DISOWNED BY MEMORY

WORDSWORTH'S POETRY OF THE 1790S

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Moral Relations in the
Preface and Two Ballads

Wordsworth in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads speaks of an intention he hopes will be apparent in his poems. He does not trust his readers to find this intention without help; the Preface is a disclosure of difficulties he suspects are ineradicable. An essay in criticism, it is also a declaration of self-trust, an account of the uncommon premises Wordsworth takes for granted, written for those who may be encouraged to find a way past the difficulties. The point of this work of self-defense is merely "to explain some of the chief reasons which have determined me in the choice of my purpose." Wordsworth also wants to distinguish his poems from others of the present day, which his may seem to resemble by the triviality or meanness of their subjects. A difference that matters, he thinks, is that each of his ballads will be found to have "a worthy purpose." Finally he records his faith in his adequacy to the work he aims to perform: "my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a purpose." 1

Purpose must have been an important idea for Wordsworth, to prompt the awkwardness of these repetitions of the word. The weight it is made to bear suggests we are wrong to take it as a synonym for "moral message" or "motive" or even "intention" in the ordinary sense. Wordsworth's own synonym "principal object," does not quite make the point, either. It looks as if purpose were the instinctive drive of the poet. At the same time, the presence of purpose assures us that if we enter into his train of thought, we will travel some way in a definite direction. His friends, he says, and he himself have shared the hope that, "if the views, with which [these poems] were composed, were indeed realized, a class of Poetry would be produced, well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the multiplicity and in the quality of its moral relations." 2 Success is counted only in the ultimate form of an adaptation to the permanent interests of mankind; the agency of adaptation is the multiplicity and quality of the moral relations carried by the poems. It seems then that to realize the purpose of the ballads will mean to bring to life a phase of thought and feeling both intense and expansive, unavailable before. Maybe it is fairest to think of purpose as the opposite of listlessness—a concentrating and release of energy that turns the mind from its customary plotting of moral relations.

I do not think Wordsworth accepted any division between the moral and the imaginative, and I will be discussing his purpose in the Lyrical Ballads as if it were part of their imaginative interest. As I read the Preface, its famous passages about the way poetry begins with emotion, and about the rural places and occupations that especially favor "the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation," are circumstantial illustrations of purpose with a polemical intent. To suppose they carry a "romantic" argument is to misread them. Nor do his paragraphs on the "grand elementary principle of pleasure," or his analysis of the false pleasure that comes from the refinement of poetic diction, themselves define a new topic so much as they explain his sense of how the poet establishes a field or scale of relations. Wordsworth's clearest explanation of this process comes in the first paragraphs of the Preface; and it is here we can find the best justification of two poems that exemplify the task he deliberately sought: "The Idiot Boy" and "Tse Thorn." These are among the early poems by Wordsworth commonly singled out for ridicule by his contemporaries, poems that continued to seem anomalous even as the poet's reputation grew, but they are named in the Preface itself as if they would bear particular attention; and they were the two that Wordsworth mentioned in The Prelude, along with the Ancient Mariner and "Christabel," in recounting his early collaboration with Coleridge. They indicate the motive for his warning, as early as the Advertisement of 1798, that readers of the ballads would "so doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness." 3

1. Lyrical Ballads, 144, 146; italics in original.
2. Ibid., 242.
3. Ibid., 244. These words are an insertion of his and like most of the other additions they sharpen and specify Wordsworth's meaning. But the context limits their appli-
each other, we discover what is really important to men, so by the repetition and constancy of this act feelings connected with important subjects will be nourished, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much organic sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced that by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits we shall describe objects and utter sentiments of such a nature and in such connexion with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated. The qualifications regarding persons originally possessed of much organic sensibility and those in a healthful state of association are important, for they imply that some people are more awake than others.

Two paragraphs further on, Wordsworth will say of those whose minds can feel "excitement without the application of gross and violent stimulants" that "one being is elevated above another in proportion as he possesses this capability."

