddly like a tale. As the speaker recounts the "incident," his tone shades into the mock heroic, though not for ludicrous effect. On the contrary, without losing sight of the real situation, he invests it with unexpected dignity and significance, brooding upon the mere given and making it pregnant. Thus, in retrospect, the meeting seems fortuitous (in the heroic dimension, *fated*, like the meeting with the old Leech-Gatherer in "Resolution and Independence"). Simon Lee, as if enchanted, "might have worked forever," had not his deliverer come to cut the root and break the spell "with a single blow." It is no tale, but its language manages to suggest something like the essence of a great action, showing us the hero-

ism and the suffering latent "in every thing," if we see it with our minds and hearts. Finally, if we have followed the speaker this far, we may rise with him to muse, not on Simon Lee alone, but "On Man, on Nature and on Human Life." Certainly we will finish the poem in a mood of active meditation wholly unlike the satiety one feels on closing some popular romance.

The poem as a whole, then, subverts narrative processes for the sake of something better. The speaker is our rather grudging guide but not our interpreter; he means only to lead us to a spot he has in mind and to leave us there, confident that the best will accept and enjoy the responsibility he thrusts on us. In the revised Preface of 1802 Wordsworth speaks of "the incident of SIMON LEE" as "*placing the reader in the way of receiving from ordinary sensations another and more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receiving from them*" (*PW*, II, 388, n.; my italics). The poem, as we have just read it, seems designed to bring the reader to just such a "placing": mentally alert, intellectually and morally alone, and face to face with Simon Lee—perhaps the first such being he has fully and steadily seen. For the reader in such a situation, even failure would be "more salutary" than his passive and transitory pleasure in narrative verse, the mere story in verse—the kind of poem to which he is accustomed and which he expected to enjoy, no doubt, when he began this one.

#### The Narrator

Wordsworth's early poems often confront their reader with some such figure as Simon Lee, aiming to provoke a "voluntary exertion" of the imagination and the moral sense toward what has been thus "placed in the way." Of his nineteen contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, no fewer than ten thrust forward some crazed or derelict shape to test or stretch one's human-heartedness. Among the most unmediated of these exhibitions are the poems deriving from the *complaint*, or ballad of lament, whose conventions Wordsworth bent toward the dramatic monologue.<sup>4</sup> At least three of these ("The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman," "The Mad Mother," "The Last of the Flock")

abstain from all but the least hint of narrative prompting or control, leaping at once to the goal more circuitously sought by "Simon Lee," isolating the reader from the start with a pitiable spectacle. The subjects so austere sponsored are among Wordsworth's most sensational, variations on the theme of the family remnant: the Mad Mother raving into her (dying?) infant's ear, the dazed Shepherd cradling his last lamb and weeping in the highway. But the poet resists temptation, providing only a few bare lines of introductory description, making only the most oblique appeal for solidarity with these sufferers (reminders that the Mad Mother raves "in the English tongue," the Shepherd weeps "on English ground").

Poems like these give to *Lyrical Ballads*, as a collection, something of the aspect of that "public road" which fascinated Wordsworth and which he used as a backdrop for many of these vignettes. One after another, forlorn creatures pass before our eyes, deserving but never begging for our sympathy. The reader who opens this book expecting "poetry" in any easy or merely pretty sense of the word will be not only disappointed but shocked and affronted. He will find himself in much the same position as the peripatetic and dreamy youth of *The Prelude*, who, rounding a bend in the road, comes suddenly upon a vagrant veteran who groans aloud, and from whom he hides. The parallel can easily be extended: the youth's (or reader's) reluctant approach, his waxing human sympathy, then his active intervention, and his reward in a "quiet heart" (iv.363–504).

But, as this famous episode itself reminds us, the parallel may extend to the poet as well. Wordsworth did not always exempt himself from the weaknesses and excesses, the luxurious feelings and the moral cowardice, that he censured in the public. On the contrary, even in the world of *Lyrical Ballads*, it is not only the silly reader who may have to suffer "salutary" frustrations in his approach to new subjects, difficult both poetically and morally speaking. The most obvious and interesting failures in the volume belong to the poet, or rather to his personae: the sticky-minded old sea captain of "The Thorn," the credulous country chronicler of "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," the condescending apprentice-poet of "The Idiot Boy." As Parrish has pointed

out, the Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads* is consistently a dramatic poet, with a dramatist's interest in personalities under stress, the revelation of character through troubled speech ("Dramatic Technique"). We may add that limited and self-indicting narrators are among his favorite studies and the source of whatever peculiar comedy *Lyrical Ballads* offers.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Wordsworth expected readers to experience the difficulty and feel the comedy for themselves, but in the most flagrant case he took the precaution of pointing it out beforehand. According to the brief "Advertisement" of 1798,

The poem of the Thorn, as the reader will soon discover, is not supposed to be spoken in the author's own person: the character of the loquacious narrator will sufficiently show itself in the course of the story.

In the second edition, this hint balloons into a long and circumstantial note detailing Wordsworth's conception of his speaker's general character and especially his peculiar qualities of mind. "The Thorn" is the natural product of this personality, the "dull and garrulous discourser" whom Coleridge deplored, pressing forward to give himself away in almost every stanza. But it is only one of a group of such poems devoted to exploring the uses of fumbling, erroneous poetic voices—speakers eager to wear the poet's robes but failing to perform his full function.

