Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry

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ONE of the unwritten histories within Romanticism is that of the relationship between Wordsworth's rustic poetics and the so-called "peasant" and "working-class" poetry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. That it remains unwritten is, in some ways, an indication that Wordsworth has continued to win the battle for historical self-positioning that was always so important to him. Though in recent years we have become increasingly wary of Wordsworth's passionate and vigorous declarations of originality, for the most part his own self-contextualizing essays—especially the 1800 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*—continue to govern our sense that the appearance of his "levelling" Muse marked a radical break in British literary history.[1]

[1] The term is Hazlitt's (see "Mr. Wordsworth," in *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits*, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt in Twenty-One Volumes, Centenary Edition*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. [London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–34], XI, 87). The first modern discussion of the contemporary features of Wordsworth's verse, Robert Mayo's "The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*," *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 486–522, located it in relation to the magazine poetry of the 1790s. My focus here has more in common with observations made recently by Olivia Smith in *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 202–51; Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, "The Romantic 'Peasant' Poets and their Patrons," *The Wordsworth Circle*, 26 (1995), 77–87; and Betty Rizzo, "The Patron as Poet-Maker: The Politics of Benefaction," *Stud-*

We might have a different sense of Wordsworth's relationship to his cultural moment if Francis Jeffrey's view had prevailed. Jeffrey's notorious attack in the 1802 *Edinburgh Review* on the Lake School of Poets contained a number of charges against Wordsworth's poetic program, including the particularly contemptuous assertion that Wordsworth's poetry echoed that of the versifying "prodigies" and "uneducated wonders" who had been a literary sensation in Britain for more than half a century. Noting Wordsworth's "affectation of great simplicity," Jeffrey declared his rustic verse fraudulent in conceit and vulgar in effect, saying:

> We may excuse a certain homeliness of language in the productions of a ploughman or a milkwoman; but we cannot bring ourselves to admire it in an author, who has had occasion to indite odes to his college bell, and inscribe hymns to the Penates.[2]

Given the Mont Blanc-like serenity with which Wordsworth today occupies his place atop the Romantic canon, it is perhaps difficult to imagine how such a peevish charge of slumming could have posed any real threat to his aspirations. At the time, though, Jeffrey's association of Wordsworth with uneducated poets may have seemed far from unreasonable to readers of the *Review*.[3] Wordsworth's name at the turn of the century meant "nothing," as Coleridge noted,[4] while such figures as "The Thresher Poet" (Stephen Duck), "The Bristol Milkwoman" (Ann Yearsley), and "The Farmer's Boy" (Robert Bloomfield) had provoked periodic bursts of critical and popular attention over the course of seventy years. Adding to the power of Jeffrey's insult, then, was his reliance on widespread familiarity with the quick rise to celebrity of most peasant poets, and their

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ies in Eighteenth-Century Culture, 20 (1990), 241–66. Though suggestive, these works do not pursue in detail the proposition that peasant poetry was a direct influence on Wordsworth's aesthetic project.

[2] Francis Jeffrey, rev. of *Thalaba*, quoted in *Robert Southey: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lionel Madden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 70–71.

[3] For another contemporary review placing Wordsworth within the field of simple verse, see the review of *Lyrical Ballads* in the *New London Review*, 1 (1799), 34.

[4] Coleridge, letter to Joseph Cottle, 28 May 1798, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), I, 412.

even quicker fall into obsolescence: a gentleman poet taking on rustic diction was either playing for cheap fame or trying to disguise a lack of real talent, and perhaps both.

Never the subtlest of cultural commentators, Jeffrey termed Wordsworth's 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* collection "one of [his] most flagrant acts of hostility" (p. 71), and his agitation over Wordsworth's "perverted taste for simplicity" (p. 73) was infused with an almost xenophobic class suspicion. "It is absurd to suppose," he wrote, "that an author should make use of the language of the vulgar, to express the sentiments of the refined":

> The love, or grief, or indignation of an enlightened and refined character, is not only expressed in a different language, but is in itself a different emotion from the love, or grief, or anger of a clown, a tradesman, or a market-wench. (pp. 71–72)

In his glib evocation of a monolithic peasant "idiom" (a "language of the vulgar"), Jeffrey conveniently effaced the varieties of peasant writers and of plebeian verse, as well as the complexity of Wordsworth's possible relationship to that tradition.

It could be argued, nonetheless, that Wordsworth's own elaborate public statements about the place of his rustic verse within literary culture were just as misleading as Jeffrey's broadside. Beginning with the brief "Advertisement" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and continuing in the massive "Preface" to the 1800 second edition, Wordsworth presented himself as Britain's sole contemporary poet of "low and rustic life" and suggested that his experiments with "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes" marked such a departure from prevailing literary norms as to be literally unrecognizable as verse.[5] The tropes and terms in the "Preface" that now seem so inherently and intimately Wordsworthian—"simple and unelaborated expressions," "the essential passions of the heart," "the manners of rural life," "the necessary character of rural occupations" (*Prose*, I, 124)—in fact expressed nodes of value (rusticism, au-

[5] William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," and "Advertisement," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), I, 124, 117.

thenticity, simplicity, and originality) that were necessarily familiar to contemporary readers. In a sense Wordsworth was simply giving rhetorical flight to desiderata that had been oft-rehearsed (if ne'er so well expressed) by a number of plebeian poets and their advocates in the literary establishment.

Wordsworth's silence on the topic of actual peasant and laboring-class writers is striking on its own terms, but even more so in light of the incisive, *au courant* cultural awareness that he claims for himself in the "Preface." He locates his poetry in a precise literary and social moment, identifying "a multitude of causes unknown to former times" (*Prose*, I, 128) that give his project a compelling contemporary urgency. Surveying Britain's literary landscape and finding only "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse," Wordsworth announces that "at the present day" his elementalist rustic poetry is "especially" needed (*Prose*, I, 128). In reading this diagnosis of what he calls "the general evil" (*Prose*, I, 130), we must wonder about his apparent disregard for those many figures who—whatever their literary merits—did in fact speak more or less directly from the class and demographic positions that he purports to find unrepresented in the contemporary scene. Indeed, the more one learns of fashionable engagement with "peasant" and "uneducated" poets, the more untenable Wordsworth's famous assessment of Britain's literary climate seems to become. Although we are accustomed to thinking of Wordsworth as breaching the fortress of elite literature, it is important to consider that he also breached the implicit class boundaries of literature in the other direction. In appropriating lowly rustic voices and literary forms, he could be seen as invading the demographic domain of peasant writers, occupying the class-specific territory from which they derived their tenuous (and perhaps only) artistic authority.

