

Seeing Green: Nature and Human Relationships with the Environment in Wordsworth

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DISSERTATION/THESIS GUIDELINES

FOR WSU STUDENTS

Abstract

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This thesis examines William Wordsworth's writing about the physical environment of the Lakes in his *Guide to the Lakes* and in his early poetry. My first chapters make a case for the relevance of the *Guide* to Wordsworth studies in general and, more particularly, to critical discussions about the social and political references that pervade the poetry of the 1790s. I endeavor to characterize Wordsworth's views of the Lakes in terms of ecology and examine the relationship between human social structures and nature as he understood it in the *Guide*. Overall, my work attempts to synthesize Wordsworth's politics with his views on the environment.

The *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, "The Ruined Cottage," "Michael," and "Book 1" of the *Excursion* provide a means by which readers can understand the interplay between changes in the social and political milieu of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and gradual alteration of the landscape in Wordsworth's creative work. Of these productions the Preface and "Ruined Cottage" are singled out as particularly important sites for complex interaction between people and nature.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to Dan Lunan who is my best friend and my greatest blessing. Your patience and understanding are unparalleled. I dedicate this also to my mom, my soul mate, my confidant and my foundation. With your love and support all things are possible. I love you.

Introduction

This is a work about people. This is a work about the webs that knit every animate being to the next in a complex system of life. This is a work about ecosystems and our ongoing effort to understand, to preserve, and to salvage them from our own dismantling. Above all, this is a work about a poet whose ability to see into “the heart of things” continues to show readers their own indivisibility from nature.

My writing begins with William Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes*, a multi-faceted text that gathered nineteenth-century tourists up in the fabric of the earth beneath their feet or, if you will, before their *eyes*. The book reveals a vision of the landscape as a ceaselessly evolving work of art, and a culmination of intricately related parts. In chapter one, I examine Wordsworth’s representation of the landscape in this way, and the context for his characterization of nature in the vogue of eighteenth-century picturesque tourism. I argue that with the *Guide* he attempts to educate the eye of the spectator to look beyond the surface nature, beyond its aesthetic beauty, into the inner workings. Wordsworth attempts to show readers the unfathomable intricacy of nature and their place within its web.

The *Guide* contributes to the formation of what Jonathan Bate calls the “ecological conscience” of its readership. The book encourages a view of nature as a culmination of interdependent forms, powers, and processes, what we might call “a theory of ecosystems.” The Lakes provide a localized model of the macrocosm of nature. In the local landscape readers glimpse the larger material environment as a corporate entity in which all species, no matter how disparate, are interlinked and mutually worked upon by the powers and processes of nature. Wordsworth encourages readers to consider their place among this vast network of life.

Moreover, he proposes that human communities, and their most visible productions (for example: houses, grounds and gardens) ought to harmonize with nature. The cultivation of a cooperative relationship with the land is key to Wordsworth's ideas about conservation.

In chapter two and three I draw heavily upon the *Guide* to discuss Wordsworth's ideas about human integration in the ecosystem of the Lakes. Chapter two examines Wordsworth's understanding of the way the social and economic developments of the late eighteenth century impact human relationships with the local environment. This fractured "bond of brotherhood" reveals a complex interrelation between human social systems and the environment. In chapter three, I examine the synthesis between social and environmental issues of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Wordsworth's the "Ruined Cottage." The poem demonstrates the unity between the deterioration of the native peasantry and the systematic subjugation of nature under agrarian capitalism. The "Ruined Cottage" reveals the interconnection between individuals and communities and their environment. The poem thus remains highly relevant to some of the most worrisome issues of our own time.

Indeed, the most pressing social and political events of the coming decades will be decidedly environmental in nature. The depletion of the ice caps; the deterioration of forests, wetlands, other fragile ecosystems; pollution of the air, the sea, and the land; the perils of sustaining massive global population; and climate change have already come to bear on national governments across the globe. These events are each consequences of generations of dismantling of the very ecosystems that sustain us. However, writers like Wordsworth "promise to restore us to the Earth which is our home." Through his writing, we might relearn the beautiful intricacy of nature, and recognize our home as individuals, as communities, and as a collective species within

it. While molecular biology, atmospheric chemistry, and ecology have confirmed the “ineffable and subtle intertwining of living organisms on the Earth,” only the visionary power of writing like Wordsworth’s can fully impress ecological reality on our minds and souls (Lopez 18-19).

With his seminal book *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate opened popular and scholarly audiences up to the potential for Romantic literature to help us relearn our inherent connection to and dependence on nature. As young scholar, in search of a critical idiom that addresses the pressing environmental issues of my generation, I found inspiration in Bate. His writing in *Song of the Earth* and *Romantic Ecology* underpin my own exploration of Wordsworth’s writing about nature. He and I both treat Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes* as an ecological text. My writing is however, one of the first to privilege the book as a centerpiece of extensive critical examination.

I.

The years between 1799-1810 were a rich creative period for Wordsworth. During that time he produced some of his greatest work, much of it about the area of Lakes and its people. Following the harsh winter of 1799-1800, he wrote “Home at Grasmere,” a poetic tribute to his native home. Noted Wordsworth biographer Stephen Gill describes the poem as a “love offering to the spirit of the place” and those with whom he lived (*Guide* Preface vii). Over the course of the decade, several other poems followed, among them “Michael,” “Ruined Cottage,” “The Brothers,” and “Tintern Abbey.” Like “Home at Grasmere,” each of the poems is in its way a “love offering” to the place and its people. However, the most personal, and perhaps most studied, work of the period is the autobiographical “Prelude.” The epic poem pays tribute to the many ways in which the natural environment fed the development of his poetic mind. Coming at

the end of this rich body of work, the *Guide* is, as Gill justly asserts, “a culminating celebration of the place where he had for ten years attempted to integrate art and life” (*Guide* Preface vii).

Although the *Guide* belongs to the body of Wordsworth’s best and most studied work, it has not received much critical attention. His poetic work is far more popular among scholars. However, the *Guide* deserves more critical study, especially among those who are concerned with Wordsworth’s attitudes toward nature and rural life in the eighteenth century. My wish is that my work will shed new light on Wordsworth’s writing, and on its relevance to some of the most pressing issues of our time. I hope to engender more critical interest in the *Guide* as an environmental text and as a piece of Wordsworth’s revolutionary canon in general. The book is rife with critical opportunity. Ideas about home, tradition, change, nature, politics, art, imagination, and passion, among other things, find expression in its pages. Above all the *Guide* provides unprecedented insight into Wordsworth’s ideas about nature. Wordsworth’s observations in it reveal the invisible lineaments that link human social structures with all animate nature in the web of life. More than that, the *Guide* instructs readers how to harmonize with the ecosystems that enfold them. What I have found in it is the inspiration for a thousand pages of scholarship, a back yard garden, and the hope for a more ecologically sustainable future.

Ecocritics rightly refer to Wordsworth as a “nature poet.” In the *Guide*, however, he proves himself to be a poet of ecosystems and an ambassador of nature. He lent his voice to the earth, but his songs do not merely glorify nature. Rather, his writing advocates for the inherent value and rights of the environment. Wordsworth is known for his “democratic sensibilities,” and for being a voice for the common man. However, he also recognized nature’s share in the ideals of equality and liberty that permeated the social and political milieu of the times. His *Guide to*

the Lakes is born from a desire to “preserve the native beauty” of the landscape from its subjugation and exploitation at the hands of agrarian capitalists, upper class gentry, and an increasingly alienated culture. In it Wordsworth espouses what David Pepper calls the *bioethic*, “the respect for all life forms in their own right (rather than just for pragmatic reasons)” (15). He encourages readers to perceive their share in the interdependence of nature and to take responsibility for the ecosystems they inhabit. Two hundred years later, environmentalists are communicating the very same ideals. They are in a sense continuing on the long march toward liberating ecosystems and ensuring their right to thrive in the future. A return to Wordsworth’s writing about nature is thus both timely and powerfully relevant. His insights have something to offer contemporary readers as they struggle to negotiate their relationship with nature in the face of an increasingly precarious future.

As John Keats, said “The poetry of the earth is never dead”; it resonates in the hope and the uncertainty of present moment. It calls us to return in the future to earth that is our home, to reconcile with the soil and air, and to harmonize with the ecosystems that enfold and sustain. There is hope in that.

Chapter 1

Picturesque Landscape and Wordsworthian Ecology

William Wordsworth's life and writing are inseparable from the Lake District. There he spent his childhood and adolescence, and in December 1799, he established his permanent home at Dove Cottage in Grasmere. In the decade that followed, the location became the nexus of his best, and more enduring, poetic work. As James McKusick notes, the "Lakes and mountains that first awakened and nourished his childhood imagination" were the origin of his inspiration (54). The land, and its inhabitants became also the subjects of much of the poetry.

Wordsworth's admiration was shared by many who read about and visited the lakes. By the last quarter of the century, the area was already a popular tourist destination for the educated elite. In 1789 author Hester Lynch Piozzi reported "There is a rage for the Lakes!"; "we travel to (the lakes), we row upon them, we write about them, and about them" (167). The area, more than any other part of England, was the subject of description and illustration in travel books like Piozzi's *Journey to North England*, and more notably, William Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye*. The latter book is credited with initiating the vogue for "picturesque tourism" (Andrews 86). In it, Gilpin deviated from the common form of travel writing, with its focus on traditional modes of cultivation and culture. Instead, his interest is trained on the aesthetics of the natural scenery, as viewed through the prism of established artistic principals. In his writing, the natural scenery is represented as a painting, or scenes that might be sketched or set to canvas. The effect of light, shadow, and color on the "face of the country," and its composition, are thus vital elements to his writing about the Lakes.

In *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty, On Picturesque Travel, and On Sketching the Picturesque* (1808) Gilpin clearly defines the principals of picturesque beauty as he understood them. The term picturesque pertains to scenes or activities appropriate to paint or sketch (Andrews viii). In *Search of the Picturesque* (1989), Malcolm Andrews notes that the word came in to vogue in the early eighteenth century as a anglicized derivative of the Italian “pittresco” and French “pittoresque” (vii). Gilpin defines the aesthetic characteristics of “the picturesque” in nature in his essay *On Picturesque Beauty*. It is, he says, rough, varied, and full of contrast, but harmonious overall. The picturesque synthesizes the visual complexities of a simple scene from nature, for instance, layered ranges of rugged mountains, like “the billows of a troubled sea,” rising above a forested vale.

A degree of irregularity is an essential component of the picturesque. Thus, the manicured grounds of a landscaped garden are not picturesque; they are too “smooth” and “uniform” (Gilpin 28). For the same reason the “extended plain” is also not picturesque. Gilpin describes the alterations necessary in its surface and form to qualify. “Break the surface of it” he explains, “add rocks, trees, and declivities; that is, give it roughness, and you give it also variety” (Gilpin 28). “Enriching” the landscape with roughness results in “the combined idea of simplicity, and variety; from whence results the picturesque” (Gilpin 28). In nature, the approved scenery combines ruggedness of feature, variety of form, color, shadow, and light in a united composition, wherein the various and contrasting elements harmonize. In artist Richard Wilson’s painting *The White Monk*, for instance, an image of a young couple at rest in the shade of an imposing tree is foregrounded against a complex backdrop of mountains, valleys, and forest. Paintings such as this convey astounding depth and variety.



Richard Wilson, *The White Monk* (early 1760s)

Wilson's painting provides an example of one scene that satisfies the criteria of the picturesque. The term remains, however, highly subjective. In his influential book, *On the Picturesque* (1742), Sir Uvedale Price¹ illustrates the persistent ambiguity of the term. As he says,

¹ Price presents a thorough etymology of the term: "The Italian *pittresco* is, I imagine, of earlier date than either the English or French word, the later of which, *pittresco*, is clearly taken from it...The English word refers to the performance (of painting), and the objects most suited to it: the Italian and French words have a reference to the turn of mind common to painters; who from the constant habit of examining all peculiar effects and combinations, as well as the general appearance of nature, are struck with numberless circumstances, even where they are incapable of being represented, to which the unpracticed eye pays littler or no attention" (*On the Picturesque* 80).

. . it is applied to every object, and every kind of scenery, which has been or might be represented with good effect in painting- just as the word beautiful, when we speak of visible nature is applied to every object and every kind of scenery that in any way give pleasure to the eye. (Price 77)

But though the term is frequently applied to nature, but is not necessarily confined to it. In a letter to Joshua Reynolds, Gilpin asserts “I have always myself used (picturesque) merely to denote such objects for painting; so that, according to my definition, on of the cartoons, and a flower piece are equally picturesque” (Essays 37). Likewise Price says that “music, though it appears like a solecism, may be as truly picturesque” as a visual object (79-80).

Regardless, observations of the picturesque in natural scenery inspired educated elites to go in search of the picturesque in nature. In particular, Gilpin’s *Observations on the River Wye* is generally considered to have “initiated the vogue for Picturesque Tourism in Britain” (Andrews 86). By the end of the century the book, already its fifth edition, provided a travel companion for members of the educated elite. Among them, “a feeling for the rugged and the mysterious in nature became a fashionable affection” (Selincourt xi). They sought exquisite vistas in nature’s “untouched” regions. Such tourists looked on the land, as Gilpin did, through the eye of the artist, paying careful attention to light and shadow, color, and composition. In a sense, the eighteenth-century tourist sought those “picture postcard” vistas that continue to allure contemporary travelers to the Grand Canyon, and even still, to the Lake District.

I.

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, tourists began penetrating deeper and deeper into the landscape of the Lake District. The improvement of roadways toward the end of the century enabled still growing numbers to visit upon the lake shores, passes, and river valleys. In summer months, coaches of all shapes and sizes carried tourists into the countryside in search of picturesque exhibitions in nature. However, even as they penetrated into the landscape their observations remained shallow. The picturesque eye sought only “beautiful colourings of rock, wood and water, [and the] tremendous. . . disposition of mountains” in and around the Lakes. Local people too attracted the interest of tourists, who appreciated the novelty of their “rustic” appearance. Not infrequently:

coaches . . . rattled along the Lakes, struggled up steep passes and now and again, waited at the roadside while passengers jumped out to take a quick sketch of a bewildered shepherd. (Andrews 153)

The passage captures the picturesque tourists’ insulation from nature and from local people. The coaches mitigate the tourists’ connection with nature. By them tourists are transported from scene to scene with little direct association with nature. Encounters with nature and local people were brief, and cursory; “passengers jumped out to take a quick sketch” of a novel scene (Andrews 153).

