Title: Wordsworth, "Simon Lee," and the craving for incidents

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IN HIS PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS (1800), WILLIAM WORDSWORTH FAMOUSLY, if also enigmatically, defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." (1) Readers of Wordsworth's preface often concentrate on one half or other of this formulation. Readers who privilege the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings produce an understanding of Wordsworth's poetry, and of romantic poetry more generally, that relies heavily on theories of expression and aligns poetic power with spontaneity. The fact that for Wordsworth these powerful feelings are "recollected in tranquility" remains enigmatic, in part because it introduces a necessary temporal delay, a level of mediation that is difficult to reconcile with the unmediated access to powerful feelings the first half of Wordsworth's formulation promises. Readers who privilege the importance of "recollection" have in recent years linked Wordsworth's commitment to tranquility to a civilizing process that subordinates immediate sensation to reflective judgment. Tranquility marks a necessary temporal and psychological distance from the initial sense-experience and becomes one way for the poet to maintain control over such experiences. As Noel Jackson summarizes, "Wordsworth's claim that the poet is capable of formally abstracting from and exerting control over the immediacy of 'vulgar' sense-experience has often been read as the signature proposition of Wordsworthian aesthetics and a crucial expression of its ideological character." (2) Through reflection, in other words, the poet learns to impose continuity on discontinuous sense-data. Such readings of Wordsworth find in the movement from a spontaneous overflow of feeling to the recollection of these feelings in tranquility a model for the development, as enculturation, of the individual, society and the nation state.

However, Wordsworth's introduction in the preface to Lyrical Ballads of a necessary temporal delay and an accompanying psychological distance from immediate sensations, made possible by what he calls "tranquility," also introduces an interpretive dilemma. At some key moments, Wordsworth invites readers to conclude that the feelings recollected are not exactly the poet's, which results in an idiosyncratic understanding of tranquility. Famously, Wordsworth writes in The Prelude (1805) of his past self." "so wide appears / The vacancy between me and those days, / Which yet have such self-presence in my mind / That, sometimes, when I think of them, I seem / Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself/And of some other Being." (3) Wordsworthian tranquility, which implies a certain distance from oneself and from one's own feelings, may not always denote an experience of calm, but an experience of estrangement from the very things one hopes never to feel estranged from, like oneself. With "tranquility," I suggest, Wordsworth describes not merely a psychological state belonging to a "civilized" subject but also introduces a certain interpretive dilemma that poetry poses for its readers, even when the reader is also the poet himself.

Through a reading of the concluding lines of "Simon Lee: The Old Huntsman with an Incident in Which he was Concerned," in which this necessary delay is typographically marked by the inclusion of a dash that separates the final four lines of the poem, I show how this delay far from enabling an assertion of control over the experience recorded produces instead two competing reflections on or responses to the incident. What Wordsworth's poem demonstrates in closing is a poet-narrator less in control of his responses to the incident with which he was concerned than has previously been noted in the body of criticism that responds to the poem. The concluding lines of Wordsworth's poem suggest that one danger of tranquility--of the necessary temporal and psychological distance from incidents--may be a sort of estrangement, for the poet-narrator himself as well as for the reader, the interpreter, from the incident the poem describes.

Readings of Wordsworth's poetry that privilege the spontaneity of powerful feelings have missed other passages from the preface to Lyrical Ballads that have, in recent years, come to a renewed legibility. In his preface Wordsworth identifies a modem dilemma:

a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, 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. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. (249)

For Wordsworth the health of the mind is threatened by the too rapid communication of intelligence about events "daily taking place." Certain technological advances make it possible for the mind to be supplied with extraordinary incidents (and so momentarily gratified). But the cost of such a craving is alienation, solipsism, and even death, what Wordsworth describes as the absence of all "voluntary exertion." The rapid communication of intelligence gratifies a craving for extraordinary incidents, but gratification is opposed to voluntary exertion and thus also to anything like willed action.

In this way, Wordsworth's fear as it is expressed in 1800 anticipates the failure of realistic, real-time media today to bring about proper political action, even as it perfects the transmission--the rapid communication--of intelligence. (4) The numbness that consumers of realistic, real-time media experience today when confronted with massive amounts of information may be a version of the blunted modem mind Wordsworth diagnoses in the preface. As Geoffrey Hartman writes in The Longest Shadow: "Even while deploring and condemning the events, we experience what the poet John Keats called 'the feel of not to feel it,' as we continue with everyday life." (5) While information is consumed at a great rate, one fears that the greater the rate of transmission the less effective the intelligence becomes. News of events daily taking place momentarily satisfies the craving for shock and surprise but at the expense of the mind's ability to respond to the events. The rapid communication of intelligence becomes one way among many of blunting the impact of events, or more strongly put, of avoiding the impact of events, rather than a means to understand or respond to them.