Granting all of these points, I want to move beyond them and suggest that the way to approach the recovery of this "missing" rustic tradition, insofar as it enables a reconsideration of Wordsworth's rustic poetics, is not through an interpretive model of Wordsworthian solipsism or historical repression. Rather, we need to place the motives for Wordsworth's elision

of the plebeian tradition within the very pervasiveness and power of that tradition. For peasant poetry made Wordsworth's position almost impossibly awkward as he attempted, in the years around 1800, to establish himself as a poet. He was, after all, a writer of rustic verse who could not profess to be an "authentic" rustic, a self-avowed champion of "the real language of men" ("Preface," in *Prose*, I, 118) who nonetheless presumed to give priority to his own ideal of rustic speech. The imperatives of his own rural-aesthetic vision collided sharply with a preexisting vogue for simplicity he could not properly shape, and perhaps not even profitably acknowledge. Contrary to the claims of the "Preface," Wordsworth did not have to create a public taste for rural subjects and pseudo-humble diction. Instead he faced the more difficult task of creating a vital rustic verse that was distinct from peasant poetry.

Wordsworth's response in the "Preface," I have suggested, is to subsume or displace the historical presence of peasant poetry. Several of the best-known poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, however, engage his problems of persona and originality in ways that the "Preface" does not: through repeated, willful reenactments of the contemporary dialogue between high and low literary milieus. In these poems Wordsworth does not seek to disguise himself, as Jeffrey would have us believe, as a versifying rustic. Nor does he position himself as a sort of *über*-peasant poet, seeking to out-do or eliminate all rivals. These poems find their interest, their originality, and their complexity in their pairings of elevated narrators with lowly subjects. This recurring dialectic yields a rustic poetry radically equivocal in tone, narratorial perspective, and social identification. In dramatizing the dilemmas and options that confront a gentlemanly chronicler of "low and rustic life," Wordsworth establishes both the contemporaneity, and the innovation, of his verse.

The history of British peasant and laboring-class poetry is far better understood today, and far better documented, than it was just a decade ago. Though there is not space here to detail the newly available primary materials or

the recent scholarship on individual peasant writers,[6] some sense of the delicacy of Wordsworth's situation can be suggested by considering the discursive field that existed around peasant poetry by the turn of the nineteenth century. While this discursive field necessarily included the sheer popularity of rustic verse, it is probably better seen in the complex modes of critical response that the verse engendered over time: stereotyping, satire, cliché, and elaborate circumventions of cliché. The founding ideal of the laborer-poet eventually becomes scaffolded with revisionist, sometimes self-regarding addenda, including cautionary fables, protestations of critical cynicism, and self-parody among the poets themselves. Even a brief account of these movements reveals both the cultural saturation of this verse and the critical tradition's awareness of itself.

We must start with a sense of peasant poetry's great and enduring popularity, a fact that would have been palpable and unavoidable to Wordsworth. In 1800, as he prepared his second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, he also witnessed the runaway success of a narrative poem of Suffolk farm life, Robert Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy*, with sales that over three years would run to some twenty-six thousand copies, "a greater number of a new poem than had ever before been sold in so short a time."[7] But the reading public's fascination with Bloomfield was only the latest installment in an ongoing affair that had begun as far back as 1730, when "Thresher Poet" Stephen Duck gained the preferment from Queen Caroline that made some consider him a serious candidate for the Laureateship. In the decades that followed, several dozen diverse writers were brought before public attention under the rubrics of "peasant" and "uneducated" poet, including Robert Burns, James Woodhouse, Ann Yearsley, James Hogg, and John Clare, as well as a host of figures who enjoyed far briefer periods of celebrity.[8] Nearly a cen-

[6] See, for example, Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739–1796* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990); and John Goodridge, *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).

[7] Rayner Unwin, *The Rural Muse: Studies in the Peasant Poetry of England* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954), p. 92.

[8] A sampling of figures obscure even in their day: Robert Tatersal (fl. 1735), *The Bricklayer's Miscellany: or Poems on several subjects* (London, 1734); John Frederick Bryant (1753–1791), *Verses, by John Frederick Bryant, late tobacco-pipe maker at Bristol* (London,

tury after Duck's fêting we find Coleridge complaining of receiving a stream of "Letters from Lords & Ladies urging me to write reviews & puffs of heaven-born Geniuses, whose whole merit consists in their being Ploughmen or Shoemakers" (*Coleridge Letters*, V, 25).

Authenticity was the *sine qua non* of the hypothetical peasant poet, as is suggested by Coleridge's exasperation with the notion that literary "merit" sprang from simply "being" a ploughman or shoemaker. Biographical representations typically stressed the poet's comprehensive poverty of means: John Clare was "perhaps, the least favoured by circumstances, and the most destitute of friends, of any [English poet] that ever existed."[9] The true rustic savant should have an absolute minimum of formal education and should be demonstrably engaged in ignoble labor. Combined, these two symptoms of rusticity encouraged a narrative of a strenuous double life, wherein the poet daily "returned from labour to learning," as Burns was said to do, "and from learning went again to labour."[10] The odd, almost absurd juxtapositions of the autodidact's life were vividly imagined early on: the frontispiece of a pirated edition of Duck's poetry features him "in a barn with a flail in one hand and a copy of Milton in the other; a nearby table contains ink, pens, paper, knife, rule, and books; hens are wandering about, and through the door appears a view of a hog and laborers reaping grain."[11]

That the authenticity *topos* so often rested on concrete organic images—dirty hands, farm animals, a vocational tie to the soil—meant that it carried the seeds of its own satirization

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1787); cobbler John Lucas, *Miscellanies in verse and prose* (Salisbury, 1776); and domestic servants Susannah Harrison (1752–1784), *Songs in the Night: By a Young Woman under deep affliction* (1780), and Mary Leapor (1722–1746), *Poems upon several occasions*, 2 vols. (London, 1748–51). A composite list like this is not meant to suggest, of course, that these poets lack distinct voices or that their poetry is even similar.

