

his youthful education in book 5 and of his early imaginings about London (6.77–115). Literary genres, he suggests through these fluid shifts among them, are really modes of apprehension, coexistent within the mind as within the book of one's mind that is an autobiographical poem. As the record of *The Prelude* begins with the pastoral bower of childhood, slowly moving through the unstable imaginings of romance and deflations of satire to a mature engagement with the destiny of nations, and finally to an assertion of the manifest destiny of one's own nation, so there is built up the composite order of this poem and this imagination, which is to say this exemplary, unitary life, "from kindred sphere to sphere."

The complex crosscurrents of that maturation have been simplified in this abstraction of Wordsworth's attempt to relive his life through literary form, and it may sound much more academic than the process of the poem suggests it to be. Yet if the subtitle of the published poem, "The Growth of a Poet's Mind," can be taken with added emphasis on the distinctive nature of this autobiography, Wordsworth's patterning of himself through the inherited forms of poetry is logical. It is the ultimate extension of that geometric abstraction with which he attempted to reconceive the elements of his craft and to revitalize a national literature that had, from his perspective, either sunk into mechanical imitation or veered from it into a specious and sensational novelty. Whether conditioning his mind to a small scale or enlarging its vision to epic proportions, Wordsworth, as if by instinct, consciously shaped as he saw. And what in sum he shaped as well was the subsequent direction of British poetry. If it is initially discomfiting to think of the exponent of spontaneity and passion as a supreme artificer, the more one contemplates the idea, the more liberating it becomes. So, in truth, it was for Wordsworth.

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## CHAPTER

## 7



## The Triumphs of Failure Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798

KENNETH R. JOHNSTON

This essay is dedicated to those legions of students who have been led into the wonderful poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* through the awful thickets of Wordsworth's preface to the second edition (1800), and Coleridge's chapters in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) on the *Lyrical Ballads*' origins and intentions. Some few have emerged illumined, and adept in curious literary argument, but many more, in my experience, have come out of the ordeal disgusted, not only with Wordsworth and Coleridge, but also with poetry in general and the well-known tag phrases they have been forced to apply to it: "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," "emotion recollected in tranquility," "the language really spoken by men," and so on. I am far from denigrating the literary importance of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's critical arguments. Rather, my aim is to provide an alternative to the still-common pedagogic practice of asking students to discuss some poems from *Lyrical Ballads* in the light of excerpts from Wordsworth's preface or Coleridge's retrospect, or both. Specialists in the field know that the connection between the poems and those prose statements is highly problematic, dubious in some important respects, and on occasion nonexistent or just plain wrong. "How do Wordsworth's poems in *Lyrical Ballads* relate to his preface?" is a question that knowledgeable scholars approach gingerly, behind the academic equivalent of the proverbial ten-foot pole, and may take the better part of a valuable career to answer. Yet stu-

dents are routinely asked versions of the same question, to be answered in the fifty minutes, or less, of a written exam.

The *Lyrical Ballads* are so important in the history of literature written in English that a small but full-time critical industry has been devoted to them almost since their day of publication, and shows no signs of flagging as their bicentenary approaches. There are many reasons for this, not least of which is the quality of the poems they contain: Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* and Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* would appear on almost everyone's list of best poems in the language, certainly as among the best of their kind. But it is not just great poetry that makes *Lyrical Ballads* important. Even more crucial are the critical issues they raise, and these emerge in the connection (or lack thereof) between the poems and the two poets' various prose comments upon them. It is no exaggeration to say that the issues raised, or implied, by *Lyrical Ballads*—namely: What is literature? How is it written? Who writes it? Who is it written for? What are its appropriate subjects and forms?—still constitute for most readers the agenda of modern literature and, perhaps even more so, of modern literary studies. There are better poems in the language, and certainly more acute prefaces, but none that establish such clear landmarks for the nature of literature and its institutionalized study in modern democratic societies.

It goes without saying that the questions raised, or provoked, by the poets' explanations have done more to guarantee their volume's immortality than the answers they provided. Such is the nature of criticism: endless conversation, not definitive laboratory demonstration. But, while not denying the value of the two poets' comments on their famous volume, I propose to set them aside temporarily and concentrate on what Charles Lamb called the "living and daily circumstances" of its composition.<sup>1</sup> Lamb disapproved of Wordsworth's intention to add a preface to the second edition, and he was right, as he often was in his down-to-earth reactions to his friend's tendencies toward pomposity. That preface, with its splendid but pugnacious humanism, is at once terribly defensive, frighteningly aggressive, and very long, diverting us from many valuable aspects of the poems it ostensibly introduces, especially their themes and subject matter, by entangling us in a technical literary argument about diction, style, and meter and preoccupying us with a mere "experiment" that is being conducted only to "ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and

that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart." (This is only part of the preface's second sentence and gives a good foretaste of the heavy sledding lying ahead.) The same objections may be raised to the introductory value of Coleridge's chapters in *Biographia Literaria*, despite their more attractive style. Both texts, it seems to me, distract from the humanitarian and even revolutionary "purpose" of the volume—"the multiplicity, and . . . the quality of its moral relations," to which Wordsworth referred—by concentrating on stylistic matters rather than the "systematic defence of the theory, upon which the poems were to be written," which Wordsworth said he "declined" to give because it would require him to retrace "the revolutions, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself." In short, *Lyrical Ballads* is a revolutionary document without its requisite revolutionary manifesto—or *with* a manifesto that displaces its revolutionary thrust into matters of poetic methodology.

Of course, in the repressive internal political situation of England between 1795 and 1815, the two poets had good reason to play down the radical political implications of their poems (Wordsworth's much more so than Coleridge's), and their own disillusionment with the course of revolutionary activism in both England and France made it all the more easy for them to do so. But even to modern, first-time readers of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, it is obvious that the great majority of these poems are powerfully disturbing statements about very unfortunate and painfully suffering poor people. They raise important sociopolitical questions, making artistic considerations of appropriate language and subject matter seem irrelevant, somewhat like the effect of Walker Evans's unsettling photographs of southern poor folk in James Agee's classic of the Depression, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. We can gain quicker entrée into this ambience by going behind the volume's prefaces and retrospectives into the "living and daily circumstances" of the poets' other work at the time, particularly their lifelong ambition to create a new masterpoem, to be called *The Recluse*, which would address the new democratic society then painfully coming to birth. It would do so by offering "views" of Man, Nature, and Human Life in which all three elements would be displayed in a redemptive, nonrevolutionary philosophy of progress—a consummation still devoutly to be wished.

It is now well known that the accounts offered by Wordsworth and Coleridge as to how, when, and why the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 came to be written differ materially from what the poets were actually doing in that

"annus mirabilis" of English Romanticism that began in the summer of 1797 when Wordsworth moved to Somerset to be near Coleridge and ended in the summer of 1798 (18 July, to be precise) when the last of the poems, *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, was delivered to the printer. There is nothing very surprising or reprehensible in these discrepancies. Everyone tries to put a good face on things, and artists in particular have a natural predilection for drawing a strong line of cause and effect between initial inspiration, no matter how haphazard, and final production, especially when, as with *Lyrical Ballads*, the production has a celebrity far beyond the artists' original dreams. The only danger of confusion arises when the artists' account, or creative mythos, becomes accepted, as has also been the case with *Lyrical Ballads*, as objective historical fact. Thus many textbooks and innumerable classrooms continue to project the image of Wordsworth and Coleridge coming together in 1797, igniting a spark of mutual creativity that led wonderfully and inexorably to the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* a year later, and "the rest" (the teachers intone) "is history." But it is not; scholarship knows better, even as the best scholarship acknowledges that all history depends on degrees of creative reconstruction.