While the extraordinary incident seems to offer some escape from the uniformity of history, nothing is more uniform in modernity--Wordsworth suggests indirectly--than the craving for extraordinary incidents produced by the rapid communication of intelligence. In this light, the clamor for shock and surprise, for intense experience, is possibly the modern mind's last great defense against experience; the rapid communication of intelligence becomes a way not to experience events or the feelings they inspire. As Giorgio Agamben writes in Infancy and History, "the question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgment that it is no longer accessible to us." (6)

A somewhat embarrassed Wordsworth situates poetry--specifically the poetry of Lyrical Ballads--in relation to this dilemma, and so raises the ethical stakes of reading poetry: "When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to counteract it" (249). What role does poetry play in counteracting this thirst after outrageous stimulation without retreating into another, aesthetic form of solipsism? How does poetry "un-blunt" the mind or make possible alternative forms of response to events daily taking place? If experience is no longer accessible, can poetry make experience possible again? It is clear from Wordsworth's preface that poetry is not to guard readers against stimulation as such. It is not the role of poetry to isolate readers from the world--though this is one way in which the function of the aesthetic has been misunderstood. But neither is poetry, worries Wordsworth, to satisfy readers' thirst for outrageous stimulation, which is satisfied by the works Wordsworth opposes: "Frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" (Lyrical Ballads 294).

While powerful feelings and their spontaneous overflow are necessary for poetic production, Wordsworth is keenly aware of the dangers presented by this thirst after outrageous stimulation, linked as it is to the craving for immediate communication of extraordinary incidents. Wordsworth challenges the popular sentimental literature of his day, which stimulated quickened emotional responses to representations of events. If poetry is only the expression of the powerful overflow of spontaneous feeling then it is always in danger of satisfying the craving for extraordinary incidents and so participating in the blunting of the mind that Wordsworth diagnoses in his preface.

Poetry, hopes Wordsworth, makes possible some form of response that is neither an abdication of the responsibility to respond nor a thirst for more outrageous stimulation, for more rapid communication of intelligence. In turning away from an intensity of feeling, in mediating the experience of spontaneous feeling, Wordsworth hopes to make possible the return of-the return to--feeling. Tranquility, however, understood as the interpretive dilemma that poetry poses, interrupts the redemptive trajectory suggested here, for if tranquility mediates the craving for spontaneity, aligned as it is with outrageous stimulation, it also alienates oneself from oneself. Feeling returns but only as unclaimed by consciousness.

O gentle reader!

To consider some of the issues Wordsworth raises in his preface in more specific detail, I turn now to one of Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads," first published anonymously in 1798, "Simon Lee: The Old Huntsman with an Incident in Which he was Concerned." The poem describes an old man struggling to survive and a young man's offer of aid when he happens to come upon Simon working to sever a root. In its complicated concluding lines, the poem raises as a question the ability of the poet-narrator to respond appropriately to Simon Lee's struggles, both his more general struggle to survive in a modern world that has no use for him, as well as his more specific struggle, described in the second half of the poem, to sever a root. To the extent to which the poem raises as a question the ability of the poet-narrator to respond appropriately to one in need, it also questions the ability of poetry to function as a bridge between sympathetic identification (in the form of spontaneous and powerful feeling) and political or ethical action in the form of humanitarian aid. What is, in other words, the relation between powerful feelings and action, especially given Wordsworth's suggestion in the preface that a craving for incidents capable of producing powerful feelings threatens to produce apathy and not action?

The poem has challenged readers for centuries. It perhaps challenged its first reader, Wordsworth himself, most of all. As Ernest de Selincourt writes, "On the text of no other short poem did W. expend so much labour as on Simon Lee." (7) Wordsworth repeatedly revised the poem over the years, returning to it again and again; unlike other poems originally published in Lyrical Ballads, by the time he published "Simon Lee" in The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth in 1832 it had changed considerably. "Simon Lee" also challenges readers more directly; the poem is likely most famous for the apostrophe to the reader that Wordsworth includes between the ballad-like first part of the poem (which corresponds roughly to the first part of the poem's subtitle: "The Old Huntsman") and the lyric-like second part of the poem (which corresponds roughly to the second part of the poem's title: "with an Incident in Which He Was Concerned"). Like "Hart-Leap Well," which begins the second volume of Lyrical Ballads published with the addition of several poems in 1800, "Simon Lee" participates in an experiment in poetic form. Generated by the tension Wordsworth perceived between narrative and lyric poetry, "Simon Lee" moves the reader from the ballad, with its stress on narrative action, to the lyric, with its stress on emotional intensity. (8) In situating the apostrophe to the reader between the ballad and the lyric, the ballad (the narrative of suffering chronicled in the first half of the poem) is aligned with the sensationalism the poet-narrator critiques.

In the ballad-like first part of the poem, the poet-narrator describes Simon Lee in his youth: "No man like him the horn could sound, / And no man was so full of glee" (17-18). Simon's youth is celebrated, but it is celebrated in order for it to be more effectively contrasted with his present condition, the condition in which the poet-narrator finds him. In the past, Simon was a famed hunter, but now he has grown old: "he is lean and he is sick" (33). In this way, the poem reminds one of--and responds to--other poems published during this period that chronicle the experiences of the poor, the forgotten, the mad, etc., like Robert Southey's "The Widow" and "The Idiot," or Charlotte Smith's "The Dead Beggar," in other words, the humanitarian protest poem.