The behavior of picturesque tourists bewildered, and indeed, increasingly annoyed local residents. Among them, Wordsworth was perhaps most vocal. His poem “The Brothers” illustrates something of the impression tourists had on Lakeland residents:

These Tourists, heaven preserve us! needs must live

A profitable life; some glance along,
Rapid and gay, as if the earth were air,
And they were butterflies to wheel about
Long as the summer lasted; some, as wise,
Upon the forehead of a jutting crag
Sit perch'd with book and pencil on their knee
And look and scribble, scribble and look
Until a man might travel twelve stout miles
Or reap an acre of his neighbor's corn. (1-10)

The narrator of the lines, “the homely Priest of Ennerdale,” speaks of what must have seemed the baffling behavior of the tourists that infiltrated the area with increasing regularity. The tourists’ lack of connection to the land is evident in the lines; they “glance along” as if “the earth were air.” Its substance is lost on them. Thus, they might “look and scribble, scribble and look” without perceiving anything of the essential nature of the land and its people, their depth, complexity, and interconnection. In contrast, the last line suggests that local people share an intimate and productive relationship with the land. The processes of cultivation and harvest alluded to in the description of reaping require an abiding connection to the crops, soil, and climate. The native farmer must be versant in the rhythms of nature in order to cultivate and harvest its fruits. This kind of depth, or rootedness in nature is foreign to the tourist, as is a sense of connection to the local community. That the line references a man’s ability to “reap an acre of his *neighbor’s* corn,” conveys a sense of continuity. Each man is equally attune to the labor of his neighbors, and the knowledge of nature required to execute it. The depth of each individuals’

connection with nature is reinforced by the continuity of the whole community's connection with nature. The picturesque tourist is, however, disassociated from all of this. His attention is drawn away from the substance of the very earth beneath him, and from that of the local community into which he has entered.

Certainly, the opening lines of the poem, "The Brothers," also convey the peculiarity of the tourists' behavior. Andrews claims that the lines express the distance between leisurely tourists and the rural laborers that comprise the local community. These Lakelanders, he asserts, "had been used to their country as a working country, which exacted too much time and energy from their lives to allow them the luxuries of tourism" (Andrews 154). He suggests, then that the lines convey their confusion and contempt- Wordsworth's own feelings- for leisurely travel.

However, what Andrews' reading fails to consider, is Wordsworth's own experience as a tourist. James Butler points out in his article "Tourist or Native Son: Wordsworth's Homecomings 1799-1800" (1986) that Wordsworth was for a time a "tourist" himself. During that period, he wandered extensively throughout the English countryside. In his travels, Wordsworth penetrated into the solitudes of nature and approached its many scenes with a contemplative mind. He valued aesthetic beauty of nature for its impact on the soul and imagination. Nature was something to commune with and meditate upon. Thus, it seems unlikely then that Wordsworth disdained tourism outright, but rather questioned the nature of picturesque tourists' approach to nature.

Specifically, Wordsworth seems to regard picturesque tourists' fascination with the "face of nature" as shallow and incomplete. The tourist "perch'd with book and pencil on their knee" looking and scribbling an image of nature on a piece of sketch paper perceives only the surface

of nature; the depth and intricacy of its composition is lost. In his *Guide to the Lakes* Wordsworth challenges these tourists to re-approach the landscape, not as a series of views or scenes, but as we will see, a complex ecological masterpiece. Wordsworth is most frequently recognized for his poetry, but throughout much of his life wrote and read travel literature, as well. John Glendening notes, the poet “read travel literature and felt compelled to take and memorialize his our tours” (122). He did so in verse and in prose. His collection of poetry *Memorials of a Tour in Scotland* (1803), *The Prelude*, *The Excursion*, and even “Tintern Abbey” document his traveling experiences. The *Guide*, however, is his contribution to the tourist market for books about touring North England.

Jonathan Bate notes in his book *Romantic Ecology* that the *Guide* is unlike other guide books to the Lakes. First, the book is a complex, multi-faceted work, geared toward answering “every purpose that could be desired.” Bate points out that “it is not merely for the tourist. . . it uses the popular guide book format to put Wordsworth’s own concerns across to the public” (44-45). Second, and perhaps most important to Bate’s and my own interests, the book puts forth a fundamentally ecological view of the landscape of the Lakes. The book is unique, in that it stresses the unity and complexity of the landscape and its people. If Gilpin’s *Observations on the River Wye* encouraged tourists to examine the “face of the land” according to the “principals of picturesque beauty,” Wordsworth’s *Guide* encourages them to look deeper, into the complex, interrelated causes of that beauty.

The *Guide* was first composed as an introduction to Reverend Joseph Wilkinson’s *Select Views in Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire* (1810). However, Wordsworth regarded Wilkinson’s book as largely impaired. He took particular issue with the veracity of its

engravings; these he considered as no less than inept. In a letter to Lady Beaumont, the poet mused that the images would please “many who in all arts are most taken with what is worthless” (qtd in Selincourt ix). In 1820, the *Guide* appeared in Wordsworth’s name in *The River Dudden, A Series of Sonnets: Vaudracour & Julia: and Other Poems. To which is annexed, A Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes, in North of England*. In a brief explanatory note, Wordsworth explained that the *Guide* was

attached to these volumes from a consciousness of its having been written in the same spirit which dictated several of the poems, and from a belief that it will tend materially to illustrate them.

The *Guide* first appeared on its own in 1822, as *A Description of the Scenery of the Lakes in The North of England*. The first edition of 500 copies sold out immediately. A new edition of 1,000 copies was reprinted in 1823. The edition included an account of an excursion up Scafell Pike, and another of an excursion to Ulswater. In 1835, the *Guide* appeared under the title *A Guide to Through the Districts of the Lakes in North England, with a Description of the Scenery, etc. For the Use of Tourists and Residents*. In this edition a section dedicated to “Directions and Information for the Tourist” was set aside as a kind of preface (Bate 43). The body of the *Guide* was by this time divided into three main sections. The first, “View of the Country as formed by nature,” illustrates manner in which the “powers and processes” of nature shaped the land. The second section, “Aspect of the country, as affected by its inhabitants” examines the influence of “the hand of man” on the “face of the country.” Here, he focuses specifically on the relationship between native inhabitants and nature, which he characterizes as a kind of harmonious interdependence. In the last section, “Changes, and the rules of taste for preventing their bad

effects” Wordsworth criticizes manner in which new inhabitants altered the land, and makes recommendations for its preservation. As Bate notes,

New residents who are not rooted in the land have brought dissonant new building styles; worse, in accordance with the ‘craving for prospect’, their new houses have been built on obtrusive sites where they do not ‘harmonize with the forms of Nature’. The rage for picturesque improvement has resulted in the alteration of the contours of the principal island on Windermere Lake. . . (46)

Wordsworth is cognizant that new inhabitants and tourists will not depart from the Lakes, and “further changes in its appearance [will] inevitably follow” in time (Guide 90). However, the *Guide* is written, as he says, from a desire to “preserve the native beauty of this delightful district” from further assault (*Guide* 90).

Bate argues that the fundamental purpose of the *Guide* is to “educate” tourists and residents “how to care for the delicate ecosystem” of the Lakes. Wordsworth never refers to the Lakes as such, but he does demonstrate a powerful understanding of the interconnectedness between processes in nature, and human beings and nature that reflect what Bate regards as an emerging ecological consciousness. Bate focuses predominantly on the book’s relevance to new residents. Indeed, it can and has been read as a manual on building and the laying of grounds. However, the *Guide* is a response to the phenomena of picturesque tourism. I suggest that with it Wordsworth attempts to ground the “glancing butterflies” of picturesque tourism in an awareness of the the intricate “powers and processes” of nature that govern and shape the landscape. In “Section First” of the *Guide*, in particular, he attempts to educate the eyes of the these tourists to look and understand, understand and look *into* the heart of nature. The tourist is encouraged

move beyond a surface level appreciation of nature, to consider instead the complex processes of composition, the manner in which, if you will, the “invisible hand of nature” painted the landscape.

The fundamental purpose of the *Guide* is to educate the eye of the picturesque tourist and resident, that she see into and perceive the wholeness of the landscape. To that end, in “Section First: Description of the Scenery of the Lakes” Wordsworth attempts to illustrate the relation between major elements of the landscape, and the means by which nature formed them. Mountains, lakes, and vales are revealed as the consequence of collaborative geologic, atmospheric, and biological processes. Each feature is comprehended a culmination of interconnected elements, and a contribution to the still more complex whole of nature. Thus, Wordsworth reveals the landscape as a intricate web, in which plants, animals, geologic forms, and people are all integrated, and over which the powers and processes of nature preside.

II.

The picturesque tourist delights in views, which seemed perfectly suited to paint, or perhaps reminded them of a work of art or literature. In *Three Essays*, Gilpin describes this pursuit as a hunt:

Every distant horizon promises something new; and with this pleasing expectation we follow nature through all her walks. We pursue her from hill to dale; and hunt after those various beauties with which she everywhere abounds. (48)

Gilpin’s metaphor expresses the narrowness of their interest in the landscape. They pursued specifically those species of view which art and literature aesthetically validated (Andrews

39-40). Once “attained,” to use Gilpin’s word, the spectator delighted in tracing resemblances between scenes in nature and art. In the *Spectator* (1712) Joseph Addison asserts “we find the Works of Nature still more pleasant, the more they resemble those of Art” (25). The spectator, he suggests, is pleased to compare “Ideas rising from the Original Objects, with the Ideas we receive from the Statue, Picture, Description, or Sound that represents them” (25). Thus, to take an example from Andrews “the glimpse of a scene in North Wales, beguiles the spectator because it seems a nearly perfect facsimile of a Dughet landscape” or “pastoral poem” come to life “on the banks of the Ulswater” (40).

The ability to discern these kinds of resonances between nature and art belonged to the elite. As Andrews notes “the picturesque tourist is more aesthetically privileged than the illiterate spectator,” because he or she can draw from a liberal education in classic poetry and art (4). He is thus referred to as the “the man of taste.” *Taste*, of course, refers to the sensory ability to discern flavor through the organ of the tongue, but also to the ability to discern or examine, for example when one discerns floral or fruity notes in complex flavor of a wine. The word then also is the mental perception of quality, and in that sense, it becomes a discriminative faculty (OED “taste”). Thus, the “man of taste” is one who discerns the interplay of light, shadow, color, and form in the composition of a scene, and draws connections between nature and art or literature. His “taste” is a consequence of his education in both areas as a member of the elite.

Wordsworth’s fellow poet, John Clare did not belong to the elite, but nonetheless provides a powerful example of the word’s application to picturesque tourists:

I always feel delighted when an object in nature brings up in ones mind an image of poetry that describe it from some favorite author. . . a clown may say he loves the

morning but a man of tastes feels it in a higher degree by bring up in his mind that beautiful line of Thomson's 'The Meek eyd morn appears mother of dews'. (174-175) Clare suggests that the man of taste received a greater joy from natural scenery because his eye traces resonances of great poetry in it. Thus, his elite education differentiates his "vision" and experience of a scene from that of the common man. In that regard of course, Clare highlights the evident elitism of the picturesque (Andrews 4).

The kind of "taste," or vision, Wordsworth promotes in the *Guide*, requires the cultivation of an entirely different kind of education. He addresses the book expressly to the man, or as he democratically puts it, "the person of taste." "In preparing this Manual" he explains "it was the Author's principal wish to furnish a Guide or Companion for the Minds and persons of taste and feeling for the Landscape, who might be inclined to explore the District of the Lakes with that degree of attention to which its beauty may fairly lay claim" (1). Wordsworth thus addresses his writing to the members of the educated elite who pursued, or might pursue, the picturesque in the District of the Lakes. His words here play on the egos of such tourists, whose interest was the minute details of shadow, light, form, and color that comprise a particular view. The "degree of attention" he asks readers to pay to the "beauty" of the Lakes is more penetrating.

That Wordsworth takes scruple with the manner in which picturesque tourists have approached the landscape is evident. His "delineation" of the lakes is, he asserts, intended to correct or improve the way experienced and unexperienced tourists alike perceive the landscape: The delineation, if tolerable executed, will, communicate to the traveller, who has already seen the objects, new information; and will assist in giving to his recollections a more orderly arrangement than his own opportunities of observing may have permitted him to

make...(and)... will be still more useful to the future traveller by directing his attentions to distinctions in things which, without such previous aid, at length of time only could enable him to discover. (Wordsworth 22)

Wordsworth here identifies two important qualities about his “view” or verbal illustration of the Lakes. First, his guide material attempts to improve the perceptions of the uninformed observer through the communication of “new information” about the objects that compose the landscape, and their relation to one another. In lieu of this material, he suggests, even the seasoned tourist can make only partial, or “disordered,” observations. Second, his “delineation” of the Lakes is based in local, or native, knowledge. Wordsworth thus offers the tourist the benefit of observations derived from a long-term relationship to the land, its forms, and people.