John Jordan has masterfully untangled the sequences of aborted plans and false starts toward publication with which Wordsworth and Coleridge kept their Bristol friend, Joseph Cottle, interested throughout that famous year in the idea of publishing the joint, or separate, volumes they might produce, some of which would have contained poems (such as Wordsworth's bleak *Salisbury Plain*) far different from the *Lyrical Ballads* we now know.<sup>2</sup> Mary Moorman and Mark Reed have made it very clear that only during the last three or four months of that year can Wordsworth be said to have been concentrating on the composition of the poems that became his contribution to the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>3</sup> From July of 1797, when he and his sister Dorothy first settled at Alfoxden, through mid-December, he spent most of his time revising his play, *The Borderers*, for sale to a London theater company. Following the complete failure of this project—a fate shared equally with Coleridge's dramatic effort, *Osorio*—he began the new year of 1798 by writing and revising nondramatic, blank verse narrative poems, until in early March he could announce the birth of a new master project, *The Recluse*, which would contain them all. It was only after the first week in March, when William and Dorothy received notice that their tenancy of Alfoxden House was to be terminated (because neighbors had told their

landlord they were dangerous radicals: i.e., republicans), and the idea of spending a year in Germany with Coleridge began to seem like a plausible next move, that Wordsworth began to compose many of the poems for *Lyrical Ballads and a Few Other Poems*, to give the book its full title. Then, indeed, the concentration of his creative activity becomes phenomenal and well worthy of inclusion among the splendors of English, or any other, literary history.

Mark Reed has also cast a cool eye on the likely literal validity of Coleridge's received account of the origin of *Lyrical Ballads*, an account published nearly twenty years after the fact, in chapter 14 of the *Biographia Literaria*. In Reed's estimation, Coleridge's famous recipe for the mixture of natural and supernatural modes, which he said he and Wordsworth concocted in 1798, is largely the product of later views and retrospective wishful thinking. Reed also notes in passing that the only literary plan which can be demonstrated as occupying much of the two poets' conscious intention in late 1797 and early 1798 is that of *The Recluse*, a philosophical masterwork "on Man, on Nature, and on Human Life," which Wordsworth said would receive all his "eloquence" for the next year and a half at least.<sup>4</sup> Reed does not describe this other plan, because it is not his object of study, nor have others, either in itself or in its relation to the *Lyrical Ballads*, for the very good reason that it is very hard to find such a plan. The most complete one we have also derives from Coleridge's writings of twenty years later and is if anything even more affected by retrospective views and second thoughts than his account of the origin of *Lyrical Ballads*. But we are now in a better position, by extrapolating from recently published texts of the *Recluse* extant in 1798,<sup>5</sup> to say what its plan or intention was, and, having done so, to see how it relates to a similarly extrapolated (i.e., unprefaced) plan of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. The result of this juxtaposition sets Wordsworth's achievement in that volume in a new light, complementary both to his own and Coleridge's accounts and to the refinements recent scholarship has shed upon them.

*The Recluse* was many things besides a simple failure or an unrealized literary project. Philosophically, it was an epic project based on the faith that its three constituent topics—Man, Nature, and Society—existed in a mutually positive and ultimately redemptive relationship. A fruitful relationship between the individual perceiving mind and the world of natural phenomena would extend outward by a kind of developmental or evolutionary

force into the moral relations of one human being with another in society, or civilization. Artistically, *The Recluse* was to have been, in Coleridge's later words, "the first great *philosophical poem*" in English, meaning that it would supplant the last great *religious epic* in the language, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Biographically and compositionally, it was Wordsworth's attempt to repay with deepest gratitude Coleridge's recognition of his genius, by writing the cultural masterpiece on which they pinned their hopes of his literary immortality. And historically, it is a central example of one of the deepest impulses of literary Romanticism: to produce an epic work that would have redemptive force for modern, secular man, compensating for the demise of revealed religion by creating the mythical text of a new religion of humanism. Goethe's *Faust*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Blake's *Jerusalem*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and Beethoven's symphonies are all, in their disparate ways, examples of the same impulse, among many others that could be cited.

Given so many large and various burdens, it is not surprising that *The Recluse* failed to get written. Or rather, that it was produced in large, fragmentary sections whose unified relationship has presented a daunting challenge to subsequent readers (as have all other examples of Romantic epic pretensions). But no one who has studied *The Recluse* texts carefully, from William Minto and Emile Legouis in the late nineteenth century, to John Alban Finch, Beth Darlington, Jonathan Wordsworth, and myself in the late twentieth, has been content to accept the easy dismissal that it is a nonexistent failure simply because it was not finally produced in the shape projected by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798. Helen Darbishire's witty attempt to dismiss it, as consisting of "little more than a prelude to the main theme, and an excursus from it," is self-refuting, since any poem containing both a poet's posthumous masterpiece (*The Prelude*) and his contemporary magnum opus (*The Excursion*) can hardly, at nearly twenty thousand lines of text, be treated as if it did not exist.<sup>6</sup>

But though some of these dimensions of *The Recluse* must have been the subject of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's conversation and the object of their most ambitious thoughts, the only evidence of its status in 1798 that exists today, on paper, are the four poems which constituted the "1300 lines" of poetry to which Wordsworth referred in announcing the beginning of his new epic task to friends. These poems are now known as *The Ruined Cottage*, *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, *A Night-Piece*, and the lines on the

Discharged Veteran which appear at the end of book 4 of *The Prelude*. These poems in their original form give clear evidence of Wordsworth's efforts, difficulties, and initial failure to write the projected *Recluse*. His task, in a nutshell, was to incorporate a metaphysical faith in the existence of spontaneous, unmediated grace—symbolized by images of natural beauty—with an ethics of humane concern for all human beings, no matter how lowly or outcast. And the characters of the first *Recluse* poems show that he set himself to his task in the most difficult way possible, for they represent some of the most miserably suffering human beings observable in England in the late 1790s: an old, senile beggar; an indigent discharged veteran suffering from diseases contracted while on service in the West Indies (subduing slave rebellions on the rich British sugar plantations); and, in *The Ruined Cottage*, the distraught wife, or widow, of another veteran, wasting away through delirium to death as she waits in vain for her husband's return. Around such "views" of Man and Society, Wordsworth was attempting to construct a coherent philosophical framework in which his "views" could be positively interpreted in the light of the beauty and sublimity of visual images of external nature. To justify the ways of man to Nature, as it were.

And by March of 1798 he was failing in this effort. Indeed, his letters to friends announcing the beginning of *The Recluse* and his intention to devote himself to it for the next year and a half must in fact mark the *end* of his first concentrated efforts to compose it, for he did not write any more poetry intended for *The Recluse* until almost two years later, when he began *Home at Grasmere* in celebration of his return to the Lake District with Dorothy after their extremely unhappy sojourn in Germany. Of course, their landlord's notice that they must quit Alfoxden House provided an immediate reason for his breaking off work on *The Recluse*. But there are other reasons as well, reasons so powerful that they must have made the quit notice a welcome relief and the idea of a trip to Germany with Coleridge (to learn more about the German Idealist philosophy which was the main source of Coleridge's ideas for *The Recluse*) look like a noble and necessary detour. In the event, composition and publication of *Lyrical Ballads* was undertaken immediately, in the somewhat dreamy expectation that proceeds from its sale would help defray the expenses of their trip.

But Wordsworth's failure on *The Recluse* in January and February of 1798 was not a failure of poetic power. On the contrary, it was a triumph of

poetic power unleashed—but uncontained. *The Ruined Cottage* was the first poem Wordsworth had written which can be called “major” without qualification. Coleridge never forgot its impact on him; it alone may have convinced him that Wordsworth, not he, had the artistic genius necessary to become the author of a culture-wide philosophical epic like *The Recluse*. But *The Ruined Cottage* and the other first *Recluse* poems have a power which tends to knock readers out of the framework of poetry, or art, altogether, making “enjoyment” seem a superfluous if not scandalous consideration (akin to Aristotle’s concern over the nature of the pleasure we derive from tragedy), and raising questions about the need for social action which are always potentially revolutionary, and not only in the repressive political atmosphere of England in 1798. Wordsworth’s failure was thus not a failure of inspiration, nor of creation, but a failure to fit his productions into recognizable poetic form, especially given the optimistic philosophical burdens *The Recluse* was to shoulder, since these first efforts tended more to contradict than to confirm the operation of a benign grace in human existence. Such a failure is no disgrace but quite the contrary: a noble failure in Romanticism’s doomed heroic effort, that art should minister to human need by finding or persuasively establishing a necessary or plausible connection between the world of nature and the world of man, an effort manifested in a variety of ways throughout the nineteenth century’s attempt to establish a new religion of art. In short, Wordsworth had arrived at a philosophical impasse, and that is exactly where one does arrive in trying to establish a self-evident and positively meaningful connection between natural processes and human or cultural ones. Nor did Wordsworth abandon his effort precipitously; he spent almost another twenty years, inspired by the idea of *The Recluse*, trying to show how “Love of Nature leads to Love of Mankind.” But it does not, at least not in any logically demonstrable way. Ironically we may be closer today to establishing the necessary loving link between man and nature, by the negative force of the superhumanly compelling logics of nuclear or ecological destruction, than through the optimistic faith in Nature held by the first Romantics.