Let us consider closely the elaborate sentence above. Thought and feeling were evidently words with special senses for Wordsworth. The usage of the period is not much help, nor even the usage of other poets, and the phrase "influses of feeling" calls attention to the involuntary character of all feeling. It follows that the poet cannot be pictured as a cultivator of feelings. They come and go, an impulse that human beings can never originate by an act of will. Impulse is another word, besides influs, favored by Wordsworth when he wants to suggest volition without inwardness or a belonging uniquely to ourselves.

What belong to us distinctly are thoughts; and thoughts, according to this passage, are "the representatives of all our past feelings." I am not sure how far a republican metaphor may be concealed in the idea Wordsworth gives of representatives directing influses of feeling, as a representative in the House of Commons would direct the sentiments of our thoughts.

5. Ibid., 46-47.

6. This is confirmed by two revisions of 1812: the omission of the word "organic" modifying "sensibility" and of the phrase "his taste exalted." The latter phrase anticipates the corrective tutorial and curatorial function of the poet who will be a reoccupation of the Essays. Supplementary to the Preface of 1850, where the poet is said to be instructed to correct and humble, so as to exalt and purify, the taste of the reader. Looking at the test of his Preface, Wordsworth saw, in 1812, that "organic" was redundant and it was wise to keep the claim for sensibility at a minimum. It does not constitute an act of feeling but belongs to our nerves and touch. It does not relate to refinement, and its opposite is not coarseness or vulgarity, but insensibility. Burke in the Sublime and Beautiful had confounded himself to the same narrow sense of the word.
of a people unqualified to act for themselves.' Anyway, past feelings do join our personal identity and become part of the furniture of habit, as present feelings do not. We know past feelings from the thoughts that are their shadows, and those thoughts are the medium in which we begin to generalize an idea of ourselves. The thoughts are brought into relation with each other, and so, by a vast and continual process of abstraction, we see how it might be possible to reflect on our experience as a whole. As Wordsworth will say later, "So feeling comes to aid / Of feeling, and diversity of strength / Attends us, if but once we have been strong." In that sentence of The Prelude, diversity of strength applies to the representation of feelings by thoughts; the inference seems to move from a thought of one life to a relation to humankind. The result, if we can succeed in making this transition, is specified by Wordsworth: enlightenment (in some degree), and ameliorated affections. Or, to step down from the metaphysical manner of the passage: we will have attained conscious pleasure, or happiness. This is the promise—but notice the number of qualifications Wordsworth puts in the way. The association of thought with thought, of feeling with past feeling must be repeated, it must take place on the ground of "important subjects," the mind in which the relations occur must be originally possessed of much sensibility, and the being to whom we address ourselves must be "in a healthful state of association." The reader, I take this to imply, must be one of those receptive men whom Wordsworth speaks of later, who differ from the poet only in degree. The possible effects of such work of the mind are common. That is to say, faculties belonging to everyone, and experience from which no human being is necessarily excluded, are, along with good fortune, the only conditions required to produce it. Nothing in the Preface, however, will suggest that such effects are common in the sense of occurring frequently.

The strangest feature of Wordsworth's account of thoughts and feelings, and the way that together they may achieve an amelioration of the affections, is the central role he assigns to habit. We must obey the habits that guide the connection of our thoughts to our feelings; we must obey them not just steadily, but "blindly and mechanically." Indeed, it is our very obedience to a process that acts in us blindly and mechanically that leads to the reform of our affections, which this long sentence ends by evoking. Wordsworth uses these neutral and even pejorative words—"blindly," "mechanically"—because he finds a source at once of fear and hope in the miracle by which an animal reflex acts to humanize. The curriculum of association only follows the laws of nature, yet in doing so, it produces a creature capable of reflecting on nature. Blindness and mechanism incidentally will be unmistakable elements in many of the ballads—in "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," for example, and "The Mad Mother," and also in "The Idiot Boy" and "The Thorn." The main characters are such as will be found, initially and by many readers, grotesque—they are versions of animal faith, reduced beyond the attractions of a human surface. It is a source of shock, as much as consolation, that the blind habit that induces them to act as they do likewise works in us, to make us know more deeply certain feelings that belong to humankind. Or so it does if we can feel; and here Wordsworth issues his challenge. If we fail to accept as a blessing the action of the same blind habit in ourselves, we are among the thoughtless and insensible.

