

Wordsworth's Poetic Theory

Knowledge, Language, Experience

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a linguistic act than in the 1798 Advertisement. In her fascinating analysis, Theresa Kelley traces the role of the linguistic in Wordsworth's thought, as she uncovers the antitheticality of Wordsworth's aesthetics especially in so far as the workings of figures of speech are re-viewed between the 1800 and 1802 Prefaces. Kelley's example is that of personification, first admitted only in a few instances in 1800, and then transposed as a 'rare' figure attuned to exceptional instances of passions in 1802. Kelley's reading of the qualifier in the sub-clause in the first version, and the declaration of rarity in the main clause in the second one, perceptively reads the re-signification of figures for the 'business of poetry' and, we might add, of prose. See Theresa M. Kelley, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 193--7.

11. G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 15, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 282. Translation mine.
12. Apply for the present context, Paul de Man's reading of Hegel's aesthetics links poetry to 'Gedächtnis' (the external term for 'memory') rather than 'Erinnerung' (memory which relies upon something internalized). See 'Sign and Symbol in Hegel's Aesthetics', in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrezej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 91-104.
13. Hazlitt, 'Mr. Wordsworth', pp. 231-2.
14. See William Shakespeare, *Complete Works: The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

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Writing and Orality around 1800: 'Speakers', 'Readers', and Wordsworth's 'The Thorn'

Frances Ferguson

For all the prodigious scholarship of the past few decades on books and their readers, it remains notoriously difficult to write the history of reading. On the one hand, historians of the book are increasingly effective in identifying how many copies of various books were printed at various times, and historians of literacy can mount arguments about how pervasive the ability to read was in a given society at any given time. On the other, literary criticism urges us to consult letters, journals, and essays to see exactly what particular readers thought of particular poems. The approach of historians of the book and historians of literacy is aggregative; and statements made under its aegis have a conjunctural force that may not directly correlate with the experience of any actual reader. The literary critical approach, by way of contrast, is, we might say, all too particular. It stresses what I. A. Richards would have seen as acts of communication by collecting testimony about exactly what one reader or another takes an individual poem to mean and exactly how much one reader or another values it.¹

To some extent the division I have just characterized is merely an expression of the relatively social scientific cast of work on the history of the book and of the relatively philological, text-centred work in literary criticism. But much recent historicist work has proceeded to try to reconcile the two approaches by offering specific readings of individual texts that are authorized by the aggregate picture: since such and such a view would or would not have been available to persons living in such and such a time and situation, some historicist critics have suggested, this particular poem must have meant such and such to this particular poet or novelist and her readers. Such a procedure, much as Roland Barthes might criticize it for imagining that contextualism solves most of the problems of reading, has its plausibility, because historicism seems

to offer a way of avoiding the claim that literature is simply timeless – equally available to all readers at all times.² Yet historicist critics have all too often been led by their own methodologies to produce readings on behalf of spirits of an age rather than actual individual readers and to provide broad-brush accounts of what everyone must have thought at a given moment. They have, that is, treated the historical record as universally and uniformly known. And the perennial charge against literary criticism – that no one can ever confirm what a text really means – is not so much answered as compounded by the charge that no one can confirm the spirit of an age but can only assume its reach in advance.

I offer the discussion that follows as a kind of experiment in trying to think not merely about what a poem means or what contemporary references best explain it but also about the particular tension between writing (in the form of the published volume with its individual readers) and orality. Nicholas Hudson has shrewdly observed that 'European intellectuals achieved a clear perception of "orality" only after their own world had been engulfed in print.'³ Late eighteenth-century ballad collections and contemporary literary work that took oral ballads as models suggest that orality became a topic of considerable interest not merely because it seemed unrecoverable but also because it raised questions about what literature is and what difference it might make for it to be transmitted in two different ways – either *viva voce* or through the sight of print.

Hudson points out that Protestants of the seventeenth century 'poured scorn on the belief that any substantial legacy of knowledge could be preserved orally' (163), and enables us to see the importance of the rise of print in promulgating the sense that binding opinions about religious and legal matters can be justified only by reference to written texts. The question of the standing of the oral changes rather dramatically, however, when we apply the Protestant view of oral and written tradition to literary fictions and have to confront the fact that a considerable number of sturdy Protestants were actively involved in the recovery and imitation of an oral literature of the folk. For while the emphasis on written texts increasingly funded the notion that national governments derived their legitimacy by appealing to constitutions and statutes that were there for anyone to see, a simultaneous counter-movement in literature transcribed, authenticated, and aped oral literature. As various writers including Edward Said, Katie Trumpener, and Pascale Casanova have argued, literary nationalism – in the form of the recovery of languages and literatures that, in their oral transmission,

are said to demonstrate the cohesiveness of various peoples – became a leading edge for political nationalism.⁴ Peoples claimed their right to self-determination, that is, less on the basis of their common interests in the present than of their ability to affirm that they had their own distinctive literatures. There had always been, they said, an England, a Germany, a Scotland, and one could see evidence of those nations' virtual existence in their native tales and ballads.