In a letter to Adam Sedgwick, the first professor of geology at Cambridge, Wordsworth explained that in the tourist market, guides that catered to the “Body of the tourist” were outselling his book (Bate 43). Sedgwick had furnished a geological contribution to the *Guide*, which, appended to the back, joined an assortment of other material pertaining to scientific and ecological topics. In addition to Sedgwick’s geological survey of the Lakes, Thomas Gough of Kendal provided material on local botany. In a table listing local woods and fells he identifies the locations of approximately 250 species of indigenous plants. The material supplemented Wordsworth’s observations and analysis of the face or surface of nature and the relationship between people and their environment (Bate 45). More than that, the material helped to distinguish the *Guide*, and more specifically Wordsworth’s view of the lakes, from those that emphasized the picturesque. As Bate points out:

Where earlier guide writers adopted the picturesque tourists' point of view and rarely descended from their stations, Wordsworth's approach was holistic: he moved from nature to the natives, exploring the relationship between land and inhabitant; then in his third section he considered the evolving and increasingly disruptive influence of man on his environment. (45)

Other guides appealed to the sensory experience of tourism. They were pitched to the picturesque tourist's desire to see aesthetically approved scenes of nature: the pinnacles and turrets of rugged mountains; a ruined abbey amidst a sylvan vale; a rustic shepherd tending his flock. The *Guide*, however, attempts to cultivate the contemplative eye of the tourist². His "principal aim" is, he says, to "furnish a Guide or Companion for the Mind of persons of taste"(Guide 1). Picturesque guides like Gilpin's more frequently addressed the eyes of the tourist. Certainly, the ability to discern certain approved aesthetic qualities in scenery, or resonances between nature and art required developed discriminative faculties. Picturesque tourists, as I have shown, were generally highly educated. However, their cognitive abilities were applied to the study of *surface* of things. In appealing to their minds, Wordsworth gestures toward a deep sight, based in a different kind of education and study.

It is Bate's position that the *Guide* endeavors to educate tourists and residents about how to live in the land, and care for its delicate ecosystem (Romantic Ecology 45). More simply though, Wordsworth attempts to usher tourists and residents beyond the aesthetic, or surface, that

² In an effort to increase the market appeal of the Guide Wordsworth did, however, incorporate some material of interest to picturesque tourists. For instance, a section dedicated to "directions and information for the tourist" included extensive descriptions for "how to approach" the various "scenes" of the landscape to the best advantage. That he somewhat casually dismisses the section as "humble and tedious" signals that his interests lie elsewhere though.

they might perceive the landscape as a culmination of interconnected parts and processes. In “Section First: View of the Country as Formed by Nature,” Wordsworth uses a physical replica of the Swiss Alps which he saw while at Lucerne as the framework for his description of the Lakes:

At Lucerne, in Switzerland, is shown a Model of the Alpine country which encompasses the Lake of the four Cantons. The Spectator ascends a little platform, and sees mountains lakes, glaciers, rivers, woods, waterfalls, and valleys, with their cottages, and every other object contained in them, lying at his feet. (21)

Wordsworth admired the model because it allowed the spectator to “understand and comprehend” the “sublime and beautiful region, with all its hidden treasures, and their bearings and relations to each other” (22). In “Section First,” he attempts “something of this kind” in respect to the region of the Lakes. His verbal model presents a holistic view of what we now call the ecosystem of the Lakes. The “vales and mountains enclosing and surrounding them” the rivers, islands, and even the lonely mountain tarn are laid out in “relation to each other” and understood as vital components in the substance of the whole landscape (*Guide* 22).

Wordsworth’s perspective of choice is ariel, because the vantage affords a glimpse of the landscape as a whole. Thus, he transports readers to a cloud midway between Great Gavel and Scawfell, from where the land unfolds like spokes from the nave of a wheel:

We shall then see stretched at our feet a number of valleys, not fewer than eight, diverging from the point, on which we are supposed to stand, like spokes from the nave of a wheel. (22)

The image of the wheel conveys the unity of the natural landscape. The wheel, or circle, is itself a symbol of “wholeness”; its spokes give it substance and shape, without one the entire unit is weakened. So the landscape is also the culmination of interconnected features, organisms and species. As Bate suggests, the description “develops a sense of unity of the country as formed by nature” (46).

The intricacy of connected features compounds the closer we look. In the vale of Esk a “stream passes under the woody steep upon which stands Munster Castle, the ancient seat of the Penningtons, and after forming a short and narrow estuary enters the sea below the small town of Ravensglass” (*Guide* 23). In the valley of Wastdale “within a bed of steep mountains, the long, narrow, stern, desolate lake of Wastdale...the stream that issues from the West-water. . . falls into the estuary of the river Esk” (*Guide* 23). The stream Ehen in Ennerdale “flowing through a soft and fertile country, passes the town of Egremont, and the ruins of the castle” then breaks “through the barrier of sand thrown up by the winds on the tempestuous coast, (and) enters the Irish Sea” (*Guide* 24). In his view of the Lakes, the features of the land bleed into and communicate with each other. Rivers lace through the vales, dilating and contracting as they flow through towns or silent planes, finally washing into lakes or beyond in to the sea. Each form blends seamlessly into the next:

It may be observed, that, from the circumference to the centre . . . from the sea or plain country to the mountain stations specified, there is- in the several ridges that enclose these vales, and divide them from each other, I mean in the the forms and surfaces, first the swelling of grounds, next of hills and rocks, and lastly of the mountains - an ancient

almost regular gradation from elegance and richness, to their highest point of grandeur and sublimity. (Wordsworth 25)

Such descriptions stress the complex intricacy of each form's connection to the next, and to the whole.

Wordsworth's emphasis on geological, or topographical, elements of the landscape is logical, given his audience. Picturesque tourists visited the region to glimpse its particular combinations of mountains, vales, lakes, and rivers. So that the reader can more completely "comprehend and understand" the landscape as a whole, he endeavors in the section to dilate in some detail upon the composition these important elements and their relation to each other.

III.

In his analysis of the landscape, Wordsworth homes in on specific aesthetic elements of the picturesque, namely color and variation. Certainly, no particular color is inherently "picturesque." However, as Uvedale Price points out, there are certain *variations* of colors "generally found in objects and scenes highly picturesque" (137). Among these are:

. . . the autumnal hues in all their varieties- the weather stains, and many of the mosses, lichens, and incrustations on bark and on wood, on stones, old walls, and buildings of every kind- the various gradations in the tints of broken ground, and of the decayed parts of hollow trees. (Price 137)

Not coincidentally, these colors all derive from age and decay, the processes by which nature varies the surface of the landscape. Nonetheless, these processes appear to have been overlooked in favor of their aesthetic consequences, or effects. Wordsworth, however, emphasizes the

manner in which natural processes lend themselves to the picturesque aesthetics of landscape. In other words, he focuses at length on the natural *causes* of particular visual effects of the natural scenery.

Wordsworth's analysis strives to reveal the complexity of the very hues and tints that Price identified in the passage above. For example, the gradation of color from the summit of the base of the mountains is attributed in part to the specific botanical species that invest the rock at various altitudes, and their seasonal variation. According to Wordsworth the "changes which the seasons make in the coloring of the mountains depend" on the fern above all other plants. In the Fall, when "advancing heat of summer" has "somewhat faded" the "fresh green tint of herbage" the "appearance of the fern" is "revived" (28). The "rich green" of October is succeeded by the yellows and oranges of advancing Fall. The the color of the fern lends itself to the other plants, and to the gradual gradation of color from summit to base.

. . . brilliant and various colors of the fern are then in harmony with the autumnal woods; bright yellow or lemon colour, at the base of the mountains, melting gradually, through orange, to a dark russet brown toward the summits where the plant being more exposed to the weather, is in a more advanced state of decay. (*Guide* 28)

The "beauty and variety of [mountain] surfaces and colours" so appealing to the picturesque eye are identified as the effects of geological processes, as well. The pigment of the rock is a result of its mineralogical composition, and the effect of climate and deposition:

Schist being the substance of the mountains, the predominant colour of their rocky parts is bluish, or hoary grey- the general tint of the lichens with which the bare stone is encrusted. With this blue-grey color is frequently intermixed a red tinge, proceeding from

the iron that interveins the stone and impregnates the soil. The iron is the principle of decomposition in these rocks; and hence, when they become pulverized, the elementary particles crumbling down, overspread in many places the steep almost precipitous sides of the mountains with an intermixture of colors, like the compound hues of a dove's neck (*Guide* 28).

Such descriptions explain the “painterly” attributes of the landscape using the technical parlance of geology and function to ground the beauty of the landscape in the very real, very complex processes of nature. An appreciation for the intricacies and the processes that shape the landscape is fostered by explanations of how the mineral composition of rock influences its color, for example, as is an awareness of the delicate relationship between elements of the landscape. The visual power of the mountain relies on the the smooth function of the species and processes that work or live upon it.

The dove's neck is an exquisitely beautiful visual metaphor for the effect of natural processes on the surface of the whole mountain. Not coincidentally, Edmund Burke identified the dove a model of aesthetic beauty in nature. For him, the lines of the bird's physical body illustrate the principal of gradual variation:

. . . the head increasing insensibly to the middle, from which it lessens gradually until it mixes with the neck; the neck loses itself in a larger swell, which continues to the middle of the body, when the whole decreases again to the tail; the tail takes a new direction, but soon it varies its new course, it blends again with other parts, and the line is perpetually changing, above, below, upon every side....its parts are to use the expression melted into

one another; you are presented with the sudden protuberance of the whole, and the whole is continually changing. (qtd in *Literature and Nature* 336)

These observations appeared in Burke's widely read *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). His illustration resonates with Wordsworth's vision of the landscape. Like Burke, Wordsworth traces the features of the land from one to next, explaining as he goes the seamless variation between individual forms, each blended into the next. Thus, we "are presented with the sudden protuberance of the whole" and perceive that by the powers and processes of nature, "the whole is continually changing."

Wordsworth thus calls tourists to perceive, not the likeness of art, but the artfulness of nature in the scenery before them. The borders of the frame are broken away so that the magnitude of nature might more readily be understood and the intricacies that unify it, perceived. The scene is thus dilated to encompass the whole of nature, and the spectator, as well. The *Guide* thus promotes awareness and appreciation for the depth and complexity of the "beautiful and permanent forms of nature" that drew so many to visit and settle in the Lakes.

IV.

The *Guide* concludes with a call to preserve the Lakes as a national trust:

In this wish the author will be joined with persons of pure taste throughout the whole island, who, by their visits (often repeated) to the Lakes in North England, testify that they deem the district a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy. (Wordsworth 92)

With these concluding lines the Wordsworthian spectator, the “person of pure taste,” is distinguished from the passive and detached picturesque spectator. The latter discerns only the aesthetic quality of the natural scenery. The tourists’ Wordsworthian counterparts are attune to the vulnerability of the landscape and the importance of its preservation. The lines convey that they, like Wordsworth, recognize people’s stake in the survival of the biosphere of the Lakes; its conservation is, indeed, a national responsibility. More than that, these concluding lines call for a shift from passive spectatorship to activism: Wordsworthian spectators are to “join” together to “testify” to the local environment’s value, and right to thrive. Indeed, his words on the formation of a “national property” have since earned him some credit for the initiation of the National Trust and Lake District National Park (Bate 47).

Like a postcard from the brink of catastrophic environmental change, his concluding lines remind contemporary readers that we are all mutually responsible for the preservation of the ecosystems that enfold us here and now. As we have seen, it is not sufficient to simply admire the view as it crumbles before us. Rather, the perpetuation of our own local and global ecosystems, indeed of future generations, relies on the same sense of mutual responsibility and stewardship that Wordsworth espoused two hundred years ago.

Chapter 2

Local People and Ecosystems in Wordsworth's

Guide to the Lakes

The *Guide* belongs to the body of Wordsworth's best literary productions. Though it has not received the critical attention given to its more popular poetic counterparts, the book imparts important insight into the relationship between common people and nature in Wordsworth's writing. In it, human society is defined as an indivisible component of the physical environment, and a system based on harmonious partnership with nature is advocated for. Social and environmental politics are thus interwoven in the *Guide* such that Wordsworth's writing about common people elsewhere is found inseparable from his writing about nature. The *Guide* thus affords a bridge between the oft polarized critics who write about Wordsworth's views on rural life and those who write about his views on nature.

Ecocriticism is frequently at odds with New Historicist analyses that exclude Wordsworth's attitudes about nature and human relationships with nature. New Historicists are interested in what has been referred to as the "Political Wordsworth." Their work is frequently invested in references to socioeconomic and political conditions in the poems. In particular, allusions to late eighteenth century events that adversely affected the rural poor have drawn specific critical interest. For instance, in *Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse: Poetry, Poverty, and Power* (1994), Gary Harrison argues that the pastoral poems "constitute a direct engagement with and intervention in the politics of poverty and reform the swept the social and political and

cultural landscape during the 1790s in England” (16). His book is a response to George MacLean Harper’s claim that Wordsworth’s poetry is not “charged with temporal alloy” (Harper 1). Harrison’s work joins a body of criticism that attempts to show the influence of the sociopolitical and economic milieu of late eighteenth century on Wordsworth’s poetry. Critics of this camp maintain that, as Harrison puts it, the poetry was forged in of climate of the times (16).

Harrison examines Wordsworth’s poetic references to the poor, homeless, and solitary people that haunted the Lakes during the 1790s. The poetry, Harrison insists, came out of direct encounters with the the local poor and contributes to ongoing debates about poor laws. In his view, the poems “reproduce and empower... features of discourse on poverty that shaped the attitudes toward the poor well into the nineteenth century” (Harrison 16).

A similar argument appears in David Simpson’s *Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination* (1989). Simpson is predominantly interested in the historical roots of Wordsworth’s poetry and the degree to which he accurately references specific political events. Like Harrison, he insists that “Wordsworth’s poems address themselves to fairly precise events and circumstances,” specifically, “the French Revolution, the condition of England, [and] the plight of the poor” (2). Harrison and Simpson are joined Majorie Levinson and Alan Liu, both of whom are equally interested in the degree to which Wordsworth suppresses historical fact. They respectively argue that Wordsworth consciously elides or subdues elements of history in his poetry, often at the expense of the common people he frequently wrote about. Levinson argues that critics who focus on references to distressing socioeconomic trends in his pastoral often fail to consider what is “missing” or excluded from the poetry (3). For instance, she is annoyed with Wordsworth for not referencing the vagrant poor that haunted the Tintern Abbey ruins. In her view, Wordsworth

consciously suppressed historical fact in some of his poetry, and for that he should be held to task.