How does Wordsworth's argument on habit connect with his desire to communicate pleasure? (Can the mere redundancy of habit somehow support his belief in the moral good of physical pleasure?) He seems to have known that the argument would be controversial, and therefore liked to present it as a common discovery, as in the lines of Michael that allude to

The story of Michael will reach that habit cannot be distinguished from feeling. Michael's son, Luke, is so bound up with Michael's way of life that the loss of one seems identical with the loss of the other. And yet, those remarkable lines bring out a meaning of pleasure more primitive than habit; and one may recall here an unexpected feature of the Preface, its stress on quantity of pleasure. The phrase about finding a "multiplicity" of relations does refer to quantity; an odd case of apparent convergence between Wordsworth and Bentham. As with the interest in "pursue," this is a repeated emphasis: in its second sentence the Preface asks to what extent "that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure, may be imported, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart." So when Wordsworth later writes of a "healthful state of association," he has in

7. Compare Burke: "the most poor, illiterate, and uninformed creatures upon earth are judges of a practical opprobrium. It is a matter of feeling, and as such persons generally have felt most of it, and are not of an over–given sensibility, they are the best judges of it. But for the real cause, or the appropriate remedy, they ought never to be called into council about the one or the other." Works, iv, 216–18.
mind among other things the balance of pleasurable and painful impressions that form the mental substance of association. This motive of the argument does come from Hartley, who had assumed that the pleasures of nature predominate over the pains. Wordsworth answers that pleasure evidently must predominate for the poet, if he is to achieve the effects he desires, but not every life is so happy as to offer a basis for that ambition. A sense he only arrives at much later, that this truth is important and not obvious, will be a reason for the apologetic length of the opening and closing books of The Prelude. But the same consideration lingers in the Preface itself; it appears once more in the discussion of the character of the Poet. We are told there of sympathies “which, from the necessities of [the poet’s] nature, are accompanied by an overbalance of enjoyment.” Overbalance can only mean: so much pleasure that it can afford to be shared. And we will be told of the Wanderer in book 1 of The Excursion, “He could afford to suffer / With those whom he saw suffer.” This again presumes quantity: more pleasure than pain; more pleasure than is necessary.

With his advantage of pleasure to strengthen the motive of blind and mechanical association, the poet, as Wordsworth understands him, is able to penetrate beyond the causes that “are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.” Capable as he is of communicating excitement without the aid of “gross and violent stimulants,” he can place the reader “in the way of receiving from ordinary moral sensations another and more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receive from them.” This, though Wordsworth does not say so here, must involve the disruption of a habitual order of association grown corrupt and unthinking. At least, it must if we take seriously the case study he offers in “Simon Lee.” In the final two stanzas of that poem, the narrator performs an act of neighborly kindness to relieve the labor of Simon Lee in cutting a tree root; the old huntsman, once the first in the chase, is now lean and sick and forced to work, and he weeps tears of gratitude that make Wordsworth sorry for the exchange of strength for weakness.

— I’ve heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds
With coldness still returning.

Must the gratitude of men
Has often left me mourning.

It is a summing up so abasing that one of the best critics of Wordsworth, Frederick Porter, decided that the poem was insoluble. But if one reads with particular stress on “gratitude” and remembers that this virtue, an inert and artificial principle to which we give the name of natural feeling, was suspect to Wordsworth in his revolutionary years, a time when he scorned the entire system of property and paternal morality—then the ending of “Simon Lee” has its republican logic. Gratitude (the poem is saying) can be redescribed as a vice, and ought to be a source of regret: it is a man like Simon Lee weeping tears of joy at what is in fact an absence of pleasure, an impotence that requires someone else to be an indispensable actor in his life. Wordsworth has the courage to mourn what others would admire with vicarious complacency as an occasion of “sympathy.”