The significance of the orality of oral literature was that it was taken to be so nearly internal to the culture itself that it scarcely needed to be transmitted. Its every rehearsal was an endorsement, and an almost unnecessary one. As Propp would later observe about the Russian folk tale, literature that can become traditional is continually refined by the process of transmission, and something like the voice of a language itself stands in for the author function. Too many idiosyncrasies, and the tale is left stranded in a particular teller, and the tale disappears. Too many improbabilities, and the narrative loses its internal coherence. Susan Stewart has ably detailed the dilemmas that the collection and authentication of ballads entailed and has in the process suggested how the late eighteenth-century conception of oral tradition dramatized by way of contrast the situation of the contemporary author.⁵ The 'location of voice within character in the ballad' involves 'the ballad singer' in taking 'the form of each of the "characters" in a ventriloquistic fashion', she writes; and 'the dissolution of the performing self in the performance style ... promises a total immersion of personality in context that is the antithesis of the literary author's separation from both the local and the living presence of audience' so that 'we have the appearance of tradition speaking through someone' (125). Orality does not merely involve voicing words before an audience; for a world 'engulfed in print' and different accounts of printed words, orality represents a consensus of past persons and opinions, the story that 'we' could all relate equally well of our collective past because it is a story generated by the sounds of our language and the logical operations of narrative.

The notion of an oral tradition is itself, as Stewart suggests, a tragic one. On the one hand, ballad collectors might fill out the transcriptions of certain ballads, almost as if they were able to participate in a collective voice that no longer existed. On the other, ballads provided a central occasion for the rise of historical scholarship, in which the scholar and collector exposed the forgery of a Macpherson or an Ossian by demonstrating how deluded they were to imagine that this collective voice might still speak. Every individual writer thinking in the terms of a full-blown oral tradition recognizes that she or he must speak as if

she or he were a committee, must think of these words as theirs because they are everyone's, must see themselves uttering words that might as well be carried in someone else's mouth. The notion of the oral tradition, that is, creates an imagination of a prehistoric world in which all ballads and tales are essentially contemporaneous. The collection of ballads and tales and the attendant scholarly authentication are part and parcel of a fall into history, as literature comes to be treated as both assignable (to an individual author) and datable (the product of a particular time). Thus Propp expresses a fundamentally correct proposition about oral literature when he rejects the idea that it might be used for historical purposes (such as determining how land-measurement might have been done at some point in the historical past), because in doing so he rightly insists upon the fundamentally ahistorical character of the oral tale or ballad as an idea.⁶ Oral tradition may not ever really have existed in the pure form of this conception, but only such an intensely formalist conception of oral tradition provides its genuine foundation, exposing it as the opposite of historical unfolding and creating the possibility of history when its fossilization subjects it to the trials of the written word.

The very title of the collection *Lyrical Ballads* in which 'The Thorn' appears suggests two different versions of literary orality – the lyric, which is said to have a speaker even when that speaker is only belatedly revealed to have an auditor (as in 'Tintern Abbey', with its sudden address to Wordsworth's sister Dorothy, or 'Nutting', with its concluding remarks to a 'dearest Maiden') and the ballad, always marked – actually or fictionally – as a form in which speaker and auditors are present to one another. 'The Thorn' gives many indications of being closer to a ballad than to a lyric, as generations of critics have acknowledged in stressing its balladic subject – infanticide. Indeed, when Stephen Parrish registers the dissenting view that the poem calls upon us to focus on the unreliability of the mariner (and thus describes it as a 'dramatic monologue', with the full range of implication that that term carries in the work of poets like Browning), he shifts his emphasis from message to messenger but in such a way as to assume the constant co-presence of speaker and audience.⁷ The mariner who speaks the poem is precipitated out of the community that attends the tale he tells, but the storytelling community of the poem continues to resemble that of a ballad. In making the storyteller himself the real story, Parrish depicts the dramatic monologue as an implicit case study, in which the auditors are expected to affirm the assumptions of the community by recognizing how far the mariner departs from them.

'The Thorn' as dramatic monologue is thus 'The Thorn' as scapegoat narrative. Attending to the tale itself identifies the community as everyone except Martha Ray, whose story the mariner attempts to imagine, while attending to the speaker along the lines that Parrish does defines the community as everyone except the mariner.

The suggestion that I want to press here is that previous discussions of the poem – and it has attracted an abundance of compelling accounts – have afforded scant attention to the audience that the poem projects. In analysing Wordsworth's 'The Thorn', I want to call attention to problems of interpretation that have perennially been seen to attach to it. Yet, rather than seeing the poem as a statement of either a determinate meaning or a transhistorical indeterminacy of the kind that deconstruction taught us to discern, I offer some conjectures about what the obliquity of the narrator's statements in 'The Thorn' might enable us to infer about reading situations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Without arguing that the poem was always read under the conditions that I shall detail below, I want to suggest that influential late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century anthologies that collected literary excerpts for the purposes of public reading had an impact on the character of the poem that Wordsworth wrote. The hypothesis I shall develop is that literary anthologies like William Enfield's *The Speaker*, which first appeared in 1774, and Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Female Reader*, which appeared in 1789, exercised a significant influence on Wordsworth's thinking about questions that we usually characterize as those of authorial intention and audience reception. Enfield's *Speaker*, Wollstonecraft's *Reader*, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld's slightly later *The Female Speaker* (of 1811) all participate in the establishment of what William St Clair has taught us to think of as the 'old canon'.⁸ Unlike the *Annual Anthology* or periodicals like the *Edinburgh Review* or *The Gentleman's Magazine*, the editors who compiled 'speakers' and 'readers' were not principally gathering their materials from contemporaries; they collected selections of literature from a variety of different periods. And while Dryden or Pope might have linked contemporary literary production with the classical past, the editors of the 'speakers' and 'readers' extended the reach of English literature from Chaucer through such contemporary productions as Wilberforce's parliamentary speeches. As the titles of the anthologies suggest, they aimed to provide selections for public and communal reading, of the kind that Dissenters – and Enfield, Wollstonecraft, and Barbauld were all Dissenters – practised. In contrast to the fictional situation of the ballad in which the singer was interchangeable with the auditors and in contrast to the Augustan affirmation of transhistorical community that Pope voiced in his happy affirmation of

what 'oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed', the 'speakers' and 'readers' created readers and, I would argue, auditors who are markedly more individuated than we have acknowledged. My aim in this chapter is to suggest the heteroglossia of the poem and its imagined audience – even though the audience is never directly quoted or represented.