We might expect the first four *Recluse* poems to have a significant relation to other poems Wordsworth was composing about the same time, and this is exactly what we do find in regard to his contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads*

*lads* of 1798. The burden of my argument is that we see in Wordsworth’s lyrical ballads of 1798 the triumphs of a failure. That is, some very successful poems—successful especially in aesthetic wholeness, poetic closure, and generic identity—that emerged from his failure to get on with *The Recluse*, which carry nevertheless—vicariously as it were—the power of the inspiration behind *The Recluse* even as they disguise some of the troubling philosophical and political implications of that power in slighter, more conventional forms.

Prompted by his landlord’s notice and the desire to make some money for his trip to Germany, Wordsworth turned, in early March 1798, from his grand but doomed plans for a philosophical epic poem to the much more satisfying expedient of writing shorter poems—lyrics and ballads—with conventional forms and conventional expectations, which he could finish and feel that his readers would recognize as finished poems, even though he hinted in his preface that they might “look round for poetry, and be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.” No reviewer of the volume, even the least favorable, swallowed that bait, or went so far as to declare that its contents were *not poems*. But if they had had the poems’ relation to *The Recluse* set clearly before them, many would have done so. Indeed, part of the enduring controversy provoked by Wordsworth’s long preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800 may be accounted for, not only by the force, splendor, and sheer wrong-headedness of some of his claims, but by the fact that the preface has a rhetorical range and elevation much more appropriate to a grand cultural edifice like *The Recluse* than to the predominantly small and apparently naive poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. The key subject terms of *The Recluse* can frequently be observed in the preface’s language, as when Wordsworth refers to “the most valuable object of all writing, whether in prose or in verse, the great and universal passions of men [Man], the most general and interesting of their occupations [Society], and the entire world of nature [Nature].” Similarly, Wordsworth’s wonderful description of the ideal character of the Poet, added in 1802, carries much more force in the light of *The Prelude*, his masterpiece “on the growth of my own mind,” than it does as an introductory statement to all but the most elevated of *Lyrical Ballads*. This discrepancy between the preface and the poems, rather than the poems alone, provoked reviewers enormously and continuously and is still part of the ongoing cultural life of *Lyrical Ballads* today.

Finished, in the sense of satisfactorily concluded, is precisely what the

four *Recluse* poems of early 1798 are *not*, powerful thought they are: finished, that is, in the sense of providing the reader with the persuasive philosophical explanations—that their rhetorical mode of blank verse seriousness leads us to expect—of the kind of world it is that allows such suffering to exist, or the kind of world we should be building to alleviate it. But finished, in the sense of coming to “The End” in a recognizably satisfactory way, is just what Wordsworth’s lyrical ballads of 1798 *are*: the same persons and issues are present, but the rhetorical treatment and genres do not lead us to expect a “conclusion” in the sense of a comprehensive philosophical or political explanation.

Wordsworth repeatedly flirts with the difference between these two kinds of endings, or “issuings,” as in the lines from *Simon Lee*: “O reader! had you in your mind / Such stores as *silent thought* can bring, / O gentle reader! you would find / A tale in every thing” (emphasis added). The narrator protests that his account of old Simon’s pain “is no tale; but should you *think*, / Perhaps a tale you’ll make it” (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> Throughout Wordsworth’s contributions to the 1798 volume, words like “think,” “thought,” and “reason” are used as shorthand substitutes or stand-ins for the absent but implied philosophical system which was to inform *The Recluse*, which would account for the wide discrepancy between natural beauty and human moral ugliness. For example: “*think*, ye farmers all, I pray, / Of Goody Blake and Harry Gill” (emphasis added). The simple ballad form does not lead us to expect that the farmers’ thoughts should be represented in the poem, but what if they were? What would be the issue, and where would “The End” be, if all landed farmers in England in 1798 were to think systematically about their responsibility for indigent persons like Goody Blake squatting on their lands? Or again, both the failure and the poignancy of Wordsworth’s efforts to write *The Recluse* are refracted through the famous refrain of the *Lines Written in Early Spring*: “If such be of my creed the plan [that Nature is a consciously beneficent force] . . . / Have I not *reason* to lament / What man has made of man?” (emphasis added). Indeed he does, but the form of his poetic utterance also gives him a reason, or a literary convention, for not pursuing such reasons in a lyric celebrating the advent of spring. If he did pursue them, he might have so much “reason” to “lament / What man has made of man” that he would be forced to give up the *plan* of his *creed* (i.e., his philosophical or theological system) altogether. And finally, the philosophical weight of *The Recluse*, present but

buried in *Lyrical Ballads*, is manifested with magnificently strange effect in the whole tissue of negative rhetorical constructions by which *Tintern Abbey*, the last and in every sense culminating poem of the 1798 volume, urges itself along to its deeply affirmative conclusion, like a doubter’s Lord’s Prayer: “If this be but a vain belief,” “Not for this faint I, nor mourn nor murmur,” “Nor perchance, / If I were not thus taught,” “Nor, perchance— / If I should be where I no more can hear / Thy voice,” “Nor wilt thou then forget.” It is precisely the *dubiety* of thought and belief, of teaching and of faith, that paradoxically underscores *Tintern Abbey*’s natural religion; and it is, I am suggesting, the multilayered and deeply felt presence of the failed *Recluse* just under the surface of almost all Wordsworth’s poems in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* that helps to account for their strange power—as much as the rationale offered in his preface of 1800.

How could the powerful but invisible relation between these two important poetic projects be demonstrated? It is not of course surprising that the fame of *Lyrical Ballads* has obscured the important place of *The Recluse* in Wordsworth’s poetic development, despite the latter’s precedence both in chronology and, to a considerable degree, in aesthetic merit. *Lyrical Ballads* is a finished, published document that went through many editions and provoked endless critical controversy, whereas *The Recluse* is a grandiose but largely failed poetical-philosophical idea, no more than half published (part posthumously), and more provocative of ridicule than of critical controversy strictly speaking. Moreover, in marked contrast to my argument that *Lyrical Ballads* and the polemical milieu Wordsworth and Coleridge created around it are in large part a displacement from the goals and hopes originally intended for *The Recluse*, other critics and scholars, commenting on the obvious differences between the two kinds of poetry in question, have drawn the relation between these two texts in much more negative, contrastive terms.

But I believe we can see Wordsworth transferring the vexed but enabling power of *The Recluse*’s philosophical and political burdens and its generic ambiguity (was it to be an epic? a narrative? meditative verse essay?) into the smaller poetic forms and conventions of *Lyrical Ballads* by a single, simple strategy: dividing his work on *The Recluse* into essentially two

different types of poems. These are, first, his five lyrics of meditative natural description, all identified with the same initial title word, "Lines," designating their conventionally informal, sketchy, and occasionally epigrammatic quality, and situating their utterance with sometimes exhaustive precision, from the "Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree, which stands near the Lake of Esthwaite, on a desolate Part of the Shore, commanding a beautiful Prospect" to the "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798." Second, there are his ballads or tales, ten in all, about suffering poor people, especially mothers and fathers and children, comprising (with the addition of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*) most of the poems that are usually understood to be the "lyrical ballads" of the title: that is, more or less mysterious narratives involving ordinary people but written in much more intricate and various rhyme schemes than those typical of the authentic folk ballad. There are, in addition, four "dialogue" poems, printed together in two pairs, which partake of, or point toward, the double thematic aspect comprised by the main division into lyrics and ballads. Wordsworth wrote fourteen of these nineteen poems between March and July of 1798, but my description of his two generic types extends also to the five he wrote earlier: two sets of "Lines" (on the yew-tree seat, and "at Evening"), and three narratives which, though not strictly ballads, anticipate his 1798 experiments in that vein. One of these (*Old Man Travelling*) was, moreover, originally part of one of *The Recluse* poems, *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, and I shall make use of another of these three, *The Convict*, to clinch my argument, by showing how the difficulty in making it conform to this division of the volume is in fact the exception that helps to prove the rule.