I mention “Simon Lee,” and Wordsworth’s evident confidence in the experiment it offers, to suggest how far out of the path of customary moral relations he saw the work of the poet as taking us. And yet a radical return to “the primary laws of our nature” can occur, he thinks, most favorably in the most ordinary of settings, among people who “from their rank is society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse,” exhibit thought and feeling with few accretions of artificial taste. The pleasure that he takes most pride in representing, he declares near the end of the Preface, is “the pleasure which the mind derives from the percepts of similitude in dissimilitude.” As “Simon Lee” indicates, this must imply a readiness to discover hidden orders of feeling even at the risk of paradox. The pleasure derivable from such a percep-

8. On the blessing or good fortune that Wordsworth and Coleridge take for granted as necessary to the life of a poet, see Martin Greenberg, The Hamlet Vacations of Coleridge and Wordsworth (Iowa City, 1986).

9. My treatment of the Preface shares, with two essays by Lionel Trilling, the premise that Wordsworth believed what he said about the all-importance of pleasure, for the poet and for the reader to whom he addresses his work; see “The Fate of Pleasure” in Beyond Culture (New York, 1967) and “Wordsworth and the Rabbit” in The Opposing Self (New York, 1990).

10. Lyrical Ballads, 158.

11. Ibid., 149.

12. Ibid., 148.

13. Helen Glen in Vision and Diemagnetic (Cambridge, 1983) catches the poignancy of this moment better than any other commentator I have read: “The effortlessness with which [the line] is delivered makes it an apt and powerful image for the unwitting ease of that paeanitic ‘pity’ which diminishes that which it is to the suffering other impossible” (p. 317).

14. Lyrical Ballads, 147.
tion "of the great spring of the activity of our minds and their chief feeders. From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it take their origin. It is at this depth perhaps that the powers of origination of the poet connect most steadily with those of ordinary men and women. An appetite that all pursue in sex, the poet feeds with the creation of metaphors.

"The Idiot Boy" is mentioned in the Preface among the poems that show "the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement," or, as Wordsworth states it, poems that show "the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature." It is concerned with tracing "the maternal passion through many of its more subtle windings"—a remark which suggests that the point of view from which we enter the poem is that of the boy's mother, Betty Foy. She sends out Johnny to fetch a doctor to check the fever of her friend, Susan Gale; Johnny, mounted on his pony, wanders and forgets his errand; as the hours pass, Betty Foy's anxiety for him grows stronger than her sense of neighborly duty to Susan; she races to the doctor, who tells her that Johnny never came; and with dreadful thoughts, in the silence of the night, she continues her search:

So, through the moonlight late she goes,
And far into the moonlight dale;
And low she ran, and how she walked,
Would surely be a tedious tale.
In high and low, above, below,
In green and small, in round and square,
In tree and tower was Johnny seen,
In bush and brake, in black and green,
'Twas Johnny, Johnny, every where.

She comes upon him at last, in the wood near a waterfall, sitting on his horse, the rein dropped slack so that the horse feeds as freely as Johnny gazes, "Beneath the moon, yet shining fair, / As careless as if nothing were." Meanwhile, coincident with this discovery, Susan Gale finds her body growing healthier as her mind takes part with the fears of her friend; she rises from bed "As if by magic cured," finds her way to the wood and joins the mother in celebration.

Such is the action of "The Idiot Boy." One can see the grounds of Wordsworth's fear that the humbleness of his subjects might be taken for meanness and the lack of "external excitements" for a sensational triviality. The poem does briefly deviate into a mod-sensational exercise, when a series of stanzas try out various fates for Johnny, with what seems a cheapening coyness: "Oh reader! now that I might tell / What Johnny and his horse are doing," "Perhaps he's turned himself about, / His face unto his horse's tail," "And now, perhaps, he's suniting sheep." To a reader familiar with Wordsworth's code, this stretch of the poem is a deliberate tease—coldly polemical, and meant as a warning against our fondness for the sort of romance in which our feelings about Johnny would be tortured to the last pitch of distress. The stanzas of perhaps rebuke any conventional anthropomorphic feeling—any sentiment that could assimilate this boy to conceits about childhood and its amusements. Of course, Wordsworth will want to build so this rebuke to gain a sympathy of his own. But what in that case is the poem about?—what is the "subject" the poet has looked to steadily? As a record of the windings of the maternal passion, it must be centered on the feelings of Johnny's mother. The horse brings him to a place full of excitement, with the moon, the thundering waterfall and the hooting owls. Knowing the trust between the horse and the boy, Betty Foy is able finally to think where the horse would take him. Susan Gale, in distress of a kind that commonly centers all feeling on oneself, is roused to feel for Johnny as much as if she were his mother, and it cures her fever. Only the doctor fails to share the excitement: irritated to have his sleep disturbed, he feels as a doctor, and not as a man.