For the moment, let me suspend any direct attention to the anthologies known as 'speakers' and 'readers' and the ways in which they were used, so as first to explore the plausible line of analysis that has seen this poem as an example of the literary ballad. Scholars have for some time spoken of the poem in terms of the ballad revival of Germany, England, and Scotland of the late eighteenth century, and have identified an influential precedent in William Taylor's translation of Gottfried Bürger's new antique 'Des Pflarrers Tochter von Taubenheim' as 'The Lass of Fair Wone'.⁹ They have recognized Wordsworth's use of ballad metre in 'The Thorn' and have taken its very indecisiveness about the content of its story as a mark of its continuity with the ballad tradition, which frequently represents its speaker as experiencing genuine wonderment about what he will say: 'What shall I tell?'

In Geoffrey Hartman's account of the poem, the indirection with which the mariner recounts the story of Martha Ray is one of the chief elements marking 'The Thorn' as a ballad. Although Hartman ultimately echoes Coleridge and the critics of 'the more experimental of Wordsworth's ballads' and suggests that Wordsworth's having felt a need to supply a note that distinguishes between himself and the narrator is a mark of the failure of the experiment, he speaks of the poem as 'courageously if not wisely' offering 'a caricature of Wordsworth's own imagination-in-process'.¹⁰ With that summary judgement, Hartman both acknowledges Wordsworth's literary historical moment – one in which literature cannot speak in the language of the community as readily as it did in balladry – and insists upon the importance of the ballad for representing the motive forces of literature for Wordsworth. Although Hartman treats the speaker's strange way of talking around his subject as directly inspired by the ballad, now conceived as one literary genre among others, he also sees the narrator's inability to specify the story he recounts as ultimately betokening a recurrent Wordsworthian theme – that of the absorption of persons and their stories into nature, rather than into a human community.

Hartman has particularly commented on the speaker's fascination with a 'spot-syndrome', the continual return of the poem's main character, Martha Ray, to the place where the thorn grows. In describing the poem in that fashion, he uses the notion of Martha's fixation on

the place as a symptom of emotional magnetism – and as justification for the narrator's fixation on both the place and her story. The poem's narrator, observing Martha come regularly to the same spot, offers a line of connection between the character's recurrent plaint, 'Oh misery! Oh misery! / Oh woe is me! oh misery' (ll. 65–6) and her frequenting this particular spot.¹¹ Like a detective imagining that there must be a connection between Martha's lament and the place at which she utters it, the narrator details what he can observe and suggests conclusions.

Hartman's concern for literary psychology, then, lends support to the account of poetry as a communicator and regulator of feelings, to his description of poetry as 'the history or science of feelings' (*LB*, 351). For 'The Thorn', for all its awkwardness, operates for him as a series of analogies generated by emotion rather than by direct statement. If a woman returns to a thorn tree and utters a lament, her plaint establishes a connection between the thorn and the tragic event that the poem's narrator responds to even if he can only clumsily imagine a narrative; he has grasped what T. S. Eliot would call an 'objective correlative' without knowing exactly what it is correlative to. Moreover, the narrator's attachment to the emotion rather than to the story and his continual sense that the story he can present is inadequate to the emotion appears to Hartman as something like the deepest spirit of metaphor in Wordsworth (see 146–8). Indeed, Wordsworth makes the mariner an epitome of a certain non-gentlemanly version of the man of feeling. First, he distances himself, the poet, from the mariner who speaks the poem in the Advertisement of 1798 by simply saying that the poem, 'as the reader will soon discover, is not to be supposed to be spoken in the author's own person: the character of the loquacious narrator will sufficiently shew itself in the course of the story'.¹²

In 1800, however, Wordsworth offers his famous Note to 'The Thorn'. On the one hand, the narrator occasions a kind of maxim. What had been the personal 'loquacity' of the individual character in 1798 now appears as a larger principle for the expression of emotion in language. One man has become every man, not anomalous or eccentric but universal, as Wordsworth writes that

every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language. During such efforts there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character.

(*LB*, 351)

Coleridge had not yet published his criticism of the language of 'The Thorn' and the various other poems for which Wordsworth had adopted the language of rustic life, but his shift from the practice of this narrator to the practice of speakers generally suggests an anticipatory defence. For Wordsworth justifies his narrator in 'The Thorn' by making exactly the same sort of turn that Lévi-Strauss does in *The Savage Mind* when he insists that no society is symbolically deficient.¹³ And his claim on behalf of narrative thus insists on according *a priori* standing to the tale. If we recognize a tale in everything, he suggests, we will also recognize that there are tellers and tellings for everything. The position is formalist in the full sense of the term, in that demands for the adequacy of a particular expression are subordinated to the larger conception; narrative has been defined in advance as successful, and approval for this particular performance follows from that (so that the tale is put outside the reach of the abstract formulation of conventions and values that Coleridge defends).