Why this division into two markedly different kinds of poems? Let us remember that Wordsworth's task in writing *The Recluse* was to integrate a metaphysics of spontaneous grace—symbolized by images of natural beauty—with an ethics of humane concern for all human beings—signally represented by some of the most miserably suffering persons observable in England in the late 1790s. His understandable failure in this task is masked in *Lyrical Ballads*, even as the effort is continued, by relegating each of its terms to separate poetic types in which the reader's expectation of a comprehensive philosophical explanation is submerged or distracted, even as the central (integrative) issue is alluded to in the various poems' tendency to echo each other's concerns, as in Wordsworth's use of the pointed question

"Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?" as a refrain in a lyric celebrating the coming of spring. Furthermore, the "plan" of *The Recluse* (see the table) is present in Wordsworth's calculated placement and juxtaposition of his nineteen poems throughout the 1798 volume—the actual, observable "plan" of *Lyrical Ballads*, one with a much stronger deducible relationship to *The Recluse* than to either Wordsworth's or Coleridge's comments about their controversial volume and its various plans and intentions.

In such a tabulation, Wordsworth's pattern of sequence and alternation is quite clear, especially as one moves backward and forward from the strategically placed pairs of dialogue poems. They are separated by the long

A Plan for Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798

Genre	Poem
— [C]	[ <i>The Ancient Mariner</i> ]
— [C]	[ <i>Foster Mother's Tale</i> ]
L	LINES ( <i>on a Yew-tree Seat</i> )
— [C]	[ <i>The Nightingale</i> ]
B/N	<i>The Female Vagrant</i>
B	<i>Goody Blake and Harry Gill</i>
L	LINES ( <i>First Mild Day</i> )
B	<i>Simon Lee</i>
D	<i>Anecdote for Fathers</i>
D	<i>We Are Seven</i>
L	LINES ( <i>Early Spring</i> )
B	<i>The Thorn</i>
B	<i>The Last of the Flock</i>
— [C]	[ <i>The Dungeon</i> ]
B	<i>The Mad Mother</i>
B	<i>The Idiot Boy</i>
L	LINES ( <i>Written at Evening</i> )
D	<i>Expostulation &amp; Reply</i>
D	<i>The Tables Turned</i>
B/N	<i>Old Man Travelling</i>
B	<i>Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman</i>
N?/L?	<i>The Convict</i>
L	LINES ( <i>above Tintern Abbey</i> )

Key: B = ballad; L = lyric/"lines"; D = dialogue; N = other narrative; C = Coleridge.

stretch of Wordsworth's parent-child "mad songs" at the very heart of the volume, which has a transitional set of "lines" before and after it, the first lamenting what man has made of man (in contrast to what Nature makes of Spring), and the second (*Lines written . . . at Evening*) lamenting poets' difficulty in celebrating anything in Nature that does not lead to thoughts of death. Furthermore, before the first set of dialogue poems and after the last, there is a roughly inverted parallel sequence, of "lines" merging into ballads, and then of ballads leading out to culminating "lines," in which commentary on the meaning of natural beauty and narrative on the fact of human suffering are effectively counterpointed—presuming, that is, one wants to see and feel the contrast as point-counterpoint and not mere undifferentiated difference. Finally, the two pairs of dialogue poems are pointedly set together *as* pairs in significant ways, and not only by their positioning in the volume. They are considerably lighter in tone than almost all the other poems in the volume, yet they have a discernible function that relates them to the more serious poems, in that they are conversational or anecdotal *enactments* of the principle of dialogue, or dialectic, operative between the other two kinds of poems, thus marking the trail of their legacy from *The Recluse*. The dialogue poems represent internally Wordsworth's two main kinds of contribution to *Lyrical Ballads*, by presenting conversations between speakers representing ordinary, conventional, commonsense views of reality, and speakers representing the extraordinary, unconventional, and even visionary possibilities immanent within ordinary reality. To the extent that they juxtapose fundamentally different views of reality or choices about life, they offer to implicate the reader in the dialogic nature of the entire volume. And they do this in a nice sequence also, since the first two present children confounding the merely calculating logic of "commonsense" adults, while the last two present both sides of an argument between two educated adults on qualitative versus quantitative uses of human time.

As with the four poems written for *The Recluse* in January–February 1798, the narrative element bulks much larger in Wordsworth's contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* than the lyric element. But the explanatory or interpretive burden carried by his ballads of March–July is much less than that of the *Recluse* poems, particularly *The Ruined Cottage* and *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, which nearly break down under the weight of the commentary Wordsworth tries to make them bear. The success or failure of Wordsworth's experiments in narrative technique in his ballads of 1798 has

always been one of the most prominent topics in critical discussion of his work. But, by comparison with the narrator-auditor situation in the *Recluse* poems, his lyrical ballads are far simpler, a simplicity Wordsworth achieved by radically reducing, or cutting out altogether, the function of the bystanding auditor who "hears" the tale of woe and "tells" it to the reader. In the *Recluse* poems, this narrator is a sensitive young man, essentially similar to Wordsworth himself, who feels severely threatened by the sadness of the stories he hears. In the original version (1797) of *The Ruined Cottage*, he is devastated almost to the point of nervous breakdown by the story of Margaret's sufferings; in the version of early 1798—the version most properly associated with *The Recluse*—he is shielded from this massive depression by a wise old Pedlar who narrates her tale to him and who, in Wordsworth's additions of 1798, interpolates a message of healing calm that places Margaret's sufferings in a larger vision of ongoing natural processes, symbolized by some weeds and grasses the Pedlar once saw "silver'd o'er" by drops of dew and mist as he passed her ruined cottage.

But in Wordsworth's ballads of 1798 there is little danger of such "contamination" from the suffering object to the narrating subject of the poems, since the narrator is very little present. In most of them, a poor, old, decrepit or deranged person tells his or her life story to a bypassing interlocutor whose presence is barely necessary to get the story going ("I followed him, and said, 'My friend, / What ails you? wherefore weep you so?'" ) and whose reactions to it are represented very minimally, if at all, in the poem. In the ten ballads (or narratives, more generally, since only seven of them are really in ballad form), the narrative situation ranges from no external narrator at all, as in *The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman*, to the highly involved narrator of *The Convict*—whose high degree of involvement is, I will suggest, the main reason the poem is so unsuccessful. In between, along this narrative spectrum, there are three poems (*The Female Vagrant*, *The Last of the Flock*, and *The Mad Mother*) with almost no narrator, except to ask the question or set the scene that gets the story going. In the center of this spectrum, we find the highly problematic narrators of *The Thorn* and *The Idiot Boy*, whose character and degree of comprehension of the events they narrate has quite properly been the focus of most of the critical controversy over the success of Wordsworth's narrative experiments. Moving toward the more "involved" end of the narrative range, we have two poems, *Goody Blake* and *Simon Lee*, whose narrator says almost as



little as in the former group of three but whose comments seem more weighty because they come at the end as well as the beginning of the story and thus have the effect of an interpretation on the events narrated.