My description of "The Idiot Boy" has left out the metaphor with which it ends, a metaphor that exactly meets Wordsworth's criterion of "similitude in dissimilitude." Johnny, when asked by Betty to tell where he has been, what he has seen, and what he has heard that night, and to "tell us true," replies:

"The cocks did crow to-whoo to-whoo,
And the sun did shine so cold."

It is an inversion, or derangement of sense, cocks for owls and sun for moon, but this answer of "Johnny in his glory" is also poetry. It shares in the glory Wordsworth associates with the poet's comprehension of "the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which [man] knows, and
feels, and moves. It is a confession of the effects of attention: a pure, painless concentration. We are shown such effects in Johnny from an early moment, when, used to hobbing or shaking in his excitement, suddenly "he's idle all for very joy," and Wordsworth compares his stillness to the movement of the pony, the only character in the poem who bears the attributes of a normal dutiful person.

And while the pony moves his legs,
In Johnny's left-hand you may see,
The green bough's motionless and dead;
The moon that shines above his head
Is not more still and mute than he.

Benny Foy at the end feels the same mute excitement, but without Johnny's conversion to stillness, when, as we are told, "she is uneasy every where; / Her limbs are all alive with joy." The boy's vivid presence as a focus of such sensations, which are, to Wordsworth, a motive for recognizing the reality of "moral relations," makes him a type of the poet, though not himself a poet. This justifies the extravagance of the closing lines—an epigram spoken by an idiot boy.

The poem was based on a story of such words, actually spoken by such a boy; Thomas Poole reported the fact to Wordsworth, who wrote the last stanza before the rest. But the inversion also makes a satisfying close for a poem that must meet the complex requirements of a narrator of ordinary fancy and a mother who knows her boy as a cause of more than ordinary passion. Throughout, a miraculous element in the tale has been implicit although subdued—a dumb chorus seems to sympathize with Johnny: "The little birds began to stir. / Though yet their tongues were still," and throughout, if we hear the poem as scored for sound, the brrr of his voice has been an organizing accompaniment like the meter of a ballad. The regular sound suits Wordsworth's thought about the uses of meter, that it asserts an "interruption of ordinary feeling," "the co-presence of something regular," to offset a danger that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds."

16. The setting and action at the end of "The Idiot Boy" are close to "The Nightingale," written by Coleridge about the same time, in March–April 1798. His "Grave Babe" is "capable of no articulate sound" but "Murmurs all things with his inarticulate lip" and by listening invites others to listen to nature. Once, "In most distressful mood (some inward pain / Had made up that strange thing, an infant's dream," he was calmed by the poet, Let me limit the comparison I have drawn between the Wordsworthian idea of the poet and the idiot boy. To judge by the Preface, they resemble each other in the suddenness with which they are brought face to face with their susceptibility to the principle of pleasure. For both, an effect of pursuing an instinctive activity is to bind more closely the affections of other men and women. In this, and in this alone, the two characters differ less from each other than they differ from those who move and live and feel according to convention. The signs connecting the two are scattered—easy not to notice, and better imagined if not felt consciously. But a suppressed analogy may give more offense for being suppressed, just as a metaphor may render the terms of a comparison more jarring by refusing to employ a grammar of justification. Coleridge's objection to this poem is well known: he thought the brrr was a needless particularizing of an unattractive trait. A similar challenge on a broader front was made by a precocious seventeen-year-old reader, John Wilson (later the critic and anecdotist who wrote under the name Christopher North, and the professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh). Wilson was sufficiently impressed by the "lyrical Ballad" to write a private letter to Wordsworth declaring his discipleship; but he made it clear that "The Idiot Boy" was an exception to all his reasons for admiration, indeed the poem that almost made him doubt his loyalty. This letter offered Wordsworth a chance to back away, or to equivocate on behalf of an experiment that would continue to appear to many of his most willing followers an extravagant assault on the canons of propriety, and it is therefore doubly interesting to trace the logic of his response. Because Wilson speaks as an earnest and well-instructed reader, he sees that the point is not Johnny's feelings about himself, even if we could know them, and neither is it the feelings a reader can be expected to have about Johnny, so much as the passion we can be led to share with Johnny's mother when we realize vividly the depth of her passion about someone not herself. We have to pass a long way outside what we think we know of idiot boys, or mothers, or poetry, to begin to sympathize—too far, in the view of the young John Wilson.