[9] The phrase is that of John Taylor, Clare's editor, in his introduction to *Poems Descriptive* (1820), quoted in *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Mark Storey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 43.

[10] Robert Heron, *A Memoir of the Life of the Late Robert Burns* (1797), quoted in *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Donald A. Low (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 117.

[11] Rose Mary Davis, *Stephen Duck, the Thresher-Poet* (Orono: Univ. of Maine Press, 1926), p. 42.

along Augustan lines. "Whatever be assumed as the operative cause," wrote a commentator for the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1821, "the fact has repeatedly of late been sufficiently evident to the world,—of Genius . . . rising, as it were, from the clods and the dunghill" (quoted in *Clare: Critical Heritage*, p. 112). The unhappily named Stephen Duck proved an easy target for the pseudonymous "Benjamin Drake, Yeoman," who sardonically applauded him for having "well . . . waddl'd thro' the country dirt" (*Thresher-Poet*, p. 59), as well as for Swift, who in "A Quibbling Epigram" (1730) objected loudly to the royal patronage granted the thresher-poet:

> The Thresher, Duck, could o'er the Queen prevail;
> The proverb says, *no fence against a flail.*
> From *threshing* corn, he turns to *thresh* his brains,
> For which her Majesty allows him grains;
> Though 'tis confest, that those who ever saw
> His poems, think them all not worth a *straw*!
> Thrice happy Duck, employed in threshing *stubble*!
> Thy toil is lessen'd, and thy profits double.
> (quoted in *Thresher-Poet*, pp. 53–54)

A too-quick rise, a peasant or tradesman "prevailing" over a Queen (and over more worthy members of the literary establishment): it was not hard to put these insubstantial levitations in their place by bringing back into view the organic literalism of "the clods and the dunghill." As Horace Walpole wrote to Hannah More, patron of the ambitious Ann Yearsley: "She must remember that she is a Lactilla, not a Pastora, and is to tend real cows, not Arcadian sheep."[12]

Overlapping with these satirical dismissals of peasant poetry, however, and gathering steam late in the century, was a strain of serious-minded, conscientious criticism that recognized that the habitual critical default to a peasant-poet stereotype threatened the credibility of poet and reviewer alike. Henry Mackenzie's influential review of Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the*

[12] Horace Walpole, letter to Hannah More, 13 November 1784, in *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, et al., 48 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1937–83), XXXI, 221.

Scottish Dialect (1786) evokes deprivation cautiously, disclaiming it as a clear marker of value: "In mentioning the circumstances of his humble station, I mean not to rest his pretensions solely on that title, or to urge the merits of his poetry when considered in relation to the lowness of his birth" (quoted in *Burns: Critical Heritage*, p. 68). Walter Scott, evincing a similar anxiety in a favorable early notice of Hogg, tries to confront the clichés head-on. In a send-up of the organically inspired rustic, Scott makes his claim for Hogg's legitimacy by rejecting virtually the entire generation of versifiers encouraged by Burns:

> The steep rocks poured down poetical goatherds, and the bowels of the earth vomited forth rhyming colliers; but of all the herd we can only distinguish James Hogg, the Selkirkshire shepherd, as having at all merited the public attention.[13]

This sort of backhanded appeal would perhaps reach its apogee with an anonymous 1827 reviewer for *Literary Magnet*, who sought to make credible his modest praise for the poetic efforts of Robert Millhouse ("a journeyman weaver"), Donald Macpherson ("late sarjeant of the 75th regiment"), and Mr. Nicholson ("a woollen-cloth barber"), by demolishing the ideal of the rustic genius for all eternity:

> Every blockhead who can jingle a few verses, neglects, in these enlightened days, the business for which he may happen to have been educated, for the purpose of following the idle and unprofitable trade of a poet. . . . Some injudicious patron has . . . persuaded him that he is a genius: and, determined that his light shall be no longer hidden under a bushel, he prints and publishes. For the first volume, by dint of laborious personal application, he perhaps contrives to gather as many subscriptions (half-purchase—half-charity), as enable him to meet the expenses of his book. But before his second effort is ready, the wonder has ceased, and his volume attracts just as many readers as it deserves, and no more. Disappointment, of course, ensues: the genius considers himself a flower,

[13] Sir Walter Scott, "Of the Living Poets of Great Britain," *Edinburgh Annual Register*, I (1810), 417–43; rpt. in Kenneth Curry, *Sir Walter Scott's "Edinburgh Annual Register"* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1977), p. 96.

> —born to blush unseen,
> And waste in sweetness in the desert air:
>
> and broods over the fancied neglect of the world, in sullen and solitary vexation.[14]

As a form of literary promotion, this parody of misguided patronage is a marvelous contortionist's act, but the vigor of its renunciation bespeaks a real crisis of purpose. Underlying the anger and annoyance of these later reviewers are profound doubts and questions about their entire critical enterprise: Am I contributing to a decline of public taste? Can any peasant poet escape the role of short-lived literary cliché? Can I promote this figure without encouraging the delusive hopes of others? Should I be writing this review at all? More than the typing of peasant poets, more than the satiric opposition they garnered, and more than raw sales figures, this hypercautious, metacritical *worrying* testifies to the saturation of the *mythos* of the plebeian writer.