*Old Man Travelling* is the hardest poem to place on this spectrum, and Wordsworth's treatment of it suggests he was well aware of the specific nature of the difficulty it presents. The narrator says quite a lot at the beginning of this "sketch," heavily interpretive of the "patience" and "perfect peace" of the slow-moving old beggar: but the original last six lines, spoken by the old man, about traveling to visit his dying son in a naval hospital, appear to question so radically the benign interpretation of his life offered by the narrator that the poem, for most readers, is broken into two contradictory parts. Wordsworth recognized this flaw and subsequently excised the last six lines altogether, in keeping with the overall narrative strategy observable in his lyrical ballads (relative to the *Recluse* poems) but in reverse: instead of reducing the role of the narrator to a minimum, he thus reduced the speaking voice of the suffering object to nil. In a very similar way, he created *The Female Vagrant* by cutting it out of a larger poem, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, in which the wandering woman meets a fugitive sailor and they spend the night telling each other the story of their unmerited sufferings. This extended narrative is in turn embedded in a Rousseauistic framework which considers suffering in "advanced" societies worse than that in primitive ones because in the latter the sufferers do not know what they are missing, not having fallen from any higher state. But this psychohistorical interpretation is both turgid and tentative, as Wordsworth recognized by not publishing the whole poem until 1842, and then only as an example of his juvenile efforts and under a new title, *Guilt and Sorrow*, which highlights the emotional effects rather than the social causes of the two protagonists' suffering.

The "lines" or lyrics in this descriptive division of Wordsworth's labors on *Lyrical Ballads* are half as many in number and proportionately much shorter than the ballads, as befits their genre, except for their lengthy descriptive titles. They are placed at roughly equal intervals throughout the volume, every three to five poems, thus forming a pattern of hopeful, optimistic belief in the natural beneficence of this world, counterpointing the intervening tales of unrelieved human suffering. Just as Wordsworth keeps *interpretive* commentary to a minimum in his ballads of 1798, so in most of these "lines" he keeps to a minimum any *narrative* explanation of the

speaker's situation, so that they tend to become full, or total, interpretive credal statements about "seeing into the life of things" through natural forms.

But the "lines" adhere less purely to this division of poetic kinds than the ballads; as I have already suggested, they tend to echo or hint at the larger cultural, political, and philosophical implications behind the *Lyrical Ballads*. This is clearest in the mournful refrain which cuts across the otherwise self-indulgently playful *Lines Written in Early Spring*: "Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?" Similarly, in the closely parallel "lines" on "the first mild day of March," the minimal domestic situation seems to have no historical context at all, except for readers who—and there were many more of these in 1798 than there are today—might think, on hearing of the "living Calendar" the speaker proposes to establish with his sister, about that other new calendar, still in force in Directory France, which changed March to Germinal under the authority of a similar ideology: "Love, now a universal birth, / From heart to heart is stealing." But this speaker specifically excludes the rationalistic universalism of the French Revolution in favor of personal emotion: "It is the hour of feeling"—not, let us say, the Age of Reason.

Wordsworth's "Lines" poems in *Lyrical Ballads* may be said to converge upon the *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* from many directions and in many ways, all contributing to the greatly conclusive effect of that magnificent poem. It is so complex and masterful a creation that I do not have space enough here to say much about it, except by way of comparison with some of Wordsworth's other "lines" and especially with the badly flawed but deeply similar poem, *The Convict*, which immediately precedes it. Like the two spring lyrics, *Tintern Abbey* alludes to themes from Wordsworth's ballads of suffering, in its references to "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods" and "the still, sad music of humanity," thus continuing the echo effect by which Wordsworth's beautiful nature lyrics remind the reader of the contrasting themes present in the volume.

The very first set of "lines," those ostensibly written upon a yew-tree seat on a shore in the English Lake District, point suggestively toward the lines above Tintern Abbey, for they describe the failed life history of a young man, "a favoured Being," whose virtuously ambitious hopes closely parallel those of Wordsworth, and with a similar fate. Disappointed in his efforts at worldly success, he retired from the world "With indignation . . . , / Aud

with the food of pride sustained his soul / In solitude." But Nature's beauty could still make him remember "those Beings to whose minds / Warm from the labours of benevolence / The world, and human life, appeared a scene / Of kindred loveliness." Establishing such a sense of "kinship" between a similar triad of Man, Nature, and Human Life was of course the hard mission set for *The Recluse*, and the discouraging attitudes of the world at large to this young man's hopes ("dissolute tongues, and jealousy, and hate, / And scorn") are close enough to those against which Wordsworth says, in *Tintern Abbey*, Nature will protect Dorothy as it has protected him: "evil tongues, / Rash judgments . . . the sneers of selfish men, / . . . greetings where no kindness is."

The moral value of natural beauty is interpreted retroactively for the builder of the yew-tree seat, but in the *Lines Written While Sailing in a Boat at Evening*, Wordsworth attempted a prospective statement of Nature's redeeming power, and the difficulties he experienced are illuminating in the present discussion. These lines tend to break down, or apart, for lack of the poet's ability to find a meaning in his various natural metaphors for human life—the setting sun, the flowing river—that does *not* lead to associated thoughts of death and dissolution. His problems multiply when he switches from talking about nature to talking about poetry, for he finds himself mourning when he wishes to be celebrating: the death of James Thomson, the death (and well-known insanity) of William Collins, the passing of history, "later ditties" generally (what Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom have called "the burden of the past" or sense of "belatedness" which fell heavily upon Romantic poets)—all lead to "The End" in a way that Wordsworth wishes to avoid, and he can only pray for a moment suspended out of time, symbolized by the repeated image of the boat's "suspended" oar. The whole lifetime of Dorothy Wordsworth functions as a similar (though considerably extended) moment of suspension at the end of *Tintern Abbey*, but in a more successfully artistic way, thanks to Wordsworth's much more sophisticated handling of his preparatory natural images. He recognized the difficulties that still remained in the 1798 version of the *Lines Written . . . at Evening*, and he solved them in the 1800 edition in a way very similar to his bold excision of the original ending of *Old Man Travelling*: he cut the poem in two parts and in all subsequent editions published them as two separate poems, the first two stanzas with the original title, the last three as *Remembrance of Collins Composed upon the Thames near Richmond*. This drastic surgery did not "solve" the residual philosophical problem of either poem,

of course—namely, that love of nature and love of mankind (or of poets in particular) have no necessarily positive connection—but it did have the considerable benefit, for Wordsworth, of isolating the two parts the problem he was wrestling with in his *Lyrical Ballads* in their implicit connection to the *Recluse* project: writing poems of metaphysical faith in the meaning of natural beauty and poems of humane concern about the significance of human suffering. In this sense, his division of the *Lines Written while Rowing in a Boat at Evening* can symbolize his entire division of his work on *The Recluse* into the two main poetic types of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*."

Finally, some of the usefulness and, I hope, the validity of this kind of descriptive analysis may be demonstrated by comparing Wordsworth's worst poem in *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Convict*, with his best one, the lines written above *Tintern Abbey*. That *The Convict* is Wordsworth's worst is confirmed by the poet's own judgment: he cut it from the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and never published it again. It is a sort of companion piece to Coleridge's *The Dungeon*—significantly, in that they are the only two poems in the 1798 volume to approach social commentary directly.

#### THE CONVICT

The glory of evening was spread through the west;  
—On the slope of a mountain I stood,  
While the joy that precedes the calm season of rest  
Rang loud through the meadow and wood. 4

"And must we then part from a dwelling so fair?"  
In the pain of my spirit I said,  
And with a deep sadness I turned, to repair  
To the cell where the convict is laid. 8

The thick-ribb'd walls that o'ershadow the gate  
Resound; and the dungeons unfold:  
I pause; and at length, through the glimmering grate,  
The outcast of pity behold. 12

His black matted head on his shoulder is bent,  
And deep is the sigh of his breath,

And with steadfast dejection his eyes are intent  
 On the fetters that link him to death. 16

'Tis sorrow enough on that visage to gaze,  
 That body dismiss'd from his care;  
 Yet my fancy has pierced to his heart, and pourtrays  
 More terrible images there. 20

His bones are consumed, and his life-blood is dried,  
 With wishes the past to undo;  
 And his crime, through the pains that o'erwhelm him, descried,  
 Still blackens and grows on his view. 24

When from the dark synod, or blood-reeking field,  
 To his chamber the monarch is led,  
 All soothers of sense their soft virtue shall yield,  
 And quietness pillow his head. 28

But if grief, self-consumed, in oblivion would doze,  
 And conscience her tortures appease,  
 'Mid tumult and uproar this man must repose;  
 In the comfortless vault of disease. 32