However, in "Simon Lee" the poet-narrator anticipates and then actively frustrates the expectations of the imagined reader in addressing the reader directly after narrating Simon Lee's decline: "My gentle reader, I perceive / How patiently you've waited, / And I'm afraid that you expect / Some tale will be related" (69-72). After contrasting Simon's youth with his present condition, the poet-narrator abruptly announces that the poem will move now in a new direction which calls attention to the imagined reader's investment in sensationalism. The apostrophe questions the reader's desire for narratives of suffering. With the apostrophe the poet-narrator turns, as the second half of the poem's subtitle warns readers he will, to an incident in which Simon Lee is concerned. The poem moves from a detached third person narrative to a more intimate first person perspective, in which the poet-narrator's encounter with Simon vainly attempting to sever a root is described. A reader of what Wordsworth calls "extravagant stories in verse," the apostrophe implies, is not likely to believe that such an unremarkable incident will produce an emotionally intense experience. As Stephen M. Parrish suggests, however, the goal of a poem like "Simon Lee" is to "reduce the role of story or event in narrative, in favor of passion or feeling--to internalize the action." (9) The poem focuses on an unremarkable incident to aid the reader to invest in a passion or feeling that is not reducible to sentimentahsm or sensationalism. The stress is not placed on the incident but on the reader's ability (or inability) to "take it." As the poet-narrator explains: "What more I have to say is short, / I hope you'll kindly take it; / It is no tale; but should you think, / Perhaps a tale you'll make it" (77-80). At the same time, the presence of the apostrophe suggests that the reader is in need of some instruction. The poet-narrator anticipates and intentionally thwarts the narrative expectations of his imagined reader, expectations that he has helped produce in the first half of the poem. As James Averill notes in Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering: "Expectation, the craving for the 'moving accident,' the desire for the stimulus of fictional suffering, becomes a symptom of deficiency." (10) The first half of the poem produces in the reader just the sort of desire for fictional suffering the poet-narrator critiques. Precisely because the poet-narrator's imagined reader is not likely to find the incident emotionally powerful, the poet-narrator sets out to frustrate (and alter) the imagined reader's expectations. As Wordsworth explains in the preface to Lyrical Ballads, his goal, specific to "Simon Lee," is to produce "another and more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receive" from ordinary moral sensations (Lyrical Ballads 293).

As a result, though, "Simon Lee" questions the goals of the humanitarian protest poem by drawing attention to its own narrative frame. In stimulating moral sensations, fictional suffering always risks generating the craving for extraordinary incidents Wordsworth criticizes in his preface to Lyrical Ballads. Similarly, humanitarian protest poems may challenge readers to rethink the prevailing assumptions that govern responses to the poor, but they also risk substituting sympathetic identification with the representation of suffering for sympathetic identification with what one might call actual suffering. Does the fictionalization of suffering inspire readers to put an end to suffering or does it relieve readers of the responsibility to act because it allows readers to view the suffering of others as fictional? (11) In a reading of The Ruined Cottage, Karen Swann explores Wordsworth's use of narrative frames. Wordsworth, writes Swann, uses "a mediating narrative consciousness to interpose distance between the reader and the narrative of suffering--thus encouraging a meditative rather than a stimulated response to painful events." Wordsworth often complicates the narrative frames of his poems in order to draw attention to the "narrative acts themselves and thus invite[s] the public to reflect on its own investments in sensationalism." (12)

Like The Ruined Cottage, the goal of "Simon Lee" is not merely to inspire within the reader great feelings of sympathy for Simon Lee, or even for those who exist in a condition similar to his. If this were the case, it is not clear that Wordsworth--or the poet-narrator--should need to interrupt the narrative the ballad constructs. One suspects that sympathy is more easily produced in a reader when it is not demanded of him or her in quite so direct a manner. In moving from the narrative quality of the first half of the poem to a specific incident that testifies to Simon's weakened condition, the poet-narrator calls for the reader to make a tale of this incident, to discover feeling in those moments others pass over in the search for "extravagant stories in verse." In turning to such an unremarkable incident, and yet one capable of producing great feeling, the poet-narrator reminds readers that the desire for extraordinary incidents may preclude and not enable feeling. The desire for sensational tales may be one way in which feeling is evaded.

Alas!

In frustrating the imagined reader's expectations, the poet-narrator foregrounds the poem's didactic aims. In the rest of this essay I turn to the closing lines of the poem, which seem at odds with the didactic aims the poet-narrator sets for the poem with the apostrophe. While the apostrophe implies the presence of a knowing poet-narrator, one who hopes to instruct his reader in how to read poems and so come to experience the world differently (as well as respond to those in need appropriately), the closing lines suggest an alternative reading at odds with this one aim.