The series might well be stretched to include even the speaker in *The Prelude*; but obviously the case for the inclusion of "Simon Lee" is very strong.<sup>6</sup> The poem can easily be understood, not as a sort of spider's web with a sardonic Wordsworth lurking at the edge, ready to pounce when the reader is entangled, but rather as a little drama of a poet in difficulties, exposed before an audience that he would like to please. Such an interpretation does no damage to our notion of Wordsworth's evangelistic ambitions in this poem (only the means look different, not the end) and not much to our appreciation of his virtuosity with masks and voices. It puts us where Wordsworth says we belong, "in the company of flesh and blood" from first to last, advancing uncertainly toward new literary and moral territory at the side of a narrator much like ourselves, struggling (as Wordsworth's

Preface says we should expect to struggle) “with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness” (*PW*, II, 386) and almost failing to find the forms of speech demanded by a personal encounter, the crucial “incident,” whose meaning threatens to slip through his, and our, fingers.

According to this view of the poem, there is no design upon us, for the speaker’s intentions are no secret; nor is there any reason at the outset to be skeptical of his chances of success. Moved by his meeting with Simon Lee, he means to make a modern ballad of the old huntsman’s story, set against the decline of Ivor Hall. And he shows many of the qualities that Wordsworth’s own Preface assigns the true poet. He can write verse—perhaps a dubious advantage, since it is “the act of writing in verse” by which the modern poet may signal his willingness to please the modern taste. His vigorous description of Simon’s vanished youth, however, leaves no doubt about his “disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present.” He has read “Lycidas,” as line 25 testifies; he shows signs of a “lively sensibility” and seems able “to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes.” He always “looks steadily at his subject,” either with the re-creating eye of the mind (as in the first three stanzas) or with the bodily eye, which sees almost too clearly. “See!” he cries in stanza 4, turning to Simon bereft; and we do see “his ankles swoln and thick,” his legs “thin and dry,” and, again, “his weak ankles.”

The speaker does so many things effectively that his sudden turn and charge to the reader (sts. 8–9) must come as a surprise, at least to some. The poem’s original readers, though, were not left so long in doubt. “Simon Lee,” as we now read it, is the product of many revisions, the last as late as 1832, in the course of which the speaker’s credibility was greatly enhanced, to say the least. In the first version of the poem he is without question an incompetent poet (perhaps no poet at all) and a silly man into the bargain. Wordsworth’s revisions slightly compress and thoroughly fumigate his often tedious and wayward speech; but the fact remains that “Simon Lee” first saw the light as an out-and-out experiment in botched narration.

In the version of 1798 the speaker constantly attracts attention to himself, and never in such a

way as to inspire confidence. Like the speaker in “The Thorn,” he strains after accuracy in quite inconsequential matters. Thus, he gravely weighs the evidence concerning Simon’s exact age (“no doubt” he is old, but “he says” seventy while “others say” eighty) and the precise extent of his early fame (“To say the least, four counties round / Had heard of Simon Lee”). Or, again, he is not satisfied to say that Simon’s “long blue livery-coat” is “fair”—he must call it “fair behind and fair before,” fair all around! His love of certainty, or of evidence for its own sake, shows also in absurd appeals to his reader to verify his statements: “As you may see,” he crows, and “As he to you will tell.” Yet he is so vague as to repeat himself, noting twice within twelve lines that Simon has lost an eye (ll. 15, 26). Finally, he has so little sense of order or development that he sets down what he knows of Simon in a jumble, mixing personal observations with hearsay and history, the present with the past. As Thomas Hutchinson says, “In 1798 contrasted traits of youth and age jostle each other throughout the several stanzas” (quoted in *PW*, IV, 413). This speaker clearly could not tell a story if he would, but seems to draw at random from the unsorted contents of his mind. When at last we reach his plea to the reader (sts. 8–9), we surely understand it, not as the sneering challenge it may be in the revised version, but rather as a characteristically fumbling apology. The one significant alteration Wordsworth made in the last four stanzas (left almost entirely untouched) points up the original speaker’s irresolution and timidity. In the version of 1832 he insists that “you must kindly take it,” but in 1798 he only dares to say “I hope. . . .”

Neither the troublesome detail of the blind eye nor most of the self-betraying phrases survive in the final version of the poem. In most cases, where the early version calls attention to the speaker’s feelings and inquiries, the later substitutes something impersonal (for example, “I’ve heard” becomes “’Tis said”). Especially vulgar or feeble expressions disappear (“poor old ankles” and “poor old Simon” become simply “weak ankles” and “old Simon”). The fine blue coat that lured the original speaker into such idiotic praise has been transfigured, by 1832, into a phrase of almost Augustan power and concision, “liveried poverty.” The revision

gains most, however, from a clean separation of past from present times. As Hutchinson points out, "in 1832 the traits and evidences of Simon's early vigour are concentrated within stanzas 1-3, while those of his sad decline are brought together in stanzas 4-7," presumably in order "to broaden and emphasize the contrast" (*PW*, iv, 413).

If by 1832 the rambling early stanzas of "Simon Lee" have been both redesigned and reworded, what has become of the poem's original conception and purpose? Certainly something has changed. The revision of "Simon Lee," like that of "The Thorn," points to the older Wordsworth's loss of confidence or interest in the more burlesque aspects of his loquacious narrators. But the loquacity itself, the sincere but impotent garrulity, remains. Indeed, as the speaker changes character (and loses character) his essential failure comes into ever sharper focus. For in neither version can he get on with his story, that is, make the poem work. After equally lengthy introductions, both versions devolve into the same disclaimer and the same "incident." Even in 1832 our poet, strictly speaking, narrates nothing, does nothing to connect the old man we see with the young man we hear about at the beginning. This gulf itself, this obscurity about causes and processes, might stir something in the reader. But, as we know, the speaker falls to stating facts about the old man (and, now, Ruth Lee as well), out-Crabbeing Crabbe in this, his poem's second phase and style. And his thoughts catch in a groove, reiterate the same ugly truth through many different details, and come full circle—just before the break—on the chief detail of the ankles "swoln and thick." Hopes for a story have long since gone out the window, and now the whole poem breaks down. As sometimes happens in *The Prelude*, an importunate image has crossed our poet's path or risen up before his gaze.<sup>7</sup> Simon's aged figure presses in, not here and there confusedly as in 1798, but all at once (as Hutchinson notes), irresistibly:

And he is lean and he is sick;  
His body, dwindled and awry,  
Rests upon ankles swoln and thick;  
His legs are thin and dry.  
One prop he has, and only one,  
His wife, an aged woman,

Lives with him, near the waterfall,  
Upon the village Common.

