

Contents

<i>General Editor's Preface</i>	viii
<i>Some Important Events During the Lives of Wordsworth and Coleridge</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	1
PART 1: ANALYSING LYRICAL BALLADS	5
1 Childhood and the Growth of the Mind	7
'Lucy Gray'	8
'We are seven'	16
'There was a Boy'	23
'Nutting'	32
Conclusions	40
Further Research	41
2 Imagination	43
'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey'	43
'The Nightingale'	56
'Love'	69
Conclusions	81
Further Research	82
3 Old Age: a 'vital anxiousness'	83
<i>Michael: A Pastoral Poem</i>	84
'The Old Cumberland Beggar'	100
'The Fountain'	114
Conclusions	125
Further Research	126
4 Social Issues: 'the mean and vulgar works of man'	127
'The Convict'	128
'The Female Vagrant'	141
'The Thorn'	156

Conclusions	171
Further Research	172
5 Nature and the Supernatural: ‘the strangeness of it’	173
‘Lines written in early spring’	176
‘The Tables Turned’	183
<i>The Rime of the Ancient Mariner</i>	190
Conclusions	205
Further Research	206
PART 2: THE CONTEXT AND THE CRITICS	207
6 The Politics of Wordsworth and Coleridge	209
(a) Wordsworth and the ‘Rabble-rousers’	211
(b) Coleridge and dreams of Utopia	214
(c) 1798 and after	217
7 Reading and Writing in Eighteenth-Century England	220
(a) Publishing, printing and book-selling	221
(b) Effects on writers	224
(c) Readers: education and literacy	227
(d) The Ballad revival	231
8 The Poet as Critic and Theorist	234
(a) Wordsworth and ‘pre-established codes of decision’	234
(b) ‘five hundred Sir Isaac Newtons’: Coleridge’s literary theory	242
9 Dorothy Wordsworth and the Lake Poets	251
(a) Dorothy among the poets	252
(b) ‘more than half a poet’: home at Alfoxden and Grasmere	257
(c) Dorothy herself: ‘Come forth and feel the sun’	261
10 Critical Responses to <i>Lyrical Ballads</i>	264
I. A. Richards	269
Robert Mayo	273

Geoffrey H. Hartman	278
Paul de Man	282
<i>Further Reading</i>	287
<i>Index</i>	289

PART 1

ANALYSING
LYRICAL BALLADS

1

Childhood and the Growth of the Mind

if the child be not constrained too much, and be left sufficiently to her own pursuits, and be not too anxiously tended, and have not her mind planted over by art with likings that do not spring naturally upon it ... she will become modest and diffident.

(Wordsworth, letter to a friend, 1806)

In this chapter I want to begin our discussion of *Lyrical Ballads* by concentrating on one of the major themes of Wordsworth's poetry, that of childhood, and to focus in particular on his special interest in the development of the mind of the child. As well as being a major theme, childhood is also for Wordsworth an important location for a discussion of wider philosophical ideas involving the imagination and nature, which are discussed in subsequent chapters. Accordingly, although I have treated these (and other themes) in separate chapters it is important to be aware of their interrelatedness.

Here, the four poems we will be analysing in detail are:

'Lucy Gray'

'We are seven'

'There was a Boy'

'Nutting'

'Lucy Gray'

The ballad 'Lucy Gray' was written in 1799 during Wordsworth's brief and unhappy residence in the Harz mountains of Germany. His isolation and solitude found sympathetic expression through a story suggested by Dorothy in which a girl becomes 'bewildered' by a snow storm, and falls and drowns in a canal lock near Halifax.

The poem is in three main sections. The first (stanzas 1–3) is in the narrative 'present', looking back to her time and place; the middle section (stanzas 4–14) relates to Lucy's fruitless search for her mother in the storm; the final section returns to the 'present' and the memory of her disappearance.

I have chosen to analyse stanzas 1–9:

Oft I had heard of Lucy Gray,
And when I crossed the wild,
I chanced to see at break of day
The solitary child.

No mate, no comrade Lucy knew; 5
She dwelt on a wild moor,
The sweetest thing that ever grew
Beside a human door!

You yet may spy the fawn at play,
The hare upon the green; 10
But the sweet face of Lucy Gray
Will never more be seen.

'To-night will be a stormy night,
You to the town must go,
And take a lantern, Child, to light 15
Your Mother through the snow.'

'That, Father! will I gladly do;
'Tis scarcely afternoon –
The Minster-clock has just struck two,
And yonder is the Moon.' 20

At this the Father raised his hook
And snapped a faggot-band;

He plied his work, and Lucy took
The lantern in her hand.

Not blither is the mountain roe – 25
With many a wanton stroke
Her feet disperse the powdery snow
That rises up like smoke.

The storm came on before its time,
She wandered up and down, 30
And many a hill did Lucy climb
But never reached the town.

The wretched parents all that night
Went shouting far and wide;
But there was neither sound nor sight 35
To serve them for a guide.

The opening four stanzas make very clear Lucy's isolation but also anticipate her end by the warning that she will 'Never more be seen', highlighting the poem's balladic sense of doom. The opening of the poem is typical of ballad style, with a simple but memorable, mythical anecdote, often handed down by word of mouth concerned with the life (or death) of a local figure.

Stanza 5 suggests a readily compliant, obedient Lucy who is respectful of her father with a strong sense of filial duty. The imminence of the storm reveals her trusting innocence, and eagerness to please ('That, Father! will I gladly do ...', l. 17). Her assignment also reveals her vital function in the family, with a specific role to fulfil and it is filled with a quite onerous mission.

'Not blither' in line 25 stresses her eagerness as well as her naive, trusting nature, which helps prepare her role as the victim. The remainder of stanza 7, with that image of Lucy idly kicking up the snow, beautifully evokes the heedless complacency of childhood – while the word 'wanton' points up her utter absorption in this casual fun. Gradually, and tragically, this abstraction transforms into disorientation, she loses her way, and Lucy becomes enveloped in the snow and consumed into the landscape.

Some of these important elements are hinted at and reinforced elsewhere in the poem. In line 7 she is described as the 'sweetest

thing' and this charm is taken up again with the girl's 'sweet face' four lines later. As well as her endearing cuteness, these references also endorse the feeling of vulnerability she exudes. The simplicity of the natural setting together with its minimalist details are in naturalistic sympathy with the girl's disposition in the poem. However, these points also have the effect of extending Lucy beyond her actuality as a living girl by implying that she is herself part of nature, or at least in close affinity with it. And this idea is further emphasised by the associations made between Lucy and the local animals: the fawn (9), hare (10) and the mountain roe (25). The fact that these endure after her death reminds us of the sense of her as innocent victim.

Some of these issues are anticipated in the second stanza where she is described as

The sweetest thing that ever grew
Beside a human door! (7–8)

in which 'Beside a human door' implies a strange metamorphism, not quite human but indigenous and somewhere on the mysterious threshold between the human and the natural.

So while Lucy is intrinsic to the family she also belongs inherently to the natural scene outside the house. Perhaps this accounts for her readiness to obey her father and her 'wanton' absorption into the landscape once outside. But what can we make of her parents? In the above passage the fact that Wordsworth gives us the actual words of Lucy's father presents him directly before us. Yet at the same time the father seems dogmatic and imposing towards Lucy:

You to the town must go,
And take a lantern (14–15)

After his instruction he turns suddenly, back to his tasks, sharply (and fatally) cutting off his daughter to the storm. His manner is cold, peremptory but, with evident irony, he is redeemed by Lucy's cheerful innocence – at first anyway. He too comes across here as a lonely figure, lost in his work but somehow confident of Lucy's familiarisation with the wilderness. A commanding patriarchal figure, her father

seems god-like and the deftness with which he raises his hook and 'snapped a faggot-band' (22), strengthens the impression of a brusque and forthright man.

The symbolic role of the parents in the poem is pointed up by their oddly curt attitude to Lucy. In blunt terms, Lucy is exploited by her father, shirking the job himself, though stanza 6 implies that he is inattentive rather than culpable, taking her for granted. This in turn heightens Lucy's function as the innocent victim, one strand of the poem being the way she is subjected to the will of others (compare two other poems in which children are sent away: 'The Idiot Boy' in which Betty sends her son for a doctor and he gets lost, and *Michael* in which Isabel reluctantly sends her son Luke to his kinsman and he too becomes 'lost', but in a slightly different sense).

In spite of this, line 33 describes the parents as 'wretched', pointing to their own sense of guilt as well as remorseful loss, and Wordsworth is careful not to wag fingers or turn the poem into a lament. Instead the final section of the poem (stanzas 15 and 16) directs attention away from the parents and onto the mysterious aftermath concerning Lucy herself.

This unexpected ending wrong-foots the reader of course. Yet, further, by suddenly raising the tempo towards that enigmatic void at the end, Wordsworth foregrounds the symbolic elements of the poem and of the eponymous heroine herself. She was never found but has, apparently, become elemental, transmuted into the very nature of the landscape itself (a point anticipated in lines 6–8), taken back into and reclaimed by nature. But since she was never found alive again, we too are led back into the poem for clues.