Indeed, there was a sense in which this nearly freestanding web of discourse seemed to entrap the poets themselves, leading them inevitably to play out the privations they had been celebrated for. Though Yearsley, Woodhouse, Hogg, and Robert Dodsley were able to improve their situations markedly and achieve some measure of financial stability, the lure of lasting fortune was usually a poisoning fiction. Post-celebrity poverty and despair were so common, in fact, that they became a fully realized element of the peasant poet's official history. There was a certain romance in this ruination: a kind of graveyard-school of criticism saw the bard's fall into obscurity as a sort of homecoming, a late return to authenticating poverty and suffering. Indeed, it became difficult to see the human realities within this predictive rags-to-riches-to-rags fantasy: the wretched fates of Duck (suicide by drowning), Burns (death in poverty), and, later, Clare (thirty-five years in a madhouse) seemed almost scripted, and suggested a collective destiny like the one Clare himself described in his elegy "To the Memory of Bloomfield":

[14] "Poets in Humble Life," *Literary Magnet*, n.s. 4 (1827), 153.

"many a fame shall lie / A dead wreck on the shore of dark posterity."[15]

Thus, the ever more self-referential criticism of peasant poetry redounded to the poets themselves. Aspirants needed to show not only the primary credentials of rusticity but also a degree of sophistication about the pitfalls of what they were getting into. Consciousness of the critical gaze did, it seems, temporarily provide a sort of sympathetic magic for a few of these figures.[16] Nonetheless, the well-worn story, the biographical imperative, continued to triumph. Coleridge, perhaps, captured it best: "What W[ordsworth] & I have seen of the Farmer's Boy (only a few short extracts) pleased us very much," he noted in a September 1800 letter to James Webbe Tobin, but, as he wrote to Southey in January 1803, "Blomfield [*sic*] is the Farmer's Boy, not a Poet—in the mind of the Public" (*Coleridge Letters*, I, 623; II, 913).

What would all these layerings and compoundings of discursive activity have meant for someone self-identified neither as "establishment critic" nor as "peasant poet"? Most immediately, they created a context in which there was no way for Wordsworth to address peasant poetry directly without getting entangled in sticky questions of comparable worth or of the basis of his own credibility. Devoid of critical or biographical license, he was faced with a task that he described only much later, in the 1815 "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface," where he acknowledged the foundational necessity of literary public relations: "every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has . . . the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed" (*Prose*, III, 80). More significant, this critical tradition—a tradition that, even in its self-awareness, effectively reaffirmed a reductive definition of authenticity—seems to have led Wordsworth to imagine a rustic poetry whose varieties of voice and tone would promote an enlarged social vision of "the rustic." In *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth pursues his original notion of rustic authenticity specifically by filtering his simple

[15] John Clare, "To the Memory of Bloomfield," in his *The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. Ann Tibble and R.K.R. Thornton (Ashington, Northumberland: Mid Northumberland Arts Group and Carcanet Press, 1978), p. 397, ll. 13–14.

[16] See Cafarelli, "The Romantic 'Peasant' Poets," esp. pp. 81–85.

tales through the contrarian perspectives of educated and semi-educated narrators. The resulting equivocations show him seeking authenticity through multiplication—the multiplication of voices, authorial and narratorial perspectives, and degrees of social sympathy.

Wordsworth's equivocations and mixed identifications are nicely anticipated in the brief "Advertisement" to the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, where he writes:

> The tale of Goody Blake and Harry Gill is founded on a well-authenticated fact which happened in Warwickshire. Of the other poems in the collection, it may be proper to say that they are either absolute inventions of the author, or facts which took place within his personal observation or that of his friends.
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> (*Prose*, I, 117)

The tone here may sound decisive, but as an account of the genetic (or generic) basis of his poems this statement is highly unstable at best. Wordsworth first adopts a rural legend on the basis of its truth value ("a well-authenticated fact which happened in Warwickshire"); celebrates other poems as works of pure imagination ("absolute inventions of the author"); and endorses still others for their odd nesting of objective truth within subjective experience ("facts which took place within his personal observation or that of his friends"). Though he begins by seeking the credibility of native rustic authority, he seems willing—even eager—to renounce any such affiliation. This diffident embrace of the authenticity *topos* suggests an awareness on Wordsworth's part that he is not perfectly free to assume a rustic persona and offer it unproblematically as his own peasant verse.

The poems, however, lack this diffidence entirely; they experiment boldly, almost rashly, with voice, tone, and class sympathy. The narrator of "Simon Lee" spends much of the poem apparently amused by the distressing signs of Simon's old age, appropriating his suffering as material for a light workout with the ballad form:

In the sweet shire of Cardigan,
Not far from pleasant Ivor-hall,
An old man dwells, a little man,
I've heard he once was tall.
Of years he has upon his back,
No doubt, a burthen weighty;
He says he is three score and ten,
But others say he's eighty.[17]

This initial comic remoteness from Simon's decline is discomfiting, and the narrator's dilatory balladeering, first remarked upon by John F. Danby,[18] only increases our unease:

Few months of life has he in store,
As he to you will tell,
For still, the more he works, the more
His poor old ancles swell.
My gentle reader, I perceive
How patiently you've waited,
And I'm afraid that you expect
Some tale will be related.
(pp. 66–67, ll. 65–72)

In the wake of such self-consciously literary posturing, which seems incompatible with any expression of simple human pathos, the long-deferred tale arrives: the narrator takes an axe, severs a tree stump "with a single blow" (p. 67, l. 93), and sees Simon's tears of thanks. Sudden, simple, it is yet tale enough to prompt in the narrator the "mourning" with which he closes:

—I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds
With coldness still returning.
Alas! the gratitude of men
Has oftner left me mourning.
(p. 67, ll. 101–4)

[17] William Wordsworth, "Simon Lee," in *"Lyrical Ballads," and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 64–65, ll. 1–8. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Wordsworth's poems are from this edition and are cited by both page and line number.

[18] See *The Simple Wordsworth: Studies in the Poems, 1797–1807* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

For the poem's dramatic effect Wordsworth relies upon our earlier perception of the narrator's flippancy; our lowered expectations give the final incident the power to surprise and move. It is important to see, however, that the late upwelling of suppressed emotion does not bring about a complete levelling in the men's relationship. The narrator's concluding observation, though poignant, conveys a certain worldliness, a continuing confidence in his ability to step back, generalize, and offer a verdict. His imaginative participation in another's suffering is difficult to disentangle from his instantaneous disengagement: a reflex of empathy that issues into cultured abstraction once more.