The Note to 'The Thorn' helps us to see exactly how Wordsworth's experimental poems of *Lyrical Ballads* really do differ from the magazine verse of the 1790s – however little their ostensible subjects would belie that difference. As Robert Mayo pointed out in a classic essay some time ago, beggars, mad mothers, and infanticides figure prominently in both Wordsworth's poems and what we might think of as the routinely published work of the day; thus the subjects – much as they represented a departure from Pope's satire, topically, and commitment to precisely drawn 'characters' – were not wildly novel.¹⁴ And although various commentators have thought that Wordsworth's poems were distinguished by their quality – their simply being better poems – that explanation is a bit hard to credit when the poem has invited a great deal of parody because it sounded as though it was parodic of itself. Rather, the sympathy that Wordsworth imagines the narrator generating – for himself and for the Martha Ray whose story he relates – takes precedence over the drama of the events. When Wordsworth says in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800 that the 'feeling ... developed [in his poems] gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and the situation to the feeling' he is not merely repudiating 'frantic' and 'sickly' (*PW*, 1:128) contemporary productions. He also distinguishes his poems from what we might think of as the forerunners of Hollywood action films – events that do not revolve around the aims of morality and acknowledgement that Wordsworth repeatedly mentions in his Preface.

Indeed, the conjectural, credulous, and superstitious character of Wordsworth's narrator and his report takes us so far beyond the facts

of Martha Ray's case that those facts cease to seem particularly relevant to the workings of the poem. For the sentiment, the narrator's fierce commitment to the memory- and storm-tossed woman whose story he tells, occasions the narrative. That foundational sentimental gesture helps to suggest what I take to be the limitations of Stephen Parrish's brilliantly reductive reading of the poem, in which the mariner is judged by the facts of the case and found to be aberrant. The poem provides a tissue of reports that sort very uncomfortably with one another. The narrator first urges his auditor to go in search of the thorn he's describing when Martha Ray is in her hut ('You must take care and chuse your time ... / For oft there sits ... / A woman in a scarlet cloak', [ll. 58–63]; and 'I never heard of such as dare / Approach the spot when she is there' [ll. 98–9]) and then suggests that she is always there, an unavoidable presence. Yet if we cannot quite make out exactly what the mariner thinks and cannot reconcile all the details of his account, the poem provides him with companionable thinking – rather than isolating him in the same way as characters in dramatic monologues are separated from their auditors by a conspicuous if implicit difference of view.

Parrish's case depends on our being able to pathologize the mariner, as if he were a near relation to a moral monster like Browning's Duke of Ferrara or one of Browning's casuistically adaptive monologists. Yet even if we discount a great deal of the mariner's testimony about what everyone in the neighbourhood says and believes, the narrator provides an especially telling detail in the penultimate stanza of the poem when he reports that the villagers who had determined to constitute themselves as a posse and search for a body that might enable them to bring murder charges against Martha Ray abandoned that plan when 'the beautiful hill of moss / Before their eyes began to stir; / And for full fifty yards around, / The grass it shook upon the ground' (ll. 236–9). While Parrish eloquently states his case that 'The Thorn' is nothing other than a story about a man and a tree (and thus assimilates it to *Peter Bell* and the questions of misplaced imagination), Josephine McDonagh draws a more plausible conclusion from the lines I quoted earlier:

Thus the attempt to bring Martha Ray 'to public justice' by disinterring the body of the child stimulates an uncannily protective response from the landscape. ... It is as though Nature itself is implicated in the concealment of Martha Ray's guilt, condoning her probable act in sympathetic identification with her plight. Martha Ray and her dead baby are absorbed into nature.¹⁵

While Parrish could plausibly claim that, in accepting the account of the protective action of the tree, the moss, and the surrounding ground, the mariner shows himself as a gull in his new community he is, Parrish might say, willing to believe anything, and the villagers might thus find amusement in trying out their tallest tales on him. Alternatively, Parrish could imagine that the mariner and the villagers are all equally bemighted, that they all too easily accept the idea of hauntings.

McDonagh, in contrast, stresses the way in which the mariner and the villagers participate in 'the shared beliefs of the community'; and she thus appeals to the precedent of ballads, in which 'child murder is presented as the traditional response to unwanted pregnancy in rural communities' (79). Yet even though McDonagh makes a number of acute observations about the poem and about infanticide in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she here relies excessively on an account of communal attitudes towards specific situations – such as unwanted pregnancy and acceptable responses to them – such as infanticide. For the poem does not merely detail 'the belief and landscape of traditional rural life' (80) in order to suggest that infanticide – if it had occurred – wouldn't have been particularly unusual in traditional rural communities. Rather, it depicts the villagers as holding two diametrically opposed views – first, that they should seek 'public justice' because they think that infanticide, an act that they view as a crime, has been committed and, second, that even if Martha Ray committed infanticide, it is no crime in their eyes, any more than in the eyes of the natural world that refuses to testify against her.

Thus, while I agree with McDonagh that the description of the chain of events 'is based not merely on the aberrations of an individual superstitious mind' (79), I think that the poem does not so much locate communal beliefs as insist, as I earlier suggested, that the point of a poetry in which 'feeling gives importance to the action and situation' is to try to imagine that everyone has a story that poetry might uncover in much the same way that psychoanalysis would do in the twentieth century – not so much to identify the pathological as to explain the logic of behaviours that are all too frequently dismissed and derogated. The mariner, however credulous and superstitious he may be, operates out of something other than superstition at the moments in which he explicitly sets a limit to the kinds of conjecture he is prepared to engage in. Although he arrived in the village well after the events recounted or conjectured in the poem (after Martha Ray's abandonment by Stephen Hill, after her discovery that she was pregnant, and after the infant died prematurely or at term, and of natural or unnatural causes), he repeatedly takes her side as vigorously as if he were

Anna Howe defending Charissa Harlowe against the other members of her family. He introduces the information that he's heard that 'the moss is spotted red / With drops of that poor infant's blood' (ll. 221–2), only to deny the possibility that Martha might have murdered her child: 'But kill a new-born infant thus! / I do not think she could' (ll. 223–4).