As so often with Wordsworth's lyrical ballads the simple diction makes the lyric seem simple, even banal. It is even so here, that we have more than a sorry tale of a young girl's death in the winter storm. The final two stanzas enigmatically re-route us back into the poem for a re-reading of its signs. Although her father orders Lucy out on a mission, it is ironically the careless parents themselves who embark on the mission, in search of a lost or evasive childhood. It is they who follow *her* tracks, and try to decipher her signs left in the snow: childhood becomes the moral guide to adulthood and ironically Lucy takes over the educational role. Significantly she holds

a light before her in the storm, 'to light / Your Mother through the snow' (15; and we recall her name derives from the Latin *lux/lucis* for 'light'). Furthermore, her recognition of the moon in line 20 suggests that she sees in it something of a natural, celestial father. She is the light and this, together with her blithe uncomplicated innocence, discloses her role as moral leader.

In death she becomes teasingly elusive. The poem's final line implies that she endures within the moorland wind, ephemeral, immortal and incorporeal, the *genius loci*. In line 62, she 'never looks behind', colloquially suggesting the clearness of her own conscience. Conversely, though 'lost', she persists as a haunting reality of stoicism, loyalty and release from care as her careworn parents trace the ghostly prints of 'Lucy's feet' and 'footmarks small' (lines 44 and 46): like the reader, they will have to interpret such signs in order to interpret and recover the lost life. The death of Lucy is the loss of childhood in the storm of approaching adult life.

In the end Wordsworth is teasingly silent on Lucy's exact position, her 'message' in the poem. Instead he alerts us to the special character of childhood, its mysteriously transcendent quality and special relationship with nature. At the nub of these is Lucy's solitude, a point which is underlined by the fact that when Wordsworth later revised the poem he extended its title to 'Lucy Gray, or Solitude', making explicit what was simply implied

No mate, no comrade Lucy knew;
She dwelt on a wild moor (5–6)

The wild moor (Wordsworth later changed this to 'wide moor') and the absence of friends draw attention to the desolation and loneliness of a lakeland childhood – though Lucy herself does not actually experience loneliness. Yet 'No mate' goes significantly further and even denotes her pre-sexual status.

At the time of her disappearance she is transitional between childhood and adulthood. Literally and figuratively she is moving towards the mother. But her disappearance fixes her at pre-pubescence in the storm of adolescence, and like the 'bride of wood' she represents a sort of linkage, but incomplete. (The storm symbol also appears in

‘Three years she grew’ and there are echoes of it in ‘Nutting’ and ‘There was a Boy’; see below for a discussion of the ‘storm’ symbol.)

She can be seen as a pivotal, if incomplete, link in a poem constructed of antitheses: between country and town, father and mother, high and low, calm and storm. Lucy herself, however, is not presented as incomplete though she is departing into a sort of limbo apparently before her time. In fact her most crucial transition – that between mortal and immortal – has the unmistakable air of fulfilment, even if this remains an unhappy conundrum for her parents.

Central to this theme of bridging mortal and immortal states is that of time. The poem has numerous references to the temporal – for instance, each of its main sections opens with a specific reference to time as well as to physical actions. For Lucy the storm represents a matrix of conflicting natural elements and, ironically, it is through these that she will eventually transcend the realm of the human (which is characterised by the pre-eminence of time and the turmoil of human actions). She enters the realm of the immortal, becoming at one with the ghost-like spirit of nature, an elemental being. This has the effect of subverting the typical ballad ending, away from loss, sadness and remorse, and into an affirmation of the heroic spirit of solitude with its echoes of infinity and eternity. This heroic lesson is the parable which little Lucy sets her parents to learn.

Having said this, Wordsworth’s poem manifests many of the traditional ballad features: simple, musical rhythm, using deceptively plain diction, focused on an intensely dramatic narrative. The poem is also set in conventional ballad metre: four lines alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter, rhymed ABAB. ‘Lucy Gray’ is essentially a species of cautionary tale and one which Wordsworth moulds, extends and elevates, loading with metaphysical themes to breaking point.

This experiment with such a simple poetic form clearly runs the risk of buckling the lyric under its metaphysical cargo. However, Wordsworth successfully manages to avoid this risk. One reason for this success is that he underplays his themes, using the mystery of the narrative (including its surrealistic ending) to provoke the reader into exploring deeper interpretations. His supple and highly imaginative verse, too, with its hints and pointed impressions also suggest

a dimension beyond a plain account of a tragic death. For example, in the above extract,

The storm came on before its time,
She wandered up and down, (29–30)

the expressions ‘storm’, ‘before its time’ and ‘wandered’ function colloquially but, as we see time and again in Wordsworth’s writing, he empowers his diction to work both literally and figuratively often with little discernment between the two.

This sort of semantic economy is evident too in terms of imagery. I have already referred to there being many references to time and action and these help to flag up the poem’s underlying themes of mortality and human turmoil. At the same time they help to deepen a sense of urgency in the ballad, thereby intensifying the drama of the tale too. References to light also figure strongly (see lines 15 and 24, for example), suggesting the theme of enlightenment, and have their correlation in the large cluster of words connected with ‘seeing’ (lines 3, 12, 35, 43, 59 and so on).

Two other points worth noting here are, on the one hand, references to bridges or to crossing (for example in lines 2, 39, 42, 49, 52, 62) and, on the other, images of parts of the body. ‘Bridging’ endorses Lucy’s symbolic and moral role of bonding in addition to the idea of her ‘crossing over’ to the other realm of elemental immortality. Conversely, references to parts of the body give vitality and vividness to the actions of the poem (such as when Lucy takes up the lantern and her feet ‘disperse the powdery snow’) – as well as reminding us of her mortal origins.

Consistent with traditional ballad form, the poem exudes a strong air of fatalism. Wordsworth’s use of past tense from the very beginning and the starkly forbidding statement in line 12 give the whole poem a mythic tenor, the tragedy doomed to be played out in each retelling. However, the switch to present tense in the final section helps to stress Lucy’s immortality, the eternal in her new status as an ever-living child. The supple flexibility of verb tense and the early disclosure of Lucy’s fate act to moderate any tendencies to melodrama inherent in the events by distancing them from the reader. They also

witness the narrator's firm control over the narrative, at the same time bolstering the plot, while his explicit voice in the first and final sections works as a framing device around the events (and the latter is a recurrent feature in *Lyrical Ballads*).

Wordsworth's deft management is apparent too in his manipulation of the reader's expectations. This occurs frequently in his use of negatives: Lucy 'Will never more be seen' (12), 'never reached' (32), 'nor ever lost' (51), 'further there were none' (54) and now she 'never looks behind' (62).

It is not difficult to see that 'Lucy Gray' is an acutely subtle and expansive treatment of a simple dramatic tale. Many of its themes are the major themes of Wordsworth's poetry as a whole. For example, most of the other 'Lucy' poems involve the image of a lost or doomed young girl, especially in the sense, as here, of one crossing over to merge her human existence with that of nature's extensive soul.

In 'She dwelt among th'untrodden ways' the subject's unnerving solitude is underscored in the images of the half-hidden violet and the solitary star (as well as literally in the absence of companions). In fact Wordsworth's fascination with her, her exceptionality, seems to subsist in this very state of being overlooked or undiscovered, virginal. She is, like Lucy Gray, having no mate, 'And very few to love'.

Lucy Gray is in part defined by the negative words and ideas in which she is couched, a correlative for her incompleteness as a developing adolescent. As such, the poem also stresses her eternal juvenescence, intact and fixed. Making similar use of negative sculpting, 'A slumber did my spirit seal' goes even further as a Lucy poem (if indeed it does feature Lucy) and its complex finale again develops the theme of the child coalescing with nature. In an uncanny atmosphere which is almost supernatural, Lucy is again alive, beyond mortal life, beyond the 'touch of earthly years', fused into and subject to the natural forces, 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course' (7). The atmosphere here is uncanny because we can imagine the dead girl, with no will of her own, subject to the mysterious forces of nature (and that troubling phrase 'rolled round' clearly points to this nullifying of the will, the 'spirit' sealed). It is uncanny too because the corollary of her death and altered state is to induce in the poet an uncomfortable realisation of the corpse-like slumber of his own spirit.

'We are seven'

A different view of childhood and one from a different angle is offered in 'We are seven', written in the spring of 1798. The poem's central theme is anticipated with some irony in Coleridge's introductory stanza: 'What should it know of death?' (4). It quickly emerges however that what she does not understand is simply the adult's peculiar perspective on death. She interrogates it and then invalidates it in favour of her own alternative. Her perspective is both a major theme of the poem and the vehicle for presenting it.

'We are seven' is structured into four sections: stanzas 1–3 familiarises us with some of the materialist elements of the girl and her landscape; stanzas 4–9 outline the facts of her family background responding to the narrator's puzzling enquiry; stanzas 10–15 fill out her enigmatic reply, on her own life and the deaths of her siblings; the final leaves a stand-off between these two polarised and entrenched positions. For analysis I have decided to focus on stanzas 13–17.

'The first that died was little Jane;
In bed she moaning lay, 50
Till God released her of her pain,
And then she went away.

'So in the churchyard she was laid,
And all the summer dry, 55
Together round her grave we played,
My brother John and I.