The imperfect, or incomplete, nature of the men's bonding is conveyed in the ambiguous iconography of the severed stump. Though in one sense the stump is the occasion for their coming together, in symbolic terms its removal suggests division rather than convergence, division for which the narrator alone is responsible. And though the men's encounter reduces the distance between them, Wordsworth's speaker does not shape the occasion through the sort of egalitarian poetics later imagined by John Clare, who contended that, just as "fields are every ones employ," so "poesy is a language meet."[19] Chastened though he may be (and though he has shared the field of labor with the weak old man), the narrator emerges as the one who has "thought long and deeply" ("Preface," in *Prose*, I, 126) and can inform the reader of the tale's larger significance—part of which is that the field of poetry is *not* everyone's employ. Simon remains where he was at the beginning, consumed with the immediate problems of his existence.

The tone of "Old Man Travelling" could hardly be more different from that of "Simon Lee," but here again the narrator's aestheticizing impulse, laid bare for our inspection, is central both to the poem's dramatic setting and to its residual ambiguities. Seeing the old man creeping down the road, the narrator imagines him "insensibly subdued / To settled quiet" and "by nature led / To peace so perfect, that the young behold / With envy, what the old man hardly feels" (p. 110,

[19] "Pastoral Poesy," in *Midsummer Cushion*, p. 291, ll. 10, 9.

ll. 7–8, 12–14). In fact, as we discover in the poem's final lines, the old man is far from possessing the perfect peace that the narrator envisions; rather, he is walking to see his son "dying in an hospital" (p. 110, l. 20). This tragic revelation is especially ironic because it is brought about by the narrator's well-intentioned but wrongheaded determination to add further ornament to a preconceived rustic fiction. In pressing the old man for an account of "whither he was bound, and what / The object of his journey" (p. 110, ll. 15–16), the narrator seeks to magnify and indulge his own pastoral idyll, assuming that whatever the man says will enrich the mysterious ontology of his "animal tranquility." Instead, the old man's answer produces in the narrator the stunned, shamed silence that ends the poem. This silence—as a token of the narrator's terribly misplaced judgment—is his first appropriate "act" in the poem, if an act it can be called. The lyricism of "Old Man Travelling" resides in its profound final impasse. The poem's message is communicated despite the failure of the messenger; indeed, it emerges from the reader's perception of that failure. In suggesting that even a narrator who wishes to portray rustic dignity can get it wrong, the poem stands as a vigorous self-critique of Wordsworth's own impulse to represent the rural poor. Its lingering aura of confused irresolution also makes it, by contrast, a more successful piece than the related "Point Rash-Judgment" poem of the 1800 collection (*Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 247–50), which offers a similar but more narrowly didactic Wordsworthian self-repudiation.[20] Through the pained final silence of "Old Man Travelling" Wordsworth suggests that a gentlemanly narrator cannot always redeem his perceptual biases through the sort of formal confessional employed to conclude "Simon Lee."

Though several critics have noted the dramatic tension that derives from conflicts between Wordsworth's educated narrators and his unself-conscious rustic subjects, it is important to see that, as in "Simon Lee" and "Old Man Travelling," this ten-

[20] Despite the judgment that Wordsworth delivers upon himself and his companions, "Point Rash-Judgment" ("A narrow girdle of rough stones" [p. 247, l. 1]) is a much less searching poem: it seems to imagine that a functional social reconciliation between high and low is possible, if only the "idle" will be kinder in their judgments.

sion is often increased to the point of narrative implosion.[21] Almost perversely, Wordsworth implies that his speakers cannot perform the task at hand. The "superstitious" speaker of "The Thorn" is "credulous and talkative from indolence";[22] the globe-trotting narrator of "The Last of the Flock" is stupefied by the suffering he encounters on his native "English ground" (p. 85, l. 5); the narrator of "The Idiot Boy" (pp. 91–104) frequently verges on outright mockery, even in regard to the worth of the poetic experiment in which he is engaged. Perplexing narrative arrangements of this sort continue in the second edition with "Michael," perhaps the most important new poem in the 1800 collection, which begins with the narrator's admission that the poem is written not for the sake of shepherds like Michael but for future poets who will be Wordsworth's "second Self" when he is gone (p. 253, l. 39). Faced with speakers so willfully digressive, or so nakedly self-involved, we might feel that Wordsworth does not even approach realizing his ambition. Repeatedly it seems that the poem he wishes he could write—a poem expressing deep feeling and quiet simplicity—is being undermined by the cognitive or social gap between narrator and subject.

But this apparent crisis is an expression of the volume's broader pattern of self-questioning. In engaging the epistemic, indeed existential, separation between narrators and subjects, Wordsworth considers the possibility that his "experiment" is ill-advised—that the narrators are too high for the exploration of elemental passions, or that the subjects are too low to be worthy instruments of philosophical revelation. Thus the narratives of individual poems repeatedly turn us back to the basic conceptual burden of the volume. Wordsworth typically relieves the sense of crisis by having the narrators experience late epiphanies that, in the end, make some mutual understanding

[21] See, for example, Don H. Bialostosky, *Making Tales: The Poetics of Wordsworth's Narrative Experiments* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984); Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); and Stephen Maxfield Parrish, *The Art of the "Lyrical Ballads"* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973).

[22] Wordsworth's 1800 note to "The Thorn," quoted in *"Lyrical Ballads" and Other Poems*, p. 351.

possible. But we need only think of "The Idiot Boy," a work that has appropriately been called "the 'test' poem" for *Lyrical Ballads*, to see that such relief is not always forthcoming.[23] Here again the narrator's strange burlesque of his subject makes for confusion and distress. Wordsworth "never wrote anything in so much glee," he told Isabella Fenwick (*Lyrical Ballads*, p. 354)—a glee all too evident to Geoffrey H. Hartman, who has commented that "the poet's obvious pleasure while narrating 'The Idiot Boy' . . . . draws too much attention to Wordsworth's own 'burring.'"[24] What Hartman calls "the poet's obvious pleasure" does seem distastefully self-indulgent, since it comes, more or less explicitly, at the expense of the characters that Wordsworth ostensibly is intending to honor in some way. More troubling is that the speaker's pride is never balanced by any final comeuppance. No retrospective judgment is rendered in which his pleasure in narration is exposed as cheap and petty. Perhaps this confusing poem should be read as one in which Wordsworth takes his authorial dilemma to its extreme: he brings together the lowliest of rustics and the least sympathetic of narrators, with an eye toward seeing if anything useful can come of the collation.