Wordsworth's social and political concerns have been examined without much consideration for his writing about nature. New Historicist analyses have curiously excluded the environmental context for his writings (McKusick 15). However, in the early 1990s a group of critics interested in what is referred to as the "Environmental Wordsworth," or Wordsworth "the nature poet" began to emerge. Among them Jonathan Bate and James McKusick are perhaps the most influential. Both are interested in Wordsworth's writings about nature, and human relationships to the physical environment. In his book *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (2000), McKusick notes that years of critical examination of the poetry has yielded a "thorough understanding of [Wordsworth's] multifaceted complexity, as a poet and a person" (54). However, he asserts that "something of the radical and elemental simplicity of his poetry has been lost in the process" (54). The material environment of Wordsworth's writing - the hills, and trees, and air - are vital to his art, his politics, and as a resident of Grasmere, his daily life (9). Ecocriticism promises to renew interest in these elements as they acted on and work within the writing. An ecocritical reading of Wordsworth:

has strong historical force, for if one historicizes the idea of an ecological point of view- a respect for the earth and a skepticism as to the orthodoxy that economic growth and material production are the be-all and end-all of human society- one finds oneself squarely in the Romantic tradition. (Bate 9)

This kind of reading, Bate asserts, brings Romanticism to bear on the most pressing political issues of our time: climate change, the destruction of ecosystems, pollution, acid rain, resource

depletion, and the “concreting” of our green spaces. Bate’s assertions remind us that environmental is today, as it was for Wordsworth, deeply political.

I will attempt to bridge the gap between seemingly antithetical New Historicist and ecocritical readings of Wordsworth. His writing about nature, I will argue, interlaces democratic and ecological concerns. Indeed, there is more than a casual correlation between his concern about the state of local people and the land they traditionally inhabited. In fact, a reading of his *Guide to the Lakes* reveals that the decline of native farmers in the eighteenth century led to a correspondent deterioration in the ecology of area. I argue that for Wordsworth this class of people were historically incorporated in the ecosystem of the Lakes, such that their gradual eradication had dramatic ramifications for its ecological welfare. My reading will draw heavily from the *Guide* and from Wordsworth’s writing about “common rural life” in the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, in which he first articulates his ideas about the relationship between rustic people and their environment.

I.

The first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798, included an ‘Advertisement’ describing the poems as “experiments” to determine “how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure” (Prose Works 116). The edition met with harsh reviews. The first, the harshest, appeared in October 1798 in the *Critical Review*. The reviewer, no less than author Robert Southey, skewered the prefatory advertisement. The “experiment” he said “we think has failed, not because the language of conversation is little adapted to ‘the purposes of poetic pleasure’ but because it has been tried

upon uninteresting subjects” (qtd in Barker 241). Similar reviews followed from other publications. Despite them all, however, the first edition sold out. Booksellers requested a reprint (Barker 259). When a second edition appeared it included Wordsworth’s now famous essay, justifying the poetry. *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems. In Two Volumes* was published in late January 1801 with an expanded the advertisement into a full scale defense of the poetry. The “Preface” was born from Wordsworth’s anxiety about potential critical backlash to the poetry. In her biography, *Wordsworth A Life*, Juliet Barker explains that he anticipated an “explosively hostile” reaction to the poetry because it willfully defied established literary traditions (273).

The “Preface” dramatically expands on and justifies the poetic vision behind Wordsworth’s contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*. In it, he defends his conscious decision to write about “incidents and situations from common life” in “language really used by men” (Preface 127). He asserts that common man and ordinary things and events are worthy poetic subjects, and advocates for a poetry free from artifice that integrates art and real life. Poetry, he says, should trace “truly, though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature,” and “the great and simple affections” of the heart in “naked and simple” language. The great poet is, he asserts, “a man speaking to men,” who celebrates and affirms the “naked dignity” of common people and the “essential passions of the heart.”

Although many critics since Robert Southey have condemned Wordsworth for his ideas, his characterization of the relationship between common people and nature has some interesting ecological implications. The terms *common*, *rustic*, and *low* are used in the “Preface” to identify Wordsworth’s chosen poetic subjects. Included in this group were the criminal, the outcast, and the insane, as well as what we might call “plain country folk.” The assortment of people

collected under his umbrella of “common life” suggests that he used the word somewhat broadly to refer to members of the lower classes, particularly those on the margins of society. However, he justifies his choice of subject by espousing the virtues of common country life in particular. In his view, common people share an abiding connection to their natural environment, by which they are ennobled or enriched:

In that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity; are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity...the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and from the necessary character of rural occupations. . . (“Preface” 128).

What may be called “organic images” pervade his characterization of rural life. First, that in the country “the essential passions of the heart” “germinate” in “a better soil” is particularly potent (“Preface” 128). The word germinate applied here connects their “essential” nature or heart with the soil; it becomes in his description like a growth or production of the natural landscape. The passage is meant to convey what makes “common life” a fit poetic subject. For Wordsworth the worthiness of common, rural folk rests in the virtue of their occupations, which put the people in almost constant interaction with nature. This constant exchange nourishes and preserves an admirable state of simplicity and innocence. This kind of favorable representation of rural life dates to classical times. In his book *The Country and the City* (1975), Raymond Williams explains the country is traditionally associated with “a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue” (1). Characterizations of the country such as this affirm the idea that physical proximity to “the fields, woods, the growing crops, [and] the animals” places one in

a more natural state, as if the closer a person is to nature the more attune to she is to the “essential passions” of human life.

Wordsworth’s description of rural life in the “Preface” tends to idealize country life. These kinds of characterizations are not unique to Wordsworth, however. In fact, Raymond Williams suggests, the kind of generalizations we see in the “Preface” pervade generations of writing, all the way back to Eden (1-2). However, there are notes of the ecological in Wordsworth’s characterization of rural life that are worthy of closer consideration. To return to the word “germinate,” he suggests that people do not merely interact with nature, but rather grow from and are a part of it. As he says, “in that condition men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (“Preface” 128). The word *incorporate* signifies the unification of things into one entity. To *incorporate* is to unite in one body, and in that way become ineluctably part of the whole (OED “incorporate”). Common people, he suggests, are of the body of nature. To use the lexicon of contemporary ecology, they are a part of the local ecosystem. Like indigenous ferns of Mount Gawfell, the people are individuals species of their environment, and in that sense, they are also extensions of it.

The application of the word “low” to the people also has the effect of placing them not near, but in nature. First, the word lowness is clearly used as a social descriptor for the “lower,” or working, classes. To be low is to belong to a humble, or inferior set; to be “wanting in elevation” (OED “low”). In that sense it implied a closeness to the ground, or soil. More significantly, to be laid low is literally to join in the earth, or be buried under the soil. *Low* also signifies an inferior “degree of civilization” (OED “low”). Applied in that sense the word connotes wildness or primitivity, both of which were associated with a “natural,” or

“uncivilized” state during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus, while the word denotes the social status of his subjects, it also connotes ideas about nature that yoke them with their environment.

As a social marker the word “low” is thus mired in classist attitudes about the poor. However, used here it subtly reinforces Wordsworth’s perception of the innate, almost umbilical connection between “low” people and things and nature. Wordsworth uses the word here to great effect. In a somewhat paradoxical move he suggests that the “lowness” of the laboring rural classes makes them worthy poetic subjects.

II.

In the “Preface” Wordsworth is most concerned with the manner in which the people’s integration with nature ennobles their souls, and way of life. In the *Guide* he affirms this stance, but characterizes their relationship more in terms of a harmonious partnership. The hand of man, he asserts, works “as incorporated and subservient to the powers and processes of nature.” As a consequence the human social structure is also integrated in the natural environment, as are the structures of their life and work. “Section Second: Aspect of the Country, as Affected by its Inhabitants,” is dedicated to the manner in which people, working in partnership with nature, have historically shaped its appearance. Their physical contributions to the landscape are used to illustrate the people’s productive union with nature. With the section, Wordsworth attempts to explain the reciprocity of the local people’s relation to nature. The “the face of the country,” he asserts, “is indebted to the hand of man.” Likewise, the “hand of man” is “incorporated” with nature, and his work blends harmonious with it (51). The local community is thus presented as a

model of sustainability, meaning that the people maintain a balance between their needs and the needs of nature. Indeed, he suggests, the bounds between human life and the natural world are frequently permeable.

As he does in the early poems, Wordsworth reveals in the *Guide* the complexity and beauty that belies common people and the ordinary things they created. Rustic cottages, bridges, and fences are singled out as illustrations of the peasantry's incorporation in the body of nature. His attitudes in the section are important, not only because his views of "low and rustic life" of given further expression, but because he draws a strong connection between the ecological fate of the landscape and that of its native inhabitants. This point, I suggest, adds an important dimension to the critical discussion of the pastoral tragedies like "Ruined Cottage" and "Michael" that warrants consideration.

The "incorporation" of people and things in nature is characterized in the *Guide* in what we might call specifically ecological terms. First, Wordsworth clearly identifies inhabitants and architecture as "native." The word replaces signifiers of social station, region, or occupation in several places. The words "common" and "low," used in the "Preface," function first and foremost to identify social status; "rustic" identifies regional and occupational affiliation. The later word is used to describe people of agricultural stock. In the context of the "Preface," wherein Wordsworth attempted to justify his decision to write about the rural poor, these signifiers were appropriate. In the *Guide*, however, the terms are replaced by one that refers explicitly to the relationship of people and things to place, and more specifically to nature. Common people are identified as "natives." So, too, their way of life and architecture is "native." The word connotes a deep, long-term connection to the landscape. As a noun, it refers to

a person who or thing which, by nature or custom, belongs to something or somewhere. Whether by birth or the processes of assimilation, the native is in this sense incorporated in a place or condition; it is “inherent, innate; belonging to or connected with something by nature or natural constitution,” in other words, “naturally occurring” (OED “native”). Thus, the application of the word in the *Guide* affirms the people’s natural incorporation in the ecosystem of the Lakes. Their communities, traditions, homes, bridges, and ways of life are extensions of the local environment.

Wordsworth also stresses the ancientness of their relationship to nature. Their status as natives is the consequence of generations of living and working in the land. The “first aboriginal colonists of the Celtic tribes,” he asserts, entered into an already ancient empire:

they found it overspread with wood; forest trees, the fir, the oak, the ash, and the birch had skirted the fells, tufted the hills, and shaded the valleys, *through centuries of silent solitude*; the birds and beasts of prey reigned over the meeker species; and the bellum inter omnia maintained the balance of Nature in the empire of the beasts (Wordsworth 52).

His characterization of the tribes as colonists conveys ideas about conquest and imperialism that are otherwise out of place in his description of their relationship to nature. Far from conquering the landscape, the tribes were subsumed, and become subservient to, the “empire of beasts” (Wordsworth 52). They “became joint tenants with the wolf, the boar, the wild bull, the red deer, and the leigh” (Wordsworth 52). The phrase “joint tenants” more appropriately describes their status in nature, because it suggests ideas about coexistence and sharing. As

cohabitants with the “wolf, the boar, the wild bull, the red deer, and the leigh” the people became, like the animals, extensions of nature.

Perhaps even more telling is his description of the hereditary bond people developed with the land over the course of generations. Wordsworth suggests they developed a kinship with their environment. As McKusick notes in *Romantic Ecology*, in Grasmere, the people are embraced “maternally by the hills around. Nature serves as *both* parents” (21). The native inhabitants are “sons of the hills” and antiquity is the “copartner” but also the “sister of nature” (74). This familial bond is also apparent in the pastoral poems. For example, in the “Ruined Cottage,” the pedlar-narrator observes that the waters of the nearby stream lament Margaret’s death; “for them a bond/Of brotherhood is broken” (84-85). In “Michael” the bond between man and nature even exceeds that between father and son. In the poem, an elderly shepherd and his family suffer the loss of a large portion of their land. The forfeiture is economically devastating; a large portion of patrimonial fields are denied the shepherd’s son. However, the emotional trauma of the loss is more pronounced. His affection for the native “fields and hills” is characterized as “a pleasurable feeling of blind love,/The pleasure which is in life itself” (76-77). Thus, his separation from the land is paramount to losing his very grip on existence. Michael considers selling a parcel of land, but the emotional burden of the sacrifice is too much. Should the land “pass into a stranger’s hands” he says “I think I could not lie quiet in my grave” (231-232). Michael resolves to part with his son instead; the boy is sent to a successful kinsman to learn a trade. The decision to send the boy away conveys the ineluctability of man’s bond with nature; it exceeds even the most intimate human relationships.

For Wordsworth, the traditional peasantry understood the land as an extension of themselves. Certainly, peasants for generations depended on the elements of soil, air, light, and water for their very existence. Cultivated nature yielded their sustenance and livelihood. However, Wordsworth suggests that more than economic necessity belied the people's attachment with nature. They had, Wordsworth asserts, "a consciousness that the land, which they walked over and tilled, had for more than five hundred years, been possessed by men of their name and blood," and thus read their collective and individual identities in the soil (*Guide* 74). The passage of land from generation to generation was accompanied by the transmission of a way of life, a culture. Each successive generation thus shared in the legacy of their ancestral community, and the working of the soil became a means of sustaining the present, but also preserving of the past. The soil "[peasants] walked over and tilled" thus bore in it a reminder of their ancestral incorporation with nature. More than material property, Wordsworth suggests, the land became the mould of a community.

Wordsworth's characterization of the traditional peasantry's deep affection for the land finds beautiful expression in "Michael." The loss of the shepherd's ancestral land is "a grievous penalty" that depletes "but little less than than half his substance" (214-215). The word *substance* takes on two meanings in the line, one economic and the other bodily. In the context of the passage, his *substance* refers to his total property. Thus, the loss cuts him from "a little less than half" of the land under his possession, a "grievous" economic "penalty" to be sure. However, the word also has both spiritual and bodily connotations. *Substance* refers also to "that of which a physical thing consists; they material of which a body is formed" (OED "substance"). Indeed, in

“Michael,” the shepherd suggests that the physical substance of his ancestry is intermingled with the soil:

Though now old
Beyond the common life of man, I still
Remember them who loved me in my youth.
Both of them sleep together; here they lived,
As all their Forefathers had done; and, when
At length their time was come, they were not loath
To give their bodies to the family mould (365-370)

The ancestral grave, or *family mould*, is the site of each generation’s physical incorporation with the soil. There the processes of decay transmute their physical bodies into the *mould*, which in soil composition is fertile upper layer. As the body, also referred called the *mould*, deteriorates its tissues become the organic material that renews, and enriches the soil. The substance of the body and the substance of the soil are thus unified, and in that way the people’s connection to nature is actualized. Their physical “incorporation and subservience” to its “powers and processes” provides a literal example of their harmonious integration in the ecosystem that sustains them.