'And when the ground was white with snow,
And I could run and slide,
My brother John was forced to go,
And he lies by her side. 60

'How many are you then, said I,
If they two are in heaven?
The little maiden did reply,
'O master! we are seven.'

'But they are dead; those two are dead! 65
Their spirits are in heaven!'

'Twas throwing words away; for still
 The little maid would have her will,
 And said, 'Nay, we are seven!'

This passage seems to me to be important because in it the girl expands her account of the fates of her sister and brother, but also because it exposes Wordsworth's view of the child's mind, revealed through her attitude to death and mortality.

Beginning with the death of her sister, Jane, the modifier 'little' in line 49 is interesting because, in addition to pointing to Jane's youthful frailty, it takes up a word which the narrator repeatedly uses to demean her. However, the girl's own use of the word has the ironic effect of raising her status in regard to her deceased brother and sister – though it sounds the sort of colloquialism she has picked up from her mother, perhaps. Adult usage is evident too in her account of their deaths,

God *released* her of her pain (51)

and

My brother John was *forced to go* (59) (my italics)

They quit their earthly, mortal existence by 'release' and 'force', but the two descriptions sound like a mother's euphemistic report of the mystery and injustice of premature deaths. In spite of this adult echo, the girl's plain outlook is quite un-adult-like as she continues to sit and somewhat manically sing to them (line 44). And this, of course, is the point of the poem.

Quite often Wordsworth's ballads and shorter lyrics are so simple as to seem (on a first reading at least) deeply obscure or even banal. Often, too, as here, the lyric sets down a situation in a plain, unadorned style as if the point were either simplistically trivial or deviously cryptic. Consequently, Wordsworth's silence and the poem's wide-eyed mystery challenges the reader to go deeper into the poem to discover what he is really about. And when we do this in 'We are seven' we share with the narrator himself some of the mystery concerning this young girl's world view.

What we have, of course, are two distinct ways of seeing and knowing. In addition we have the result of these two ways colliding, plus Wordsworth's silence in between. These ways are clearly evident throughout the poem but are reiterated most bluntly and trenchantly in the final two stanzas – and the exclamation marks there serve to underline the silent gulf set between.

Taking up a theme from 'Anecdote for Fathers', the adult persona tries to impose his bullying and officious logic onto the child's intuitive and spontaneous wisdom. She is just as obstinately loyal to her way of thinking but without the threatening, overbearing intimidation of the adult. In fact the child displays as little emotion concerning the fact of death as she does about the facts of her own view of it,

My brother John was forced to go
And he lies by her side. (60)

After rehearsing their opposed positions on this point, they reach an impasse which parallels the antitheses in the poem (life/death, age/youth, movement/stasis) implying that the gulf between youth and age is unbridgeable – at least by the adult.

However, she does not evade nor is ignorant of the reality of death because in line 49 she declares prosaically 'The first that died' whereas the adults have previously weakened the truth with euphemisms. This is enacted in her games around her sister's grave (line 55) and sitting or singing to both her dead siblings in the churchyard (43–4). At the same time the essential point about her logic lies in the significance which death plays in her outlook: the relationship between the living and the ones who were 'released' or 'forced to go'. For her, the dead are not inanimate objects but living spiritual presences: a dead sister is still no less a sister.

Nor can we accuse her of morbidness concerning her brother and sister. The poem witnesses the vitality of her youth from the beginning,

That lightly draws its breath
And feels its life in every limb. (3–4)

The adult too recalls this later in 'Your limbs they are alive' (34), while the extract presents other reminders of her vigour in playing,

running and sliding (55 and 58). Although lines 41 and 42 hint at the shades of adulthood that later may close about her (knitting and hemming, in stanza 11), she has an untroubled sparkle of imagination. This along with her energy and self-assurance readily help her to accommodate the idea of death.

In contrast to Lucy Gray, the girl of 'We are seven' has great strength of will, particularly in the overbearing presence of adult willpower

The little maid would have her will. (68)

At the same time she politely defers to the adult enquirer with 'master' in line 60 (and 'Sir' in line 45), making her confrontation less personal, less excitable by contrast. Significantly, where Lucy Gray was *sent* outward to become an elemental, wind-blown spirit, the girl here is steadfastly located in a physical context, namely beside the cottage (the 'cottage girl', l. 5). Her strong sense of self-identity and loyalty to her siblings as well as her obdurate rationale help to generate the poem's strong atmosphere of the uncanny. The adult narrator repeatedly attempts to undermine this resolve with his seven-fold use of the epithet 'little'.

So in the end the 'little cottage girl' outsmarts the stern and mighty philosopher. His encounter with her becomes an educational experience for him and the proof of this is the poem itself, which she has directly inspired. A kind of preacher, he attempts to give a moralising sermon as well as a lecture in arithmetic (compare the rationalist father in 'Anecdote for Fathers'). His attitude is a hangover from eighteenth-century rationalism, while his dogmatic persistence reveals him to be a domineering chauvinist – whom the girl satirises as a comic figure. In the end the poet learns *her* lesson. The poem warns against the stultifying intransigence of some adult reasoning but, like 'Lucy Gray', also reveals the great power of the childhood imagination to deconstruct and liberate adult thinking.

Although the general tone of 'We are seven' is one of simple spontaneity, it is, of course, a finely wrought production. On one level the poem is structured via the antiphonal exchange of speakers; but it is organised around its prepositions, especially those referring

to time: till ... then ... And when ... so ... if ... then. The movement at times sounds like an old elementary school arithmetic test led by some dreary pedant,

‘How many are you then, said I,
If they two are in heaven?’
The little maiden did reply,
‘O master! we are seven.’

(61–4)

In fact there are not two but at least three main figures in the poem and the moral of the piece may depend on this fact. Beside the girl and the pedant we hear the poet, the man as he is now, modified by his encounter with this girl. In contrast to the persistently exasperated voice of the querulous adult, the poet's mood is subdued and acquiescent, now distanced by time and change from the original moment. However, while Wordsworth offers no direct comment on his former self, by making the girl seem more percipient, he generously satirises this early version, making himself the ready butt of his mockery.

As well as dictating the form and tone of the poem, the young girl largely determines its diction too. The language as a whole is doggedly simple, even austere, a tribute to Wordsworth's skill in evincing such complex and heroic themes from humble premises. While it is quite spare, its leanness acts to focus the attention firmly on its concrete, realistic details. For example, in the extract, *names*: Jane and John (plus Conway, line 25); *locations*: in the churchyard, the ground, by her side; and *actions* ‘went away’ (52), ‘played’ (55), ‘run and slide’ (58). Elsewhere in the poem we hear precise details of the girl's appearance (stanzas 2 and 3), ages, and the distance of the cottage from the graves (39). In contrast to ‘Lucy Gray’, *place* here takes precedence over *time* and important background ideas are connoted by some deft switching between action and static-ness, both rooted in place; for instance, in the extract, stanzas 14 and 15 (lines 53–60) each juxtaposes playing against lying.

The emphasis on the concrete is, of course, all one with the theme of cold arithmetical logic and it accounts too for the poem's dearth of figures of speech. This dearth tends to lend eminence to particulars which thereby assume metaphorical or symbolic significance; thus

'white with snow' (57) conveys suggestions of death and innocence (likewise 'dry' in line 56). On the other hand 'green' (37), in pointing to the freshness of the graves, also manages to embrace the living girl who intuitively 'feels its life in every limb'. This last quotation appears in the opening stanza and represents the chief figurative element in the poem because, as well as being the means by which the poem's moral is to emerge, it also signals to the reader that the girl stands for more than just herself and operates as a symbol of childhood with its uniquely elusive ways of thinking.

I mentioned a moment ago that in general terms the poem has a deceptive simplicity. A major factor in the creation of this effect lies in the sounds of the poem, especially its rhythm. Clearly the regular ballad metre contributes much to this effect as it does in, say, 'Lucy Gray' and 'The Fountain'. Stanza 13 is a regular example of the English ballad metre, with the stressed syllables indicated

'The first that died was little Jane;
 In bed she moaning lay,
 Till God released her of her pain,
 And then she went away.

(49–52)

In terms of the rhyme, too, simplicity is the key: here ABAB, though a traditional ballad would use ABCB. Obviously such simple and repetitive patterning has affinities appropriately enough with children's nursery rhyme, but also runs a high risk of monotony or of sounding jingly.

I have argued that the very simplicity of the poem is one of the devices by which Wordsworth draws attention to the serious themes of the poem. The repetitive syndrome of the metre also plays a useful function by reiterating the 'When we are seven' refrain which gradually takes on an insistent drone-like effect, undermining the adult speaker in the poem. This quasi-hypnotic rhetorical feature is supported too by the shortfall of the final line of each stanza whose abruptness echoes the young girl's obstinacy. The result is that the staccato effect helps her to discompose her inquisitor's fluency.