When his fetters at night have so press'd on his limbs,  
 That the weight can no longer be borne,  
 If, while a half-slumber his memory bedims,  
 The wretch on his pallet should turn, 36

While the jail-mastiff howls at the dull clanking chain,  
 From the roots of his hair there shall start  
 A thousand sharp punctures of cold-sweating pain,  
 And the terror shall leap at his heart. 40

But now he half-raises his deep-sunken eye,  
 And the motion unsettles a tear;  
 The silence of sorrow it seems to supply,  
 And asks of me why I am here. 44

"Poor victim! no idle intruder has stood  
 "With o'erweening complacence our state to compare,  
 "But one, whose first wish is the wish to be good,  
 "Is come as a brother thy sorrows to share. 48

"At thy name though compassion her nature resign,  
 "Though in virtue's proud mouth thy report be a stain,  
 "My care, if the arm of the mighty were mine,  
 "Would plant thee where yet thou might'st blossom again." 52

A large part of the failure of *The Convict* can be explained by reference to Wordsworth's compositional difficulties with *The Recluse*, for it is the only one of his ten ballads or narratives of suffering in which the narrator both directly addresses the suffering person *and* offers directly to comment interpretively on the causes or meaning of his suffering. It is also the only one of the ten in which the suffering person is both physically present and completely silent, resembling, in this respect, *The Old Cumberland Beggar* (and the revised form of its "overflow" into *Lyrical Ballads, Old Man Travelling*) and, by extension, *The Ruined Cottage*. The situation in *The Convict* is similar to what would have obtained if the young man in *The Ruined Cottage* had come upon Margaret in the last days of her decline, without the company of the Pedlar or the benefit of his philosophical long views, and had tried to say some kind, reassuring words to her. Thus *The Convict*, which dates from 1796 or earlier, the period of Wordsworth's most intense recoil from his political activism, can help us appreciate how much Wordsworth had already achieved by way of universalized human narratives, as distinct from immediate political protests, in his *Recluse* poems. And *Tintern Abbey*, which, amazingly, follows it immediately at the end of the 1798 volume, though the two poems seem to come from entirely different artistic universes, shows us how much further he could go in this direction, eliding the social stresses inherent in his material while linking them to the humanist myth of natural inspiration which informs his most characteristic poetic voice. There may appear to be a correlation here, between growing political conservatism and increased poetic skill, but it is misleading: Wordsworth was still a strong liberal or humane republican in 1798, though moving consistently away from his earlier radicalism. *The Convict* is in fact more of a "liberal" poem (in the pejorative sense of merely expressing wishful good

intentions) than a radical one, but Wordsworth's decision to cut it from his oeuvre is justifiable on artistic grounds—as was his excision of the more truly radical but still bombastic antiwar sentiments from *The Female Vagrant* in 1800.

*The Convict* opens with its narrator in a mood of regret at what man has made of man, as he turns from “The glory of evening . . . spread through the west,” to the stark—and gratuitous—contrast of the convict, seen through “the glimmering grate.” To draw this moral tension as tightly as possible, Wordsworth has the narrator move directly from his picturesque viewing station to a conveniently nearby prison, where it even appears (from lines 9–12) that he has deliberately asked for the prisoner to be brought forth for his contemplation. There may have been a conventional fashion for this kind of moralistic tableau vivant, to which Wordsworth alludes in the poem's last two quatrains, but using *Tintern Abbey* as a template for comparison with this narrative situation, we may say that Wordsworth in *The Convict* turns very abruptly from a scene of natural beauty to a highly articulated scene of human distress, thus causing an abrupt shift in tone, which, in *Tintern Abbey*, is managed much more gradually, by building up slowly through the conjectures, objections, and qualifications of his long verse paragraphs until he can smoothly achieve the harmonic moral chord, or tonic, of “the still, sad music of humanity.” The convict is also a more palpably pitiable human object than the “vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods” in *Tintern Abbey*, though his narrator has also, already, begun to “see into the life of things,” albeit with a less original rhetoric: “my fancy has pierced to his heart, and pours / More terrible images there” (19–20).

Wordsworth intensifies the convict's psychic tortures in the poem's curious long center section (25–40) by comparing them to the pampered treatment received by royal criminals, but by this point in the poem the grotesque contrast between the suffering convict and the glorious sunset has been drawn out so excruciatingly as to destroy altogether its effectiveness as a contrast, and we begin to wonder what the point of it all is. It is very much to Wordsworth's credit, and very much a part of his development into poetic greatness, that he begins to wonder the same thing and, moreover, builds his wondering right into the texture of his verse, asking himself, in effect, the most damaging question that can be put to any lyric expression: “So what?” The convict raises his head, dislodging a tear, “And asks of me

why I am here.” To what does all this delineation of human suffering lead, especially in its explicit comparison with the glory, joy, and calm of Nature described in the first stanza? This question, we should note, is precisely the question Wordsworth does *not* put in the mouths of any of his other suffering human creatures in the ballads of 1798, and for good reason. Imagine what would happen to *The Female Vagrant*, or *Simon Lee*, or *The Mad Mother*, or *The Last of the Flock* if any of those speakers should suddenly turn, at the end of their story, and ask the narrator what business it is of his, or what he intends to do about it. Disguising or subverting this disturbing possibility was also, in compositional terms, Wordsworth's most likely reason for creating the fictional, problematic, and apparently untrustworthy narrators of *The Idiot Boy* and *The Thorn*.

The narrator of *The Convict* begins his defense of his presence at the convict's cell—really a defense of the entire poem—by insisting that he is not “idle,” not, that is, a moral prig blandly congratulating himself on the difference between his situation and that of the convict. The conventional moral lesson—“There but for the grace of God go I”—is not the one Wordsworth intends to draw. Rather, he addresses the convict in something of the prospectively redemptive way in which he addresses Dorothy at the end of *Tintern Abbey*—with obviously greater effectiveness there, since Dorothy is not imprisoned or otherwise in danger. This narrator expresses the same hope for future good, in defiance of conventional moral evils, represented here by hypocritical compassion and virtue, as they are represented in *Tintern Abbey* by jealous misunderstanding, “rash judgments,” selfish sneering, and hypocritical “greetings where no kindness is.”

But *Tintern Abbey* is a personal religious poem, whose private gestures of retreat from society are self-fulfilling and can thus serve to support its transcendental leaps of faith. *The Convict*, on the other hand, is a public, social poem, and though Wordsworth's rhetorical flourishes are equally grand—raising “the arm of the mighty”—they are fatally subjunctive. He can only wish the prisoner well, presumably by transportation to Australia, the specific form of prison reform probably alluded to in the poem's last line. We may also note that the action proposed for this apparently radical “arm” is expressed in horticultural rather than political terms: “Would plant thee where yet thou might'st blossom again.” These are the first words of positive, natural, organic process to enter the poem since the first quatrain and constitute a shorthand symbolism, as we might now recognize, for

Wordsworth's faith in a moral interdependence between the world of nature and the world of mankind.

The long last paragraph of *Tintern Abbey* is also a defense against the speaker's possibly apparent "idleness" by invocation of a heretofore invisible bystanding sibling, the poet's sister. The narrator of *The Convict* tries to establish a similar relationship with the suffering person he contemplates: he "is come as a brother thy sorrows to share." Being one's brother's keeper is always a morally risky business and was especially so for Wordsworth in his poetry business of 1797–1798, by his own design. In his major effort on *The Recluse*, *The Ruined Cottage*, he had had his young narrator contemplate the ruin of another human being and had portrayed him as being so overcome by emotion at hearing the tale of Margaret that he could not appreciate the Pedlar's story as a story at all but instead sought relief in a much more intimate relation to Margaret than that of mere bystanding auditor: he leans over her garden wall, "and it seemed / To comfort me while with a brother's love / I blessed her in the impotence of grief." He is left in just such a position of impotence at the end of *The Convict*, wishfully indulging fantasies of power to no purpose, for lack of a real live sister for him to instruct, or for lack of a wise old Pedlar to instruct him in "that secret spirit of humanity" which still endures despite nature's "calm oblivious tendencies" and makes all the sorrow and grief of human ruin appear "an idle dream that could not live / Where meditation was" (emphasis added). This is the kind of meditation Wordsworth had not learned to construct when he finished *The Convict* but which he had learned, to a degree of mastery unsurpassed in the language, by the time he wrote *Tintern Abbey*. Between the two, he taught himself how, through his partly failed efforts to solve the huge philosophical and poetical problems posed by *The Recluse*. In *Tintern Abbey*, William and Dorothy can afford to ignore the sneering rash judgments of erstwhile London friends on their apparently escapist devotion to nature because they know they look on nature morally, "hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity." But the speaker of *The Convict* is much less successful, has in fact nothing more to say, must almost literally shut up at the point at which his poem ends, rather than concluding it more effectively, because he has attempted to draw *direct and immediate* connections between: (a) his appreciation of natural beauty, (b) his sensitivity to human suffering, and (c) his own function as commentator between the two, when he undertakes to respond to that portentous tear that "asks of me why I am here."