Beside their moss-grown hut of clay,  
Not twenty paces from the door,  
A scrap of land they have, and they  
Are poorest of the poor. . . .

The poem is on its way toward a dead stop, and even the verse slows down, limping through many pauses. The old man is characterized repeatedly, in an apparent effort to grasp exactly what he is ("And he is lean and he is sick"). We learn of his wife, his hut, his scrap of land—and also just where these things are. Prepositions of relationship abound ("with," "near," "upon," "beside," "from"), and things are counted, number is insisted upon ("not twenty paces"; "one prop . . . and only one"). In short, we have entered the world of "The Thorn" (or the mind of its narrator), where what little is brought forward for our inspection is observed for us with scrupulous exactitude as to its condition, relation, and quantity.

Nothing in Wordsworth has given more trouble than this "ocular man," as Hartman calls him in his interpretation of "The Thorn" ("I've measured it from side to side; / 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide"). As Hartman points out (following the lead of Wordsworth's own explanatory note), the repetitions and absurdities that characterize the speech of the ocular man are not without significance; they are the language of a mind "fixated" on some "compulsive center of interest," both attracted to it and repelled by it—circling round and round it, therefore, at a little distance. The result, or product, is a poem not easy to like, simultaneously boring and intense. But it is also, more mysteriously still, an unmistakable "caricature of Wordsworth's own imagination-in-process"—a parody of the very ways in which Wordsworth knew himself to be stirred into strong feeling and creative effort by some particular ruin, vestige, half-glimpsed figure, scrap of story, and so on.<sup>8</sup> Wordsworth almost admits as much in his note to "The Thorn," when he describes the personal experience that led him to adopt the device of the loquacious narrator, whom he credits with "a reasonable share of imagination" (though no power of fancy at all) and a mind open to "deep feelings," enamored of "impressive effects"

(*PW*, II, 511–13). One is left asking, though, what there might be in such a device to compensate Wordsworth for the obvious risk in offering a parody like this—a mind so near and yet so far from his own mind in its most powerful and productive moments?

That question is hard to answer with respect to “The Thorn” alone, but not so hard in the case of “Simon Lee”—which teaches us, in fact, just where the “ocular” fits in and what its uses are. For a parody of the imagination is just what “Simon Lee” seems to demand at this point in the poem’s (and the poet’s) progress, uneasily suspended now between narration and imagination, unconsciously inclining toward the latter. It is precisely this most puzzling quality of parody that earns ocularity a place in “Simon Lee,” filling the gap between the storytelling with which we began (and where the fancy is at work, where “pleasure and surprise are excited by sudden varieties of situation and by accumulated imagery,” in the words of the note to “The Thorn”) and the imaginative effort we shall soon be asked to make. Ocularity in and by itself is certainly a trap. It represents, nevertheless, the kind of concentration upon the thing in itself that we respect elsewhere in Wordsworth’s poetry but have not seen before in “Simon Lee”: a passionate scanning of the surfaces and outsides of things that Wordsworth half commends and half mocks when he describes the mind exhibited in “The Thorn” as *adhesive* and says that it *clings*, *cleaves*, and *craves*. It brings to bear a pressure of interest that, however mad and fruitless in itself, is but a step away from truly imaginative and creative seeing, which it resembles, though by caricature. The speaker in “The Thorn” remains ocular to the end, frustrated and frustrating, gravitating round his bush. But the speaker in “Simon Lee” has come some distance already just to reach the ocular mode, and he is about to take the final step across the threshold of the “incident”—all that remains, all that has ever mattered.

His apology, or charge, to the reader can thus be welcomed as the death rattle of a story-monger and the birth of a poet. In the end, “Simon Lee” finds itself, in either version, as a Wordsworthian lyric: three stanzas of deeply felt recollection finding unusual meaning, scarcely to be articulated, in an ordinary event. These

stanzas begin in the forthright and simple spirit of Wordsworth’s songs or, better, of the renovating memories from which *The Prelude* sprang (“One summer day . . .”). With a new if unobtrusive power, they concentrate all the weakness of the still persevering old man—the same pathetic weakness that had earlier detained the poet through more than three stanzas of ocular explorations—into one line: “The mattock tottered in his hand,” which gathers all Simon’s feeble force into the image of the tool precariously poised. It is a humble image but an imaginative line, the product of an act of the imagination. Like the Virgilian, Shakespearean, and Miltonic uses of the word “hung,” which Wordsworth dwells on in the Preface of 1815, his own “tottered” shows “the full strength of the imagination involved in the word”—or, if not its full strength, still that kind of creative intervention of the beholding mind by which we are to recognize the “endowing or modifying power.” In theme, in form, in the final meditative disengagement (“I’ve heard of hearts unkind . . .”), and in this verbal evidence of imaginative exertion, the last three stanzas of “Simon Lee” may be compared to such lyrics as “The Solitary Reaper” or “Stepping Westward.”