On the other hand, and as we might have expected, Wordsworth successfully minimises the risk of monotony and he achieves this

through a range of measures. Most of the lines of the poem are end-stopped but the occasional enjambement creates a natural fluency (see lines 23–4 and 27–8). Then there is internal rhyme which the poem uses extensively – and typically in the following lines

Their graves are green, they may be seen. (37)

Twelve steps or more from my mother's door. (39)

While this contributes to the variety and density of the poem's overall sounds, it perhaps detracts from the natural speech rhythms which Wordsworth explicitly aims for elsewhere in the poem.

Variations in the metre too are a major source of diversity in 'We are seven', working in sympathy with natural speech cadences. For example, in the extract Wordsworth anticipates the closing of the poem by incorporating irregularities in the two final stanzas. Lines 62 and 63 break the regular pattern but the final stanza goes further. As well as sporting an additional line, stanza 17 finishes the poem with two lines containing the 'full' four stresses in each, emphasising the finality of the girl's refrain,

The little maid would have her will,
And said, 'Nay, we are seven!'

(and note the resolute, unexpected stress on 'Nay').

Is the poem a success? Given the inherent divisiveness of the two voices and perspectives there is a strong risk here of fragmentation. However, the presence of the 'later' persona, the poet himself acts as a medium for cohesion. The convergence of theme, character and poetic resource injects a strong sense of cohesion as well as much of the poem's interest. The girl's character is a major contributor to this interest and instils the poem with deeper curiosity, along with some comic perverseness and an uncanny, even discomfoting quality. In this matter Wordsworth's silence also undoubtedly adds to the strength of her position here, holding back on psychological conjecture. The adult character's persistent questioning, however, does supply structural momentum at the same time drawing attention to the key question of the girl's psychology and her persistent refusal to mourn, which is the poem's crux.

In reviewing this poem late in his life, Coleridge praised Wordsworth's 'wonder rousing' insights here. In referring to the child's mysterious gift of philosophy, he talked of one who has read the 'eternal deep'. Coleridge himself believed that such childhood percipience probably sprang from the eternal spirit of God at work within the young unfettered child. Although he himself was not always positive about such a source, he believed that Wordsworth's silence on the origins of the girl's perspicacity here was a weakness of the poem. On the other hand, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth insists that his intention in what is, after all, a relatively small-scale composition was quite limited, being simply to portray

the perplexity and obscurity which in childhood attend our notion of death, or rather our utter inability to admit that notion.

'There was a Boy'

'There was a Boy' is another important poem of childhood in which silence again plays a key role. Contemporary with 'Lucy Gray' and 'We are seven', it also has at the heart of its narrative a mysterious untimely death. That Wordsworth thought highly of it as a treatment of the 'growth of the mind' is shown by the fact that he published it again in 1815 (in *Poems*) and included it as an episode in his epic biographical poem *The Prelude, or The Growth of the Mind* (it appears in Book 5, where it is usually referred to as 'Winander Boy'):

There was a Boy, ye knew him well, ye Cliffs
 And islands of Winander! many a time,
 At evening, when the stars had just begun
 To move along the edges of the hills,
 Rising or setting, would he stand alone, 5
 Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake,
 And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
 Pressed closely palm to palm and to his mouth
 Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
 Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls 10
 That they might answer him. And they would shout

Across the watery vale and shout again
 Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
 And long haloos, and screams, and echoes loud
 Redoubled and redoubled, a wild scene 15
 Of mirth and jocund din. And, when it chanced
 That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,
 Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
 Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
 Has carried far into his heart the voice 20
 Of mountain torrents, or the visible scene
 Would enter unawares into his mind
 With all its solemn imagery, its rocks
 Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
 Into the bosom of the steady lake. 25
 Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,
 The vale where he was born: the churchyard hangs
 Upon a slope above the village school,
 And there along that bank when I have passed
 At evening, I believe, that near his grave 30
 A full half-hour together I have stood,
 Mute – for he died when he was ten years old.

The poem consists of three sections: the first recalls a solitary boy who stands amid the trees, cliffs and islands of ‘glimmering’ lake Winander and imitates the hootings of owls until their answering calls and echoes crescendo in a riot of sound; in the middle section the sudden silences would startle him with a deeply incisive shock reaching ‘far into his heart’; the final part involves a leap in time as Wordsworth stands in silent meditation beside the grave of the boy.

A much brighter poem than ‘We are seven’, ‘There was a Boy’, however, begins in a reflective quietness. ‘There was a Boy’ sets up a chatty, balladic opening to the poem while the past tense ‘was’ prepares for the elegiac tone to follow (and the phrase ‘I believe’ in line 30 makes explicit the subjectivity of Wordsworth’s recollection). Once more the poem appears to be established on a fairly bare circumstance of an odd fellow calling to the birds, yet its mere 32 lines involve a daring interplay of thought and allusion which sets it apart decisively from the two previous ‘childhood’ poems. A further

important contrast with them is Wordsworth's self-confident use of blank verse here, its longer measure reinforcing the conversational effect while also offering a more substantial vehicle for this poem's sophistications. Again, Wordsworth's voice is the structuring principle but the chief centre of interest lies, at first anyway, in the bizarre chaos of sound kindled by the boy, followed up by the intriguing phrase, that 'gentle shock of mild surprise' (19).

Wordsworth clearly identifies with and has deep sympathies with the boy of Winander. On the other hand, he never quite involves us directly in the emotions experienced – not until the very last line at least. He holds the reader at arm's length to keep his own meditations in the foreground (the sudden switch in time in line 25 is another device to objectify the reader). Like the boy himself (who is in fact the young Wordsworth) the poet ends up in silent meditation over troubling thoughts: the passage of time, the 'death' of his own childhood, and the significance of the role played by childhood in the growth of the adult mind.

We come back again to that important word 'was' in the first line. It is a key pointer accentuating the pivotal factor of time in the poem's memory as well as in the development of the poet's psychology. The following lines seem to me important in keeping these features to the fore:

many a time,
At evening, when the stars had just begun
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone. (2–5)

The timeless stars and the ancient hills frame the boy within the context of eternity as well as within the localised homeland of the lakes. The almost endless spiralling turbulence of birdcalls plus the reference to heaven in line 4 render the scene a dizzying maelstrom of history and terror. The word 'far' in line 20 hints at the depth and intensity of this danger but also the sublime potency of the human heart and mind.

The poem has a profusion of time imagery: as well as the evening and the rising and setting of the stars, there are 'pauses', 'half-hour',

'ten years old', birth and death, memory, plus the many adverbs of time ('when', 'then', 'sometimes'). The effect of all this is to mould us to the poem's subtle temporal framework: dealing with two separate but crucial moments, the whole composition springs from the operation of memory, or 'association'. Most menacingly, time is death, the graveyard, 'hangs / Upon a slope above the village school'. Time oppresses childhood with an image which recalls stanza 10 of 'We are seven': death is ever-present even in the full bloom and pleasure of youth. Paradoxically, even amid the eternal, mortality exerts a deep sombre awareness. This moment of silence, in which mind and nature are no longer in certain coordination, is the prefiguring for Wordsworth here of his own death.

In the poem 'Lucy Gray', Lucy is described as a 'living child' (58) even though she was lost in the storm and in 'We are seven' the young girl imbues her dead siblings with an obdurate immortality. But what of the boy of Winander who 'died when he was ten years old'? In literal terms, Wordsworth again cannot conceive of the boy as other than dead and in his grave. In allegorical terms, however, the situation is more complicated. The 'cliffs / And islands of Winander' knew him well and probably still do. The poem itself gives life to the boy so long as men or women have eyes to read it. But if we think of Wordsworth here as meditating on his own childhood, symbolised by the Winander boy, then the boy lives on as the changes that the poet himself has undergone and which are also represented in the middle sections of the poem.

Although we know that the boy dies at age ten (Wordsworth later altered this to twelve) it is not clear how old he is when the main events of the poem take place. While the cause of his death remains a mystery (and is something of a loose end in the poem) his untimely decease comes before the onset of self-consciousness. We observe him as a familiar figure of the local natural landscape – again the *genius loci* – a Puckish fellow with an impish vigour, fully in tune with nature, figured in his rascally power to deceive the birds in 'mirth and jocund' (16). By virtue of this skill he takes on the very nature of the owl, adding a sort of natural animalism to his boyish cunning and playful vitality. Until line 17 it is the delight of boyhood that we witness, but then the murmur of a more solemn music intervenes.

In a preface to the poem in 1815, Wordsworth drew more attention to the power of internal events, set off by the deep silence after the birds' failure to return the boy's calls,

The Boy, there introduced, is listening, with something of a feverish and restless anxiety, for the recurrence of the riotous sounds which he had previously excited; and, at the moment when the intenseness of his mind is beginning to remit, he is surprised into a perception of the solemn and tranquillising images which the Poem describes.

It is easy to imagine the lad delighting in his hubristic knack of inflicting madness on the landscape. Line 15 describes it as a 'wild scene', pointing both to the natural environment but also to the chaos of sound that fills it so rapidly and completely ('Winander' is Lake Windermere in Cumbria if you fancy visiting the spot and flexing your own hooting muscles).