In the second part of the poem, the poet-narrator writes of his encounter with Simon toiling away at a tangled root. Simon is so weak that it seems he might toil forever at the task. But the poet-narrator kindly takes the mattock and severs the root with one stroke:

"You're overtasked, good Simon Lee, Give me your tool" to him I said; And at the word right gladly he Received my proffer'd aid. I struck, and with a single blow The tangled root I sever'd, At which the poor old man so long And vainly had endeavour'd. (89-96)

The action produces in Simon an overwhelming response. The poem concludes:

The tears into his eyes were brought, And thanks and praises seemed to run So fast out of his heart, I thought They never would have done. --I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds With coldness still returning. Alas! the gratitude of men Has oftner left me mourning. (97--104)

The poet-narrator severs the root and this act of kindness inspires such gratitude in Simon Lee that the poet-narrator is almost unsure how to respond. In fact, instead of narrating how he responded to Simon's effusive expressions of gratitude, the poet-narrator turns to address the reader again in the concluding four lines of the poem. The poet-narrator pauses (a pause marked by the inclusion of the dash) and then begins to reflect on the incident. The poet-narrator remarks not simply on the fact of Simon's tears, but the fact that tears of gratitude surprise him and transmit great emotional force. Simon's gratitude produces a strong emotional response in the poet-narrator, who begins to mourn. The poet-narrator writes that he has heard of "hearts unkind" that have failed to express gratitude. He has, in other words, heard of ingratitude. And while ingratitude might cause one to mourn, sometimes gratitude, strangely enough, causes one to mourn more. Why precisely Simon's gratitude should cause the poet-narrator to mourn is left unexplained. The dash separating the memory of the incident from the self-conscious reflection on the incident marks a silence in the text. It may be that Simon's tears expose the poet-narrator's inability to respond in kind. For what sort of response do tears of gratitude call? Or, the poet-narrator may mourn Simon's condition. He may mourn, in other words, the fact that such a simple act, the severing of a root, should produce tears in Simon, pointing to the discrepancy between the excessive nature of Simon's expressions of gratitude and the poet-narrator's accomplishment. After all, the poet-narrator has merely severed a root. There is little to suggest that in the near future Simon will not be faced with a similar dilemma.

Or, the poet-narrator may mourn the unanticipated and potentially negative significance of the action that he has performed. The presence of "seems" in the lines preceding the dash ("And thanks and praises seemed to run / So fast out of his heart") raises as a question whether or not Simon is in fact grateful for the action performed by the poet-narrator. By severing the root, the poet-narrator has freed Simon from the mechanical repetition of his own actions. Simon "gladly" receives the proffered aid and the poet-narrator saves him from what seems like ceaseless toil. However, what is true in the underworld may be true on earth as well; what one endeavors forever to accomplish may be the one thing that grants one's existence meaning. While Simon's vain endeavor inspires great pathos in readers it is also one of the few remaining signs that Simon lives. One could contend, in other words, that the root roots Simon's existence and is not simply an obstacle that must be overcome. The poet-narrator's inclusion of "seems" suggests that he recognizes this troubling possibility but only too late. The ease with which the poet-narrator severs the tangled root would confirm what Simon may already have suspected, that he is old and weak and so near death. More dramatically stated, if the root stands for Simon's life-thread then the poet-narrator plays the role of Atropos, one of the three Moriae or Fates who cuts the thread of life. Simon welcomes the poet-narrator's aid but then is forced to bear the poet-narrator's symbolic announcement of his death.

This is an unpleasant suggestion, but the view that the poet-narrator is reliably responsive to Simon's needs has led to some selective quotation by readers of the poem. Don Bialostosky, for example, in Making Tales, which takes "Simon Lee" as a point of departure in its discussion of Wordsworth's narrative experiments, writes: "The warm thanks are evident enough in the way Simon's 'thanks and praises' are described running 'So fast out of his heart.'" (13) Despite Bialostosky's claim that these warm thanks are "evident enough," he elides from the poem Wordsworth's poet-narrator's troubling use of the word "seems," which raises as a question the poet-narrator's confidence to relay to the reader what he thinks Simon's tears signify. In the language of the apostrophe the poet-narrator adopts the role of a benign pedagogue but in the closing lines of the poem the poet-narrator "seems" uncomfortable with his ability to narrate the significance of the incident he describes, though it may be the poet-narrator's difficulty narrating the incident that grants the incident significance. (14)

Wordsworth's poems often remain stubbornly silent at those moments one most wishes for them to "speak," to disclose their meaning and narrow the possible range of interpretations. While the language of Wordsworth's poetry is famously reserved and reticent, John F. Danby's reading of the poem, from The Simple Wordsworth, remains the accepted one:

"Simon Lee" exists as a poem, I think, to carry these lines [the concluding four] to the reader in the precise way it does: with the weight, the depth, the soberness, the measured seriousness and overflowing tenderness that they have. It exists, that is, to ensure the "comprehensiveness in thinking and feeling" which Wordsworth thought the great poet should possess and the good reader acquire. (15)