This is, of course, success. “Simon Lee” as a whole may be understood, in fact, as a comedy of belated success on the part of the reader or the speaker or both at once, won only by persisting in the wrong line until exhausted: a peculiar but an edifying pattern, and of enough importance to Wordsworth to figure as the “plot” of the first book of *The Prelude*. There, the energy and confidence of the outseting bard slowly dwindle into uncertainty, frustration, and recrimination as the poem simply will not find its way. Both poems lose themselves for a long while in details, until the mind is oppressed, the wheels beginning to spin. Both poems find themselves only by admitting failure in medias res and making it, for the time being, their theme. Then both can move off again in a new and, this time, fortunate direction. The speaker of *The Prelude*, like the poet in “Simon Lee,” begins by assuming that poems must be narratives; he seeks “time, place, and manners” and a story line. He has to learn by trial and error that no tale can suit his purpose, not Mithridates’ nor Wallace’s nor even “a tale from [his] own heart”

(l.177–228). He is forced to turn back to find the source of his real strength, and the proper channel for his verse, not in stories but in those “incidents” around which his own experience revolves. Then he is launched, though even then he thinks himself still sinking:

Was it for this,  
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved  
To blend his murmurs with my nurse’s song . . . ?

The balladeer who began “Simon Lee” has the same reasons to complain. Perhaps he finds a similar renovation in likewise backing into his poem—not the ballad he seems to have wanted to produce, but the poem actually demanded by his encounter with the old man. Each speaker is unwillingly led, by a ministry he certainly does not appreciate at the time, into a kind of poem new to him but true, nevertheless, to his personal vision. Each is slowly driven back and down toward the point at which he should have started—and, in the process, away from “stories in verse.”

After much baffled striving in the first book of *The Prelude*, the sudden image of the river Derwent comes as a relief and a release, and not only to the poet; the reader too is glad of this “voice that flowed,” as *The Prelude* is to flow, by and large, hereafter. In “Simon Lee” the speaker’s sudden chop through that “tangled root” has a similarly welcome and symbolic energy, putting an end to more than one man’s “vain endeavour,” releasing all the parties to this poem from a literary tangle.<sup>9</sup> The poem as a whole shows how ready Wordsworth was to expose and “improve” not only his audience but his own profession of poetry in its traditional approaches to the kind of subject he now wished to meet in a new way, and make his own. At its conclusion, the speaker as well as the reader ought to have come to see, with Wordsworth, that (in the language of the 1800 Preface) true poetry “sheds no tears ‘such as angels weep,’ but natural and human tears”—like the real Simon pure of the final stanza (*PW*, II, 392).

Tears “such as angels weep” versus “natural and human tears”—the two kinds of weeping are of course to be found in *Paradise Lost*, and Wordsworth never invokes Milton casually. To distinguish, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,

between the angelic anguish of Book I and the human grief of Book XII is to allude (with a density almost Miltonic in itself) to the great shift in *Paradise Lost* from heroic narrative to tragic drama: from Satan, weeping in the grand style for the wreck of military might and glory (“Thrice he assayed, and thrice in spite of scorn, / Tears such as angels weep burst forth”), to the plain style of our first parents’ woe at leaving paradise, the first instance of a strictly human sorrow (“Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon”). To define true poetry by this distinction, as Wordsworth’s Preface does, is to associate oneself with the great repudiations of Milton’s new model epic; to turn away, with Milton, even in the course of the poem, from *res gestae* toward real human experience—from “fabled knights in battles feigned” toward “the better fortitude / Of patience and heroic martyrdom.” Looking back from one’s final *placing* in “Simon Lee,” the willing reader and the speaker together may well find its first movement, and style, surprisingly remote and false. Young or old, sick or well, what can Simon Lee have ever had to do with “Echo” (l. 11) and the exhausted artificialities of her poetic world?

#### Silent Thought

This sacrifice of one whole world of feeling for another is no more than what Wordsworth warned the original reader of *Lyrical Ballads* to expect. That reader would be right to guess, as the Preface rather warily puts it, that “if it be proposed to furnish him with new friends, that can only be upon condition of his abandoning his old friends” in verse. Wordsworth goes on to admit that “in order entirely to enjoy the poetry which I am recommending, it would be necessary to give up much of what is ordinarily enjoyed.” He makes a handsome bow toward the Falstaffs with whom we are supposed to have wasted our youth:

All men feel an habitual gratitude, and something of an honourable bigotry, for the objects which have long continued to please them: we not only wish to be pleased, but to be pleased in that particular way in which we have been accustomed to be pleased.

But the last paragraphs of the Preface leave no doubt that Wordsworth means to turn us away from familiar sources of low pleasure, “less worthy of the nobler powers of the mind,” toward a new and higher pleasure: “other enjoyments, of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature,” deriving from a poetry of a different kind from what pleased us before. Wordsworth calls it “genuine poetry”—“well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and likewise important in the multiplicity and quality of its moral relations” (*PW*, II, 404).

What is genuine poetry? Who are these new friends? Wordsworth means to let his poems themselves answer. We should notice, however, that the genuine poetry his Preface salutes is defined primarily by the kind of mind that makes it and the effect it has, in turn, on the mind that takes it. It is to be known, not so much by what it is, as by what it does. It offers us a moment of active relationship, a field for the exercise of our “nobler powers,” an “exquisite enjoyment.” But as attractive and intense as such an experience must be for the reader, the genuine poem looks past it, toward the lasting effect: that which survives the poem, stored in the mind as “silent thought.” We emerge from our engagement with the poem, not perhaps with just that inward working or deep feeling which the poet knew, but with something much like it that is permanently our own.