Wordsworth's fine linguistic economy selects just sufficient pastoral detail for the reader to grasp an impression of the 'visible scene' (21): the cliffs, islands, hills, glimmering lake, watery vale, evening and the stars, rising setting, rocks, woods. Hootings speedily become the 'riotous sounds', and riot speedily, mysteriously becomes an awesome silence, a void. The poem begins with an almost palpable evocation of scene and sound, yet the middle section (lines 17–25) points to a much deeper pact with nature and a knowledge of its psychological influence on the young person. We can now move on to trace its process and effects.

As in so many of Wordsworth's 'nature' poems, solitude is an essential element in communion with the spirit of nature. When alive, the boy 'stands alone' and his grave also seems lonely, while Wordsworth too, companionless, mirrors him. As corollary to the absence of human mates, the boy enjoys a close intimacy with nature, so much so that a strange reciprocity coheres between them. Surprisingly, although Wordsworth briefly dematerialises the cliffs and islands, the bosom of the lake, he does the reverse with the boy, identifying him with material nature.

All the same, while the boy stands outside of nature, stirring and disrupting its complacent serenity, he becomes deeply affected when

nature suddenly replies to his tormenting art with her equally troubling silence,

Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents, or the visible scene. (19–21)

Her power to shock entails him being receptive to her penetrating images and torrents (compare the moralising effect of the ‘silent trees’ on the boy in ‘Nutting’).

At this point, the boy’s hooting calls connects him spiritually with Lucy Gray. He momentarily transcends into purely natural, elemental being, recalling the way that Lucy transmuted into the mountain winds. The silence mocks his art, carrying into his innermost core the voice of nature together with a vision of her landscape: this generates a new profound type of silence, now internalised as an inner serenity and expressed metaphorically in the ‘bosom of the steady lake’ (25).

It is, of course, a defining moment for the child. It is also an awesome, frightening moment originating in his idly hubristic ‘mirth and jocund’. The joke turns cold, worse than cold, shadowing forth his death only five lines later. Solemn music converts the boy’s fun and games into a prescience of disaster.

Wordsworth’s poetry has many such unnerving premonitions of human transience. For example, from *Lyrical Ballads*, the movement of the moon in ‘Strange fits of passion’ and the chilling ‘murmurs’ which perturb many of the poems (‘Nutting’, ‘Three years she grew’, ‘Tintern Abbey’, for example). And in *The Prelude* there are the well-known examples of the flood in Books V and XIII and of the decaying Alpine trees in Book VI. In ‘There was a Boy’ the boy himself is too young to interpret the full burden of the ‘solemn imagery’ here but the many references to time point to a dawning sense of mortality, the approaching shades of what Wordsworth describes elsewhere as the ‘Shades of the prison house’ growing about the child (‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, l. 67).

Nature and her icy lore bring the joke to a sober end. They strike deep within the boy’s ‘heart’ (20), even if but dimly understood by

him. A sort of hint, a shadowy forewarning, it is unformulated except on the level of an occult amorphous idea, but nevertheless intelligible on those terms. And even nature's material delights – fair words and beautiful spots – are ultimately unconsoling. By the same token, that 'uncertain heaven' in line 24 even undermines the promise of a Christian afterlife (compare the heaven promised in 'We are seven' and the diurnal fate at the close of 'A slumber did my spirit seal' – which perhaps emulates the fate of the Winander boy).

What then does happen to this boy after he has incited this madness on the landscape? What does *it* do to *him*? The complexity in lines 20–5 is important here and their meanings are entwined with Wordsworth's elegant and surrealistic vision. The middle section of the poem is a kind of literal whirlpool within whose knotty currents the drama is enacted. It is a twisting arc of sounds which reverberate against each other until the eerie silence slashes through it all,

carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents, or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake. (20–5)

The widening coil of sound mirrors the widening circle of chaos he has provoked. 'Heart' (20) and 'bosom' (25) both imply the emotions, of course, but at the same time suggest a central point of refuge within it, calm within or beneath the confusion. While this lad is utterly engrossed in his mischievous prank, nature furtively ('unawares', l. 22) steals 'into his mind'.

The external landscape also finds its inner, mental, landscape. What Wordsworth engages with here is one of his foremost poetic themes: the effect of the natural landscape on the sensitive, especially the youthful, imagination. The first part of the poem reveals that the boy is already attuned to the natural wavelengths of the landscape whereas lines 20–5 speak to the precise moment when nature fastens on the receptive imagination, so that its 'solemn imagery' – rocks, woods, etc. – becomes imprinted acutely on the consciousness.

Wordsworth referred explicitly to the process in his 1815 Preface to the poems

I have begun with one of the earliest processes of Nature in the development of this faculty. Guided by one of my own primary consciousnesses, I have represented a commutation and transfer of internal feelings, cooperating with external accidents to plant, for immortality, images of sound and sight, in the celestial soil of the Imagination.

The power of nature (both in its turbulent elements and in its power to penetrate the mind) is matched by and mixes with the tremendous power of the human imagination.

Like the girl in 'We are seven' and the Lucy of 'Three years she grew', this boy of Winander has a highly charged imagination, playful, spontaneous, by turns innocent and fiendish. Lucy's mind too is amorphous, and receptive, highly attuned to the call and influence of nature. Here, in 'There was a boy' the crucial moment in the centre of the poem brings to a climax those first gropings of the boy's ripening imagination, stimulated by nature's shaping hand.

But then, again like Lucy, the boy dies. The poem, like the boy, is snatched from us. 'There was a Boy' is one of the most important of Wordsworth's early poems on the interaction between nature and the child's mind, especially the faculty of the imagination. It is a vital theme in many of the poems of this early phase in Wordsworth's verse, but here its treatment is less explicit and not quite fully realised, largely because meaning defers to the brilliant feast of imagery. The occasion described is undoubtedly a prelude but exactly to what remains elusive. The moment is indeed gnomic – highly suggestive but ultimately indefinite.

In talking about the theme of the imagination it is of course salutary to distinguish between that of the boy (who experiences its thrill) and that of the poet (who attempts the describing, having been the boy himself). The imagination of the boy is manifested both in his impersonation of the owls as well as in his incipient responsiveness to the natural setting. Wordsworth's imagination is evident here, too, in his artistic choices – the selection and arrangement of narrative, images, sounds, metre, voice and discourse and so on. The two personas are linked by two key momentary silences (the 'deep silence'

of the boy in line 18 and the 'Mute' Wordsworth in line 32) which further encourages us to see that the young child is indeed the 'father' of the mature poet himself. Seen in this way, the present silence (of Wordsworth's in line 32, that is) taps into the lineage of silence trailing back to that key formative moment in his youth.

Man and boy are re-united in a curiously artistic manner. Like the boy's hootings, the poem itself is addressed to 'ye cliffs / And islands of Winander!' (lines 1–2) and this is in order to make us aware of yet another symbolic role of the boy's hootings. He holds his own sort of mirror up to nature and his mimetic skill successfully deceives the birds. These hootings are perfect onomatopoeia – and the poem itself actually begins to hoot in onomatopoeic sympathy (between lines 8 and 10: 'too', 'to', 'through', 'blew', 'hootings', 'to'). The boy and the man are both poets in sound effects and the poem as a whole is the artistic outcome of Wordsworth's mute meditation on the boy's communion with nature, the growth of his own artistic imagination.

Furthermore, there is present in the poem a third strand of the imagination theme: the reader himself. I have already referred to Wordsworth's Preface to his collected poems of 1815 and in it he comments on the highly important influence which may be exerted on the reader's own imagination by the key words of a poem. Such words ought to (and do) reach into our minds to trigger off the imagination as a prelude to our own constructions of the poem. In this respect, it seems to me that the word 'wild' in line 15 is just such a key item. In 1798 the word 'wild' carried a much stronger impression than it perhaps does today, with slightly shocking resonances, and for us it acts to connect raw and primitive nature with the riot of crazed noise which fills it, together too with the torrents of emotion that are borne into the boy's imagination.

The poem as a piece is, of course, superbly effective in evoking the pictorial scene and the sounds of a quite intensely critical moment, the fusing together of the audible and the 'visible scene'. Its language, like its ideas, is clearly that of an adult while adopting the uncomplicated *parole* of the child (using it to convey quite complex concepts). However, the diction is also among the poem's weaknesses, at least on a simple level, with over-dependence on the conjunction 'and' – though we might generously forgive its twelve incidences in thirty-two lines as the recreation of childlike excitement.

In contrast to the two previous poems under discussion ‘There was a Boy’ is mercifully spare of Wordsworth’s pieties. As a statement of nature’s power to enthral the mind and as an evocation of a momentous episode it is beautifully successful – even if the lyrical beauty subordinates the poem’s metaphysics. In our next poem, ‘Nutting’, Wordsworth focuses on familiar themes but produces a gem of both metaphysics and descriptive effect.