The mariner here presents himself as a character witness for a woman he has never met (though he has, unless Parrish is correct, seen her); and he claims to know what she would and would not do. Moreover, he demonstrates his staunch confidence in this particular woman's behaviour, not in that of mothers or persons in general, and never resorts to the dismissive explanation that is readily available: 'A person would have to be crazy to kill her new-born child.' Although Martha has recurrently been described as having gone mad and as having 'a brain so wild' (l. 147), the speaker never treats her madness as evidence that Martha would have committed a crime. Indeed, he reserves his indignation for Stephen Hill: 'Oh mel ten thousand times I'd rather / That he had died, that cruel father!' (ll. 142–3).

What seems most striking about the mariner's position is that he makes no apologies for Martha Ray, saying neither that it would be understandable for a young woman who had been abandoned by her lover to kill her infant nor that madness would nullify our negative judgement against an infanticide. Instead, he simply states that there must not have been an infanticide because Martha could not have done such a thing and, further, wishes Stephen Hill dead (with the suggestion that he, rather than the infant, should have died). McDonagh has usefully called attention to the uncertainty that surrounds infanticide and to the difficulty of establishing whether an infant has 'been stillborn, [has] died of natural causes, or was the victim of a violent crime', and she has highlighted the way that the 1624 'Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murdering of Bastard Children' did not require positive proof of murder but took 'concealment of the death of an infant bastard' as presumptive legal proof that 'the mother was guilty of murder' (3). If she had tried to disguise her pregnancy, in other words, she would have been treated as if she had always planned to eliminate the child who would be conclusive evidence of a pregnancy.

The narrator of 'The Thorn', however, does not rehearse evidence about infanticide in terms that have any relevance to legal decisions. It is clear that Martha Ray's pregnancy was apparent for all to see, and it is equally clear that, had the villagers unearthed an infant's skeleton near the thorn, the discovery of the infant's body would still not have decisively answered the question of whether the infant had died of

natural or unnatural causes. When, at the end of the poem, the mariner recounts how the hill of moss 'began to stir', not even that extraordinary occurrence (or the imagination of it) settles the question of Martha Ray's guilt or innocence. It is only suppressed, with the earth itself seeming to say, 'Don't ask'.

Were this poem the only poem we had of Wordsworth's, it would be easy to see it as a fairly typical ballad. Yet Wordsworth's insistence on an unusually intense conception of the relationship between humans and nature justifies the picture that Hartman has given and that McDonagh endorses in talking about how 'Martha Ray and her dead baby are absorbed into nature: literally buried in the landscape, but also in the community's experience of nature' (79). That convergence of the human and the natural world appears in the way the thorn and the infant come to be associated with one another, in a process that is only intensified by the peculiar effect of the narrator's recounting that he once mistook the mother for a crag. Yet what we can plausibly describe as Wordsworth's pantheism, his voicing of the spirit of the phenomena of the universe, takes the unusual form here of projecting a voice for the natural world as it appears in the thorn, the hill of moss, and the earth around them. As they alarmingly move or are imagined to move, they do not so much take the side of the infant or the mother as ward off anything that might lead to the uncovering of a body. In that, they speak the language of the censor and insist that the tale should proceed only along the oblique inferential path it has long traversed. Moreover, they share with the censor an inability to lay questions to rest. If the moving earth fails to aid in Martha Ray's condemnation, it also fails to dispel the questions that have arisen.

What I am here calling Wordsworth's pantheism obviously involves giving a speaking voice to earth, but we have only to think of such influential examples of an explicit pantheism as Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *Hymns for Children* to see that Wordsworth's poem is not here engaged in a positive pantheism like hers – a registration of the beauties of the earth as evidence of omnipresent divinity. For in such famous passages of *The Prelude* as the egg-stealing and boat-stealing episodes, Wordsworth presents an animated universe that does not so much offer constant recommendation of the world as introduce a new voice, which expresses a rebuke to the only character present who has a distinct human voice. Moreover, a poem like 'Nutting', published in *Lyrical Ballads* and intended for inclusion in *The Prelude*, may speak in the voice of the narrator when urging the 'dearest Maider' (l. 52) to move delicately in the woods, but that voice has been radically altered during the course of the

poem itself. This is poetry of dawning sympathy, poems in which the speaker continually says to himself, 'What have I done?' In the place of a pantheism that amounts to a universal embrace, Wordsworth offers up a pantheism in which the poetry narrates the advent of consciousness of other worlds and other minds. Indeed, I think that one could make a strong case that Wordsworth's apparently belated acknowledgement of his sister Dorothy at the end of 'Tintern Abbey' participates in this movement from an apparently all-inclusive pantheism into something that we might describe as a liberal pantheism, in that it imagines differences between the speaker and the universe and also acknowledges differences between the speaker and other persons.¹⁶

In describing Wordsworth's poetry in such terms as I have adopted, I am attributing to Wordsworth a different view from that which John Stuart Mill enunciated in his famous essay 'What Is Poetry?' when he distinguished between eloquence and poetry by saying that 'Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener.'¹⁷ For I have been concerned with the ways in which Wordsworth is not so much attempting to persuade an audience in the manner that Mill's eloquent speaker would as aiming to narrate the poet's own overcoming of his unconsciousness of a listener – be that listener natural or human. Wordsworth's narrator in 'The Thorn' addresses himself to an audience, but the obtuseness that numerous commentators have noted in him is principally a social insensitivity, an awkward relation to his auditors in which he talks at them rather than to them.