This is the lyric pattern in Wordsworth, and in “The Solitary Reaper” it is not only the pattern but the central metaphor. The traveler who speaks in that poem—the mind “described” or “represented” in action, as Wordsworth liked to say (see, for example, *EY*, p. 366, and *MY*, I, 148–49)—stops to gaze and listen with unaccustomed interest, as in the last three stanzas of “Simon Lee.” His baffled but intense participation in the alien scene and song produces, first, a long moment of relationship across the field of grain and, second, something that lasts beyond the meeting and the moment. His repeated efforts to grasp or realize what he sees and especially what he hears (“Will no one tell me what she sings?”) produce a kind of working side by side with the Reaper, or a duet with her (not so solitary after all)—guessing, straining to know, and thus making a song of his own, in parallel to hers. And in the end he reaps his own harvest,

too—like the girl’s, something saved from the continual ripening and dying that both Keats and Wordsworth saw as human experience in the world:

And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more.

The Solitary Reaper has been seen as grim, swinging time’s own sickle—an image focusing the traveler’s consciousness that “there is no harvest except death and through death” (Hartman, p. 14). But surely, as she sings and reaps, and “cuts and binds the grain” for her stores, she shows that something intensely valued may be seized and withheld from the flux of everything toward death, to become “life and food for future years.” Her reaping represents symbolically the same process of mind the poem exhibits in its speaker (and would induce in its reader) as he stops, perceives, strains to know and possess, and then goes on: moving from an anxious, yearning delight in the moment to a secure contentment in something taken away, taken to heart.

Many of Wordsworth’s poems end with self-congratulations for just such a harvest reaped from a moment or a meeting. “To a Highland Girl,” for instance, ends with a grateful consciousness of what the poem interestingly calls a “recompense,” mingling with and easing the sadness of partings and endings:

Joy have I had, and going hence  
I bear away my recompense.

“Stepping Westward,” another legacy of the Scottish tour, devotes itself entirely to the harvesting of yet a third Highland Woman’s obliquely meaningful speech, heartfelt and borne away in mind at poem’s end:

The echo of the voice enwrought  
A human sweetness with the thought  
Of travelling through the world that lay  
Before me in my endless way.

We might define the Wordsworthian lyric as a poem whose business it is to reap this mental harvest, converting the passing moment and the particular place into something that is both and neither: in Wordsworth’s own boldly dimension-confounding phrase, a “spot of time.”

“Simon Lee” is a poem of 1798 and, as such,

is more concerned with fellow feeling, less with purely imaginative exertion, than are the later lyrics. In "Simon Lee" the all-important intervention is frankly an act of human kindness; the mental harvest is less palpable than the lyrics make it. But the "incident" with which it comes to an unexpected climax is, even so, a moment of extraordinary clarity and singleness of vision, a holding and a deepening that may seem to touch the infinite or take us out of time (compare "He might have worked forever" with "As if her song could have no ending"). And something does continue when the moment's spell is broken, leading beyond the moment and, in fact, right off the page:

—I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds  
With coldness still returning;  
Alas! the gratitude of men  
Hath oftener left me mourning.

Toward this strain of all-but-silent thought, private and enigmatic, everything in the poem moves. Down this mental avenue the speaker recedes at the poem's end, sounding the keynote, as it were, of the incident in which he was concerned. It is this that makes "Simon Lee" an opportunity for the reader, a success for the speaker, and a genuine poem in Wordsworth's special sense: leaving all parties filled, active in mind, long after the immediate stimulus of words and images has faded from mind. By ending in this way, with implications trailing off into silence, Wordsworth may have meant to suggest the inadequacy of words and images once the imagination has been awakened and the soul made conscious of her powers.

But Wordsworth's lyrics do not make us sacrifice our "old friends" in verse for silent thought, as "Simon Lee" does. Nor do they introduce a doubt about the real gain represented by silent thought; and "Simon Lee," rather surprisingly, does this too.

Wordsworth's lyrics of encounter seem in general to work toward reconciling contraries, resolving tensions, and (above all else) avoiding loss. They run risks, but they end by integrating or absorbing the still moment of intense response into the steady life that goes before and after (the metaphor of the journey common to all these poems, "travelling through the world"). They are conservative and even worldly poems,

as Wordsworth's poems go: mediating, accommodating—and continuing, resuming the journey. "Simon Lee," in contrast, is a radical poem. What the later lyrics integrate, it disjoins and holds apart; it increases tensions until something breaks; it forces a choice between contraries. Above all else, as we well know, it is peculiarly designed to make the reader and the dramatic speaker feel the loss of something they hold dear, which vanishes even as they give themselves up to its familiar delights (sts. 1–4), not to be replaced until the poem is almost over, and then by something quite different.

"Simon Lee" is really a kind of elegy. Even its three stages, or styles, correspond fairly closely to the phases of the usual elegiac process. It begins by feelingly evoking what is gone. It then confronts decay, mourning and complaining ("But, oh the heavy change!"—a protest to which the cheated reader may add his own voice). Finally, having risked failure and despair (as a serious elegy must), it reaches for "recompense": the reward of the lyrics but also the elegiac consolation—the "large recompense" of *Lycidas*, the "abundant recompense" of "Tintern Abbey." The poem as a whole is a schooling of the imagination, as we have understood all along. It would take us from "the sweet shire of Cardigan" to the realms of "silent thought"; from the world of change, where the huntsman or the "grey-fly" winds (briefly) a sultry horn, to something that can never fade or die in the same way, because it cannot be seen and heard in the same way. "Simon Lee" would tune our ear so that we hear first "the still, sad music of humanity" in the old man's suffering and then, perhaps, beyond that, "the eternal silence" itself, that strain "of a higher mood" which cuts across *Lycidas*, momentarily stilling the oaten piping of lament.