There is also a deeply spiritual element to the people’s integration with nature that finds representation in Wordsworth’s characterization of Michael. His internal *substance*, his essence or essential nature, is derived from “the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” that he communicates with daily. An abiding affection for “the green valleys, the streams and rocks” defines his person:

Those fields, those hills- what could they less? had laid

Strong hold on his affections, were to him

A pleasurable feeling of blind love,

The pleasure which there is in life itself (61-77)

Jonathan Bate's description of Rilke in *Song of the Earth* resonates with Wordsworth's characterization of Michael's intimacy with nature in these lines. While reclining against a tree in the garden of Schloss Duino, Rilke "felt himself entered by the open":

He seemed to become nature itself, to share his being with tree and singing bird as inner and outer were gathered together into a single uninterrupted space (263).

As they do in Rilke, outer and inner nature unite in Michael. However, this sensation of being entered by "the open" is not transient for Michael. Rather, the fields and hills of his native home are interfused in his being; they are "life itself." Their loss is "a grievous penalty" on his soul, worth "half its substance." Nor can he part from more. As pointed out earlier, his son instead is sent from home in search of work, by which to secure their patrimonial fields. The sacrifice is suggestive of the people's vital connection to their ancestral land; to lose it all is to lose one's being, and "life itself."

III.

In his environmental manifesto *The Rediscovery of North America* (1991), Barry Lopez decries the violent domination of nature as a result of five hundred years of subordinating it to human interests:

We never said to people or animals or plants or rivers or the mountains: What do you think of this? We said what we thought, and bent to our will whatever resisted. (18)

Lopez traces this sort of disregard for the environment to the first Spanish imperial conquest of the Americas. The exploitation and destruction of ecosystems that began with large scale colonial enterprises accelerated in the nineteenth century with the rise of agrarian capitalism and industrial revolution (Buchardt 6). According to Jerry Buchardt's analyses of changing European attitudes about nature, "the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed a extension of human control" over nature (6). In the agricultural context, the bounds of cultivated land gradually, but dramatically expanded (Buchardt 6). The improvement activities in agriculture during the eighteenth century frequently attempt to subordinate and control nature. For instance, the processes of enclosure and moorland reclamation, which relied on the drainage of marshes lead to more efficient farming and increased yields, but often at the expense of the ecosystem (Buchardt 6). The processes of enclosure, frequently led by enterprising landowners, equally devastated native peasantry, whose holdings were frequently bought out to make way for improvements.

As Buchardt notes, the success seventeenth and eighteenth century landowners had in "improving" rural landscapes resulted from the bridling and exploitation of nature and native inhabitants alike (6). Some, however, rejected these alterations. A "countervailing wish to let nature back in" rose up among advocates of nature, and local people. Among them, Wordsworth, espoused the wide-scale adoption of the manner in which native peasantry lived and worked in nature:

It is then too much to be wished a better taste should prevail . . . that skill and knowledge should present unnecessary deviations from that path of simplicity and beauty along which without design and unconsciously [our] predecessors have moved, (*Guide* 91-92).

For him, the communities offer a model of what we now call an environmentally “sustainable” way of life. In contrast to those who regarded nature as subservient or exploitable, he suggests, the common peasantry lived and worked in partnership with nature, to which *they* were subservient.

A consequence of the people’s incorporation in nature is “an integrated social structure” (Bate 47). The local peasantry comprised a “Commonwealth” of nature: “the members of which existed in midst of a powerful empire like an ideal society or an organized community, whose constitution had been imposed and regulated by the mountains which protected it” (*Guide* 68). The people, he asserts, live and work in a collective harmony with the “powers and processes” of nature. That their “constitution” is “imposed and regulated” by “the mountains” places them also in a position of subservience to the natural “empire,” or ecosystem.

Wordsworth offers rural architecture as a physical example of the integration of the local peasantry’s social structure in nature. Native stone walls, intermixed fields of common pasture, native growth, and cultivated crops, and cottages are each represented as the culmination of “the hand of man..as incorporated with and subservient to the powers and processes of Nature,” precisely because each blends in and fuses with living landscape. Cottages provide a particularly strong example of the physical integration of nature and structure. Wordsworth regards these simple ‘habitations of man’ as no less than ‘works of art’, because in them man and nature worked collaboratively. In substance, the houses were frequently built from “native rock,” and roofed with “slates.” The stone of the walls and roofs was “rough” and “unhewn,” leaving “places of rest” for “seeds of lichens, mosses, ferns, and flowers” that when they germinated “clothed” the houses in a “vegetable garb” (*Guide* 71). Outwardly, they looked like “a production

of Nature”; they seemed “to have grown than to have been erected- to have risen, by instinct of their own of the native rock” (*Guide* 70). The “wildness” and “beauty” of the structures, he says “call to mind the processes of Nature” (*Guide* 71). Constructed as they are from native materials and interfused with biological life they appear to be physically received in the “bosom of the living principle of things as it acts and exists among the woods and fields” (*Guide* 71). Thus, the cottages provide a physical representation of the otherwise abstract notion of an integrated social structure.

Other structures represent, for Wordsworth, the people’s attempts to actively preserve the native ecology of the Lakes. Mining operations that began in the Medieval period depleted the native forests radically. Without a doubt, the clearing of wood to make way for cultivated land also contributed. Wordsworth, however, defends neither cause of deforestation. He laments “the indiscriminate ravage” of the “ancient woods,” but commends practices that “enrich” or renew their remains. For example, he celebrates the fences and “enclosures entirely of wood” native peasantry erected in an attempt to preserve and renew depleted woods. Both structures, as they might be called, represent the local people’s willingness to work with nature, and in places to renew it from the ravages of enterprises like mining.

The “sylvan” fences that Wordsworth so much admired were erected to differentiate the several small properties of the local people from one another, and from the common fields they shared. From the Medieval period up to the mid-eighteenth century, tenants possessed small plots of land, and frequently shared swathes of open meadow, called commons. These communal fields were used for grazing cattle or other livestock, and in some cases, for modest agricultural purposes. Gradually, however, tenants enclosed their portions with fences. These enclosures,

Wordsworth points out, were often composed from living elements of the land. He notes: “the enclosures, formed by the tenantry, are for a long time confined to the homesteads; and the arable and meadow land of the vales is possessed in common field; the several portions being marked out by stones, bushes, or trees” (*Guide 67*). As a result of the enclosures, the “whole vale is visibly divided” into intermixed patches of common field, cultivated tracts of tenant property, and clusters of native trees (*Guide 66*).

However, the fences provide permeable boundaries between each type of land. Comprised of “stones, bushes, or trees,” the fences, like the cottages, interfuse with the very land they mark (*Guide 67*). Their substance allows them to blend harmoniously with the ecosystem and in some places enrich it. For example, “where the inconvenience suffered from intermixed plots of ground in common field, had induced each inhabitant to enclose his own” they used indigenous species like “alders, willows, and other trees” (*Guide 67*). Where “the native wood had disappeared” the introduction of these species “enriches” the otherwise depleted sylvan biology of the ecosystem (*Guide 68*).

Other more overt attempts at conservation resulted in the formation of ‘tufts’ of enclosed wood. When exploitative mining practices halted under Elizabeth resumed again, local people elected to enclose the remains of native wood as preserves (*Guide 69*). Timber fueled mining enterprises in the area. The “quantity of wood which was consumed in them” radically depleted ancient forests, a source of sustenance for livestock (*Guide 69*). Consequently, the local people invested themselves in rudimentary forest renewal projects: “[it became] the interest of the people to convert the steeper and more stony enclosures, sprinkled over with the remains of

native forest, into close woods, which, when cattle and sheep were excluded, rapidly sowed and thickened themselves” (*Guide* 69). Preserves were maintained for generations after.

The renewal of native forests is, in Wordsworth’s view, essential to the preservation of the “native beauty of this delightful district.” The depletion of these ancient, indigenous woods detracts from the native ecology of the area, as it also does the aesthetic beauty of the Lakes. So too, he suggests, the destruction of native inhabitants as a result of the exploitative advances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries supplanted an integrated social structure with a dominating, and destructive, one.

If the poor and vagrant that populate Wordsworth’s pastoral poetry tell us anything it is that during the in eighteenth-century the traditional fabric of rural life was torn. In Wordsworth’s “Discourse on Poverty in the eighteenth century British ‘Agrarian Idyll,’” Harrison notes:

Economic and social historians generally agree that the rise of population and massive redistribution of land through private acquisition and enclosure between 1650 and 1800 took a heavy toll on the customary relations of production in the English countryside, largely to the detriment of those at the bottom two tiers of the classical triad of landlord, tenant farmer, and landless wage earner making up the social landscape of rural England. (*Vagrant Muse* 27)

A general decline in tenant farmers took place between 1660 and 1760. During that period, agricultural prices were low, and a gradual shift from hand labor to mechanized production, accelerated in the eighteenth century, crushed the home industries that sustained many rural families. As Pamela Horn explains “the growth of a large production unit, be it factory or

workshop, undermined and eventually destroyed most of these domestic arrangements, the cottage cloth-making industry being one of the earliest victims” (2).

Wordsworth describes the function and decline of the cottage industry and its impact on the rural poor in the *Guide*. Formerly, the family of each man “whether estatesman or farmer” had “two fold support, the produce of his lands and flocks’ and ‘the profit drawn from...spinning their own wool in their houses” (92). The wool was carried to a market center for sale. Scenes of cottage industry appear in “Michael” and the “Ruined Cottage.” In the former, the whole family contributes to the home industry:

Luke (for so the son was named)

And his old Father both betook themselves

To such convenient work as might employ

Their hands by the fair side; perhaps to card

Wool for the Housewife’s spindle (“Michael” 103-107)

Her spinning wheels, he says, were in constant motion: “if one wheel had rest,/It was because the other was in motion” (84-85). In the “Ruined Cottage,” the aftermath of the collapse of the industry is evident in the “idle loom,” and the mournful image of “the little child that sate to turn the wheel” as their cottage roots around him (465). In her state of despair and poverty Margaret is seen “spinning the long drawn thread with backward step” (461). The line conveys a sense of regression, and in that sense a kind of unnatural, backward moving decay. As poverty and grief came nearer, she retreats from the land into her own despair, her house all the while crumbling around her.

Even after the industry's decline, families continued to produce wool and cloth for their own use. In his autobiography William Cobbett describes images of this kind of labor from his childhood:

In the "dark ages," when I was a boy, country laborers' wives used to spin wool, and knit the stockings and gloves that were wanted in the family. My grandmother knitted stockings for me after she was blind. Farmers' wives and daughters, and servant maids, were spinning, reeling, carding, knitting, or at something or other of that sort, whenever the work of the farm house did not demand them, (234-235).

The textile work that Cobbett describes, however, provided for the immediate needs of the family. By the time the young boy in the description observed these kinds of activities, the market for cottage-produced textiles was collapsed, leaving farmers with little income beyond what they eked out of their fields.

The "unfortunate alteration in the circumstances of the native peasantry" during the period led to their wide-scale dispossession and removal (Wordsworth 92). Every house, he laments, "fell to the sway" of the major economic shifts in agriculture and industry, stemming from the collapse of the cottage industry, the dispossession of small farmers, and enclosure of acres of countryside (Wordsworth 92-93). This last practice turned major chunks of countryside into private property, often to the detriment of small land holders whose properties were bought up and consolidated.

A major shift in the type of people and the manner in which they lived in the land attended the decline of the native peasantry. As Harrison observes, a gradual, but extensive transformation, occurred in the "habitus and sense of identity of those who occupied that

landscape” (28). Those who had lived and worked in the countryside for generations were “torn loose” and “struggled to adopt and adapt to new practical demands” (Harrison 28). Many became wage laborers on the plantations and farms of the gentry or fed the growing work force of emerging industries (Horn 8-10). Cottages were abandoned and left to rot in a countryside over which the tentacles of agrarian capitalism increasingly extended. The arrival of a well-to-do class of landowners accompanied the economic developments of the period, bringing with them the practices of ornamental gardening and land improvement.

For Wordsworth the arrival of this new class of residents signaled a dangerous shift in the way people lived and worked in nature in the area of the Lakes. New settlers, he asserts, regarded nature as something *other*, something that needed to be suppressed and improved. A consequence of this attitude was the “indiscriminate ravage” of the native landscape. Residents, “profaned” the landscape by introducing “discordant objects, [and] disturbing the peaceful harmony of form and colour, which had been through a long lapse of ages most happily preserved” (*Guide* 72). He particularly disdained the introduction of tree plantations, often at the expense of native botanical species. For example, an “alien improver” felled “the venerable wood that had grown for centuries” at St. Herbert’s Hermitage to make way for “melancholy phalanx” of scotch fir and other tree plantations (*Guide* 70).

In Wordsworth’s view, the plantations signified the discordant relationship between new residents and nature. The producers, he notes, “thrust every other tree out of the way to make room for their favorite” (*Guide* 86). The trees thus signify a lack of regard for the ecosystem; it is, he argues, subordinated to the people’s “craving for prospect,” wealth, and status.

The trees are symbols of domination, or power, rather than incorporation. According to Tom Williamson “the planting of woods and plantations was, above all, a prime symbol of gentility, for the simple reason that only large landowners possessed sufficient land to take tens or hundreds of acres out of cultivation in this way” (77). The trees are thus wholly different from the wooded enclosures and living fence lines of the traditional native peasantry. The former signify the willful subordination of nature to human interests. They are thus malignant additions to the native ecology.