It is here that the speech situation of the poem comes into view. In *Lyrical Ballads*, as for a number of Wordsworth's contemporaries, one of the most experimental elements was an attempt to acknowledge the poetic audience. Under the influence of Rousseau's *Emile*, a number of writers had begun to think systematically about the question of age-appropriateness in writing addressed to children. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, perhaps the most famous and influential of the English Rousseauvians, had written *Lessons for Children of Two to Three Years Old* (1778), *Lessons for Children of Three Years Old* (1778), *Lessons for Children of Three to Four Years Old* (1779), with *Lessons for Children, Parts Three and Four* (1787, 1788) appearing along the way. While a writer like Hugh Blair had urged the auditors and readers of his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* to make careful calculations about the various styles they should employ on different occasions, he was basically commending a modern version of the classical hierarchy of high, middle, and low styles for a conversation among adults that would be achieved by writing that might or

might not be read aloud. A writer like Barbauld, however, had sifted her potential audience by age and explicitly attempted to write in a manner that would be comprehensible to children at various stages of development. Readers were, in the process, segregated by age.

Even if Mary Moorman had not provided the information that Wordsworth directed that a copy of *Lyrical Ballads* be sent to Barbauld, it is, I think, easy to make the case that at least some of the poems of the volume are thinking about 'the language really used by men' under the pressure of the consciousness of differences between the understandings of children and adults. For his effort was not simply to avoid the stilted poetic diction that Coleridge described the Reverend James Bowyer as having disciplined him out of. Instead, Wordsworth was as early as *Lyrical Ballads* addressing the ways in which different notions of direct and lucid speech obtain for children and for adults. In 1798, that is, he published 'Anecdote for Fathers' as the ninth poem in the volume, and followed it with 'We are seven', 'Lines written in early spring' and 'The Thorn' as the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth poems; and in 1800 he linked 'The Thorn', 'We are seven', and 'Anecdote for Fathers' even more tightly to present them as one continuous series. 'Anecdote for Fathers' presents a father who keeps trying to make his son say whether he prefers the farm or the seaside, and its subtitle is 'Shewing How the Art of Lying May Be Taught', to emphasize the strangeness of the adult's trying to make the child name his preference for one place over the other when the child has a hard time grasping the language of choice and the concomitant demand for reasons. 'We are seven' notoriously depicts a conversation between a little girl and a pedestrian tourist who quizzes her about her family and becomes increasingly exasperated as the girl repeatedly insists that she's one of seven children even as she reports that two of her siblings have died.

Seeing 'The Thorn' with the poems adjacent to it does not exactly do the work that Wordsworth imagined the prelatory poem he initially projected might have done.¹⁸ But it does suggest that Wordsworth was thinking in this poem as in those others about the need for poetry to address questions of audience in a fashion that Popen urbanity would never have allowed for. Even as Rousseau and the English Rousseauvians had argued that adults and children thought very differently about the same words and attached very different meanings to them, and even as age-graded readers temporarily segregated children from adults, Wordsworth repeatedly depicted children as unwilling auditors to thoughtless adult speakers. And the popularity of Enfield's *Speaker*, Wollstonecraft's *Female Reader*, and, later, Barbauld's *Female Speaker*

make it clear that the Wordsworth household was far from unique in its practice of reading aloud *en famille*. For the anthologies known as speakers and readers were designed to create occasions in which someone of virtually any age might read to an assembled company that included persons of all ages.

We might, from this distance in time, lump such anthologies together with the sort of aspirational anthologies that Hannah More denounces in her discussions of young women's education and that Jane Austen relied on in cementing her depiction of Augusta Hawkins Elton in *Emma* by having Mrs Elton offer up a few lines from Gay ('When there's a lady in the case ...') as a way of flaunting her insider knowledge of the nature of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill's relationship.¹⁹ While Mrs Elton thinks she's paying tribute to the power of love, anyone familiar with the whole text would recognize that Gay describes a bull's interest in a cow, so that Austen can very efficiently locate her character's pretension. And anyone unfamiliar with the whole text (as Emma doubtless would be, since she always means to read more but does not) would participate in this game of leveraged knowledge under the banner of impotent protest.

The notion that literary knowledge might be harnessed for social display – that one might be concerned more with other people's reactions to one's apparent knowledge than with the literature itself – was scarcely new when Hannah More and Jane Austen outlined it. But the anthologies that were designed for public reading explicitly set out to offer an alternative to the aspirational anthologies that funded pretension – and in two ways, first, by making the text equally available to reader and hearer alike, and, second, by creating a situation in which the reader or speaker of a particular text needed to think about both her life situation and that of her auditors. She needed to consider whether she could utter this piece of writing in the presence of these particular individuals, who were nameable even when they were not named. The anthologies thus created a new form of orality for a written tradition. They consisted of excerpts from vernacular literature that were regularly identified (as they were in Wollstonecraft's descriptive title) as being – all of them – of high quality, the best. And their boast about excellence involved more than an empty sales pitch or appeal to snobbery. Rather, it was essential that the excerpts should all be 'excellent', because of the occasion for which they were destined: reading in public, certainly to one's family, most frequently to various family friends as well. These anthologies designed for public reading deliberately avoided excerpts that would betray their readers as Mrs Elton's purloined verses

betrayed her. Moreover, they involved a heightened sense of the identities of the members of one's audience, and the acknowledgement that was due to them. One might well read portions of Enfield's *Speaker* to one's brother or sister, as Dorothy Wordsworth reports that she and William did; but one might also read to an entire family group consisting of persons of all ages and to an even more extended group as the members of the community around the Warrington Academy did. Peter de Bolla has written eloquently about the constraints imposed on individuals by public reading and has seen a repressive element in the requirement that novels be read aloud rather than silently and privately, but we might also think of the public reading of the Dissenters' anthologies as a forerunner of Brecht's attentiveness to the dramatic audience.²⁰ These anthologies heightened their readers' consciousness of whom they were reading to and created the conditions for an increased acknowledgement of those readers. Through their mediation, literature was always being addressed to a particular audience and tested by it; the public reader of literature was not merely trying to communicate information or argument to an imaginary or undifferentiated audience. She was trying to avoid what Wordsworth or Jane Austen would have seen as a failure of condescension – or, indeed, what might amount to inconsideration of the kind that would in the twentieth century come to be thought of as 'hate speech', speech that wilfully and insultingly ignores the nature of its audience.