These were precisely the triangulated relationships, "on Man, on Nature, and on Human Life," that Wordsworth had, in his *Recluse* poems of early 1798, been trying to integrate and failing to, principally because of the problem of his narrating subject's "contamination" by the *affekt*, or emotional force, of the poor people whose suffering he tried to present objectively and interpret authoritatively. Thus it is not surprising that, learning his rental of Alfoxden was about to be terminated, Wordsworth quickly abandoned his heroic but failing efforts on *The Recluse* and, seizing on the idea of a joint publication with Coleridge that they had been talking about for months, turned gratefully to the smaller ballad and lyric forms of the poems he then composed between March and July, on which very much of his fame has come to rest.

He pursued these *comparatively* easier experiments successfully, even triumphantly, by the nice idea of separating the two themes—natural beauty and human morality—he had been trying unsuccessfully to integrate. The specific agency of separation was the expedient of removing, from between them as it were, his own narrating voice and presence, leaving him with his lyrical ballads of 1798: five sets of "Lines" in which he could expand upon his appreciation for natural beauty but say very little by way of explaining or applying its significance; ten ballads or other narratives in which the presence of the narrating subject is minimal, especially by way of offering explanatory comment on the human suffering he describes; and four dialogue poems, which allow "idle" and "serious" views of reality to address each other without issue but with a clear sense of victory for the "idle" party: "this one day / We'll give to idleness." Instead of fully integrating these themes in a single large poem, he could hope, by the artfully juxtaposed arrangements of his poems, that the reader would supply the necessary "thought," "thinking," or "reason" variously alluded to throughout the volume—in a word, its philosophy. The *Lyrical Ballads* are not *all* triumphant, of course, but even in the worst of them—and perhaps especially in that one—we can see clearly the seams of Wordsworth's magnificent effort of expediency, whereby he snatched his triumphs out of failure.

Some final caveats are in order on the status of the plan for Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* which I have tried to excavate by following clues that lead out from *The Recluse*. As a "discovery" of the 1798 volume's literary coherence, it can only take its place in a long line of more or less persuasive

arguments about the nature and quality of Wordsworth's achievement. Defense and criticism of Wordsworth's lyrical ballads is one of the longest running interpretive games in the profession, for the good and serious reasons stated at the outset, and I should be loath as well as presumptuous to try to close it down. Furthermore, my procedure, of looking at the volume from the "living and daily circumstances" of its compositional milieu without extensive prior reference to the claims made by Wordsworth in his preface of 1800, will to some critics seem a glaring and perverse oversight, requiring at the very least another stage of discussion: relating my conclusions to a thorough discussion of the preface's strengths and weaknesses. Nor should my argument be understood as a species of what is sometimes called "volume criticism," wherein the critic attempts to show how the placement and sequence of poems in a volume leads to certain calculated effects in the exfoliation of an organic whole. Quite apart from the fact that a plan which has lain undiscovered for nearly two hundred years cannot claim to be very effective, my own reading habits would disqualify me from making such a claim, since I never sit down and read a volume of poetry straight through from beginning to end. Though I believe the plan here exposed to light is operative on readers' experience of the volume, its interest lies more in its illumination of the texture of Wordsworth's poetic development.

Nonetheless, it is more likely than not that some plan such as the one I propose was working in Wordsworth's mind when he and Coleridge put together the first volume of *Lyrical Ballads*. For better or worse, deeply intricate and superficially obscure organizational plans are entirely characteristic of Wordsworth's practice at every stage of his career. His "Advertisement" for *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), his preface to *The Excursion* (1814), and, most notoriously, his elaborate system of chronological and generic categories for his collected *Poems* in 1815, all share the same two characteristics: (a) carefully argued defenses of the volumes' plan of organization, which (b) most readers have found unpersuasive or irrelevant to the power of the individual poems in them. He hardly ever used the same plan twice. In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, his plan was mainly stylistic and linguistic; in *The Excursion*, it was based on the organic image of a Gothic cathedral; and in the *Poems* of 1815, it was a potpourri of literary, psychological, and topical categories. None of these plans has a more than occasional bearing on the poems in those volumes, unless one is willing to

expend a great deal more effort, and sympathy, than most readers have been disposed to.

From a certain perspective, Wordsworth's entire career may be viewed as an effort to find a plan, or a system, capacious enough to contain the extremely various outpourings of his genius. I have been using the word "plan" fairly loosely throughout this essay, sometimes referring only to a plan of action the two poets had in view or a table of contents for their contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*; sometimes the word has a higher literary reference, as in Coleridge's claim to Cottle that his poems and Wordsworth's would, together, achieve an overall unity like that of an ode; and sometimes the word rises still higher, with reference to *The Recluse*, toward the idea of a philosophical or metaphysical *system*. All of these usages are also mingled in Wordsworth's own practice. If it is possible to be a powerfully philosophical thinker without being a particularly systematic one, Wordsworth is a good case in point, as he himself recognized in his defense of the ideal Poet, added to the preface in 1802, in which he asserted the power, steadiness, and sensitivity of a poet's thinking, instead of a "systematic defense" of his poetry and its theory, which he declines to undertake. Coleridge was of course much more systematic in the professional sense, but even he by the standards of academic philosophy (then as well as now) was much less systematic than most English professors give him credit for being, on the basis of his evident superiority to Wordsworth on this score. But behind this aspect of their relationship, too, and for all the brief but intense years of their creative symbiosis, they had the same object in view as they did when they paused, diverted momentarily by politically unsympathetic landlords, to write and organize their famous *Lyrical Ballads*: a huge cultural epic, "on Man, on Nature, and on Human Life," to be called *The Recluse*.

38. *The Letters*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 2:194.  
 39. *Scotsman* 14 (19 Aug. 1820): 45.  
 40. See, for example, *Middle Years*, 393-394.  
 41. The difference between Hunt's reviews of 1816 and 1819, though even in the former one can see the incipient radical fear of Holy Leaguism, epitomizes what happens to nuances in the post-Waterloo period; see note 20 above.  
 42. *Yellow Dwarf* 3 Jan. 1818: 4-5.  
 43. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, eds., *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 10 vols. (London, 1926-1930), 6:196.