The seasonal alterations of the larch are visibly out of sync with the rhythms of the ecosystem:

In spring the larch becomes green long before the native trees; and its green is so peculiar and vivid, that finding nothing to harmonize with it, wherever it comes forth, a disagreeable speck is produced. In summer, when all other trees are in their pride, it is of a dingy lifeless hue; in autumn of a spiritless unvaried yellow, and in winter it is still more lamentably distinguished from every other deciduous tree of the forest, for they seem only to sleep, but the larch appears absolutely dead, (*Guide* 89).

The trees’ obvious discordance with the natural ecosystem make them a symbol of the (dis)integration of the new social structure. By virtue of the people’s insistence to impose and regulate nature’s constitution, the native ecology of the Lakes is imperiled. So too, the ancient republic of shepherds and agriculturalists systematically deteriorates, and is ultimately eradicated. Along with them, a sustainable way of living and working in nature vanishes.

However, Wordsworth suggests that the people provide the model of a more sustainable relationship between man and nature in the future, one that ensures the preservation of both. “Let

Nature be your guide” he concludes, “harmonize with the surrounding landscape!” (*Guide* 86-89). He advises readers to abide the ways locals had for generations “incorporated” with the environment, to “work- where you can, in the spirit of Nature” and “return to [her]” those areas given to improvement activities (*Guide* 86-89):

- the whole secret lurks in a few words: thickets and underwoods- single trees- trees clustered or in groups- groves- unbroken woods, but with varied mass of foliage- glades- invisible or winding boundaries- in rocky districts, a seemingly proportion of rock left wholly bare, and in other parts half hidden . . . trees climbing to the horizon . . . a feeling of duration, power of resistance, and security from change! (*Guide* 89).

Wordsworth thus concludes on the notion that local people and traditions provide a means back to nature. The same sentiment, two hundred years later, ignited the “back to the land” and “sustainability movement” that is popular thanks to increasing concern about environmental preservation. Books like Barbara Kingsolver’s wide selling *Animal Vegetable Mineral* and Frances Moore Lappe’s *Diet for a Small Planet* tout the potentially renewing effects of a return an economy based on (or at least more supportive of) small farming for our environment. These voices have popularized rural life as a model of harmonious relation with nature in the 21st century. Thus it seems, Wordsworth’s *Guide* is, centuries later, strikingly relevant to contemporary environmental movements, calling for increased harmony with nature. In the climate of current environmental crises, the incorporation of our fate with that of local and global is powerfully felt. Thus, as Bate so rightly notes, the time is ripe to return to Wordsworth’s ideas about nature. In them, we might study our own struggle to harmonize with and thereby renew ailing ecosystems.

Chapter 3

Human Partnership with Nature in Wordsworth's "Ruined Cottage"

Wordsworth is preeminently a nature poet. His poetry can no sooner be disassociated from the "beautiful and permanent forms of nature" than it can from "low and rustic life" or even from the Lake District; all are vital to his poetics. In the past thirty years, however, critical study has moved away from, and even questioned the validity of the idea of Wordsworth as a "nature poet" (Mckusick 54). Critics like Alan Liu have gone so far as to declare "there is no nature except as it is constituted by acts of political definition made possible by particular forms of government" (Sense of History 104). In the 1990s ecocritical approaches to Wordsworth attempted to supplant the readings of the previous decade- to make Wordsworth a nature poet again (Fry 99). New Historicists considered themselves as antagonistic to this emerging criticism, and almost twenty years later, the disciplines remain at odds (Fry 99).

Ecocritical approaches to Wordsworth treat a variety of questions, all of them bound up in the material environment of the writing. In the influential anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Glotfelty outlines some of the over arching questions of this critical discipline. The questions range from "How is nature represented" through "How has the concept of wildness or conservation or ecology changed over time" (xix). Karl Krober and Jonathan Bate have each traced contemporary ideas about the environment to Romanticism, and specifically to Wordsworth. Krober, for instance, argues that Romanticism produced the "first literature to anticipate contemporary biological terms" (2). His reading is founded on the Malthusian notion of competition between species for scarce resources. Similarly, Paul Fry suggests that nature in

Wordsworth's early poetry portrays nature as an "alien presence that has the power to afflict us" (Elam and Ferguson 7). In his view, nature is the "domain of the inhuman." People and nature are fundamentally divided, but human mortality remains still under the jurisdiction of nature. Fry characterizes nature as a "deadly element to which our own life is opposed," and yet on which our survival depends (Elam and Ferguson 10).

Ecocritics of Wordsworth generally advocate an ecological criticism focused on the material environment of the poetry and its implications for the text. In a sense, their work responds to, and often rejects, the notion that "there is no nature," or that Wordsworth is "not a nature poet." With his book *Romantic Ecology* (1991) Jonathan Bate counters the critical perspective that Romantic ideology is "a theory of imagination" embodied within "self-consciously idealist and elitist texts," which is essentially the New Historicist position of people like Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson (Bate 10). He argues instead that it is a "theory of ecosystems and unalienated labour embodied in self-consciously pragmatic and populist texts" (Bate 10).

While I agree with critics like Bate, both critical camps "are dangerously reductive" because "they tend to paint their proponents into narrow corners labeled Nature and Culture" (Mckusick 15). The concepts are frequently set in opposition to one another. The distinction between nature and culture is deceptive, however. Mckusick and Bate argue respectively that nature is not entirely material, nor is culture entirely immaterial. Rather, the two concepts blur into, interact with, and inform each other. Like McKusick and Bate, I am interested in the overlap between nature and culture, humans and their environment, and I am skeptical of

any reading of Wordsworth that would examine his political or social concerns without also considering his environmental concerns, and vice versa.

I.

Contrary to the New Historicist position of scholars like Liu, nature is not inimical to or even separable from Wordsworth's social and political concerns. Certainly, his poems do "address themselves to fairly precise events and circumstances," namely war, disease, and poverty (Simpson 2). However, New Historicist analyses neglect the interplay between social and political discussions and material environment, that just as frequently and powerfully, influences and occupies the poems.

From Harrison to Levinson to Simpson to Graef, critics have preferred to read the poetry for its social and political references. Of particular interest are Wordsworth's representations of and attitudes about the rural poor. The specter of poverty looms over the poetic landscape of the early poems, such that James Averill suggested Wordsworth entertained a "real fascination with suffering" (223). After all, he notes, the "poetry is virtually a parade of victims; the insane, the miserable, the diseased, decrepit, dying, and dead populate the landscape to the virtual exclusion of the healthy and normal" (223). Poems like the "Ruined Cottage," "Michael," and "The Female Vagrant" reference the complex social, political, and economic turmoil of the 1790's, and their collective impact on the condition of the laboring poor.

Wordsworth's attitudes about nature and its relationship to the rustic poor has not been factored into his "revolutionary politics." Nature is a vital component of Wordsworth's poetic landscape, and as we have seen in Chapter 2, his ecological concerns are bound up in social and

economic climate of the times. The importance of this fact to the early pastoral poems like “Ruined Cottage” cannot be ignored. Wordsworth is a nature poet, but I argue that his particular brand of “nature poetry” synthesizes a complex social and political milieu. His attitudes about the rural poor are as much ecological as they are social. To echo Bate, his is a politics of ecosystems, a poetics of people and their environment. To be complete, any discussion about the rural poor in Wordsworth’s politically-charged pastoral poetry must also incorporate his environmental views.

In the preceding chapter I showed how in the “Preface” and in the *Guide* Wordsworth makes a case for the incorporation of the rural poor in the ecosystem of the Lakes and the impact of these people’s eradication on the landscape. In this chapter, I will take a view of the interrelationship of his ecological and political attitudes as they play out in “The Ruined Cottage.” The poem is a powerful example of the way Wordsworth understood the impact of the events of the 1790s on the relationship between the humans and nature. Like the *Guide*, the poem functions to instruct readers how to “see into the heart of things,” to perceive the (dis)integration of the bond between the rural poor and their ancestral land, and perhaps to learn something of how to live in nature.

II.

Wordsworth began writing the “Ruined Cottage” in 1797 while at work on the *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem underwent several revisions. An expanded rendering was published in “Book 1” of the *Excursion* in 1814, in which he meditates at length on the character and the Pedlar, the narrator of Margaret’s story. However, the version of the poem most readers are familiar with is

Manuscript D, dated to 1799 or 1800. The narrative of this shorter version confronts readers with the blank facts of Margaret's "tale of silent suffering" (Introduction 144-145). Agricultural blight, disease, and the collapse of the textile industry reduce the family to poverty. Economic despair gradually eats away at her husband Robert's sanity; he languishes and ultimately abandons Margaret to enlist in the forces then embroiled in the Napoleonic Wars. Waiting, in anguish, for her husband's return she gradually declines and dies. The people's deterioration is reflected in the decay of the physical structure of the cottage. The ruin is a stark symbol of the radical socioeconomic changes of the 1790s that severed the traditional rural peasantry from their ancestral lands.

The last decade of the eighteenth century was a time of tumultuous social, political, and economic change in England. According to Harrison, "the high cost of war with France, poor harvests, enclosures and commercialization of all sectors of the economy brought spiraling high prices, large scale, agricultural unemployment, intermittent food shortages, social discontent and increasingly tense oppositions between a more highly organized right and left" (15). In the countryside, a massive redistribution of land and methods of agricultural subsistence gradually altered the face of the countryside and the lives of traditional peasantry. As Mckusick points out "traditional methods of subsistence agriculture were gradually being supplanted by more capital intensive modes of production, and the common areas upon which the local farmer relied for their seasonal grazing and gathering activities were increasingly withdrawn for exclusive private use by the processes of enclosure" (64). Those who stood in the way of modernization were steadily, and as Raymond William notes, often "ruthlessly broken down" (Country and City 61).

In the 1790s modernizing tendencies in agriculture rapidly accelerated, in large part because of the Napoleonic War. The high cost of the war drove up the prices of crops and other agricultural commodities, making “the intensive production of market crops” an attractive market for wealthy entrepreneurs (McKusick 63-64). In addition, an explosion in population put pressure on farmers to increase agricultural output. As a result, small farmers frequently sold or were bought out of their holdings to make way for the private farming enterprises that maximized output and profitability, often at the expense of the laboring poor whose ranks land redistribution fattened.

For Wordsworth, however, the major economic disaster for the rural poor during the period was the decline of the textile industry. In the *Guide* to the Lakes he identifies the shift away from hand labor to mechanized production as one of the principal causes of their distress. The in-house production of wool and cloth provided vital supplementary income to families that otherwise drew their livelihood from their small plots of land, water, or field. With the collapse of the cottage textile industry a vital source of revenue dried up, leaving families vulnerable to the kind of socioeconomic and political events that dominated the 1790s, and in some cases accelerated the very changes that threatened to remove them from the land. According to Wordsworth, although “the women and children might, at many seasons of the year, employ themselves with advantage in the fields” often “beyond what they were accustomed to do” the limitations of traditional modes of subsistence and resources left them wanting (*Guide* 92). As a result, proprietors and farmers were frequently not “able to maintain themselves upon small farms” (*Guide* 92). Properties were mortgaged or sold “into the hands of wealthy purchasers” (*Guide* 92). A consequence of transitions in property ownership was the steady, but

dramatic reorganization of farmland. The several, small self-sustaining properties of the tenantry were consolidated into larger holdings under the ownership of a single wealthy patron.

Traditional houses and buildings went “to decay” or were “destroyed,” and traditional modes of agriculture were supplanted by modes that maximized efficiency and output.

A massive movement to privatize public land attended the changes in the English countryside during the eighteenth century, in many cases compounding the plight of the rural poor. According to Jeremy Bucharadt, “the accelerating rise of the market economy in the eighteenth-century led to a more emphatic and sharply defined assertion of exclusive private property rights at the expense of collective customary rights” (47). As a consequence, swaths of open space, previously open to public use, were carded off as private property. Most notably, acts of parliamentary enclosure barred rural and urban poor alike from common fields, parks, and other formerly public domains (Bucharadt 47). The laboring poor of the countryside were confined to still smaller parcels of land, and not infrequently evicted from areas turned over to private enclosure.

The steady eradication of traditional modes of subsistence modes corresponds with a shift away from small-scale sustainable systems of agriculture to large-scale exploitative system, based in capitalism. McKusick notes in *Green Writing* (2000) that the traditional system was for all intents and purposes comparatively sustainable. The peasantry’s mode of subsistence agriculture, based on “a widely varied set of crops rotated annually, eked out by fishing, livestock grazing, and the seasonal gathering of nuts, berries, and firewood” had endured “relatively unchanged” since the Middle Ages (McKusick 63). Such a mode of subsistence was without a doubt back breaking. However, small-scale subsistence farming is typically more

sustainable than modern agricultural practices, because it relies on a wide variety of foods and commodities, often produced or harvested with comparatively limited impact on the environment (McKusick 63). Modern farming however, relies heavily on the intensive production of a single crop, often at the expense of the soil and streams. Whereas traditional subsistence agriculture promotes biological variety, modern agriculture is frequently limited to high-yield crops. As a result, heritage varieties are frequently lost, and native plants and species are supplanted to make way for the monocultures. Thus, the deterioration of traditional modes of subsistence during the 1790s might be said to correspond with a shift toward the kind of economic practices that resulted the depletion of soils, stream pollution, habitat destruction, and other contemporary environmental crises affiliated with capitalist agriculture.

III.

Wordsworth's poetry about "low and rustic" comments on the gradual eradication of rural communities as a result of the changes of the 1790s. The poems thus synthesize social and environmental concerns. The "Ruined Cottage" provides a particularly useful example. In the poem, Wordsworth comments not only on the plight of the poor, but on the strain of these social and economic change on their relationship with nature, and their subsequent eradication from the landscape. The central focus of the poem is the deterioration of one peasant family's ancestral bond with nature. Their minds, bodies, and home are gradually phased out of existence as a result of a series of economic disasters, but perhaps most of the collapse of the textile industry on which they depended. Indeed, the poem illustrates the destruction of the traditional peasantry's

bond with nature as a result the industry's decline, and the subsequent eradication of their "perfect Republic" from the landscape.