‘Nutting’

With the poem ‘Nutting’ we reach a different order of childhood – and an altogether different order of poetic quality. It is a beautiful, brilliant piece of writing and it is one of the highlights of *Lyrical Ballads* – though strictly speaking it is not a ballad but a more elegiac, conversational poem. In a later memoir of the poem, Wordsworth explained that the poem had been intended for his autobiographic *The Prelude*, and it shares some of that work’s magnificent condensation of feeling and artistry (it also anticipates themes richly articulated in his *Immortality Ode* and *The Excursion*). Unlike the poems discussed so far ‘Nutting’ focuses on an older youth, one on the hesitant threshold of adulthood, and its main event deals with first steps towards the world of the adult. I have chosen to concentrate on the following extract (lines 20–55) for discussion:

A little while I stood,	20
Breathing with such suppression of the heart	
As joy delights in; and with wise restraint	
Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed	
The banquet, or beneath the trees I sate	
Among the flowers, and with the flowers I played;	25
A temper known to those, who, after long	
And weary expectation, have been blessed	
With sudden happiness beyond all hope.	
Perhaps it was a bower beneath whose leaves	
The violets of five seasons re-appear	30
And fade, unseen by any human eye,	
Where fairy water-breaks do murmur on	
For ever; and I saw the sparkling foam,	
And with my cheek on one of those green stones	
That, fleeced with moss, beneath the shady trees,	35

Lay round me scattered like a flock of sheep,
I heard the murmur and the murmuring sound,
In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay
Tribute to ease; and, of its joy secure,
The heart luxuriates with indifferent things, 40
Wasting its kindness on stocks and stones,
And on the vacant air. Then up I rose,
And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage; and the shady nook 45
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being: and unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Even then, when from the bower I turned away,
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings, 50
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees and the intruding sky. –

Then, dearest Maiden! move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch, – for there is a Spirit in the woods. 55

Again the surface narrative is fairly straightforward: the poet recalls a day when, as a youth, he was decked out by his landlady ('my frugal Dame') for a solitary excursion to collect hazelnuts; resting in unspoilt seclusion, he relishes the deep natural joys of this place until in a sudden frenzy he sets about the savage plunder of the trees; eventually he comes to regret his destructive outburst, and in the final lines the older man delivers a penitential prayer to the deity in nature.

Once more our theme is time. Unlike the poem as a whole, the extract opens with a reference to time, 'A little while I stood' and there are many such references throughout (for example, lines 26, 30 and 47–8). As line 48 makes apparent, the poem deals chiefly with two important moments: the 'past' of the central episode, framed by the 'now' of the adult's memory and conscience, convened through lines 48–9. There is also a third important element of time in the poem, as we shall come to below.

The early mention of the Dame's advice on clothing helps to establish his youthfulness and inexperience and then the novelty of the experience, his freedom and independence. 'Breathing with such suppression

of the heart' (21) recalls the awe of the boy on entering the mysterious copse while at the same time emphasising the breath-catching effect on the older narrator as he recalls it. Such sharp psychological touches are distinctly redolent of the mature Wordsworth.

Rolled round in this psychology (and shared with the reader too) is his awful realisation in line 51 that youth and its acute sensitivity has now passed away even at the moment of its rich indulgence ('I felt a sense of pain'). This sadness is hinted at too in the highly significant word 'shades' in line 53 and the characteristic Wordsworthian 'murmur' in lines 32 and 37.

Conversely, the narrator comforts himself with the reflection that such moments 'cannot die' (3), they are 'heavenly', immortalised in the memory. The sensitivity of youth – so highly alert to the effects of nature – is also extended in another way; it is transmuted into the adult's recognition of nature's power but also into the poet's creative sensibility, the fact that he has converted his private experiences into poetry. This and other moments (or 'spots of time' as Wordsworth called them) became immortalised through their deep moral effects, as here, working on the young man's conscience and emotions to bring about those feelings of shame and discomfort referred to in the conclusion of the poem and implicit in its diction (for example, 'ravaged' in line 44, and 'Deformed and sullied' in 46). The spirit in the woods has entered and slyly transformed his soul.

After the opening to the poem, whose main task is to lead us into the bowery dell, the verse undergoes a clearly noticeable change (at line 20) in mood and tone. As the boy enters the romantic dell, the poetry itself becomes enchanted in a rich sinewy diction, synthesising image and music in studied rapture. He presses his cheek against one of the mossy stones at the water's edge, and

I heard the murmur and the murmuring sound,
 In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay
 Tribute to ease; and, of its joy secure,
 The heart luxuriates with indifferent things. . . .

(37–40)

Notice the effect here of the word 'that', revealing Wordsworth's confidence in a shared feeling, with a reader young once and partnering

in these effects and those to follow. The sense of happiness is so exultant and profound that the boy begins to commune with indifferent, non-human things in nature. It luxuriates too in the simple joy of words.

It is a poem focusing on a rite of passage, of youth in transition, beginning and ending in experience, though two very different experiences it has to be said. At the core of the extract, the excursion by the boy falls into two parts: the discovery and delight in the nature of the dell and then his despoilment of it. And as we would expect, the two contrasting moods and activities are reflected in the style of the verse. In the first (lines 20–42) combining joy and tranquillity, with imagery of happy sensual pleasure and discovery, Wordsworth deploys longer vowels together with soft ‘s’ and ‘f’ sounds and the murmuring ‘r’. At this point, the blank verse is characterised by regularity with loose sentence structure, the calmness underpinned by the use of run-over lines (the longest utterance of the poem appears at this moment, extending over lines 33–42).

Such freedom in the verse not only sympathises with the calmness of the original occasion but also collaborates with the tenor expected in a conversational poem, recollected in tranquillity. At the same time, the words ‘suppression of the heart’ (21) and ‘restraint’ (22) hint that the happy calm confines the burgeoning youthful energy so that it wells up below. This is likewise echoed in the muscular music of the verse: for instance, note the richly palpable blend of consonant and vowel in line 38,

In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to play

(try reading it aloud, or whisper it to a close friend, and mark the voluptuous sensuality of those lip and tongue syllables).

What image, though, does this create of youth itself? Above all, there is freedom of course. After the patronage and tutelage of adults, the boy is set free to roam, to explore, discover, feel and express himself, first in joy and then in destructiveness as emotion overtakes him. And this is another way in which this poem differs from the two previous: freedom as the inspiration of the whole experience. It is, as I have already noted, Wordsworth focusing on a stage in life that is

highly responsive to nature's allure, with a deep capacity to be moved (by nature but also by what nature provokes inside). All of experience lies before the boy in a time of discovery and imagination, and he finds a new type of awareness, a new type of joy, one symbolised by the romantic bower.

Nevertheless, in Wordsworth experience is never a neutral occurrence and the important point here is, of course, the element of learning: both about nature and about oneself. When the boy hears the 'murmur' in line 32, he hears a figurative premonition of the voice of nature and of something urgent within himself (as well as a foreboding of the 'pain' and 'shades' of much later).

The poem presents the boy with two teachers, two women: the 'frugal Dame' at the start, advising him to wear rough beggar's clothing for the expedition, and the 'dearest Maiden' (53), realised and acknowledged by the adult poet. The maiden is clearly the personification of the spirit of nature, and in a Rousseauesque impulse the boy breaks away from school learning (signified by the Dame) in favour of experiential learning, experience at first hand in nature. Dressed in beggar's weeds and in tremulous solitude he becomes immersed in the music and the lore of nature.

A virgin himself, the boy steps into an archetypal maidenly landscape ('green' and 'unseen', lines 31 and 34). The reference to fairy (32) and later to the 'Spirit in the woods' (55), signals to the reader the prospect of strange, even supernatural phenomena, of transformation and transcendence. And Wordsworth does not disappoint us. The virgin boy discovers the bower and in doing so also finds a new awareness of self and his sexuality. Wordsworth explores all three as destinations for the changes which the poem explores.

The poem essentially symbolises a first sexual encounter for the pubescent boy. It abounds in sexual and quasi-sexual imagery: the 'dear nook' is the 'virgin scene' (20; and 'unvisited', 16) which he forces his way into (14). Overwhelmed by his emotion at the discovery and then his penetration, he 'luxuriates' in its 'voluptuous' sensuality until in the 'merciless' act of robbing its fruit he reaches a climax of orgasmic riot and ravishes it, leaving it 'sullied' (46). The final lines of the middle section rehearse a sort of post-coital tristesse, a cadence of silence and pain.

Underpinning the spontaneous arousal and joy is Wordsworth's marvellously subtle shading of emotion. In fact it is the heart that governs the centre of this poem. Wordsworth brilliantly draws together atmosphere, setting and action along with the delicate, almost imperceptible modulations of the boy's feelings. The latter are mirrored in the soft nuances of alliteration, building up by degrees to the climactic violence and rapine in line 43 with its strongly pulsating, monosyllabic measure,

And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage. (43-4)

Now set free, the boy determines his journey ahead and forces the way in, blindly as it happens, too. He is at this moment unaware of the tenacious effects of nature's grasp on him as he blunders into the secret, trap-like bower, until at last he reaches the admonitory silence in line 52.

Like Blake before him, Wordsworth poignantly draws out the full sense of anguish and post-coital melancholy in the lost innocence of childhood. The onset of sexuality, of carnality, is the irreversible moment of loss, too, of that very childhood, sensibility and freedom which led to the experience in the first place. Wordsworth foregrounds this not as joyous fulfilment in the consummated moment but as the melancholy of deflation, 'when from the bower I turned away' (49). Although superficially exultant, 'rich beyond the wealth of kings' (50) it has brought no lasting recompense, but instead a 'sense of pain' and 'shades' of morose nostalgia, and a tension between the two.