But, even as this design unfolds and realizes itself, we may ask whether the exchange we have to make constitutes a gain for "charity" and "humanity" after all. It may seem that the world we lose (the world of balladry and fiction, "fabled knights in battles feigned") contains most of what we identify as life, while the realm of truth (or silent thought) borders on death. Certainly the early world of "Simon Lee" is bursting with life. It is a world like an arena for active, thoughtless boys; a world bounded as are the

happy vales of *Songs of Innocence*, crisscrossed with strong, swift movements, and filled up with echoing sounds; a world like that of the growing boy in *The Prelude* and "Tintern Abbey." Young Simon, like those younger versions of the poet, is essentially in motion—"He all the country could outrun," "A running huntsman merry." And, wherever he goes, he generates whooping noise, with his horn and his halloo reverberating "round and round" till "hill and valley rang with glee" (in the first version, "Four counties round / Had heard of Simon Lee"). It is a loud, physical world, an animal and even a violent world, with Simon in hot pursuit of creatures not very different from himself. It seems also a finite or closed world, a sort of large bowl inside which all this life circulates and rebounds. But it is interestingly open at the edges, as it were: in one direction, toward the legendary or fabulous, with Echo and her kind; and, in another, toward something neither physical nor fabulous:

He all the country could outrun,  
 Could leave both man and horse behind;  
 And often, ere the chase was done,  
 He reeled, and was stone-blind.

These lines hold in extraordinary solution both the violent animal passions of the huntsman's way of life and that blind giddiness by which Wordsworth usually signals the onset of ineffable or spiritual knowing, "when the light of sense goes out" and the invisible dawns.

No sooner has this world been evoked than it begins to fade, and we begin to mourn. It both shrinks and slows down. The hills and valleys swept over and ranged through in the first stanzas give way to a world so much more truly bounded, and so sluggish, as to seem part of a different universe. The youth who could outrun both man and horse is now reduced to the "husbandry and tillage" he scorned in stanza 2, tied to "a scrap of land," hobbled by those ankles we now begin to hear about. The significance of those ankles we may now appreciate, too (should we think!), since what they mean is the end of all his merry running. To anyone who has grasped what the young huntsman really was, those swollen ankles tell a tale indeed, though not in words. Already, then, it may be that we hear strains of a higher mood—always, in Wordsworth's poetry, the soundless strains of

one's own mind as it begins to work, making out what is latent or implied "in every thing" (at least in everything old). The feeling for latency redeems even the ocular. Contraction brings this kind of concentration, as we have seen.

But still, the poem's movement overall *is* a contraction and a gradual cessation, continuing into and indeed perfected by the "incident" that follows the troubled and troubling middle stanzas. This "relentless narrowing of focus" (Hartman's phrase, p. 146, still more applicable to the tightening spiral that is "Simon Lee" than to the endless circling of "The Thorn") culminates in the mute invitation of the lonely, separated figure beside the stubborn root. To move toward this crucial image—single, silent, still—has been to draw away from everything active, multitudinous, loud. Now, with its advent, all energy has drained away from the world of the poem. In fact, except for the root, that world has disappeared, even the scrap of land. Now more than ever is Simon Lee "the sole survivor."

Nothing could plead more urgently for the contribution we are asked to make at this turning of the tide, when the flow has to reverse itself and run from reader into poem, when we must follow the lead of our narrator, who, in another instant, steps into the frame of his own "incident" to break the spell, bringing the tears and words welling up out of the grateful old man.

At the same time, nothing could show more plainly just how much we have had to give up to get here—and we are not done yet. This poem, which has aimed throughout at drawing in at least some readers so as to *place* them, seems to conclude by *unplacing* and ignoring them. Silent thought brings no one into permanent union with "the world of all of us," "the common growth of mother earth"—hailed by Wordsworth elsewhere as his haunt and the main region of his song. It leaves us nowhere, spaceless, self-absorbed, in an isolation more complete than that of the old man, from whose words of thanks the speaker withdraws even a little impatiently ("I thought / They never would have done"). In the last four lines of the poem we see nothing, nor are we addressed. The speaker ends by talking to himself (as long as he talks at all), contemplating himself—how *he* is "left," as he puts it (significantly, still "mourning").

Is this success? It is the characteristically

Wordsworthian consolation, comparable to the “thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” of the great “Ode,” or (in what seems a different key) “the joy of elevated thoughts” embraced midway through “Tintern Abbey.” But it is always of doubtful comfort, seeming to free us, not so much from sorrow or mourning (which continues to the end and beyond, in all three poems), as from the world that gave us cause both to joy and to mourn. The poet in *Lycidas* ends by twitching his mantle blue, recalling himself to the world where the sun rises and sets, from which his “eager thought” has kept him only for a day. The poet in “Simon Lee” ends lost in thought: in a self-consciousness that Wordsworth exalted as “an indestructible dominion” but that we may see as the last turn in the poem’s narrowing spiral, the next thing to what Coleridge termed Wordsworth’s dangerous “self-involution.”<sup>10</sup> A reader might be forgiven if he looked back on “the sweet shire of Cardigan” as upon life itself, finding his recompense for leaving it too silent, empty, and self-involved—too far from *Lycidas*, anyway, with its “fresh fields, and pastures new.”