The juxtapositions of class to which Wordsworth continually recurs in the framing and narration of these poems present a salutary variation on the conventional theme of rustic literary "inadequacy." As Linda Zionkowski argues, when eighteenth-century laboring-class poets signposted their lowliness and lack of proper training, they often expressed the anxiety that stylistic marks of rusticity and provinciality had to be expunged in order for them to produce work of real literary merit.[25] But as

[23] See Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman, introduction to *Wordsworth: "Lyrical Ballads": A Casebook*, ed. Jones and Tydeman (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 20.

[24] *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), p. 151.

[25] See "Strategies of Containment: Stephen Duck, Ann Yearsley, and the Problem of Polite Culture," *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 13, no. 3 (1989), 91–108. Though Burns is a significant exception, many of the most prominent peasant poets preceding Wordsworth worked within the conventions of eighteenth-century verse, writing in rhymed couplets, expressing emotion through traditional personifications and abstractions, and meditating on universal themes. The poetry of Stephen Duck and Ann Yearsley, Zionkowski argues, reveals "the value and power of traditional literary forms," and she adds that "although the conventions of elite poetry may be foreign to the experience

Annette Wheeler Cafarelli has recently illustrated, this gesture often became merely conventional, and timely confessions of inferiority allowed figures like Burns, Hogg, and Yearsley to engage in strategic forms of self-abasement by which they manipulated the "vicarious imaginings" of "a jaded marketplace [that] was seeking more and more rustic figures" ("Romantic 'Peasant' Poets," p. 84).[26] In offering his own poetry of potentially inappropriate lowliness, Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads* often approaches the reader from the other end of this divide: rather than beginning with rustics who worry aloud that they are not qualified, Wordsworth provides literary scholar-dilettantes who feel overqualified, and who assume that the only way to make their peasant sociology worthwhile is to leaven it by stooping to joke. So while the humility of Wordsworth's rustic subjects is genuine, so is the vanity of his narrators, and the poems are interesting partly because of the persistence of this uneasy combination. But Wordsworth is not merely inverting the contemporary discourse of inadequacy, nor is he simply engaged in the kind of role-reversal attributed to him by Betty Rizzo, who suggests that he adopted "the very techniques which the natural poets ought to have used (but did not, as they had their hearts set on mastering the heroic couplet)" ("Patron as Poet-Maker," p. 261). Wordsworth is not interested in vanishing wholly into the guise of a rustic; indeed, he is trying expressly to deny the sort of cultural sleight-of-hand that had first construed "peasant" and "poet" as mutually exclusive terms—and then, with pleasant surprise, joined them.

No poem in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* better reveals Wordsworth's determination to overcome this critical bad faith than "The Thorn." In its arrangement of author, speaker, and subject, and in its vision of the complex relation between the social and the aesthetic, the poem is more layered than any other in the collection. It "is not supposed to be spoken in the author's

about which they wrote, Duck and Yearsley had to acknowledge these conventions in order to develop a poetic voice that their audience would recognize and approve" (p. 92).

[26] Timothy Brownlow also hears in the public voice of many peasant poets the false note of artifice: "the sound of the Pastoral Pipe overheard by a poet who has learned to orchestrate it and play antiphonal effects with it" (*John Clare and Picturesque Landscape* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983], p. 3).

own person" (*Prose*, I, 117), Wordsworth carefully tells us in the "Advertisement," but rather in the voice of a middle-class narrator, hypothetically a retired "Captain of a small trading vessel" who is himself removed from the humble inhabitants of the rural community that he describes. That Wordsworth had given extensive, even obsessive thought to the narrator's social background is apparent from his remarkable note to the poem, part of which serves to justify his speaker's narrative tendencies and limitations:

> The character which I have here introduced speaking is sufficiently common. The Reader will perhaps have a general notion of it, if he has ever known a man, a Captain of a small trading vessel for example, who being past the middle age of life, had retired upon an annuity or small independent income to some village or country town of which he was not a native, or in which he had not been accustomed to live. Such men having little to do become credulous and talkative from indolence; and from the same cause, and other predisposing causes by which it is probable that such men may have been affected, they are prone to superstition. On which account it appeared to me proper to select a character like this to exhibit some of the general laws by which superstition acts upon the mind. Superstitious men are almost always men of slow faculties and deep feelings; their minds are not loose but adhesive; they have a reasonable share of imagination, by which word I mean the faculty which produces impressive effects out of simple elements; but they are utterly destitute of fancy, the power by which pleasure and surprize are excited by sudden varieties of situation and by accumulated imagery.
>
> (*Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 350–51)

Even presuming that former captains of small trading vessels (with modest annuities, past middle age, retired to unfamiliar villages) were "sufficiently common" in Wordsworth's day, the narrative specificity of the description would surely tax any reader who wished to make a demographic "match" in order for the example to hold; the very detail of the description works against Wordsworth's desire to evoke "a general notion" of his narrator. What this runaway specificity reveals, however, is the intensity of his belief—an intensity carried in the close imagin-

ing of a particular "type"—that class is explicitly linked to cognition and, in turn, to the modes and operations of poetic representation itself. Perhaps only in the "Preface" do we find a more powerful expression of Wordsworth's conviction that the processes of aesthetic perception and production have social and vocational origins.