Departure from the magic bower is also departure from childhood. It is Wordsworth's departure of course, written by the mature man so the metaphors of lust and rapine issue from him not the young 'nutter', a point that further underlines the latter's innocence – he is not at that moment aware of the real significance of his actions, nor of the critical power of nature's nurture and moral influence.

Nature here functions of course as both the setting or landscape of the poem and also as the interacting spirit of that landscape (with the power to 'kindle or restrain', as Wordsworth emphasises in 'Three years

she grew'). What more precisely he intends by 'nature' will be the ongoing question of our whole discussion (and especially Chapter 5), but here we can take a few important steps towards a preliminary understanding of his ideas concerning nature. A good starting point is – ironically – the final line of the poem:

for there is a Spirit in the woods (55)

After he has been kitted-out in protective clothing the boy sets off to discover the 'unseen' virgin bower and when he does he is overwhelmed and transfixed by its beauty, the 'sudden happiness', in line 28. A moment of stillness ushers in the primordial setting and he delights in its sensual charms. It is an almost sacred religious instant (a 'suppression of the heart') as he kneels to savour the caress of the mossy stone on his cheek. Falling beneath the enchantment of the 'Spirit in the woods', he has become seduced by the delicate pleasure of leaves, flower and stream.

At length, however, this gentle repose is spontaneously put to flight by the intervention of his frenzied passion. Wordsworth clearly posits a strong potential for wanton destructiveness in the human (or at least the male) psychology, which is latent and released in the process of seduction and arousal. As I have already pointed out above, his use of the word 'that' in line 38 proposes that these impulses are commonly shared – a radical psychological idea for Wordsworth's day. After a holy communion with nature the boy breaks violently away from it in a blind tumult of devastation.

Consistent with this idea of a shared human fallibility Wordsworth abstains from judgemental comment on the youth, his own younger self. The implication is that youth is not culpable, acting from human nature, and in any case, his excursion is approved by his 'frugal Dame' ('frugal' identifying her with nature). Such discordant acts are not unfamiliar in Wordsworth (see *The Prelude*, 1805, l.461–4, for instance) and are usually proffered as a significant element in the process of nature learning.

The moral formula of the poem admits of a further allegorical facet. The boy is graced with a glimpse into spiritual bliss attended by overtones of eternity and immortality (the third thematic element of

time, which I mentioned above). Here destructiveness too links into this allegorical strand: the bower as Edenic garden permits the boy a vision of paradise and eternity, existing outside of time, with its fruit and maiden, and his nature draws him blindly on to re-enact the fall of man, into 'pain' and 'shades' of lost innocence. He is 'turned away' not by God but by his own sense of shame.

This is a lapse on the personal level, of course, yet Wordsworth seeks to draw a more universal psychology of mankind in nature, or indeed nature's effect on mankind. In this we are necessarily mindful of the important role played by the imagination. Beginning at the beginning, the boy sets off physically resistant to nature's effects, inured within his protective rags. Yet the very object of the trip is to exploit nature by collecting hazel nuts. He is completely unprepared for nature's devious moral and spiritual sway on himself, which has begun by the moment he enters the grove – if not before.

The chief indication of this translation appears in line 40 where he 'luxuriates' in nature's objects, its stores, trees, flowers and so forth, as 'indifferent things'. Yet the boy's imagination has already succumbed to its spell, exemplified in his childlike simile in line 36, which compares a group of stones to a 'flock of sheep'. So marked is its transfiguring effect on the youth that the adult is now unable to fix exactly when the change began (lines 51–2; compare 'Three years she grew' in which Lucy becomes a changeling, a nymph of the river and mountains, and as such transcends the human world to the natural, existing eerily on the margins between the two).

The boy discovers that nature is not only active but virulently so, and yet it is not as a man that he recognises the educational effects of this encounter, (the child is father to the man). The poem sets out, implicitly at least, the processes by which the child learns to see nature in this new light. The condition of solitude is again recognisably important since, in this condition, nature can work directly without diversion on the young receptive senses. Through the senses nature works first on the emotions (while subduing the reason and logic) and eventually transfiguring the mind in rapture. Nature, a highly mercurial if cryptic agent is personified in the coda of the poem as a goddess 'a maiden' with the power to induce calm and joy and, eventually, after some destructive frenzy, a kind of mental

rebirth. The whole process is signified in the conventional symbol of the spiritual journey undergone by the boy, concurrent with his actual physical journey (a journey which naturally inspires ready comparisons with that of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* not least because both main characters come to penitential sadness and wisdom by way of guilt and shame at their offences against the natural world: see Chapter 5).

It is not difficult to recognise how central to the process is the boy's imagination. Nature is enabled to act on the predisposed senses and emotions by triggering off his imagination. It succeeds as a species of teacher since his imagination is such an actively responsive faculty – so responsive in fact that it gives rise to the violent overflow of emotion in the latter part of the poem (it is this element of the *active* imagination that differentiates the boy from the younger children in 'Lucy Gray' and 'We are seven'). Through the imagination he learns directly from the 'dearest Maiden' the goddess of nature, 'Spirit in the woods' (contrasting with the Dame, the other female 'teacher' in the poem, who as his school house matron is associated with more formal pedagogic learning). Through his encounter with natural, physical objects the child's inward eye is permitted a momentous vision of eternity and this, together with some equally potent hormonal forces, impels him beyond the threshold on his transition into adulthood.

Conclusions

This chapter has examined in detail two important areas in Wordsworth's poetry: the poet's attitude to childhood, and the role of nature in the development of the young mind. Childhood is a time of vulnerability, innocence, discovery, a distinctive form of inner space and a unique vision entailing a special relationship to time and mortality.

We have seen that for Wordsworth childhood is a vitally important period in life because the child's mind is particularly sensitive to the highly formative influences of nature or, as the critic Nicola Trott has described it, 'an immaculate openness to natural influence'.

This is not to say, of course, that Wordsworth adopts a simplistic attitude to childhood as merely a sort of idyllic golden age untroubled by care or mortal need. It seems to me to be quite the opposite and the complexities for Wordsworth are encapsulated in two paradoxes which have emerged from our discussion of childhood.

In the first, childhood is characterised as a period of both physical and spiritual freedom, but these freedoms are threatened by the pressures of maturation and adulthood intervention. At the same time a more poignant dilemma for Wordsworth is that while childhood is literally a beautiful period of innocence and intimacy with the spirit of nature, its significance for adults is, resignedly, only a metaphorical one. In other words, we discover too late the great power and moral joy of childhood and it exists as a constant reminder of our unwelcome fall from this condition.

We cannot reach childhood again, much less recover it and this syndrome is most forcefully brought home here by the symbol of premature death. On a bleakly historical level, this reflects a very real threat of illness and death for children in eighteenth-century England, while thematically it serves as a constant reminder of human mortality.

In Wordsworth children frequently die before consciousness and individuation can reach full fruition. Such processes are arrested in their tracks and opened up for closer scrutiny. The same is true for Wordsworth's theory of the process by which nature acts on the young mind as a *tabula rasa*, and he is more explicit: typically, nature works on the child's senses, speaking directly to the child's highly receptive imagination. The exact process of interaction remains a mysterious, evasive one even for Wordsworth himself, but he is firmly convinced of its results, which are both moral and creative. In the post-Freudian era it is easy to forget just how revolutionary was Wordsworth's view of childhood seen as the crucial formative stage in the process of the adult, 'the child as father to the man'.

Further Research

To consolidate and broaden your understanding of Wordsworth's treatment of this theme, take a look at some of the many other poems

in *Lyrical Ballads* touching on childhood: in particular, see ‘Three years she grew’, ‘The Idiot Boy’ and ‘The Idle Shepherd Boys’.

Read each poem and try to establish Wordsworth’s attitude to the childhood portrayed in it and especially the relationship between, on the one hand, children and adults and, on the other, between children and nature.