In their "happier day's" Margaret and Robert lived and worked in sync with the rhythms of the nature. A weaver, Robert is "up and busy at his loom/In summer ere the mower's scythe had swept/The dewy grass" and "in early spring/ ere the last star had vanished" (Ruined Cottage 122-125). The movements of his labor were formerly attune to the diurnal and seasonal movements of nature. Later in the poem, however, when "shoals of artisans are turned away from their daily labor" Robert's falls out of sync with the rhythms with which he once harmonized: "with a strange, amusing but uneasy novelty" he blends 'where he might the various tasks of summer, autumn, winter, and of spring" (Ruined Cottage 166-171). The disruption in the pattern of his work is a manifestation of the madness that settles over him as a result of the collapse of the textile industry.

Margaret and Robert suffer several afflictions, "two blighting seasons when the field were left with half a harvest," the "plague of war," and Robert and then Margaret's illness (Ruined Cottage 133-136) However, more than these, the collapse of the textile industry leaves the pair without recourse when disease depletes their scant resources. When, after a long illness, Robert regains his strength he finds "the little he had stored/to meet/ the hour of accident, or crippling age,/ was all consumed" (Ruined Cottage 149-153). In the lines immediately following, the narrator notes:

Twas now
A time of trouble: shoals of artisans
Were from their daily labor turned away to

Hang for bread on parish charity (152-155)

Robert, like many men, was a weaver. His craft furnished an income through cottage textile industry. The industry's collapse, alluded to here, thus deprives the family of a key source of income. Formerly, "numerous self-denials" allowed Margaret and her family to survive "calamitous years" of blight and disease. The silence of the looms, however, constrains their survival to "parish charity" and the meager resources of their garden. The impossibility of their situation is already tragically evident. As the narrator notes, "happier far" could the poor in their condition "have lived as do the little birds/That peek along the hedges/ or the kite/ That make her dwelling in the mountain rocks" (154-160). The lines hint at Margaret and Robert's crippling alienation from nature as a result of the economic changes that confront them. Their self-sufficient lifestyle is compromised, cutting them from Nature, who provides better than the scant church charity on which they are forced, in part, to survive.

Robert's growing alienation from nature is evident in his erratic behavior, and ultimate abandonment of home and family. Formerly, he worked "his busy spade" and wheel, but deprived of meaningful industry and slipping into abject despair he begins to "carve uncouth figures on the heads of sticks" (164-165). The same hands that moved in sync with the diurnal rhythms of nature, with day and night and season, disorder the "various tasks of summer, autumn, winter, and of spring" (166-171). As Harrison observes, "we could say that Robert has fallen from...the self regulating order of nature" (109). As a result, he "day by day" begins to "droop." The application of the word "drooping" to Robert, and later Margaret, sharply contrasts with to the image of the "essential passions of the heart germinat(ing)" from the soil of the countryside in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*. "Drooping" conveys a sense of languish, or

decline in vital strength that is wholly opposed to the vigor of germination. For instance, the plant, deprived of its vital sustenance, steadily droops as it progresses toward death. If the passions of the heart flourished from a connection with nature, Robert's drooping signifies a decline predicated by a disconnection from nature.

After Robert enlists, Margaret undergoes a similar, though more prolonged, decline that causes her also to "droop." In lines 393-395, the pedlar uses the word to describe her emotional state: "Ere on its sunny bank the primrose flower/ Had chronicled the earliest day of Spring/I found her sad and drooping." Since the season is Spring, a period of germination and re-growth her drooping is wholly out of sync with the natural order, and as we find in the deteriorated state of house and garden that this disconnection is both fed by and feeds her steady eradication from the land.

Margaret's (dis)integration is perhaps more evident in the parallel decline of the cottage. As she declines, by degrees, so too does the structure. The pedlar first perceives its change in the "worthless stonecrop" that "started out along the window's edge like weeds"; the "honeysuckle crowded round the door" in "heavier tufts"; the "straggled" appearance of the garden beds. The changes mirror Margaret's emotional decline. Like the rose "dragged from its sustaining wall and bent down to the earth" by "unwieldy wreaths" of weeds, she "droops" in despair. The "sustaining wall" is a loaded image; it is Robert, for whom she despairs, but also the traditions, nature, and more immediately, the dwelling itself. First, Robert's departure leaves Margaret in a state of abject despair and uncertainty. As Kurt Fosso notes, she is never able to determine whether he lives or not, and so cannot mourn nor determine her own status. She is both "wife and widow" (334). The emotional trauma of her abandonment, and uncertainty as a result of being

“dragged from” the “sustaining wall” of her husband “bends” her “down to the earth,” in which she must toil to live. Initially, she is seen “busy with her garden tools,” but as poverty and despair mount, the house and garden are given over to the “sleepy hand of neglect.”

However, her deterioration stems most from the family being “pulled from” the “sustaining” embrace of nature itself. This fracture, perpetuated by their alienation from “sustaining” work, “bends her down to the earth” in that it initiates the processes of decay that pervade the poem. Her distance from nature is evident in the “unwieldy wreaths” of weeds that consume her garden and deteriorate the “sustaining walls” of the cottage around her. She has fallen out of conscious, meaningful interaction with the “powers and processes of nature.” Instead, she becomes idle, like the garden and cottage. In that condition, she becomes the subject of decay, nature working on her, rather than in and through her. This is most evident in the rapid deterioration of the house, which “reft” by “frost, and thaw, and rain,” is penetrated by the elements. Nature’s dismantling moves inside. However, Margaret remains disassociated, even as “her tattered clothes” are “ruffled by the wind” at “the side of her own fire” (485).

Descriptions of Margaret’s decline and the decline of the house are enjambed throughout the poem. In one instance, the pedlar, taking notice of the first hints decline, links her condition with that of the dwelling:

She seemed the same

In person or appearance, but her house

Bespoke the sleepy hand of negligence (399-401)

A consequence of the enjambment is the association of her internal state with the external state of the dwelling, as if the two are synonymous. Their enjambment also functions to illustrate the

somewhat cyclical consequences of her distance from nature. The economic conditions that deny the sustaining work that united her with nature precipitate a spiral of poverty and despair that, in its course, removes her still farther from nature.

Indeed, critics have read the decaying cottage as alternately a symbol of Margaret's psychological decline. In Harrison's view, the narrative of the cottage's deterioration is a comment on the cognitive burden of poverty (Harrison 109). He explains, "the loss of their imaginative sympathy with nature ultimately destroys the spiritual integrity and mental health of both Margaret and Robert" (Harrison 109). I agree that Robert and Margaret's economic, and subsequent psychological deterioration are the catalysts for the ultimate (dis)integration of their formerly harmonious relationship with the nature. What warrants further consideration, however, is the ultimate consequence of their decline: eradication

After, the collapse of the textile industry bars Robert from sustaining work, he sinks away from the land into his psyche, and so falls out and away from its rhythms:

At his door he stood
And whistled many a snatch of merry tunes
That had no mirth in them, or with his knife
Carved uncouth figures on the heads of sticks,
Then idly sought about through every nook
Of house or garden any casual task
Of use or ornament, and with a strange
Amusing but uneasy novelty
He blended where he might the various tasks

Of summer, autumn, winter, and of spring (162-171)

Cut from the land, he wanders 'here and there among the field' without purpose or a sense of connection. Ultimately, his decision to enlist eradicates him from the land. He is literally removed, or erased. Robert's "disappearance" is the first of four, that cancel the family from the land. Their two children follow after him, one to the church parish, where he is taken in as an apprentice, and the other, an infant, dies without explanation. With its death, Margaret "was left alone," her home already crumbling around her.

Margaret's eradication is a more drawn out, and painful process. The (dis)integration of her bond to the land comes gradually, in stages, becoming more and more evident as the poem progresses. In "poverty and grief" she ceases to till or tend the soil and crops of her domestic garden. No "ridges" of "clear black mould nor winter greenness" are evident to the pedlar's observant eye. The absence of the mould, or tilled soil, suggests a break down in the relationship between the cultivator and the earth. Like Robert, Margaret's hands cease to work in "corporation and subservience" to "the powers and processes of nature." She becomes instead "sleepy" and "negligent." She becomes emotionally and physically removed from the communicative processes that united her life with the land. Thus, she too takes to wandering the fields, often with the will never to return home; "I've wandered much of late,/And sometimes, to my shame I speak, have need/Of my best prayers to bring me back again" (340-343).

Her growing disconnection from nature is reflected also in her growing detachment from the processes of life and death. As she remarks "I am chang'd"; "my tears/have flowed as if my body were not as such/As other's are, and I could never die" (355-357). Her statement suggests that she feels disassociated from life, even from mortality. Indeed, she becomes like a living

ghost. Her face grows “pale and thin.” At his last visit, the pedlar observes that “her voice was low,/Her body subdued” and when she sighed ‘no motion in the breast was seen/no heaving of the heart” (375-385). Margaret’s overwhelming grief seem to remove her from the natural order of death. She no longer feels a part of this most natural of processes. Instead, she “lingers long” in a condition somewhere between the two, before finally dying, “last human tenant of these walls.”

In death, however, Margaret joins again with the earth. Through the processes of decay she becomes the *mould*, or organic material of the soil. The pedlar's lament, “she is dead, the worm on her cheek” is in that sense then ironically hopeful. Paradoxically, her (dis)integration reincorporates her with the rhythms and processes of nature. The translation of her physical body into the soil recalls Wordsworth’s description of Lucy in “A Slumber Did My Spirit Steal”:

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor see;
Rolled round in the earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees (5-8)

Bodily reintegration with nature is hopeful; it suggests that, as the narrator observes, the “secret spirit of humanity” in fact persists “mid the calm oblivious tendencies of nature” (Ruined Cottage 503-504). However, in as much as Margaret’s story is the story of a people wiped out by the self same tendencies that would over the next two centuries bridle and abusively exploit nature, her final unification with nature is more sad than hopeful.

From the rapid decay of the house, it becomes evident that in time “no monument is left” of the people at all. The house is already, in the “present” of the poem, little more than “four

naked walls” (31). The only sign of human presence that remains is “the useless fragment of a wooden bowl” (91). “Nettles rot and adders sun themselves” on the bench where, in happier times, Margaret nursed her infant, and in sorrow, awaited news of her husband (108-109). The garden is subsumed by spear grass, and “the wandring heifer and the Potter’s ass” find shelter in the broken chimney wall. The deterioration prompts the pedlar to notice “that which each man loved and prized in his peculiar nook of earth dies with him, or is changed” beyond recognition (70-72). More broadly, his remarks capture the totality of the traditional peasantry’s erasure from the landscape.

IV.

However, Margaret’s bodily return to the soil does carry in with it the notion of a redemption through reconnection with nature that is not to be overlooked. The “Ruined Cottage” is not merely the story of the senseless tragedy of a people. Rather, it affords an opportunity for the reader to contemplate a more harmonious connection for themselves with nature. The potential for her story to transform the way readers think about their relation to the environment is evident in the change that takes place in the narrator from beginning to end of the poem.

James Averill and Kurt Fosso have published independent studies of the affect of Margaret’s story on the narrator. In his article “Suffering and Calm in Wordsworth’s Early Poetry” (1976) Averill notes that through the course of hearing Margaret’s story the narrator undergoes a cathartic process that radically transforms his psyche. Without a doubt, a major shift occurs in the narrator’s emotional state. As Averill notes, the narrator enters the poem in an agitated state. He is first seen wandering alone through a hot and barren landscape. The summer sun beats down upon the plain, and the “uplands” seem to “glare” hostilely through the “pale

steam” diffusing in the air above the plains. As he toils with “languid feet” his steps are “baffled” by the “slipp’ry ground.” His movement suggests a sense of disconnection from nature; he cannot find his footing there, and becomes uneasy. This is most clear in the description of his attempt to rest:

When I stretched myself
On the brown earth my limbs from very heat
Could find no rest, nor my weak arm disperse
The insect host which gathered round my face
And joined their murmurs to the tedious noise
Of seeds of bursting gorse that crackled round (21-27)

Nature is oppressive to him; it is “tedious,” “hot” and “baffling.” He is out of place. In the midst of this description he digresses upon the image of a “dreaming man,” who as Averill notes “exists in comfort and harmony.” The man is at ease among “soft cool moss” and “dewy shade.” The “tedious noise” of the proceeding lines is replaced by the sound a wren’s “soothing melody;” the “brown earth” of the “bare wide common” with the cool shade of a sheltering oak. The overwhelming “heat” is, for the dreamer, “clear and pleasant sunshine, pleasant to him.”

The digression, serves to emphasize the subjectivity of the narrator’s experience of nature. In Averill’s view “it suggests that internal psychological factors are largely responsible for his being out of turn with his surroundings, and that the weariness is rather more a spiritual than a physical state” (223). Nature is not, as Fry would have it, inherently hostile to the narrator. Rather, he merely perceives nature as hostile and oppressive, and this perception is a product of his internal state. The world without and the world within are in other words sympathetic.

By the end of the Margaret's tale, however, the narrator's perspective of nature has radically shifted, from disquietude to "tranquility." The pathos of Margaret's story overcomes him:

The Old Man ceased; he saw that I was moved
From that low bench, rising instinctively,
I turned aside in weakness, nor had power
To that him for the tale he told (493-496)

In his agitated emotional state he "leans o'er the garden gate" to "review the Woman's sufferings" with "a brother's love." The pathos of the poem is emotionally purgative. The tale induces a strong pathetic reaction that transports him from his uneasy psychological state at the beginning of the poem to a place of reflective tranquility at the end (Averill 224). In the twilight evening, he perceives something wholly different in the landscape:

I returned,
Fondly, and traced with milder interest,
That secret spirit of humanity
Which, 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies
Of nature, 'mid her plants, her weeds and flowers
And silent overgrowings, still survived (501-506)

He now perceives that nature is tranquil, and harmonious with the "human spirit." The transformation of nature from the beginning to the end of the poem reflects a like transformation of the traveler's internal state. He has shifted from "paranoid irritability" to a "sense of universal well-being" as a result of hearing, and reflecting on the tale of Margaret's suffering (Averill 224).