Wordsworth replied firmly to this appeal for an edifying compromise. He takes his stand on "human nature, as it has been [and ever] will be," which we can find only "by stripping our own hearts naked." The poet who led him gaze at the moon, and whose prayer now is "that with the night / He may associate joy"—an ameliorative change of associations.
ought to "rectify men's feelings" by showing that they belong to a nature that includes Johnny. And again, "He," that is, the poet, "ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides." There is more reason for him to do so when—on the evidence of questions like Wilson—people assume and act as if they did not belong to the same nature. But Wilson's anti-levelling argument is rational and consistent, and better founded on contemporary reasoning than may appear from Wordsworth's answer. Wilson was relying on an authoritative theory of the affections made current by Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As I showed in chapter 1, Smith took particular interest in the affection of gratitude, in the reciprocity of affective claims between two persons. This "keeping time," as Smith called it, with the sentiments of other people was at the heart of a morality Wilson believed to have emerged as the common sense of mankind. So he tells Wordsworth,

the object [of Betty Foy's] affection is indeed her son, and in that relation much consists, but then he is represented as totally destitute of any attachment towards her; the state of his mind is represented as perfectly dispor-
able, and, in short, to me it appears almost unnatural, that a person in a state of complete idiosyncrasy should excite the warmest feelings of attach-
ment in the breast even of his mother. This much I know, that among all the people I ever knew to have read this poem, I never met one who did not rise rather displeased from the perusal of it, and the only cause I could assign for it was the one now mentioned. This inability to receive pleasure from descriptions such as that of The Idiot Boy, is I am convinced, founded upon established feelings of human nature, and the principle of it constitutes, as I dare say you recollect, the leading feature of Smith's theory of moral sentiments. I therefore think that in the choice of this subject you have committed an error. 17

What could Wordsworth have said to make Wilson less sure of himself? His larger reply is in the Preface, in its appreciation of the blindness and mechanism that govern thought as much as feeling. Poetry allows us to enter into feelings like Betty Foy's about Johnny, and such feelings belong to the "native and naked dignity" of human life. Once we have felt with her for him, is it possible that we should feel his "idiosyncrasy" as an obstruction to our sympathy? Will the boy's incapacity for gratitude even occur as a moral objection, to any but a mind so stuffed by theory that it is no longer even dramatically right? It is a usual aim

of Wordsworth's poems to offer an occasion of feeling as strange as Johnny's creed, and to place the reader in a relation as near as possible to someone who feels the circumstances deeply. In the popular poetry of the day, Wordsworth writes in the Preface, the action and situation give importance to the feeling, but in the *Lyric Ballad* the feeling will be found to give importance to the action and situation. 18