Jane Austen would, within scarcely more than a decade of the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, demonstrate the comic possibilities of a character's obliviousness to her associates by having Emma repeatedly say the right thing to the wrong person, as when Emma feelingly testifies to her own former governess about the horrors that await Jane Fairfax if she must become a governess. And Austen would also develop the courtship plot as a way of demonstrating the virtual omnipresence of misdirected statements; only romantic love, finally, suits speakers to understand one another's statements – and to see how little they once did. Wordsworth's experiment in having a speaker adjust himself to his audience in 'The Thorn' has less direction to it. There is no love plot to the mariner's story, and he seems, as a relative newcomer, to bring his audience into focus almost as little as if he were speaking to the invisible audience of writing. Only his desperate introduction and retraction of the question of infanticide suggests the possibility of his alertness to an audience that partially consists of children.

While 'Anecdote for Fathers' and 'We are seven' clearly introduce the notion of a dialogue between adult and child, 'The Thorn' introduces

children into the audience for the mariner's tale only by having the mariner regularly mangle his own tale – as if suddenly conscious that he is speaking in the presence of at least one person, a child scarcely past infancy, who might be personally alarmed and not merely literarily shocked. I have been arguing that a chief feature of Wordsworth's practice in many of the *Lyrical Ballads* poems, including 'The Thorn', is his consciousness of the ways in which the public reading of written texts – an oral version of writing – precipitates out an awareness of the persons who make up the audience. And I have been suggesting that Wordsworth allows such reading practices to exert pressure on his writing – that just as he creates narratives of the growing awareness of pantheism in a poem like 'Nutting', so he develops a literary pantheism that involves dawning or sudden consciousness of his auditors as individuals, persons with lives, feelings, sensitivities.

One element of 'The Thorn' – the name of the young woman described in the poem – would, however, seem to present a significant challenge to the account I am offering: Martha Ray. On the March day when Wordsworth was struck by the appearance of a thorn and determined to write about it, he was in the company of his sister Dorothy and the seven-year-old Basil Montagu, who was living with William and Dorothy while his father, also Basil Montagu, was studying law in London.²¹ Basil Montagu père, Wordsworth's friend from their Cambridge days, was himself the son of an actual person named Martha Ray who had been the mistress of John Montagu, Earl of Sandwich, and who had herself been murdered in 1779 by a disappointed lover, the Reverend James Hackman. Karen Swann and Josephine McDonagh have recently provided dazzling readings of the poem and have not stopped, as many scholars have, with expressing scholarly puzzlement at Wordsworth's having chosen the name Martha Ray for the mad mother of 'The Thorn' when the grandson of the actual Martha Ray was living in his household.²² Both Swann and McDonagh examine the way in which the Hackman of real life and the Martha Ray of imagined life might be seen as suffering from what Erasmus Darwin termed 'erotomania', a love that misdirected itself as violence, and they are both alert to the public sensation that Martha Ray's murder caused and the scandalous publications that detailed it. In Swann's account, 'The Thorn' evidences Wordsworth's queasy inability to distance himself from lurid sensation and his sense that he too traffics in the suffering of women 'in a way that is advantageous to a literary career'.²³ Wordsworth in her view does not keep as much distance from the 'sickly and frantic' as he would like to think.

It would be a strong argument against the case for Wordsworth's heightened sensitivity to the members of his audience as individuals if he were merely using the name Martha Ray to remind young Basil Montagu of a family tragedy and scandal. But I suspect that Wordsworth saw himself as engaged in a different enterprise altogether – that of recognizing how little history children know and of turning that ignorance to good effect. For the Basil Montagu who had gone to Alfoxden in 1795 at the age of four to live with William and Dorothy and who was only seven at the time Wordsworth wrote 'The Thorn' might scarcely have registered the name of Martha Ray as having painful associations, or, for that matter, any associations. Indeed, I suspect that Wordsworth saw himself as reassigning the name Martha Ray and creating a virtual set of connections around the woman of 'The Thorn' that would act, by virtue of having been closer to young Basil's own experience, as a screen against the story of his actual grandmother by the time he would come to hear it. What I think Wordsworth aimed to achieve was a channeling and direction of Basil's own associations that would use the proximity of a fiction to shield him from the harshness of still-distant historical fact for Basil. The Wordsworth who can concern himself enough with his own future thoughts to say to himself that he will think about the leech-gatherer on the moor when next he is depressed is providing a counter-narrative for Basil's future.

'The Thorn' is a poem that not only shies away from talking directly and openly about possible infanticide to an audience including children scarcely past infancy. It also (and in a way that links it with 'Tintern Abbey') aims to provide a screen memory for its auditor – and its auditor's future thoughts. Poetry here speaks for the mind of man, but it sees itself as doing so most fully when it is proleptically responsive to and considerate of particular persons and kinds of persons. What I have been attending to here is the way in which individuals – and not just mountains and silent footsteps – suddenly loom up in Wordsworthian consciousness. Wordsworth's awareness of a distinctive reworking of the relationship between orality and writing enabled him to create poems that did not merely address an anonymous and distant community but figured an inconstant but real awareness of readers as listeners. These are poems that depict themselves as under the pressure of the sudden and looming consciousness of the individuality and sensitivities of their auditors.