Wordsworth's notion of class casts economic background as the first cause of identity formation: the developmental movement for men like the narrator is from economic security, to idleness, to superstition, a progression upon which Wordsworth can impose more sweeping models of consciousness and finally deduce artistic merit from them. "Such men" possess "slow faculties and deep feelings; their minds are not loose but adhesive." When they turn to storytelling they become aesthetic beings of a certain species: their "reasonable share of imagination . . . produces impressive effects out of simple elements; but they are utterly destitute of fancy, the power by which pleasure and surprize are excited by sudden varieties of situation and by accumulated imagery." This account would suggest that such non-gentlemanly narration as former trading-vessel captains can muster may be remarkable in its local effects—especially considering the necessary simplicity of its materials—but it evidently has no sense of the relations of parts to whole and cannot sustain a deliberate poetics toward integrated ends. What Wordsworth terms "fancy" would dictate that the key elements of his story—the hill of moss, the muddy pond, the thorn itself, and Martha Ray's repeated cry of "misery!"—be employed as massed, interrelated emblems; the narrator, however, has a hardheaded tendency to separate them out and leave each unsupported by the others.

A more positive manifestation of these formal deficiencies is found in the narrator's desire to be a folklorist, or at least an acceptable chronicler of rural legends; whether or not he achieves the status of poet, he genuinely hopes that retelling Martha Ray's story will prove more effective than his telescope has in helping him understand the social workings of his new community. Thus in recounting and interpreting the basic facts of the case—Martha's abandonment by Stephen Hill, her preg-

nancy, the appearance of a "hill of moss" sized like an infant's grave—he strives for accuracy and restraint. Indeed, he is cautious almost to a fault: we read the evidence as he gradually dispenses it, and we wonder why he cannot seem to put the pieces together.

Again, though, the fragmentary formal nature of the poem has its favorable psychological expression: the narrator's exaggerated caution ("For what became of this poor child / There's none that ever knew" [p. 82, ll. 157–58]) allows him to sustain a dim awareness that no factual summary could ever be adequate to the larger, communal meaning of this event. Thus his reversion to her cry of "misery" is at once a kind of narrative retrenchment, a timid pulling-back from the dawning implications of his story, and the sign of a nascent poetic sensitivity. In his somewhat awkward reiteration of the poem's basic questions—"But what's the thorn? and what's the pond? / And what's the hill of moss to her?" (p. 83, ll. 210–11)—the narrator seems to recognize that any attempt to consolidate the meaning of this decades-old story must incorporate not only the putative facts of the case but also the immemorial nature of Martha's desolation, the various legends continually circulated by the local populace, and the symbolic power of natural objects. The stunted origins of poetic sensitivity may also lie in the narrator's equivocal reporting of the paranormal events rumored to occur at the graveside. The language of "superstition"—his description of mysterious "scarlet moss" and "the shadow of . . . a baby's face" (p. 84, ll. 221, 227–28)—is perhaps the closest thing he has to a properly literary language. Limited though it may be, this language is his way of expressing the ineffable, and it at least approaches the uncanny sense that Wordsworth himself seems to have felt when, on a stormy day in 1798, he saw the profile of a lone thorn on a ridge in the Quantock Hills.[27]

[27] See Dorothy's Alfoxden journal entry for 19 March 1798, in *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1941), I, 13; and the Isabella Fenwick note to the poem (*Lyrical Ballads*, p. 350).

The poem thus endorses the worthy impulse of "such men" to attain literariness, but though the speaker avoids a failure of the "Simon Lee" variety (he is not coyly distant from his rustic subjects), his presence further down the social ladder does not guarantee him authority or insight. Poetry is "the history or science of feelings," Wordsworth tells us in the 1800 note to the poem (*Lyrical Ballads*, p. 351). If the speaker in "The Thorn" has one definitive failure, it is his inability to understand the extent to which his own feelings—not those of Martha Ray—determine the shape and texture of his poetic expression. He cannot characterize his emotions with appropriate disinterest or stand far enough away from them (as either historian or scientist) to understand how they are first excited, and then encompassed, by the very act of narration. Indeed, he is so fixated on the idea of an audience that at times his listeners seem to be the wishful products of his imagination, and even as his "garrulity" steadily increases under the intoxicating effects of storytelling, his attempts to make meaning continue to fall short. Ultimately, the story of Martha Ray in its relation to village memory remains obscure, and the narrator offers himself up, unaware, as the thing that we will read.

Finally, however, we need not see the narrator—or the poem itself—as successful by the measures of formal coherence or dispassionate self-knowledge in order to recognize the importance of the poem's experimental impulse. The middling social position of the narrator produces just enough artistic self-awareness to engender awkwardness, and though it was not the sort of poetic voice that Wordsworth often chose to adopt as his career progressed, he always defended his speaker's tiresome loquacity and the artistic legitimacy of his recursiveness. Neither mute inglorious Milton, nor peasant savant, nor learned sylvan historian, the speaker of "The Thorn" is placed outside the socio-literary categories made most readily available by the rustic tradition. His presence in the volume suggests Wordsworth's awareness that, whatever the deficiencies surrounding the sentimental ideal of the peasant poet, his own model of a "man speaking to men" ("Preface," in *Prose*, I, 138) had to accommodate at least the potential for the sort of in-

articulateness that could threaten the entire enterprise from within.

The maneuverings of these early poems suggest more about Wordsworth's processes in creating a distinctive persona as a writer of rustic verse than do his direct comments on individual peasant and laboring-class poets, most of which date from the decades after he had moved away from his early poetry of simplicity. His major statements on Hogg and Burns, for example, which come from the 1810s, cannot serve as reliable critical accounts; they are too compromised by personal antagonisms, by Wordsworth's own sense of professional superiority, and by his morbid sensitivity to criticism.[28] His piqued dismissal of Hogg in a December 1814 letter as "too illiterate to write in any measure or style that does not savour of balladism" is no more revealing than its sentimental opposite, the late "Extempore Effusion Upon the Death of James Hogg" (1835), where Wordsworth honored the "Shepherd-poet" as a "mighty Minstrel."[29] Similarly, Wordsworth's 1816 *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* (which, despite its title, expends much of its energy in an attack on Francis Jeffrey) attempts to rehabilitate Burns's tarnished reputation without acknowledging his al-

[28] Benjamin Robert Haydon remembered that Wordsworth during this era would enter a room "with a mortified elevation of head, as if fearful he was not estimated as he deserved" (*The Autobiography and Memoirs of Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1846)*, ed. Tom Taylor, 2 vols. [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1926], I, 303). This tendency toward hypersensitivity was central to the bitter feelings that developed between Wordsworth and Hogg; see Alan Lang Strout, *The Life and Letters of James Hogg, the Etrick Shepherd, Volume I (1770–1825)* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1946), pp. 81–83; and Wordsworth, letter to Edward Quillinan, 14 April 1832, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Second Edition: The Later Years, Part 2: 1829–1834*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 517–18.