Though one does not know definitively why the poet-narrator mourns, one assumes that the incident together with or perhaps as a result of Simon's simple expressions affects the poet-narrator powerfully; the incident has a power to which the poet-narrator wishes to testify. The poem aims to transmit this affect to the reader. The power may be the result of the emotions expressed by Simon or the moral outrage--to the point of disgust--the poet-narrator seems to feel toward a society that allows its members to exist in such a state of poverty. (16) The power may even result from the poet-narrator's belated recognition of the negative significance of the action he has performed. Each of these suggestions, however, and there are others not pursued here, assumes that the poet-narrator experiences strong feelings in response to the incident. The assumption is (and has been) that the poet-narrator, following Danby, exists as a model of "thinking and feeling" that the good reader should emulate.

The conclusion to the poem, however, complicates such a feeling. As R. F. Storch notes in "Wordsworth's Experimental Ballads," the final stanza of the poem begins with a stock eighteenth-century idea, that ingratitude causes one to mourn. Wordsworth quickly overturns the conventional idea with the suggestion that it is not ingratitude that the poet-narrator mourns but gratitude. Just as the apostrophe to the reader takes readers by surprise and frustrates expectations, so too does the poet-narrator's turn from convention in the final lines of the poem. He does not simply rehearse the poetic conventions of the past. He surprises readers with his willingness to overturn poetic convention and seems only more sincere as a result. However, as Storch also notes, the use of "Alas!" introduces a bit of play acting at the most emotionally intense moment of the poem and so raises some troubling questions. (17) It may always be those expressions meant to convey sincerity that seem all too calculated and so, at least to some degree, insincere for that very reason. Such is the risk of "Oh" or "Alas!" in any lyric poem, a risk staged repeatedly by romantic poems. If the poet-narrator of "Simon Lee" is willing to play with the reader's emotions at the moment that one assumes is to carry great emotional import, how reliable is this poet-narrator? How affected has he been by his encounter with Simon Lee? Or, how affected is his response to this encounter?

If one questions the reliability of the poet-narrator, then some minor details of Wordsworth's language come into focus. Registering a turn inward by the poet-narrator, the final four lines attempt to punctuate the lesson he has learned. The dash marks some minimal degree of separation between the poet-narrator and the experience he relates, between the incident itself and the poet-narrator's reflection on the incident he records in the poem. Typographically, the dash marks the temporal delay that makes possible the psychological distance Wordsworth elsewhere in his preface to Lyrical Ballads links to poetic production. This emotional or psychological distance is intensified by the poet-narrator's diction. While the poet-narrator has heard of unkind hearts, his use of "oftner" in the last line of the poem implies that this is not the first time that he has encountered the gratitude of men and experienced the mourning that these encounters produce in him. The poet-narrator very quickly takes Simon's tears as a type of response, one that he has encountered numerous times before. He compares Simon's specific expressions of gratitude with those of others and compares the intensity of the experience of mourning he feels with past experiences of mourning that he has felt. The force of the emotional response seems to come from the poet-narrator's surprise, but "oftner" introduces a calculating mind and an emotional or psychological distance at what one assumes is the most affectively powerful moment of the poem.

In pursuing such a reading, other complicating questions are raised. The final two lines ("Alas! the gratitude of men / Has oftner left me mourning") seem meant to counter the two preceding ones ("I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds / With coldness still returning"), arguing that expressions of gratitude might be more powerful than expressions of ingratitude. However, it is also possible to read these last two lines as referring back to Simon's possibly histrionic expressions of gratitude. The final lines, then, suggest that despite their effusiveness Simon's expressions of gratitude leave little impression on the poet-narrator. In this case, "oftner" compares the gratitude of Simon with the gratitude of other men, and the poet-narrator finds Simon's expressions of gratitude lacking. They carry little force. Rewriting the line slightly may help this alternative reading to emerge: Alas, the gratitude of other men has oftner left me mourning. Such a reading presents a very different poet-narrator than has been identified in the critical literature that surrounds the poem. This is a poet-narrator who is perhaps overly cynical, perhaps even unhealthily immune to others' tears. It is a reading of the poem consistent, however, with Wordsworth's all too theatrical inclusion of "Alas!"

In reflecting on the incident, two competing senses of it emerge: the incident was powerfully felt and strangely unaffecting. In this way the poem performs the dilemma of interpretation that tranquility may occasion. Readers view the poet-narrator reflecting on the incident, but in the process the poet-narrator becomes less, not more, in control of his own responses to it. The final lines suggest the existence of a conflict within the poet-narrator. The poem presents, in other words, a poet-narrator, like Wordsworth himself in The Prelude, who struggles with two "consciousnesses" within himself. The poem, as a result, performs and bears witness to the sort of self-alienation Wordsworth describes with "tranquility" in his preface to Lyrical Ballads, a self-alienation that Wordsworth's poems very well may work to produce in readers in order to counteract the craving for the extraordinary incident whose impact is palpably felt but robbed of force for that very reason.