This may suggest a reason why "The Idiot Boy" is less difficult to interpret than "The Thorn." It leaves no mystery about the action and none about the feeling, but a puzzle to the taste of a reader like John Wilson, about how the one can possibly suit the other. With "The Thorn," by contrast, there is a mystery in the action—an infant may or may not have been killed—and there is a mystery also in the tone of feeling. In his advertisement of 1798, Wordsworth went out of his way to dissociate himself from the narrator of "The Thorn", is it. It was supposed to be spoken in the author's own person: the character of the loquacious narrator will sufficiently shew itself in the course of the story. 19 He makes a similar disclaimer about no other poem in the book. Why do it here? The tactics of dissociation occur in several layers. The narrator presents himself in any case as new to the neighborhood, and just learning its native lore. If that is not enough to distinguish him from the poet, a note of 1800 proposes that he might be "a Captain of a small trading vessel for example, who, being past the middle age of life, had returned upon an annuity or small independent income to some village or country town." But the trouble about this story is not made smaller by turning it into a trouble about someone else telling the story. There is an uneasiness, as Wordsworth seems to have perceived, in the incidents of the poem, in the links between them, and in the perspective of eager or morbid interest which the reader is asked to share.

He likes to begin a poem with an almost legible object, a deposit in a landscape that has to be read. In *Michael*, it is something man-made, which looks as if it had joined nature again, the half-built sheephorn that a careless eye might pass without remark. In "The Thorn" it is a part of nature, a tree, that has taken on strangely human attributes.

20. The best justification I have found for supposing that Wordsworth, through the poem's speaker, created an irony not otherwise available to him, is in Paul D. Stuehler, "Wordsworth's "Theatricality and Politics of Baston," *Wordsworth Circle* 23, no. 2 (spring 1992): 94–100; but, however poised to challenge the premisses of the respectable, the oddness of the speaker seems to me to induce no moral except the unacceptability of a moral in a poem such as this.
There is a thorn; it looks so old,  
In truth you'd find it hard to say.  
How it could ever have been young,  
It looks so old and gray.
Not higher than a two-year's child,  
It stands erect this aged thorn;  
No leaves it has, no thorny points;  
It is a mass of knotted joints,
A wretched thing forlorn.  
It stands erect, and like a stone  
With lichens it is overgrown.

The thorn resembles a man, a peculiarly disfavored or "wretched" man; though it is also like, of the same height as, a two-year-old child. The next four stanzas continue the description of the object and its surroundings. It is hung with tufts of moss and seems as if it were being dragged to the ground, as if it were being buried. It stands on a mountain's highest ridge, "not five yards" to the left of the path; three yards farther to the left is a muddy pond, which is never dry, and yet so small it ought to be occasionally dry: "I've measured it from side to side: 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide." And beside the thorn, one other thing—a hill of moss, "Just half a foot in height," of "lovely tints" in network as if made by a lady's hand—a hill, we are told, "like an infant's grave in size."

Many precise measurements are here. The suggestion of a small child, which was offered in the first image of a tree, is repeated in the description of the hill; and the pool is just big enough to contain such a child, as we see without being told. The tree and hill are companion objects but also metaphorical opposites: a living thing reduced to knots and joints like a skeleton, bereft of every sign of youth; and a mound of earth, charmed to a semblance of spontaneous life by the color of moss and flowers. The following four stanzas tell of a woman who sits on the "heaps" the size of an infant's grave (the comparison is repeated yet again); she sits there often, in a scarlet cloak, at all times of day and night, crying her misery; but to see the spot in safety, you must pass by her door and be sure that she is at home; none dare approach the spot when she is there. The narrator cannot explain this superstition, and when he imagines a reader asking what the woman's story is, he suspects that on the spot itself "You something of her tale may trace."

Meanwhile, he has some facts. Her name is Martha Ray, she gave herself to a man named Stephen Hill, but he had engaged to marry another woman and did so, on the very day set for his marriage to Martha Ray. "It dried her body like a cinder, / And almost turned her brain to tinder," and then, "they say," six months on, visibly pregnant, she began to haunt the mountain-top. She was driven out of her mind by grief, but Farmer Simpson thought her sanity revived as the birth drew near. Nobody knows whether it was born alive or dead; some remember Martha Ray continued to climb the mountain. Cries from the spot were heard that winter, cries like the living and like the dead. That she was sometimes there the narrator knows for sure, from his first sight of her, by accident, through a glass with which he used to look at the ocean. "When to this country first I came," When, once in a storm, he thought he saw a jutting crag for shelter, he ran to the spot and found instead Martha Ray, and heard her cry of misery.