It does not matter, however, whether a reader sides with Wordsworth or with Coleridge about such endings and their significance. What matters is the process as a whole, the exchange itself—what might be called (borrowing from De Quincey) the *elegiac involute* in Wordsworth’s poetry, a “perplexed combination of concrete objects” through which pass more, and more subtly interrelated, deep feelings and thoughts than ever reach expression separately and in the abstract.<sup>11</sup> In the elegiac involute, as in one of De Quincey’s own richly ambiguous dreams, a landscape full of life transforms itself before our eyes into a world of death, or at least a world that speaks of “something that is gone,” from which the poet then recedes into himself, into thought. Thus, in the “Ode,” the world of beautiful, boisterous creatures and of almost equally vital natural objects (Coleridge’s “happy living things”) contracts before our eyes into the image of a single, mutely meaningful thing (“But there’s a tree . . .”), seen so intensely that it vanishes in its turn—paradoxical as that sounds—to be replaced by a meditation of which it is not the object but only the occasion. This involute, or pattern, recurs throughout

Wordsworth’s greatest poetry, often in works that do not grieve at all but positively rejoice. Most of the central passages of *The Prelude*, for example, begin as “Simon Lee” does, with glad animal movements—seductive images of swift or swirling motion in space, usually with a competitive edge (the race, the chase, the game, the climb)—which then, receiving some rebuke or check, fade into and are replaced by something very different: a mood of mind that seeks nothing because it feels itself, finding peace in a pure inward objectlessness, the mere “sentiment of being.”<sup>12</sup>

What this archetype “means,” strictly speaking, is impossible to say. We have here, I think, something akin to what Freud called the “navel” of a dream, where meanings are most dense—the thoughts, feelings, and images of the dream twisting together ever more tightly as we approach its source, “the spot where it reaches down into the unknown.”<sup>13</sup> We can say, however, that the spectacle of vigorous movement, especially of some eager pursuit—aptly and frequently symbolized, in the poems, by the hunt—spoke to Wordsworth powerfully but also ambiguously, holding for him both a high excitement (which he wished to feel) and a threat (which he wished to control). We can say that his poems typically address the human appetite for strong actions and emotions only to “chasten and subdue” this appetite, slowing down and stopping all that lives and moves within the poem, including the reader and the speaker (“Stop here, or gently pass . . .”). And we can say, at last, that Wordsworth’s attitude toward story—not only toward what I have called the ballad world, with its violent deeds and strong sensations, but equally toward the pulse and flow that are narrative per se—is only one expression of his deeper ambivalence toward man’s life in space and time, with all its aching joys and dizzy raptures.

“Simon Lee” is an early and an especially self-conscious instance, then, of narrative hurry and bustle gradually subdued, coming to a full stop at last before a kind of picture—one thing fixed—on which the mind can feed, from which the mind can then slowly withdraw into its own place. The education of the thoughtless reader into silent thought, the blundering progress of the dramatic speaker through ocular fixations

toward genuine poetry, the evolution of our protoballad into a lyric—all these simultaneous and interlocking movements reflect and draw their power from one central tendency in Wordsworth's mind and work: a drive, or drift, from the corporeal to the mental, from action to passion (feeling), and from time to eternity—a tendency nowhere better expressed than in the famous death-haunted lines spoken by Oswald/Rivers in *The Borderers*, almost the first great lines that Wordsworth ever wrote:

Action is transitory,—a step, a blow,  
The motion of a muscle—this way or that—  
'Tis done, and in the after-vacancy  
We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:  
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,  
And shares the nature of infinity. (*PW*, 1, 188)

This speech announces the principle of many a later poem. It strictly opposes what can only be *done* to what is *felt* and *thought* (suffered); what fades at once, leaving a vacancy, to what endures and satisfies; a condition of desire or need, which is life in the world, to a condition of fulfillment, which is the life of mind “And shares the nature of infinity.” These words profess a profound indifference to all human undertakings and to the spectacles that have always moved men, leveling down every action, heroic or trivial, to “the motion of a muscle—this way or that.” They express Wordsworth's fascination and yearning for that state of “suffering” (being strongly moved, not making vigorous movements) here imagined as sublime in the best Burkean sense, that is, “obscure and dark,” ominous and huge, absorbing the whole mind.

But they do not unambiguously choose or endorse the way of suffering as opposed to action. The chef d'oeuvre of the sublime, as everyone once knew, is Milton's figure of Death. Oswald, always suspect, is here clearly a satanic tempter, manipulating Marmaduke/Mortimer in dangerous directions even while finding words for the latter's own inmost thoughts. The morbid context, furthermore, offers its own silent but quite specific comment. The atmosphere of the whole play is heavy with guilt for a very specialized sort of crime, murder by neglect—in other words, desertion, something not *done* that ought to have been *done*, an action withheld, with results that are not indifferent. Under the circum-

stances, to dedicate oneself to a permanent personal infinity seems another death of the same type: an expiatory suicide, a brooding death-in-life like that to which Marmaduke does finally doom himself at the end of the play.<sup>14</sup>

No wonder, then, that Wordsworth should consistently (privately as well as publicly) dismiss the poem of action as a form of violent exercise and regard its readers as persons of dormant or no mind. The imitation of an action—what could it be for Wordsworth (Aristotle to the contrary notwithstanding) but a mere “arrangement and selection of incidents, by which the mind is kept upon the stretch of curiosity [another athletic metaphor], and the fancy amused without the trouble of thought”? The call to lyric, or genuine, poetry follows naturally. It is a call, and a pledge, to disengage the mind from games and shows and motions of all kinds, “to send the soul into herself, to be admonished of her weakness, or to be made conscious of her power.” Both ends are accomplished in “Simon Lee,” and even in this order.<sup>15</sup>

No more wonder, however, that Wordsworth should return over and over, despite such convictions and pronouncements, to the poem of action and the problem of narrative. For the choice that he appears to make for himself and to lay before his reader cannot really be made on this side of the grave. It can only be repeatedly confronted, entertained, explored, in poem after poem, from *The Borderers* to *The Excursion* and from “Simon Lee” to “Tintern Abbey”—poems that, however they may end, reveal at bottom an allegiance to both worlds, and to two kinds of poetry.