In this didactic poem, the poet-narrator testifies to the power of incidents as tales. He celebrates the power--the lyric potential--of the most unremarkable of events, and readers are invited to make a tale of the incident he relays. But if the final lines of the poem suggest, however obliquely, that the poet-narrator's response to Simon Lee's helplessness is itself problematic, then how are readers to respond to the apostrophe, which calls for the reader to respond to the incident? When the poet-narrator asks the reader in the apostrophe to make a tale of the incident, is he asking readers to respond as he responded or is he asking readers to respond differently? Is "Simon Lee" meant to instruct readers of sensational ballads how to engage properly with their own emotional experiences or is "Simon Lee" meant to warn readers not to respond as coldly, in quite so unsympathetic a manner, as the poet-narrator when he compares Simon's gratitude to the gratitude of others?

Two seemingly incompatible readings are staged in the concluding lines of the poem. On the one hand, the poet-narrator gives voice to Simon's condition and in testifying to the force of Simon's expressions of gratitude he also testifies to the force of even the simplest everyday encounter. Here, the lyric triumphs over the sensational ballad. The force of the incident is transmitted to the reader who is reminded that feeling may not be the same as sensationalism or sentimentalism. A "tale" has been related but it is not one the reader was expecting, though it may be all the more powerful for that fact. On the other hand, if the final lines are read as referring back to Simon's expressions of gratitude, if they compare Simon's gratitude with the gratitude of other men, then the poet-narrator is testifying not to the force of Simon's simple expressions but to their powerlessness. Simon's expressions of gratitude fail to evoke in the poet-narrator an emotional response. Here, the poem would seem to testify to the danger of making tales of everything.

A Blunted Mind

The closing lines of the poem hinge on the reader's ability to determine whether or not the poet-narrator is conscious of the complexity of what he says with "Alas! the gratitude of men / Has oftner left me mourning." If the reader is to model him or herself on the poet-narrator, then the fact that the poem's rhetoric stutters around the act it describes reveals a potential problem with the very possibility of repetition on which such modeling depends. The opening line of the concluding stanza features two different rhetorical schemes that foreground repetition. The lines, "I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds / With coldness still returning" (101-2), are somewhat cumbersome. Many readers stumble on the awkward movement from "hearts unkind" to "kind deeds." The difficult rhythm of the poet-narrator's language may give voice to his own surprise. Like Simon, the poet-narrator has been robbed of the ability to speak fluidly and without effort. But the intrusion of rhetoric here at the end of the poem is remarkable and Wordsworth's specific use of paronomasia and polyptoton suggests another reading. In moving from paronomasia to polyptoton, Wordsworth moves from a scheme where the similar sounds of words are at play ("heard" and "hearts"), to one in which the same root word is repeated but in a different form ("unkind" and "kind"). The progression from (weak) paronomasia to polyptoton suggests a focus on the root word, which is all too conspicuous given the poet-narrator's ability to sever roots with one blow. In moving from "unkind" to "kind," the poet-narrator, it seems, is looking to focus attention on the root, a root ("kind") that is also central to the apostrophe that divides the poem: "What more I have to say is short, / I hope you'll kindly take it" (77-78). If, as I suggest, the poem leaves readers unsure of whether or not to repeat the poet-narrator's gestures and sentiments, it is hardly a coincidence that the conclusion of the poem should focus attention on the question of repetition through the employment of two rhetorical schemes, especially if the second (polyptoton) consists of circling, in this case, somewhat cumbersomely, around a root. The rhetoric of the poem returns readers to the action of the poem, the severing of the root, which is repeated linguistically by the comma that divides "unkind" from "kind." The poet-narrator's language registers, though without his seemingly becoming conscious of it, some awareness of the strangeness of his action. Here may be one clue that Wordsworth and the poet-narrator should not be collapsed too quickly into one and the same figure. The language of the poet-narrator registers a resistance to what he says. That this resistance is carried forward to the reader, that it becomes legible for the reader even though it remains outside of (or beyond) the consciousness of the poet-narrator testifies to the difficulty of knowing for sure whether readers should strive to emulate the poet-narrator or abstract a poet's promise behind that of the poet-narrator.

If, as Wordsworth suggests in his preface to Lyrical Ballads, the craving for extraordinary incidents produces a blunted mind, then what are readers to make of this incident with which Simon Lee is concerned? For Sigmund Freud, an incident must be inscribed within a narrative in order for psychological health to be maintained or, in the face of traumatic events, restored. And yet, at the same time, Freud acknowledges--in a text like Beyond the Pleasure Principle--that to construct a narrative is always possibly a way not to encounter various incidents, a way to evade the incidents with which one no longer wishes to struggle. (18) In closing, I want to suggest that "Simon Lee" is at best ambiguous about the desire to make incidents into tales, to make a tale of everything; such a desire becomes, in the light of the poem's closing lines and the questions they raise about the ability of the poet-narrator to respond to Simon's tears, a potential symptom of the blunted mind Wordsworth diagnoses in his preface. The result of making tales of everything may be the cold deafness the poet-narrator exhibits.