What do the pond and the tree and the hill of moss signify? These are stories: that she hanged the baby on the tree, that she drowned it in the pool, "But all and each agree" that the mound is where it is buried. In this version of allegory, objects remember what they did: the pool cannot change, cannot grow larger or smaller, from the shape it had one fateful day; the tree, made to assist in a death, becomes itself an emblem of death in life, erect as a child who has learned to stand, yet knotted and denatured. But only one of the objects was needed to kill the child if it was killed. It looks as if what they are remembering are merely stories. And there are superstitions yet more lurid: that the scarlet moss is a memorial of the baby's blood; that, if you look deep in the pond, you will see an image of a baby's face. It is a consecrated spot, whatever else we make of it. When, so it is said, a search was begun once for the body of the child, "for full fifty yards around, / The grass it shook upon the ground." The place itself claims the burial of its dead.
The narrator ends by deferring every conclusion. "I cannot tell how this may be," he says,
The thorn continues to stand against the moss bent on subduing it, and the voice of Martha Ray continues to mark the spot, without explanation.

Wordsworth in his note of 1810 defended this poem as the terms of the Preface seemed to require. A form must come from a feeling by one person about someone or something human. In "The Idiot Boy" the person was Johnnion's mother, but we found in the excitement of the boy, and in its possible effects, a wider basis for reflection. In "The Thorn," Martha Ray is seen by glimpses and never coherently. As the only other candidate appeared to be the narrator, Wordsworth concluded that it was a poem about his venture in submitting himself to the local superstitions of a place. From the summary I have given, that will seem an implausible account, and if one looks into the poem closely it feels much more implausible. The narrator does hold the stage, but he commands no interest in himself, whereas the objects he mentions evoke, by their peculiar relation, a great deal of interest. He is penetrable only by feelings (like that of Martha Ray on being jilted) which have been aroused through convention and cliché. I do not think any part of the pleasure of "The Thorn" is accounted for by our sympathy with the man who narrates the poem; but one can see what happened to Wordsworth in this effort of justificiation. The poem is so strange that the task of translating its qualities led him to betray himself, to settle for a reduction of his purpose for the sake of intelligibility. And yet, in noticing how much this narrator does not know, one may fall into the opposite error of supposing we are meant to read a moral into the doubtful facts of the tale of Martha Ray. The idea that she can be the focus of sympathy is wrong: we know too little about her, and what we know is a tissue of rumors that, if believed, would prompt compassion and revulsion in about equal measure. Besides, the idea in back of such a reading—in—that she is an object for approval or disapproval, that she is meant to arouse our moral faculty in some regular way—seems to me equally wrong. There are too many versions, the picture is too confused with metaphors that imply events, rather than events themselves and Martha Ray's madness, which is the one sure thing about her, renders our usual judgments vain.

If we return now to Wordsworth's concern with the adaptation of thoughts and feelings to permanent interests, it may seem "The Thorn" is about the conditions in which all thought and feeling emerge. Even less than "The Idiot Boy" does it confine its discovery to what can be known by a person or group of persons. Its story of attachment belongs, of course, to a particular neighborhood. We are used to expressions of the sort it derives its drama from—"A calamity so full of sorrow the very grass seemed to shake"—and to that style of enforcing pathos "The Thorn" gives literal force. But the feeling that gives importance to the situation is here so dispersed in life that it might be revived from any spot of ground that bears a trace of human purpose or passion. "The Thorn" is about the permanence of accident, the fortune that becomes for us another name for fate. Wordsworth's sense in this poem of the destructibility of hope—of the violence that human things suffer as they join the record of memory—has parted from any concern regarding the distribution of sympathy. Suffering is by ascription: it cannot be fully known, not even surely known to exist. After a lapse of time, people and their acts will have been so mixed with surmise, with retrospective presumption and the force of common fears, the range of conjecture is so scored on the face of nature itself that the least a poet can do may be the most. He can say that things happened. He can mark the place where they happened as embodying in itself a memory.