In a slightly different reading, Fosso suggests that the tale's recital foments a deep communal bond between the narrator and the pedlar. He is predominantly concerned with the processes of mourning the dead, and their ability to unite the living. However, he shares Averill's view that the narrator is, at the beginning of the poem, in a "spiritual'...crisis...[and] that he is in need of improvement" (330). According to Fosso, the narrator's transformation is a result of his communication with the pedlar, whom Fosso calls "a guardian." If the transformation is psychological, he aptly points out that it is also a transformation of perspective. The pedlar's tale allows him to "see what he presently cannot see" at the opening of the the poem (330).

Fosso's observation gets to what is lacking in Averill's reading. He focuses on the emotional affect of the story to the neglect of what it does for the narrator's perception of nature, and the human connection to it. The narrator does, as Averill suggests, undergo a kind of psychological transformation from the contemplation of Margaret's tale. However, the vital effect of this transformation is on his perspective. At the beginning of the poem, the pedlar remarks with confidence to the narrator, "I see around me here/Things which you cannot see" (67-68). He goes on to muse:

We die, my Friend
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
And prized in his peculiar nook of the earth
Dies with him, or is changed, and very soon
Even of the good is no memorial left, (68-62)

The lines suggest that the pedlar's vision is penetrating. He sees *into* the essential truth of things. The narrator however, he suggests, lacks this ability. Like the tourists who came to the Lakes in search of the picturesque, his view of nature is in a sense shallow, or colored by his immediate reality. The pedlar makes a motion to radically alter the young man's view, to draw his eye to the ephemerality of life: "we die" and everything we "loved in (our) peculiar nook of the earth" is altered beyond recognition or erased with us. His tale also illuminates the "secret spirit of humanity" that survives "amid the calm oblivious tendencies," the ceaseless "powers and processes" of nature, that at the conclusion of the tale the narrator is able to perceive alone.

The pedlar's perceptivity is an essential component of his character, making him the apt "guardian" or tutor to guide the narrator's and the reader's sight deeper into the land. Composed in 1814, more than a decade after the "Ruined Cottage," the *Excursion* includes and expanded version of Margaret's tale, in which something of a biography is set down for the pedlar. The development of his character is explored from childhood to old age, up to his meeting with the young traveller at the ruin. In the preface to the *Excursion* Wordsworth asserts that he drew the character from that of a local "packman" he interacted as a child and grew to admire as a man. He intimates that "the character" is "chiefly an idea" of what his 'own character might have become in his circumstances" (Poetical Works 403-404). Had he been born in a class that "deprived (him) of what is called a liberal education," he asserts, "I should have taken to a way of life such as that in which my Pedlar passed the greater part of his days" (Poetical Works 404).

Wordsworth's esteem for the pedlar derives from his "wayfaring" life, which put him frequently in solitude among the "beautiful and permanent forms of nature." In "Book One," of the *Excursion* Wordsworth imagines this immersion in the landscape developed in him an ability

to see into and understand nature. Even as a child, he became conversant in its powers and processes:

Far and wide the clouds were touched
And in their silent faces could he read
Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
Nor any voice of joy (203-206)

The pedlar's ability to see into nature came from a deep spiritual connection to it. His “spirit drank the spectacle sensation, soul, and form” and “all melted into him” (206). He imbibed nature’s visible beauty; “the ocean and earth, the solid frame of the earth/and the ocean’s liquid mass,” and with it, its soul. The internalization of the “spectacle, sensation, soul and form” of nature radically imprints his soul, or essential nature:

. . . they swallowed up
His animal being; in them did he live,
And by them did he live; they were his life (207-210)

In this instant, the nature within and the nature without co-mingle in the pedlar; he becomes incorporated: “in them did he live, and by them did he live; they were his life.” The union transpires through his eyes, or more specifically, through the act of observing the sun rise over the ocean. As Wordsworth suggests, “what soul was his, when from the naked top of some headland, he *beheld* the sun.” The line suggests that his eye held, or cupped, the scene within its sphere. Its ‘spectacle, sensation, soul, and form’ in that moment taken into his soul via his eyes. Thereby, nature enters and adjoins with his soul. A consequence of the union of inner and outer nature is the pedlar’s ability to see into and perceive the soul of things.

This visionary sight is a key element of his ability to relate Margaret's story in the Ruined Cottage. As one incorporated with nature, he is able to perceive the deterioration of Margaret and Robert's bond with nature and consequent changes brought about in their lives, even when they cannot. The pedlar moves in sync with nature throughout the poem. He passes by with the change of seasons. For instance, he first speaks with Margaret after Robert has abandoned her in "early spring." When he leaves her, she "busy with her garden tools" (82-83). He returns again at "the wane of summer" to find much changed in the cottage and in Margaret. Increasingly alienated from herself, and from the land, she has taken to wandering. Her aimless steps through the fields are sharply contrasted against the pedlar's wanderings. She moves without purpose, in a haze of sorrow. Unlike even the narrator, she cannot perceive anything sympathetic in nature; there is no mention made directly of it. Nature it seems is an utter blur. Even in wandering, however the pedlar maintains a sense of rootedness in the land. In the intervening periods between visits he "roved o'er many a hill, and many a dale" with his "best companions," the "driving winds," "trotting brooks," and "whispering trees" (289-295). Even as his mood fluctuates from happiness to melancholy nature remains his "best companion."

Half a year has intervenes between his departure and return; it is now again "early spring." He perceives what she seemingly does not: the disharmony between the season, presided over by birth, and the decay and disorder of the garden. Margaret however, seems oblivious the discord. She remarks in passing, only about a single tree that is "nibbled round by truant sheep." Of it she observes only the inevitability of death: "I fear it will be dead and gone ere Robert come again" (425). Death, she perceives complacently, is the product of her garden. When the pedlar, returns 'beaten by the Autumn winds' death has infiltrated the household, as well: "she

told me her little babe was dead” (436). Presumably, the infant’s death stems from the same “sleepy neglect” that deteriorated the garden. The infant’s death is thus an unnatural result of her inability to mother it.

In addition to his ability to see into and perceive the heart of nature, Wordsworth asserts in the Excursion that the pedlar has also “intimate knowledge of human concerns.” In a sense he is also able to see in to the soul of men:

He wandered far; [much did he see of men](#),
Their manners, their enjoyments, and pursuits,
Their passions and their feelings; chiefly those
Essential and eternal in the heart,
That, 'mid the simpler forms of rural life,
Exist more simple in their elements. (340-345)

The lines echo Wordsworth’s description of “rustic and low” life in the “Preface”: “in that condition the essential passions of the heart find better soil in which they can obtain their maturity” (2). The pedlar, is able to “see the heart of men,” or rather into “their manners,” “passions,” “feelings,” to perceive in them the “essential and eternal” “heart” of “rural life.”

Furthermore, Wordsworth says that in his travels he witnessed the changes that took place in the land and its people. As the pedlar explains in the Ruined Cottage, “wander among the cottages I saw the hardships” of that devastating “season,” when “many rich sunk down as in a dream among the poor, and many poor did cease to be” (Ruined Cottage 139-143). Wordsworth reinforces his intimate awareness of these changes in the “Excursion.” In “his various rounds” he asserts:

He had observed the progress and decay
Of many minds, of minds and bodies too;
The history of many families;
How they had prospered; how they were o'erthrown (375-378)

Thus, the pedlar's sight is informed by his integration into nature, his interaction with its people, and first hand experience of their deterioration "by passion or mischance or such misrule among the unthinking masters of the earth/ as makes the nations groan."

The pedlar's visionary narrative makes visible that which "things which you cannot see" without the trained eye of one who sympathizes with nature. His story ultimately reveals what was lost as a result of Margaret and Robert's deterioration. As he says of the waters beside the cottage ruin "a bond of brotherhood is broken" is broken between man and nature: "time has been/ when every day the touch of human hand disturbed their stillness/ and they ministered to human comfort" (85-87). However, in the lines just preceding, he suggests that the "bond of brotherhood" is not entire expunged, nor unreclaimable:

I stood,
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel
One sadness, they and I (82-84).

The lines convey the sense the he shares in a continuing bond with nature, and introduce the notion of a sympathetic bond between man and nature to the narrator. Prior to being party to such observations, however, he is unable to perceive any of this. He approaches the ruin of the cottage, with little curiosity in anything except shade and and water. Through the process of listening, and internalizing her story, however, his vision is guided into the heart of the ruin.

There he perceives the sufferings of “last human tenant of these walls,” but also redemptive quality of her (dis)integration into nature. The “heart” or essential being, he observes, persists in the “calm oblivious tendencies” and “silent overgrowings.” The notion of a kind of spiritual redemption in nature functions to soften the otherwise bleak tragedy of the dead. Margaret’s essence is rejoined with nature, and persists in its “calm oblivious tendencies.” However, the narrator’s recognition that the human spirit’s survival in nature has important implications for the living. The lines convey man place amid nature, and the possibility of a more harmonious union between the two for the narrator, and for readers alike.

Indeed, in the final lines narrator speaks as one who recognizes and finds tranquility in their own “incorporation and subservience to nature”:

By this the sun declining shot,
A slant and mellow radiance, which began
To fall upon us where beneath the trees
We sate on that low bench. And now we felt
Admonished thus, the sweet hour coming on:
A linnet warbled from those lofty elms,
A thrush sang loud, and other melodies
At distance heard, peopled the milder air (526-534)

In his own reading of the poem, Jonathan Wordsworth points out that while the wanderers enter the scene “separately with separate attitudes” the story unites them as comrades. The dissonance and discomfort that marked the narrator’s experience of nature is lulled by the pedlar's narrative, and in the end their perspectives harmonize. “Together” they “cast a farewell

look/Upon those silent walls” and seem to perceive in them the tragic history of “the last human tenant,” and so much more. In that last look, the ruin is, for both men, a monument to a declining way of life, but also a symbol of the importance of renewing, and maintaining a harmonious bond nature. If the heart survives only amid its “calm oblivious tendencies,” the men, and we with them, can’t help but recognize our own survival in nature. The prescience of this revelation, is not lost on contemporary readers, who, mired in the current environmental face the possibility of the eradication on a massive scale. If climate change has taught us anything, it is that our survival depends on the smooth function of “powers and processes” of the global ecosystem. Wordsworth’s poetry is only not resonant with our own emerging ecological consciousness⁷⁷, it offers contemporary readers an opportunity to contemplate a deeper, more harmonious future in nature.

Afterward

The preservation of nature depends on human's ability to read their own incorporation in the delicate ecological systems that enfold them. Without such literacy the human social structures and activities have become disassociated from and too often adverse to nature. With the figure of the pedlar, however, Wordsworth initiates a radical new way of reading the landscape that calls us to recognize their home nature. The pedlar introduces the possibility of becoming visually and spiritually literate in the powers and processes of ecosystems. Indeed, he provides a model of reading *as* incorporation, or "incorporative reading." The pedlar's is ecologically literate, meaning that his mode of reading reveals and then continually reaffirms humans' integration in nature. The process of reading the landscape draws the eye deeper into the heart of things; the invisible lineaments of the web life become visible. The spectator is at once outside looking in and bound up inside the complex system of nature. In other words, the pedlar reveals a mode of reading that promises to dissolve the bounds between the human body and soul and that of nature.

This kind of reading shatters the frame of the picturesque, which requires physical and spiritual distance between the spectator and nature. In "The Brothers," for instance, the tourist observes and sketches patch of natural scenery from which he is removed. The landscape that interests him is physically distant. His eye marks only the remarkable aesthetics of its surface. Nature is something to be sketched and framed. However esteemed, it is something other from the tourist. Picturesque scenes penetrate the observer only as far as superficial emotional reaction allowed, for instance, in the excitement of feelings of awe or admiration. The powerful

confluence of human soul and the soul of nature which the pedlar knows is utterly foreign to the picturesque tourist. In contrast, the pedlar's mode of reading radically contracts the distance between interior and exterior worlds, such that a superficial exchange with nature is no longer possible.

In "The Ruined Cottage" the pedlar in fact openly rejects the picturesque in favor of a more spiritual, or what I have called ecological reading of nature. In the shade of sheltering elms the ruins of the cottage and its grounds no doubt made a picturesque scene. Indeed the pedlar notes the visual appeal of the ruins: "often on this cottage do I muse/ As on a picture" (Ruined Cottage 117-118). However, he abruptly rejects this "vision" as both superficial and incomplete. The pedlar's "wiser mind" draws his thoughts to the suffering and sorrow that are writ in the ruins on which gazes. As we have seen, the pedlar reads dissolution of a people's bond with nature in the crumbled cottage walls. He perceives also, and we with him, the hope of a return to nature.

Wordsworth appears to have anticipated that cognitive distance from the environment would enable its systematic subjugation and dismantling. With the figure of the pedlar he reveals a way back to nature, back to a more integrated social structure and way of life. The development of an ecological literacy, he suggests, is necessary for any kind of re(union) with nature. People must first move from the surface into the heart things; they must be able to read the invisible web of life in which all things interweave before they can mend any of its accumulating tares.

That is not to say though that an appreciation for the surface level aesthetics of landscape is inimical to a deeper understanding of nature or its preservation. Indeed, public admiration for the beauty of a place can often become the justification for its protection. Yellow Stone, The

Grand Canyon, Banf and other swaths of scenic protected lands are prime examples the power of the scenic to inspire acts of conversation. Or nearer to Wordsworth, the decision to enclose the Lake District as national trust derived in part from the wish to, as he put it, “preserve [its] native beauty.” However, the figure of the pedlar invites way of seeing and thinking about the land that encourages a more comprehensive approach to conservation. As opposed to privileging the scenic or picturesque, the observer values the wholeness of nature. The pedlar’s mode of reading induces, even requires, a sense of subservience to and incorporation in the powers and processes that order the landscape. This kind of thinking is conducive with more holistic ideas about how to live with land, for instance, the reorganization of human social structures to be more harmonious with nature. Thus, the pedlar offers something to contemporary readers who struggle to negotiate the changes necessary to salvage our ecosystems from the brink of destruction. Readers can learn from him the visual and spiritual literacy necessary to the very wide-scale return to nature our current situation seems to require.

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