The poet-narrator's language undermines (or at least questions) the lesson the encounter is meant to pass on to the reader. It simplifies the poem too much to replace the sympathetic poet-narrator (one perhaps modeled on Wordsworth himself and one to whom readers of the poem have responded) with a more cold-hearted poet-narrator, in pointing to (and pointing out) the poet-narrator's resistance to the encounter with Simon Lee as lie relays it to the reader, a resistance made legible in the closing lines. To deny the poet-narrator's resistance (however minimal it may be) to the force of the encounter he records risks missing the way the poet-narrator opposes his own reading (or understanding) of the encounter. Language continues to act even when the consciousness of the poet-narrator holds short. "Alas!"--I argue--acknowledges the force of a transmission not necessarily available to consciousness, but one legible nonetheless; the re-performance of the central event of the poem on the level of the signifier marks not only the intensity of the encounter but also the poet-narrator's resistance--even as a form of self-defense--to it. What is passed on to the reader is not only the force of the encounter with Simon Lee but also the poet-narrator's resistance to this force; the language of the poem passes on what the poet-narrator does not wish to describe: his own resistance to the incident in which Simon Lee is concerned. The language used to describe an experience may always tell others more than one wishes them to know about.

Readers are left stranded somewhere between taking the poet-narrator as an example--to the extent that he exhibits the kind of emotional response Wordsworth is looking to produce in readers of his poems--or as a counter-example--to the extent that he suffers from an inability to hear Simon's gratitude or witness his suffering. The poet-narrator, in addressing his imagined reader, invites readers to make a tale of the incident, but it is unclear whether or not making a tale results in humanitarian aid or a repetition of the poet-narrator's deafness to Simon's expression of gratitude, a deafness marked by his comparison of Simon's gratitude with the gratitude of others.

Read in this light, and given Wordsworth's description of the blunted modern mind, the poet-narrator serves as a reminder that the craving for incidents (however ordinary or extraordinary) may lead not to appropriate action but to paralysis, deafness, coldness: a failure to see, a failure to witness the suffering of another. Not to hear the warning Wordsworth subtly introduces in the final lines by opening the possibility that the poet-narrator is more interested in how Simon's gratitude compares with the gratitude of others is to miss the possibility that the making of tales risks the paralysis that Wordsworth's poetic project is meant to counteract. It is difficult to know, in other words, whether the poet-narrator (and the encounter he describes in "Simon Lee") serves as a means to counter the dilemma Wordsworth identifies in his preface or if the poet-narrator suffers from the demands of modernity in characterizing Simon's expressions as somehow lacking in force. "Simon Lee" places readers in an uncomfortable double-bind: if one does not make a tale of this incident one is in danger of turning away from the means to counter the blunted mind Wordsworth describes; and yet, in making a tale of the incident one risks repeating the poet-narrator's failure to respond adequately to Simon's need. One risks repeating the poet-narrator's turn from Simon. In other words, in making a tale of the incident, one is also in danger of satisfying the craving for extraordinary incidents symptomatic of what Wordsworth calls the blunted mind.

As a result, the poem complicates Enlightenment ideals of civic responsibility that are governed by the assumption that appropriate political or ethical action follows from an increase in knowledge. This may also be true of the increase in feeling. In perfecting the transmission of knowledge and in eliminating the possibility of ignorance one eliminates inappropriate political and ethical actions. In Lyrical Ballads Wordsworth worries that the opposite is true: the proper political and ethical response is not guaranteed by the exponential increase in information, intelligence, or emotion. As more and more information of historical events is transmitted with greater and greater speed the mind becomes less (not more) able to process it. "Simon Lee" suggests that this may also be true of information about the suffering of others and the most immediate emotional responses available.

In a poem like "Simon Lee," Wordsworth acknowledges that sympathy, sympathetic identification, while necessary to the project of the humanitarian protest poem and even the larger poetic project of Lyrical Ballads, is always possibly a form of resistance, a symptom of the blunted mind he diagnoses in the preface and no guarantee of right-minded humanitarian action. In presenting readers of the poem with a poet-narrator who seems both engaged by and disengaged from the tale of suffering he tells, Wordsworth poses a question that is difficult to acknowledge, let alone answer: what if the failure of sympathy (and humanitarian action) results not from the failure of images or texts to inspire powerful feeling, but from the success of images and texts to inspire powerful feelings and so satisfy a craving for extraordinary incidents that leads to apathy and emotional detachment? As images of suffering come to dominate the news media, this may be just the sort of question most in need of an answer. But the strong need for an answer to this question may go a long way toward helping one understand why the final lines of "Simon Lee" have not occasioned the disagreement for which they call. For better or worse, one often knows enough not to acknowledge the questions one does not know enough to answer.