For Coleridge, “Simon Lee” stood with “The Thorn” at the opposite pole from “Tintern Abbey”; and so it may, in its style of speech, its untrustworthy persona, and its palpable design upon the reader. But “Simon Lee” comes closer in spirit to the great meditation that capped *Lyrical Ballads* than does any other poem in the volume. Both poems are the work of a mind pulled in two ways at once, offering affirmations and conclusions that seem solid but are in fact unstable, sometimes questioned as soon as made. In both, a natural appetite is rebuked, an instinct educated, and the strongest of bonds loosened, if not broken . . . but in such a way as to create more than a doubt about the recom-

pense achieved (“for such loss, *I would believe*, abundant recompense,” “Tintern Abbey,” ll. 87–88; my italics); and not, of course, until those primitive tastes and ties have been acknowledged and, indeed, indulged. For Wordsworth typically indulges, *even while he under-*

*mines*, his and our love of the world below the moon, in which young huntsmen and storytellers delight.

University of California  
Berkeley

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to de Selincourt, “On the text of no other short poem did W. expend so much labour as on *Simon Lee*” (*The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols., Oxford: Clarendon, 1940–49, iv, 413). In a letter to Francis Wrangham (5 May 1809) Wordsworth mentioned “Simon Lee” among those poems he considered “interesting to a meditative and imaginative mind either from the moral importance of the pictures or from the employment they give to the understanding affected through the imagination and to the higher faculties” (*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth; The Middle Years*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt et al., Oxford: Clarendon, 1939–70, i, 413). In subsequent references, the *Poetical Works* are cited as *PW*; the *Letters . . . Early Years* as *EY*; and the *Letters . . . Middle Years* as *MY*, i, and *MY*, ii.

<sup>2</sup> *The Simple Wordsworth* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), pp. 35–41. Paul D. Sheats, *The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry, 1785–1798* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 188–93.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1907), i, 51.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen M. Parrish, “Dramatic Technique in the *Lyrical Ballads*,” *PMLA*, 74 (1959), 85–97, argues thus and compares “The Mad Mother” to “Lady Anne Bothwell’s Complaint” in Percy’s *Reliques*. Wordsworth would have found examples of the genre, not only in Percy, but also in the popular magazine poetry of his day; see Robert Mayo, “The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*,” *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 486–522.

<sup>5</sup> See John E. Jordan, “Wordsworth’s Humor,” *PMLA*, 73 (1958), 81–93. For Jordan, however, it is not the narrator, or persona, but the narrative form that is being undermined or teased: by parody, as in the mock-heroic strains of “The Waggoner” and “The Idiot Boy”; or by a means less easily identified, the sort of wry twist given such pseudosimple poems as “Goody Blake” by the pressure of the poet’s own sophisticated and rather dark vision. In any case, as Jordan rightly stresses, “simply telling a good story . . . was almost never enough for Wordsworth.”

<sup>6</sup> Parrish, despite his interest in Wordsworth’s dramatic voices, confidently assigns “Simon Lee” to the (for him) narrow class of lyrical ballads spoken by Wordsworth himself, in his own person (“Dramatic Technique,” p. 94). But Coleridge singles it out, with

its cousin “The Thorn,” as representative of what he calls the poet’s “humblest” and most “colloquial” works, at the opposite pole from the noble, the authentically Wordsworthian “Tintern Abbey” (*Biographia Literaria*, i, 51).

<sup>7</sup> Mary of Buttermere is an example, her shape “returning” after it has been gently dismissed to stand again, as the speaker says, “in the way which I must tread,” preventing him from moving on until he has dealt with her (and her child) as they are at present, not just as they were (*The Prelude*, 1805, vii, 346–47).

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 146–50.

<sup>9</sup> Sheats finds a similar release of aggressive energy in this sudden stroke but traces it to a different source: “It is . . . a gesture of defense, and even revenge, on behalf of a humanity caught in the inexorable processes of natural law” (p. 192).

<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth, Preface of 1815 (*PW*, ii, 441). Coleridge, *The Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), ii, 1013.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis*, in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater . . . with its Sequels, Suspiria de Profundis and The English Mail-Coach*, ed. Malcolm Elwin (London: MacDonald, 1956), p. 466.

<sup>12</sup> The phrase quoted appears in a passage from *The Prelude* that presents a generalized image of action and motion stilled, or quelled, by transcendence of the fleshly and the many to the One (ii, 420–21). But the pattern fits almost every “spot of time” re-created in the poem, and none better than the most famous and debated of such passages, the crossing of the Alps (vi, 488–572). There, the speaker’s anticipated pleasure in a purely muscular and athletic triumph is denied him by an ironic providence, which, however, turns him—by the way of frustration, as in “Simon Lee”—onto the right road, leading to one of the poem’s central ecstatic visions, that of the great Apocalypse in the ravine of Gondo. This vision discovers a universe whose every force and movement are frozen eternally, held still in tensions within the Divine Mind. And though the poet-seer is presumably traveling through the ravine as the vision is revealed, we think of him, as usual, as fixed, “placed in the way,” before something unmoving and single (in this case, the All).

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in

*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 23 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953–68), v, 525.

<sup>14</sup> Marmaduke's last speech (the last words of the play) equates his choice of a wandering outcast's life with that of the penitent hermit or of the Roman suicide, falling on his "sword's point." Marmaduke imagines himself henceforward as forever roaming, but without an object ("in search of nothing"), and shunning all human contact, neither giving nor taking:

No human ear shall ever hear me speak;  
No human dwelling ever give me food,  
Or sleep, or rest. . . .

He means to wander through the world as blindly as old Herbert, his victim, but with his mind's eye wide open and fixed eternally on "The Spectre of that innocent Man"—an inward beholding, self-punishment by self-involution (*PW*, I, 225).

<sup>15</sup> "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" (*PW*, II, 429; my italics).