Notes

1. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1928), pp. 25–33. I would like to thank the organizers and

- participants of a conference on eighteenth-century conversation at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge and of a lecture series at Princeton University for comments that helped me in the development of this chapter. Conversation with Susan Wolfson of Princeton University has been especially generative.
2. One of the most important of the moments in which Barthes advances this position is his claim that 'the reader is without history, biography, psychology: he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted'. *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148.
3. Nicholas Hudson, "'Oral Tradition': The Evolution of an Eighteenth-Century Concept", in *Tradition in Transition: Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-Century Canon*, ed. Albert Ribeiro and James G. Basker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 162.
4. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
5. Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 102–31. Hereafter cited by page numbers in the text.
6. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, rev. Louis A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), pp. 13–14.
7. Stephen Maxwell Parrish, "'The Thorn': Wordsworth's Dramatic Monologue", *ELH*, 24 (1957), 153–63. See also Susan Wolfson's important essay 'Lyrical Ballads and the Language of (Men) Feeling: Wordsworth Writing Women's Voices', in *Men Writing the Feminine: Literature, Theory, and the Question of Gender*, ed. Thais E. Morgan (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 29–57. There Wolfson stresses the hysteria that unites Martha Ray and the manner and their wandering words.
8. William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), especially pp. 66–83.
9. See Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (1798) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 219–20; Karen Swann, "'Martha's Name,' or The Scandal of 'The Thorn'" in *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry*, ed. Yvonne Pines and Maerea Shreiber (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 60–79; and Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture 1720–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
10. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, p. 148. Hereafter cited by page numbers in the text.
11. 'Lyrical Ballads' and *Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 79. Hereafter indicated as LB and cited by page numbers in the text. Poems in this volume are cited by line numbers in the text.
12. *The Prose Works*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 117. This edition hereafter indicated as PW and cited by volume and page numbers in the text.

13. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 1–33.
14. See Robert Mayo, 'The Contemporaneity of the Lyrical Ballads', *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 486–522.
15. McDonagh, *Child Murder*, p. 79. Hereafter cited by page numbers in the text.
16. Margaret Homans has stressed Wordsworth's obliviousness to Dorothy's presence for most of the poem in her incisive reading of 'Tintern Abbey' and has seen it as a symptom of Wordsworth's exclusion of Dorothy from the symbolic and of his assigning her to a role as auditor and embodiment of his message. Although I think that Homans's case for her position is very strong, I myself emphasize the sudden turn to Dorothy as a genuine shift into acknowledgement rather than a sign of her exclusion. *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 26–7, 76–8.
17. *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 348.
18. In his Note to 'The Thorn', Wordsworth wrote, 'This Poem ought to have been preceded by an introductory poem, which I have been prevented from writing by never having felt myself in a mood when it was probable that I should write it well' (*LB*, 350).
19. Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Frances Ferguson (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), p. 338.
20. Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: History, Aesthetics, and the Subject* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 230–78. See also Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 333–71.
21. Dorothy Wordsworth wrote, on 19 March 1798: 'Wm and Basil and I walked to the hill-tops, a very cold bleak day. We were met on our return by a severe hailstorm. William wrote some lines describing a stunted thorn.' *The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 10.
22. See Swann, "Martha's Name," or The Scandal of "The Thorn", pp. 72–6; and McDonagh, *Child Murder* pp. 72–9. For a fuller account of Swann's view of Wordsworth's thinking about popular taste, see her 'Public Transport: English Romantic Experiments in Sensation', *ANQ*, 6 (1993), 136–42.
23. Swann, "Martha's Name," or The Scandal of "The Thorn", p. 76.

8

The Excursion and Wordsworth's Special Remainder

Paul Hamilton

Crimes against our 'species-being' (*Gattungswesen*) are the culminating charges Marx lays against capitalism in his early Paris manuscripts.¹ These writings were drafted in 1844, not published in full until 1927, and not Englished until 1961; they transformed Marxist thinking in the twentieth century; 'Marx before Marxism' inspired a humanistic Marxism as influential philosophically as the later science of *Das Kapital*. From Korsch and Lukács onwards, the Paris writings were understood as explaining the future for post-Kantian philosophy which Marx and Engels saw embodied in the German working class. For Engels, the 'outcome [*Ausgang*] of classical German philosophy' need not be exclusively the Catholic reaction Heine attributed to Schlegel and Novalis.² To redeploy philosophical insight in romantic fashion could also be to transform its speculative originality through practical collaborations heedless of disciplinary boundaries. From Lukács's praise of Novalis (one of his 'great thinkers of the art of living') to Benjamin's early inspiration in Friedrich Schlegel, new Marxists can be seen to go back to the future when they find precedents for the resuscitation in unlikely languages, sociological and technological, of a humanism whose conventional expression or German ideology had been discredited.³

Yet we still too often assume that to regard as a *species* the humanity whose despoliation through the commodification of labour Marx attacks would have appeared in the preceding period to concede the argument. Wordsworth's frequent invocation of the 'species' seems lodged within a discourse – at best anthropological, at worst Malthusian or proto-Darwinian – that has knocked off its perch Romantic talk of a uniquely human self-consciousness traditionally enlisting artistic support. Installed in its place is a scientific reduction treating human beings as a particular kind of animal and licensing a growing utilitarianism.