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(1.) William Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads (New York: Roudedge, 2005) 307. Future references to "Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman, with an incident in which he was concerned" will be to this edition. "Simon Lee" can be found on pages 105-8.

(2.) Noel Jackson, "Rethinking the Cultural Divide: Walter Pater, Wilkie Collins, and the Legacies of Wordsworthian Aesthetics," Modern Philology 102.2 (2004): 209-34 (216). Jackson specifically footnotes David Lloyd and Paul Thomas from Culture and the State (New York: Routledge, 1998): "The narrative by which poetry transforms the disintegrative effect of the multiplying shocks of modern experience into a principled phenomenology of perception in turn replicates the universal history of man's progression from 'savage torpor' to true culture" (78).

(3.) William Wordsworth, The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979) 66.

(4.) See also, Thomas Keenan, "Publicity and Indifference," PMLA 117.1 (2002): 104-16 and Luc Boltanski, Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics, trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).

(5.) Geoffrey Hartman, The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996) 100. In Regarding the Pain of Others (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), Susan Sontag returns to this idea that she first pursued in On Photography (1977). Summarizing her position in On Photography, she writes, "in a world saturated, no hyper-saturated with images, those that should matter have a diminishing effect: we become callous. In the end, such images just make us a little less able to feel, to have our conscience pricked" (105). Now, Sontag wonders if this is true: "I thought it was when I wrote [On Photography]. I'm not so sure now" (105). She warns that "it is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people's pain, just as it is absurd to generalize about the ability to respond to the sufferings of others on the basis of the mind-set of those consumers of news who know nothing at first hand about war and massive injustice and terror" (110-11). For her short discussion of Wordsworth, see 106-7.

(6.) Giorgio Agamben, Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Verso, 1993) 13.

(7.) The Poetical Words of William Wordsworth, eds. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940-49) 4.413. Andrew L. Griffin makes a similar point in "Wordsworth and the problem of the Imaginative Story: The Case of 'Simon Lee'" PMLA 92.3 (1977): 392-409.

(8.) As Griffin writes, the "apology, or charge, to the reader can thus be welcomed as the death rattle of a story-monger and the birth of a poet. In the end, 'Simon Lee' finds itself ... as a Wordsworthian lyric: three stanzas of deeply felt recollection finding unusual meaning, scarcely to be articulated, in an ordinary event" (401). See also Garrett Stewart's discussion of "Simon Lee" in the opening pages of the second chapter of Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996). Stewart writes: the "passive ... consumption of narrative is acknowledged by Wordsworth only to be rebuked and cured" (26).

(9.) Stephen M. Parrish, The Art of the "Lyrical Ballads" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1973) x.

(10.) James H. Averill, Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980) 164-65.

(11.) These are questions often raised by critics of Sentimentalism. For general discussions of Sentimentalism, see Janet Todd, Sentimentalism: An Introduction (London: Methuen, 1986); and Chris Jones, Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s (London: Routledge, 1993). For more specific readings of the relation between Wordsworth and Sentimentalism, see Averill, Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering. For more on questions of Wordsworth and philanthropy, see James O'Rourke, "'Goody Blake and Harry Gill,' 'The Thorn,' and the Failure of Philanthropy," European Romantic Review 9 (1998): 103-23 and J. Andrew Hubbell, "Wordsworth's Excursion in Romantic Philanthropy," European Romantic Review 18 (2007): 43-68.

(12.) Karen Swann, "Suffering and Sensation in The Ruined Cottage," PMLA 106.1 (1991): 83-95 (84). For a related discussion of Keats and sensation, see Orrin N. C. Wang, "Coming Attractions: Lamia and Cinematic Sensation," SiR 42.4 (Winter 2003): 461-500.

(13.) Don Bialostosky, Making Tales: The Poetics of Wordsworth's Narrative Experiments (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984) 76.

(14.) The continuation of the line does not necessarily clear up the confusion: "I thought they never would have done." Most readers take "done" as "finished" or "concluded," but one might read "done" as in "I thought the tears would never accomplish what they were to accomplish." In this reading, the poet-narrator does not so much take the tears as a sign that Simon Lee is overcome by an overflow of powerful feeling but a sign of Simon's calculating mind; the poet-narrator subtly insinuates that the tears have been produced by Simon Lee with some strategic end in mind, which registers a high degree of resistance within the poet-narrator to the event that he describes.

(15.) John F. Danby, The Simple Wordsworth (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) 38.

(16.) See also Arnd Bohm, "Nimrod and Wordsworth's 'Simon Lee': Habits of Tyranny," Romanticism 8.2 (2002): 131-60.

(17.) R. F. Storch, "Wordsworth's Experimental Ballads: The Radical Uses of Intelligence and Comedy," Studies in English Literature 1500-1900 11.4 (1971): 621-39.

(18.) I am thinking in particular of Freud's definition of the origin of consciousness: "Protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli." Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961) 30.

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