#### Chapter 7. The Triumphs of Failure

1. Cited by Stephen Gill in his edition, *William Wordsworth*, in the Oxford Authors series (London, 1984), 379.
2. John Jordan, *Why the "Lyrical Ballads"?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976).
3. Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth, a Biography: The Early Years, 1770-1803* (Oxford, 1957); Mark L. Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years, 1770-1799* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 25-34.
4. Mark Reed, "Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the 'Plan' of the *Lyrical Ballads*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 34 (1965): 238-253. Other critics have defended the organization of the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, with or without reference to Wordsworth's preface; cf. Stephen Prickett, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Lyrical Ballads* (London, 1975), and John Beer, *Wordsworth and the Human Heart* (New York, 1978). James H. Averill has made a persuasive case for the volume's "workmanlike" degree of internal coherence, without claiming a "seamless" organic unity ("The Shape of 'Lyrical Ballads' (1798)," *Philological Quarterly* 60 [1981]: 387-407). Averill bases his case on Coleridge's claim that the poems in the volume are related to each other like the parts of an ode. He discusses the thematic importance of the opening and closing poems, isolates an opening sequence or movement of four poems, points to the function of certain obvious pairings like *The Tables Turned* and *Expostulation and Reply*, and identifies a central section of "poems whose topics . . . are particular instances of personal and institutional inhumanity: 'The Thorn,' 'The Last of the Flock,' 'The Dungeon,' and 'The Mad Mother'" (402).
5. I refer to the volumes in the continuing *Cornell Wordsworth* series published by Cornell University Press, particularly those edited by James Butler (*The Ruined Cottage and the Pedlar* [Ithaca, N.Y., 1979]), Stephen M. Parrish (*The Prelude, 1798-1799* [1977]), Beth Darlington (*Home at Grasmere* [1977]), and Joseph Kishel (*"The Tuft of Primroses," with Other Late Poems for "The Recluse"* [1986]).
6. Helen Darbishire, *The Poet Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1950), 90; Emile Legouis,

*The Early Life of William Wordsworth, 1770-1798* (London, 1897); John Alban Finch, "Wordsworth, Coleridge, and *The Recluse, 1798-1814*" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1964); Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford, 1982); Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and "The Recluse"* (New Haven, Conn., 1984).

7. All quotations from Wordsworth's poems are from *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, vol. 1, ed. John O. Hayden (New Haven, Conn., 1981), to which I am also indebted for information on the chronology and composition of *Lyrical Ballads*.

8. Moorman, *William Wordsworth: Early Years*, sees two separate streams of composition coming together in January-February of 1798, those of *The Ruined Cottage* and the *Prospectus* lines, which then break off when Wordsworth turns to the *Lyrical Ballads* project (355-363). Most scholars would now regard these two streams as essentially one—*The Recluse*. Stephen M. Parrish, in *The Art of the Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), the best comprehensive study of the poems in both volumes, also draws the relation between *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Recluse* in negative terms: *The Recluse* project was bad for Wordsworth's poetic development because it encouraged his natural egotism into abstract philosophical conceptions that led ultimately to his creative decline, diverting him from his best voice of "lyrical, narrative, and dramatic utterance" (59). Mary Jacobus does not directly mention *The Recluse*, but the entire two-part division of her book, between introspective lyrics and tragic ballads, corresponds to the division I am proposing—which has of course always been the most popular way of discriminating among Wordsworth's contributions (*Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)*, Oxford, 1976). She shows very clearly how *The Pedlar* (a separate version of *The Ruined Cottage*) stands behind the early spring lyrics of 1798, as an abstract presence—and thus, in her estimation, a less successfully poetic one. Don H. Bialostosky makes no reference to *The Recluse* in *Making Tales: The Poetics of Wordsworth's Narrative Experiments* (Chicago, 1984), but his conclusions and mine about *Lyrical Ballads* are in general congenial, despite some differences in our ways of categorizing its poems.

9. Wordsworth's radical surgery on his compositions of 1798, dividing their interpretive burden away from their sociological thrust, goes directly opposite to his impulse in revising *An Evening Walk* in 1793. There, he nearly doubled the length of the poem by adding contemporary sociopolitical comments which lie heavily on the conventionally descriptive lines of the published version, though these revisions were never adopted in subsequent printings (James H. Averill, ed., *An Evening Walk* [Ithaca, N.Y., 1984]). These two contrasting actions, inserting sociological commentary in 1793 and carefully separating it out in 1798, may thus be seen to demarcate in compositional terms the beginning and end of Wordsworth's most intense commitment to political activism. Alan Bewell has recently proposed another dual aspect

for some of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, viewing narratives like *Goody Blake and Harry Gill* as "case histories" in eighteenth-century psychopathology, cut off from the systematic and theoretical contexts which supported them in Wordsworth's sources, such as Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia* ("A 'Word Scarce Said': Hysteria and Witchcraft in Wordsworth's 'Experimental' Poetry of 1797-1798," *ELH* 53 [Summer 1982]: 370-371). More generally, the division I am discussing could be related to the dialectical thrust of many Romantic works on the relation of natural (or imaginative) beauty to social responsibility, especially Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* (1789-1794).

#### Chapter 8. Reclaiming Dorothy Wordsworth's Legacy

1. *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. William Knight (reprint in 1 vol., London, 1924), vii-viii.
2. Thomas De Quincey, "William Wordsworth," *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, ed. David Wright (Harmondsworth, 1970), 131-132.
3. De Quincey, "William Wordsworth," 204-205.
4. Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (Austin, Tex., 1983).
5. Selections from Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere Journal and one of her poems have, however, been included in Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (New York, 1985), 196-206.
6. *The Poetry of Dorothy Wordsworth, Edited from the Journals*, ed. Hyman Eigerman (1940; reprint, Westport, Conn., 1970).
7. Elizabeth Hardwick, *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature* (New York, 1974), 143. The chapter on Dorothy Wordsworth first appeared in idem, "Amateurs: Dorothy Wordsworth and Jane Carlyle," *New York Review of Books*, 30 Nov. 1972, 3-4.
8. Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* (Princeton, N.J., 1980), 3.
9. *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*, pt. 1, 1806-1811, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2d ed. rev. Mary Moorman (Oxford, 1969), 24-25.
10. Quoted from Susan Levin and Robert Ready, "Unpublished Poems from Dorothy Wordsworth's Commonplace Book," *Wordsworth Circle* 9 (1978): 37.
11. The letter, dated 30 July 1891, is quoted by Jean Strouse, in *Alice James: A Biography* (New York, 1982), 338.
12. *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*, 454. Dorothy Wordsworth's published journals include the Alfoxden Journal (1798), Journal of

Visit to Hamburg and of Journey from Hamburg to Goslar (1798), *The Grasmere Journal* (1800-1803), *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* (1803), *Excursion on the Banks of Ullswater* (1805), *Excursion up Scawfell Pike* (1818), *Journal of a Tour on the Continent* (1820), *Journal of My Second Tour in Scotland* (1822), and *Journal of a Tour in the Isle of Man* (1828). Unpublished journals at the Wordsworth Library at Dove Cottage, Grasmere, include a fragment from 1821 and entries between 1824 and 1835.

13. Mary Jane Moffat and Charlotte Painter, eds., *Revelations: Diaries of Women* (New York, 1975), 5.
14. Thomas Mallon, *A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries* (New York, 1984).
15. Virginia Woolf, "Dorothy Wordsworth," in "Four Figures," *The Second Common Reader* (1932; reprint, New York, 1960), 155.
16. Unless otherwise noted, passages from Dorothy Wordsworth's journals are quoted from *The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, 2d ed., ed. Mary Moorman (Oxford, 1971).
17. Robert Gittings and Jo Manton, *Dorothy Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1985), 77.
18. *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London, 1970), 101, 103.
19. "Journal of a Tour on the Continent," *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2 vols. (1941; reprint, London, 1959), 2:101-102.

#### Chapter 9. Wordsworth and Keats

The number of scholarly works centering on Wordsworth and Keats together is surprisingly small in view of the importance of the relationship. The principal items are Clarence D. Thorpe, "Wordsworth and Keats—A Study in Personal and Critical Impression," *PMLA* 42 (1927): 1010-1026, mainly biographical information; John Middleton Murry, *Keats* (London, 1955), chap. 11, "Keats and Wordsworth," 269-291 (first published in Murry's *Studies in Keats New and Old*, 1939), biographical anecdotes plus scattered impressions concerning Wordsworth's influence; Thora Balslev, *Keats and Wordsworth: A Comparative Study* (Copenhagen, 1962), an indiscriminating collection and survey of verbal similarities; Jack Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana, Ill., 1971), especially the essay "Keats, Wordsworth, and 'Romanticism,'" 120-149, mainly on the two poets' theories of imagination; Miriam Allott, "Keats and Wordsworth," *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin* 22 (1971): 28-43, on the older poet's influence on Keats's style as well as ideas; and Mario L. D'Avanzo, "'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and *The Excursion*," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 23 (1974): 95-105, on specific connections between the Grecian passages of Wordsworth's poem and the subject and "charac-