Index

- Alfoxden, Somerset, 44, 185, Chapter 9
passim
- Aristotle, 174, 246
- Arnold, Matthew, 267
- Austen, Frances, 56, 93, 198
- Austen, Jane, 224, 287
- Austin, John, 273
- ballad, 231–2, 275, 276, 278
- Bible, the, 92, 110, 117, 174, 193, 204,
205, 223, 248
- Blake, William, 37, 149, 204, 211, 232, 235
- Bligh, William, 193
- Bradley, A. C., 267
- Bristol, 1, 99, 215
- Browning, Robert, 219
- Bruno, Giordano, 73, 247
- Bürger, Gottfried, 232
- Burke, Edmund, 113, 212, 218, 224
- Byron, George Gordon, 103, 134, 224,
242, 249
- chapbooks, 230–1
- Chatterton, Thomas, 149, 235
- Christianity, 29, 39, 91, 92, 149, 174, 187,
198, 201, 203, 204, 205, 247
- Clare, John, 149, 228, 232
- Cobbett, William, 154, 221, 222
- Coleridge, Derwent, 79
- Coleridge, Hartley, 59, 60, 64
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor**
- POEMS
- Christabel*, 59, 77, 256
- ‘Dejection: an Ode’, 62, 79
- ‘The Dungeon’, 138, 140, 172
- ‘The Eolian Harpy’, 66, 67
- ‘A Frost at Midnight’, 65, 68
- ‘Kubla Khan’, 68, 79
- ‘Lewti; or, the, Circassian, Love-Chant’,
56
- ‘This Lime-tree Bower My Prison’, 65, 68
- ‘Love’, 69–81, 103, 134, 139, 194
- ‘The Nightingale’, 56–69, 73, 77, 238,
275
- ‘The Pains of Sleep’, 79
- The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, 3, 40,
66, 70, 77, 103, 131, 139, 145, 171,
190–205, 232, 242–3, 245, 265,
274, 275
- PROSE
- Biographia Literaria*, 43, 50, 60–1, 67,
175, 176, 215, 234, 243, 244–50,
270, 271
- Notebooks*, 79, 190, 204, 271
- Osorio*, 226
- Table Talk*, 271
- Coleridge, Sara, 77
- Conrad, Joseph, 200
- Constable, John, 218
- Cook, James, 193
- Cottle, Joseph, 223, 225, 233, 237, 265
- Danby, John, 169, 288
- Dante, 130, 139
- deconstruction, 282–3, 285–6
- Defoe, Daniel, 201, 230
- de Man, Paul, 280, 282–6, 288
- De Quincey, Thomas, 77, 149, 222, 253,
254, 262
- Derrida, Jacques, 282
- De Selincourt, Ernest, 252, 268, 287
- Eliot, T. S., 60, 66, 279
- Empson, William, 269, 287
- Epicurus, 174
- feeling, 51, 54, 56, 60, 63, 72, 75–6,
90, 100, 104, 128, 134, 140, 143,
149, 161–2, 166, 171, 175, 177,
239, 241, 245, 246, 254, 255,
270, 278
- Fenwick, Isabella, 44, 166
- Ford, Jennifer, 79, 288
- Fox, Charles James, 111

- French Revolution, 101, 136, 138, 142, 209,
210, 211, 213, 214, 216, 217, 247
- Freud, Sigmund, 198, 269
- Fry, Elizabeth, 137, 138
- Gerard, Albert, 157
- Germany, 8, 157, 217, 253, 260
- Godwin, William, 138, 140, 142–3, 204,
210, 212, 214, 215
- gothic, 59, 130, 134, 135, 136, 139
- Halifax, 8, 253
- Hamilton, Paul, 170, 288
- Hardy, Thomas, 105, 152
- Hartlepool, 216–17
- Hartley, David, 50, 204, 238, 246
- Hartman, Geoffrey H., 55, 278–82, 283,
284, 286, 288
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 165
- Hazlitt, William, 1, 2, 127–8, 185–6,
190, 211, 219, 222, 226, 249, 253,
254, 266–7
- Heidegger, Martin, 247
- Hobbes, Thomas, 175
- House, Humphry, 172
- Howard, John, 137, 138
- Hutchinson, Mary, 70, 254
- Hutchinson, Sara, 70, 77, 255
- Ibsen, Henrik, 152, 168
- imagination, 29–31, 39–40, 41, Chapter 2
passim, 133, 139, 163–4, 171, 176,
185, 190, 200, 205, 238–9,
243, 245–50, 272–3, 278, 280,
281, 284, 285
- Jacobus, Mary, 141, 166, 278, 288
- Jeffrey, Francis, 165, 222, 265
- Kant, Immanuel, 62, 175, 247
- Keats, John, 60, 77, 80, 103, 108, 134,
139, 219, 232, 240, 249
- Leavis, F. R., 269, 279
- Locke, John, 168, 223, 247
- Lucretius, 174
- Lyrical Ballads* (see also titles of individual
poems), 1–4, 44–5, 56, 69, 83, 105,
111, 134, 135, 136, 138, 141, 142,
163, 167, 169–70, 175, 181, 191, 193,
196–7, 210, 216, 223, 232, 236, 237
242, 243, 257, 264–7, 277
- McMaster, Graham, 267, 288
- Malory, Thomas, 77
- Mayo, Robert, 273–8, 288
- Mellor, Anne K., 260, 263, 288
- Milton, John, 58, 59, 133, 213, 220,
225, 249
- Murray, Roger N., 56, 288
- Neo-Classicism, 52, 55, 64, 235
- New Criticism, 278–9, 282, 283
- Ovid, 58, 60, 174
- Paine, Thomas, 142, 210, 211, 214, 224
- Pantisocracy, 203, 215
- Parrish, Stephen, 278
- Percy, Thomas, 195, 232, 278
- Pitt, William, 216, 218
- Poole, Thomas, 85, 260
- Priestley, Joseph, 204
- Purchas, 198
- Purkis, John, 168
- reason, 51, 52, 63, 64, 109, 120–1, 162,
175, 177, 178, 189, 197–8, 243, 246,
248, 270, 272, 278
- Richards, I. A., 269–73, 277, 279, 288
- Romanticism, 3, 47, 51, 52, 53, 62–4, 103,
133, 135, 139, 148, 149, 173, 175,
178, 190, 193, 199, 209–10, 217, 222,
235, 238, 242, 244, 249, 253, 261,
263, 264, 266, 274, 279–80, 282, 283
- Romilly, Samuel, 137
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 36, 121, 131, 141,
142, 175, 186, 280
- Schlegel, A. W. and F., 62, 175, 249
- Shakespeare, William, 62, 93, 105, 125,
174, 220, 225, 249, 250, 277
- Shelley, Mary, 139, 218
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 103, 240, 249
- Sockburn-on-Tees, 70
- Sotheby, William, 244, 247

- Southey, Robert, 199, 200, 215–16, 226, 244, 249, 253, 265
- Spenser, Edmund, 77
- supernatural, 67, Chapter 5 *passim*
- Swift, Jonathan, 230
- Taylor, William, 114
- Tennyson, Alfred, 77
- Thelwall, John, 212, 215, 216, 249, 253, 262
- Trott, Nicola, 40, 288
- Vallon, Annette, 142, 161, 268
- Virgil, 174
- Watson, John, 165, 288
- Wilson, John, 213, 236–7, 240
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 250, 273
- Wollstonecraft, Mary, 210, 224, 227
- Wordsworth, Dorothy, 44, 49, 54, 186, Chapter 9 *passim*
Journal, 83, 98, 101, 157, Chapter 9 *passim*, 268
- Wordsworth, William**
 POEMS
 ‘Anecdote for Fathers’, 18
 ‘The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman’, 151, 161, 172
 ‘The Convict’, 128–41, 149, 154, 165
The Excursion, 32, 84, 211
 ‘Expostulation and Reply’, 100, 114, 183–6
 ‘The Female Vagrant’, 84, 103, 141–56, 161, 164, 168, 172, 179, 206, 275, 276
 ‘The Fountain, a Conversation’, 114–25, 169, 181
 ‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’, 164, 170, 172, 276
Guilt and Sorrow, 142
The Idiot Boy 11, 42, 67, 170, 176, 213, 265, 276
 ‘The Idle Shepherd-Boys’, 42, 140
 ‘The Last of the Flock’, 100
 ‘Lines written in early spring’, 177–83
 ‘Lines written near Richmond’, 82, 181
 ‘Lucy Gray’, 8–15, 28, 40, 67, 94, 124, 161, 176
 ‘The Mad Mother’, 148
Michael, a Pastoral Poem, 11, 84–100, 103, 110, 111, 118, 124, 131, 149, 153, 167, 168, 179
 ‘Nutting’, 28, 32–40, 47, 48, 49, 54, 68, 112, 117, 120, 140, 176, 179, 188
 ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, 28, 32, 121, 123, 130, 131, 132, 176
 ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, 100–14, 119, 120, 131, 135, 140, 149
 ‘Old Man Travelling’, 90, 103, 142, 172, 276
Peter Bell, 195
The Prelude, 23, 28, 32, 38, 99, 100, 112, 114, 123, 135, 141, 173, 176, 178, 185, 187, 209, 213, 220, 253, 263
 ‘The Ruined Cottage’, 84, 256
Salisbury Plain, 142
 ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’, 29
 ‘Strange fits of passion I have known’, 28
 ‘The tables turned’, 114, 120, 183–90
 ‘There was a boy’, 23–32, 47, 54, 117, 179, 280–2, 283–6
 ‘The thorn’, 156–71, 195, 232
 ‘Three years she grew’, 28, 30, 39, 42, 94, 181
 ‘Tintern Abbey’, 3, 28, 43–56, 59, 62, 64, 66, 68, 81, 82, 107, 109, 121, 130, 138, 169, 178, 188, 189, 238, 239, 262, 275
 ‘Two April mornings’, 114, 120, 124, 126
 ‘We are seven’, 16–23, 29, 30, 40
 ‘Winander Boy’, 23, 29; *see also* ‘There was a boy’
 PROSE
Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads, 105, 171, 185, 234–6, 241, 274, 277
Guide to the Lakes, 94, 251
 Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, 212, 214
 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 23, 30, 51, 52, 83, 99, 117, 142, 155, 169, 175, 212, 213, 218, 220, 232, 234, 238, 240, 242, 244, 247–8, 264, 274