[29] William Wordsworth, letter to R. P. Gillies, 22 December 1814, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Second Edition: The Middle Years, Part 2: 1812–1820*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 180; and Wordsworth, "Extempore Effusion Upon the Death of James Hogg," in *William Wordsworth: The Oxford Authors*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), p. 370, ll. 12, 9.

most mythic status as the greatest of the peasant poets (see *Prose*, III, 117–29). Perhaps these red herrings are the reason that commentators continue to tread cautiously around the issue of influence. The important recent studies of patronage and peasant poetry by Cafarelli and Rizzo, for example, both of which locate Wordsworth within a literary-historical continuum of simple verse, are careful to focus primarily on common milieus rather than on detailed models of direct influence—an understandable emphasis, since Wordsworth's specific adaptations of peasant poets (e.g., of Burns in "Benjamin the Waggoner" [1806] and, in the Lucy poems, of the Cumberland dialect poetry of Robert Anderson) are few in number.[30]

Though I have been arguing for the necessity of reinscribing this historical relationship, I would like to resist the notion that to do so is automatically to conclude that Wordsworth was actively exploiting or marginalizing the work of peasant poets. Given the omissions of the "Preface"—and the general tendentiousness of its argument—we might expect a certain complacency in Wordsworth's representation of rustics; and there may well be some truth in Jon P. Klancher's observation that "a secret ambition of the *Ballads*—unconfessable in public prefaces—is to represent the rural poor to themselves."[31] I have argued here that these poems do in fact represent the rural poor, but not so much to themselves as in relation to those who would seek to make poetry about them. And while individual poems project temporary bridges between artless rustics and literary dilettantes, they also stress that underlying disjunctions in class and aesthetic training cannot easily be erased.

[30] Cafarelli, for example, suggests that "the cultural construct of the 'peasant' poet" was "a social preamble that enabled the first generation Romantics to formulate a poetics of understatement and to tap the growing marketability of simplicity and authenticity" ("Romantic 'Peasant' Poets," p. 77). Rizzo notes that "[Stephen] Duck had made the whole question of natural genius, as opposed to art and learning, fashionable, and the resulting ruminations eventually established Pope as only the best of the cultivated poets of an artificial age. Caroline's taste for Duck finally transpired in a serious influence on the *Lyrical Ballads* and therefore virtually helped to annul the popular taste for Pope" ("Patron as Poet-Maker," p. 248). For a good basic account of Wordsworth's borrowings from Burns, see Russell Noyes, "Wordsworth and Burns," *PMLA*, 59 (1944), 813–32.

[31] *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 146.

In their experiments with voice, form, and class sympathy, these poems collectively explore a question that Wordsworth, working on "Home at Grasmere" in 1800, expressed with manifest urgency:

> . . . Is there not
> An art, a music, and a stream of words
> That shall be life, the acknowledged voice of life?
> Shall speak of what is done among the fields,
> Done truly there, or felt, of solid good
> And real evil, yet be sweet withal,
> More grateful, more harmonious than the breath,
> The idle breath of sweetest pipe attuned
> To pastoral fancies?[32]

When Wordsworth imagined the reinspiration of the old "pastoral fancies" with the "voice of life," he found the historical tradition of peasant poetry inescapable—though, to quote Klancher, "unconfessable in public prefaces." The *Lyrical Ballads* volume reveals Wordsworth's desire for a new rustic realism, and even as he refuses to locate this realism in the touted authenticity of contemporary peasant poets, he maintains a grasp on the thereotical obstacles confronting the removal of his own rustic poetic ideal to the material realm of "an art, a music, and a stream of words." The natural figuration of a "stream" is in fact entirely apt to the occasion. Though the rural poor speak in these poems, it is more accurate to say that they are *heard* here, heard as we might hear the "words" or music of a brook: through, alongside, or against the voices and perspectives of narrators who stand on their margins, apart.

Elizabeth Helsinger suggests that, from the perspective of English literary history, the construct of the "peasant poet" was literally a contradiction in terms, since the idea implied a conjoining of two necessarily distinct social locations.[33] The vogue for peasant poetry relied on the perception that this contradiction had been miraculously, if temporarily, suspended: like

[32] William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere: Part First, Book First of "The Recluse,"* ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 76 (MS. B), ll. 620–28.

[33] See "Clare and the Place of the Peasant Poet," *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1987), 510.

highly unstable molecules that could hold together only momentarily before breaking apart, individual peasant poets were bizarre, fleeting anomalies of nature. Wordsworth's desire to produce the "flowers and useful herbs"[34] of a living rustic poetry required moving beyond notions of peasant verse as unsustainable abberation or as parodic shadow of legitimate poetry.

In its poetry of rustic life, then, *Lyrical Ballads* relies not upon the illusion that social categories have been transcended but rather upon the artistic potentialities resident in their persistence and complexity. The 1798 volume portrays the uncomfortable meeting grounds between rustics and a range of pseudo-literary personae, in order to suggest that poetic significance does inhere—sometimes powerfully—where social distinctions are tenacious, and where potential meanings are neither fully articulated nor completely understood. In dramatizing the artistic motives and social limitations of narrators who do not share—or cannot succeed in an effort to share—the backgrounds of their rustic subjects, Wordsworth imagines a literary future in which disjunctions in class and voice, if not actually reconciled, could at least be employed in a manner that "the public taste in this country" would register fully as poetry ("Preface," in *Prose*, I, 120). Reimagined in this light, Wordsworth's experimental poems of rustic life offer numerous sites for speculation on the production, and reception, of their own new lyricism.

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[34] William Wordsworth, letter to Francis Wrangham, 5 June 1808, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Second Edition: The Middle Years, Part 1: 1806–1811*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Mary Moorman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 248.